Photography as technology of the self: Matuschka’s art and breast cancer
Hector Amaya
Southwestern University, Georgetown, TX, USA

After undergoing a mastectomy in 1991, Matuschka began photographing her nude body, and in these images she often highlighted the scar on her torso. Other women have acted in a similar fashion and have produced representations of their bodies after mastectomies. In this article the role the activity of photography plays in the process of self-formation of Matuschka is investigated. Borrowing from Michel Foucault’s technologies of the self, photography is inscribed in the tradition of art as inquiry and art production as manipulation of the self, and it is argued that the stylistic ways in which Matuschka has represented her body add an ethical dimension to her work. This ethical component shows a desire to fashion a new self by acting on the way her body is seen.

Introduction

Matuschka went through an unnecessary mastectomy in 1991 weeks after she was diagnosed with breast cancer.1 At the time, she was about to open her first photographic show in the Photography Museum of Helsinki, Finland, and had completed four years of an extensive aesthetic exploration of her torso (1996, p. 247). The mastectomy threatened her life and also threatened the continuity of her work; it transformed her body, her body’s image and her self in unexpected ways. How could she continue her work photographing her body? How could she address her changes and the ways society defined her new sexual persona?

Her work from 1991 onward has answered these and other questions regarding her sexuality, her body, the politics of sexuality, the politics of breast cancer research and the politics of images of women. The present essay attempts to explore the role that her art played in a process of personal transformation by inscribing the activity of photographing within the Western tradition of art as self-expression and of art as ethical exploration.
I want to emphasize that Matuschka’s work is part of an artistic ‘current’ comprising the art produced by women with breast cancer. These women, including Matuschka, use their artwork to criticize social definitions of femininity and the practice of medicine and medical research which they see as failing to address illnesses suffered by women.2

My inquiries have in mind the potentially complementary though very different theoretical questions and approaches raised by Janet Wolff and Michel Foucault. Wolff’s (1981, 1983) questions address the ‘sociology of art’ and ‘sociology of culture.’ For Wolff (1983), projects interested in the purely sociological and political aspects of art cannot account for art’s complexity.3 Sociological accounts of the ‘specificity of art,’ she contends, are insufficient in three instances. First, art is a specific cultural practice and in order to understand it we must analyze its rituals, legitimizing processes and the discursive practices that comprise it, such as aesthetics and art criticism. Second, sociological research often has no recourse but to use previously set aesthetic categories as determinants of inquiry, a practice that risks reproducing the limitations of these categories. Third, it is necessary to recognize the ‘autonomy of the particular kind of pleasure involved in past and present appreciation of the works themselves’ (p. 106).

If, to Wolff, art is a specific cultural practice, with its own lineage of historiographical, philosophical and epistemological questions, that is experienced in specific ways and produces specific pleasures, it is also a category of cultural products produced by individuals whose agency must be accounted for, individuals who mediate aesthetic social and ideological codes and that facilitate their expression (Wolff, 1981, pp. 136–137). So, she proposes, we must also consider the individual artist in terms of ‘situated production’ and research the subject and its rituals. Wolff is suggesting a theoretical approach where the general categories of sociology are dialectically reconstituted with the particulars as exemplified by the rituals of art production or the subject as mediator of general constitutive categories such as ideological, social and artistic codes.

Profiting from Wolff’s ideas and using Foucault’s genealogical approaches, I address the specificity of Matuschka’s art (in particular the practice of photographing) as situated production, and look at her subject position and her agency within the artworld.4 Foucault’s work on technologies of the self assists me in the last point by allowing me to talk about the subject as actant through self-fashioning and by allowing me to look at the form of mediation, which in this case is photographing, as a type of self-manipulation.

**Matuschka in discourse**

In 1996 Matuschka published a biographical essay in the edited feminist collection ‘Bad Girls Good Girls’ where she narrates the way her life and her art have been influenced by the mastectomy and by her activism. She writes about her aesthetic influences (Frida Kahlo, Susan Markisz, Nancy Fried and Deena Metzger, all women who have taken their ‘damaged’ bodies as subject matter) and the way her activities (or
activisms) as a victim of breast cancer have opened and closed doors in her life. It is a very intimate portrayal that shows a Matuschka more fragile than the one encountered in her art, where she displays the strength of a survivor. I remark on one aspect of this essay and on one of her photographs in order to relate her experiences to her artistic practices and the style of her work.

