Navigating Darkness: A Photographic Response to Visual Impairment

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In recent years, photographs by persons with visual impairments are increasingly shifting into new arenas: from sociological contexts of therapeutic pedagogies to aesthetic contexts of art on public display. In this shift, discursive tropes about vision, disability and artistic practice emerge. Moreover, these tropes emerge around images—but a much-needed attention to the images is habitually by-passed in curatorial as well as artistic statements in favor of an emphasis on the troubling details of the artist's life. As a consequence, the emancipatory agency of the images is undermined when it is unmoored from its visual source.

This article adds nuance to a biographical approach by tending to the image with a rare combination of art history, critical media theory and disability studies on functional normality and variation. The focal point is a photograph by Kurt Weston, who relates his work to experiences of otherness that follow an identification with homosexuality, AIDS and blindness—an otherness whose inclusive quality plays out in the image yet remains unaccounted for by the surrounding discourse without in-depth image analysis. Here, otherness is addressed in dialogue with the notions of tactics and catharsis to unfold the performative operation taking place within and around the image. Visual and verbal statements reveal narratives that overlap yet also diverge, holding implications beyond the singular image for a society where ableist notions of normality are taken for granted.

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Kurt Weston: *Peering through the Darkness* (2009). Used by permission of the artist.

Introduction: Defiance and Discourse

> You need to look at this disabled body, this aging body. And maybe you need
> to reconsider your ideas about what is normal or abnormal. You need to look,
> and I'm going to make you look.

These are the words and the image of Kurt Weston, standing at the center of this article. Weston is an American photographer, born in 1957, who led a successful career in the fashion industry until the mid-1990s when he began to lose his sight as an effect of AIDS. In the five years from diagnosis to near-blindness, he changed his personal and professional life, earned a fine arts degree and developed an artistic corpus with a new perspective on making and experiencing images.

    This article is about Weston's photograph *Peering through the Darkness* from the self-portrait series *Blind Vision* (2009) and about the discourse around it exemplified by *Sight Unseen: International Photography by Blind Artists* where the image and the quote appear (2009 a: 100). As the first big museum exhibition with visually impaired photographers—touring over a dozen venues worldwide since

2009—it is a key instance of an increasingly notable initiative to redirect impaired photographers away from contexts of therapy towards contexts of art.

Weston addresses life with homosexuality, AIDS and blindness—a defiant step enforced by choosing photography: a medium obsessed with visuality. To analyze Weston's image in the context of *Sight Unseen* reveals a discursive formation of photography and disability that is productive yet problematic. Exhibitions mirror and generate discourse by what they show and say—and what they do not (Foucault 1972: 38, 74, 116). The discourse around Weston shares his critique of ableism, i.e. discrimination against disability, but stresses the artist's life to a point when the image is lost along with its agency to participate in the discourse (EB; OED).[1]

The article complements a biographical approach with a close image analysis, from a viewer perspective informed by semiotics and phenomenology (Merleau-Ponty 1948; Barthes 1980; Alloa 2011). The material consists of visual and verbal statements from *Sight Unseen* as well as from Kurt Weston's website and the 2012 biography *Journeys through Darkness* by Alina Oswald. This delimitation gives in-depth focus while being representative since the *Blind Vision* series, developed from 2000, became a new starting-point when Weston lost his sight (Oswald 2012: 115-135). Rather than reducing the image to an illustration of loss, the analysis shows how loss—as a biographical experience but also a socially constituted one—manifests and makes meaning through what can be seen in the image.

To link the emancipatory drive of the discourse to its aesthetic source, the analysis is contextualized in three themes—catharsis, tactics, and otherness—supported by theories of disability and photography. Disability theory situates the unruly body as a site from where to critique normality (Siebers 2006: 30, 64-65, 68; McRuer 2006: 6-7, 19, 31-34; 2018: 22). As the image of Weston's unruly body evokes haptic and kinetic qualities, it engages with a multisensory and socio-cultural visuality (Marks 2002; Mirzoeff 2006; Paterson 2006). On this basis, the image becomes a visual variation of the verbal and bodily acts by which social relations are established and transformed—unique yet referential, descriptive yet open to reinterpretation (Austin 1962; Butler 1988; Iversen 2007). This performative take on photography shifts the notion of the image as a what-has-been towards a what-will-be (Iversen 2007: 91-94, 104-105; Schneider 2011: 138-144).

