

ARTIST AS PATIENT

*A journey into the Foreign Body;
Camera as Probe*

written by Anna Sadler



Fig.1 Anna Sadler Photograph of Methods of Practice, November 2010

In May 2010, I contracted the deadly strain of e-coli 0165 that led to a severe life threatening complication known as hemolytic uremic syndrome. Foreign bacteria had entered my body, attached itself to the inner wall of my intestine and here it was leaking toxins into my bloodstream. This in turn led to invasive medical treatment where a literal, 'foreign body' was left protruding from my jugular vein like some kind of alien obstruction. The life saving treatment over the next ten days involved attaching the tube, to a plasma exchange machine as a way to recycle my blood. My body responded unpredictably to this treatment; I was no longer in control of the body I once thought I knew.

I came face to face with my own insides. Blood. Plasma. Waste. Fluid and since recovering, I have become interested in the way that the internal and external body is probed in contemporary art and medicine. It was the attachment of the 'foreign body' to the plasma exchange machine that obliged me to live on and it is this peculiarity between the body and medical equipment

that also blurs the distinction of who is in control. Our culture has embraced the idea of prolonging life through organ transplants, transfusions and other types of surgery. There is an ongoing battle against disease and a collective fear of coming face to face with, and finally experiencing, death. It is this fear that justifies our manipulation of nature when our lives are at stake.

As a patient, I was a subject of both attraction and repulsion and I now make work that crosses these boundaries. In my studio practice, I combine video, sound, kinetics and found objects as a way to question our relationship between the material world of objects, props and machines and the interior of our body. I visit car boot sales, recycling centres and metal scrap yards as well as clambering up into lofts and garages to scavenge for objects that I can manipulate in my studio. For example chimney exhausts, plastic gauze, insulation fabric and trampoline springs (to name a few!). I am drawn to spaces with jarring or awkward architecture so that I can begin to make odd and playful relationships

between what lies beneath our skin and the interior space of the room. I am conscious of the point where these collide and mutate and what this tells us about the body as a site for exploration and actually 'experiencing' the work in the space. The diminishing world of the hospital bed and the intensity of the 'medical gaze' have seemingly followed me into the studio. I perform my mouth for the camera by fusing it against sheets of clear Perspex and attaching this to a rubber tube and camera thereby creating the video Mouth Endoscopy. Figure 1 shows my 'gaze' fixated on the LCD screen of the video camera. It was this intense stare that enabled me to choreograph my actions and in turn, choreograph what the audience sees. In doing so, I created analogies around the endoscopic view of the body thereby inviting the audience to journey, with me, into the darkened void. Mouth Endoscopy conjures up a kaleidoscopic view of metaphors; a deep-sea suckerfish, a watery blackened glass eye, a moist dark genital hole. I created for the viewer and myself, feelings of repulsion and attraction as the mouth is exposed, up close and personal. (See Fig.2)

The work invites the audience to examine a completely stripped down and repulsive view of the mouth hole, drenched in its bodily fluids; saliva. To view the video go to: <https://vimeo.com/32360511>

Mouth Endoscopy has forced me to recognize the image of my mouth in a way that I have never seen before. I have become aware of the relationship between seeing the image on screen and knowing it is a part of my body. This feeds the experience of the self and the point at which 'I' becomes 'other.' To put it differently, via the medium of video, I have mobilized the strangeness within myself. This kind of internal interrogation allows for a more complex sense of one's own identity.

Performance artist, Stelarc uses the portal of his mouth for a literal exploitation of the insides of his body. In his work 'Stomach Sculpture', he pushed down his esophagus an 'umbrella-like' object made from titanium, stainless steel, gold and silver as these materials were compatible with his stomach fluids. In

