Cancer *Langscapes* and the (Digital) Art of Pain in Beth Herst's *Dark Room/Gray Scale /White Noise*

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The aim of this paper is to examine the intersection of live and digital theater in Beth Herst's performance *Dark Room/Gray Scale/White Noise*. First, I will discuss the way Herst employs discourse, with emphasis placed on the written/projected/printed dramatic text itself, and its performativity, to create linguistic landscapes, or "langscapes." These sites are shaped out of Herst's language of pain and its problematic expressibility by means of cancer metaphors and their digitalized mise en scène. Further on, I will examine the tension found in the interplay of living versus digital/symbolic suffering bodies, which expands to embrace the playwright's concerns regarding the cultural effects of the new technologies reflected in the body of traditional art. As a conclusion, I will attempt an evaluation of Herst's digital theater experiment under the perspective of the disparate attitudes regarding the future of the dramatic text and its contested technologically-empowered hybridization.

In 1980 Keir Elam argued for the dynamism of theatrical discourse as one "by definition remain[ing] in progress:" Unlike film, he wrote, theatrical discourse "is necessarily unrepeatable," that is unable to be paused for scrutiny. The various performances of the same dramatic text, therefore, cannot be identical, rendering the text's segmentation essentially problematic (Elam 46-47). Eighteen years later, "Philip Beesley Architect Inc." website spread the word about *Dark Room/Gray Scale /White Noise*, an interactive CD-ROM artwork based on a performance text with the same title by the playwright Beth Herst.[1] The digital version of *Dark Room* is in

1. Beth Herst is a Toronto playwright whose work has been performed in Canada and

fact a narrative environment fusing both electronic text and an on-screen event. The live performance that had preceded it was developed at the venue of Nightwood Theater, Toronto, in 1997. A visual artist, a digital imagery composer, the writer, and four actors collaborated for the production of a hybrid media spectacle: an intersection of live and digital theater. In Herst's piece, a digital platform enabled performers to interact with a computer-generated pastiche of sound, image, and text. This real-time interactivity, which effectively made projected images and headlines "performers in their own right," is found at the heart of the piece's theatrical discourse, reflecting the increasing concerns of playwrighting in the media age and proposing ways to effectively merge theater and technology (Herst, "*Dark Room*" 18).[2]

In the introduction of *Dark Room/Gray Scale/White Noise*, which, unlike the restricted CD-ROM version, is widely available in print as a journal article, Herst expresses her fascination with her digital theater experiment and its electronic language, but at the same time admits its contested theatricality (in the conventional sense): "What does it mean to create live theatre in an era of virtuality? How are the new media of simulation shaping what theatre artists do and theatre audiences experience? How should the wider cultural effects of these media be reflected in our art? How can we use that art to reflect upon them in turn?" ("*Dark Room*" 18). As for the actual text of her digital-theater project and the challenge of representing it within printer-friendly conventions, she confesses that, however problematic and insufficient, "those fixed black marks on white ground stand […] as signs for a text that truly exists only in the interplay of word, sound, image, and

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the United Kingdom. She has published several articles and reviews on interactive multimedia and installation projects such as "Second Skin: The Theatrical Passion of Tanja Jacobs" *PAJ* 25.3 (Sept. 2003): 75-84; "The Disembodied Eye" *PAJ* 24.1 (Jan. 2002):122-26; "Quiet Apocalypses: The Textual Theatre of Clare Coulter" *PAJ* 22.1 (Jan. 2000): 65-71; "Is There a Fourth Wall in Cyberspace?" *PAJ* 20.3 (Sept. 1998): 114-17. She has collaborated with EngineX Knowledge Works, a web-based knowledge sharing and management enterprise. For further information on "Dark Room (Gray Scale, White Noise)" CD-ROM version, see ⟨http://philipbeesleyarchitect.com/stage/9720darkroom/darkroom.html⟩ (visited on 22 March 2009).

2. Savas Patsalidis and Elizabeth Sakellaridou breach the often opposing attitudes regarding the ways technology leaks into theater, expressed by theater scholars and practitioners alike, sustaining that what is important is "to find ways to combine the technical image and human flesh, that is to strike a delicate balance of elements where technology and theatre will help us understand the hidden potential of each" ("A Look at Both Sides: Foreword" 15).

movement, the interaction of bodies, imaginations, and time that is what theatre has always been" (19).

