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WRITING THE PAIN OF OTHERS: A STROLL WITH DISTURBANCE

Rethinking ethical agency by way of practice-based research

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[SLIDE 1]

In my research practice, I explore what I claim to be an added value immanent in the body in pain. This surplus value I suggest is brought about not in spite of, but because of an increased physical sensibility. I regard this excess as a subversive potential in a becoming-active of individuals in pain¹. The aim with this artistic study is to interrogate, explore, and foster an idea and a reality of a proposed space for 'sharing pain events' of emancipatory becomings. The intention with this paper is to discuss the means and procedures in my practice, whereby suffering bodies are being transvalued into modes of productive resistance, strategies that likewise strive to avoid illegitimate, reifying uses of representation of bodies in pain. In qualifying pain further, in this study the phenomenon is regarded as a process, and a structuring principle of a life 'always in flight from itself' (Deleuze, 2004 B, Deleuze & Guattari, 2004 A, 2009).

[SLIDE 2]

To be in pain is usually described as an "unpleasant sensory and emotional experience²". It is a condition generally perceived as a negative state of being, or even as the negation of life itself. In this research project, an open-ended, interrogative scrutiny of the body's capacity to affect and become affected extends a critical reflection of the human tendency to negate pain. In an attempt to reroute a desire usually propelled by lack, I try to practice an affirmative attitude towards pain and the interrelation between bodies and forces of pain.

¹ I am first and foremost undertaking an exploration of the self-modifying traits and transformative potential of *chronic* and *episodic* pain, that is, of a degree of pain that bodies are caused to suffer without finality (as compared to pain which serves as biological safeguard, or pain which derives from the violence of torture and war).

² This is the main clause of the definition of pain by IASP (International Association for the Study of Pain).

A reconceptualisation of pain and a transvaluation of bodies in pain is supported in this project mainly by suppositious, suggestive, and speculative writing, even though modes of presentation are diverse and configured by different genres and techniques such as drawing, printmaking, text and video essays, readings morphed into performance lectures, mixed-media installations and interventions to name a few. While I attempt for each series of work to have its own unique chain of action or technical logic, integral to them all is the activity of practicing writing. This is a practice which encompasses the ethical strategies of *documenting* and *scripting*. Both terms are conceptualisations underway in my research practice.

[SLIDE 3]

For me, bodies in or out of pain are documenting structures which produces reality at the same time as they are being documented. One of the reasons why I like to work with writing is that it provides the opportunity to negotiate the distribution of intensive parts and features of the documents I encounter. The interplay between reading and writing extends these moments of engagement and interconnectedness with other hurting bodies.

While techniques and logics of action might vary from one work to the next, my artistic material is almost exclusively composed of inorganic *affects* which inhabit the interrelational space between bodies in pain and other social structures, the latter of which a great majority are permeated by ableist norms³. This immaterial content is retrieved from e.g. medical and surgical archives, medical handbooks, and literary biographies.

[SLIDE 4]

For me, pain intensities subsist both in matter and between matter. For any connection we make or relation that we form, even those who pass unnoticed, there must be an intensity belonging to the shared space of the encounter. Mediated by affect, intensities affect us in degrees of joy or sadness in a literal sense. If the favouring of affect as artistic device pertains to my own practice, what is common to all works of art is the potential they hold for creating new forms of affect. In my case, the attempt is to create new forms of sensibility of pain which will encrust the surface of the art work all the while intensity, the ether in which we all bathe, is mediated by affect.

³ The particular relation between non-human affects and bodies in pain is a subject I explore further in the working paper *What Can the Body in Pain Do?* (Willenfelt, 2015).

The agency of the artwork, conceived in a mutually shared space of affect, I call *text-becoming*. A text-becoming is bound up in the writing process, only extended as affective and perceptual visual and textual compounds or blocks of sensations⁴. The affects and percepts created are lived by the audience viewer, reader, or listener. A text-becoming thus transcends borders, as it does not belong to the object of art nor to an individual subject reader but is always a creation of the art work itself (Deleuze & Guattari, 1994). Text-becomings belong to the meeting, to the transience of the encounter, and to the affective space where the sensibility or intense matter of the artwork circulates. Accordingly, writing is actualized in my practice not in the composition of the textual compound work itself but always as an effect on the lives and matter of the audience and the extended milieu where the circulation of art works take place. The degree of actualization of new forms of being of an artwork thus hinges on the interplay between a particular logics of action including the technical choices made in the composition of a work, and the influence of immaterial units, percepts and affects, on the audience⁵.

[SLIDE 5]

In my research practice, scripting, documenting, and text-becoming form a triad of interrelated movements and shifts within the writing process which all contribute to a transformation of biographical content into an individual yet pre-personal life of pain. In rethinking an ethics⁶ of pain relations, scripting and documenting constitute two different qualities of writing the pain of others. Scripting I perceive as a mode of experimentation, and a perspective from the point of view of the individual⁷. It is the occurrence of fabulating from a sub-representational plane. I also relate the concept of scripting to a creative selection which can be regarded as an artistic gesture for overcoming limitations in life. For me as composer

⁴ The constitution of the artwork in forms of blocks of sensation or percepts and affects is articulated by Deleuze & Guattari (1994).

⁵ The aesthetics of scripting and documenting, the specific logic of sensibility with which writing is delivered, is of course hugely impacted by the chosen medium. For example, the video medium and the genre of video/text essaying bring to the work their own history, politics, and aesthetics (see Bärtås, 2010: 43 ff.). Then there is a negotiating process to do with the technical structures of editing; cutting, movement, sound, quality, and motifs. Regarding the latter, the composition of image, sound, and writing requires its own in-depth analysis, which I cannot expand on here in focusing on writing as a key to my methodology.

