Multiple Bodies as One

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by

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“But what I have just been talking about is predicated on the feeling that what sculpture was is insufficient because it was founded on an idealist myth. And in trying to find out what sculpture is, or what it can be, it has used theater and its relation to the context of the viewer as a tool to destroy, investigate, and to reconstruct.”

Rosalind Krauss, *Passages in Modern Sculpture*
INTRODUCTION

I have been involved in three accidents in the past four years: the first resulting in severe multiple bodily injuries and a hip surgery that left me with metal devices in my joint and arthritis in my bones, and the others resulting in multiple herniated disks along my neck and spine. Through navigating life with chronic pain and learning alternate ways of carrying one's body and building physical strength without strain, I have investigated support systems and their interaction with the body.

My insurance will not cover physical therapy yet will cover certain prescription medicines and surgeries. At this point, I have been told that I should undergo an invasive procedure which will break my left hip into three pieces, rotate them, then put them back together. This apparently will get rid of my arthritis and make my joint more stable. However, this procedure will prevent me from being able to walk without crutches for nearly a year, an experience which I have already undergone after my bike accident, which I am still almost five years later recovering from the atrophy in my left leg.

Rather than submit to the system of insurance and pharmaceutical companies invading my body and requiring follow-up procedures every decade, I have created my own system of building my body back together after being broken. With the use of devices which require labor produced by a body in motion, the structures serve as an exoskeleton to the user, providing them with an extra set of bones and additional set of organs. The performer is an extension of the sculpture and the sculpture is an extension of the performer, they co-exist to produce one body. The performer generates breath into the sculpture, and the sculpture transforms the performer's body. Only when the human performers are added does the sculpture become complete, as now time,
balance, transformation, and unpredictability are added to the equation. Each performer is a unique, and constantly changing, factor in the breathing balance of the machine and its organs.

**THE BIKE ACCIDENT**

I was out in the garden tending to my tomatoes that morning when Shannon called to see what time I was coming to the studio and if she should get started on mixing the pigments. Until I spoke with her, I had not wanted to go in until after noon, but then changed my mind as I recalled the white clothes and fabric that I had set aside months ago, when it seemed like there would be more time for something personal. For years I had carried a large mason jar filled with blended food in my backpack, liquified lunch was preferential because I could eat as I worked, occasionally swallowing a brown sludge of carbs and proteins and then fitting the jar with its lid so no floating particles could get inside. My backpack did not have enough space for both the fabric and the glass jar; besides, it seemed like a good day to get the vegetarian sandwich from the Graham Avenue butcher and sit outside in the sun with Shannon. As I mounted my bike, I thought that I should really thank Rachel for screaming at me as she passed me on Metropolitan that night on my way home weeks ago. “WHERE IS YOUR HELMET? DO YOU WANT TO END UP LIKE EMILIE?” Emilie was hit by a commercial truck which resulted in the loss of her vision.

That night I dug my helmet out of one of the moving boxes marked ‘miscellaneous’. Forest was my usual route, though there was a new bike lane on Woodward that connected to Metropolitan at the Western Beef parking lot. This street has far fewer obstacles, a cemetery situated on the right meant that cars could only enter from the left. The summer sun seared my skin as I let
gravity pull me downhill, but I still had a tight handle on both brakes as the road was riddled with potholes. Not too fast, or I could hit a bump and fly face forward. As I entered the end of the cemetery, a car slightly slowed down at the stop sign to my left, but then suddenly gained momentum with a great force. Fight or flight, I took a sharp right. Time passed at a frame by frame pace, my breath changed from sixty breaths per minute to fifteen, though my heart rate elevated exponentially. Suddenly sandwiched between two metal objects, my knee remained clamped as my body twisted and slammed face up onto the hood then thrown onto the concrete. The driver eventually stopped before running over my body. My heart felt like it was attempting to erupt from my chest, my lungs switched to auto pilot and remained at a steady fifteen breaths per minute no matter how loud I screamed.

**COLLABORATION**

All of the pieces have been made in collaboration with composer P. Spadine. We began our collaboration in 2017 with a piece that involved my hand made balance board from physical therapy coupled with a manual aleatoric percussion device made by Pat. I placed the instrument on my balance board and would move my legs to make percussive sounds using a marble that moved on the surface of the board to hit bells surrounding the perimeter.