This textual tension is transferred to the actual performance wherein title nodes, images, dialogue and action merge with performing bodies with their impact largely depending on the way the audience's perceptive skills combine and process this plurality of data. Reconfiguring "simultaneity, overlap, repetition and dissolve—the temporal modes of memory, fantasy and dream" Herst's virtual environment affirms itself as such both framed by and fracturing time-space principles ("*Dark Room*" 19). If focus shifts from structure to content, this tension among and (con)fusion of disparate materials and forms still remains. Herst's language of pain, or its lack for that matter, is bodied forth through a female character's cancer in the way she handles physical and emotional pain. This is consistent with what Elaine Scarry has illustrated as inexpressibility of pain, "which does not simply resist language but actively destroys it" (5). In light of that, pain discourse along with its digitalized mise en scène, which "exceeds […] the limits of writing itself" (Herst, "*Dark Room*" 19), put forward major questions about the conventions of art and language in theater expressed earlier by Herst. This fact, as we shall see, allows for several critical approaches and theoretical insights to come into play in order for the viewer/reader to reach a deep understanding of Herst's venture.

Dark Room's Cancer *Langscapes*—Herst's Art of Pain

Herst defines the world of *Dark Room* as "a mind-place in which we lose ourselves beyond—or behind—the computer screen, a place of fragments and links, discontinuities and associations, of transmuting and ephemeral texts, sounds and images" ("*Dark Room*" 18). Within this world, she contends, the unlimited potential of virtual reality and the haunting specter of irremediable loss, declared through the materiality of the body itself, co-exist. The piece opens with a slashed painting of a woman's portrait while on exhibition. Four characters are involved: Whitney, the painting's owner who is dying of cancer; Ivor, Whitney's lover and director of the museum, hoping to acquire her collection; Anna, the young museum conservator, restoring the painting; and Michael, a software magnate and prospective museum benefactor who is after Whitney's paintings for his own collection. While the painting is being restored, another portrait appears beneath the canvas's surface. This revelation spurs Ivor and Michael to compete for possession, while it associates Whitney with Anna and the painting's woman,

as various incarnations of the same entity. As Whitney's cancer becomes more painful, a series of transformations takes place, with her traveling back to her childhood, blurring memory with imagined situations. In these dream-like flashbacks, the images of all the women involved, Anna, the portrait's woman, a child, and Whitney herself, merge with and dissociate from one another endlessly. By the time the restoration is completed, Whitney kills herself, leaving her collection to Anna, "[a]nd the circuit of desire, rivalry, and loss begins again, with the portrait again at its heart, and another woman in possession" (Herst, *"Dark Room"* 20).

What is particularly interesting about this piece is the way Herst manipulates the performativity of language in order to stage the strenuous relationship among her characters, with special emphasis placed on Whitney's suffering. Since emphasis on perception is so much weighed, the piece offers itself to be appreciated for its phenomenological complexity, language being largely part of it. Experimenting with "the presence of liquid and metamorphosing projected words with which the performers interact: both physically and vocally" Herst is faced with the challenge of "a sensual and self-conscious language that is both elusive and resonant" ("Learning (from) Hypermedia VI" 5). If language can acquire the qualities of image, as it does in *Dark Room*, it thus becomes "a world without limits, where you can see sound[;] [h]ear vision" (Herst, "*Dark Room*" 23). In light of that, Herst draws on linguistic performativity in order to create a site where Whitney's pain is transformed into an unmediated experience. Discursive codes do not only serve communication, but break down to linguistic landscapes, or "langscapes," a neologism introduced by Jane Palatini Bowers to describe Gertrude Stein's metadramatic experimentation with language as a felt presence in her plays, "[making] written text an element of performance."[3] As Susan Sontag notes on cancer's metaphorical language, "[it] is not so much a disease of time as a disease or pathology of space. Its principal metaphors refer to topography (cancer 'spreads' or 'proliferates' or is 'diffused'; tumors are surgically 'excised')" (*Illness as Metaphor* 15). Placing this concept within a theatrical langscape, the temporal principle is replaced by the spatial one, essentially "'turning time into space' through language" (Carlson 150).

