

# Imbalanced Bodies: The Representation of Physical and Psychological Pain in Art

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# ***Imbalanced Bodies: The Representation of Physical and Psychological Pain in Art***

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**A thesis in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts by Research**



**Faculty of Art and Design,  
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## Abstract

This Master of Fine Arts research centres on the idea that the experience of pain – physical or psychological – is invisible and isolated to the external viewer. The research engages the idea that even though the experience and feeling of pain may be beyond language, it is not out of reach of visual, physically based communication. Hence, there is a concentration in the research on how artists create ways of communicating to others experiences of bodily pain and subsequent psychological suffering.

The research also aims to show how performative and visual expressions of pain – through digital video and photography – are able to connect to notions of the ‘imbalanced body’ and investigate the ‘body under stress’. Some of the artists’ work analysed in relation to these themes include Hannah Wilke, Jo Spence, Kate Mitchell, Alicia Frankovich and Pipilotti Rist. The research continues by expanding on the discussion around awareness and acceptance of responsibility in relation to our corporeal bodily reality.

The methodology of the practical research probes what actions we take as individuals to build ourselves up and out of situations of suffering, illness or injury. The practice focuses on the positive transitions the body and self go through whilst shifting forward in this process. As a work of art, *Floored* (photographic and video installation) concentrates on the possibility that a performative digital visual aesthetic is able to express some of the sensation and emotion that bodily pain creates for an individual. As a research project, the installation aims to create a greater understanding of the constant struggle we have with our bodies over time.

Ideas emerging from this Masters of Fine Arts research include the recognition of the importance of visual communications over the spoken word and how they may be more crucial in expressing physical and psychological experiences of pain and suffering. By way of engaging forms we create (photography, performance and video); such visual media allow us to connect more directly with those around us. These visual communications can assist us in our attempt to make everyday bodily and psychological sensations of pain and suffering more widely understood and accessible.

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## Introduction

In chapter one, this thesis investigates the relationship between physical and psychological pain in relation to illness (terminal and non-terminal), and its visual representation in art. Additionally, the thesis examines how the experience of pain can often be at odds with the verbal or textual languages we have at our disposal to communicate. Given the internal nature of physical pain, strategies for visualising the invisible become apparent when working as an artist.

The idea that links the investigation into the discussed themes is the difficulty artists and the everyday individual have in expressing to those around us a true corporeal experience of internal pain – be it physical or psychological. This can be imposed from an external source for the political or discursive purposes of art, or from an uncontrolled source such as a terminal illness or chronic ongoing health conditions. The artists' works being examined in this paper are related by their ability to use the physicality of their real life experiences, connected to the art making process. Each artistic situation aims to communicate the reality of the body's potential for failure and/or the experience of the deteriorating body as a subject matter and material itself. Essentially, the aim of this paper is to further understand how artists reference their negative experiences of ill health, the body under stress or that of the imbalanced body, to create a visual representation that articulates something words are unable to express.

As a part of the discussion in chapter one, a distinction will be made between the motivation behind the controlled, forced impact of pain (violence) versus the individual's uncontrollable personal experience of it. This thesis also examines how the photographic/performance works of Hannah Wilke comment on the representation of physical pain experienced due to internal illness and from a more political standpoint, externally inflicted pain. There will also be a discussion on later photographic and video installation works by Wilke, how they combat the invisibility of her experiences with cancer and the subsequent pain and suffering the disease inflicted. Wilke's work shows an acceptance of physical pain and suffering as conveyed through the powerful, instantaneous connection of photographic and video imagery. These images show that no direct verbal or textual languages are needed by Wilke in communicating to the viewer her real life experiences.

In chapter one, this thesis also investigates how through her photo-therapeutic photographic images, Jo Spence made her illness (breast cancer) the representative subject, in order to communicate the invisible nature of her physical pain. Spence used the medium of photography as a personal and political platform through which she aimed to generate discussion, particularly around shared or unshared experiences to do with the body. This thesis also examines how in Wilke and Spence's practices, their shared goal was to create a visual language by which individualised physical pain could be represented. Their photographs show some evidence that images can sometimes convey more than speech when representing physical pain and illness.

In chapter two, the discussion turns to how Kate Mitchell and Alicia Frankovich's endurance performance pieces – throughout the 2000s until now – relate to the theme of the 'body under stress'. This thesis defines the theme of the body under stress as the injured, stressed and chronically, terminally or non-terminally ill body. Both artists – for the purposes of art – place self-imposed external physical pressures on themselves and place their lives in situations that point to our collective bodily realities. In similar fashion to Wilke and Spence, the video performances of Mitchell and Frankovich make the body the subject and material of their practice.

Consideration is given to how Mitchell and Frankovich use performance as a tool to represent the risks apparent in the lived experience of the body. The discussion inspects the directness of physical action in the performances of Mitchell and Frankovich, and how they represent strongly to the external viewer the fragility and chance of failure available to the body. These artists' performances operate on a level outside of language, in order to represent to the viewer unknown personal sensations of their physical selves being pushed to the exhaustive limit.

The reality of dealing with 'imbalanced bodies' in the video installations of Pipilotti Rist (practising from the 1980s until now) will also be explored in chapter two. This investigation defines the term 'imbalanced bodies' as bodies out of balance physically, psychologically and emotionally. Like Wilke and Spence, Pipilotti Rist's video installations concentrate on communicating to the external viewer the physical, material nature of the body. Her work brings into focus the gravity of the body. The visual imbalances in some of her video works, it could be said, echo those existing in our physical bodies. Rist's sensual works successfully mirror back to us the internal/external, corporeal sensation of living in a body. It will be discussed how upon

viewing Rist's videos, it's clear that visual representation reigns over language as a means of communicating through the relationship between art and a lived bodily reality.

In chapter three, there will be an acknowledgement of where my series of photographs and video performance – *Floored* – may sit amongst the discussed artists' works and ideas. This space where my practice is located is identified as the positive processes and action I take in an art practice perspective and in living, to shift the body and mind through chronic illness into a space that is regenerative. The methodologies employed as a part of creating the photographic and video Installation *Floored* will be explained. These methodologies included experimentation, trial and error, analysis of visual content, editing, and my own observations of personal experiences with pain.



## Chapter 1:

### 1.1 How is it possible to represent pain experienced due to illness visually?

This chapter discusses the experience of physical pain and examines the question: even though we have visual, spoken and/or textual languages to communicate with, can pain have unrepresentable elements? It's the invisible nature of pain that is of interest and this chapter poses the idea that it's possible for photography and video to successfully convey some of the experiences and struggles of a body in pain.

The idea that the experience of pain may be beyond language<sup>1</sup> is addressed in Kerstin Bergman's essay *Under the Aspect of Pain*. Bergman notes "Elaine Scarry stresses, in her book *The Body in Pain* that pain's 'resistance to language is not simply one of its incidental or accidental attributes but it is essential to what it is'."<sup>2</sup> This idea of a resistance to language alone as a means of communication is explored by artist's Hannah Wilke and Jo Spence in relating to the body, physical pain, illness and suffering. This chapter will continue to explore Wilke and Spence's use of photography, performance and video as integral means of creating an alternate way of communicating individual, private pain related bodily experiences in a public manner.

Within public culture at large, photography appears to be useful in communicating bodily sensations of pain to the viewer, albeit in a surface manner. Nieves Pascual mentions in her essay *Photographs as Prostheses*, "In 1991 fashion model Matuschka got cancer. In 1993, she appeared on the cover of the New York Times magazine bearing her mastectomy: 'Beauty out of Damage'. Later that same year she declared that a prosthesis would allow people to forget what happened to her."<sup>3</sup> It's apparent here that the public display of a visible physical mark of pain (a scar or missing body part) can represent to the viewer an individual and collective remembrance of illness

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<sup>1</sup> K Bergman, 'Under the Aspect of Pain', *Witness to Pain, Essays on the Translation of Pain into Art*, Nieves Pascual (ed.), European Academic Publishers, Bern Switzerland, 2005, p. 126.

<sup>2</sup> A Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985, cited in, K Bergman, op. cit., p. 126.

<sup>3</sup> N Pascual, 'Photographs as Prostheses', *Witness to Pain, Essays on the Translation of Pain into Art*, Nieves Pascual, ed., European Academic Publishers, Bern Switzerland, 2005, pp. 60 – 61).

and in part pay homage to the physical and psychological trauma of pain. Moving forward, these marks on the body remain.

