



*Re-: An Errant Glossary*, ed. by Christoph F. E. Holzhey and Arnd Wedemeyer, *Cultural Inquiry*, 15 (Berlin: ICI Berlin, 2019), pp. 77–82

BIRKAN TAŞ 

## Rehabilitation II

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**ABSTRACT:** This text discusses rehabilitation in relation to prosthetics by focusing on the artist Lorenza Böttner. Lorenza's refusal to use prosthetics provides an example for the argument concerning the manner in which rehabilitation operates within a context of gender and sexual conformity.

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# Rehabilitation II

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Lorenza Böttner was a Chilean-German trans woman and performance artist, born in 1959 in Chile. When she was eight years old, both of her arms were amputated after a severe accident in which she was electrocuted and fell from an electrical tower. At the age of fourteen, two months after the Chilean *coup d'état*, she went to West Germany for plastic surgery and moved to Lichtenau. She studied painting at the Kassel School of Art and submitted a thesis entitled 'Behindert?', which explored the category of disability and the history of mouth and foot painters.<sup>1</sup> She

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1 Paul B. Preciado, 'Lives and Works of Lorenza Böttner', *South as a State of Mind*, 9 [documenta 14 #4] ([2017]) <[https://www.documenta14.de/en/south/25298\\_lives\\_and\\_works\\_of\\_lorenza\\_boettner](https://www.documenta14.de/en/south/25298_lives_and_works_of_lorenza_boettner)> [accessed 10 December 2018]. Preciado served as curator of public programming for the documenta 14. He is also the curator of 'Lorenza Böttner. Requiem for the Norm', the most comprehensive retrospective of Böttner's work to date, co-produced by the La Virreina Centre de la Imatge, Barcelona and Württembergischer Kunstverein Stuttgart <<http://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/lavirreina/en/exhibitions/requiem-norm/236>> and <<https://www.wkv-stuttgart.de/en/program/2019/exhibitions/lorenza-boettner-requiem-for-the-norm/>> [accessed 13 January 2019].

presented many public performances combining dance and painting in Munich, San Francisco, New York, and New Mexico.<sup>2</sup>

Lorenza moved to Germany for rehabilitation, but refused to use prosthetic arms and learned to paint with her feet and mouth. If, in Julie Passanante Elman's words, 'rehabilitation, at its core, is a self-making project involving perpetual self-discipline and self-surveillance', Lorenza's bodily and artistic performances *crip* rehabilitation by refusing to return to the racetrack of ability, masculinity, and compulsory heterosexuality that modern normalizing rehabilitative practices reserved for her.<sup>3</sup> As Paul Preciado writes about her for the documenta 14, which included several of her drawings, paintings, and video work: 'if medical discourse and modes of representation aim to desexualize and degender the impaired body, Lorenza's performance work eroticized the trans-armless body, endowing it with sexual and political potency'.<sup>4</sup>

Modern conceptions of rehabilitation regard disability as a temporary obstacle that needs to be readjusted in order to approximate normalcy embedded in an economy of autonomy and independence. In this temporal economy of 'rehabilitative citizenship', bodily differences are to be eliminated through the approximation of a supposed normalcy for maximum control and efficiency.<sup>5</sup> Lorenza's rejection of prosthetic arms and conventional gender roles

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2 Carl Fischer, *Queering the Chilean Way: Cultures of Exceptionalism and Sexual Dissidence, 1965–2015* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), pp. 205–09.

3 Julie Passanante Elman, *Chronic Youth: Disability, Sexuality, and U.S. Media Cultures of Rehabilitation* (New York: New York University Press, 2014), p. 14.

4 Preciado, 'Lives and Works of Lorenza Böttner'.

5 Elman, *Chronic Youth*, p. 16.

make her body permanently anachronistic inasmuch as reintegration to modern society requires upholding and sustaining the able-bodied (and heteronormative) norms embedded in a developmentalist ‘chrononormative timing of bodies.’<sup>6</sup> A comment under the video *Lorenza* (1991) posted on *Vimeo* illuminates this point: The commentator says, ‘beautifully shot!’ and then asks: ‘Don’t they use prosthetic devices these days?’<sup>7</sup> Apart from the ambiguity and objectifying tone of ‘they’, the comment reflects a cultural grammar of rehabilitation based on compliance and assimilation. The question operates within the temporal imaginary of compulsory rehabilitation, promoting prosthetic devices as a matter of technology and time, but not choice. If prosthetics were available to her by then, she must have used them. However, we learn from director Michael Stahlberg’s reply to that comment that Lorenza did not like prosthetic devices, which he says ‘were to [sic] cumbersome for him [sic].’<sup>8</sup>

Having emerged in eighteenth-century English medical texts, prosthetics conventionally were meant to ‘replace’ missing limbs. According to David Serlin, following the Second World War, prosthetics operated within ‘the fiercely heterosexual culture of rehabilitation medicine, especially its orthodox zeal to preserve the masculine status of disabled veterans.’<sup>9</sup> Thus, prosthetics emerged ‘to re-

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6 Elizabeth Freeman, *Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 44.