The essay tells us that from the start of her post-mastectomy work Matuschka understood that what she wanted to communicate with her art existed in the tension between beauty and illness. After seeing the photographs, paintings and sculptors of Metzger, Markisz and Fried (all of whom went through mastectomies), Matuschka realized that pride was missing from the work of these women and decided that she would try to portray pride and strength (p. 250). Her work, unlike that of Metzger, Markisz and Fried, was not going to be about 'hiding or concealing the condition, but becoming sexy and strong as a result thereof' (p. 250). But, could she 'create a picture of power and strength instead of self-indulgence?' (p. 257). The stylistic answers to this question would become the postmarks of her work: photography and painting that sought strength, beauty and sexuality despite the marks of the illness, despite the scar. Matuschka's work since 1991 consisted of the repeated portrayal (using varied techniques such as illustration, painting and photography) of her own body after the mastectomy. Take for instance Figure 1 (Classic Nude), a photograph that appeared in the magazine Gauntlet in 1995 and that belongs to a series suggestively titled 'Beauty Out of Damage.' The style of the photograph, she declares, is the style of fashion magazines (her pose, the lighting, the way her body is demarcated by the contrast between wall and shadow, are all characteristic parts of the fashion lexicon), a style that appears to be in direct tension with the subject matter, the naked body of a post-mastectomy woman. A closer look at the photograph reveals the staging of tensions among form, discourses and social practices.

The style, which could be defined as a chiaroscuro, stresses the play between shade and light and creates a visual economy in which her body and its shadow appear to have similar visual value. The composition directs our attention to her chest and Matuschka would explicitly ask, 'How can I take such an asymmetrical situation – remove it from the look available in medical books – and bring it to the level of my earlier work without evoking pity?' (Rudner, 1995, p. 24). Matuschka's object of aesthetic exploration (her 'unbalanced' body), and the fact that, as John Berger (among many) suggests, 'A woman must continually watch herself' and the way she is being seen (1972, p. 46) imply a compositional contradiction that Matuschka, as a photographer and as a woman, had to address. To this effect she photographs herself as asymmetrical, as disharmonious, as potentially undesirable, and uses the unfulfilled expectation of symmetry (an expectation produced by the canon of Western painting and Greek art) to install in the viewer a positive sense of irony.

In the photograph, as is typical in Classical Greek art, the eyes are closed and directed away from the viewer suggesting an invitation to look, to gaze. In her photograph, however, the invitation is manipulated to provoke a tension between expectations. She is working the Western artistic canon, she is replicating the canon to the point of (im)perfection, she is suggesting that the beauty normalized by the canon,
Figure 1. Classic Nude: photograph belonging to the series Beauty Out of Damage
which includes the ideas of symmetry and femininity as scarless unblemished skin, may hide the asymmetry of patriarchal society, and may hide the scars of technology. Her gaze as a photographer, the lens, produces a tension that is passed on to us. This tension taints our relation to the image, in a sense denaturalizing it. Our pleasure is no longer based on the facile pleasures of the canon. Each viewer’s gaze is perverted. Voyeuristic pleasures are disrupted by the scar; her body becomes more than an object of desire and desire becomes not just the absence of the phallus, but also the absence of her breast. In the image, the scar is presented in a subtle manner, but the position and the lighting force the viewer to linger on it.

The shadow is very important to the composition. It appears to delineate her ‘healthy,’ complete side and suggests the shape of a lost body, of a complete body. Perhaps in nostalgia, perhaps in a combative way, the shadow shows the shape of her breast that is not there. Two breasts are then shown, her full-flesh breast and her shadow breast. Her nipple and her pubic hair are very visible in the bottom part of the shadow, where, after the feminine curve of her belly, her pubic hair stands out and makes her genital area active, engaging forward, denaturalizing the idea of the passive vagina and the active phallus. Playfully her ‘feminine’ pose contradicts the ‘masculine’ codes of her flat chest and the ‘phallic’ shadow of her pubic area. The image challenges expectations of gender and sexuality and produces in its stead a complex tension of gender and sexual codes where active phallic imagery is placed in the same system of sexual difference where her flat chest, the place of the scar, suggests victimization and illness. When coded as feminine, the sexual potentialization of her feminine shape brutally contrasts with any held notion of illness and of incompleteness that the photograph insists the viewer must keep in mind. In highlighting sexuality and incompleteness in the same work the photograph ironically marks as incomplete the discourse on sexuality, the discourse on fashion and the viewer’s system of (self-) desire.

I have suggested that Matuschka’s photograph(s) can help us delineate a space where the discourses of fashion photography and Classical art intersect with the discourses of illness, medicine, sexuality and gender. The intersection places a limit to these same discourses. Of particular relevance are the limits placed, through play and contradiction, on the sexual and gender codes that are placed against the discourses of art and medicine. Looking at the way her life and experiences form the bases for the production of cultural artifacts that critique specific discourses helps us to understand one way in which Matuschka’s photograph is ‘situated production.’ Discourses, as social determinants, are dialectically constituted by her work.