This mark on the surface of the body was used by Hannah Wilke in her early work (1974 - 75), *Starification Object Series (S.O.S.)* as a representation of pain experienced, whether it is due to an internal illness or an externally inflicted pain (violence). In this series, Wilke used chewing gum as a material shaped into small stars or vaginas that were applied to the face and torso. These images were displayed as performance based photographic works where Wilke explored “the implications of bringing her full naked body into public view.”<sup>4</sup> It’s this politicised view of the body that is of interest for Wilke. She later “linked the chewing gum ‘scars’ to the branding numbers on the arms of Nazi concentration camp victims,”<sup>5</sup> commenting, “As a Jew, during the war, I would have been branded and buried had I not been born in America. Starification-Scarification.”<sup>6</sup> Again, it’s this acknowledgement of the history of pain, both physical and psychological that stayed a part of Wilke’s practice then and into the future.

In 1975, Wilke spoke directly of the bodily material nature and mortality that her *Starification Object Series* represented.<sup>7</sup> Wilke had earlier worked with latex sculptures and she commented, “I alternate between the idea of some of my works disintegrating ... because it’s hard to admit you are going to die yourself.”<sup>8</sup> This idea of representing the body itself as a (mortal) material continued throughout Wilke’s art practice, which went on to include photographic and videographic documentation of her own struggle with cancer. Wilke listened to Alan Saret’s comments on her practice at the time: “You identify your experience with your material. Your body is a material.”<sup>9</sup> She agreed, “That’s what my chewing gum sculpture is about.”<sup>10</sup> It’s this closely tied relationship to her own body as a material that forms Wilke’s individual visual representation of physical pain and illness.

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<sup>4</sup> Princenthal, Nancy, *Hannah Wilke*, Prestel Verlag, Munich, 2012, p. 50.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid, p. 55.

<sup>6</sup> Ibid, p. 55.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid, p. 50.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> Ibid.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

Nieves Pascual's essay *Photographs as Prostheses* goes on to discuss the photographic artworks of Jo Spence and Hannah Wilke in relation to the representation of pain and illness.<sup>11</sup> The question is how much can the mediums of photography and video visualise the invisibility of pain? Pascual talks about their art practices and the effect on the viewer: "The pictures of Spence and Wilke... prevent the viewer from feeling reflected in the image. They destroy visual pleasure on presenting two subjects alienated from their old, ill and undesirable bodies, and provoke fear at looking intently, but they also claim our commiseration and move us to sympathy."<sup>12</sup> Pascual highlights the issue that in some cases, these images of suffering bodies could alienate the viewer by prompting them to look away from the confrontation they propose. If this is the case, how successful are these images of suffering in truly communicating the experiences of the subject? Maybe the act of looking away shows some truth that the images have made an impact on the viewer.

This inherent political agenda brings forward the way that Hannah Wilke used the processes of her medical treatment and that of the photographic and videographic processes combined to show us what's going on at a private level. In *Rethinking Hannah Wilke*, Sandra Goldman talked about how Wilke – whilst in hospital suffering from cancer – instructed her assistants to take pictures:

"Hey, this is a great shot, I'm not going to lose it, I don't want to lose this shot."  
And about this idea that things we don't see – she was very, very conscious of opening up the hospital walls, and she says at some point in the *Intra-Venus* tapes, "Nobody sees this."<sup>13</sup>

It was this insistence on making the 'private public' that ran as a theme throughout Wilke's artistic career. Wilke was resolute that her practice made visible what is mostly unseen.

Wilke's later *Intra-Venus* photographic series (from 1991-92) connected into this sense of needing to make visible and allow the viewer to see the process of her pain and experience of lymphoma. In the portrait style dual photographs *Intra-Venus Series No. 5, June 10 1992/May 5, 1992*, Wilke is "seated in front of a grey background, her body

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 55 – 73.

<sup>12</sup> Pascual, op. cit., p. 70.

<sup>13</sup> S Goldman, Tom Koshheiser & Griselda Pollock with Tracie Fitzpatrick, 'Rethinking Hannah Wilke', *Hannah Wilke: Gestures*, Tracy Fitzpatrick (ed.), Neuberger Museum of Art, Purchase College, The State University of New York, Purchase, NY, 2009, p. 91.

and face look blasted: her eyes are blank, her chest mottled with broken blood vessels and crisscrossed with plastic tubes.”<sup>14</sup> Princenthal describes further, “In her nostrils are plugs of slightly discoloured cotton; her mouth is open and, most ghastly of all, her tongue is partly skinned by chemotherapy.”<sup>15</sup> In contrast, the juxtaposing image on the right (from May 5, 1992) Wilke shows what the pain and illness has made her feel. Princenthal observes this image of Wilke as “her fury, most explicit in the Medusa-like out-thrust tongue feels truly apotropaic.”<sup>16</sup> Through photographic ‘before’ and ‘after’ shots, Wilke puts on a show of the subsequent physical, emotional and psychological marks. It’s clear in these images that Wilke’s former self has been psychologically ravaged by both the medical treatment and the cancer. Upon viewing these images, the viewer is able to tap into the intense sense of grief and loss they hold.

In the *Intra-Venus Series* photographs, Wilke is unafraid of showing her gradual decline. According to Princenthal, Wilke seems to say through these images, “Take a good look.”<sup>17</sup> Wilke invites the viewer to see, instead of hear or read about what she’s experiencing. This comes again to the possibility that expressing the physical feeling and bodily sensation of pain could be more successful by using means other than language itself. Princenthal brings up Elaine Scarry’s argument in relation to language and pain. “Scarry writes that intense pain is wordless, being exceptional, it isn’t well represented in memory and can’t be accurately evoked by verbal description, however graphic.”<sup>18</sup> Wilke’s *Intra-Venus* photographic series relied more on the instantaneous strength of an image to communicate her experiences with chemotherapy and the pain of cancer. For example, in *Tree of Life: Red, Yellow and Blue* (1992), Wilke created a triptych of three coloured photographs as the title denotes. The images show Wilke looking gaunt and clearly suffering the side effects of chemotherapy; we see her “facing right, left and centre, her hair an iridescent tangle against contrasting neon backgrounds of cyan, ruby and sallow gold.”<sup>19</sup> It’s these strikingly colourful yet clinical style images that show the importance of visual information in giving the viewer a hint of a life being lived through trauma.

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<sup>14</sup> Princenthal, op. cit., p. 111.

<sup>15</sup> Princenthal, op. cit., p. 111-112.

<sup>16</sup> Princenthal, op. cit., p. 112.

<sup>17</sup> Princenthal, op. cit., p. 113.

<sup>18</sup> A Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1985, cited in, Princenthal, op. cit., p. 113.

<sup>19</sup> Princenthal, op. cit., p. 116.

Scarry's view of pain and suffering is echoed by Ellen Corin. Speaking more broadly on suffering, Corin explains how it "challenges the limits of language as a medium for translating the experience: suffering lies in part in a realm beyond language and is ultimately unknowable to someone else."<sup>20</sup> It's this dilemma of the 'unknowable' element of pain (for the viewer) that becomes apparent. This phenomenon also occurs in relation to the use of visual images as a means of representation. To some extent, it seems true that images as well as language are unable to fully communicate another's pain. It's clear that pain, by its very personal nature has elements that to a point are unable to be represented.

Princenthal acknowledges the spaces between pain, its representation and memory. She says of language and its representation of pain, "Oceans of ink have nonetheless been spilled in the effort [of remembering it]."<sup>21</sup> Applying this rationale to visual imagery she continues, "The same might be said of pictures: when about pain, they refer us to an experience that, even for those who have shared it, isn't readily available for recall."<sup>22</sup> The aspect of memory is added as a part of the equation when creating a representation of pain. A sequence that in some cases may come to a blank when attempting to accurately recall and represent previously lived through pain. It's the invisible nature of pain coupled with the failings of memory that make it so difficult to convey in a direct manner.

One of Wilke's final media based installations, the *Intra-Venus Tapes* (1990 -1993) uses the device of non-linear narrative on a grand scale as a means of combating the invisibility of her experiences of pain, illness and suffering. The *Intra-Venus Tapes* video installation is "shown as a sixteen monitor installation" containing "over thirty hours of imagery, including serene footage taken on trips out of New York City – and also passages showing an industrious Wilke working on the 'B.C.' faces or installing exhibitions."<sup>23</sup> The videotapes conversely show "footage of the artist in the hospital brushing her thinning hair, sleeping, throwing up" and are described as "alternately harrowing, banal, poignant and funny."<sup>24</sup> This installation uses the medium of video to effect and its multi-channel capabilities to convey Wilke's feelings and impressions simultaneously to the viewer. Princenthal even goes so far as to suggest the *Intra-*

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<sup>20</sup> Corin, Ellen, *From Another Stance: Suffering as Limit Experience and Field of Paradoxes*, Pain and Suffering Interdisciplinary Research Network, viewed on 11/11/2013, [www.english.ubc.ca/Projects/Pain/Dcornin.htm](http://www.english.ubc.ca/Projects/Pain/Dcornin.htm).