Herst's langscapes lie in the fact that language is not simply an authorial component designed to advance plot, but its sentences are literally part of the stage environment as they are projected like headlines in each scene.

3. See Bowers *"They Watch Me as They Watch This"* 3-6, and "The Composition All the World Can See" 136.

This is part of her hypermedia project, which, according to Herst, has the ability "to animate text, to give words a dynamic visual presence" ("Learning (from) Hypermedia VI" 5). The piece is therefore fragmented in units each with an integrated text, an image and dialogue. This segmentation constructs a meta-narrative that calls attention to itself and makes the audience fully embodied in their role as readers/viewers. For one thing, the naming of each scene breaks the play's structure, while the repetition of phrases or strands of dialogue creates breaks in time. Not only does this discontinuity forward a Brechtian sense of alienation from the on-stage event, but the interplay of title nodes, dialogue, images, and action, as the focus shifts from one onto the other, renders the whole process experiential largely dependent "on the viewer's own construction" (Herst, *"Dark Room*" 18).

Another agent of the self-conscious structure of this piece as an artifact is the use of painting imagery. Even though this seems to be incongruent with the digital art the piece experiments on, it builds on the artistic challenge Herst finds in working with the two. The opening scene is self-evidently entitled "Trompe l'oeil," and reveals the image of the portrayed woman turning away. This is supposed to be about an 1899 painting of a woman made by a male artist, no further national or historical background given. This motif, in fact, echoes nineteenth-century obsession with the pictorial representation of dead women or women in their deathbeds. In her extensive exploration of the representation of death and femininity, Elizabeth Bronfen refers to painters, such as the Swiss artist Ferdinand Hodler,[4] who made sketches and paintings of his mistress Valentine Godé-Darel, while she was dying of cancer; or Gustave Courbet's *La toilette de la morte (mariée)* (1850-55),[5] a painting initially portraying the preparations of a young woman's funeral, which was subsequently overpainted by the artist himself to portray a bride's dressing ritual. In Hodler's case, the full-fledged beauty of that woman was revealed in a portrait made by her lover long after her death. Up to that point, he would sketch her wretched, with eyes averted, completely erasing the feelings of the suffering person for the sake of aesthetisizing the fact of death. Courbet's painting, on the other hand, subjected to x-raying in the 1970s, revealed the truth behind the image of a bride:

4. Bronfen provides an analysis of Hodler's sketches as an "'erasure' of the feminine" attempting to attest to the denial of the woman's pain through aestheticization of her death by her lover (39-56).
5. Bronfen suggests that the painting-over process of the dead woman constitutes itself an aestheticization of a double threat: that of death and female sexuality (255-68).

a dead naked girl, brought back to life by an extra coat of paint. In that case too, her gaze, which is directed to a mirror, is hidden from the spectator, leaving the mirror's surface awkwardly empty.

These nineteenth-century painting motifs, employed to create an eerie atmosphere surrounding the slashed painting and its double meaning, are translocated in Herst's digital environment. The portrayed woman, who was supposed to be dying, is painted in front of a mirror with her gaze averted from her reflection. What Anna reveals through x-rays, is that the artist's double is reflected in the initially empty mirror. This set of doubles and multiple framing transfixes standard representation when Whitney sees her sick double in the mirror, followed by her subsequent identification with the woman in the portrait, with her own past self and with Anna, "the double [as] an ambivalent figure of death" (Bronfen 114). In this representation of idealized beauty, which nonetheless veils death (Bronfen 260), the portrayed woman, like a phantom, or a *revenant,*[6] comes back to life in a metapoetic way: the mirror, framed by the canvas, framed by screens, framed by the stage, becomes a doorway through which this woman meets Anna and Whitney. Since realistic time has been shattered, emphasis is placed on process rather than on progress, as Bowers would comment on Stein's langscapes ("The Composition All the World Can See" 140). The canvas, embodying both the double and the idea of deception, creates a precarious space, the liminal locus whereby these transformations are channeled (Bronfen 263). Spectators become conscious of their role as such, as if looking at themselves in the mirror looking in the mirror, where a perspective is configured out of endless reflections. This time, this is effected on stage, where the screening of this endless duplicity communicates chaotic feelings to the audience.