But one important thing remains open for discussion in relation to the situatedness of her work. This is the issue of repetition. Why did Matuschka continue representing her body from 1991 onward? It would be tempting to answer that she found the style that could best express her views about traditional notions of sexuality, gender and victims, and that her style had the added value of allowing her to work as an activist thus allowing her entry into a community of women and men who did not consider her body a rude statement about cancer, but a valuable statement about patriarchy, a statement within the discourses of feminist and political art. However, this answer
would in fact explain her work only in terms of social determinants, her work as constituted by society, and her motivations as rooted in the social. And, following Wolff, I argue that much would be lost if I reduced the analysis of art only to its social aspects, and so I propose to ponder the relation of Matuschka to photography and in what sense her photography is ‘productive.’

The need to take this approach is evidenced by the way Matuschka described the woman depicted on her first posters. She wrote: ‘I drew the woman as a proud, erect citizen, much as a soldier returning home from battle, wounded, but still capable of saluting the flag despite the experiences he has gone through’ (p. 251). Here, Matuschka is highlighting certain themes that run through her essay and will be present in her work in general: the issue of citizenship, the wound/healing dichotomy and the idea of life-changing experiences. I want to suggest that, in more ways than one, the individual described in the quote is like Matuschka, or at least her ideal social persona, and that her art cannot be understood, or situated, without exploring the specificity of photography and its philosophical, formal and ethical problematics, and the way all of the latter problematics relate to her notion of citizenship. In the rest of the essay, I situate Matuschka’s work in the genealogy of art and characterize her work as a tool for transformation of her body’s image and of her social position, and in particular, the way her art marks her re-entry into the social and into community.

The ethical in writing: ‘one should speak and show the truth’

I have always adhered to the philosophy that one should speak and show the truth, because knowledge leads to free will, to choice. If we keep quiet about what cancer does to women’s bodies, if we refuse to accept women’s bodies in whatever condition they are in, we are doing a disservice to womankind. (Matuschka, 1998)

Matuschka produces photographs that are statements about her own body. They function partly as aesthetic-artistic statements (shown in museums, galleries and other media), and partly as ethical-political statements. In this essay, the aesthetic is to the artistic what the ethical is to the political: this means that while the artistic and political should be understood as general fields of social action, the aesthetic and the ethical correspond to particular systems of thinking and doing that center on the individual. Discourses and practices cut across all of these levels, and Matuschka’s statements are at once part of general social codes and part of particular personal expression. And though her work is feminist art and activism, it is also the visible trace of the particular way she embraced established aesthetic and ethical discourses.

Matuschka’s work is ethical at two levels: First, it produces situated challenges to the political establishment (the medical profession, the institutions of patriarchy) and second, it is an aesthetic examination of her own body, and thus, her photograph is an exploration of the relation of Matuschka to her-self (Foucault 1984a, p. 352). It is this notion of ethics, ethics as a relation to one-self, that Foucault explores in the second and third tomes of The History of Sexuality (1990) and that I will continue using in the rest of the essay.
In *The Use of Pleasure* (1985), Foucault examines the ‘arts of existence,’ which are ‘those intentional and voluntary actions by which men not only set themselves rules of conduct but also seek to transform themselves, to change themselves in their singular being, and to make their lives into an oeuvre that carries certain aesthetic values and meets certain stylistic criteria’ (p. 11). The values after which one models one’s life are historically constituted and are constructed as a system intelligible enough to provide individuals with specific procedures for transformation toward the stylistics of an ethical goal. In examining ethical statements, Foucault (1984a) identifies four areas of analysis: (1) the ‘ethical substance,’ which is the part of the self open to ethical questioning (p. 353), (2) the ‘mode of subjection,’ which is the rationale linking the subject to ethical mandates, (3) the ‘mode of elaboration,’ which is the system of production that establishes a ‘self-forming’ activity through which we ‘change ourselves to become ethical subjects (p. 354),’ and (4) the ‘telos,’ which refers to ‘the kind of being to which we aspire when we behave in a moral way’ (p. 355). In order to address this process, I analyze Matuschka’s work as the material manifestation of the activity of photographing, where photographing can be understood as a productive system that produces ethical statements.

**The body as ethical substance**

Ethics is, for Foucault, ‘the kind of relationship that you ought to have with yourself … and which determines how the individual is supposed to constitute himself as a moral subject to his own actions’ (1984a, p. 352). The monitoring of actions and the moral prescriptions that govern this process and that constitute the individual as a moral subject are linked to the individual’s idea of her position in the social. Differently stated, one requirement that the individual must fulfill to become ‘a moral subject to [her] own actions’ is her constitution as a ‘self.’ To fulfill this complex requirement the individual must account for her materiality in the world (self–world relation), a fundamental step for consciousness, but she must also fulfill historically constituted ideas about self and identity that may go beyond (though they are closely related to) the material body.