<sup>21</sup> Princenthal, op. cit., p. 113.

<sup>22</sup> Princenthal, op. cit., pp. 113-116.

<sup>23</sup> Princenthal, op. cit., p. 118.

<sup>24</sup> Princenthal, op. cit., p. 122.

*Venus Tapes* are a “rapturous, life-flashing-before-one’s-eyes complication of all that mattered [to Wilke]”<sup>25</sup>. There is clearly a genuine communication and connection with the viewer in this piece, especially for Princenthal to have picked up on the phenomena of seeing “life before one’s eyes,” which Wilke as a cancer patient herself may have experienced.

Wilke’s *Intra-Venus Tapes* are significant in that they convey a total acceptance of her life situation and sufferings. Princenthal explains the tapes “are also a blinding, raging protest against that enormity’s loss, and, in the somehow harmonious orchestration of all that, testimony to a truly remarkable degree of acceptance.”<sup>26</sup> It’s this acceptance of pain and illness that, in this case, seems to be more easily conveyed through video imagery — more so than language alone. These videotapes show action in an immediate manner and how Wilke was able to continue existing on a day-to-day basis. They communicate to the viewer an idea of how she coped psychologically with life during the illness.

Wilke had the courage to use the directness of photographic and video processes to “represent both ... the body triumphant and ruinously assailed.”<sup>27</sup> Princenthal goes on to discuss Wilke’s art practice in relation to Susan Sontag’s critique on illness – *Illness as a Metaphor* (1977): “Like Sontag, Wilke insists on exploring and expressing the body’s most insistent and powerful conditions which ultimately refuse to submit unreservedly to language.”<sup>28</sup> Sontag thinks that physical illness is not something that can be controlled by analysis with words. Princenthal explains, “Sontag railed against the trend toward ‘Psychologising’ illness, which offers a false sense of control over disease and thereby undermines its reality.”<sup>29</sup> In other words, chronic and terminal illness will still be there after it’s been talked about it. Ultimately, it’s the afflicted person and the illness itself that have a dialogue together. For this reason, illness is an isolating experience and it’s this element that seems to have been one of the driving forces behind Wilke’s insistence on capturing it on photographic film and videotape, and displaying its totality.

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid..

<sup>28</sup> S. Sontag, *Illness as a Metaphor*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, N. Y, 1978, cited in Princenthal, op. cit., p. 123.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

English art practitioner Jo Spence also worked with photography imagery as a means of exploring – from a political standpoint – the isolating aspects of pain and illness. Anna Lovatt explains Spence's approach by saying, "Spence rejected the term 'artist', preferring to describe herself as a 'photographer' or 'cultural sniper'."<sup>30</sup> Lovatt describes Spence's production as "characterized by a patent indifference to the market and an emphasis on the use-value of photography – as document, political statement, educational device, and therapeutic tool."<sup>31</sup> Between 1980 and 1982, Spence had worked with her partner and collaborator, Terry Dennett on a series titled *Remodelling Photo-History*. Dennett commented on Spence's approach to photography, saying she believed that "the photograph should never be a finished or closed art object, rather it should always function as a jumping off point which continually directed us towards situations that existed in real life outside of the photographic frame."<sup>32</sup> It was the real life experience and diagnosis of her breast cancer in 1982 that pushed Spence to create the photographic series *The Picture of Health?* (1982-86).

Like Wilke, Spence made her illness the tangible subject in order to delve into the invisible nature of individual pain. Spence's image *Mammogram* – with text *Putting myself in the picture* – shows her in the process of having a mammogram test taken. Spence stated, "I determined to document for myself what was happening to me. Not to be merely the object of their medical discourse but to be the active subject of my own investigation."<sup>33</sup> It was important for Spence to create her own understanding of what was happening; she used her own style of photographic documentation, which was separate from the medical picture being created for her by the mammogram (medical) machine. Maria Walsh wrote about Spence's *The Picture of Health?* (1982-86) series, saying, "It is still empowering to witness her subjectivisation of the alien experience of illness, especially in relation to our current medical climate (England 2012) that cajoles us to take control of our bodies so that governing bodies can abdicate responsibility."<sup>34</sup> Spence's *The Picture of Health?* (1982-86) speaks to the isolating effect of illness, pain and suffering of which the images are an attempt to combat.

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<sup>30</sup> Lovatt, A. 'Jo Spence', *Artforum International* 51.2 (Oct 2012), p. 276.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, p. 276.

<sup>32</sup> Bell, S E. 'Photo Images: Jo Spence's Narratives of living with Illness', *Health (London)*, 2002 6:5, p. 17, <http://www.heal.sagepub.com/content/6/1/5>, viewed on 6/11/2013.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 15.

<sup>34</sup> Walsh, M., 'Jo Spence: Work (Part I & II)', *Art Monthly*, Jul/Aug 2012, issue 358, p. 30.

For Spence, this was her own form of 'phototherapy'. Watney commented that Spence's "photo-therapeutic work proceeds from our attitudes to health, to our bodies, and to those institutions which regulate them."<sup>35</sup> Spence's work through the 1980s was also a critique on the English public health system and how individuals were put in a position where they had to comply with the existing systems in relation to their bodies and illnesses, and how they were to be dealt with. In a review of Spence's artwork Walsh explains: "In the 1980s, taking responsibility for one's physical and psychical health was, as is exemplified in this exhibition - Jo Spence: Work (part I & II), an alternate stance to the dominant structures of power, not an order from them."<sup>36</sup> It's clear from Spence's personal decisions in relation to the management of her illness and her photographic practice itself that she subscribed to the second wave of feminist theory that claimed, "The personal is political."<sup>37</sup>

Similar to Wilke, Spence used photographic processes to mentally and emotionally *deal* with the physical effects on her body and personal self. As Lovatt describes, "In *Infantilization* (1984), Spence externalized the feelings of regression engendered by her hospitalisation by posing in a baby's bonnet and sucking on a pacifier."<sup>38</sup> Here, Spence is visualising the invisible effects of pain and illness by documenting a role-play that expresses underlying emotions. Lovatt continues, "Rather than simply documenting her illness, such photographs provided a means of processing previously unexpressed emotions."<sup>39</sup> This points to other questions such as, if we looked at visual documentation of illness in the medical format of photographic imagery, would it convey a genuine experience of that illness to the viewer? And, do Wilke and Spence's images of illness and pain convey to the viewer these underlying experiences? In contrast to this idea, Spence had commented in relation to portrait photographic representations, "There is no peeling away of layers to reveal a 'real' self, just a constant reworking process."<sup>40</sup> Is it that these photo representations of pain and illness are merely a form of therapy for the sufferer? Maybe they are simultaneously forms of communication and therapy.

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<sup>35</sup> Watney, S., 'Jo Spence', *History Workshop* (No 21, Spring, 1986), p. 210-212, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4288705>, viewed on 7/11/2013.

<sup>36</sup> Walsh, M. op. cit., p. 30.

<sup>37</sup> Bell, S. E. op. cit. p. 11.

<sup>38</sup> Lovatt, op. cit., p. 276.

<sup>39</sup> Lovatt, op. cit., p. 276.

<sup>40</sup> Bell, S. E. op. cit. pp. 13 - 14.



Spence had specific intentions about how her photographs were to interact with viewers. Bell explained:

Spence believed that she and the audience have a responsibility to one another. The responsibility of the audience is to take the photographs beyond the frames, to incorporate them into their own experiences, to use them as a means of linking their personal experiences with hers, and beyond hers, such as to those of other women, workers, patients, doctors and families.<sup>41</sup>

Spence's art practice had a large emphasis on connecting to community and closely interrogated the social issues surrounding women's bodies, the health system and the way it dealt with illness. Spence was driven by the need to create a dialogue with her audience; however, when it came to the investigative approach of her later practice into her cancer, she came up against resistance. Bell noted, "Spence struggled to find a language for representing her experiences with breast cancer in order to be able to have dialogues. Looking back, she told Grover (in a 1991 interview) that the more silence there was from audiences, the more determined she was to be heard."<sup>42</sup> Essential to Spence's practice was the notion of giving herself and others a platform to connect, voice and create discussion around shared or unshared experiences to do with the body.

