-). -connecting-doing-undoing (bodies) ;;;;;;;

Remedios Zafra

With relief, with humiliation, with terror, he understood that he too was an appearance, that another was dreaming him.
J. L. Borges

Our bodies are not entirely our own. However much you might care for them, feed them, dress them up, put them to use, stroke them, kiss them, pornographize them and all the rest, our bodies are ours but not entirely so. And that is where history becomes politics.

According to Judith Butler's revealing description we are «from the start [...] given over to an Other»[1], even prior to individuation we are predefined by the Other and the effect is the «social vulnerability of our bodies»; predefined as a way of symbolically proving what society expects of us with reference to the body: an organism, an image, a sex, an age, a *face*[2], a gender, a discourse... something that nonetheless involves both a castration of the being and a «physical and social grounding»[3]. Levinas[4] argues that it is not so much the advancement of the Other but the encounter with the Other that simultaneously instils a responsibility for the Other in oneself (a construction in the other), such that the subject is responsible for the Other even before being conscious of its own existence.

But we should not think that everything becomes simpler once we assume that our body is not entirely our own, that it signifies «what it signifies» by virtue of its relationship with the Others in a given socio-cultural context; nor should we think that any personal commitment is cancelled out. Accepting this argument does not mean surrendering or abandoning the desire for a community direction, an abjuration of our responsibility in the subjective constitution, in its collective value. Becoming aware of the value of the «Other» in subjective and identity processes is the first step in discussing the body and the self-appointed agents of its transformation; it means questioning what we are, not as something given but as something individually and socio-culturally modified and, as such, something capable of being altered, not only materially and biotechnologically, but in terms of its social meaning and value. This constructivist thesis implies that the corporeal production processes can to a certain extent be revealed, understood and appropriated for a political action. What is not clear is how effective it is in the way it makes visible, re-signifies or even collectively «de- signifies» the body; to what extent it is possible for the Other, for the body itself, from the body itself also constituted by the others; to what extent we can turn that discussion, so common in feminist and queer art, into a social policy that transcends people's lives.

Our starting point, then, will be our body, as a *symbolic construct*[5], with its ways of seeing, its social and identity filters and its subjective pretensions. I will digress and observe my body. I want to identify a thousand patinas and filters of vision and thus establish the context of my discourse (...) It isn't easy and I nearly give up. There is so much baggage that has become normalised. It is nonetheless a consolation to think that this is no more the case for me than it is for you; that is why I will question myself about them with you (...) Take a look at your own —your bodies: your face, hair, belly, genitals, legs, piercings, body adornments, dresses and (Why not?) your computer screens (are they not interfaces and are they not assembled liminally to our bodies in on-line relations?). Observe your culture in your bodies: the dresses that are also a body, and that allow humans to become what they have chosen to be, «even (as Barthes, paraphrasing Sartre, reminds us) when what they have chosen to be represents what the others have chosen in their place»[6] (...) And monitors as the material node of cyberspace, linked to the body; monitors that not only dress us, but that furnish a new complexity by fostering the creation of identities split away from the body, deferred and commonly hidden in our interpersonal on-line relations. These possibilities of making our bodies invisible and lightening our presence with the added value that virtual anonymity provides offer a fertile territory for considering the body on the Internet, the post-body or non-body, if you prefer; the context is the same and we will now examine it.

Here, we do not intend to provide the keys for a possible re—signifying of the body through computer screens and cyberspace nor to offer guidance on how to use it for «visibilization» and for the political demands derived from the body. Our purpose instead will be to question the circumstances in which the person-screen tandem operates and its possibilities —both deconstructivist and for the persistence of hetero-patriarchal and conservative models; what the Net offers and what it is capable of.

—

In the virtual world the plurality of images of the self makes it possible to play around and discover unknown aspects. Moreover, in experimenting with the arbitrariness of the way the «I» and the «we» are produced we can see a *correlation*[7] between form and content, between the social body and the means of perceiving the physical body. Thus any imagination of gender in the virtual world inevitably involves the body.

The fact that the Internet operates as a territory of liberation and bodily rest is something we can see and practise for ourselves in

cyberspace. However, the fact that it can also act as a territory whose circumstances favour a greater potential deconstruction is a feature many of us noted during the first years of the Internet, yet one which today raises a number of points.