The mastectomy that Matuschka went through in 1991 disrupted her materiality and her relation to herself. This disruption is manifested in her essays, interviews and photography in terms of a nostalgia for her pre-mastectomy body, which she refers to as ‘perfect,’ suggesting both the recognition of her present imperfection and the correlation between completion and perfection (Matuschka 1996, p. 254). The disruption is manifested also in the fact that in order to be seen as ‘strong’ and ‘sexy’ she must do something, she must create representations that allow for these interpretations of her body.

Besides issues of embodiment and body image, Matuschka’s sense of self was challenged because in becoming a ‘victim’ (a term that she understandably dislikes) she became a non-agent, a sort of self-less individual who had to be protected, whose voice did not exist and thus must have others speak on her behalf. As her body became incomplete, her self became unhealthy and incomplete, an unavoidable side
effect in the Western cult of perfection, healthiness and body-image.\textsuperscript{8} It is significant that the photographers whom she initially contacted to photograph her torso produced work that she disliked either because they emphasized her incompleteness or because they emphasized pain and despair. She writes about the work of Cervin Robinson: ‘Although the work was strong, it once again played into the game that a woman is measured by her bust not by her brains or her whole self’ (p. 254). More problematic was the fact that the style of the photographs played into the ‘perspectives of concealment and shame’ (p. 255). After the second photographer, Allen McQuinney, she wrote something similar in 1993: ‘Mastectomy women’ are not just their bodies, and they should be encouraged to live their lives fully and participate in life instead of experiencing themselves as deformed, damaged, incomplete, disfigured, and isolated’ (p. 256). ‘Incompleteness,’ ‘deformation’ and ‘whole self’ are clear acknowledgements of and references to her precarious selfness, a state of imbalance and frustration, a state that has played a profound role in the lives of cancer victims in general, but breast cancer victims in particular.\textsuperscript{9}

How could her body continue to be a tool for knowing the social and for displaying a self when her body had become ‘unrecognizable’ to herself? Or, to put it differently, given that embodiment and ideas about the self in the United States depend on certain types of ‘individual actions,’ how could she become a self? It is important to remember that discourses on ‘individuality’ and ‘self’ in US society often rely on one or more of the four following characteristics: entrepreneurship (the economic self), self-reliance (the social self), originality (the cultural self) and self-expression (the political self).\textsuperscript{10} So, aside from the discourses on the body that construct femininity, womanhood and sexuality, Matuschka had to struggle against the notion of ‘victim,’ against those ideas that naturalize the victim as dependent: economically dependent, socially dependent, culturally dependent and politically dependent, the latter two dependencies directly implying a lack of voice or expression.

Embodiment, body-image, self-formation and expression are four areas of problematization for individuals who have experienced radical, unrequested, surgical transformation. They are also the manifestations of the previously mentioned ‘general’ (or social) categories that compose individuality in the realm of the ‘particular’ (or of the subject). With mastectomy, as with other ‘illnesses,’ the process of recovery typically involves activities directed toward a type of health, constituted in history and manifested in discourse.\textsuperscript{11} If recovery is understood both as the path towards a type of ‘health’ and a type of citizenship, can Matuschka photographing her own body be understood as the core of her process of recovery and the substance of her ethical actions? Furthermore, what conceptions of therapy, health and recovery are suggested by the work of Matuschka?

To answer these questions it is necessary first to indicate that in regard to ethical rules two different issues are at work. The first is the ethical system that Matuschka must abide by, and which includes core discourses on individuality such as the four already mentioned (entrepreneurship, self-reliance, originality and self-expression). One other issue is the specific ways in which she ought to form herself ‘as an ethical subject acting in reference to the prescriptive elements that make up the code’
Photography as technology of self (Foucault, 1984b, p. 26). Or, stated differently, the specific ways in which embodiment, the body’s image, self-formation and expression are constituted as areas of problematization. As I suggested before, the activity of photographing addresses the four areas of problematization at the level of the individual and at the level of the subject. By photographing her body Matuschka can rework her body’s materiality, her body as a site for meanings, as a participant in discourse. Her photographing is also her type of activism, which is intrinsic to her political self, also her livelihood or her economic self and, more importantly for the purposes of this study, her method of cultural expression. With photography she discovers a stylistic for ‘being in the world,’ the stylistics of a social body. It is important to remember that photographing herself means acting on her body while it is her body that is being acted on. Photographing is therefore action, expression, reflection, manipulation and transformation. Is the image of her body the ethical substance of her behavior? Is her visuality what constituted, at that historical moment, the substance that had to be ethically regulated?