Spence's early practice also concentrated around the need to encourage audiences to see past what information traditional photographic portraiture representations provided. This approach was apparent in an exhibition entitled *Beyond the Family Album* (1979) in which Spence, in her own words, began to "question photographs, asking not what we think they show us... but also what they don't (can't?) show us."<sup>43</sup> For example, Spence displayed two photographs in the exhibition with the text *Family Album 1934 to 1979*. As Bell explains, one of these photographs was taken when "she was eight and half months old, and the other 'five hundred and twenty eight months later', when she was 40."<sup>44</sup> In both of these images, Bell describes Spence as "...nude, lying on her belly, one leg extended behind her and the other slightly bent over it."<sup>45</sup> Part of the question put forward by placing these two images side by side is, what happened in between eight and a half months and age 40? These images reinforce "Spence's

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 12.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid, p. 19.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid, p. 13.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

argument about visibility and invisibility, and of the problem of showing a wider context.”<sup>46</sup> As Spence’s practice developed, she continued to place an emphasis on incorporating this wider context surrounding photographic imagery in relation to English social history.

This approach of showing an experience of what is unseen was being used by Spence and Dennett from a more political standpoint in the earlier images and text projects *Remodelling Photo-History* (1980-82). One of the images in this series was titled *The History Lesson: Self as Image* in which Spence “brings together a closely detailed photograph of a woman’s foot, swollen and squashed, next to the plain brick doorway of a typical small tenement house, holding a broom.”<sup>47</sup> As Simon Watney describes:

The first image immediately locates itself within the domain of medical photography, whilst the second – given that the woman is naked from the waist up – plays off against the style of classic British anthropological photo-documentary, invoking that which we realise such imagery represses, and never shows.<sup>48</sup>

In part, this strategy of images combined with text was taken into Spence’s later works, which dealt more directly with the body and illness.

In *Remodelling Photo-History* (1980-82) Spence and Dennett discussed how text and image “both address memory – that which is considered unthinkable/unspeakable, censored from consciousness, and that which in terms of class/power is *rendered invisible*, not spoken about or shown, and often is indeed actively suppressed.”<sup>49</sup> This shows that Spence’s practice was already dealing in this *modus operandi* of visualising the invisible by using the juxtapositioning of different photographic representations and styles. It’s of interest in this case, that together, language (text) and representation (photography) could be a more effective way of communicating what’s absent, as opposed to only using one expression (language) or the other (imagery) to connect viewers to an individual experience.

Spence understood the divide between the representation of the body and the corporeal body itself. Lovatt describes how, within the series *The Picture of Health?*

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Watney, S. op. cit. p. 212.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Watney, S. op. cit. p. 212.

(1982-86), Spence “captured the painful disjunction between the theories of photographic representation in which she had been immersed, and the blunt facticity of her diseased body.”<sup>50</sup> Lovatt points here to the problem of photographic representation and how it operates at a distance from the facts of reality (Spence’s reality of living with a diseased body). Spence realised her body was not “an image, or an idea, or a psychic structure.”<sup>51</sup> Spence clearly acknowledged the difference between the independent devices of image, concept and mind, with that of the experience of being ill and in pain.

Bell observed that Spence’s photographic images “contain problems associated with narrative concerning ‘truths’ and ‘representation’.”<sup>52</sup> Bell goes on to explain that Spence’s photograph *Mammogram*, “raises doubts about the meaning and consequences of ‘documentation’”<sup>53</sup> and “questions how much control Spence has over her body once it is constructed as the body of a patient.”<sup>54</sup> In this case, Spence’s example of bodily documentation and representation points back to issues of power and control from a personal standpoint, against that of the state’s traditional medical system. Whose representation is more real or exact? It depends on the perspective you are coming from; this is what Spence strove to make clear – that as patients, we can make our own approach real on an individual level.

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<sup>50</sup> Lovatt, op. cit., p. 276.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

<sup>52</sup> Bell, S. E., op. cit. p. 23.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Bell, S. E., op. cit. p. 16.

## Chapter 2:

### 2.1 The Body Under Stress

This chapter will discuss two artists' work that investigate the idea of the 'body under stress'. The first of these artists is Kate Mitchell, whose video installations *Get Into It* (2012) and *Lucky Break* (2013) both display the effort and risk the body takes when it (literally) 'works' on something.<sup>55</sup> When positioned under intense stress and pressure, the body and mind – in a particular set of circumstances – may be placed at significant risk of injury.

Kate Mitchell's *Lucky Break* (2013) is a seven-channel, synchronised video installation that shows the artist physically breaking or jumping through a pane of glass. This breakthrough action is repeated seven times over with each channel of video tinted in its own distinct colour and back projected onto panels. These surfaces are conjoined at the edges to create a video installation that you can walk around the outside of, following the sequence of the synchronised movement as you go. The movement of your own body with the movement of Mitchell breaking through the glass seems to give the viewer a more energised, dizzying experience of the action itself.

For Mitchell, *Lucky Break* was about "a longing for, a kind of reaching my full capacity feeling at the edge of myself. What I am capable of and what is it to feel very much in the present moment and to be fully and completely alive."<sup>56</sup> This want to "be in the present moment" is similar to the idea of mindfulness. Mindfulness means, "Maintaining a moment-by-moment awareness of our thoughts, feelings, bodily sensations, and surrounding environment. When we practice mindfulness, our thoughts tune into what we're sensing in the present moment rather than rehashing the past or imagining the future."<sup>57</sup> It's this action of putting yourself physically and mentally 'on the spot' that is of interest to my own research, to be discussed later in this paper.

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<sup>55</sup> B Dean, 'Kate Mitchell, Escape Artist', *NEW12*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Southbank, VIC, Australia, 2012, p. 42.

<sup>56</sup> K Mitchell 'Interview with Kate Mitchell about *Lucky Break* for *The Space Between Us* Anne Landa Award for Video and New Media Arts 2013', Art Gallery of New South Wales TV, Sydney viewed on 29/07/2013, [www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/channel/clip/478](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/channel/clip/478).

<sup>57</sup> 'What is Mindfulness?' The Greater Good Science Centre at the University of California, Berkeley 2013, viewed on 29/09/2013, <http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/topic/mindfulness/definition>.

Mitchell goes on to explain that *Lucky Break* is “a myth busting of actions. There is this gap between intent and outcome. Things go according to a plan, not the plan. In that space, that’s where risk and chance and happiness preside. It’s about the remembrance of the precariousness of life.”<sup>58</sup> Mitchell further explored this idea of the “remembrance of the precariousness of life”<sup>59</sup> in the single channel high definition projection piece titled *Get Into It* (2012). Bec Dean gives a description:

On the wall of the ACCA (Australian Centre for Contemporary Art) gallery space, a billboard-sized video projection shows the artist scaling the computer-generated façade of a fortress-like building with the assistance of toilet plungers. Mitchell’s progress up the wall challenges basic laws of physics, and eventually she disappears into one of the ‘windows’.<sup>60</sup>

Dean goes on to discuss how in this video Mitchell defies gravity and escapes failure,<sup>61</sup> unlike other situations where the artist usually sets herself up for a physical fall. This ‘set up’ is evident again in the video performance piece titled *In a Situation* (2011) a single channel high definition video. In a rural setting, complete with cows grazing in the background, Mitchell sits - facing the camera/viewer - on a wooden plank that protrudes out from the window of small brick building. In her left hand, Mitchell brandishes a saw, which she proceeds to use to cut herself down from a height that looks to be easily more than her body length. Again, Mitchell puts herself at personal physical risk whilst ‘working’ at something.

The performance continues and we see Mitchell succeed at cutting herself down from the window and tumble to the ground in one piece. After viewing, you are left to ask yourself, why would Mitchell make herself ‘walk the plank’ in this all-knowing manner? It could be that by deliberately placing herself in harm’s way, i.e., – *In a Situation*, Mitchell is emphasising that at times in life we will no doubt find our physical selves at risk simply due to circumstances controlled or uncontrollable.

It’s the deliberate physicality of Mitchell’s practice that’s most poignant and its focus on the reality of having a body. It’s about what actions we force or choose for ourselves to do – with our body – and what actions the institution of “work” physically directs us to do. For example, it may be as physically risky sitting at desk in front of a computer for

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<sup>58</sup> K Mitchell op. cit., [www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/channel/clip/478](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/channel/clip/478).

