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# **BODY ART AS A NEXUS BETWEEN A BROKEN BODY AND A RECONCILED IDENTITY**

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### *Abstract*

Perceptual images (configured sensorial modalities) and remembered images (produced by the memory) act to reach objective knowledge in both the reasoning and the decision-making process. The images we perceive are real for ourselves, while the ones provided to us by others are images comparable to our reality. Images are generated through a complex neuronal network in which perception, memory and reasoning take part. From the very beginning, the staging produced by Body Art has allowed artists to fictionalize their own lives by establishing relationships between the images they perceive and the ones they produce, both which cause their own identity to be questioned, disintegrating the essence of oneself. In this article we will expose some pieces from Stephen Dwoskin's work (1939-2012), an artist subjected to a "broken" body by a chronic illness and who invites others to occupy his place in several occasions by using his prosthesis. With these performances he pursues to generate perceptual images that modify the way others sense their own body. This experience displaces the body from its own conscience by creating new perceptions and memories and, hence, a new reasoning that allows the artist to reconcile with the gaze of others.

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## 1. Introduction

This article advocates that Body Art establishes a nexus between a broken body and a reconciled identity by analyzing the body art of Stephen Dwoskin, who at the age of nine, suffered from a severe poliomyelitis infection. Curtis (1971) reveals how this disease strongly affected Stephen's neuromusculoskeletal system, paralyzing his legs completely and confining him to the use of crutches until he finally ended up in a wheelchair. Perhaps this is the reason why the human body was the main subject of his work. Beautiful bodies and sick or deformed bodies confront Dwoskin's prejudices, inhibitions and taboos. Dwoskin both directs and performs in his films, involving the spectator directly in both gazes, seeing and being seen— always with the purpose of knowing what others are like, connecting with their minds and understanding the impression that his broken body makes on them.

Siegel and Solomon (2003) define social neuroscience as “the interdisciplinary study of the neurobiological processes (nerves, endocrine, immune) that allow us to interact with the social world” (p.2). Recent studies in social neuroscience field show how specific conflicts in the relationships with others can leave aftermaths in our identity. Throughout the experience lived in his films, Dwoskin deconstructs the previous image of his body to invent a new one through the body of others.

Social representations inscribe in the body a concrete discourse related to the general symbolism shared by society. The pertained images and knowledge that concern depend completely on a social state, on a vision of the world and, within this vision, on the definition of the “persona”. Therefore, the body becomes a symbolic construction instead of a reality in itself; from the symbolic interpretation, and through a physical experience in space and time, the body reaches the role of mediator between the external world and the inner self. The body is the means by which we produce ourselves as social beings within a social space built, in reality, by ourselves (Fernández, 2015, pp. 32-46).

Body Art understands the body as a socio-cultural and versatile (physical, psychological and social) construction of the self. This artistic discipline could be defined as an internal reflection that becomes public through action. This action leaves a trace on both the artist's and spectators' perceptual memory while sharing a time-space relationship. Damasio (1994) presents “the body as a theatre of emotions”, describing it as the place where feelings are dramatized to return to the brain and vice versa. This dramatization develops new images that the brain learns to absorb and project through “neurotransmitter nuclei activation that are essential in the cerebral representation of the body management. There are, hence, neuronal units that help us feel as if we had an emotional state” (Damasio, 2005, p. 220).

Stanislavsky (1983) states that actors should experience the performance by recreating life from their human condition, where body and mind must establish a constant dialogue. This pedagogue-director gives the name of the “Magic If” to the stimulation of the imagination that allows actors to embody a character. When the actor performs from emotion and conscious technique, this prompts the imaginary and becomes moved by his own passions lived through the experience.

## **2. Problem Statement**

The body is a real and symbolic space, a place for life, but it is also a place for pain and tragedy. Stephen Dwoskin presents the body as a theatrical stage, transforming his illness into an artistic representation of pain. He projects his diseased body onto the body of others to intervene and modify their own perception. He subjects and exposes the bodies of others to states of extreme hardness that is caused by his disease de-dramatizing it through humour. Fiction and reality fuse in his work to filter the artist pain through the performer's pores when private becomes public transforming it in an almost cosmic experience.

Performance is a philosophy of direct contact; It is a language of complex signs and symbols that relate to the viewer immediately and that, as the artist and the viewer are confronted, causes an expected but unknown reaction for both parties (Tarcisio, 2001, p. 21).

When action takes place in his performances, the boundaries between reality and fiction merge. The objective of his work is to transform and rebuild his body through the gaze of the other to modify his own processes of subjectivation. "Subjectivity is based on the body because it seems to be configured as a guarantor of unity, of individuality, of the autonomy of a subject - I, conscience, self-image of himself - recognized as such in a given collective" (Romero, 2006, p. 142).