—

Let's start with the material side, with «Once upon a time there was a single body in front of a computer logged on to the Net». Let us say that body is yours, and you are looking at your screen. Before you engage with that unknown person, you silently wonder: *Who are you?* You cannot evade the question. In it you will have to face not only your formulation of the other, but also of yourself. The common response of the other doesn't take long in coming, and it will probably be the one you needed before you even heard it, as Hannah Arendt suggests, reinforcing what you already know. For Arendt the answer to this doubt normally establishes the prejudice in the repetition of the common: «being» that which is reassuring; that which culminates the performative act of being as is socially expected, censoring in advance the different and the infrequent. If all truly assumed existences involve reflecting on oneself, taking part in the construction of what we are, we should not forget that that freedom requires an effort, a disruption of social identitary reassurance, which encourages us to fall back on traditional identification; being that which before revealing itself to us identifies and situates us socially and reassuringly.

However, sitting in front of the screen, the body can armour-plate itself and the answer can shift this statement towards a question, an ellipsis, as if reinforcing what we know to be not enough, as if it were still possible not to deceive ourselves. Thus a succession of possibilities and divergences arises.

> *I remove the mask… (in front of this screen I can be more myself). I am what I am… I am many… (multitude-I). I am I, enormous I. I invent myself… (I play at being). «Madam… you are a man» (echoes of Orlando).* And a thousand ellipses for each one...

Obviously, in every case the fact that the response can be «habitual» gives us the key to understanding that it is not determined, that it is contingent and is not written on the bodies, that it can be re-codified and is potentially diverse. Nonetheless it is true that being able to change that response does not guarantee that it will be changed, nor how it will be changed. However, knowing the circumstances in which the question (*Who are you?*) occurs can give us more keys for understanding the replies.

—

One of the conditions that marks the habitual situation of the on-line subject —his or her circumstances— is the one established by the individualisation of the computer interface, that feature marked by the solitude of access. These circumstances of access are not neutral with respect to the possible identity response. Intimacy brings us back to ourselves; it confronts us with the desire to *be* and with the failures of having not been, of not being. But that intimacy also situates us in the relaxation that is typical of an eternally prophylactic contact, far from material dangers; responsibility for what we have said; pollution; disease; procreation; commitment; the reproduction of daily life and its collective standards; although more than ever governed by desire.

It is solitude that determines the intimate alliance between the machine and the subject or between the subjects through the machine. Millions of people logged on, millions of people alone in their own rooms. That image always inevitably reminds me of Walter Benjamin's story about one of his first radio talks, which I think may be relevant to our discussion of the on-line experience. Before taking part in the programme, he was given two warnings: one about timing and the other about the type of audience that would potentially be listening to him: «beginners (...) make the mistake of thinking they have to give a talk to a more or less numerous though circumstantially invisible audience. Nothing could be further from the truth. The radio listener is nearly always a lone person: even presuming several thousand people listen to you, they will always be several thousand individuals (...) people on their own»[8]. Like listeners to the radio, on-line bodies are normally lone bodies sitting in front of the computer, where each screen is made only for one —even if they form a crowd when they are all interconnected. The television screen, on the other hand, can be seen in a group; in any case, it keeps viewers weakened as they exercise a more relaxed contemplation. It is a suburbanising medium which, with its repetitive calming patterns, consolidates the sense of security of the members of the communities at which it is aimed, placing us where we are placed by what we hear and see. There are people who passively feel, when they hear the news on television, that for that space of time their home no longer belongs entirely to them: the clarity of the discourse, the firmness of the declarations, the handling of the information, the ranking in order of importance... In the solitude of the Internet, everything is different. Netsurfing cannot normally appropriate our homes so easily; we are outside the screen but also inside it. In the solitude of being logged on you can allow yourself to be carried along by the mythology of «coming home» to the place where we feel protected

from the world, but «in» the world, where the subject, with his or her apparently passive body, is active, where some part of ourselves moves —even if it is only a flashing cursor in the box of a search engine or an arrow that marks our position on the screen and, with it, in the world.

But let us return to the body, to the connected body and to the liminal identity that is generated on the screen in these solitary conditions we have mentioned. As such, the limit has a defining function that positions and at the same time protects something valuable, something vulnerable, differentiated from the other but in itself associated. What makes it special is that it brings about a shift, a wanting to be, to exist, on-line, an involvement as agents in an individual condition. This means that whereas in a physical displacement, the body is the active subject, apparently in this case it is everything that is *not* the body that acts and experiences movement. In this virtual direction there is something of the liminal, of that *liminality* that Turner[9] mentions in reference to pilgrimages and rites of passage, referring to that still ambiguous state through which one passes when one is no longer who one was but not yet someone new.