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> B Dean, op. cit., p 42.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

eight hours a day, five days a week – where injuries can occur from repetitive actions and lack of movement – as it is cutting yourself down from a plank at height. Whatever physical action we take — or do not take — can have elements of bodily risk involved. Mitchell's videos pose questions such as, what actions validate our physical nature and what makes us worthwhile or is worth doing for ourselves?

Dean comments further about work and the self in relation to Mitchell's practice. "The combination of banality and absurdity in the work of Kate Mitchell encourages a deeper engagement with the stuff of her work, its materiality and its ability to represent her as an artist and as a fallible anti-hero."<sup>62</sup> Mitchell's videos refer directly back to herself, almost like a parody of what it is to be in the body of an artist: the sensation of having to 'put yourself out there' or literally 'hang' a piece of yourself in front of an audience and subsequently knowing the self is in some way being held up for criticism. There is always the potential for failure and the threat of human error is ever-present. Humanity is physically highlighted by Mitchell's performance practice.

Dean also speaks to the medium of photography and digital video in Mitchell's practice. Dean describes *Get Into It* as, "It is as if mock-stone walls are flattened by the act of filming, and Mitchell's self-representation – of personal failure or success – is simply a question of choice."<sup>63</sup> Dean further discusses Mitchell's use of technology: "Through flattening processes using re-photography and video, she (Mitchell) questions the relationship of photo-media to reality."<sup>64</sup> Mitchell creates fabrications within fabrications; in no way are her videos and their digital nature trying to be real. However, the constant real element in them is her physical self, her body. The performative action of the 'body under stress' is central to Mitchell's practice.

Alicia Frankovich's art practice connects with that of Mitchell's as it too explores themes of the body under stress and its natural potential for failure. The media release from the Anne Landa Award for Video and New Media Arts 2013 exhibition at the Art Gallery of New South Wales introduces Frankovich's range of practice, saying it "appropriates movements and gestures from sport, dance, art history and cinema in her performances, video documentation and sculptural installations."<sup>65</sup> Artspace New

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.

<sup>64</sup> Ibid.

<sup>65</sup> C Martin, 'Anne Landa Award for Video and New Media Arts 2013', The Art Gallery of New South Wales, 2013, viewed on 29/07/13, [www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/media-office/space-between-us/](http://www.artgallery.nsw.gov.au/media-office/space-between-us/).

Zealand comments in relation to Frankovich's background: "Formerly a National level gymnast, the possibility of striving for the achievement of perfection is dichotomized by its counterpoint, failure."<sup>66</sup> Frankovich's practice has strong ties to what Mitchell investigates, in particular the idea that when we put our bodies to work, over time they are bound to fail. When pushed to the point of injury, the body is physiologically in a place of crisis.

Artspace NZ noted that Frankovich's performance events "are densely layered with other references – the history of stamina in performance art" and "also the calculated movement of theatre and dance, and the physical occupation of architectural space."<sup>67</sup> Frankovich says the title of the Artspace NZ project *A Plane for Behavers* (2009), "insinuates a kind of activity which is misbehaving."<sup>68</sup> The project took the form of three separate performances, the first of which involved both the artist and the director of the gallery, Emma Bugden. Ellen Blumenstein described when speaking with Frankovich how the forced failure of the body was evident throughout the one-hour duration of the performance. In *A Plane of Behavers*, Emma Bugden "had to pull" Frankovich "up on a block and tackle until [they] were both physically entirely exhausted."<sup>69</sup> Similar to Mitchell the question arises, why would Frankovich deliberately place herself and the curator under such physical stresses?

Frankovich commented on the deeper impact on both bodies involved in the performance of *A Plane for Behavers – Performance One*: "Emma became increasingly more exhausted as the hour progressed with some 12 suspensions. Some criticised the level of pressure put on the curator, but my part was equally taxing though in a different way and perhaps less visibly; the harness pulled on my arteries and cut some of the blood flow making me weak and light-headed."<sup>70</sup> It's this highlighting of the fragility of the body when it's under repeated, intense pressure that is clearly brought forward here. Frankovich's personal revelation of what was occurring physiologically to her body during the performance, links to the previously discussed theme of 'visualising the invisible reality of pain'.

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<sup>66</sup> Artspace NZ, 'Alicia Frankovich, A Plane for Behavers', 16 May - 27 June', 2009, 2007 – 2013, viewed on 12/10/2013, <http://www.artspace.org.nz/exhibitions/2009/aliciafrankovich.asp>.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid, <http://www.artspace.org.nz/exhibitions/2009/aliciafrankovich.asp>.

<sup>68</sup> Artspace NZ, op. cit., <http://www.artspace.org.nz/exhibitions/2009/aliciafrankovich.asp>.

<sup>69</sup> E Blumenstein, 'Monographic Essay on Alicia Frankovich: Behavers, A conversation between Alicia Frankovich and Ellen Blumenstein, artnews.org, 2013, viewed on 12/10/2013, <http://www.artnews.org/ellenblumenstein/?t=7266>.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid, p 2.

In this performance, external stressors are shown to have played a part in bringing to the surface internal struggles. One struggle is happening underneath the skin of each body and the other is occurring behind what the viewer sees: two individuals pulling against the weight of each other. My research is also concerned with what we do to recover or cope in states of crisis or. There will be a discussion later in this paper about the hidden reserves of positive energy and stamina we draw upon to revive ourselves, and escape or survive spaces of stress.

Another performance by Frankovich, *Floor Resistance*, held at Hebbel Am Ufer, HAU 3, Berlin (2011) also speaks literally to what we are made of. Frankovich describes what she intended for the performance: “My piece at the HAU will have an orchestra inverted lying horizontally, spread out on the stage playing instruments with the physical interruption of the floor restraining full movement.”<sup>71</sup> Using the position and occupation of the body, Frankovich further emphasises the sensation of being in a body. She explains:

Where the musicians play the instruments on top of their bodies, the altered physical state of the musician might make one see the body as a real active body of flesh and blood, as opposed to merely a musician who plays as normal. The function of these bodies as playing music becomes secondary to their live being.<sup>72</sup>

Thus, Frankovich is aiming for the audiences to be reminded that the performers are human *before* they are musicians. This relates back to *A Plane for Behavers – Performance One* (2009), with the curator at Artspace NZ, a piece that was also about ensuring the audience realised that the two bodies, as humans were ‘fallible’.

Frankovich’s performances focus on the performer’s body in direct relation to the audience’s physical bodies. She explains further:

There is a constant exchange between the participant (the viewer) and the participant (the work). The audience doesn’t have time to cognitively think about their reactions or response; they aren’t viewing as detached from their physical engagement with the work. I am encouraging the breaking down of the gap between the work and the affect (sic) on the body, how they can experience or

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<sup>71</sup> E Blumenstein, op. cit., p 4.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.



perceive it. The aesthetic experience is influencing their body rather than a mental decision.<sup>73</sup>

To some degree, Frankovich's intention is to take viewers out of their minds and into their own bodies. She encourages her audiences to think less when engaging with her performances. This again links back to Mitchell's performance of *Lucky Break* (2013), in which she highlighted a need to be mentally in the present moment, to feel fully alive.

There are other performances of Frankovich's where this direct physical engagement of the audience with the performance is developed. This is evident in Alicia Frankovich's most recent performance *Free Time* (2013). The Art Gallery of New South Wales describes the performance as a choreographed, "live series of spontaneous performances by invited participants."<sup>74</sup> Upon looking at the video documentation of *Free Time*, the action is as follows:

On the ground level of the Art Gallery of New South Wales, we see a woman on the floor performing her yoga practice, she is amongst others sitting on the floor reading with laptops or other paper based material. There are many others who are a part of the audience standing around the periphery; we hear a call for silence and two joggers run into the space and stand still trying to catch their breaths.

Next, a couple of Qantas air stewards – in uniform – stroll through the central space, effortlessly wheeling their baggage along. Following them, our focus is shifts to a man looking intently through a set of binoculars. Then two bicycle riders run swiftly through the foyer into the ground floor, holding up their bikes. Placing the bikes down, they take a rest, leaning onto the bikes. The space becomes more and more crowded as two teams of what look like young football players use the space for a training session. As the performance comes to a close, the area becomes packed with bodies and it's difficult to determine who is an audience member and who is a part of the choreographed performance. The Performance of *Free Time* (2013) becomes an investigation into how people interact with different groups, within enclosed spaces and in relation to the actions or behaviours they generate in such situations.