Stephen Dwoskin aims to recognize his body in the gaze of the Other, that is to say, facing the mirror, and vice versa. Freud (1971) explains how the mirror means the subjective gaze, "a real experience of refraction and physical reflection, captured essentially by the sense of vision as a bridge to the integration of the other sensory categories and finally to the cohesion of the Self" (Sánchez, 2016, p. 3).

The artist is aware of having suffered a fragmentation in the way of living his body due to his illness and caused by the gaze of the other. This fragmentation inevitably leads to identity conflicts. The gaze of the Other has been causing records in memory that have been changing the perception of himself and projecting this perception onto others. Lacan (1966) explains how the recognition of the subject in a mirror supposes a "transformation that occurs in the individual when he assumes an image, an image that is not anyone but that of the totality of himself as similar to his own species" (p. 12).

## **3. Research Questions**

Throughout our study we asked the following research questions: Can Body Art act as a therapeutic process to rebuild a fragmented body? Can art act as a nexus between a broken body and a reconciled identity? To answer these questions, we expose and analyse the work of experimental filmmaker Stephen Dwoskin below.

## **4. Purpose of the Study**

Through this study we focus our attention on the perceptive experience of one's body implied in Body Art. In the analysis of selected pieces from the filmography of Stephen Dwoskin, we intend to reveal the hints that display how art through action is able to reproduce body states that induce the modification of "the sympathetic emotion in a feeling of empathy" (Damasio, 2005, p. 114).

## 5. Research Methods

For the research of this article, we have applied the methodology of analysis of a descriptive case study. We present a theoretical analysis of meaningful pieces from the filmography of Stephen Dwoskin that we believe useful to evidence the validity of our proposal: the power of art in the reconciliation of the identity. In order to get a wider scope, we have brought the theoretical knowledge of the artistic and scientific fields together.

## 6. Findings

### 6.1. Presentation and analysis of the case study: Stephen Dwoskin

Before receiving Fulbright scholarship with which he would move to London, Dwoskin was already part of New York's underground scene. In 1966 co-founded with Andy Meyer and Simon Hartog the London Film Makers Co, becoming one of the main promoters of the 70's British counter-culture, teaching at the Royal College of Art (1973-83) and the London College of Printing (1983-87), publishing the book *Film is* (Dwoskin, 1975) and releasing some of his most recognized films: *Times for* (1971), *Tod und Teufel* (1973) o *Behindert* (1974).

Starting in the 80's and following the guideline set by *Behindert*, Dwoskin's work would become more and more personal, portraying himself and his environment in forms that would go from interview and documentary to diary. In 1981 *Outside In* premiered at Rotterdam Film Fest.

A combination of memories from the visual diary of a disabled person from his point of view: the visual impression that remained during the integrating process in the so-called "non-disabled society" lasting twenty strange years of adulthood, transformed into visual metaphors (Dwoskin, 2012, para 1).

Throughout the film, Dwoskin interacts with various characters and their bodies. We highlighted a particular scene in which he dates a woman in his room with the intention, halfway between sexual game and performance, of interchanging roles. She tries on Dwoskin's prosthesis and he observes her fighting for stability and balance. The fight is useless because the ties and bars that give freedom and ensurement to Dwoskin, in the friend's body become an oppressive object, blocking the movement and causing imbalance. The scene ends with both of them lying in the bed, on equal terms and laughing out loud.

Similar to this experience is the four-handed movie that he does with Boris Lehman, *Before the Beginning* (2015), an unfinished project due to the passing of Dwoskin in 2012. The film is a continuous confrontation in which despite style and language differences, both directors try to achieve the impossible: become the other.

To start the transformation Lehman first of all tries to learn how to use the crutches, how to breathe with the oxygen mask and sit in the wheelchair. Incapable of reaching the top of the stairs with the crutches or any other performance of Dwoskin's body, Lehman assures it will take time. The film shows both directors frustrated over every attempt of occupying the place of the other as directors, through gaze and language, but both are enthusiastic about what this experience brings.

Lehman has also worked during his career exploring with the camera his identity through his body and his relationships within a close circle of friends who perform in his films, as well as driving this investigation by performing in front of the camera himself.

During the shooting of this film, Lehman visited Dwoskin in 2005 and 2006, both actors tried to perform the other in front of different cameras that had been used in their filming experience, and they interchange ways of seeing and making, using a type of facing mirrors that lead to infinite. There are three versions of different lengths. The one we are presenting in this article is the second version that lasts 70 minutes. In the film's introduction, each director selects two pieces from their filmography, the first one (in both cases) with an explicit sexual content and a frustrating ending. In the second choice, both directors extract sequences in which their bodies are attacked and ridiculed.

