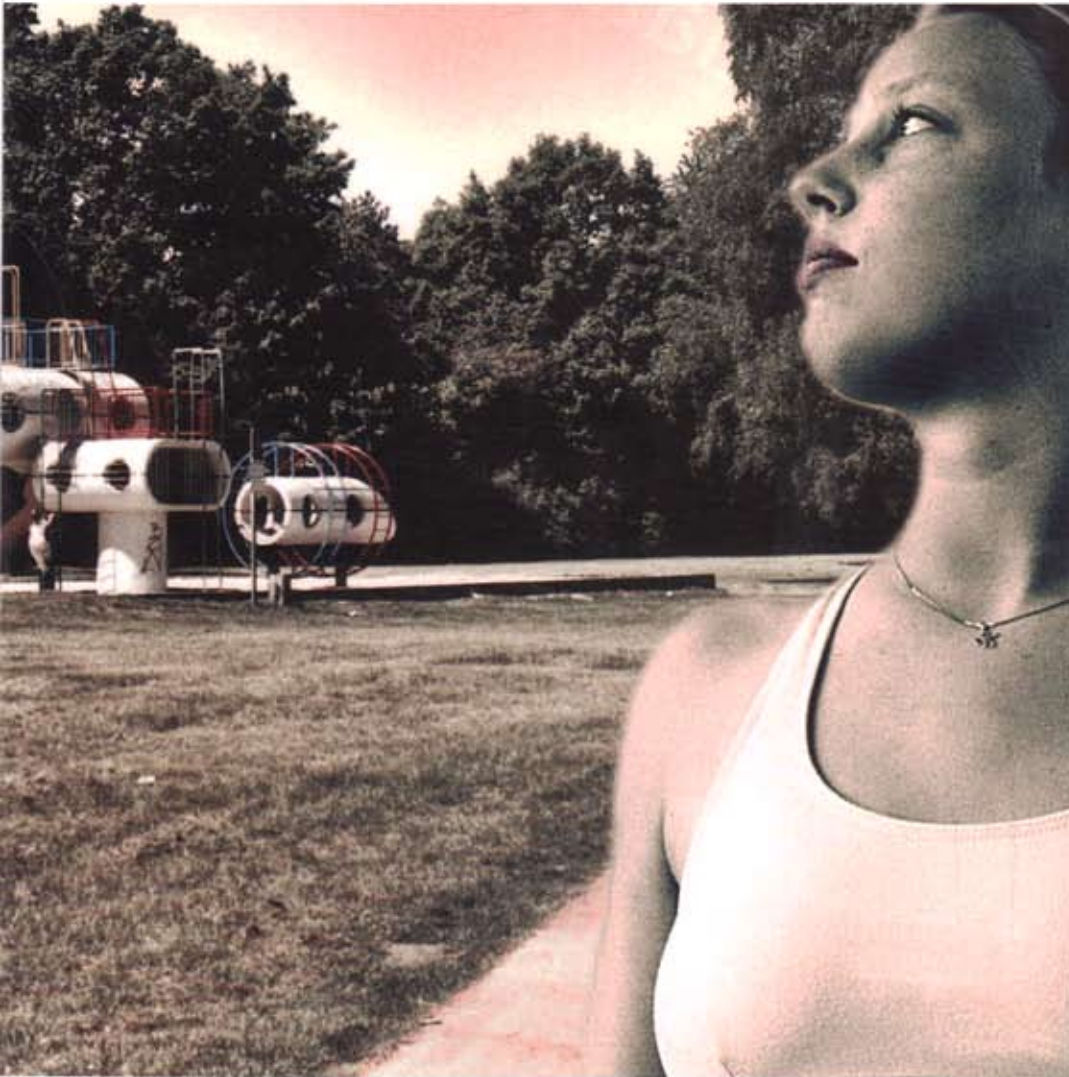


MEDIA AND



BY ANKE HAARMANN

Looking at images of bodies as they are presented in live style magazines, on advertisement plates, in music clips, comic books or Hollywood films reveals the overall presence of an athletic, dynamic, shining, hence, strong, self-determined and heroic prototype that is pictured by these media idols. At the surface and silhouette of the mediated bodies appears a role model that stands for far more than only the 'good shape'. A training for sovereignty seems to be expressed in the shape of trained bodies. The aesthetics apparently imply the ethics of feasibility and the idea of a designable subjectivity. Shaping the body in the fitness center by practising an 'aesthetic-ethical' work out obviously means to train one's self-governed personality as well. Media figures function within this creative work of the self as images, reflecting the aesthetical and ethical utopias, desires and self-images of spectators. The everyday presence of the moldable bodies promoting the amalgamation of beauty and sovereignty leads to an understanding of media images as crucial to body politics. Individuals apparently perceive aspects of the nature of their body in view of and in the context of mediated bodies. Media images prefigure the self-understanding of persons. However, within that reflexive constellation of self-images and mediated role-image the process of appropriation becomes crucial. It seems that practices of re-staging

IN THIS FOLLOWING ARTICLE
ARTIST AND PHILOSOPHER ANKE
HAARMANN DISCUSS CULTURAL
CODES, SELF IMAGES AND
ETHICS IN EVERYDAY LIFE

IMAGES

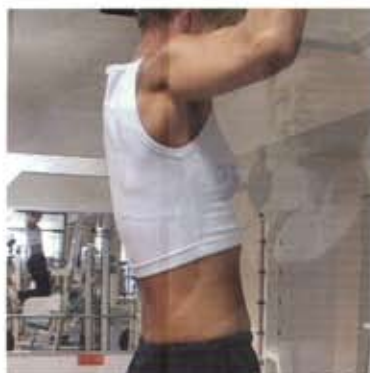
BODY POLITICS



constitute the relation between the image of the body and the bodily nature of the self. But it also might be that individuals take part in the creation of their own self-images and body-nature not only as passive recipients and repeat but also as active participants, taking the spectrum of contemporary images as a selection to tactically make use of.

PERFORMATIVITY AND PERFORMANCE

The assumption of practices of re-staging and appropriation that take place in the interplay between the individual self and the mediated body image serves as a starting point to look at the terms of performativity or performance as they were introduced by the US-American philosopher Judith Butler in her book *Gender Trouble*.¹ Using these terms Butler aims to explain the mechanisms of transition between cultural discourses and material bodies. In order to examine the possible relationship between the term of performativity and the term of re-staging, I will summarize central aspects of Butler's theory. Thereafter I shall suggest to supplement the term of the discourse by the term of the image to finally understand the process of re-staging as a visualization of performativity in the sphere of imagery.