Working in such close collaboration every step of the way allowed for two bodies to act as one and rapidly generate ideas, produce prototypes, and solve problems. The labor put into these sculptures required nine months of consistent work. We began by scaling up the balance board into a see-saw, which had many iterations over the course of nine months, all were designed to set up in less than 15 minutes and break down in the same time and all fit into a cargo van. The
first iteration was a see-saw that landed on squeaky toys. The second iteration was a see-saw that popped balloons. The third iteration was a see-saw with illuminated foot bellows routed to PVC flutes. We combined the second two and expanded to include the double accordion bellows and PVC flutes in the middle. Simultaneously, we were asked to include the See-saw in a show that could not fit the 20’ long sculpture, so we modified in one night it to be vertical and created the Benches from the skeletons of a failed prototype to fit into a 5’ square space.

We had the idea for the Bike a few months before we began working on the See-saw. Our friend gave us an antique pump organ whose bellows had cracked over time. We took apart the organ to see how it was made and decided that rather than fix the bellows we should use the reed keyboard and hook it up to a bike that pumps bellows so we could do physical therapy while playing music. Pat had back surgery at the same time I had hip surgery, and we each regained strength and motion from the stationary bike. We began construction of the bike months after this thought, and the design changed to what the Bike is now. Over that time, we learned how to efficiently build components of organs with variations on structural designs. The Bike design is an expansion on what we learned from the See-saw and Benches.

**THE MODULAR SOUND SCULPTURE**

Two skeletons, with interchangeable organs.

Circulatory System: Pumps = heart, Bellows = lungs.

Wind-driven energy.

Balloons record the amount of air generated by the pump.

4 Single-fold bellows, illuminated from the interior.

2 Double accordion bellows, illuminated from the interior.
Two skeletons, interchangeable organs, three performers.

Iteration one: 2x4 see-saw skeleton, 2 block and tackle driven vacuum PVC pumps, 4 single fold illuminated bellows, two double accordion illuminated bellows, two PVC air routers, fourteen PVC flutes, two clear balloons.

Performers: Pat and Tim, both musician/composers and weigh the same.

Iteration two: two 2x4 bench skeleton, 2 block and tackle driven vacuum PVC pumps, 4 single fold illuminated bellows, two PVC air routers, eight PVC flutes, two clear balloons, two ropes with handles.

Performers: Valerie and Pat, collaborators.

CONFIGURATIONS OF THE MODULAR SOUND SCULPTURE

See-saw Configuration

Each side of the see-saw has a PVC vacuum pump modularly attached to the base of the see-saw and the back of the lever plank. A clear hose is attached from the exit valve of the pump to a PVC air routing structure that stands behind the performer. At the top of the structure is a clear balloon, which is inflated as the performer on the other side generates air through movement, distribution of body weight, and gravity’s pull. The PVC air routing structures each vertically hold four PVC flutes, two on the right and two on the left. Each pair has a corresponding hose that is inputting air from an illuminated single-fold bellow situated under the foot of the performer. Two double accordion type bellows are held underneath the middle of the plank, and each continually pump air into a trio of flute pipes fixed inside the plank.
Performance of the See-saw

Two performers are on either side of the see-saw, pushing each other up in the air. As they rise and fall the double accordion bellows vertically expand and contract and produce a drone tone when in motion. As the performers’ feet fall, they press down onto the bellow at the base of their foot, which produces an audible chord from the PVC pipes on the structure behind them. The harder the push, the higher the note. Each foot bellow has the ability to produce three different notes depending on the pressure the bellow is pushed. The performer cannot see the balloon just behind their head inflating, and thus does not know when it will pop. There will be one moment of silence in the performance when the performers equally balance each other, thus stopping the air flow from all bellows and silencing the flutes. The piece continues until one balloon pops, signaling the end of the performance.

