Karlynn Ming Ho  For the Left Hand Alone

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Somatic Dissonance:
Phantom Pain & Karilynn Ming Ho’s For the Left Hand Alone

I discovered that I was a hypochondriac through Google, the same obsessive online researching that no doubt contributed to triggering the disorder.

A fixation on a specific illness for more than six months? Check. Persistent fear of illness despite reassurance of health status by health care provider? Yes. Repeatedly checking the body for signs of illness? Constantly.

The hypochondriac, much maligned by society throughout history - female, hysterical, doctor shopping - is actually not faking it. For a myriad of reasons, often related to trauma and anxiety, the hypochondriac’s brain doesn’t interpret information about the body correctly. The brain doesn’t trust the stimuli it receives from the body. Hypochondria has been replaced by the less derisive and more descriptive ‘Somatic Symptom Disorder’. This makes sense to me: what I feel is real, while immersive and disorienting, it is not a complete sensory hallucination - it is based in some truth, just one that is hideously amplified. One paper that I read describes hypochondriacs as people simply afflicted with loud bodies.

The disoriented and fractured body is ever present in Karilynn Ming Ho’s exhibition For the Left Hand Alone. Taking the idea of phantom pain as a point of departure, Ming Ho interrogates the digitally mediated contemporary body, where notions of wholeness and authenticity are always in flux. Phantom pain is a condition where an individual experiences pain and perceptions in a limb that is not physically part of the body, occurring in upwards of 40% of people with limb loss. Ming Ho evokes this idea through the use of a score performed by Paul Wittgenstein, an Austrian concert pianist who had his right arm amputated during World War I. Wittgenstein commissioned a number of scores for the left hand alone, and performed them virtuosically, developing innovative techniques that allowed him to play in manner previously regarded as impossible for a five fingered pianist.

Wittgenstein suffered terribly with phantom pain in a time when it was little understood. While not strictly a modern phenomenon, reports of phantom pain increased exponentially in the wake of the carnage of World War I. Wittgenstein was of particular interest to neuroscientists, because his is one of the best documented cases of the moving phantom phenomenon, where the amputee experiences not only pain and sensation in the missing limb but illusion of movement. Wittgenstein experienced his missing right hand moving so specifically that he relied on it to figure out complex fingerings in new compositions - one of his students describes this: “he told me many times that
I should trust his choice of fingering because he felt every finger of his right hand.”

While Wittgenstein’s body was literally fragmented as part of the horrific violence and of the first modern war, *For the Left Hand Alone* points to the ubiquitous psychic fracturing of the body through digital technology. In his recent essay titled *Art, Technology and Humanism*, media theorist Boris Groys describes a contemporary moment, where we produce secondary self-designed bodies through the production of digital imagery and more generally through our participation in a digital world that is almost instantly dispersed globally. To illustrate this fragmented digital body, Groys points to the ubiquitous internet search, where: “If one searched the Internet for a particular name, one finds thousands of references that do not add up to any unity. Thus, one has a feeling that these secondary, self-designed, artificial bodies are already in a state of slow-motion explosion…” It is impossible for us humans to put this self-designed body back together again. As Groys puts it, the self-designed body is “dismembered, dispersed, decentered, even exploded - but still keeps its virtual unity. However, this virtual unity is not accessible to the human gaze.” Surveillance and search engines may have the capacity to understand the Internet as a whole, but we do not. It begs the question, what effect does this dismembered ‘secondary’ body have on our real, physical bodies? Is it possible to experience tangible phantom pain for our fragmented digital selves?

While there is no immediate remedy for the digitally induced phantom pain, there is thankfully treatment for people experiencing sensations from missing limbs. While little is known about the true mechanism that causes phantom pain, it is generally considered to originate in the way the brain perceives the loss of a limb. Mirror box therapy developed by neuroscientist Vilayanur S. Ramachandran, is a very simple type of virtual reality that manipulates how the brain perceives the missing limb. Patients position themselves in relation to a mirror and move the intact limb in concert with the phantom limb. The reflection of this movement in the mirror gives the illusion of agency over the phantom limb - if it felt paralyzed it can ‘move’, it was cramped it can be ‘stretched out’. Mirror box treatment relieves painful sensation, in that it provides an illusion of physical unity.

The spectre of the mirror box is present in the sculptural elements of *For the Left Hand Alone*. Here Ming Ho uses a classical male bust sliced in half, placed upon a circular mirror, its reflection creating a perception of wholeness. The second sculpture is the same male bust cut diagonally, bisecting the face and removing the arm, with a mirror placed upon the missing section. These objects point to our deeply divided and disoriented selves, but at the same time allow for the possibility of bodily unity, or at least the therapeutic illusion of it.

Sarah Todd
Sarah Todd currently works as a curator at the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, AB. She has previously worked at Western Front, InterAccess Electronic Media Arts Centre, XPACE Cultural Centre, and The Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery. She has recently produced exhibition projects with organizations including Vtape, Kunstverein München, The Goethe Institute, The Pacific Cinematheque, and The Illingworth Kerr Gallery.

Karilynn Ming Ho is a Vancouver-based interdisciplinary artist working with video, performance, multi-media installation, sculpture and collage. Her work draws on existential themes as a means to examine formal and conceptual ideas around screen culture, technology, performativity and the body. Ming Ho has exhibited in solo shows across Canada including the Glenbow Museum in Calgary, Trinity Square Video in Toronto, Optica Centre d’art Contemporain in Montreal, and Khyber ICA in Halifax. Her work has been screened widely in film and performance festivals in Canada, the US, and France.

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