Butler develops the term of performativity in the context of a theoretical draft that is taking up Michel Foucault's theory of the subject appropriating it for a revised concept of feminism. Foucault argues that 'the subject', hence the phenomenon that is understood as 'the human being' must not be perceived as a timeless and autonomous constant but as a phenomenon that is continuously re-structured in the interplay of different types of knowledge. Revealing different notions of 'the human being' by analyzing different types of knowledge in different historical epochs Foucault proves the contextual quality of the subject.² Butler picks up this notion of the subject to assign its con-

textual quality to the category of 'the woman'. She aims to show that 'the woman' must be perceived as a cultural construction and cannot be used as a focus for feminist identity politics. According to Butler the fundamental distinction of humans in two heterosexual sexes does not rise from any kind of material truth, but is to be understood as a cultural construction. Actually Butler makes clear that particularly the idea of the 'nature of sex and gender' must be regarded as an effect of the discursive and cultural production of truth.

Interesting here above all seems to be the systematic level of the argumentation and not so much only the category of gender. A general theory on the construction of corporality is empathized. Then new questions arise: in what sense do we have to consider the physical body as part of a culturally coded subject and to which extent can we actually think of new categories linked with the contemporary bodies. Possibly the common understanding of the natural staidness of the body and its sexual materiality vanish while categories such as formability, figurativeness and aesthetics join to a 'new nature' of the body. The sexed or material nature might not be lost in the canon of contemporary conceptions, but it probably does not shape any longer the center of thought. The substantial condition of the human body then would be the feasibility and formability of its shape. The public presence of trained bodies in media images would consequently signify this new truth of corporality while work out practices in fitness studios represent the new body politics realizing the new truth of formability as the nature of the body.