Benches Configuration

Two 2x4 benches with vertical structures attached to the left of the performer sitting on the bench, (somewhat resembling a guillotine). Each vertical structure holds a PVC vacuum pump modularly encased inside of the vertical structure (much like a heart in a ribcage). A clear hose is attached from the exit valve of the pump to a PVC air routing structure that stands behind the performer. At the top of the structure is a clear balloon, which is inflated as the performer on the other side generates air through movement, opening and closing the pump by the use of a rope and handle. The PVC air routing structures each vertically hold four PVC flutes, two on the right and two on the left. Each pair has a corresponding hose that is inputting air from a single-fold bellows situated under the foot of the performer.
Performance of the Benches

Two performers are seated on benches facing each other, keeping eye contact throughout the duration of the piece. They begin by lifting their feet and pressing on bellows, which creates a breathing sound. Performer A hands Performer B their respective handle to pull the air pump for the balloon, which is attached to the PVC structure next to Performer A. The sound of breathing continues. Performer B hands the other handle to Performer A. Each are pressing bellows with their feet and pulling pumps with their arms. This creates a pattern of rhythm. As time progresses, pieces of tape are individually taken off of the PVC flutes which allows air from the bellows to now make notes. There are eight total notes. Variations of the audible sound pattern occur as each performer has a different pace with both their arms and feet, alternating between two feet pressing at one then one at a time. This continues until one balloon pops. The performer whose balloon popped plays a rhythm with their feet and slowly lets go of the handle. The performer whose balloon remains takes it off and pulls the opening tight, to create a reed, and slowly lets the air out of the balloon until it is deflated.

THE BIKE SCULPTURE

The third sculpture is meant for me to perform solo. A stationary bike with an 8-inch diameter pink and red dyed vinyl ball in place of the handlebars. Behind and on top of the bike frame are four clear bellows which appear to float in air. They are attached to the bike frame by a crane bolted to the rear bike rack with a horizontally perpendicular rectangle at the top. Each bellow is attached by a bolt to the rectangle frame. The lights inside of the bellows are all red. The ball has four outlets at the bottom with four clear hoses clamped around the edge. One of the hoses leads to the bellows and is responsible for routing the air that the bellows generate into the vinyl
ball. The other three hoses each lead to two accordion reeds on a chrome metal horn attached vertically and at a forward and external angle at the front of the bike frame.

The Performance of the Bike

All four red lights inside the bellows on the bike are on. I approach the bike and come around on its left side, facing the frame. Two pieces of clear medical tape are lightly taped to the frame. My hands lightly grip the top bar as I contort my torso back and lift my bent right leg into the air with a pointed toe. I mount the bike and use my arms to hoist my body onto the seat and adjust my position. I look back to my left, where I find a green light attached to a wire that leads to the bellow frame. I reach back and get the green light attachment and place it on my heart. I hold the attachment with one hand while I reach for the clear tape with the other, then bring the tape to my heart and press on the attachment. The bellows begin to blink at a rate that directly corresponds to my heart rate. As I turn the pedals on the bike, the chain carries my movement to a crankshaft that replaces the rear wheel. The crankshaft reaches to the bellows with 4 clear acrylic arms pumping the bellows and generating air which is routed into the ball with hoses inflating it, I press down on the vinyl ball manipulating the air pressure to get variations in the tone produced by the trumpets. This is a durational piece, the score is “Play one note until you are tired, play the second note until you are exhausted, play the third note until you can’t anymore.”

BODY AS MACHINE

“The 1900s brought a new influence in prosthetics design. Runner’s legs, made for Aimee Mullins and other competitive athletes, imitated the flexion of the cheetah’s leg and resembled the suspension band in a pickup truck more than a familiar articulated leg. This design trajectory of a technology – from mimicry to
modification and then to disassociation with the original – has happened many times in history…. Artists of these technologies have long since abandoned any allegiance to their precursors. Following a similar course, many prosthesis makers in the late twentieth century took a turn into visionary engineering, where parts replicated neither form nor function of the human body…. Are prosthesis then, like bicycles and typewriters or like mechanical lipsticks? Is an artificial leg more like an antitoxin or an iron lung? Or maybe a hemostat or the elegant pin tumbler Yale lock? The answer depends on who does the asking…. If the history of prosthetics is about the history of medicine and technology, it is also about learning strategies to live with one’s own body and adept to circumstances, learning to understand other people’s bodies. This is true whether you are a prosthesis maker, as Steven Kurzman recounts in this volume, or you are a fellow human with expectations about health, body appearances, and body functions.”

