

The body performed in genderland

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Abstract

This paper¹ envisages the body wandering in genderland and transforming in the 'Looking-glass', which annihilates boundaries and allows it to play with conventions. It questions various conceptualisations of gender and sexuality with reference to the performed body. Consequently, it looks at the emerging hybridisations resisting the recognised structures and forms. The fantasised body – either trans, hetero or queer – becomes fluid, challenging concepts of gender, sexuality and identity with novel manifestations found on the other side of the mirror, inviting new perspectives on gender. The theatricality of the body will be investigated with references to concepts of the Baudrillardian 'trans', the narcissistic going through the mirror and Hélène Cixous's 'merging' of genders.

Key words: the body, gender, mirror, performance, trans.

Let me quote Alice (in Wonderland):

I'll tell you all my ideas about the Looking-glass House. [...] the books are something like our books, only the words go the wrong way [...] how nice it would be if only we could get through into it [...]

(Carroll 1998: 126, 127)

The next moment Alice found herself on the other side of the 'Looking-glass', where "everything was as different as possible" (ibid: 126, 127). My game with the body begins on this side of the mirror. Nonetheless, I decide to go through the 'Looking-glass', which juggles with vision and provides a valuable perspective on an otherwise unchangeable imprisoned image. Going and looking through the mirror inverses

looks and liberates the body that can finally experience various optical illusions. It can finally enter the 'Looking-glass', which is a threshold between here and there, a Baudrillardian 'swallowed mirror'. It is a space where it is possible to re-dress, trans-vest and explore what is 'other'. Therefore, in this paper I allow myself to go on a journey to the other side of the mirror, where everything is possible –femininity merged with masculinity and illusion with the real. I am giving myself the opportunity to serve you a cocktail of art theory, gender studies and sexuality, perhaps with a hint of philosophy. As the Unicorn talking to Alice once suggested: "You don't know how to manage Looking-glass cakes, the Unicorn remarked. Hand it round first and cut it afterwards" (ibid: 201). Enjoy!

Mirrored passages

When you enter Yayoi Kusama's *Invisible Life* (2000), a site-specific installation, you start wandering in a network of corridors, covered in ninety convex mirrors lining the walls and ceiling. You feel as though you have just fallen down the rabbit hole, towards magic and unexpected sensory experiences and visual distortions. Suddenly, your perception is deceived by the labyrinthine space that seems to have no end. You find yourself in the wonderland with no center comprising of a mirrored environment of reflection, which you constantly traverse. You wander along the corridors into the created illusion of infinity. Your body is reduced and fragmented but its pieces cluster together in the mirror reflection. It becomes distorted and entangled in the realm of glittering surfaces. This bizarre environment absorbs corporeality and dissolves the sense of physicality. At the same time, it melds forms into one another, obliterating the sense of spatiality, foreground or background. Everything becomes possible. All dimensions seem to be projected and accumulated together. They build up and gather, creating basic scaffolding for the examination of concepts of gender, sex and power relations, which are destabilised in this limitless and incalculable space. Hallucinations and visions appearing in the reflected surfaces function beyond the limits of the body, which might become partial, extended or shrunk. It is continuously renewed in the transitional modes of perception. While walking in the narrow corridors, images are fragmented across the mirrored surfaces and obliterated into a full-blown kaleidoscope with myriad of colours and possibilities. The convex mirrors, all round and all dissected by smaller round spheres repeat the often applied by Kusama polka dot motif. According to the artist, it comprises the sun, the

earth and the moon, signifying infinity of the universe and its constant growth, happening in a cyclical motion. This also refers to identity and the self, which re-occur and are composed and repeated again and again in this inexhaustible space. Kusama's reflecting and disorienting corridors entice the viewer. They subtly reference the body, which is continually fragmented across mirrored surfaces. The mirrors lining the internal space allow bodies to slip between recognised structures and forms. They play with the visual, physical and sensory environments and perceptions, destabilising what is known. The body wanders in genderland, being dismantled and liberated from one-dimensionality of gender constructions. Symbols, such as dots or circles, investigate into non-representational forms of identity. Acts of reflecting and mirroring abstract the body, which, even though repeated, extended or aggregated, is being erased and, at the same time multiplied into an infinite and amassed possibilities. The corridor functions as a passage towards multiplicity and the 'Looking-glass', which directs the viewer into another dimension, a mirrored reflection.

Kusama's corridors demonstrate an extended mirrored space, infinite and unbound. They offer a kaleidoscopic perception – fractal, infinite and full of possibilities. Mirrors that function as a threshold between the tangible and the fictional, allow reflecting, revising and disorienting of identity and gender. It seems that the limitless, incalculable space becomes what I propose to call genderland – a realm of illusion and indefiniteness. Kusama's explorations of the never-ending capacity and infiniteness illustrate my concept of the trans-body, which goes through the Looking-glass to become something else. This sense of dissemination of identity and liberation by offering a limitless number of possibilities allows the body to finally explore what happens on the other side of the mirror. Here, it can be whole or fragmented in the mirrors' reflection. It constantly shifts and transforms. The body can attempt to experience the mirror's reality and to immerse itself into the realm of illusion. It can become its perfect equivalent, or its opposite sex, or someone in between. Finally, the body can play with appearances and mould the external image, becoming inexhaustible and continuously re-shaped and re-adjusted. Its reflected representation investigates its own multiplied and ruptured identity.

