Becoming-Amazon: Femininity, Embodiment, and Sexuality in a Photographic and Digital Breast Cancer Project
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Abstract: In recent decades, digital and photographic life narratives by women living with breast cancer and mastectomy have gained public visibility. This article examines how a documentary and fashion photography project in contemporary Berlin rethinks normative concepts of femininity, embodiment, and sexuality through the performance of the breast cancer patient as Amazon warrior. Based on feminist theory, disability studies, media studies, and in particular Gilles Deleuze’s concept of becoming, I coin the term “becoming-Amazon” for the process of relational subjectivity formation that the project opens up. Uta Melle’s project shifts notions of post-mastectomy bodies as unfeminine, incomplete, or asexual and envisions and celebrates a multiplicity of relational femininities, embodiments, and erotic zones with difference. By combining digital cancer activism and an aesthetics and politics of visibility, difference, and intercorporeality, Melle’s project intervenes in contemporary cancer discourse and unsettles what has been considered as redemptive cancer culture.

Keywords: femininity, embodiment, sexuality, becoming, photography, breast cancer

“Scars scare many people because they refer to something that doesn’t exist any longer.”
—Sophie Albers, “Brustkrebs: Die Schönheit ist das Weiterleben”
“The point is that both a world and a body are opened up for redistribution, dis-organization, transformation; each is metamorphosed in the encounter, both become something other, something incapable of being determined in advance, and perhaps even in retrospect, but which nonetheless have perceptibly shifted and realigned.”
—Elisabeth Grosz, Space, Time and Perversion

Photographic representations of women living with breast cancer range from professional photography to photo blogs and Instagram selfies; these images have enriched many cancer memoirs. In the seventies and eighties, cancer photography emerged as a documentary and political practice designed to increase visibility, mostly of breast cancer patients, and to urge the viewer to witness and rethink conventions of femininity, beauty and disease in relation to medical discourses. British photographer Jo Spence, for instance, expresses feelings of powerlessness and silencing in a patriarchal medical and social culture in her breast cancer portraits. In addition to individual self-portraiture, since the late 1990s, collaborative (fashion) photography projects by a photographer and multiple subjects or photo-documentaries of one woman’s experience by a chosen photographer have become more prevalent. More recently, digital cancer narratives in the form of photo blogs, (Facebook) web pages and (Instagram) selfies have opened an additional space for the visual expression of breast cancer experiences. While some scholars consider the digital space liberatory, others claim that (digital) breast cancer narratives also confirm and reinforce heteronormative notions of illness, femininity, and beauty.

This article discusses Uta Melle’s breast cancer project that is situated at the junction of visual and textual narratives and includes breast cancer photo-documentary selfies, individual and collaborative fashion photography, and a cancer memoir. Melle, a married mother of two children located in Berlin, was diagnosed with breast cancer at the time when her mother died from the same illness. Because of her family history, Melle opted for a double mastectomy even though only her left breast was affected by cancer. After her surgery in April 2009, Melle started to create an online selfie diary which was complemented by a blog, first on her website and later, from 2014 to 2016, for the German news magazine Stern under the rubric “oben ohne” [topless]. In addition, Melle did three photo shoots with the photographer Jackie Hardt in 2009 and 2012, one before the surgery and two after the mastectomy. Based on this experience, in 2010, Melle organized two Amazon-themed photo shoots with twenty women between 30 and
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60 years old who had undergone a single or double mastectomy due to breast cancer, one with Hardt and another with the photographer Esther Haase. Both events led to an exhibition and the publication of an art book in 2011 entitled Amazonen: Das Brustkrebs-Projekt von Uta Melle mit Fotos von Esther Haase & Jackie Hardt [Amazons: Uta Melle’s Breast Cancer Project with Photographs by Esther Haase and Jackie Hardt]. The project further consists of the 2014 memoir Die Amazone vom Kollwitzplatz [The Amazon of Kollwitz Square], in which her husband F. Hendrick Melle narrates his life during her chemotherapy, tying in diary excerpts by Uta. The photo shoots and exhibitions received significant positive media coverage in German, European, and international newspapers, journals, and TV shows. This article examines how the predominantly visual and digital project challenges and confirms normative discourses of femininity, sexuality, and breast cancer.