Artificial Parts, Practical Lives: Modern Histories of Prosthetics.

The sculptures are all variations of a pump organ, each has a set of single-fold bellows that when pushed route air through a series of pipes to produce different notes. In addition, the see-saw has two sets of double bellows whose folding pattern is designed after accordion bellows, allowing them to expand and contract on a vertical plane. The ball on the bike is an air reservoir that is modelled after the air system of a bagpipe, an instrument traditionally made from largely intact animal skins with tied off ends where the limbs and head protrude from the body.

Circulatory system – “the system of blood, blood vessels, lymphatics, and heart concerned with the circulation of the blood and lymph” (Merriam-Webster). The organ components of the sculptures have a double-meaning of the word “organ”, as they are designed after musical organs and also function as vital organs for the sculptures to breathe and route air through a system of pumps, tubing, and bellows. The pumps are built with the same function as a human heart: to circulate a substance by means of a mechanical pump continually and rhythmically pushing the substance through a connected series of vessels. The pumps are connected to clear balloons by means of a series of tubing, which when in motion eventually ruptures the balloon, allowing for the air to escape. This rupture of the vacuum inside the balloon makes a loud audible pop.
“A cyborg is a cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction. Social reality is lived social relations, our most important political construction, a world-changing fiction… Liberation rests on the construction of the consciousness, the imaginative apprehension, of oppression, and so of possibility… This is a struggle over life and death, but the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion. Contemporary science fiction is full of cyborgs—creatures simultaneously animal and machine, who populate worlds ambiguously natural and crafted. Modern medicine is also full of cyborgs, of couplings between organism and machine, each conceived as coded devices, in an intimacy and with a power that were not generated in the history of sexuality.”

* A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century.
* (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), pp.5-6

The bellows expand and contract to generate air that is pushed through a network of tubing that leads to flutes and reed horns. They allow for the piece to breathe. As the air is breathed through the outlets of the flutes and horns, an audible tone is produced. This is the voice of the piece and allows for the performers to communicate by means of moving their bodies as opposed to a series of words. Performing together with the sculptures allows for the sculptures to come to life, activating their hearts and lungs, and the performers acting as a single brain. Thus, the two performers become part of a completely separate body from their own. They now comprise of an entity where 1+1=3. All ego is lost. The self and other co-exist, multiple bodies become one body.
SOUND

The sound is generated from bellows that are physically pushed by performers. The air is routed through hoses to the PVC circulatory system, where it produces an audible tone by escaping through the flutes’ and horns’ mouths.

The sound is a record of physical action.

Music is metaphysical way to alter one’s mind.

Breathing patterns are a way to alter one’s mind.

Physical actions are a way to alter one’s mind.

Organ = instrument

Modular components = vital organs

See-saw sounds: drone tone plus staccato

Benches sounds: staccato

Bike sounds: drone tone

IMPROVISATION

The nature of the organs drove us to a more improvisational approach to the compositions. The usual feedback between performer and instrument is expanded by the addition of the second performer creating a system in which the inputs of both performers influence and react to the output of the organ.
The see-saw and benches are both instruments meant for two people to play. They serve as a way for the two performers to communicate through music and motion. Not only do the sounds have to relate to each other, but the nature of the instruments requires the performers to move their bodies with regard to each other. They require a collaboration in order to operate in physical and musical conversation and relate to each other.

The horn from the bike is designed after a honk horn, the horn commonly used on a street bike. The commercial honk horn is a single-reed horn. The three horns on the bike sculpture each have two reeds salvaged from a broken accordion, each a pair of the same note slightly out of tune. This creates a brighter sound, which accentuates the variates in air pressure created by the performer through the ball. The three horns seal off the reed chambers, and sympathetically amplify the reeds. Visually the horns serve as an exaggeration of the bike horn. They act as a mechanical extension of my voice, allowing me to broadcast my scream through my hands.

