



SARAH RICHTER

SENSORY PARADOX
An Artist's Experience with Multiple Sclerosis

SARAH RICHTER: ARTIST'S STATEMENT

I have found the experience of living with multiple sclerosis to be a fluid and dynamic process. Symptoms can change and heal over time, new symptoms can occur, and all of these physical occurrences change the way I perceive and interact in the world. My MS symptoms create a fluctuating landscape with effects that are negative, positive and often unexpected. Seeing the world differently has been inspiring, overcoming obstacles has been liberating, and developing a deeper understanding of myself has been transformative. Sometimes I detest the limitations of having MS, but more often, I can't imagine who I'd be today without it.

In the exhibition, *Sensory Paradox: An Artist's Experience with Multiple Sclerosis*, I focus on describing the feelings and sensations associated with symptoms from my personal experience with this illness including: fatigue, vertigo, visual and auditory changes. One of the compelling aspects of creating this work is the opportunity to communicate an existence that is very difficult to describe. MS makes a world that is very real, but its symptoms are often invisible to others and challenging to translate. My hope is to facilitate a dialogue of connection and understanding in relating to the experiences of those living with MS.

I woke up one morning in 2009 with multiple sclerosis symptoms, and since then, my life has been completely different. Many of these changes were positive. The visual anomalies I experienced were incredibly beautiful. They have been a source of artistic inspiration, both visually and conceptually. The nature of our sensory awareness in relation to our physical reality is a compelling subject for me. In addition to encountering these strange and beautiful symptoms, they are also physically painful, which adds layers of complications to the experience.



Fatigue, 2015, video installation

Uncertainty is another aspect of living with MS. To know that I have a serious and possibly disabling illness, no matter how it looks today, is a very challenging reality to manage. Symptoms appear and then go away but always leave me with a little anxiety—the anxiety of not knowing if or when they will return, if or when I will have full physical use of that body part again. But slowly, over time, I've learned to come to terms with the ambiguity of MS.

I am a patient at the Rocky Mountain MS Center and have received incredible, state of the art care. My specialists have always provided excellent advice and guidance and the most advanced and effective treatments. This has made a huge difference in my health and the quality of my life. Because I receive exceptional care, there is much less ambiguity to manage now, and I am able to live a relatively normal, fulfilled life.

Sarah Richter, November 2015



SARAH RICHTER: SENSORY PARADOX

There is an expanding understanding, both in the field of contemporary art as well within the conventional healthcare community, that contemporary art practices represent an alternative body of knowledge which add to our understandings of health, illness and disease. Contemporary art represents a different approach from the strategies of clinical interventions and services such as art therapy. It also stands apart from the triumverate of data, methodology and authority that characterizes conventional biomedicine such as the validation conferred by clinical trials or the knowledge derived from research and practice. Biomedicine formulates its relation to disease within the structure of rationality and sees the

value of art in demonstrable outcomes of improved well-being, alleviation of pain and speedier healing. Further, art created in response to sickness and disease outside of a therapeutic or medical setting is more likely to evoke the range of the artist's subjective experience of suffering, anxiety, altered states of consciousness and traumatic beauty as well as is more likely to have recourse to strategies and forms of art-practice not typically available in a clinical context.

The artistic practices that provide the nourishing ground for Sarah Richter's work are not derived from the language or systems of medical practice, and although

Sight Distortions, 2015, video installation



the visual representation of illness has increased dramatically in recent years, it has rarely focused specifically on contemporary expressions of the experience of being ill. The one possible exception that comes to mind is the enormous body of work created in response to the AIDS crisis of the 1980s and 1990s. Sarah Richter's art emerges both from her facility with contemporary art practice as well as from her personal encounter with illness – in this case Multiple Sclerosis. Can we read Richter's work as a subjective expression of suffering – or of resilience and hope? What is distinctive about the visual expression of illness? Do those expressions enable the artist – and the audience – to forget what disease negates? Are there ethical issues that are potentially associated with exhibiting expressive portrayals of illness? Does the gallery context mute and aestheticize the experience of suffering? If so, what are the contexts in which this work should be seen and experienced?

These are some of the questions that Sarah's work raises for me and that I am still deeply considering. Where Richter's work succeeds for me is in her ingenuity in using media to directly convey "the fluid and dynamic process" of living with MS as a visual and conceptual experience that includes great beauty as well as pain and uncertainty. In my experience, an individual's encounter with chronic or incurable illness can often liberate her capacity for experiencing the world as continually refreshing itself – a world in which the most mundane of objects is suffused with beauty and significance. It is this paradox and possibility that informs my approach to Sarah Richter's remarkable evocations of both the distressing and transformative experiences of being "stricken" with Multiple Sclerosis.



Sight Distortions, 2015, video installation

I'm grateful to the Rocky Mountain MS Center for supporting Sarah's project and making it possible for her to create this remarkable work which speaks to a range of typically unconnected communities – artists, clinicians, researchers, curators, and the art-aware public. To learn more about the MS Center's work, please visit mscenter.org. As always, I'm indebted to Dr. Tess Jones for seeing things clearly and for sharing her incisive clarity with me.

Simon Zalkind, Curator
November 2015

SARAH RICHTER SENSORY PARADOX

An Artist's Experience with Multiple Sclerosis

Simon Zalkind, Curator

December 10, 2015 – March 3, 2016

Exhibit Opening: Thursday, December 10 4:00 – 7:00 PM.

Conversation with the Artist Sarah Richter and Curator Simon Zalkind:

Thursday, December 10, 6:00 PM

Introductory Remarks by Patricia Daily, Director of Counseling and Support Services, Rocky Mountain MS Center (RMMSC)

The Art Gallery

Fulginiti Pavilion for Bioethics and Humanities

University of Colorado Anschutz Medical Campus,

13080 East 19th Avenue, Aurora, Colorado 80045, 303.724.3994

Map and directions at: www.coloradobioethics.org

Gallery Hours: 9am - 5pm, Monday - Friday, free and open to the public

Sensory Paradox is proudly supported by the Rocky Mountain MS Center, a patient- and family-centered local nonprofit organization that provides a comprehensive and integrated wellness approach to MS, life-changing support services, and cutting-edge research. The MS Center's mission is to improve the quality of life of individuals and their families living with MS and related neurological diseases through care, support, education and research. For more information, please visit mscenter.org.

This exhibit was made possible with the support of Teva Pharmaceuticals, a manufacturer of specialty and generic pharmaceuticals. Teva provides both new and innovative therapies and greater access to affordable medicines. For more information, please visit tevausa.com.

cover image: Sight Distortions, 2015, video installation

inside flap: Fatigue, 2015, video installation

University of Colorado

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