Becoming-Amazon

In discussing Melle’s treatment options for her breast cancer, her husband draws an image of his wife as an Amazon to signal his acceptance of her body without breasts. In the following, Melle connects her photography project with an Amazon warrior discourse that has a long if vexed history in art history and breast cancer discourse. This discourse references mythological women warriors who formed an independent kingdom governed by a queen named Hippolyta or Hippolyte. The idea, however, that Amazons cut off one breast to shoot better and be better warriors is a myth. In ancient works of art, Amazons are always represented with both breasts, even though the left is frequently covered. At the same time, artistic portrayals of Amazons are often erotic, suggesting that mutilated women could embody sexual attraction. In Illness as Metaphor, Susan Sontag famously argues that the warrior metaphor of cancer implies that patients and societies wage a war against cancer and thus casts life with cancer as either victory or failure. Dissecting the gendering of the metaphor, S. Lochlann Jain dismisses not only notions of militarized masculinity but also normative ideals of sexualized femininity in redemptive breast cancer discourse. In contrast, Audre Lorde embraced the image of the legendary one-breasted women warriors of the West African kingdom of Dahomey in her writing about breast cancer and envisioned “an army of one-breasted women descending on Congress.” Like Spence, Lorde critiques hegemonic medical practices and refuses to reconstruct
her breast or to wear a breast prosthesis. Lorde resists the construction of women with breast cancer as invisible victims and, instead, seeks to make her difference visible and political. Diane Price Herndl takes up Lorde’s call to increase the visibility of breast cancer but expresses her difference not bodily but rather by pointing at the difference between visible self (with prosthesis) and written critical voice. Herndl strives, in William Major’s words, to make “manifest a utopian ideal: A well-informed ‘army’ of single-breasted women . . . ready to break with medical and social codes of normalization.”

She rejects the limitations of a single identity of survivorhood, and instead highlights the instability of identity, health, and embodiment. I argue that Melle follows Lorde’s and Herndl’s call to express difference and visibility in multiple ways and to create a visible “expansive community” of Amazon warriors. In contrast to cancer memoirs, Melle’s project does so by envisioning and visualizing a digital imagery of Amazon warriors through a range of individual and collective fashion and documentary photography projects. While Lorde’s memoir directly politicizes and criticizes medical cancer discourses and survivorhood, Melle’s project draws on digital cancer activism and fashion photography to engage a larger audience with the neglected topics of sexuality and cancer. Even though the images draw on the worn-out and normalizing image of the fighting and eroticized breast cancer survivor in contemporary cancer culture, they are able to expand and queer imaginaries of (post-mastectomy) female bodies and sexualities.

The article connects contemporary breast cancer photography and discourse with feminist philosophy, visual culture, and (queer) disability studies, in relation with Gilles Deleuze’s notion of becoming. In A Thousand Plateaus (1987), Deleuze and Félix Guattari contrast the plane of immanence and becoming with the transcendental plane of being, reason, and identity in liberal individualism. The latter categorizes bodies in fixed molar forms that are defined by species and genus and conceived through their functions, for instance “man” and “woman” or “human” and “animal.” In contrast, in becoming, difference unfolds as a proliferative and productive force and undermines, to whatever degree possible, fixed determinants and identities. Rather than in dialectical opposition to the other, in Metamorphosis (2002), Rosi Braidotti reasserts sexual difference as many differences between, among, and within woman. Becoming-woman redefines female subjectivity as embodied and internally differentiated and as embedded in asymmetrical power relations. The political goal of becoming-woman is to joyfully create and represent a feminist subjectivity that destabilizes the asym-
metrical power relations sustaining the socio-symbolic system: “Women must therefore speak the feminine, they must think it and represent it on their own terms; read with Deleuze, this is an active process of becoming.” Drawing on Braidotti’s concepts of becoming-woman, I coin the term “becoming-amazon” as a theoretical lens to describe a process of subjectivity formation of women with mastectomies that calls into question traditional notions of post-mastectomy bodies and sexuality. Contemporary mainstream culture still often imagines a molar concept of a woman that is defined, among other things, by female genitalia, breasts, and hair, by a particular performance of genital sexuality and by principles of autonomy and demarcation. In contrast to the whole body, the visibly disabled and fragmented body, Margrit Shildrick argues, foregrounds lack and intercorporeality and leads to cultural anxieties, in particular about sexuality. I demonstrate how Melle’s project replaces such molar concepts of female performance, embodiment, and the sexuality of post-mastectomy bodies with a multitude of gendered and sexual becomings.

