

Satellites Programme

Alison Scott

Matter over mind

A response to Kirsty Hendry's film *Navel Gazing* (Satellites Programme 2020, Collective) by Satellites participant Alison Scott.

As a teenager it was decided there was 'something wrong' with me. I was 'too' something and 'not enough' something else. Part of determining what this meant involved various scans and hospital visits—all vague to me then in terms of their precise purposes and methods. I did listen as these were described, nodding along while shifting around in the papery hospital gown, but really I was just trying to get it over with, get out of there. Gut instinct springs into action in moments when the body becomes so aware of 'being'.

The result of these visits tended to be heading back to school clutching whatever image of myself the experience happened to produce. I remember walking through corridors with an A5 printout of my skeleton from a bone density scan tucked in my pocket, finding a friend, showing them what my skull looked like and pointing to the faint wobbly line around the skeleton: 'that's my fat layer'. Analysis: 'spooky' and 'cool'. Then folding it back up and putting it back in my jacket, where it stayed forgotten about amid the detritus that ends up in such places: lip gloss, pen lids, bus tickets. I assume the technicians in the hospital thought that having copies of my scans might help me understand what was happening - see my body as a sort of bespoke version of the diagrams in textbooks and NHS leaflets: the generic made personal. But really these images remained in the abstract, any understanding being so mediated by the technology of the medical institution. I imagine this experience to be common, though not commonly discussed. Understanding your own body is not as

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simple as living in it. Necessarily we need to communicate with others, attempt to define our pains and problems to them, and trust those people to take that experience as truthful, legitimate evidence.

In a group conversation with Kirsty Hendry she read a passage from a book on feminism and the body in the medical eye¹ and noted the effect of the author neglecting to use the first person: keeping an air of pseudo-objectivity and *disembodiment* via their use of the third person. The sentiment, and the position however, was one I could relate to: like the author, I too am not accustomed to seeing blood and guts, nor actual skeletons. How 'we' in the West understand ourselves, or visualise the usually invisible internal parts of ourselves, is heavily reliant on medical imaging, diagrams and abstractions. I can understand what basic versions of digestive and reproductive systems look like in the sterile, layered kind of depictions produced for school textbooks, but without these - and even with them - I still doubt I could make much sense of the apparent mess that's going on in there.

How information becomes digestible or communicable, depends on prior knowledge and also on your metabolism: how readily you can consume and extract meaning from diagrams, written data, or descriptions. In Kirsty's work the question of the gap between embodied experience and knowledge, and diagrammatically or linguistically encoded understanding is antagonised - those functions so associated with 'brain power'.

Navel Gazing ruminates on metaphorical and physical roles of the digestive system by use of a characterisation of the stomach as 'The Gut'. The actor performing this role, Aby Watson, appears held within the close bubble of a fleshy, soft studio setting, as though

broadcasting from the stomach itself, the microphone dropped in like an endoscope down the gullet. She gives her first person voice to 'gut feelings', demanding her perspective is heard by the body at large and her importance known. She grumbles, she squeals, she revels in her criticisms and performs them to excess. 'If only my body could speak to me', I tend to think, but in watching Kirsty's work and listening to *The Gut*, it's clear in a sense it already does. Perhaps we just don't trust this voice or take it as seriously as rationalised knowledge.

Rather, the gut, symbolically and literally, has been considered an interior site of intuition, foresight: a different kind of vision. *The Gut* on screen explores and holds her own history and mythology through anecdotes: how she has been viewed as a brain; how looking into your navel could reveal the universe; how there is more bacteria in the gut than stars in the sky. How she is underestimated, but maybe hasn't always been so. In turn she proudly, exuberantly, sardonically, or cynically repeats such statements over and over, regurgitating and resisting facts she is told about herself. The character churns language in bursts of often incredulous frenzy, declaring she is 'too emotional', 'too sensitive', 'too volatile', 'too irritable'. Gulp. I feel these words in my mouth, down my throat, their repetition eliciting a bodily response as her yells hit my stomach in sympathy. Being 'not quite right', having 'something wrong', being 'too' one thing or 'not enough' something else; these phrases abound in our collective capacity to idealise a generic 'well' body - or 'functioning' body - but they also moralise the ill and particularly the gendered body.

The character of the gut, here, resents being expected to process whatever is thrown at her: whatever toxic or nourishing foods and ideas she is asked to digest, the 'additional labour' she is asked to perform without grumbling. Evidence of the film's production and its ethics—the actress breaking from her role to find the right pitch; the script spread out in front of her - hint to a circularity in the work where the methodology and

content synthesise. Kirsty gives the script - itself a reworking of myriad historical and academic sources - over to be morphed by a collaborative process with *Aby*: taken on, processed, and spat back out by another body, changed. In this way *Aby Watson's* performance as 'The Gut' has a sense of an embodied intertextuality at play, and the symbiotic relationship between the writer/filmmaker and the actress embodies a constant tension between the cooperation of 'members', and a revolt.

Taking *The Gut's* words into my own body, turning my gaze to my navel, is to become sharply aware again of my body being a body, and provides a moment to reflect on what knowledge and experiences we personally are prepared to explore, prepared to stomach, and prepared to empower.

NOTES

1 Lynda Birke - *Short Circuits in Feminism and the Biological Body*, Rutgers University Press, New Jersey, 2000

Alison Scott is a Glasgow-based artist and writer who often works with other artists. Her work is research-led and driven by interests in expanded performance and writing practices, and speculative approaches to knowledge production. Alison recently completed the MLitt in Art Writing at Glasgow School of Art. Recent presentations and residencies have taken place at Glasgow Women's Library (2019), The Poetry Club (2019), Glasgow Project Room (2018), Inverness Museum and Art Gallery (2017), Timespan (2017), Edinburgh Art Festival (2017).

Satellites Programme is is Collective's development programme for emergent artists and producers based in Scotland. The 2020 participants are Alison Scott, Kirsty Hendry, Sulaïman Majali, Holly McLean and Becky Šik.