THE FABRICS

The fabrics are all made from sources that do not involve killing animals. Traditional bellows are made from leather, and traditional reservoirs are made from animal bodies. It is very important that no lives were taken while making these pieces. The bellows on the bike are made from a contemporary waterproof fabric, referencing the first waterproof cellulose-based fabric in the see-saw and benches, waxed canvas. Since they are both waterproof, they are therefore airproof. The contemporary fabric is white, and when adhered together to make bellows have the look of frosted glass. There is no off-color of the wax or canvas, this allows for the light inside of the bike bellows to be seen without tinting the color.
THE UNIFORMS

The uniforms all began as white, all are cotton. Three are worker’s jumpsuits, and one is an athletic leotard with long pants and no sleeves. Each begin as a light blue at the top, then eventually saturate to a dark blue at the bottom. When the performers wear the uniforms, they are a unit.

LABOR/ECONOMIC STATUS

Capitalism is exploitive by nature. One’s body needs to function in order to create capital and must function at a “normal level” in order to be exploited. This exploitive system does not offer care and requires that one must be able, to a certain degree, to work and afford to pay for insurance to access care and rehabilitation. I have maintained the same health insurance my whole life, and now have a grandfathered in plan that only exists for those who had it before it was grandfathered years ago. I was born with a mutation in my red blood cells and was diagnosed with Spherocytosis at the age of five. In the first five years of my life, my hemoglobin (red blood cell count) dropped to 3.6 grams per deciliter, a normal level ranges between 12.0 – 15.5 grams. I had an emergency surgery to remove my spleen, which was filtering out my red blood cells because they are shaped like spheres as opposed to plates. Until the age of 18, I took antibiotics twice daily in order to maintain a working immune system due to the lack of my spleen. At 18, I researched alternative ways to boost immune systems that did not require taking antibiotics. Through a healthy vegetarian diet consisting of daily doses of garlic, ginger, and fermented foods, I am able to sustain a functioning immune system until I am exposed to something which shuts it down. When my immune system shuts down, I get extremely ill and do not have a spleen to help fight, so must take heavy antibiotics for weeks in order to recover. I
function at an overall better level when I do not take antibiotics daily, because rather than supplementing my immune system with antibiotics therefore making it weaker, I strengthen my immune system by allowing it to grow and fight when it can, only supplementing it in cases when it cannot.

Since I was born with Spherocytosis and had my spleen removed, I have a predisposition, which insurance companies had the right to deny coverage until 2009 when an antidiscrimination law came into effect which instated a federal ban on discriminating on the basis of genetic background. I never changed my insurance since I was born because I would likely be genetically discriminated by insurance companies, and I did not change my insurance when the Affordable Healthcare Act was instated because I do not know how long this law will remain in effect. With our current administration undoing laws at a rapid pace, I will continue to keep the insurance coverage I have had my whole life in fear that I will not be covered if I switch. My insurance plan changed when it was grandfathered, it has a high deductible and is a triple-digit monthly bill, but no longer covers categories such as physical therapy, mental health, or pregnancy.

In order to be able to afford my health insurance, I must participate in the labor economy. I was very able to do so before the bike accident: I owned my own fabric dyeing company and paid assistant $18/hour in 2014. We did everything by hand, working 12-hour days in a basement of an industrial building where rent was $225/month. We would fill 35-gallon trash cans up with water at the slop sink and push them back to the studio. When unloading the spent dye bath, we would use 5-gallon buckets to scoop the liquid and hoist it up and over into the sink. All of this required our bodies to be very strong, and we had to be cognizant of how we moved. I went to a
boxing studio three times a week to do weight training, cardio, and hit the bag. I did not fight, the only person I was ever in the ring with was my coach who had pads on her hands that I would punch in patterns as we moved around.

I was hit by the car on my way to the studio to dye fabric, and the fabric in my backpack saved me from breaking my back. After the accident, I was unable to walk without assistance of a cane, braces, and/or crutches for a year. I could no longer run my growing company, even with my assistant Shannon working full time for me. She has Multiple Sclerosis and needed to work a different job to be able to afford her health insurance and medicine.