In the following, I focus on the project’s individual, group, and couple photography to theorize different aspects of becoming-amazon. Through an aesthetics of parody, masquerade and documentation, the amazon warrior portraits and selfie photographs challenge the devaluation of femininity without breasts as lacking, while performing a multiplicity of different and contradictory femininities. Reading women’s (nude) group photographs against the foil of Shildrick’s claim of the fragmentation and intercorporeality of all embodiment, I argue that the Amazon photographs portray women’s bodies not as whole or broken but simply as bodies in a process of corporeal becoming through a politics and aesthetics of visibility and connection. Finally, engaging with Elisabeth Grosz’s theorization of lesbian fluid desires, I show how Melle’s erotic couple photographs describe a progression from molar genital sexuality to a multiplicity of erotogenic zones and flows of desire. By combining an aesthetics and performance of Amazon dramaturgy with cancer activism and blog culture, Melle’s project connects with queer politics of visibility, intercorporeality, and desire to visualize gendered and sexualized becomings with post-mastectomy bodies.

Molecular Femininities and Performance in Breast Cancer Portraits and Selfies

The prelude to her personal online diary and to the photography book Amazonen shows a naked image of Melle’s body after her diagno-
The photograph is taken by her friend, the photographer Jackie Hardt, as a gift for her fortieth birthday (fig. 1). The picture incorporates an aesthetic of whiteness, thinness, and youth: a very skinny smiling woman with an adolescent body with small breasts and very short black hair, wearing only black panties, long black gloves, and a green necklace. This visual representation invokes John Berger’s and Laura Mulvey’s readings of the eroticized and objectified female body in European painting and in film, respectively, which is subjected to the desiring male gaze of the spectator. At the beginning of his memoir, Hendrick exhibits these expectations of his wife through a male gaze by explaining how he wants her to be a sexy and seductive housewife and mother:


[That’s how I wanted my wife: with shiny high heels and in tight leather pants which I got her last Christmas. I wanted her with this daring smile on her full lips, the smile in her eyes, the protruding nipples under the breathy rough-knitted linen.]

Hendrick’s description of how he expected his wife to provide him a pleasurable visual experience before the surgery fits into a traditional understanding of gender roles in their marriage. While he works as art director in an advertising agency, Uta gave up her job and became a housewife and mother. As a result of this notion of femininity, Hendrick portrays the photo shoot as a farewell party, and the image as nostalgic memento mori of her breasts and, seemingly, her whole body: “Alle wussten, dass es Uta so bald nicht mehr geben würde” [Everybody knew that, soon, Uta wouldn’t exist the same way any longer]. In Deleuzian philosophy, such a functional and static view of womanhood could be linked to molarity. In Melle’s case, the eroticized femininity defines her as a woman in relation to the white male observing gaze. While blogs have been praised as liberatory spaces, Marjolein De Boer and Jenny Slatman argue that digital breast cancer accounts generally reiterate and affirm dominant offline conceptions and norms of illness, cancer, beauty, and gender. Breast cancer experiences “are often framed in ways that assume heterosexuality, that emphasize
women’s positive attitude toward life and that pressure women to look ‘normal’ (i.e. healthy) and to adopt beautification techniques." These norms may also give rise to a sense of shame by glossing over and thus discrediting the unpleasant and painful aspects of the breast cancer experience.

Figure 1. Pre-surgery image, photography@jackiehardt.com © Jackie Hardt.

After her mastectomy, Melle’s second individual shoot in 2009 with Hardt similarly references normative or iconic representations of femininity, such as Marilyn Monroe or Madonna. The Marilyn Monroe photographs show Melle without breasts, first with a blond, curly Monroe-type wig, then without hair in typical seductive Monroe-positions and costumes. In an image that evokes a 1954 Monroe portrait by Milton Greene, Melle is seated with bare chest in a tulle skirt, pointing with her finger to her mouth or neck. In another picture, Melle is seen standing provocatively without clothes on a tram track in Berlin, parodying Madonna’s 1992 naked “hitchhiking” image by Steven Meisel, from her illustrated book SEX: She holds a black bag in her left hand, and performs a hand gesture as if she is hitchhiking, while smoking a cigarette, with and without a blond wig (figs. 2 and 3). While the photographs imitate and partially reinforce performances of iconic sexualized femininity, in contrast to Melle’s initial
nude photograph, these images heighten the viewer’s awareness of differences among women’s bodies. They critically engage with molar and fetishized notions of femininity through performative parody, that is, in Linda Hutcheon’s words, “repetition with critical distance, which marks difference rather than similarity.”