Dwoskin chooses for this sequence a cut from *Outside In*, in which he meets a woman in a scene several times. There is no stage design, just them and the floor. Each time they cross, the woman trips with the crutches and Dwoskin, unable to stand up by himself, falls down. Repeatedly, they perform the same collision in which both end on the floor and the woman screams and laughs. A representation of a tragic situation in everyday life becomes a joke through repetition, normalizing the fact that Dwoskin's legs do not have the strength to hold him up, and, therefore, he may end up on the floor at any time.

The sequence from Boris Lehman's filmography belongs to his film *Histoire de ma vie racontée par mes photographies* (2001) and shows three boards in which we can read "that is my body", "that is fiction", and "that is a photograph". Those words could claim to be the meaning of the whole film.

Through *Body Art*, both authors present their dysfunctional bodies facing and overcoming their deepest fears. Before the beginning... of what? Probably before the beginning of a double identity reconstruction in the bodies that both and each of them grew up in. It is a shame that death took his part before the ending of this experiment.

## **6.2. Body Art as therapeutic process. From a broken body to a reconciled identity**

Damasio (2005) already stated how "the body and the brain are inextricably linked... and they mutually connect... they function as an indissociable mechanism" (pp. 136-137). The body of the artist is the fundamental component in the creative action of *Body Art*. The body's perception generates somatic and endocrinal corporal changes that establish relational contact and entails the acceptance of the conscious Self.

Damasio (1994) explains how emotions are activated by the images that arrive to the brain. Stephen Dwoskin provokes the experimental creation of images and they return as new images re-constructed through the lived experiences of the Other that interact with memory. These images enter the brain activating an automatic program that generates modifications in the internal organs while sensing significant changes in the body.

The psychic programs and lived experiences establish the content of the individual's psyche. Such content engenders instincts and reflexes, but the most recent brain structures are capable of creating relationships with new realities in constant change. In order to modify the brain structures marked by the experience, a new complete experience involving perceptions, feelings and thoughts may be created, thus offering new processes of self-organization of the psychosomatic network.

Stephen Dwoskin's work is a clear exponent of the relationship between image and representation with the perceptive-cognitive processes and, ultimately with the thought processes. When the artist visualizes his films, they become a mirror in which he can look at himself in a subjective way. Observing how the Other frames him enables him to reach a self-perception that allows him to differentiate himself from the Other and reconcile with his own identity. Therefore, the Eye of the Other represents us and also grants the possibility of knowing ourselves. Body Art implies showing the incarnated Self embodied in the Other to be capable of existence.

(...) art therapy proposes: the opening and respect to the persona that lets oneself to be welcome in a space of possibilities and freedom, to find their limits and capabilities, their pitfalls from childhood, their repetition structures and blocks and little by little, understand, recognize, accept themselves, and leisurely, establish new points of view (...) (López Fernández-Cao, 2006, pp. 17-18).

Art has the power to stimulate the emotions and they likewise may provoke a chain reaction in our organism and behaviour. The action that takes place in Body Art generates physical reactions not just in the artist but also in the spectator that are manifested in the bodies and translate into changes in the neurotransmitters. The significant experience lived by the artist when seeing himself embodied in the Other carries several feelings that release adrenalin. These manifested changes are operated by the sympathetic nervous system that provokes series of energetic physical reactions. The parasympathetic system is in charge of regulating every corporal functionality, developing new processes of self-organization of the psychosomatic network thanks to neuronal plasticity.

Body Art induces an interpersonal communication between the artist and the spectator where empathy fosters. We understand empathy as the ability of mental (cognitive) and affective (emotional) identification of the spectator to connect with the artist's state of mind in a specific situation. Stephen Dwoskin invites others to occupy his place by using his prothesis. Through his performance he encourages the empathy of the Other "using strong visual signs that represent situations that imply explicit somatosensorial manipulation of body parts" (Lamm et al., 2011, p. 2499).

When the spectator feels emotional by receiving the audio-visual stimulus from the films of the artist, they revive through their body the artist's state of mind thanks to mirror neurons. These visual stimuli "activate an automatic and specific mirror mechanism, capable of codifying them immediately in their corresponding emotional forms" (Rizzolatti & Sinigaglia, 2006, p. 181). Therefore, the spectator can affectively empathise with the artist reviving the somatic sensations expressed in his work.

## **7. Conclusion**

The case study of Stephen Dwoskin's work has allowed us to get a deeper impression of the power of Body Art as a conciliating process for identity. Throughout this investigation we have verified how art awakens emotion, modifying corporal states and generating a significant impact in the perception of our own body. This artistic discipline involves a modification in the comprehension between realness and virtuality by changing the way of seeing and of being seen. The artist's work mutates in the mirror of realness, where the Other's body is transformed into the becoming of the Self to reach empathy states.

We can conclude how efficient Body Art is in activating the transformation through which the artist may be able to evolve and reconcile with his or her identity.

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