> *Liminality is not only a transition but also a potentiality, not only a «coming to be», but also «what may be», an area of expressiveness in which everything that is not manifest in the daily operations of the normality of the social structure —whether because of social repression or because it has been made cognitively invisible by means of a prestigious paradigmatic negation— may be objectively studied despite the often metaphorical and elusive nature of its contents.*[10]

Yet that state of pre-identity, that which one comes to be on the Internet, may already be inhibited in advance by what «you can come to be». The possibility of temporarily doing without the body and its vulnerability offers a new scenario of identity experimentation which is useful for political subjectivity. To visualise this idea it may be helpful to look at the metaphor Victor and Edith Turner use to refer to *pilgrimage*, alluding to a path represented not by a line between an origin and a destination but by the figure of an ellipse, where a way home is evident (even if it is not made visible), in reference to a return to the initial place after we have become different. This would be an inversion with effects because when one returns home one is no longer the same. It is a bit like those puzzles where you can only move if you have a free *box*[11] allowing you to move. There will always be an unoccupied space, but it does not necessarily have to be in the right place.

Virtual political identities could stage this type of reversibility with effect. It is true that in the very multiplicity of virtual identity there is more than one way of reconciling the on-line and off-line worlds, but all of them display a singular potential for critical and creative experimentation. What I mean to say is that the reversible nature of the medium may sometimes be cathartic, sometimes gamelike, subversive, ground-breaking, emancipating, deconstructive, frustrating, indifferent... Indeed the reversibility is the appearance; it is never clear that the background is entirely reversible.

One example can be seen in objectivated sexuality in a chat room —in precisely the place where the very enunciation of the conversation becomes performative, creating the being, albeit an incredibly ephemeral being. The agility of the interpersonal identity construction in the chatroom led people to think that it could be a potential context for the deconstruction of sex and sexuality. However, some ethnographic texts[12] on the subject suggest the exact opposite, that it is a «way of experiencing pleasures in quite stable constructions»[13], in other words, forms of sexuality whose aim is to «find a way home to the everyday versions of sexuality and the family». And so, although in the chat room we are aware of the performative nature of our identities and of the creation of the Other in authenticating it, there is a game between the performativity of the two people and the desire («to be what you want to be provided they accept your demands») in such a way that the deconstructive possibility is boxed in by the limitations of the game, the deceit and the transience; as if we were thinking; «None of what I am doing will go any further»; as if in our relations in the chat room we were limiting ourselves to the sublimation of our desires in order to later reinforce (in the return to the body) what we are socially; like a self-regulating mechanism fostered by virtual anonymity and, also, by the unreal context cyberspace creates. This identitary use cannot be underestimated.

But then, what is needed for this critical liminality we are talking about here, that territory where repressed or silenced features can be reflexively explored in cyberspace? I think there are several different possible answers to this question but one might be: the reversibility with effects, i.e. a reflexive affectation of our experimentations on the Internet. That element is at the centre of the work of many parodists, who put us —and themselves— in the place of the «other», not merely in empathy but as something deeper that leads us to «be» the other.

Fiction: Room35
-hi. are you a man or a woman?
-hi. I'm a straight white man, brown hair, attractive, 45, teacher, nice guy. I'm looking for friendship and whatever else comes up.
-ok. Good luck. I'm a straight man, looking for a girl. Ciao.
-wait. don't go. I'm a girl as well.
-OK. Let's start over.

—

In this context, the disturbing thing about cyberspace is that in it different kinds of identity reception and production converge, and that in that diversity, unlike other media such as television, the reflection *would* be viable, in that we could intervene in our time and on our subjectivity, going beyond the role of being simply resigned voyeurs and conformed bodies. Indeed, Derrida[14] proposes the insubordination of networked computer screens opposing the power of capital. In other words, he sees a difference —and in it a political potential— between networked computers and other media such as the television screen. The latter, Bourdieu insisted [15], does not favour thinking as it nullifies the time for thought. And here we come across another key feature in our approach to networked identity experimentation: The time for reflection, such a scarce resource. In this sense, the comparison with television is still illustrative. The speed of television is favoured by the symbolic effect of the only images it tolerates: those that reinforce ideas that were already amongst us, «taking for granted» that we cannot question what they convey; images that allude not to a *knowing*, nor to a present and active memory (more typical of reading and of some forms of net browsing), but to emotions, identifications and projections, i.e. to the past; and in the case we are dealing with, to the repetition of identity models. This link with what has already been lived fosters the exchange of «preconceived ideas» and clichés, the only ones that can cope with the speed, because they were already amongst us: the preconceptions, the thoughts that shape the stereotyped and symbolic identities.