In contrast to these images, in the later shoot with Hardt in 2012, Melle no longer repeats iconic portraits of traditionally sexy women, instead confidently playing with femininity and masculinity to emphasize the ambiguity and fluidity of the sexed body. The photographs from the shoot show Melle in sensual and erotic positions with her bare chest, lying or sitting on or near a bed in a dressing room, evocative of the visual style of boudoir photography. In several pictures, her face is covered with a large feather mask and she wears suspenders and high heels, playing with the viewer’s inability to determine her sex (fig. 4). In one portrait, she plays with masculinity, exposing her breastless chest and very short hair and blowing smoke from a cigarette in her mouth while at the same time performing femininity through excessive necklaces and makeup, with many layers of silver pearl necklaces and bright red lips.
In these individual shoots, Hardt and Melle rely on *mise-en-scène* and masquerade, both well-established aesthetic strategies in photographic self-portraiture and gender studies, to highlight the theatricality of the self and the performativity of gender.\(^{24}\) For instance, the photographer Cindy Sherman dresses up in front of the camera as different female personae in a gender masquerade, described by Mary Ann Doane as “the hyperbolization of the accoutrements of femininity” which confounds the male gaze and leads to a “defamiliarization of female iconography.”\(^{25}\) In her series of “Untitled Film Stills,” Sherman transforms herself with makeup, wigs, and elaborate costumes into figures from generic black-and-white Hollywood B films of the 1950s, including movie stars such as Sophia Loren and Brigitte Bardot. In her reading of Sherman’s images, Judith Williamson argues that these images are more than “either a witty parody of media images of women, or a series of self-portraits in a search for identity.”\(^{26}\) Sherman’s masquerade reveals the construction of multiple, fractured femininities through the image; they show “not just a range of feminine expressions . . . but the *process* of the ‘feminine’ as an effect, something acted upon.”\(^{27}\) According to Williamson, Sherman’s later images even push beyond different femininities to cross the border between femininity and masculinity, thereby questioning not only ambiguous sexual identity but oppositionality itself.
Melle’s photographs illustrate a similar process. The first parody series juxtaposes originals and slightly varied copies that parody traditional notions of sexy femininity and unsettle the male gaze and its expectations. By referencing an idealized condition of “before,” the images play off and work against prevalent cancer imagery in the medical sphere that compares the condition before and after surgical interventions. The second boudoir series assembles, picture by picture, an ambiguous femininity after mastectomy that moves beyond concepts of an essential, molar feminine and masculine. Importantly, these images do not imitate normative femininity, but, in Deleuze’s words, “emit particles that enter the relation of . . . a microfemininity,” that “produce in us a molecular woman.” The photographs celebrate gender ambiguity, transgression, and performativity through provocative and eroticized theatrical strategies.

Like these theatrical stagings, Hardt’s 2010 Amazon portrait photographs of Melle and other women after mastectomy similarly play with masquerade, difference, and molecular femininities. These portraits show a particular dramaturgy of Amazon warriors: each woman is dressed in a different stylized warrior costume, including armor, helmet, feathers, jewelry, brocade, and baroque garments, leaving their scarred chests mostly covered. Their stoic faces, shown frontal or from the side, often stare down at the viewer against a dimly lit background (fig. 5). These historicized images reference Renaissance portraits of male warriors. According to Tamar Tembeck, Jo Spence and Hannah Wilke used similar aesthetic strategies in their photographic autopathographies by staging themselves with reference to historical artworks and to poses from the worlds of fashion and popular culture, including works by Albrecht Dürer and Frida Kahlo. Through historical references and performative staging, the women are associated with the dignity, authority, and beauty of a male sovereign, thereby juxtaposing vulnerability and strength, femininity and masculinity.