⁶ In the application of an affective ontology of bodies and matter, I follow a Spinozist definition of the concept of ethics. This approach is further extended by a deleuzo-guattarian onto-ethical critique as well as a *transformative ethics* developed by Rosi Braidotti.

⁷ The individual is here regarded as a process (also *individuation*) rather than a fixed position (See Deleuze 2004 B: 315 ff).

writer, scripting is thus an attitude, a stance, a way of looking compassionately at the world *with* sensation. Unlike the ideational stance (*Wesenschau*) of transcendental subjectivity, scripting looks at the world from a relational, embedded position. Scripting is also the tool I use for framing pieces of chaos; the brightness and darkness, the clear and obscured, the terrors and passions of sensation. It gives affect a place, a body, a universe. Scripting thus enables an engineering of pain intensities.

[SLIDE 6]

In the video and text essay *It's always three o'clock in the morning* (2016) I am scripting the life of Margery Kempe, a layperson and practicing mystic and author of *The Book of Margery Kempe* (written approx. in 1438). The book depicts a woman who is actively engaging in devotional pain practices in an attempt at a union with God. Kempe herself suffered chronic pain, but she also inflicted and reenforced existing pain in what I would describe as a mild form of self-flagellation. Kempe performed her body in pain in the public realm, without sanction or acknowledgement from the Church. In feminists' revisions of her life, she is said to have utilized her body in pain to separate herself from the roles and codes of behaviour imposed on her by patriarchal civic society⁸. It was also a means for her to cultivate her authority as a religious visionary and, I think more importantly; to create a room of her own on her own terms. From a feminist perspective, affirmative moments of ecstatic pain is often regarded as a way to emancipation. A recognised method in contemporary feminist studies, it was adopted by medieval mystics and anchoresses⁹ alike. The stills are excerpts from the video/text essay, intended to convey an idea of how scripting and documenting are performed in my work.

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These renderings are not quotes taken from the book itself but are rather the result of scripting inter-corporeal affects of pain by means of affective reading and a corresponding practice of suppositious, factitious writing. In expositions of my work, pain experiences are often presented from several perspectives and different positions, sometimes they are assuming a first person perspective, sometimes a range of different voices are brought

⁸ In the book, the psychological distress of Kempe is shifting rapidly from psychological to physical pain, from her duties in society as a woman (e.g. sexual duties as a married woman), and dealing with the opposite sex. "Her psychological improprieties (hardship with men) force Margery to a rethorical self-fashioning where she regularly tries to outmaneuver the men she is dealing with (Klages, 2008: 139)".

⁹ Religious, female recluses.

together. Common to them all is that they are conditioned on a pre-personal space of individuation. In *It's always three o'clock in the morning*, the perspective is warped. The viewer is not sure if she is witnessing something from inside or outside. A non-linear narrative describes episodes of pain where the life of pain sometimes emerges as a being of its own. Visually one is walking through a brushy forest laden with snow while subtitles are describing a suffering woman, a creature suffering "like a woman in labour" (Willenfelt, 2016). Later on in the video the perspective changes into a first person narrator describing a woman's bodily condition and its consequences. Pain separates the narrator (narrative perspective) from the world but pain also recreates her (it). The narrator is both self and other in the sense that the pain possesses her but the pain is at the same time separated from the idea of her body. Like writing itself, a life of pain is not a reversion to a pre-linguistic, primal plane. A life of pain is not "outside language, but [rather] the outside of language (Deleuze, 1998:6, my emphasis)". In the work *It's always three o'clock in the morning*, pain becomes something the narrator can tap into: an escape route or a tool.

If scripting is the grounding of writing in my practice, its flip side is documenting; a surfacing abyss or an ungrounding. I define the ethical strategy of documenting as a simultaneous process of disidentification and becoming with the pain of others¹⁰. Both biography and biographer are coming undone in the process. In documenting, there is a two-way course to every relation, a movement which pulls through both directions at the same time. This relation cannot be severed, or yield to dualism. To write with and through the body is a practice that affects not only my - the writer's - relationship to the other, but also the other's relationship to herself and world (as much as it does the writer's). According to Deleuze, when we write, we "become something other than the writer (Deleuze, *ibid.*)". The documenting process synthesizes pain, making a virtual as well as a real record of it. The documenting relationship between bodies in or out of pain is thus distributed equally between the documenting body and the documented other. On the one hand, there is an asymmetrical relationship between the documenting body and the documented other. This relationship is asymmetrical insofar as the documenting body only can live the documented body's deep structure of pain in forms of an affection (it is never able to actually live their pain or to exhaust it). It is a mutual or 'flat' relationship insofar as the compound relation or

¹⁰ Denoting *deteritorialisation* (Deleuze & Guattari, 2004 A, 2009).

assemblage formed between the documenting body and the documented other hinges on a contingent relation between activity and passivity at work in that assemblage. The contingency of pain relations is what is intended to be at work in the dispersion of affects and percepts of the artworks I make. Drawing these together I use the writing strategies of scripting and documenting to create zones of productive indiscernibility between compound bodies and the singularities of sensibility that they embody. In this case, the objective is to dissolve or diffuse any sense of personal biography in order instead to give way to the novelties of a life which subsists underneath but is always co-extensive with the identity of our bodies and organisms. If successful, a shared space for pain and a text-becoming between different modes of being and experience can be attained.

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