Weston's quote signals an activist stance against normality that points to a kinship between disruptive practices: the cripping of ableist tropes evolved from a queering of gender scripts and is here linked to the glitching of technical protocols. Introduced in due course, along with details about Weston, suffice it now to state that this case study is motivated by his way of disrupting normativity by

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[1] See *Shooting Blind: Photographs by the Visually Impaired* (2002), *Seeing Beyond Sight: Photographs by Blind Teenagers* (2007), *See as No Other: Photographs by the Visually Impaired* (2015) and *The Blind Photographer* (2016) for examples like *Sight Unseen*.

making us see the unruly body as well as the norms behind our seeing. The act of making visible leads beyond individual circumstances to a mediation that acts on behalf of its creator, its contexts and its unstable selves: it invites us to take a look.

A Look: Seeing with *Peering through the Darkness*

The three selected contexts where this image appears—exhibition, website and book—yield scarce information besides biographical details. Neither website nor exhibition give much comment on the production process. In the biography, the author briefly notes the artist's preference for black-and-white negative film and silver gelatin prints, as well as his purchase of a handheld telescope and magnification glasses (Oswald 2012: 128, 132). Regarding this particular image, she states that Weston "sprayed a glass with foaming glass cleaner and took a self-portrait sitting behind it" (2012: 133). This explanation is missing in the other contexts yet the presence of a liquid corresponds to the image. However, the image is made using a scanner, noted in the exhibition and confirmed by the artist.

Scanning gives a short and shallow depth of field that renders the body in the image pressed to the glass horizontally with liquid dropping out rather than down. Closest to the hard light, the details of the outer side of the right hand and the tip of the nose burn away against the dark. Reflecting no external light, the body is represented through the source and process of light inside the machine. The visual elements are crowded into a surface that looks too close for comfort.

The depth of field yields more than a void separating photographer and viewer. Without a horizon line, flat abstracted areas spread a darkness that encroaches on the human form, steadied within a seated rectangle whose slight indentation concentrates the motion upwards to enhance the tension of a vertical incline. The high contrast articulates figurative parts, but in a way that blends them with abstract parts. The body and other elements blend into the spaces around them. Masses of gradient and condensed grey tones distribute weight across the pictorial field and add momentum to its elements, specifying the field as an energetic one: encompassing photographer and viewer. Formal fundamentals thus set up a shared space that is explored further on as cathartic: an ambiguous intimacy within a strong composition visually supports a transition between photographer and viewer via the image, which commemorates the photographer's presence of pain in the presence of the viewer. Insofar as the sharing of pain may ease the burden, this transition is transformative.

The photographer photographs himself, yet bodily closeness need not signify a metaphorical capture of self. The "I" is a mode of embodying possibilities, creating the drama that lets the body make meaning, even if no inner essence is there to express (Butler 1988: 521, 525, 530). Weston's drama materializes in a capture of himself by the scanner. Pronouncing the "I" in a series of scanned self-portraits

entails a repeated interaction that becomes a reenactment: "it is through the material support of the photograph that the reenactment *takes place* as performance: the performance takes place *as* photograph" (Schneider 2011: 154). Weston returns to the scanner bed that supports and resists his body—expanding the apparatus of the photographic medium to expand his possibilities of embodiment.

With photographer and viewer coming face to face, the image opens up a space for catharsis since their proximity invites empathy. A visual cue to this process is that Weston performs a key action by coming close enough to the pictorial plane to leave an imprint. The touch creates the image, all but unseen yet felt by the photographer himself. The image evokes a phenomenological, kinetic and haptic dimension: "a spatial imaginary" of the blind that extends from the hand's reach interwoven with the movement of the body (Paterson 2006: 52, 54, 56). Weston both reaches and moves—actions that shape the image.

The liquid outlines the surface with splashing foam: this soapiness, confirmed by description and evidence, gains importance with its connotation to clarity and cleansing. The parts of the image that are whited out are caused by a solution intended to clear the view, but blocks the eye's route. A material meant to clear the way instead gets in the way, rerouting interpretation to account for an aspect of the image's visuality and materiality that is disabling: soap in your eyes. The aesthetic builds on physical circumstances that integrate a performative act: a unique instance when the liquid signifies an effort to transform a problem, articulated in the repeated gesture of window cleaning.

The liquid connotes catharsis as the cleaning process is captured mid-wash. Rather than arriving at a clear view, the image recalls the unfinishable clearing of a disabled eye. Without referring to disability as a biographical and metaphorical given, it puts the viewer in the situation of the photographer whose impaired sight echoes in the dirty window. In the frozen repetition of an urge to clean, the image vacillates between acknowledging the dirtied view and subversively embracing it.