'Trans'

Let's now look at the concept of 'trans'. Jean Baudrillard suggests that "The orgy is over." (Baudrillard 1989: 46) Sexuality has entered a new era when the search for liberation and sex has been substituted with explorations in the field of gender. This new erotic culture focuses on sexual identity and own definition rather than desire. I investigate this new undefinedness and the mixing of genders, what Baudrillard calls 'Gender benders' (ibid: 47). The current situation of art, culture, politics and social body is called by Baudrillard 'after the orgy' (Baudrillard 2005: 104) – the orgy of modernity that liberated reality, sexuality and critique. Therefore, after Baudrillard, we need to ask "What do we do after the orgy?" (ibid: 104) Is the new trans–sexuality or trans–vestism that centralises on the indistinctness of sexes the solution to the lost singularity? Are we now experiencing the Baudrillardian era of the 'Transsexual'? (Baudrillard 2008: 177)

Baudrillard remarks that the body has travelled from being a metaphor for the soul, then sex to the current stage, when it can be anything (Baudrillard 2002: 7) or, as I would like to suggest any–body – the trans–body. Everything becomes 'trans', "the transpolitical, the transsexual, the transaesthetic" (ibid: 10). The 'trans' destabilises gender binary and deconstructs the paradigm of sex/gender difference. Our specific social, historical and political conditions – described as 'performance in trans' by Kate Bornstein (Bornstein 1994) – makes the body a site of identification rather than otherness. There is no space for the in–between, the situating oneself in the mirror. This possibility of illusion that disappeared together with desire causing the era of 'trans' also refers to the body. A new trans–body has replaced the illusion of it. The body became visible, fragmented and dissected into small particles, as though seen in a kaleidoscope. It often exists in hybridised states of dubious sex and a fluid state of transition. Gender is 'bent' to describe how the inside and the outside persona can be reassessed and appropriately expressed, beyond the traditional notions of sexuality. The body is epitomised as a material, a viable medium, in constant flux that can be forged in order to depict the inner self. These mutations, hybrids or metamorphoses externalise the identity residing inside.

Mirror

Let's come back to the concept of the mirror. Jess Dobkin in her performance piece Mirror Ball at the Performance Mix Festival in New York City (2008–2009) appeared

on a high pedestal wearing a body suit covered in hundreds or thousands of small mirrors, reflecting each other and everything around. The artist turned herself in a circle to a loud pulsating, psychedelic disco beat, invoking the spirit of the 1970s, when disco became the genre of heterosexuals, gays and lesbians, blacks, Latino and other cultural and sexual groups beyond binary limitations. The mirrors, the music genre itself, the spinning around and the dance – everything seemed to multiply and transgress identity, body, gender and reality limitations. Dobkin literally turned herself into a human mirror ball – a glittering specular sphere reflecting light in multiple directions and displaying a distorted image of reality. She functioned as both the mirror and Narcissus, investigating corporeal and psychical vulnerabilities and boundaries. She offered a spectacle of 'Looking-glass' – reflecting, transforming and seeing all the possibilities. The glowing dots dancing around with Dobkin as a rotating mirror ball enchanted a reality somewhere between disco and baroque trompe l'oeil's optical illusions.

In Mirror Ball Dobkin plays with the concept of the mirror. Covered in little reflecting pieces of glass she becomes the mirror herself, creating an alternative visual order. Her body seems to have already been dragged by the Looking-glass, searching for an equivalent reality and liberating itself from the trap of binary structures. Dobkin also goes beyond the concept of narcissism. She recognises alterity in a multiplied image that is finally able to travel from the self to the other through looking back. As such, the mirror mirrors past histories but also functions as a metaphor broken at the threshold between the real and the imaginary. Finally, the mirror becomes a magnifying glass that allows us to finally 'see' the other, a boundary, which transforms into what Mieke Bal calls 'mirroring as a mirror' (Bal 1999: 245), a metaphoric substitution and a new 'hybrid identity' (ibid: 2). It invites to access the other side of the mirror, where gender has become fragmented. Finally, the norms describing its boundaries have the potential to loosen and open. Parts, sections, cuts and appropriations invite us to re-visit the idea of wholeness and completeness and question the terms of gender. Hélène Cixous's 'merger type sexuality' (Cixous 1981: 254) affords a view of the body as a compilation of the feminine and the masculine, beautiful and ugly, psychical and physical. It inscribes desire in an ungendered space – although dissected and cut, it remains constructed from whole yet individual

elements. The 'merger type sexuality' is liberated from phallogentric representationalism and erases oppositions forming the binary. This other sexuality dissolves the distinctions and draws sexuality from any body and any time, desiring "the other for the other, whole and entire, male or female" (ibid: 262).