The body's textualization—which will soon prove to be its sexualization—lies in the metaphor of the slashed canvas as a scarred skin, which renders the body "a surface of social incision" (Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* 138), upon which the wound functions as a register of trauma and memory (Caruth 4), as well as a staged environment, within which the plot of Whitney's suffering, both physical and mental, is enacted (Kuppers, *The Scar of Visibility* 9, 19). Whitney herself compares the slash to "a surgical incision, tracing the hollow of the back. The swell of the buttocks. The curve of a thigh" ("*Dark Room"* 20). The slash therefore, which follows the track of the painter's

6. Bronfen refers to the return of the deceased woman in the form of a phantom, or a *revenant* (=a person coming back from the deceased) (262).

brush along a female figure, both wounds and aestheticizes the body, as it is subjected to a scrutinizing, almost medical, gaze, a feeling that is further supported by the title of the following scene, "Post mortem." This resembles an anatomical invasion of the dead body/canvas, both objectifying and reveling at the sight. "The first cut" Michael says, "must be the best. The first penetration. When the canvas still resists. When *she* still fights back" ("*Dark Room"* 20; emphasis added). The intense physicality of language in this scene is condensed in the use of the pronoun "she" under which the damaged surface of the canvas and the wounded flesh of a female body converge. In a multimedia context, this tribute both to traditional art represented by the canvas and the female body as a map upon which social and cultural inscriptions (which in many ways have shaped art) can be traced, acknowledges the density and mutability of language the way Herst imagines it: as an undeniable physical presence in her piece and at the same time, as a contested signifier, as it is countered by virtuality in the era of the so-called "paperless society."[7]

The fact that language is both symbolic and literal/phenomenal is best promoted in the way this slashed flesh/canvas prefigures the scene where Whitney slashes her wrists, towards the end. The choice of the pronoun "she" which is often repeated when referring to the painting, establishes the metonymical connection of the painting with the person it portrays, an uncontestable sign of the sexualization mentioned earlier. In a later scene, the woman's gaze, often identified with Whitney's, is averted from the audience and the answer is projected as a heading: "Because she was dying." The scene's title is "Flashforward," which indicates a leap into the future, anticipating Whitney's suicide. This is juxtaposed to a subsequent scene, titled "Flashback," which offers a glimpse at Whitney's memory: the image projected is that of Ivor and Whitney as lovers, with the latter's figure disappearing from each frame. This discontinuous lapse in time with the painting as its axis constructs the mindscape within which Whitney's suffering is mapped.

Thus framed, Whitney's pain is elusive and silent, echoing cancer culture, according to which the disease is thought to work "slowly and insidi-

7. In his editorial note to the Spring 1995 issue of *Cyberstage*, Mark J. Jones refers to the "myth of the paperless society," questioning the ambitious promise of the digital age for the substitution of traditional print by software as utopian, as he claims that "despite the recent hype surrounding the coming digital revolution in publishing, we will never completely lose our relationship with paper." See also Herst, "Learning (from) Hypermedia VI." and Raley.

ously" (Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* 15).[8] This cultural context is the undercurrent that shapes our understanding of the "Case History" scene, in which Whitney reports her clinical condition:

> Single woman, fifty-one. No previous history. Adeno carcinoma of the left breast. Status: inoperable. Left malignant pleural effusion, multiple nodules left lung. Indicating metastases. Areas of increased uptake thoracic vertebrae three and four. Indicating metastases. Multiple areas of low attenuation right hepatic lobe. Indicating metastases. (*"Dark Room"* 22)

This strand of highly medicalized discourse, apart from a reference to a breast, completely erases gender signifiers from Whitney's body, as opposed to the previous scenes where the description of the canvas and its association to Whitney is richly textured with sexual references. The body's insides, on the other hand, are made explicit via a language that is both deconstructed and deconstructing: deconstructed, since its basic syntactic form is highly elliptical, with verbs being totally absent, while the word "cancer" per se is persistently omitted.[9] Other words are used instead, such as "carci-