Hand and liquid emphasize each other in a swirl that defines the image by articulating sharp and blurred bodies in the machine light. This play of light and dark, of internal and external relations, begins in the gestural touch: skin against glass, momentarily but still too long. The mundane gesture repeats a symbolic and constitutive enactment that may count as the stylized repetition that creates the illusion of a self (Butler 1988: 519). The image occasions the gestures of photographer and photograph, repeated for the viewers who partake in the operation: the labor of recognition in images that address selfhood (Schneider 2011: 143, 156). Here, the body is recognized and misrecognized. Following artistic intention, *Sight Unseen* curator Douglas McCulloh presents it as "inhumanly vivid and detailed" due to the specific affordances of scanners, projected as signs of disability (2009 a: 100). Visual data supports this interpretation since scanning gives medical associations. Sharp contrast can be perceived as vivid, given the ambiguous nuance of aliveness in a context of impairment. As for the inhuman detail,

this description implies that a representation counted as human needs a rather ableist look of wholeness to be acceptable.

These signs of impairment are less legible on the body and more performed in the moment of photographic exposure. For instance, the body is visually both articulated and disintegrated. Right thumb and index finger blend into the right side of the face, in turn blending into the neck and the flat dark behind. Left eye indistinguishable from the face, right eye covered by a lens: a demonstrative reference to disability yet not apparent as an assistive device. The hand—not the eye, as a locus of trauma—centers the image in a pull towards the space of the viewer. An outward momentum reaches through the tops of the swirls, beyond the frame. The sweep creates an opening where Weston appears. His movement frees up what would otherwise be covered by the curtain of wet white foam, abstracted out of a representational reading at the edges of figuration and recognizability. The sudden clearing makes him visible and seen: he looks out to meet the viewer looking in—or the other way around—regardless of his level of ability. The body intertwines into a visual space that it shapes with its gestural motion. The visual cues, rather than known biographical facts, construct the context of disability.

Movement adds to the image's context since its horizontal orientation gives room to expand—180 degrees, the space constituted as a normal field of vision in photography. While the format reduces a tension associated with verticality, it also encircles the photographer's tense relation to the implications of the visualization process. For instance, the discrepancy built into the relation between technological and human fields of vision and therefore between users locked in an exchange of denial and benefit with regards to able-bodied sight.

This discrepancy gains meaning if considering the image as an interface: a shared boundary where different bodies, spaces and phases interact (EB; OED). In the image, the assistive lens is just one element that hints at discrepancies. Weston enhances the agency of these discrepancies since it is his gesture that makes any seeing possible here. Knowing the production process, the glass and the washing liquid add symbolic value. For instance, the window holds a significance to the graphical user interface that mimics the immediacy of perspectival representation or instead breaks its illusion with a hypermediated construction (Bolter & Grusin 1999: 21-44). McCulloh suggests that the scanner-as-camera makes the image both immediate and hyperreal due to the photographer's proximity. Weston's description—"no intervening air, no subterfuge, no escape" (2009 a: 100)—can thus be understood in terms of interfacing. The immediacy of body-to-glass enhances a hypermediated function that makes viewers aware of their own experience. Like the hand gesture, this interaction exaggerates the repeated everyday acts that produces an able user—and a disabled one, whose actions in this case makes the image possible (Butler 1988: 519, 525).

The image's visual and material facticity find support in its title. Peering keeps the eyes less than fully open: a tentative gaze, perhaps difficult, less than

optimized. The affinity between peering and squinting connotes disability, but includes a range of sightedness. Peering is trying to see rather than taking visual control, countering the intellectual control addressed further on as implied in the notion of inner vision that is habitually ascribed to visually impaired artists. This image visualizes seeing neither as a gift nor a curse, but as labor: intense work.

Peering takes place from somewhere to somewhere else: the individual who peers engages in the environment to which the peering is directed yet not fully revealed. The word *darkness* locates the environment and the word *through* locates the undisclosed transition: navigating darkness. The character of the darkness — deeply ocular yet polyvalent — is signaled by the assistive lens, enabling a view towards the viewer but obscuring the eye from them. Moreover, the viewer is positioned opposite the photographer with several layers — lens, scanner bed, pictorial plane — dividing a space that could be shared if considering that the foam on the glass is blinding on both sides. The viewer may be invited to share the darkness with the photographer. At the same time, each is the other's other.

This analysis shows that the visual aesthetics add to an experience of what the title and other statements explicate — and more. The title emphasizes distance harbored in contrasts that clash and blend against the wet glass, while suggesting an immanent yet ambiguous shift for which the image functions as a testing ground. What is tested here is a mode of seeing that ceases to be hidden and claims the open space: from peering to seeing, through and beyond a darkness that equates impairment with failure. Rather than restoring sight to a normative ideal, the image expands into a moment when failure is met with poise. The work continues. The image embodies a process of trying, neither to approximate a norm nor to break it but to communicate seeing as an ongoing labor: a daily navigation.

Catharsis: Purity or Mess

> In these photographs, I turn myself into an object, a stigmatized object. I try to make myself look inhuman, grotesque.