At the systematic interface between knowledge and reality Butler introduces the terms of performativity and performance to explain how the cultural understanding of corporality turns into a physical experience and

corporal reality of individuals. In the argumentation she shows how the conception of sexual differences turns into the nature of bodies because the culturally accepted knowledge about a sexed nature circulates continuously as an inquiry to recognize the sexual difference at the site of ones own body. As an effect of this continuous inquiry every single person is invited (respectively forced) to discover its sexed body while the body performs the discovered-invented sexuality. The production of a sexed nature takes place within the process of continuous re-signification of knowledge about the sexed disposition of nature. 'Be male or female, because the being is sexed' – the overall present speech sounds like – and respectively every single body constantly performs the male or female sex at the site of itself. 'Shape your body, because the nature of bodies is their feasibility' – another inquiry sounds like. Performativity here describes the process of discursive production while the term performance focuses at the self-presentation of bodies. The discursive production and the performative practices must be considered as sequential processes realizing (recognizing and effecting) the nature of the body in an ongoing procedure of inquiry, re-signification and fulfillment. Bod-

All pictures are from the Self/Images project called Fitness.

Self/images is a sequence of projects emphasizing socially relevant issues in a co-operative work method. The Fitness art project was realized in 2000.

My concern is how certain persons' self-images are mirrored, reinforced or deterred by the media images. I am interested in the development of the individual self-image as a process of reflecting or excluding influences of social environment and role models. The relationship of an individual person to society can be observed in the relationship of images - private and public - that aesthetically express cultural standards.

Consequently Self/Images projects make use of co-operative working methods as an artistic form. I am working with individuals, collecting and re-staging public and private images. This process of collaboration is what I call Project-Art.

ies are culturally constructed through the repetition of stylized acts in time. Therefore the performance of bodies is not a masquerade at the surface but a production of reality.

IMAGES

After all Butler is in search for the mechanism that allows the discursive structure of knowledge to turn into the material structure of physicality to understand the interplay between the corporal world and the discursive world as an cultural construction that nevertheless produces real truth on one side and true reality on the other. The problem that needs to be explained is the transition between the different ontological quality of the discourse and the matter. Looking at the semantic finesse of performativity or performance the terms already point towards an intermediary category beyond Butler's argumentation that is in search for a somewhat discursive transition between dictum and factum emphasizing the inquiring speech. Performance signifies an action that can be conceptualized as a series of images added into a motion picture. Hence performance implies the image as a category beyond the discourse and before the matter. The performativity of the discourse and the performance of the body refer to the imagery as the intermediary between discursive knowledge and materiality.

Images are able to realize cultural meaning as natural being because the signifying character of the nevertheless physical image already ontologically intermingles (symbolic) culture and (physical) nature. The figurative presentation that characterizes the performance implies both: the

symbolic-figurative and the corporal-physical character. In the process of performing nature the body produces symbolically-physically the cultural image of the nature of bodies. The figurative presentation proves to be the real interface between discourse and matter. Consequently the regulating principle of the inquiring speech needs to be extended by the principle of the mediated images. More precisely, the performance of the corporal self seems to be already present as a kind of preliminary practice at the site of media images. The public pictures occupying the public space figuratively present dominant conceptions about the nature of the body and mediate such ideas exemplary.

Now, another remarkable quality of the notions of performativity and performance is the aspect of repetition or re-signification that implies a constant process of expressing and doing nature. Here the aspect of a sudden deviation comes into play. Not only the identical mechanisms of reproduction of norms, but the incidences of random errors are a result of performing practices. If the performance is to be understood as a continuous process of a constant production of reality, it leads somewhat automatically to little inaccuracies or peculiar displacements. The basic idea of this argumentation is that the performative self-presentation never functions by hundred percent identically. This non-identity reveals on one hand the performance as an active process not an occurrence of nature and on the other hand it points to the possibility of variation and thus a variable nature of bodies. Looking at the possibility of peculiar displacements the whole