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8. Discussing cancer metaphors empowered by culture in her *Illness as Metaphor*, Sontag referred to it as a disease which is "intractable and capricious," locating its metaphorization primarily in the fact that cancer "fills the role of an illness experienced as a ruthless secret invasion" (5). In the same vein, Stacey has commented on cancer as a disease metaphorically interpreted as a secret, mainly due to the way it develops, but also to the social urge to silence the fact (42), turning it into a tantalizing taboo even during the late twentieth century—the period when her seminal work on cancer *Teratologies* was published.
9. Departing from the long-held social belief that an illness that is not specified "has to be cancer," crystallized in Sontag's later work *AIDS and Its Metaphors* (109), playwrights have tackled with the idea of an unidentified or euphemized disease in their plays. Michael Cristofer's *The Shadow Box* (1977) is a play about terminally ill cancer patients, with the actual name of their disease remaining secret throughout. *Shadow Box* was first staged in the United States in 1977, at a time when simply by uttering the word cancer one might have felt vulnerable to the disease, or vexed by its abject connotations. Another instance is Marianne Paget's "The Work of Talk" (1983), an experimental dramatization of a phenomenological study on a social science essay about physicians' mistakes and the emotional effects on their patients. In a dialogue between a doctor and a postoperative cancer patient, the word "cancer" is entirely left out, despite the obvious possibility of that being the reason for her insisting pain. Cancer, however, makes its presence felt phenomenologically in discourse and figuratively on stage by being personified by an actress, as Paget herself commented in her analysis of the performance (see *A Complex Sorrow*). Both plays

noma," "metastases," "malignant effusion," which are indicative of an alarming situation. This discourse is also deconstructing, since Whitney's report in the third person, conveyed in an intricate medical jargon which is hard to follow and interpret, dissociates her from her body and dismembers body into parts, while the reiterated words, "indicating metastases," function as another euphemism for "cancer is spreading." In the same detached manner, Whitney continues: "Patient has refused radiotherapy. Patient has refused chemotherapy. Patient has refused further assessment or counseling. Patient has refused" (*"Dark Room"* 23). This state of denial verifies Scarry's view that "the very content of pain is itself a pure physical experience of negation" (52). In the very last sentence, the lack of object allows for multiple interpretations of this negativity, for example, it might be a refusal to live, or to be objectified by medical gaze. In this moment of ultimate disembodiment of language, Whitney's naked body, divested not only of clothes but of every labeling cultural marker—like Courbet's silenced woman—turns to confront our gaze for the first time in the play. This gaze, read as Whitney's personal narrative, speaks out the body's pain, its memory, its fear, but is also there for us to lose ourselves into and provide our own interpretations. Intense and wordless, this gaze creates a paradox: she may not be able to recognize herself in the mirror but through the act of looking back at us reveals her self-awareness as a spectacle, and therefore, conscious of her own visibility (Grosz, *Volatile Bodies* 92-93). Even though this is Whitney's projected image we are looking at, without any written or spoken language to frame it, it is precisely in the obvious absence of language that pain writes itself. In that sense, this gaze provides us with the input our perception needs in order to fill in the slots of linguistic ineffability.

Herst further invests on pain imagery, as it is distinctly exposed in the "Memory" scene where images of a child with her mother, and Whitney becoming that child are in a constant dream-like flux. The scene's title "Mother and child" contrasts with the accompanying image of a child waiting alone, a picture that vibrates with loss and fear read as the script of pain. Whitney narrates the story of a child waiting

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mentioned here communicate a tense atmosphere to spectators, engaging them into a conspiracy that works against their own perception. For a detailed discussion on cancer metaphors and their on-stage enactment, see my "'Encumbered by the Trappings of Metaphor:' On-stage Negotiations of Cancer in Western Culture," diss., Aristotle U of Thessaloniki, 2008.

> for someone who left a very long time ago, and promised that she'd be back soon, and take her away […] from the paintings and the drawings […]. So, she waits and wonders why the woman in that painting turned away. And if the mirror beside her is really a doorway to some other place. And she thinks how slowly time goes. And how fast it passes all the same. (*"Dark Room"* 24)