> The focus of this work is not only to illustrate physical vision loss, but also an inner journey involving my fears and emotions about becoming totally blind. This is a journey towards infinite darkness in which physical sight is diminished and obscured but artistic vision, my blind vision, is enhanced. […] [A] synergy of the physical (corporeal) experience framed within the context of a metaphysical journey to form a unique vision beyond sight.

Kurt Weston presents *Blind Vision* as an expression of the physical and psychological hardship of becoming blind (McCulloh 2009 a: 100; Weston: website). A similar blending of art and life, with both rooted in disability, is notable in Douglas McCulloh's presentation (2009 b: 27):

> He suffered through debilitating experimental HIV/AIDS treatments, but in 1996 doctors gave him only a few months to live. Surgical implants into his

> eyes, intended to prevent his sight from deteriorating, backfired and almost completely destroyed his vision. […] Small wonder that Weston's subsequent photos express feelings of anger, loss, and the stigma of disease and decay.

These quotes exemplify the trope of stigma as a sensitization that counteracts vulnerability: a visual bodily mark that symbolically empowers its bearer. The discourse around Weston's images empowers the marks of his identification: homosexuality, AIDS, blindness. Such marks are routinely punished by a society that demands a normative identity performance (Butler 1988: 154).

Weston's images and the statements about them become performative by emphasizing vulnerability and transcendence. The repeated verbal display of stigma, and its overcoming, affirm catharsis as an idealized state of purity. However, this image brings about a catharsis that gains its value by being initiated but always pending: it stays in-between. Similarly, Weston's work repeats his painful past by making it present, returning to photography as a space where his "here" meets a viewer's "here." This space is the space of the audience who witnesses catharsis, situated with empathy between one's self and other selves. The witness, off-center from the main event yet more than a bystander, is a viewer position here since it acts and re-acts upon the visuality implied in the definition of catharsis (EB):

> Through experiencing fear vicariously in a controlled situation, the spectator's own anxieties are directed outward, and, through sympathetic identification with the tragic protagonist, his insight and outlook are enlarged.

The pivot here is to see and be seen: looking within, back, and around more than looking at. In this process, photographer and photograph connect in a "dynamic of witness" (Schneider 2011: 140). The dynamic conflates the notion of photography as a that-was-there with a having-been-distracted or a will-be-around-later. As a memory technique, photographs repeat an elusive pastness: they mold memory, add and take away, and let us forget what they can or cannot keep. At the same time, they are well suited to reconfigure the past since a constant supply of memories provide a past to hold on to. McCulloh's claim that "photographers—commonly viewed as specialized seers—are perhaps the blindest people of all" (2009 a: 4) hints at the mnemonic dilemma as a result of adapting to conventions that educate the eye. As a commemorative practice, photography is persistent yet corrosive: the now that holds memory is reshaped with each new viewer who remembers the image's memory. This motion destabilizes the essence that is a premise of the true seer's inner vision.

The pivot occurs between bodies codified as able or disabled using norms about visuality that integrate physical faculty, cultural act, and socio-political visibility. To perceive of Weston's viewer, and not just himself, as a witness invites interplay between visual modes constituted as different. McCulloh ties this role to the photographer whose "[s]imple witnessing is the purest kind of creation," thereby positing the witness not as an agent of catharsis but a catalyst that may

change a situation but not change itself (2009 a: 3). Another, more cathartic, mutuality comes through when he calls the work "a participatory document from a marginalized world" in reference to a photographic tradition of social critique (2009 a: 100). While the dynamic of witness unsettles a fixed state of marginalization, the margin functions to mark the boundaries of how disability is defined.

Definitions of disability resemble definitions of catharsis: from medical cleanse to social reconstruction, a surpassing of limits that seems positive even if painful. Shifting the problem, from individuals defined as disabled to environments that produce such definitions, opens up for a culture-oriented focus on mediation—and disrupted mediation, explored in the next section on tactical glitches (Siebers 2008: 54, 188-190; McRuer 2018: 19). In relation to medical, social, and cultural models of disability, a conceptual merging of eye and mind enforces a false opposition between mind and matter that makes blindness as a metaphor less embodied than cerebral. If ideas about a nature of seeing are central, its visceral messiness is not. Priority is set on a superior mind to deal with a failed body as if the eyes disintegrate from the body to assert intellectual control over it, echoing the tension between innate knowledge and sensory experience in debates on blindness (Paterson 2006: 52). Such individualistic superiority reveals an underlying ableism: a narrative of overcoming where disability is a portal into magical powers by which to defeat disability (Siebers 2008: 63; McRuer 2018: 20-21). Kurt Weston's images and statements about them slide between these positions when a physical ailment becomes a metaphysical asset. When losing sight becomes a premise for insight, a troubling hierarchy emerges (McCulloh 2009 b: 1):

> *Sight Unseen* presents work by the world's most accomplished blind photographers as they explore ideas about the nature of seeing. Great art, it has been said, is not a product of the eyes, but of the mind. […] Similarly, the artists of *Sight Unseen*, in bringing their inner visions into the world of the sighted, reveal a rich visual and emotionally complex blending of the physical and conceptual worlds.