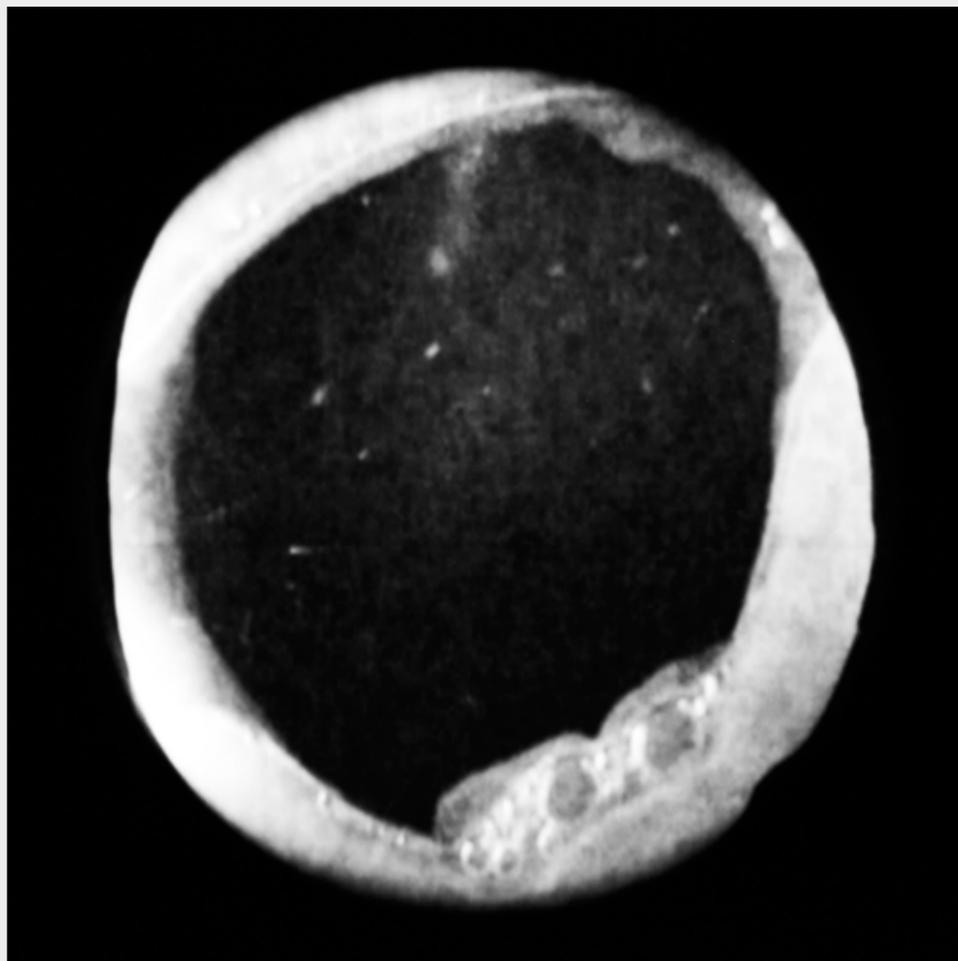


Fig.2 Anna Sadler Video Still – Mouth Endoscopy November 2010

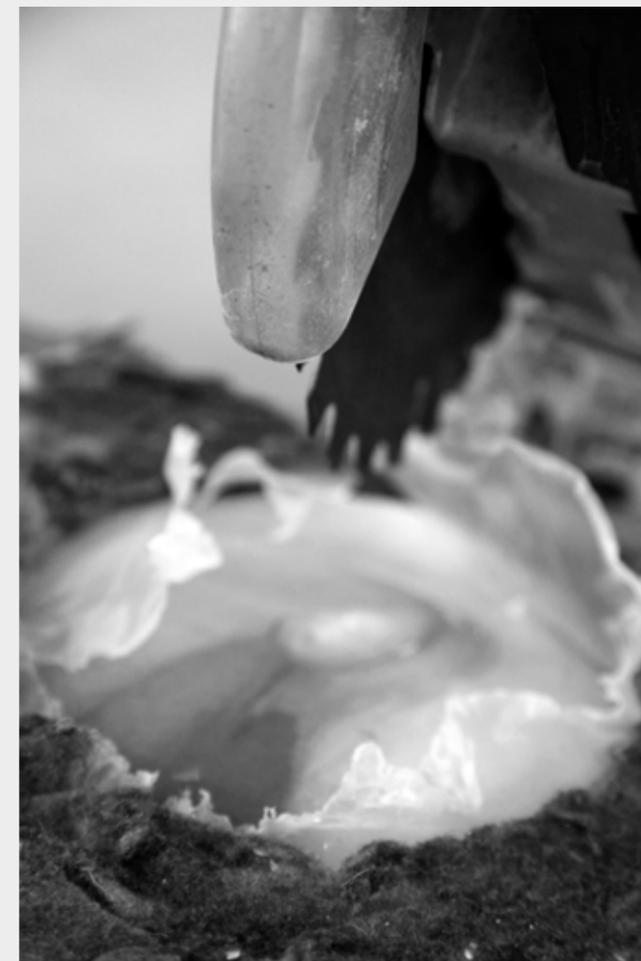


Fig.3 Anna Sadler, Close up view: Intruder1, 2011

this way, he became a subject of self-inflicted violence, pain-filled and repulsive. He created for his audience (and himself) a choking response similar to that of 'food loathing' in Julia Kristeva's Essay on Abjection, "I experience a gagging sensation and, still farther down, spasms in the stomach, the belly; and all the organs shrivel up the body, provoke tears and bile, increase heartbeat, cause forehead and hands to perspire". During the performance, he encountered problems with excess saliva and on several occasions the probe needed a hasty removal. In Amelia Jones' view, it is the failure of his attempts at managing to control his body that makes this performance effective for it is a reminder of the ultimate failure to control the body's responses to this unpredictable world.

In hospital, I was connected to the plasma exchange machine on three separate occasions, each session lasting two hours. The in-built technology was designed to imitate my own body's function for survival in a highly technical and specialized way. I remember the allergic

reaction my body endured when the machine was switched on. I began to feel increasingly nauseas. Pins and needles began to creep across my body and smother me and in my deluded mind, I was sure I would be left paralysed. Then everything became grey and blurry and the nurses turned to me and asked how I was feeling. At this point I was incommunicado. I wanted to speak and tell the nurses how I felt but it was as though the machine had annihilated my voice box. Being attached to the machine renewed my blood and started my body's engine. The body/machine experience has shifted my understanding of what it means to be human. "I am the illness, I am the medical intervention, I am the grafted organ and the bits of wire that hold my sternum together. I am this injection site permanently stitched to my clavicle, just as I am the screw in my hip and this plate in my groin. I am becoming like a science fiction android, or the living dead. We are, along with all my more and more counterparts, the beginnings of mutation." In the quote above the French philosopher, Jean Luc Nancy muses over his own medical experience and inspires