In Amazonen, each of Hardt’s Amazon portraits is complemented by brief autobiographical vignettes, which add to the warrior discourse in ambiguous ways. Some of the women call for a fight against cancer, pronouncing that “ich fest daran glaube, den Krebs zu besiegen” [I believe firmly that I can beat cancer] and encouraging others: “Und das schaffst du auch” [And you will also succeed]. Such utterances have been critiqued by Jain, who is wary of militarizing and sentimentalized cancer aesthetics and politics. Jain sees the Pink Ribbon campaign as seeking to restore a lost normative femininity, arguing for example that the hyperdesigned quality of the mastectomy photo-
graphs by model Lynn Kohlman showcases her beautiful body with aestheticized scars—but does not invoke cancer. Clearly, Hardt’s stylized Amazon portrait photographs, in conjunction with some of the statements, also aestheticize and celebrate cancer patients as victorious warriors. At the same time, this performance does not conform to the ideal of happiness and slender beauty but includes differently shaped bodies and a diverse range of affects, from melancholic to seductive to wild; the narratives do not deny that struggle and the specter of death are parts of cancer. Some women reject questions about the status of their breasts, claiming that the question “wie sieht frau jetzt aus” [how a woman looks] is secondary; the crucial question concerns “Überleben” [survival]. Rather than sentimentalizing cancer politics, the photographs together with the texts attempt to tie fashion photography and mythic tropes of Amazon empowerment to feminist breast cancer advocacy, thus reaching beyond a community of peers who are already active in cancer politics.

In contrast to Hardt’s aestheticized portraits that reference and subvert fashion and cultural icons, the daily selfies in Melle’s online photo diary document her process of recovery after the double mas-
tectomy and during her chemotherapy over a period of ten months. Like the historicized Amazon images, these self-portraits are staged but much less stylized: they mostly portray her naked upper body frontal from head to chest, often with close-ups of her breast scar or her head, but otherwise dressed in casual clothes (fig. 6). Taken at home with her webcam, the selfies, according to Tembeck, are a practice of life writing whose serial nature closely relates to the tradition of the written illness diary. The serial diary documents the healing process over time: the initial pain in her wound, the puncturing of the wounds to release accumulated liquid, the development of scar tissue, and the increasing mobility in her left arm. The sequential images over an extended period of time against the same background of a shelf and the same framing help the viewer focus on the constant material transformations of her body. In the short captions or diary posts, Melle comments on the side effects of her chemotherapy such as fatigue, nausea, mood swings, food sensibilities, and her repeated hair loss and regrowth. According to Tembeck’s categorization of “selfies of ill health,” Melle’s images document and acknowledge the impact of illness or treatments had on her and serve “the benefit of peer education.” One commentator acknowledges that Melle’s images gave her a more realistic idea of what she would look like after mastectomy beyond the “schreckliche Fotos auf Medizinseiten” [terrible images on medical websites] and normative beauty ideals. For De Boer and Slatman, digital projects can challenge medical authority and its dominant (mostly male) doctor-(in this case female) patient relationship through the availability of alternative (non-medical) knowledge systems within these weblogs. Unlike the Amazon portraits, these selfies and captions do not aestheticize cancer but rather document the material changes of her body and the ugly feelings of loss, despair, grief, and anger and conflicts that are part of Melle’s experience. While these post-surgery images are preceded by and reference Melle’s photographs as molar and sexy women before the surgery, the selfies materialize an inherently unstable and vulnerable body in the process of becoming-woman without breasts.