I think that the answer to both questions is ‘yes.’ In part this has to do with the way Matuschka’s problematics concentrate around her body and around the image of her body as seen by herself and others. But it also has to do with a common way the body of a woman becomes social. Susan Bordo (1993) and Kathy Peiss (1995), for instance, discuss the social aspects of the female body in terms of processes of embodiment related to anorexia and cosmetic surgery, respectively; they both comment on how the construction of femininity is linked to the control of the image and the materiality of a woman’s body. For these and other feminist writers, the category of Woman is produced through the subjection of the body’s surface and matter, and, paradoxically, it is only through this subjection that women can find a way of being in the world: their social self, the Woman. Similarly, Matuschka’s way of being in the world, her social self, is closely bound to her body-image. In her case the ‘particular’ (the scar and all its implication) and the ‘general’ (her gender and all its implications) find a point of convergence in her body-image, a convergence that, in Matuschka’s work, sediments the substance of her ethical behavior around a stylistics in which the self must be embodied by a healthy individual.

But what can Matuschka do with such substance? Is her body’s image a substance that is malleable? If the answer is ‘yes,’ how should Matuschka ‘transform’ her body’s image? How can her body’s image be made to comply with the rules of individuality and the problematics of subjectivity?

Art as mode of subjection: truth

[The] mode of subjection … is the way in which the individual establishes his relation to the rule and recognizes himself as obliged to put it into practice. (Foucault, 1984a, p. 27)

One way of addressing the previous questions is by looking to problem areas within Matuschka’s body’s image. There are the issues already mentioned of the asymmetry of her chest, that of body (im)perfection suggested in her nostalgia for a lost body, and that of wanting to portray women with mastectomies as ‘strong and sexy’
(suggesting that her body had to be framed in specific ways in order to elicit such responses), not as victims. All of these problem areas center on the issues of truth and truthful representations. ‘Strong and sexy’ are, for instance, evaluations or ‘truth effects’ that are the result of specific discourses. Sadly, the body of a woman with only one breast and a large scar in place of the other breast can hardly be interpreted as ‘strong and sexy’ in the discourses of medicine or sexuality or gender or femininity or fashion photography. Medicine would pathologize the image; within the discourses of sexuality, gender and femininity the image would be considered undesirable (or incapable of eliciting desire); within the discourse of fashion photography, the image would be considered imperfect, asymmetrical, displeasing. A mastectomy changes the way women’s bodies, as systems of meanings and as representations of selves, are interpreted. Bodies like Matuschka’s are seen as unclear sets of statements, as ‘interstitial,’ uneasily sitting between the discourses of medicine, sexuality, illness, womanhood, art and beauty.

How can the body’s image, a ‘sensible’, be used to argue, to reason, against contemporary discourses of fashion, medicine, beauty, sexuality, motherhood? More broadly, how can a sensible be used to reach the truth? There are a couple of ways of approaching these questions: one has to do with the idea that the body is a statement of truth, and the other has to do with the way sensibles are used in art to question discourses and to reach truths.

In our culture of visuality, one function of the body is to represent the self. The body, or its image, may be evaluated in terms of how successfully it represents the self. If the result of the evaluation is positive, we say that the body truthfully represents the individual and vice versa. And so the truth ‘uttered’ by the body may partly be related to the production of visual statements that refer, within specific discourses, to the way(s) the individual sees herself. Beauty canons therefore have a resonance with morality, not only for the ancient Greeks but also for the contemporary Westerner who aspires, by manipulating the image of the body, to arrive at a true representation of the self.

Some women and men use surgical formation as part of their mode of subjection – breast enlargement or reduction, liposuction and other types of plastic surgery procedures. The ‘work’ is performed directly on their flesh. Matuschka’s case is different: the removal of her breast was imposed and, consequently, she may be less interested in ‘working’ her flesh than in ‘working’ the image of her flesh. By manipulating ‘representations’ of her body, she acknowledges representation as substantial to her constitution as a subject. In the case of Matuschka, where the ethical substance is her body’s image, her mode of subjection is partly related to her body as a visual object and its potential as an instrument of truth where truth refers to the correspondence of representation and reality, or, more specifically, the correspondence between her body as representation and her self.

Her mode of subjection is also partly related to the functions of art as an epistemic and ethical ‘device.’ Within art, Matuschka’s body as a sensible can rely on a historically constituted set of rules, a ‘truth game,’ that uses representation, or sensibles, as argumentation or proof of authenticity (another way of addressing truth). In doing so,
in using art and photography to express the potential correspondence between representation and things, Matuschka reconstitutes the Western tradition of art as self-expression and as a 'truth game.'