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<sup>73</sup> E Blumenstein, Op. cit., p 3.

<sup>74</sup> The Art Gallery of New South Wales YouTube Channel, 'Free Time' a performance by Alicia Frankovich, published on 17 Jun 2013, viewed on 12/10/2013, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=g1V3PirXGi0>.

This involvement of the audience in Frankovich's performances is key to her way of communicating her message of social interconnectedness. This was clear in the performance, *SEMPRE MENO, SEMPRE PEGGIO, SEMPRE PIÙ* (2008), which "means less and less, worse and worse, more and more."<sup>75</sup> As Ellen Blumenstein described the performance to Frankovich: "For a performance at an Italian gallery Le Case d'Arte you constructed a bike with two sets of pedals and put it on the floor. The gallerist Pasquale Leccese and you were pedalling 'against' each other till the bike broke and you couldn't continue."<sup>76</sup> Again, there is a display of friction and failure, where the body or other sculptural object is pushed to breaking point. Frankovich's research regularly focuses the action on a contest that simultaneously focuses the audience's attention collectively - as in sport - on one point.

Frankovich recalls the spontaneous interaction with the audience that occurred during the performance, *SEMPRE MENO, SEMPRE PEGGIO, SEMPRE PIÙ* (2008):

The floor was of course traditional Milanese marble and the bike made some quite chaotic sounds when the frame kept hitting the tiles. The people gathered around and even sang, and at times cheered to build more momentum in the mode of a theatre. At the time it didn't feel like an intimate situation, but more like a sports competition or battle of some sort. It felt like a happening. Some people viewed from the window outside.<sup>77</sup>

As we can hear from Frankovich's recollection of the performance, it's clear that the audience could relate as a group, as one body and on a one to one basis, with the competition occurring between the artist and her gallerist colleague.

There is a video documentation of this performance, *SEMPRE MENO, SEMPRE PEGGIO, SEMPRE PIÙ* (2008) that registered a more singular pointed experience. Frankovich explains her view of the video: "I think perhaps the video looks more intense than the piece itself for the witnesses, as the camera looks directly down onto the floor at the 2 bodies."<sup>78</sup> This comment makes me think of the way that a performance is transposed into the space within the frame of a camera. Clearly, the bird's eye view that the video footage showed in relation to the actions of the bodies had an impact on the way the performance was perceived. The viewing of the

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<sup>75</sup> E Blumenstein, Op. cit., p 3.

<sup>76</sup> E Blumenstein, Op. cit., p 2.

<sup>77</sup> E Blumenstein, Op. cit., p 3.

<sup>78</sup> Ibid.

documentation in this format created a greater sense of bodily detachment (from the performance) for the viewer, in comparison with being physically onsite, directly experiencing the performance.

Frankovich's performance practice has further explored film and video. She explains her personal interest in these mediums: "I think when using video and film I remain a strong participant in the work, and my presence is still very much felt."<sup>79</sup> This interest in the recorded perspective is brought to the fore in Frankovich's first 35 mm piece *Volution* (2011). The artist statement on Frankovich's Vimeo website describes *Volution* like this: "Frankovich set up a boxing scene that morphs into a dance at Berlin's Kottbusser Tor. Loosely citing a boxing scene from Charlie Chaplin's *City Lights*, the roles of the boxer and referee becomes confused. She both constructs and participates in a scenario that is simultaneously spontaneous and controlled."<sup>80</sup> *Volution* reinforces a pattern of performance construction that Frankovich relies on, where spontaneous and controlled elements combine. The themes of 'chaos' and 'structure' are ongoing throughout her practice.

Frankovich describes more of *Volution* on her Vimeo site: "A group of dilettante and trained figures including a Street University kid, a dancer, impulsively-invited friends and the artist herself, all swing and turn in multiple rotations."<sup>81</sup> With the use of a 35 mm film camera, we notice the traceability of the bodies and their interrelated movements. In review of a solo exhibition at Starkwhite gallery (NZ) titled *Bodies and Situations*, which included *Volution*, Emily McCormack explains: "Frankovich highlighted the collisions that occur when the body is positioned within instructive or containing paradigms, examining the latent socio-personal machinations that are laid bare by these moments of friction."<sup>82</sup> It's this capturing of an awareness of each character's space – depending on their position in society - and the interruption of their body's immediate zone/s that is key in this performance.

Cormack also analysed it as, "These experiments have given the artist (Frankovich) a nomenclature of bodily notations and symbols that allow her to articulate intangible

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> A Frankovich, 'Alicia Frankovich – Volution (edit)', 02/2013, viewed on 11/10/2013, <http://vimeo.com/58379912>.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid, <http://vimeo.com/58379912>.

<sup>82</sup> E Cormack, 'Alicia Frankovich at Starkwhite', published on 01/05/2012, viewed on 12/10/2013, <http://www.frieze.com/issue/review/alicia-frankovich/>.

human impulses and essences.”<sup>83</sup> This connects to earlier discussion about visualising the invisible when it comes to biological processes (such as pain), of which we cannot automatically grasp an understanding when only investigating on an external level. This idea of having a set of ‘bodily notations’ with which to relate will also be discussed when dealing with the theme of ‘imbalanced bodies’.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid, p 1.

## 2.2 Imbalanced Bodies

This section will discuss the experience of 'imbalanced bodies' in the video installation by Pipilotti Rist and in the following methodology chapter, there will be an investigation into how my research performance video work focuses partially on the phenomenon.

Rist's solo exhibition, *I Packed the Postcard in my Suitcase* at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) in Melbourne in 2012 delved into the experiences of gravity<sup>84</sup> and the feeling of a lack of weight. In Rist's video installation *Gravity Be My Friend* (2007), Engberg describes how "groundedness – gravity – becomes a central character in Pipilotti's elemental ensemble."<sup>85</sup> Working with the universal, global elements of "the dramatics of fire, the fluidity of water and the flightiness of air,"<sup>86</sup> *Gravity Be My Friend* reminds us "earth is needed to moor the unstable." Referencing mythical worlds in Rist's video installation Engberg imagines that "without a sense of earth and without the anchoring weight of gravity we would be prey to the pull of *Ondines* and *Naiads* – the water nymphs who would tug at our psyche and take us to unfathomable depths from which there might be no retreat."<sup>87</sup> This descriptive language may clearly relate to the psychological pull of depression or physical pull of gravity.

Ultimately, the series of works as a whole in the *I Packed the Postcard in my Suitcase* exhibition were to Rist about "freeing the image"<sup>88</sup> and "mixing it with your body, with the rooms."<sup>89</sup> Like Frankovich, there was a need to create a relationship between the viewer and his or her own physicality and the references to the body within the video or performance itself. The above artists used these strategies of bodily inclusion and connectedness to communicate an experience – whether fantastical or based in reality.

Dawkins further describes the relationship of the body to video terrain of *I Packed the Postcard in my Suitcase* as "free to wander in the midst of Rist's visuals, the visitor is, theoretically, completely within the saturated mindscape of *Administering Eternity*

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<sup>84</sup> J Engberg, 'The Philosophy of Water: Pipilotti Rist, in her Elements', *Pipilotti Rist: I Packed the Postcard in My Suitcase*, Australian Centre for Contemporary Art, Southbank, VIC, Australia, 2011, p. 9.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> U Dawkins, 'Video Art and the Uncontainable Imagination, Urszula Dawkins: Pipilotti Rist, I Packed the Postcard in My Suitcase', *Real Time*, April – May 2012, Keith Gallasch, Virginia Baxter (eds.), Open City Inc., Sydney, 2012, p. 45.

<sup>89</sup> Ibid, p. 45.

(2011).”<sup>90</sup> The physicality of the viewer is constantly integrated with what’s going on in the video streaming around them. Dawkins continues, “At the same time, the tactility and the necessity to return to the body, to walk, to touch, are preparation for the final room on Rist’s series of spaces.”<sup>91</sup> Even though the works in this series do not directly speak of physical or psychological pain, they are successful in communicating to the viewer on a level that integrates our bodies with the work, emphasising the interconnectedness of mind and body.

Other installations by Rist speak directly to the physicality of our bodies and the internal/external nature of what is seen and unseen of them. *Cape Cod Chandelier* (2011), for example, is described by Bedford as being made of “found and laundered male and female underwear hanging from a frame in a shape that calls to mind the dramatic lighting fixture, Rist’s underwear chandelier brazenly elevates the concealed to an object of contemplation, not only by hanging them in plain sight, but by using those undergarments as a projection surface, too.”<sup>92</sup> In this installation, Rist - like Hannah Wilke - is using material objects to make visible to viewers our biological reality.