In this complex portrayal of Whitney's mindset, her memory, detached from her body, travels back and forth through time, destroying temporal frames with the empty mirror of the painting being the doorway that connects past and present. This montaged scenery, which brings together various selves and various memories, echoes as a Lacanian conception of the mirror stage, according to which the development of the infant's ego relies on its being able to identify with an image of its body as a "corporeal unity" (Grosz, "The Body of Signification" 83). Amid this whirl of projections the woman-child-Whitney thinks "how slowly time goes. And how fast it passes all the same" (*"Dark Room"* 24). This fluidity of time shatters borders between past and present, life and death, self and non-self, further stressed in the way Whitney continues her story, in the second person now: "And you wait. And she doesn't come. And you can almost remember that you once believed she would. And you forget. And the woman in the painting seems more distant now" (24). As this shift from third to second person reveals, Whitney might refer to herself introspectively, but she might also address Anna. What this ambiguous deixis communicates is that Whitney finds herself in a constant association with and dissociation from her sense of subjectivity, in a "womb" of infinite time-space that creates and engulfs her. In the images that follow, that child becomes Anna, and Whitney verbally endorses this identicalness to Anna: "I knew someone like you. A girl. A woman. Who once looked like you" (26). As it can be inferred, Whitney's state of deranged subjectivity echoes cases of psychasthenia: "Some psychotics," Grosz argues, "are unable to locate themselves where they should be. They may look at themselves from outside, as another might" (*Volatile Bodies* 47). Unable to recognize herself, Whitney is found to be physically, mentally and linguistically exhausted, thus receding to a semi-trance territory of confusion and diffusion.

Whitney's image before a mirror failing to recognize herself, though, reverses the Lacanian model of development, implying a movement backwards,[10] undoing time, reaching a point where the subject is unable to rec-

10. Performance theorist Petra Kuppers draws on both animal and birth imagery to define cancer regarding the way it erases every trace of logic from the mechanisms of

ognize herself, and what she sees instead is an enemy. This state of mind merges with maternal images bursting out of Whitney's memories, thus rendering the implications of backward movement even more threatening. This leads the subject to the pre-language state, as Scarry puts it, erasing all the cultural and sexual markers that used to characterize her. In her seminal work on the cultural aspects of cancer, Jackie Stacey describes cancer as "a disease of undifferentiated cells endlessly reproducing themselves, robbing the body of its internal recognition of subjects and objects" (95). Taking into account the contemplation of the cell "*as the microcosm of the self*" and projecting it onto the cellular level of Whitney's un-making, one comes to attest to Stacey's view that "cancer echoes the beginnings of life, for the malignant cells resemble those of embryonic development," threatening the subject with death by means of life (147, 81). Drawing on Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject, Stacey goes on to argue that a cancer cell, disguised as a normal cell, constitutes an assault to the self's integrity from within, thus being part of the host-body and yet a fatal threat to it, an idea that also applies to Whitney's problematic subjectivity.

This clash between subject and abject, inherent in cancer, is the logic beneath the "Foreign Bodies" scene, which opens with multiplying images of Whitney and the title "patient has refused." This mute projection displaces spoken discourse and cancels linguistic expressibility, while the silent proliferation of images imitates the metastatic action that takes place within her body. Cancer cells are silently multiplying, plunging Whitney in pain and fear, as she says:

> Cancer cells are called non-self. Each one is a counterfeit. Each one replaces, displaces, what was your own. Which means you disappear one cell at a time, and the disease assumes your likeness. When I look at the mirror now, she's always there. That dying woman who looks more like me every day. (*"Dark Room"* 10)

"That dying woman" is a deixis that creates an ontological gap between what we see and what we are told to see, as it dissociates the speaking subject, Whitney, and the object/abject on which out attention is linguistically directed, who is in fact the same person. On the other hand, Whitney's multiplying

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its development: "Cancer is the animal that walks backwards, that undoes agency with disruptive and stoic force. Body cells revert to embryonic status, change timecourse, and become undefined. Without the direction of timely behavior they destroy the being in time" (*Disability and Contemporary Performance* 28).

images visualize what she describes as a "counterfeit," the cell action within her body. Revealing to us what cannot be otherwise externalized, the digital platform constructs a landscaped psychodrama (mise en abyme) of Whitney's physical and mental interior. This dissociation of Whitney from her self echoes what Sontag reported as the cancerous non-self: "In cancer, non-intelligent ('primitive', 'embryonic', 'atavistic') cells are multiplying, and you are being replaced by the non-you. Immunologists class the body's cancer cells as 'non-self'" (*Illness as Metaphor* 68). Whitney here provides her own definition of her disease. Being herself detached from her body, her voice being outside it, she observes the slow process of decay. It seems like a dark conspiracy of her body against herself, bringing out a sick replicate that seeks to take over. Body is seen as a torturer, as the enemy who holds the self imprisoned; a body which "is […] made a weapon against [the prisoner], made to betray him on behalf of the enemy, made to be the enemy" (Scarry 48).