This statement operates performatively to establish a new canon using the label blind photographers. Linking to canonized impaired artists like Beethoven serves to legitimize the participants in a context where disability falls outside the norms of society but inside the norms of art—situated as non-normative much like a stereotypical avant-garde. The ancient Greek ranking of sight as the ideal sense is recalled in references to a blind prophet, and to art as a practice that brings out the mystery of the physical world (Paterson 2006: 55; McCulloh 2009 a: 6). If modern and contemporary art seek to represent abrasive differences, art about or by disabled bodies changes the representational process itself (Siebers 2008: 54). The avant-garde trope thus supports activist mediations of disability. It links to catharsis in Weston's work, and to art's performativity as it engages the bodies of audience members who respond and remember with empathy (Schneider 2011: 135).

Rather than invite a range of responses, the idealization of the eye as a site of trauma increases the mental distance to traumatic experiences. When the statements invoke trauma to validate art without visual cues, the shift from embodied sight (however it is) to inner (perfect) vision therefore narrows the image's potential to shape discourse. Weston foregrounds the eyes' capacities yet confronts any nature of seeing as deeply cultural. His work critiques a distance that underlines the interpretation of images created by visually impaired photographers, echoing the devalorization of corporeality in idealist notions of art (Siebers 2006: 63-64, 67; 2008: 12). Such idealism emerges in allusions to the superior inner vision of blind photographers (McCulloh 2009 a: 2-7; b: 1):

> Blind photographers operate at the heart of the medium; they are the zero point of photography. These artists occupy the pure, immaculate center—image as idea, idea as image.

Close to a presupposed heart, a zero point connotes essence (2009 a: 2, 6). Pure and immaculate, it implies that disability causes a purer kind of seeing. An ableist assumption about normality is thus turned upside down, reproducing an essentialized difference that denies diversity. Blind photographers cannot be just photographers if they are singled out because of their blindness, even if it is stipulated as a heightened state instead of a diminished one. A range of states and practices are falsely unified in favor of a seeing that non-blind people miss out on by default, even if most of them—us—become disabled too in some way at some point.

The blend of physical and conceptual worlds, given as a unique contribution by visually impaired photographers, cannot be shared when this special blend is assigned a more authentic realness than anyone else can attain. Weston's image embodies a more complex reality, one that is unstable yet scripted through the actions of individuals who both reproduce it and constitute it as reality (Butler 1988: 526-527). As the analysis shows, the reality effect of photography comes with a dramatized representation rather than with a record of something preexisting (Iversen 2007: 93). Weston's note on realness is sharp yet open: "This is your new reality. This is your strange new flesh. Let's take a look" (McCulloh 2009 a: 100). Again, the dynamic of witness noted in the image is found to begin just there: in the image. By observing vision while disregarding a preset normality, Weston's vision traces the usual cycle towards decay and death—albeit sped up.

While acknowledging the hint of catharsis in statements on Kurt Weston's work, this analysis diverges from them on the point of purity as a purpose of catharsis. Drawing out a consequence of the image's function as an invitation to take a vulnerable position, the argument here is that the image rather recalls the cathartic process as always pending. Moreover, the statements exemplify a validation of inner vision following a loss of a property posited as outer vision. Since they signify the outer as shallow and temporary, it loses validity in favor of the inner. Outer and inner appear different in a similar way as ability and disability. Yet, turning the dichotomy around does not change the underlying polarization

of what is uncontrollably diverse. Inner vision appears abstract, disembodied, static—a position from where no movement is needed, desired or possible: the end stop. Based on the image, catharsis happens instead in the unfinished labor with and within the impure: the mess of life. The cathartic quality comes about through messiness, which gives the image a tactical potential by staying in-process—not by tidying up to present a pure image of pure vision, whether inner or outer.

Tactics: To Resist a Disabling System

> My limited visual acuity—total blindness in my left eye and limited peripheral vision, no central vision, in my right eye permits me to see the world much like it appears in an impressionist painting.

On Kurt Weston's website, illness—in his more urgent wording: disease—pervades the narration of the images, but with an unsentimental straightforwardness that gives nuance to the tone of urgency recurring to explain his oeuvre. If the artist relates health and art without reducing one to the other, Douglas McCulloh describes this relation with dystopian intensity (2009 a: 100):

> Threat and decay is Weston's daily world. It's been a bitter battle just to stay in this world, so he's not about to flinch now or look away.