7 *Lorenza: Portrait of an Artist*, dir. by Michael Stahlberg (Hochschule für Fernsehen und Film München, 1991) <<https://vimeo.com/29793957>> [accessed 10 December 2018].

8 *Ibid.*

9 Quoted in Margrit Shildrick, ‘Border Crossings: The Technology of Disability and Desire’, in *Culture, Theory, Disability: Encounters Between Disability Studies and Cultural Studies*, ed. by Anne Waldschmidt,

normalize the disabled [heterosexual] male body'.<sup>10</sup> Margrit Schildrick notes that the success of prosthetics 'was often measured in professional literature by the extent to which they enabled the wearer to engage in normal gender activities'.<sup>11</sup> In other words, approximating an image of a non-disabled body through rehabilitation and prosthetics is historically couched in an approximation and reclaiming of heterosexuality. By refusing to use prosthetics, Lorenza exposes 'the inherent plasticity of the body, and its multiple possibilities of transcorporeality' and refuses to follow a 'normative corporeality'.<sup>12</sup> Her unwillingness to use prosthetics, along with her gender nonconformity, problematizes normative assumptions about what a body can do, which bodies are regarded as whole and complete. She does not 'miss' anything and hence does not need any replacements.

In the video, Lorenza *crips* paternalistic rehabilitative responses to bodily injuries, responses that envision these injuries merely in terms of a lack to overcome or a deficiency to suppress. She rejects the demand to be like others. Rather than making her disability disappear by complying with modern prosthetic technologies, she shows how disability is integral to (her) art. When she talks about statues (e.g. Venus de Milo) that have no arms or legs due to injury, she insists that they 'have lost nothing of their beauty or aesthetic appeal'. As a foundational element of modern art, and an aesthetic value in itself, disability is a critical resource for thinking about human variation and difference, as disability scholar Tobin Siebers argues as

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Hanjo Berressem, and Moritz Ingwersen (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2017), pp. 137–51 (p. 139).

10 Ibid., p. 139.

11 Ibid.

12 Ibid., pp. 138–40.

well. He defines aesthetics in relation to the sensations that some bodies feel in the presence of other bodies. That is to say, aesthetics is first and foremost an embodied affective encounter between bodies. What he names 'disability aesthetics' acts as a critical concept to show the presence of disability in modern aesthetics and also an aesthetic value in itself for future concerns. For Siebers, in most cases, it is the presence of disability that makes an artwork more beautiful and endure over time. He asks,

[s]ince aesthetic feelings of pleasure and disgust are difficult to separate from political feelings of acceptance and rejection, what do objects representing disability tell us about the ideals of political community underlying works of art?<sup>13</sup>

In considering this question, one of the aesthetic values I find in Lorenza's work is the way it broadens our understanding of conventional modes of beauty. In her art, disability acts as a generative force. Lorenza does not want to be silenced. Nor does she want her disability to disappear. In her account, disability emerges as something that can be and is complete, whole, and desirable. Her artistic performances emphasize human variation, different abilities of bodies, and their right to non-compliance. The themes Lorenza chose in her paintings, such as police brutality and nudity, politicize the aesthetics of mouth and foot painting as well. Integrating disability as a critical category of analysis and aesthetic value, Lorenza's public performances and paintings treat disability as a unique source of creation in modern art. They subvert not only hegemonic cultural discourses surrounding images of disability that

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13 Tobin Siebers, *Disability Aesthetics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010), p. 2.

discuss it in terms of tragedy, loss, tears, and frustration but also the stereotypical images of all disabled people wanting to be normal, cured, or rehabilitated. The dominant emphasis on cure and rehabilitation locates disability in bodies that need to be fixed, and hence controls and limits human variation and difference. For that reason, reflecting on the intricacies of disability and rehabilitation opens a space–time where new relations between bodies, objects, and environments as well as possible strategies for resistance against bodily norms can emerge.

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