Clearly the physical limit of the computer screen is not as evident today as the limit we can see on television. I mean that the screen can be duplicated or multiplied not only physically but functionally on a single surface, in such a way that nearly everything converges —potentially— on the computer screen. The risk here is that we will lose the distance needed for a minimal degree of reflection which might foster critical thinking about what we are and what we can be in our lives, also virtual; a time for thought that is capable of providing our practice with political meaning.

—

In any case, what we see here is the need to evaluate the circumstances of identity production and reception through the screen, questioning what we are, not as something finished and final, but as a process that was never completed and in which we can intervene individually and collectively. But we should also note the importance contained in the very devices from which we speak or that we see in stimulating or destroying that possibility for intervention.

In these years of the Internet, many of us have thought that its singular features as a medium of horizontal communication would, on their own, foster the most politically ground-breaking identity action to champion, re-signify and/or overcome bodies. If we look today at the medium and its analyses, we see that as opposed to this most emancipating and creative potential, the trend is instead determined by the ephemeral and anonymous liberation of our bodies, in many cases consolidating the most conservative identities (a return to the off-line world after the liberation). Obviously the ground-breaking potential does not involve the determination of its exercise, but the deconstructive potential of the Net continues to exist and be practised by those who reflect artistically and politically about on-line identity and the body «after the Internet». Discussing its baggage and its possibilities helps us to be active agents of our individual and collective changes in a networked society and also to live «beside ourselves»[16], not only with challenge and passion as Butler suggests, but with risk and creativity.

1 Butler, J., *Undoing Gender.* Routledge, New York, 2004, p. 23.

2 «The face speaks. The manifestation of the face is already discourse». Levinas, E. *Totality and Infinity*. Kluwer Academic, 1980.

3 «There is a more general conception of the human at work here, one in which we are, from the start, given over to the other, one in which we are, from the start, even prior to individuation itself, and by virtue of our embodiment, given over to another: this makes us vulnerable to violence but also to another range of touch […]». Butler, J. (2004), op. cit.

4 Levinas, E., (1977), op. cit.

5 This symbolic construct is grounded on the concept of *embodiment*, «Since Foucault it had become an inescapable demand. A gap had been detected in social theory which was at last filled. The body has once again emerged as a new paradigm, that of embodiment.» Velasco, H. *Cuerpo y Espacio*, Ramón Areces, Madrid, 2007, p. 52. *Embodiment* alludes to the symbolic construct of the human body penetrated by social constructs. The concept is a legacy of the *Culture and Personality* movement for whose ideologues the relationship (motivations and purposes) between culture and person lies in the body. In this perspective, the discourse is seen from the cultural experience of «being in the world», which is in turn viewed as a system of becoming body, making the corporal experience the foundation of culture and subjectivity. See: Csordas, T., «Introduction: The Body as Representation and Being in the World», in *Embodiment and Experience*. *The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1994.

6 Barthes, R., *El sistema de la moda y otros escritos.* Paidós, Barcelona, 2003, p. 418.

7 «The theoretical antecedents go back to Mauss (analysed in detail below), to Freud and the concept of «conversion» of an emotional state into a physical state (…) and to Lévi-Strauss and the isomorph of the symbolic structures; but particularly to the classical rhetorical theory that advocated a correspondence in the style between form and contents, or if you like between the literary style and corporal style (…)». Velasco, H. (2007) op. cit., p. 56.

8 Benjamin, W., *Historias y relatos.* Península, Barcelona, 1997.

9 Turner, V., *The Forest of Symbols*. Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1970, p. 93.

10 Turner, V. and Turner, E. *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture.* Columbia University Press, New York, 1978, p. 3.

11 «The very process of moving between multiple identifications presupposes a kind of empty belt that allows the leap from one identity to another, and that empty belt is the subject itself». Žižek, S., *Lacrimae Rerum. Ensayos sobre cine moderno y ciberespacio.* Debate, Madrid, 2006, p. 232.

12 Laura Rival, Don Slater and Daniel Miller, «Sex and Sociality. Comparative Ethnographies of Sexual Objectification» (27-54) in Nieto, J.A., *Antropología de la sexualidad*. Talasa, Madrid, p. 34.

13 Ibid.

14 Derrida, J. and Stiegler, B., *Ecografías de la televisión.* Eudeba, Buenos Aires, 1998.

15 Bourdieu, P., *Sobre la televisión.* Anagrama, Barcelona, 1997.

16 Ibid., p. 36.