Rist spoke directly about this bodily theme: “Blood outside the body disturbs people.”<sup>93</sup> She adds, “This abandonment of form is taboo; Menstruation is a sign of good health, but every conceivable thing is done to keep it out of sight, to make it invisible.”<sup>94</sup> Rist continues, “The potentially positive conception of blood as a life force can only be transferred to menstruation by bringing it out in the open, making it visible, as I do in my work.”<sup>95</sup> Rist successfully uses the strategies of both found object and video installation in visualising the invisible, particularly in breaking through traditional unmentionables around the concealment of women’s natural bodily functions.

Rist has spoken directly about her interest in seeing inside the body. She said, “It’s incredible, we have images inside our bodies we can never see, only imagine. I like to mix and match the inside and the outside.”<sup>96</sup> As a part of *The Tender Room* exhibition (2011 at Wexner Center for the Arts, Columbus, Ohio) there were two LCD screens installed in the bathrooms. Playing on each was, as Bedford describes, “Swirling,

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Bedford, C. *Tender is the Light, Pipilotti Rist: The Tender Room*, Ann Bremner (ed.), Wexner Center for the Arts, The Ohio State University, Columbus, Ohio, USA, p. 11.

<sup>93</sup> Ibid.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

colour-infused footage of urine entering a bowl and slowly comingling with the water around it.”<sup>97</sup> Again, Rist is placing emphasis on making seen the internal/external relationships we have with our bodies and that which the outside world has with our everyday biological functioning.

This work is an acknowledgement of what’s happening underneath the surface of the body’s exterior. Medical technology has informed the development of some of Rist’s work. She comments, “The body is a very complex machine ... For example, I saw the process of milk entering the stomach on a moving X-ray. It looks like a beautiful flower, like when you pour milk into coffee.”<sup>98</sup> Rist’s practice has an understanding of how these two bodily spaces – outside and inside – co-exist and wants to communicate this shared experience with the viewer. Like Alicia Frankovich, there is a strong relationship between the performer or performed action and the viewer in Rist’s video installations.

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

### 2.3 Interrelated Bodily Processes

Whether it's the body (and the mind) being pushed to the limit by ourselves (for example, in the practices of Kate Mitchell and Alicia Frankovich) or by something we cannot control (as in Jo Spence and Hannah Wilke's practices), such as illness (terminal or non-terminal), or the feeling of the pull of gravity on the body (as in Pipilotti Rist's video installation, *Gravity Be My Friend*), one of the shared aims of these artistic visions is to communicate the realities of having a body and its potential for failure over time. This correlates to an acceptance or deeper understanding of the processes of the body, including its inevitable deterioration.

This brings the focus towards the expression of the corporeal body. The topics investigated in this paper all relate to the personal body's lived experience. These artists examine questions such as, what is an individual's lived experience, such as in the moment when suffering and pain occurs or when the body is exhausted of all energy and resources? It was also noted that this idea has strong correlations to the philosophy and practice of mindfulness. These artists each explore how these separate, yet linked experiences can be represented through their own unique and differing approaches to photographic, video and/or performance art.

The personal, individual nature of the pathways these artists have taken are, in part, the device via which they are able to make a connection with themselves (in body and mind) and with the shared, common experiences we all encounter with our bodies over time. It emerges that the use of the material nature of the body, across the works of Wilke, Spence, Frankovich, Mitchell and Rist, becomes the central bonding focus of their practices.



## **Chapter 3:**

### **3.1 *Floored* - Photographic and Video Installation**

My practical research undertook a range of methodologies as a way of investigating the representation of physical and psychological pain through visual and performance art. The methodologies used in processing my visual research included experimentation, trial and error, content analysis and observation in regards to personal experiences of physical pain.

As a starting point, it was my first-hand experience of chronic pain that initially prompted my art practice to examining the body in this state. These experiences shifted my art research forward into an experimental mode that ensured a degree of trial and error. Parts of my practical research – what did and did not work – were questioned in regards to the photographic and video content being produced. It was a continual cycle of conceiving of an idea, shooting the photographs or video, then editing, analysing, and discarding what was not useful. If necessary, a reshoot would be done to attain an image (still or moving) that communicated – in a practical manner – some of the philosophy behind the artwork.

The approach surrounding the practical research was to communicate with the viewer something that is sometimes not well understood. That is, how to make a connection to another person (or the viewer) about what an individual may be feeling – physically, emotionally, psychologically – whilst ill or in pain. My practice, like that of Jo Spence and Hannah Wilke, uses the mediums of visual and performance art to try to express the (at times) misunderstood experience of pain – either my own or that of others. Essentially, the final research artworks came about through a combination of these processes.

From my own personal observations of experiences with chronic neuropathic pain, my Master of Fine Arts research began to take form in my mind as something that would be about the central question, how does an individual deal with the body and the mind when in pain? It's possible that each person deals with the type of pain they are experiencing in their own way. One of the strategies that my body responded to positively was through regular yoga practice. As a result, the element that became

concurrent in my physical practice of yoga and my practical art research became the performed 'action'.

From this yogic practice, my visual and performance art (as displayed on video) practice began to take form, each relating intrinsically to the other. My initial photographic and digital video takes were experimental shoots that provided a set of images with visual information that were analysed. Questions were again asked about what worked within the frame of the image. For example, the first set of trial performance videos included me doing a series of repeated yoga poses with the use of a yoga mat. The look and feel of these videos was too documentary in nature and pointed more towards an exercise video than an artwork. As a result, I continued reshooting similar content this time with the camera sitting on the floor close up and somewhat zoomed in. Upon editing this video and analysing the content, it was clear that the visual data began speaking more to the direction my theoretical research was headed towards, that of investigating imbalanced bodies.

The video performance piece *Floored* scrutinises the theme of 'imbalanced bodies', more literally in relation to the body than the work of Rist. The video shot with a digital video camera concentrates on the foot and ankle only, as the same yoga pose is performed repeatedly. The central interest of the video is the struggle of the ankle to keep stable under the pressure of pose. From this horizontal viewpoint, we see veins, tendons and muscle shift with moment of the ankle and foot. The viewer can see the body's structural elements at work, the contraction and release of muscles. It's ironic that painfully tight muscles would respond effectively with further contraction (and sometimes more pain), to then finally release.

This projected video - isolated in a large studio space - contains an internal sensory imbalance (pain and tension) in addition to the externally visible imbalance of the weakness of the ankle, as it moves left and right in an attempt to hold firm. It's here in this moment, with this action, that the yoga practitioner is forced to concentrate with body and mind. That is, to cope with a particular position you are placed in or have placed yourself in. Effectively, the strength of the body and mind is highlighted, as well as weakness and imbalance.



1. Lyndal Hansby, *Floored Part 1.2*, 2012, video still.

To either side of this central video - creating a triptych installation - two further video loops of performed yoga poses are projected. All shot from the level of the floor, these videos are collectively linked on a number of levels. Each image is segmented, focusing on the elements of balance and traction of the body in connection with the floor. In each of these projected videos, it's the large-scale immersive format that further enables the viewer to gain a physical and mental connection in relation to their own bodily scales.

Drawn separately but connected to the *Floored* video performance are a series of photographic images that approach the possibility of visualising the invisible in relation to the body and pain. These photographs sit in a space of their own away from the video. In this space of isolation and silence, the viewer has room to observe the detailed information of the still photographic, less distracted by the more kinetic nature of the video installation.

The photographs generated in this research investigate sections of the body, as they operate within particular physiotherapy exercises or yoga poses, whether simply standing or in more extreme stretches. In these photographic images, the surface of the body becomes important. There is an emphasis on what is visible underneath the skin. For example, the blood being pushed into the toes or the dryness of the surface of the skin and the discomfort of the body placed in a particular position. These photographs visually connect into the theme of the 'invisible and sometimes unknown

internal processes occurring inside the body'. Despite scientific discoveries, many unexplained experiences to do with the physical body remain.



2. Lyndal Hansby, *Floored Part 2.2*, 2012, inkjet print.

From my own experience with chronic neuropathic pain, even an MRI scan and specialist doctor advice found there was no known reason for how or why the pain was caused or created. Thinking of this 'unknown' element to some forms of pain, my research practice shifted towards taking stock of what I had experienced within my own body. As an artist, the main question appeared to be, how could I represent some of the reality of pain in a visual manner? With the ability to show detailed movement and form, digital video and performance was an important research tool when investigating this dilemma. For me, this process was a way of coming to accept the mystery and reality of my body's own imbalances. Additionally, throughout the creation of these photographic and video images, it was clear to me that they would never be able to explain fully or make others understand a lived experience of chronic pain. It is possible that due to the isolated and internal nature of pain, an external representation (photography or video) of it may not successfully communicate its effect on the individual.