Dobkin explores the processes of transformation in the 'Looking-glass'. She questions various conceptualisations of gender and sexuality and the emerging hybridisations resisting the known and recognised structures and forms. The fantasised body – either trans, hetero, queer or drag – becomes fluid. This challenges concepts of gender, sexuality and identity with the novel manifestations found on the other side of the mirror, which invites new dimensions, angles and gaze on gender. The baroque, theatricality and sometimes even monstrosity of the body is metamorphosed in the specular reality, which destroys boundaries and allows it to play with conventions. Here, 'trans' becomes a new agenda for identity politics that goes through the mirror and traverses all spheres. I am intrigued by this 'Looking-glass' reality where everything is turned upside down: narcissism into post-narcissism, desire into seduction and the body into trans-body.

Trans-body

To summarize at this point, we have already moved beyond postmodernism and its diffraction towards an otherness of new singularities. The current hybridisation of the body, beauty, politics and economy moves us in the direction of the 'trans' stage – a phase of indistinction, ambiguity and sexual indifference. Postmodernism invited politico-queer subjectivity destroying heteronormative ideologies. This led the body to become porous and enabled it to interact with otherness. The new consequently emerging trans-body desires to go beyond the postmodern subject, which, even though fluid in its subjectivity, is still entrapped in a physical body. Nonetheless, the trans-body is not a playground for baroque and a lack of specificity, where erotic becomes carnivorous. It is seeking a new opticality – look, gaze, image and visibility in an attempt, at the same time, to restore 'otherness' lost by creation of "the hell of the Same" (Baudrillard 2002: 122). My argument establishes that the body has become a vessel for various identities and its external form re-appropriates the external appearance to illustrate an inner otherness. The politics and poetics of 'trans', where the body goes to the other side of its own surface, functioning beyond just materiality, helps to destabilise the body, as though illustrating what Alice once

said: “as for you’, [...] ‘I’ll shake you into...” (Carroll 1998: 234) As such, the body becomes malleable and susceptible to metamorphosis reflecting its identity.

Behind the ‘Looking-glass’

So what exactly happens in the ‘Looking-glass’? The body goes through towards fluidity and excess, challenging concepts of gender, sexuality and identity. As a closing remark, I would like to recall Dobkin’s and Lex Vaughn’s *It’s Not Easy Being Green* performance (2009), re–interpreting Kermit the Frog’s song of the same title. Watching it, I thought of the carnivalesque, monstrosity and puppets. The piece starts with a naked Dobkin sitting motionless, as though she were a marionette, on a bar stool, fashioning herself as Kermit the Frog, painted green except from her red lips, white eyes and a small triangle around her genitals. Cabaret like music is playing loudly, creating a cheerful atmosphere. Next comes Vaughn dressed as a man and rubs lube over her hand, which disappears into Dobkin’s perineum. At that moment Dobkin lip–synchs Kermit’s signature song of learning self–acceptance *It’s not easy bein’ green*.

Here, Dobkin performs genital tricks singing about green identity. The puppeteer directs the marionette but is also playing a straight man. Who is running the show? Is the lip–synching woman mastered by the trans–vested man? Is she defined and directed by the male gaze? Or is it femininity playing masculinity? Is the male gaze annulled by the act of trans–vesting? Does it become unimportant due to ‘greenness’? Everything seems twisted and merged into a body, which is both performed and performs. In the end, the final words of Kermit’s song are: “When green is all there is to be [...] it’s beautiful! And I think it’s what I want to be.” (Raposo 1970)

I have asked before after Baudrillard “what do we do after the orgy?” (Baudrillard 2005: 110) Baudrillard suggests “a masked ball” and a “diffusion”. (Baudrillard 2002: 23) That would mean that the ecstasy and coolness has substituted passion and the mirror is deprived of its depth and transcendence. However, then Baudrillard added that the question actually derives from ‘a story full of hope: it is the story of a man who whispers in the ear of a woman during an orgy, “What are you doing after the orgy?” ‘ (Baudrillard 2005: 110)

I simply hope one dares to look straight on and to go through to the other side of the 'Looking-glass'. I also trust one believes in otherness. As Baudrillard suggests, "There is always the hope of a new seduction." (ibid, 110).

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Author's biography

Basia Sliwinska is an art historian and art theorist with a particular focus on concepts of the body, aesthetics, gender and sexuality. Her work is concerned with processes of transformations and inversions in the mirror, questioning the legitimacy and limits of gender and identity in relation to the body. She is an independent curator and the editor of the international postgraduate student e-journal Re-Visions.

¹ This paper expands and develops ideas from: Sliwinska (2010, 2011) and expands on papers presented at the conference *Reconsidering the Dynamics of "Boundaries": Subjectivity, Community and Co-Existence* at University of Tokyo Center for Philosophy, Japan; and at The Human Condition Series 3rd Biennial International, Multidisciplinary Conference: *EROS 2010* in Bracebridge, Canada, amongst others.