Herst's langscapes put thus into play the set of metaphors that have been culturally attached to cancer. To be more specific, the body-as-the-enemy metaphor for cancer, the abject self attacking its proper counterpart, is in fact concurrent with the split self imagery as an undeniable signification of schizophrenia. The stage directions point at the multiplying images of Whitney slashing her wrists (*"Dark Room"* 26). Whitney and her dying reflection come further apart as the disease advances. This process of dissociation is completed the moment Whitney's suicidal figure is projected as a multiplying presence. This electronic projection, a total disappearance of the actual body, has now taken over the stage, miming cancer cells that multiply uncontrollably and invariably. The interior process of deterioration is digitally forwarded to be fully exposed to our gaze. Whitney's verbal description of the disease is now turned into an image, breaking the protective border of flesh and letting loose over the stage space. The moment of complete identification of the self with the non-self is the vanishing point where Whitney and her cancerous self become one and at the same time split from one another, hinting at the invariable reproduction of the artistic work contemporary technology has made possible. This, however, entails the risk of being characterized not as (re)production of art but as its actual decline. To substantiate that, Bronfen refers to a kind of destructive repetition as based on "undifferentiated oversameness without variation, a repetition that comes close to being an occlusion of approximation and distance, a complete repetition, which is death, beyond life and narrative" (325). Bronfen goes on to underscore the fatality of this kind of resemblance between model and copy, whereby these two collapse into one entity. Herst's preoccupation with the

death of the text as it is known so far is once again brought into play. The question whether Whitney kills her cancerous replicate or vice versa echoes the question Herst herself has posed: whether the new technologies can indeed (re)produce art or merely cheaper replicas. That could also stand for the "death" of traditional forms of representation, which spurred Herst to explore its limits in the first place.

This blurry duplicity, however, is countered by another form of repetition, which is reconstructive to some extent. In the last scene titled "Return," the projected text is a single word: "Look" which serves as a vector deliberately directing our focus on the image. What we see is Anna, Whitney, the child and the woman in the painting in a series of transformations. This mutation is two-fold: on a first level, it becomes a comment on the very nature of cancer, which according to Sontag "could be described as a triumphant mutation" (*Illness as Metaphor* 68). However, it might also be a statement of agency, since these transformations bring Whitney's conflicting selves together and contribute to her self-textualization or the shift from self-destruction to self-construction according to Bronfen: "[W]riting death at/with the body means using the body as sign and embodying a sign" (142). This self-textualization, along with its open-endedness however, allows for another interpretation: Whitney articulates with her suicide a statement of universal pain, a set of past/present, life/death, and subject/abject binaries which, like the cells remaining in the host body after the removal of a tumor, lurk to metastasize in other vital organs, just as Anna inherits Whitney's art collection and becomes in turn Ivor and Michael's object of pursuit. In Herst's hypermedia environment, pain is digitalized and therefore perpetuated; it *was*, *is*, and *will be* there to challenge representation and affirm its haunting presence all the same.

Thus haunted and haunting, Herst's langscapes substantiate what she calls "the troubled encounter between presence and simulation, the real and the virtual" ("Learning (from) Hypermedia VI" 6). Rendering theater structures flexible, Herst's piece brings real bodies and screens together in the here-and-now in order to "explore just how problematic any notion of the 'real' has become" (6). What we have just witnessed was an artifact, made for us to consume, to think upon. Yet pain, given in the form of an artistic heritage left by Whitney to Anna, never stops. The aestheticization of pain these cancer langscapes attempt is ricocheted back to the audience, taking into consideration Jeannie Forte's statement that "the language of pain is first and foremost an attempt to communicate to the person who is not in pain" (252). If language alone, either written or spoken, is problematic in communicating

pain, Herst's pastiche of methods and media amplifies the audience's sensory powers privileging them with the right to choose what to internalize. As a consequence, this "conceptual and textual tension" promotes a simultaneity of experience that is itself a metaphor for life, the felt experience of profound pain being an essential part of it (Rogala and Moore 14). Taking advantage of "the text's hidden performative potential" (Patsalidis 4),[11] and employing this textual body-ness to negotiate conventional theater symmetries, Herst's langscapes expand without limits "[protruding] into the space beyond the frame" (Kuppers, *The Scar of Visibility* 28), to break into the audience sanctum as a tangible, palpable, phenomenal experience of pain.