thinking around my once medically transgressed body and the notion to which I make my sculptural works. By jamming one found object into another and forcing together inanimate objects they are no longer hostages to their original functions. I tend to hack parts away from other parts; ripping off the door of a washing machine, emptying out the contents of a fish bowl and extracting the insides of an armchair.

I then re-appropriate the objects and in doing so, I create an aperture, a physical portal to view this other thing. (See fig. 4) Stelarc talks about a 'hollow body' as being a 'host body'. So in this way the body is not simply a site for the psyche but becomes a host for a sculpture. This hollow body of my sculpture now provides a 'host', a place of access, a lodging or even a trapped setting to view a video projection of an endoscopic view. The art experience has become a voyage beneath the skin and in through the abstracted metal constructs inviting the audience to view into these places by way of an intrusion. For it is the trapped, dissected and restricted body

parts coupled with the strangeness of the appropriated objects that presents the body as something we are never quite familiar with.

My investigation into the camera as probe is a way of coming as close as possible to my medical experience, revealing this journey both intimately and publicly. Through this enquiry I have come to understand that the more I learn about the body via technology the more I begin to recognize the body as an assemblage of surfaces; emerging and existing. It is the disease, machine and by-products of my body that I now consider 'other' yet at the same time they are an integral part of the way I perceive myself and how I see and experience the world around me. By reconciling with this experience in both my studio and daily life, I am aware that the development of this work has not only led to experiencing the body through the work but knowing it.

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