

A response to Sarah Anne Johnson's performance, *Hospital Hallway*

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By hannah_g

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A body is, amongst other things, a link, and itself consists of innumerable links that facilitate functioning. Such links effect everything we wish to do and that others ask of us: read, walk, cook, type, remember, talk... muscles, blood, breath, hormones: their messages are conveyed via chemicals and electrical impulses that pass along billions of cells. Complex, powerful, disruptable.

Our bodies are also evidence of our ancestry, points on genetic lines that stretch back thousands of years, akin to maps, for the most part strangely impersonal, mildly fascinating. However, those who have had more immediate and thus more tangible effects on our lives, such as our family, their impacts we can more readily observe on our bodies and minds; the links that bind.

Sarah Anne Johnson, an artist based in Winnipeg, Canada, has for several years taken as her subject her grandmother's ordeal as a non-consensual participant in the CIA funded (and Canadian government supported) MKULTRA¹ research at the Allan Memorial Institute on the McGill campus in Montreal. Seeking help for post-partum depression in the 1950s, the abuse of Velma Orlikow's and her family's trust and her terrible being-altering experiences under the direction of Dr. Ewen Cameron, still resonate. Johnson's work is both an exorcism and manifestation of the ramifications of the industrial-military complex on individual lives and a vulnerable public. *Hospital Hallway* is a kind of arcing of Velma Orlikow's experience across a generation to Johnson's body, which carries her grandmother's genetic and psychological imprint.

¹ During the 1950s and 60s the United States invested millions of dollars into the research of mind control and its military applications; MKULTRA was one of these projects. Erasing and re-programming memory, creating temporary paralysis

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The set for *Hospital Hallway* is comprised of sixteen walls nine feet high, a floor, and no ceiling: the audience peers down from a viewing platform that hugs the exterior wall of the tight octagon of the performance space, the hospital hallway. Johnson, while mostly lying on the floor, maneuvers herself round the hallway over and over again, despite parts of her body not seeming to work. She wears a mask, a black and white oval photograph of her grandmother with the eyes cut out. Like trainee doctors (and occasional artists) who once watched dissections conducted by senior hands on a fresh corpse, twenty-five of us watch Johnson's body and that of her grandmother's thereof. Despite the puppeteering hands of the medical and military shades being invisible, their effects are terribly apparent.

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A human body has an intimate relationship to electricity- its functioning is premised on chemical reactions creating electrical charges that convey messages that prompt physical, hormonal, and psychological actions and reactions. Like any circuit board, the amount of electricity effects performance. So, for example, being struck by lightning can fry your circuits and kill you, or passing a controlled current from the left hemisphere of the brain to the right can reduce depression and induce memory loss.²

Memories provide essential mental ballast that helps ground who we are and why we do what we do, which in turn imparts a sense of well being and purpose, a

² Electroconvulsive Therapy induces a seizure that in turn can effect the symptoms of depression or catatonia. The memory of the treatment is erased in the process, many patients report on prolonged loss of memory. ECT is still regularly used when forms of mental illness such as depression, mania, and catatonia become very severe and/or life threatening. Treatments occur under anesthetic and with the administration of muscle relaxants and usually take place 2 or 3 times a week for between to 2 or 4 weeks, with many people having annual treatment plans. There is some debate about the relation of memory loss to ECT as people with certain mental illnesses often have impaired memory function, which makes measuring memory difficult. However, short term memory loss and amnesia is common.

sense of self.³ Dr. Cameron, allegedly, routinely used massive doses of electricity in his ECT treatments and it is reasonable to assume that the consequences for the memory function of his patients would have been profound, especially since the application of ECT was reportedly sometimes used in association with psychotropic drugs.

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Johnson's representation and abstraction of her grandmother's experience is an act of remembrance whose contortions disturb so much that those of us who watch will remember too. There are few moments when one feels a whole, functioning body is present in the performance, but one of those times is during her infrequent seizures; a sinkhole irony. Two bodies are present, two bodies affected by a dark current in mid century North America.

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The chemical composition of a body is also delicately balanced. Ingesting a pill the size of a screw head can control a woman's menstrual cycle; a thumbnail tab of LSD can make a person see a monster in every car that passes him. Via MKULTRA, the CIA wanted to find a drug that could reliably induce temporary paralysis in the limbs of the ingestee. This would be useful for apprehending, interrogating, and manipulating that person, instilling fear, helplessness, and confusion.