In *Journeys through Darkness*, a biography explicitly both about Weston and about AIDS, the artist's medical experiences are interwoven with his art. The chapter *Blind Vision* marks the importance of the series and of the selected image whose title resembles the book's title. With Weston's deteriorating health and botched treatments as a narrative engine, the author keeps a focus on trauma. For instance, her recapitulation of one gruesome and unsuccessful therapy—medication injected into the eye—echoes in images where Weston holds instruments like a syringe up close to his eyes (Oswald 2012: 115-116).

These statements present Weston's practice like an ennobling quest: they refit the pain of blindness as a hurdle needed to reach inner vision. The biographical interpretation leaves the image to illustrate the quest, unmoored from the visualization that merits the emphasis on biography in the first place. The discursive frame thus settles around a void, as the story is retold by reusing an image source that is evident yet unaddressed. Yet, photographer and photograph could go outside their initial narratives to reach other individuals who deal with their own pains. Weston's image neither collectivizes experiences of pain nor isolates them as insular representations of individuality, but acknowledges them as both social constitutions and individual embodiments. Therefore, it transforms the private physicality of pain into a shared situation that is empowering also on cultural and political levels (Siebers 2008: 60-61, 188-189, 193; Butler 1988: 522). The image alerts the viewer to how individuals perform ableist norms about individuality and challenge them by sharing diverse ways of being (an) individual.

This double quality gives Weston's image a tactical potential. Tactics empower individuals to resist a dominating socio-cultural system by acting out of line with it (de Certeau 1984: xvii-xxiv, 34-39). Such acting out of line could happen while taking photographs: making statements that in their individuality cite and thus reveal a "structural unconscious" (Iversen 2007: 97). The system is embodied in individuals who perform its rules. Weston's image makes the rules visible as his own body performs them, an unruly body that challenges an ableist system by not aligning with it.

Tactical misalignment is found in practices like glitch art, which questions the structures that power the network society by exploiting its technical errors (Kelly 2009: 285-295; Krapp 2011: 53-54, 67-68). The operative and symbolic principle in these structures are protocols: they organize the networked life-world, pervasive yet vulnerable to disruptions that reveal the performative logic of the system (Galloway 2004: 74-75, 122, 175-176, 241-246). A protocol resembles a script: both reproduce reality through individuals "acting in concert and acting in accord" yet who can still find some leeway (Butler 1988: 525-526). Protocols and scripts are tools of biopower: norms that both constitute and correct deviations, and therefore produce disability (Hirschmann & Smith 2016: 274-275). Like protocols or scripts, these norms correct the disabling moment of a glitch—a disruption that is both technical and social.

Such corrective measures recall that the able body is required in systems of labor. In these systems, a rhetoric of choice covers up the fact that there is none. As with glitching, the tactic is to reveal both the disruption as something broken and reveal that brokenness as a contingent part of everyday life (McRuer 2006: 8, 30; 2018: 23; Siebers 2008: 67). While the broken body is idealized in the statements here, it functions in Weston's image as a tactic that reveals the mechanisms of identity formation—whether these favor the broken or the unbroken.

Glitches act against the protocol if they force a system into an "injured, sore, and unguarded condition" (Galloway 2004: 206, 175). The situation evokes the roots of glitch: to lose balance in a slippery place (EB; OED). A tactical potential ascribed to technical errors is grounded in individual acts. Error can therefore be redefined as a systemic friction on an experiential level, as it empowers a tactical spectatorship (Grundell 2016) that resists absorption into mediation (Betancourt 2014). Glitches reach into the structure that organizes performance. Once revealed, users can identify vulnerabilities that ableist norms do not support. Users thus take physical part in the system. Systems depend on their labor—especially a neo-liberal system, in which passing as normal and being represented as such is crucial (Schneider 2011: 137-138, 156, 160). In this way, Weston's peering counts as labor too. Any user fails to cleanly repeat their script, their protocol. Impaired users call out both dependence and disruption by living with systemic friction. Weston's work is thus situated as a tactic against normative mediation.

To be injured, sore and unguarded characterizes a vulnerability noted across a technologized life-world (Lagerkvist 2016). As a key exponent of this life-world, photography is inscribed with vulnerability from the apparatus preset to steer user choices to the tracking and exposure of users once their images enter the digital flow. Photographs—particularly digital, like Weston's scans—are already part of a system that enforces a heteronormative ideal based on narrow categories, i.e. "the binarized borders marking living from dead, present from past" (Schneider 2011: 141-142). Since no body is able enough in a binary system, all users are vulnerable. An in-between mode thus works as a queering—cripping—tactic.