Matuschka's work is a historically contingent truth game that uses contemporary feminist artistic techniques and feminist aesthetics geared towards social activism. As an activist she uses her art to describe the limits and limitations of the discourses of beauty, fashion, women, sexuality and medicine. In blending fashion style, the nude (a term that ironically always refers to 'female' bodies) and medicine, and in trying to access middle-class women rather than only the 'art world,' Matuschka aligns her work with feminism. According to Griselda Pollock (1988), feminist critiques of aesthetics have consistently challenged the foundations of modernist aesthetics, namely, the specificity of the aesthetic experience (which Matuschka challenges by ‘showing’ her work in popular magazines), the Kantian notion of ‘distance’ between receiver and object (which Matuschka challenges by creating images that play with eroticism, thus erasing the distance between viewer and image), the boundary between object of art and commodity (again, Matuschka in popular magazines), and the social role of pleasure (which Matuschka challenges with the defacement of ‘the nude’ and the pleasures associated with it by, as commented before, highlighting her scar).

With these strategies, feminist artists and thinkers can, as Pollock (1988) has noted, ‘address women as subjects not masquerading as the feminine objects of masculine desire, fantasy and hatred. The dominative pleasures of the patriarchal visual field are deciphered and disrupted and, in the gaps between, new pleasures are being forged from political understandings of the conditions of our existence and psychological making’ (p. 15). The specificity (social, political, cultural) of women’s experience has led feminism to critique essentialist features of traditional aesthetics. To reach true representations of her self, Matuschka has used strategies from feminist artistic activism against the dominant patriarchal discourses of beauty, sexuality, art, fashion and medicine. But how can her photography be understood as a system of production, a technology of the self whereby a transformation is effected? To answer this I must discuss art as a technology and place photography within a genealogy of practice and production.

Ethical work and self-expression: subjects

[M] The forms of elaboration [are the] ... ethical work that one performs on oneself, not only in order to bring one’s conduct into compliance with a given rule, but to attempt to transform oneself into the ethical subject of one’s behavior. (Foucault, 1984a, p. 27)

Matuschka has since 1991 reproduced her body using drawing, painting, sculpture and photographic techniques. One may ask, why the repetition? Why reproduce the same object over and over? Because the object reproduced, her scarred body, had become the substance of her ethical preoccupations. She has, since 1991, asked a type of subjection, asked from her body the truth, reproducing, to test, over and over again, the gap between her image and her self. Matuschka’s ethical work is repeated
reproduction of her body, which means that the core of her transformation, or, stated differently, the tools for her transformation, are two devices, self-expression (her images are statements about herself) and the gaze (her statements are visual). What kind of work do these devices produce?

Self-expression is a technique that has been regarded as fundamental in the production of the modern subject. While looking at Rousseau’s *Confessions*, Huck Gutman (1988, pp. 105–108) found that the emergence of early techniques of self-expression presented four interrelated aspects that, I argue, are echoed in the contemporary work by Matuschka. Gutman’s first element refers to the division of human experience into self and other, a characteristic that can be found in the critical tenor of Matuschka’s work and life. With this tenor she places her work and her experiences at the interstice of discourses such as medicine, canonical art, fashion and gender, and sets her work and her experiences apart from the totality of the world. The second element refers to the emergence of the unique, individuated self as a subject of observation and description, an element present in Matuschka’s practice of photographing her own body. By doing so, she subjects her body and her self to strict observation and monitoring. The third element refers to the emergence of the self as object of the gaze of the other, a characteristic evidenced in the public character that Matuschka’s work has embraced. And finally, the fourth element refers to the way the confessional mode became a way of writing the self, something that Matuschka does every time that she writes, paints or photographs her self and uses her experiences to demonstrate her changes and her true self to other women.

One point worth making is the degree to which every element in the early techniques of self-expression (as in Rousseau’s *Confessions* and in the work of Matuschka) centers on processes of vision that dialectically confer social character to subjective practices. Like Gutman, who interprets the ocular characteristic of self-expression as part of a wider shift towards self-monitoring which provided the ground for the elaborated disciplining techniques of the modern era, thinkers like Pasi Falk (1994) and Michel Foucault (1979) understand the disciplining and surveillance applied by the new production systems and governmental institutions as social processes closely bound to what were to become two fundamental characteristics of the constitution of the modern individual, namely, self-control and self-monitoring. Implied in the ideas of Gutman, Falk and Foucault is the notion that processes of vision (or ocularity) have two levels of productivity. At the social, or what I have been calling ‘general’ level, the individual subjects itself to the observation and monitoring of institutions and community. In Matuschka’s case, the ‘general’ ocular level produces, by drawing the gaze of the other, a set of statements that bound and limit the ability of discourses about women, victims, medicine, sexuality, individuals and self, to produce ‘truth effects.’ At the level of the subject, or what I have been calling the ‘particular’ level, however, the social production of truth refracts the distinctive space created by the distance between self and body, a space that in Matuschka’s work is constituted in the productivity of photographing and being photographed.