As a piece of visual research, *Floored* (2012 – 2015) sits somewhere in between the work of Kate Mitchell and Alicia Frankovich. It's not about what we put our bodies

through whilst working, nor is it about the movements and gestures the body makes in relation to sport and dance. *Floored* is more about the positive actions we take to counteract the random, unknown, but real negative bodily (pain) and psychological experiences we all have over the duration of our lives. As an installation, *Floored* (2012 – 2015) is, in part, similar to Mitchell's and Frankovich's practice, in that each section is a construction. However, the research in *Floored* focuses more on the process of the body working with and against the active, yet invisible element of pain beneath the surface.



3. Lyndal Hansby, *Floored Part 2.5*, 2014, inkjet print.

Within the visual element of my Masters of Fine Arts research, it is the combination of physical, bodily sensation and the process of pushing yourself to make a change that became important elements in constructing the video pieces. It's in these videos that the performative element of the work becomes essential. It's about what action is taken to remedy the situation of pain in the body. Like a problem solving process, you try one fix or another, failing and retrying until something works for a time. There is an ever-



present risk that an action you take may not be helpful to the body and you're back to the beginning of the cycle.

As with the art making process, life when dealing with pain at times can become a case of trial and error. The relationship here lies in the systematic way the body breaks down and then in a new regenerative phase, builds itself back up. My art research is about the process and action we take to work with the body for positive results, whilst living with or without illness. It's part of a practical attempt (and need) to move past and through illness into a new physical, psychological and emotional space.

It's this relationship between life and art that all of the artists' work discussed in this paper, including my Master's practical research have in common. Through the art making process, my practice and those of the artists investigated in the above review, leverage art as platform to discuss shared or unshared experiences to do with the body (physical, psychological and emotional). In effect, this is the relational link between their art practices and my own.

In summary, the Master of Fine Arts studio submission comprises two bodies of work: eight colour inkjet photographs and a three-channel video installation. The works are installed at UNSW Art & Design in Black Box and Art & Design Space.

The Black Box at UNSW Art & Design is selected to exhibit the video installation because it is purpose built for displaying projected media such as HD digital video in large-scale formats. Thus, the enormous internal space of the studio affords me the opportunity to create and project a three-channel video projection artwork at an extremely large scale. Art & Design Space provides a more traditional gallery space within which to install the eight photographic images.

The darkened and closed off internal space of the Black Box forms a parallel to the known and unknown experiential spaces inside the body. The large-scale projections also allow the viewer a dedicated area to focus on the action and repetition of the body's movement within the three looping video projections. The videos, each of differing lengths, play continuously and not in sync. This allows for randomly occurring combinations of blank spaces, as well as spaces of isolated images of the imbalanced body working, through pain and tension, to a final release. The idea is to create a space for the viewer to be able to connect to the notion that sensations are at work beneath the surface of the body. One can sense the relationship between the projected,

enlarged body on the wall with one's own visceral here and now bodily reality. In this way, what is operating between the viewer and the three video projections can be described as a 'mindful exchange'.

The middle projection in the triptych comprises a close-up of a pair of feet. Of the three, this centrally placed video extends the longest in duration. An audio track recorded from real life ambient sounds provides another sensory component. This singular audio element links the three yoga practice-based videos as they are projected side by side, three entities as one. The other formal binding element of the videos' visual structure is the static positioning of the camera as it focuses upon the floor and the bland, domestic room surroundings. The placement of the camera echoes the positioning of the body. Both camera and body are always connected to the floor. In this way, the action of the body remains the focus, displaying the effort that it takes to maintain each pose and move towards a more positive, healing space away from pain.

Art & Design Space – a more intimate space than that of Black Box – was selected to exhibit the photographic element of the studio research. Only three of the four walls in the gallery space are used to exhibit the photographs. The wall at back of the room, which is broken up by structural concrete columns, remains bare. The eight inkjet photographic prints are hung in three distinct groups. Each series of photographs is installed with consideration of image sizes, subject matter and similar technical relationships.

The four photographs to the right as you first walk into the gallery are hung together due to their similarity of subject matter – enlarged, close-up photographs of an ageing, cracked toenail, an ankle full of broken capillaries and the cropped image of a sunburnt shoulder. These surfaces display marks formed by ageing, by internal physical factors or by the weather. As photographs, the visible markings evoke the effect of external forces on the body as well as suggest the invisible negative or positive experiences experienced internally either in the body or in the mind. These photographs ask the viewer to acknowledge the unknown factors of what may be occurring within the body, whilst taking into account ever-present external environmental forces that may impact the health of a body.

On the adjacent wall, three smaller scale inkjet photographic prints are hung in a series. Two of these photographs represent the feet and ankles only – two feet together and one alone. The third photograph on this wall is of a person in a yoga pose showing a

thigh, knee to the ground with its calf and foot bent behind, yet invisible to the viewer. Again, this photograph suggests possibilities for what the individual may be sensing and feeling whilst in this position; something the viewer cannot 'know' for sure. Like the video projections, these photographs are shot with the camera positioned on the floor. These still photographs present the viewer with an altered, freeze frame version of the video projections. They provide a moment of quietness, similar to that being carried out in the holding of a somewhat still yoga pose.

The third wall displays a single, medium-sized inkjet photographic print of the artist sitting and bent forward, eyes to the ground in a physiotherapy stretch, which in reality is held for about twenty to forty seconds. This photograph acts as a key to the other two still image groupings. One can look at this photograph and then turn around and look across to the other two walls of the room to view the rest of the photographs as a connected whole. There is a similar meditative and mindful atmosphere created by the photographic and video works in the two exhibition spaces. Both spaces afford the opportunity for the viewer to relate to experiences of body pain and struggle. Forming one exhibition across two different spaces, the three-channel video installation and the eight photographic images together suggest possibilities for positive, action-based regenerative processes to assuage a body in pain.



## Conclusion

My Master of Fine Arts studio and written research investigates a process of taking action and working with the body via art as a means of shifting towards an understanding of how the physical and psychological being relate when dealing with chronic illness. Through investigating the representation of physical and psychological pain and suffering in art, it may be possible to gain a greater intellectual and emotional sense of the experience of another person's pain.

It was discussed that the directness of visual languages in the art practices of artists such as Hannah Wilke and Jo Spence are at times more successful in communicating to a viewer the invisible pain experience than a text or spoken language. This paper also put forward the possibility that the combined use of the material nature of the body through art may more significantly communicate the realities of dealing with illness, pain and suffering. It was conceded, however, that an image would never fully be able to communicate to the viewer the experience of another person's pain and suffering, be it physical or psychological.

This theoretical research also discussed the theme of the 'body under stress' in relation to the art of Alicia Frankovich and Kate Mitchell. It was acknowledged that each artist physically placed themselves under pressure and risk (of injury) through live performance, to show the concurrent fallibility and success of the body in action. To Frankovich and Mitchell, it was the relationship of their bodies whilst in performance to that of the viewer's body, which enabled a truer communication. They were both able to develop a connection between the constructed bodily art experience and that of unconstructed physical daily life.

The above research further investigated the notion of creating a connection between the viewer's bodily awareness and that of the visually imbalanced bodily representations in the video installations of Pipilotti Rist. Rist's videos – like the videos of Spence, Wilke, Frankovich and Mitchell – delve into experiences of pre-existing interconnectedness between the mind and the body. Her installations tell the story of these connections by focusing on the internal and external exchanges occurring with our bodies and minds. It was argued that Rist's video spaces manipulate the power of moving visual images to communicate seen and unseen operations of the body, with a strength that can at times be more successful than a spoken word expression.

Ideas emerging from this MFA research include the recognition of the importance of visual communications over the spoken word and how they may be more crucial in expressing physical and psychological experiences of pain and suffering. By way of engaging forms, we create (photography, performance and video); such visual media allow us to connect more directly to those around us. These visual communications can assist us in our attempts to make everyday bodily and psychological sensations of pain and suffering more widely understood and accessible.

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## **List of Illustrations**

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2. Lyndal Hansby, *Floored Part 2.2* (2012), inkjet print.
3. Lyndal Hansby, *Floored Part 2.5* (2014), inkjet print.