Dr. Cameron administered drugs including LSD with the intent of controlling body function (inducing sleep for weeks, creating double incontinency, partial

³ To extend the metaphor by drawing on ballast's alternative meaning: "Without a ballast to limit its current, a fluorescent lamp connected directly to a high voltage power source would rapidly and uncontrollably increase its current draw. Within a second the lamp would overheat and burn out."
(<http://www.lrc.rpi.edu/programs/nlpip/lightinganswers/adaptableballasts/ballast.asp>. Accessed 11 May 2016, 4pm)

paralysis, confusion) and manipulating people's mental states and brain function. His treatment plans aimed to break down personalities and 're-pattern' them. Repetition was a key element of his treatments- repeated and prolonged bouts of extremely high doses of ECT, repeated ingestion of mind altering drugs, repeated imposition of sensory deprivation, repeatedly playing abusive or affirming messages to patients in drug induced paralysis over periods of hours and days.⁴ The mental and physical looping experienced amongst recreational users of LSD was heightened to nightmarish extremes in his controlled experiments.

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Johnson's movements reveal a distorted sense of self. Her prostrate body, save for several tableaux, is in motion throughout the performance, and the source of this motion is predominantly located in her legs. They push her lifeless upper body around and around the small hallway formed between the exterior and interior octagon walls. This person's sense of self has been radically altered. The agency of her legs is peculiar- at times it seems as if *they* are sentient, seeking a means to propel her body and mind into a unified sense of self again; at others they appear to simply enact a sedated reflex, like the running body of a chicken just decapitated.

Perhaps it is the strength of her legs that makes their relationship to her torso, arms, and head all the more disconcerting. That and that her hands are always palm up. An indicator of unconsciousness or death- think of the images of dead bodies strewn on battle fields or domestic murder scenes- the hands did not try to break the fall of the body as it fell, the instinct to preserve was already turned off.

⁴ Named 'psychic driving' and 're-patterning' by Dr. Cameron, messages on tape were looped, playing over and over in an attempt to reprogram subjects' minds and personalities.

After 15 minutes or so of watching Johnson push her body around the hallway, one begins to recognize repetition in her movements: how she propels herself, how her legs climb the wall, seizures, rolling from one wall to another, sitting up and straightening her clothes and hair. She is playing out a loop of gestures, of responses to 'medical' invasions. They draw on the repetitive physicality of Trisha Brown and Yvonne Rainer, but rather than presenting a distillation of mundane movements and thereby recontextualising them to critique an aesthetic and socio-political sphere, Johnson hyper-contextualises a physicality that has been devastatingly induced upon a body whose trust was violated in the interests of a psychopathic and paranoid military authority.

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The contemporary art galleries that present *Hospital Hallway* conspire with Johnson to perform as counter institutions to medical and military ones. The sets act as methods of control, containing the performance, preventing interventions, restricting the number of viewers, and when they can approach and when they must leave. They will also be torn down, leaving familiar, regular white walls and polished concrete floors. Yet within the continuum of the people who watched, *Hospital Hallway* and Johnson's mournful, antagonised body will continue to exist, alongside other ingested histories and experiences.

The circular hospital hallway and Johnson's constant movement within it is at times an overwhelming metaphor. The sense of a never-ending present is maintained, the past and future are denied, she will never leave (when the audience arrives she is already in the cycle and we leave her in it). Within this nauseating construction Johnson has made her body a memorial to her grandmother's horrific experiences and their far reaching familial effects. By

doing this she asserts the formidable power of lineage and the awesome power for abstraction to imprint experiences into a public consciousness. She has undertaken a personal exorcism that imparts a powerful call to recognize and resist bureaucracies of complicity and violence wherever they may be.

hannah_g moved to Winnipeg in 2008 in order to become more involved in Canadian contemporary art after completing the Artscape International Artist Residency on Toronto Island the previous year. During the last eight years she has worked at aceartinc., become a DJ and community radio producer, created two collections of folklore about Winnipeg, started the experimental Cartae Open [art] School, and founded Tanaby Design. Before moving to Canada, hannah worked at the Cube Microplex, an off-kilter artspace in Bristol, England where she programmed and event managed, and projected 35mm films. She also mounted the Toronto-A-Go-Go Festival bringing Chrissy Reichert (*Butcher Something/Tenderness*), Lauren Hortie (*Sigourney Beaver, SHEroes*), Eroca Nichols (*Made To Order*), Stephanie Chua (toy piano) and a program of video and film to Bristol. hannah has been a committed reader and supporter of contemporary art writing but has only recently begun writing in this area herself. Over the last year, she has realized that writing about contemporary art is something she wishes to pursue seriously, regarding it as an important means of constructively engaging different publics with culture, politics, and creation.