WRITING THE PAIN OF OTHERS: A STROLL WITH DISTURBANCES
Rethinking ethical agency by way of practice-based research

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Abstract

This paper centres on the art projects May and the potentiality of pain (2014-15), and It’s always three o’clock in the morning (2016). Both works form an integral part of the ongoing practice-based PhD project Scripting the Pain of Others, a non-representational approach to pain within contemporary art, conducted at the Institute of the Arts at the University of Cumbria. The PhD project takes an affirmative approach to physical pain which is treated as an ethical practice of relations. In doing so, it moves towards an extended, critical understanding of pain as an act of resistance. Looking closer at the subversive potential of pain, the study is informed by the idea that sense experience is an experience of varying degrees of intensity (Deleuze 2004). Sensation thus conducts its reasoning by way of self-differing intensity; a power that strikes the individual body in consecutive, singular blows, thereby forcing it to act and think. While this is true of all sentient bodies, the body in chronic pain also perseveres in sensuous discord, although to a much greater extent, hence forming other abilities. The research practice looks at how long-term pain and writing, in their capacity as inter-embodied practices of relations, can be carried out as experimental exercises in intensity in the process of “becoming text”.

By reconsidering pain in this manner, the aim is to foster new ideas of what notional “sharing events” of pain could entail. This notional space of “sharing” pain is then coincident with and conducted in this project alongside an exploration of a liminal space of and for writing, documenting, or scripting the pain of others. The paper focuses on the methodological conceptual inventions in progress in the project, on methodological devices conceived in turns of practical processes and reflective work.

Johanna Willenfelt is an artist born in Sweden. She received her MFA from Valand School of Fine Arts in 2010 and has since then been exhibiting and presenting on her work in both Scandinavia and the UK. Her work has been shown in various places, amongst others The Nordic House in Reykjavik, Jönköping County Hospital, and The Gothenburg Museum of Art. Recent engagements include the book chapter “Documenting Bodies: Pain Surfaces” in Pain and Emotion in Modern History (Palgrave 2014), the conference paper “What Can the Body in Pain Do?” for Re-engaging Elaine Scarry’s “The Body in Pain”, A Thirtieth Anniversary Retrospective, University of Brighton, and the solo exhibition It’s always three o’clock in the morning at Rakke visningsrom, Trondheim, Norway (2016).