In Conclusion: Subjects

Whitney's digitalized cancer along with her contested selfhood, as they are portrayed in Herst's langscapes, fuse theatrical discourse and technological innovations excitingly. Whitney's subjectivity, however, is not the only one challenged here. Herst's introduction to *Dark Room* is seamlessly attached to the actual body of the playscript, or "technoscript,"[12] and is there for us to read as yet another (non)self, in the way it brings together the actual performance text and its analysis under a common format. The author-Herst thus finds her own way into the performance, as she admits that "the closer I come to realizing my artistic ambitions for *Dark Room/Gray Scale/ White Noise*, the more the performance text exceeds the boundaries of print and page, the limits of writing itself" (*"Dark Room"* 19). The extent of Herst's experimentation with this excessive text is revealed to us in the play the moment Michael talks about "a world…[e]ndlessly translatable. Transmutable. No horizon. No vanishing point. An infinite space of pure perception. Like seeing with God's

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11. Savas Patsalidis in his essay on Jesurun's *Philoktetes,* discusses the dynamics of language in the construction of discursive sites, or langscapes, upon which pain is reflected and materialized (61-62).
12. In his essay "Technology and the Playwright" Richard H. Palmer uses the term "technoscript" to describe Wilson's, Coate's and Lepage's innovative productions, wherein they have developed a "new technology based concept of script" (148). Resembling Herst's ambition to create a digital version of her performance available as a CD-ROM, Wilson also tried (unsuccessfully though, as Palmer informs us) to have one of his productions copyrighted as a "visual book" (149). As in Herst's case, Wilson's productions also have texts; their published version, however "demand[s] a variety of typographical and visual innovations to communicate the way in which the word interacts with [his] visual and aural symbols" with the entire notion of text readapted to include "more than traditional typography" (149).

eyes. I can show you impossibilities. Things that never existed. Can never exist. Things we haven't learned to imagine yet. What do you want to see?" (*"Dark Room"* 23). Behind Michael's words, Herst is once more blinking at us, writing her manifesto of the much-promising field of digital art. Is this departure from theater conventions infecting our perception of life and art? Or, is it not a departure at all—only a successful mutation, to borrow Sontag's metaphor? Conscious of the new technologies' dramatic potential, she totally alters the standard concept of spectatorship, putting the audience on the spot and allowing them to commune with the theatrical event—in the way she promises to hand in the power to control the spectacle to the spectators themselves through their computer screen. Empowering us with the right to pause, flashback, or flash-forward her performance without her here-and-now intervention, she resembles Whitney and her precarious legacy. Cautious though of perusing the new media, she redirects our focus to "the dynamism of theatrical discourse" the way Elam conceived it, reminding us that "stage has always been a virtual world" ("Learning (from) Hypermedia VI" 6), that is ineffable, illusional, symbolic and yet essentially physical and experiential. Anticipating the doubt over technology-based dramaturgy, as it is crystallized in Puchner's discussion on iconic versus living bodies,[13] Herst bodies forth a text (be it printed, projected, langscaped, and/or diseased) that strikes back as both a culturally informed and technologically empowered hybrid spectacle. With this in mind, her words succinctly round up the issues on theater raised at the beginning of this study:

> If theatre needs the new electronic technologies—and my theatre does—those technologies reaffirm the need for theatre. Now, more than ever, we need an art form premised on the human body to stage, to explore, and to question the human stakes involved in the emergence of a culture whose overriding goal often seems to be nothing less than leaving the body behind. ("Learning (from) Hypermedia VI" 2)

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13. In his essay "Iconic Body, Living Body" Walter Puchner denounces the intersection of theater and technology as one that radically fragments the Aristotelian notion of the theatrical event as a communion with the real, incomplete human nature, therefore (mis)leading us to virtual (albeit empty of meaning) perfection empowered by media culture.

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