According to Weston, his work is fueled by a need to put an "exclamation point" on an urgent situation (McCulloh 2009 a: 100). An exclamation point is like the sudden alert of a glitch—and like a photographic punctum. They point out that which snags and chafes, within an image and its interpretive frame: here, the normative structures that shape how individuals become visible (2009 a: 100):

> "I am the stigmatized person," says Weston. "I am the disabled body… I've seen the people stare. Now, I'm blind and hold onto my partner and I feel the people staring."

While the quote refers to Weston's everyday life, the image performs a disabling situation more than it displays traits of disability. The disruption experienced by the viewer as a witness of pain links to the disruption experienced by the photographer who is in pain. They are linked in the image, where Weston places himself as a stigmatized object—a glitched body, glitching the system that stigmatizes him.

Weston's consistent visualization of a "stigmatized object" tactically crips discourses of both ability and disability by addressing a social codification of vulnerability. Doing so, the body and the image where it appears act like a glitch: it reveals the precarious normality inscribed in the basic systems of society by creating a break that makes the system visible to itself. The glitch thus shares its disruptive function with the hypermediated interface, shown in the analysis to be an important part of *Peering through the Darkness*. A glitched body functions like a hypermediated interface towards the system, embodying the tactical refusal to adapt to its normal operation. Revealing its own vulnerability, it calls attention to the vulnerability contingent in society. This contingency cannot be countered by excluding every vulnerable body: i.e., every body.

As systems and individuals situated by them fail to optimize, their brokenness shapes processes of being and becoming—whether to make broken bodies perform better (Hirschmann & Smith 2016: 269-270) or to glitch that normative performance by subverting identity markers like gender (Sundén 2015). Accepting the body as always already broken refutes the existence of a pure essence located in a pure past where disability never happened: an imagined (and imaged) distortion of a former truer state of normality (Hirschmann & Smith 2016: 269,

280). Moreover, interior essence does not predetermine either self or body since both form as "punitively regulated cultural fictions" (Butler 1988: 521-522, 528).

Kurt Weston's image is tactical as it performs the protocol of two bodies: that of the photographer and that of the photograph. It also counteracts these protocols by revealing how disabling systems have to be interfaced with constantly. The image captures and transforms a disabling moment as a moment of glitching: the wet glass is literally a slippery place, signifying the loss of balance after losing sight. The foam disables the lens, signifying the photographer's eye as it cannot be removed without a decisive yet uncontrollable act: swiping it away. The foam-covered glass gains a performative function as it brings out the disruptive presence of the lens in relation to the glitch in the lens of the bodily eye—and invites the viewer to vicariously test Weston's seeing mode. The point where the impact of slipperiness pierces the viewer—the punctum—could therefore be found in the liquid dispersing in the gesture that creates a shared state of disability. Weston's image draws the viewer into a process he cannot control or see as an able-bodied viewer could. He subverts the function of his material, so that the visual assistance sabotages a clear view. The viewer can observe the sabotage, the trace of systemic friction. While technology itself is not glitched, but only slightly modified and misused, he replicates a glitched mediation to visualize his experience of not just being blind—status quo—but becoming blind: a reenactment of pain both past and alive. An experience of being glitched thus becomes disabling in a way that is not restricted to disabled bodies.

Glitches, exclamation points and punctums are performative since their repeated exposure builds friction over time: one now after another. They disrupt the viewer with "a sudden phenomenological intrusion"—glitchers and photographers both engage in "inviting and reacting to conditions that allow the art to happen" by "reinfecting that which technological advancement has made sterile" (Manon & Temkin 2011: § 15, 33, 46, 55). With Kurt Weston's practice forming around illness, embodied within and between bodies, infection exceeds metaphor. His activist portraits target "people who are infected and affected… witnesses [of] the world's disquietude about the most significant dilemma of the 21st century" (website). These witnesses lead the cathartic process, as the quote points to how vulnerable bodies threaten a social order by revealing and resisting its norms. The glitch ripples through the system: in bodies infected within and by discourse—and reinfecting it by reshaping their visual presence. A glitched body points to an able body as glitchable: not-yet-glitched.

Otherness: From Exclusion to Empowerment

First, being gay, then having AIDS, and now being blind. It's been like a journey into otherness. A lot of my work aims to show that all of us are the other… We are all headed toward decay and disability.

With these words, Kurt Weston situates his photographs as materializations of otherness in three ways (McCulloh 2009 a: 100). He consolidates a brutal yet nuanced frankness in his interrogation of a painful life: a process of remembering pain without releasing it. The quote suggests that this activity is performed alone and together: a shared otherness that lets nobody escape from vulnerability.

