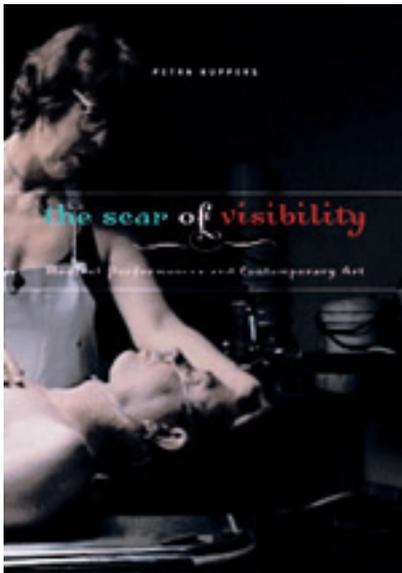


## ***The Scar of Visibility: Medical Performances and Contemporary Art* by Petra Kupperts**

Annie Tucker | University of California, Los Angeles

Kupperts, Petra. *The Scar of Visibility: Medical Performances and Contemporary Art*. Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2007. 360 images; 58 halftones. \$90.00 cloth, \$29.95 paper.



Petra Kupperts's first book, *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on Edge* (2004) explores how disabled performers use creative practices of embodiment to disrupt and reframe discourses of difference, locating disability in the dynamics of relationship and structures of signification rather than in the body. *The Scar of Visibility: Medical Performance and Contemporary Art* (2007) accompanies and extends this project, focusing on the fundamentally unknowable, open-ended, and yet intersubjective qualities of bodies in order to develop an analysis of representational strategies speaking to experiences of pain and medical intervention. Kupperts asks how the subject may be made visible through artistic practice while simultaneously retaining its inherently enigmatic nature, and how a connection between artists and audience may be established without a presumption of identification. These concerns become most urgent in a biomedical context, which mandates often quite intrusive methods of gathering bodily knowledge, and seeks to visualize the body in order to “fix” it.

For her guiding image Kupperts chooses the scar, which she imagines as a tangible mark of embodied memory or a textured trace of difference and connection existing at the interstices of visibility and interiority, signification and sensation, the biomedical and the personal. Through this model of the scar, Kupperts introduces her guiding framework of the “body fantasy,” where fantasy is a verb connoting the creative labor of fashioning new stories about bodies that may

align with, embellish, reject or reconfigure familiar discourses of health and treatment. Grounding her work in feminist theories of corporeality, a Deleuzian focus on the body's potentialities, and a phenomenological emphasis on immanence, bodily schemas, and the medium of the flesh, Koppers argues that these new stories—as they are expressed through the experiences of art-making and art-viewing—are politically important in their rejection of deficiency or indexical models and their orientation towards capacity and generativity.

Koppers writes as a flaneur, defining this as one who has a “curious yet distanced, involved and yet passing engagement with difference and otherness” (209); whose senses, body, and agency are embedded and implicated in what she sees; who is to a certain extent caught within the forces she observes; and yet whose responsibility to them remains “(dis)avowed” (3). This approach has its benefits and its limits. It allows Koppers to display her acuity as an alert and self-reflexive observer as she passes through various performances, images, and artworks, which span an array of foci and genres both within and beyond the conventional spaces of the museum or gallery. Her insistence on the spatial and temporal specificity of her engagement with the work she discusses offers moments of surprise and delight, which ultimately expand her analysis; some of the book's most sparkling moments include a description of a conspiratorial mission with another museumgoer to decipher a mark on a piece of outsider art displayed at the International Folk Museum in Santa Fe, and her covert support of a surviving piece of fungus intruding into the plastinated environment of the infamous *Body Worlds* exhibit. These moments attest to the disruptive potential of flanerier, a potential that also successfully supported her argument in *Disability and Contemporary Performance*.

However, flanerier seems to limit the realization of Koppers's stated goal of exploring the political possibilities of a phenomenological approach, both by overwhelming the reader with an arcade of works that slip into each other and by avoiding some of the more controversial discussions, especially of race, that would ground the works and therefore allow her to talk more forcefully about connections between medical interventions, pain, representation, and embodiment. For example, her discussion of a government-sponsored exhibit on HIV and syphilis touches on such themes as fears of contamination, evidence, and the body as a borderland, yet makes no mention of the Tuskegee experiment or African-American counter discourses of purposeful infection. In my opinion, her project of foregrounding the productive of body fantasies in building new public cultures sometimes misses the opportunity to delve more deeply into the specificity of their political and historical contexts in order to more clearly render their disruptive power.

Nevertheless, read in “a medical-social environment in which intervention possibilities multiply” (94), *The Scar of Visibility* offers a useful framework for considering various projects of bodily knowledge from medical endeavors to community self-help and self-advocacy groups to gallery-bound performance art. Koppers values those works that emphasize the body's opacity and multiplicity, as well as its collaborative and dialogic potential. She displays how artists may

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use the residue of medical interventions, not to give the audience the illusion that they have “shared” it, but rather to transmit the new strategies of self-knowledge they have discovered through that experience.

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## Works Cited

**Kuppers, Petra. 2004. *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on Edge*. New York: Routledge.**