The complexity of this level of production is evident if we take into consideration the multiplicity of gazes involved in her photography. She photographs her body, thus
Photography as technology of self

she must look at her body as a photographer. As the body that is being photographed, she must look back at the photographer and recognize that the lens is acting on her. The othering of the photographer by the photographed and vice versa constitutes a gap that is used to explore the potential distance between the body’s image and the actant self. At each level, the body’s image and the actant self are constituted in discourses where they appear to be opposites. On one hand, the body’s image seems a coherent truth if the scar as a statement of illness and surgical deformation is situated alongside statements where victim and disenfranchisement define the selves of breast cancer survivors. On the other hand, the acting photographer carries the effect of truth within discourses in which the gaze is used to subject women by objectifying their bodies using canonized ideas of beauty and sexuality (Berger, 1972, pp. 45–82; Mulvey, 1988, pp. 59-61). The apparent contradiction of both gazes and their relations to discursive systems is the space where Matuschka enacts a transformation in her self. Interdictions produced from this space, where very probably an effect of truth is not yet possible and which will have an ‘ironic’ relation to the discourses just mentioned, question the truth effects of patriarchal (for lack of a better term) discourses, but also create a space that can be inhabited by her embodied self, and a position from which to visualize the social world as a hospitable landscape, even if her relation to much of the social world implies a certain ironic detachment.

Matuschka strategically chooses a type of expression that depends on the objectification of her own body and therefore is able to manipulate it—to define the subject (her self) by defining the photographer’s relation to the object (her body’s image). The appearance of her body does not change through the examination of the lens, but the lens constructs a technique of looking where truth effects are shown to be ‘out of place,’ where the image of a scarred body can potentially be seen as ‘feminine,’ ‘strong’ and ‘sexy.’

The telos of citizenship: actants

[An] action is not only moral in itself, in its singularity; it is also moral in its circumstance and by virtue of the place it occupies in a pattern of conduct. (Foucault, 1984a, p. 28)

There are very different notions of citizenship circulating in our culture. Some emphasize equality, some freedom, some self-ruling, some autonomy (van Gunsteren 1994, pp. 37–48). And yet, despite the diversity of the characteristics given to citizens, there appears to be little room for the victim of an illness such as breast cancer to neatly fit into any of such variants. ‘Victim’ appears always to connote lack of autonomy, lack of freedom, lack of self-ruling capacity and lack of equality. To be a survivor, the term preferred by Matuschka, appears to be more dignified and politically powerful. But in order to stop being a victim or thinking of herself as a victim, Matuschka had to ‘do’ something, she had to act and address the social problematics of victimhood (to be seen as a victim) as well as the personal level (to feel and see oneself as a victim). She had the option of erasing the evidence and wearing a prosthesis. She decided against it and instead got herself involved in a campaign in which, by using the evidence of her body, she advocated a change in the social perception of her scar.
At different times she wanted to be perceived as strong, sexy, beautiful, feminine and/or maternal with the scar, not without it. Her conduct, at the social and at the personal level, is advocating for the right to be perceived as a woman, a citizen, as an autonomous, free, self-ruling individual equal to any other.

On one level it is, then, proper to say that the telos of Matuschka’s photography and activism is citizenship. But by virtue of which singularities is the telos of citizenship patterned through her work? The patterning of the ethical telos of Matuschka’s photography can be discussed in terms of the repetition of an action, for instance the act of photographing, and in terms of the semiotic texture produced by the patterning of actions that have a symbolic meaning.

The singularity of her actions is manifested in the trajectory of her photography as a ritual established through technical repetition (photography or representation of her subject matter), a thematics of body exploration, and in the explanations, justifications, clarifications that she has given of her work, of her activism and of her life. She repeats a technique, a thematics and a justification as the method for patterning the perception of those around her and of herself. The technique of photographing and the thematics of her body allow for a visual productivity that, by (mis)using the canon of the nude and the tension of the gaze, asserts itself over and over again to firmly ground or control the diversity of potential significations. As truth effects, her scarred body can be perceived as ‘strong,’ ‘sexy’ and ‘beautiful’ if manifested in discourse, but such discourses do not exist in our culture. Yet as a photograph, as art, her body can be seen as strong, sexy and beautiful, for art allows for changes in regard to form and this allowance is related to desire. To produce a semiotic texture that can make ‘evident’ the strength and sexuality of her body, she uses a technique of representing her body in different ways, in relation to different discourses. Popularizing the images is also a technique aimed at delineating a discursive space that is broader than the artistic and feminist fields, a space within mainstream culture, a discursive space where her body can be ‘truthfully’ strong, sexy and beautiful.