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THE CATEGORY OF 'THE CONSUMER' CAN BE UNDERSTOOD AS THE INDIVIDUAL AND RECIPIENT OF SURROUNDING IMAGES THAT IS EQUIPPED WITH A CERTAIN PECULIAR HABITUS, WHICH GOES BEYOND THE SIMPLE PURCHASE OF GOODS. IT CONSUMES THE SOCIAL TRUTH AND WORLD OF IMAGES SOMEWHAT LIKE A POACHER IN THE IMPERIAL TERRITORY.

process of normalizing performances can be understood as a changeable procedure. Dominating discourses as well as surrounding images will not be repeated and re-staged accurately only. The nature of bodies will not be reproduced in accordance with cultural standards simply. The individual might make use of the little inaccuracies and hence an emancipatory perspective comes into sight.

TRICKS AND TACTICS

The emancipatory idea of the shift and deviation finally can be supported by Michel de Certeau's theory of every day practice. De Certeau argues in *The Practice of Everyday Life*, that the apparently passive consumers actually practice active tactics and tricks of appropriation in the socio-political interplay of production and consumption of goods and ideas.¹ De Certeau illustrates his ideas on the basis of examples such as reading or walking through the city. Prefabricated goods, printed texts or indicated walking ways are bought, consumed and used, however often in a way that undermines the logic of these things and structures. As a consumer the actor buys the goods, receives the pictures, uses the roads and behaves in accordance with the given structures. However, consumers do not simply take the knowledge for granted, which is offered to them. They do not fit amorphously into the mechanism of forming and they do not represent identically, what is presented to them. They turn capriciously the use of the offered commodity and twist the expected performance unforeseeably. The position, from which the consumer evades the consumer logic, is not to be called resistant. The



consumerist temper is not standing up against the governance of commodities. It is not against, but results from a stochastic of convenient opportunities.

These considerations can be used to support the idea of an emancipatory practice of displacement. The category of 'the consumer' can be understood as the individual and recipient of surrounding images that is equipped with a certain peculiar habitus, which goes beyond the simple purchase of goods. It consumes the social truth and world of images somewhat like a poacher in the imperial territory. Two essential elements of the emancipatory identity policy are supported by looking at this 'figure' of the consumer: First the actor is not acting beyond the dominant discourses or widespread images and accepted practices of everyday life but secondly nevertheless changes something within the offered world. Such type of consumer would take the truth about the nature of the body as fact. But it would also make use of such knowledge as a kind of second hand good shifting the practical value. Analyzing these appropriating tricks and shifting tactics supports the understanding of mechanisms of consumption and performance as repetitive; as well as these practices appear not only as processes of affirmation but procedures that make incidents of non-identity and peculiarity possible.

Another aspect of de Certeau's theoretical approach adds a further element to the emancipatory hope in appropriating tricks and shifting tactics: It is the vocabulary he uses that leads to a revaluation of the values. The practices of everyday life are named as tricks and tactics. The consumer is a poacher taking advantages of opportunities. De Certeau himself offers on the semantic level a secret pleasure integrated in the affair of appropriation and redefinition of goods and conceptions. This pleasure overcomes the bitter terminology of traditional emancipation politics. Without being able to explain the source of this desire de Certeau seems to work with it as a (hopefully self-fulfilling) prophecy. The tricks and tactics replace the moral obligation of troublesome deviation with the joy of being obstinate. Such element of pleasure promises to set free far more peculiar dynamics than the unpleasant strain of traditional emancipatory strategies. This potential is to be stressed as a contribution to a newly understood ethical strategy.



(Footnotes)

¹ See: Judith Butler: *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, New York, Routledge, 1990

² See: Michel Foucault: *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*. (1966) Random House USA Inc; Reissue 1994; *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*. (1975) Random House USA Inc; Reprint 1995; and also *The History of Sexuality: The Will to Knowledge v. 1* (1977) Penguin Books Ltd; New Ed 1998.

³ Michel de Certeau: *The Practice of Everyday Life*, trans. Steven Rendall, University of California Press, Berkeley 1984

If the casual but cunning deviation can be understood as a tactic to deal with the dominant discourses the surrounding role models and normalized practices, it escapes the negative connotation, with which anomalous behavior seems to be conventionally connected.