While the image is straightforward yet not simplistic, the implication of idealizing vulnerability need further address. One such implication is that vulnerability is integrated into ableist cultural fantasies about people with AIDS and disability: "already dead or better off dead" (McRuer 2006: 20). A related implication is who the image makes vulnerable. The photographer is vulnerable as he hinges his statement on impairment, owning his vulnerability by conferring it to a system that conditions his statement. The viewer is vulnerable when confronted with a private proximity to impairment, yet may be constituted as more able than the individual whose images stir the confrontation. The system is vulnerable since it is glitchable—but it also contains disruptions. Glitches thus recall the otherness in Weston's narrative, pointing out that vulnerability pervades the socio-cultural structure and therefore serves as a tactical activity. It embraces brokenness rather than trying to transcend it like the statements do. If the image behaves like a glitch, the statements do what systems do to glitches: neutralize disruption by bypassing its root—in this case, the corporeality of the image.

Weston's image insists on a broken corporeality that brings forth a disrupted subject, more so than the verbal statements which recapitulate the transcendence of trauma by a perfectly intact subject. The image's visuality partly mirrors the discourse, and partly critiques its idealist undercurrents. The analysis suggests that the image visualizes the process of dealing with trauma more than trauma itself. This visualization is not a static reference to Kurt Weston's biography. It unfolds towards an unfinished catharsis, a process in which the photographer and the viewer together engage in the tactic of embracing otherness that emerges in the operation of the image. Disability may function as "an othering other" that underlines the otherness of the able body too (Siebers 2008: 6, 60).

The image gains a performative capacity to speak for its creator, its contexts and its unstable selves—to speak of private pain that causes difference but can still be shared. The shared difference unfolds between the body in the image and the body that responds to it. As difference is experienced and identified through mediation, bodies codified as different may be deemed valuable insofar as they mark their own borders "for the benefit of mainstream society" (Siebers 2008: 56. See also Siebers 2008: 17, 190; Hirschmann and Smith 2016: 278). The statements about Kurt Weston's work mark that border by repeating a narrative about overcoming a difference caused by pain. The image marks it explicitly only with the lens, shown in the analysis as more ambiguous and thus more productive.

Singular yet relational, the image articulates difference as it finds a more or less sighted viewer. At the other end, otherness is reciprocated in other ways. I

partake in the image's performativity as it acknowledges other—my—vulnerabilities: I live with chronic migraine. Like the critique of mainstream benefits above, my experience may amount to "a normative epiphany" of someone who affirms their own able-bodiedness as the encounter with other bodies—particularly queer and disabled bodies—stirs a crisis (McRuer 2006: 12-13, 16). I claim no illusory leverage on crip identities yet argue for a possible sharing of a cathartic process that remains always pending, as a position of alliance from which pain can expand beyond its private enclosure (Siebers 2008: 189; McRuer 2018: 24).

In its own ways, disability discourse marks borders too: around which kind of otherness belongs to it and how it should be represented. However, Weston's image lifts out of its discursively encouraged position as mediator of a restricted vulnerability when it invites the viewer to turn towards all kinds of disabling situations with self-reflexivity. Otherness is neither lamented nor idealized – but empowering. With an explicit self-reflexivity in the verbal statements, their performative effect on image and viewer could share the cathartic quality that the image already has. The image would then have a place—a body—in which to land that goes amiss with the emphasis on transcending the body. Repeating the trope of pure inner vision, the statements thus counteract the image. The former do not heed the latter's call to act on what one sees: attention to visual evidence is needed in order to do that. The look performed in this analysis sees Weston's image extending beyond illustration of biography to mediate an embodiment that is complex yet participatory.

The image fulfills Kurt Weston's aim of "holding life" (website). To hold life is to hold time: this is what photographs do. The analysis suggests that the image holds a moment of pain in its fluid state: as a process through which the pained individual keeps navigating. Memory is a slippery place, ripe with glitchy moments where the what-has-been could become a what-will-be: where a mournful commemoration could become an interrogative exploration. Weston's work implies that what will be is more pain. He peers into darkness rather than through it, approaching blindness while the image meets a viewer whose sight disappears too soon enough. His work positions him at an angle from the contradictory and inadvertent ableist tendency that, at its extreme, echoes a position "that can only imagine… people with disabilities as very special people"—a position that shapes flexible subjects who "manage the crisis" of the able-bodied without being recognized as equals (McRuer 2006: 17, 41).

In this analysis, the image shows Kurt Weston not managing a crisis of his own or of any others. From the safe space of art, his self-portrait is an inspiringly inflexible act with, upon, against and beyond pain in the past and in the present. As the core of this case study, it makes visible a way to act both with and against the discourses that frame us as individuals and communities by calling out how our own seeing is implicated in negotiations about normativity. In conclusion: an effective and topical tactic to navigate different darknesses.

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