**Conclusion**

Matuschka’s artwork production since her mastectomy is part of a process of transformation that includes her ethical self and her political self. What is unusual about her art production is not that it corresponds to a process of rehabilitation embedded in certain notions of ‘healing’ and ‘recovery,’ but rather that her notions of ‘healing’ and ‘recovery’ are invested in art’s potential to produce ethical contestations of discourses and institutions while simultaneously constructing the self of the artist. So, on the one level, artistic practice becomes a type of conjunctural practice where the exploration of sensibles (the image of Matuschka’s body) clashes with and limits art’s participation in the objectification of women. But on another level, artistic practice becomes the type of action in which the subject manifests her position towards her self and towards social discourses that oppress her in quite specific ways (in the case of Matuschka these discourses try to define her as victim, as damaged sexuality, as ‘deformed’).
The ethical in Matuschka’s work can be divided into four areas of exploration: (1) her ethical substance, which corresponds to her body’s images; (2) her mode of subjection, which is the possibility for her body’s image to be used as an argument for truth; (3) her mode of elaboration, which refers to self-expression and the manipulation of the gaze in order to produce a subject, herself, that is social and complete; (4) her telos, which is citizenship. However, hers is a very concrete type of citizenship, it is a type of citizenship where her embodiment, her body-image, her individuation and her expression are recaptured as rights and as appropriate to her body.

Broadly speaking, the gesture of producing artwork that directly addresses the representation of the sexual female body corresponds to the acknowledgment that the body is social and the social mutable through interdictions. This gesture also points to the construction of femininity as largely based on symbolic representation and objectification. That a woman has decided to objectify her own body in order to address the objectification of the female body and the power dynamics it entails suggests two different strategies of self-disciplining: technologies that objectify the body in order to ‘produce’ the self (Martin, 1988, p. 48); and technologies aimed at disciplining the body by subjecting the self.

Finally, I have tried to show a way of approaching the social analysis of art and cultural production that goes beyond social determinations. Though Matuschka’s work is invested in the reconstitution of many discourses (fashion, art, femininity) her use of art as a production technology is quite indifferent to pure aesthetic explorations or political contestations. For her, art is not only form or a critique of politics or patriarchy, it is also a technology that produces selves—actually, her own self. This production is dependent on the specificity of art as a system of truth that uses representation. Matuschka personalizes the ‘producing’ or poetic potential of art by taking as subject matter her own body in order to criticize discourses and institutions but, more importantly, also her own gaze. Art, then, becomes a personal instrument for reconstruction.

Notes on contributor

Hector Amaya is an Assistant Professor of Communication Studies at Southwestern University where he explores the way ethical, epistemological and aesthetic discourses and practices impact an individual’s sense of self. He researches artistic practice and breast cancer, documentary and race, and the codification of illness on the sexed and gendered body.

Notes

1. In March 1999, Matuschka was awarded a financial compensation of US$2.2 million for her mastectomy (Sachs, 1999). On the issue of unnecessary mastectomies, see Altman (1998).
2. For more on the topic see Matuschka (1996), Rudner (1995). Further information about other women working from similar concerns can be found through the Breast Cancer Action Group in Burlington, Vermont.
3. For some of the best sociological accounts of culture and art see Pierre Bourdieu (1984) and, with Alain Darbel (1991).

4. Throughout the essay I will be referring to Matuschka’s work as art following Arthur Danto (1981), Pierre Bourdieu (1987), Howard Becker (1982) and Janet Wolff (1983), all of whom understand art in terms of its discursive and/or institutional determinations.


6. See the Pin Cushion website for information, biography and photographs of Matuschka (http://www.itp.tsoa.nyu.edu/~student/pincushion/FORUMHTML/cushion1.html).

7. The ‘statement’ is, according to Foucault (1972, p. 26), the minimal unit of discourse. It is characterized not by a formal unity but by a functional unity.


9. For a closer look at the way these states of mind play a role in women with breast cancer, the reader can go to the vivid narration by Joyce Wadler (1993).

10. The categories are mine but each is related to our understandings of selfhood. They are also related to the modern idea of citizenship and self-determination that from Rousseau and Kant onwards characterizes ideas of the individual in Western capitalist nations. For a different perspective on the topic, see Habermas (1994).

11. The practices that are leveled therapeutics are constituted in history, as is the idea of health. Even in contemporary society, there are competing ideas of therapeutics and health. For more on ‘recovery’ and its relations to media, see Elayne Rapping (1996).

12. Matuschka has been widely honored for her work as an activist and humanitarian. By 1994 she had received the Rachel Carson Award from the Rachel Carson Institute, the Humanitarian of the Year Award from Mt Sinai Medical Center, the Jonquils Award from Duke University’s Medical Center and the Gilda Radner Award from the Wellness Community, MA. Recognition from government officials includes a Citation of Achievement from Manhattan Borough President Ruth Messenger “for putting her personal experience and her art at the service of the many whom she reaches through her work,” a Proclamation from Mayor of Cincinnati Roxanne Qualls and a Certificate of Recognition from California State Senator Milton Marks’ (Pin Cushion, 1998).

References