The auto insurance for the driver who hit me only covered a few months of being out of work, at a number which was much below what I was making monthly from my business. I had to re-invent my career to one which did not require anything physically strenuous, or even one which required the use of two hands while walking because mine were occupied holding a cane or crutches. I had taught art before through The Saturday Program at my undergrad, The Cooper Union, and my friend and mentor Anna Conway suggested that I teach art at a program in Queens. I explained my limited ability situation to the director of the program, and she arranged for me to have an assistant help setup the room and gather the supplies. The assistant was not an existing position and required a $10/hour cut from my pay. One becomes “disabled” in terms of the labor economy, requiring your body to need assistance in relation to others, and this assistance is essential for surviving. The category of “disability” is created by capitalism and is further exploited by insurance companies and federal laws.¹

¹ Marta Russell, “Capitalism and Disability” (2002).
“Industrial capitalism thus created not only a class of proletarians but also a new class of ‘disabled’ who did not conform to the standard worker’s body and whose labour-power was effectively erased, excluded from paid work. As a result, disabled persons came to be regarded as a social problem and a justification emerged for segregating them out of mainstream life and into a variety of institutions, including workhouses, asylums, prisons, colonies and special schools. Exclusion was further rationalized by Social Darwinists, who used biology to argue that heredity — race and genes — prevailed over the class and economic issues raised by Marx and others. Just as the ‘inferior’ weren’t meant to survive in nature, they were not meant to survive in a competitive society. Legislation, influenced by Social Darwinism and eugenics theory, was enacted in a number of jurisdictions for the involuntary sterilization of disabled people.”  
"Capitalism and Disability.”  

The labor component of the performances is not one that produces any capital, rather is engaged in pleasure and has a purposeless goal. The sculptures are not meant for production, they are against singularity and the capitalist notion where the individual is the primary focus. The performance involves spending time in play and pleasure, both auditory and visual. The balloon’s skin is the limit of the see-saw and benches, it continually expands as the performers move their bodies, exhausting them as they play. The expansion of the balloon is a shared moment of tension, relatable to audience and performers, and stores the performer’s labor released when the balloon ruptures, creating the loudest sound of the piece.
LINEAGE

Tauba Auerbach – *Auerglass* collaborator

Cameron Mesirow – *Auerglass* collaborator

Artist Tauba Auerbach and composer Cameron Mesirow collaborated on the *Auerglass*, a pump organ designed for two people to play. Each player moves their feet to pump bellows that supply the wind for the other player’s keyboard, creating audible notes when a key is pressed down. The instrument was built in 2009 by Parsons Pipe Organ Builders in Canandaigua, New York.

Shelley Hirsch – performer of *The Mercurius Wagon*

Horst Rickles – builder of *The Mercurius Wagon*

*The Mercurius Wagon* is an instrument built from salvaged organ pipes, toilet plungers, and bike pumps. It was built by composer/instrument builder Horst Rickles specifically for composer/performer Shelly Hirsch to improvise. The Mercurius Wagon was first performed in 1987 and has recently been restored.

Mauricio Kagel, *Zwei Mann Orchester*

*Zwei Mann Orchester* is a piece by composer Mauricio Kagel, it originally premiered at the Donaueschingen Festival in 1973. The sculpture and performance object is an ever-evolving giant contraption that is comprised of multiple musical instruments, household and found objects, and is all connected through a network of ropes and levers. It is meant for two performers to play. The performers sit far away facing one another and must move their entire body – arms, legs, feet, fingers, heads - to manipulate the sounds. The machine is re-designed and re-built by the performers and sculptors each time it is shown, with a total of four versions ever created.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


2. Valerie Skakun, May 9 – 25, 2019, Installation View of video monitors playing performances on loop. Headphones are available for audio. 2019


1. Valerie Skakun, May 9 – 25, 2019, Installation View of the *Modular Sound Sculpture* and *Bike*. 
3. Valerie Skakun, May 9 – 25, 2019, Installation View of the *Modular Sound Sculpture* and *Bike*. 
PERFORMANCE DOCUMENTATION

Stills taken from the video monitors in the installation. Headphones are accessible to hear audio.