Through the photo shoots and her selfie diary, Melle reflects in her blog “oben ohne” on her changing notions of femininity. According to her own traditional concepts, her femininity is related to body shape (in particular having breasts) and clothing. Thus, her decision against breast reconstruction unsettles these underlying definitions, defying how “in der klassischen Geschlechterordnung . . . ich ohne Busen eine äußerlich unvollständige Frau [bin]” [according to the traditional
gender system, without breasts, I am an incomplete woman]. Similarly, in the vignettes accompanying the Amazon images, some women testify that their loss of breast(s) does not imply a loss of beauty or status as women. Rather than being a “Neutrum,” they claim that even without these “Weiblichkeiten” [femininities] I can be a “schöne Frau” [a beautiful woman]. By engaging with the photographs of three models—Melanie Testa, Jodi Jaecks, and Emily Jensen—who all identify as queer after their mastectomy, Melle questions gender binaries and links her project to queer aesthetics and politics. Beyond the breast-based definition of femininity, Melle also interrogates the link between femininity and (loss of) hair. Against social expectations, Melle explains how she felt relieved after shaving her hair since the hair loss through chemotherapy caused discomfort and tension headache. Rather than only regretting the loss of her hair, she conceives of her hairless body as an agent who needs to focus on the encounter with the cancerous cells: “Sollten wir uns nicht über jedes Haar freuen, das wir verlieren? Zeigt es uns doch, dass die Therapie anschlägt” [Shouldn’t we be happy about every hair we lose? It shows us that the therapy works]. Afraid of sweating under the wig, she does not wear it and instead tattoos her head with henna, turning her bald-
ness into a canvas for art. Similarly, rather than reconstructing breast and nipple, she gets a “titoo,” a tattoo that beautifies her breast scar and takes the form of a dragon. Through artistic body experiments and the ironic performance of an “Extrem-Fashion-Victim,” Melle dramatically expands her notion of beauty and femininity, moving beyond the normative binary of pink and blue. This expansion begets activism: defying the “klassisches Modelbild” [classical model image] of the fashion industry, she calls for inclusive casting agencies and clothing companies (for swim or underwear) that adapt their products to women without breasts. These calls are neither universalizing nor dogmatic. While Melle charts a path for post-mastectomy femininity through performative aesthetics and digital nudity, she also recognizes how chemotherapy and cancer are only temporarily shared with her “Chemoschwestern” [chemosisters] and resists the idea of a common normative womanhood of female cancer patients.

Ranging from digital to print, from documentary to masquerade, from individual to serial, from historicized to contemporary, the portraits of the Amazonen project explore and map a cartography of molecular femininities of breast cancer. Even though Melle’s project unfolds within the traditional narrative trajectory—from estranged and disfigured cancer patient to greater acceptance, both of illness and of womanhood—the process of sense-making and gendered subjectivity formation is an ongoing, non-linear and indefinite process. De Boer and Slatman argue that, even though blogs often affirm normative gender and illness experiences, “by blogging and engaging with other bloggers they [the blogs] also acknowledge and even welcome multiple, fragmented, non-cohesive and non-normative illness experiences and self-narrations.” One of the women, for instance, notes in the testimony to her Amazon photograph, “Ich habe meinen Platz noch nicht gefunden, ich bin noch auf dem Weg” [I have not found my place yet, I am still on my way]. Grosz argues that becoming is “not a question of being (-animal, -woman, -lesbian), of attaining a definite status as a thing, a permanent fixture, nor of clinging to, having an identity, but of moving, changing, being swept beyond one singular position into a multiplicity of flows, or what Deleuze and Guattari have described as ‘a thousand tiny sexes’: to liberate the myriad of flows, to proliferate connections, to intensify.” In other words, the Amazon images represent such different tiny or molecular sexes or “multiple differences within.” By referencing cultural imagery of sexualized icons and medicalized imagery of breast cancer, the multiple differences juxtapose traditional and subversive femininity and give
a non-unified image of post-mastectomy female subjectivity within a patriarchal culture.

Bodies, Fragmentation and Connection in Women’s Group Photography

In addition to individual portraits and selfies, Melle’s project includes group photographs that engage with the role of visibility, embodiment, and activism as part of the process of becoming-amazon. In July 2010, Melle organized a larger photo shoot with twenty other women with breast cancer at various stages and forms of treatment (with and without reconstructive surgery), which, in addition to Hardt’s Amazon portraits, developed into the photography art book Amazonen. Esther Haase, one of the most important German fashion and portrait photographers, took individual, small- and large-group black-and-white pictures of women who were either near-nude or who wore costumes and party props and posed in mostly spontaneous positions. Several of Haase’s Amazon photographs not only show the women’s mastec-

Figures 7 and 8. Amazon group images of Sammy and Uta, © Esther Haase © Kehrer Verlag.
tomy scars but also faces or heads that are either completely cut off or covered by a hand, a t-shirt, or a mask. For instance, one image shows Uta’s and fellow “Amazon” Sammy’s entire bodies, naked against a black background, with Uta standing very closely in front of Sammy. The second, close-up image of the women from shoulders to knees cuts off their heads and lower legs and magnifies the chest and genital areas. The framing and perspective play with visibility. The positioning renders both Melle’s mastectomy scars and Sammy’s one breast visible, while leaving Sammy’s left breast and her genitals invisible (figs. 7 and 8). Consequently, breasts are not the only “missing” or hidden body parts; because faces and heads are occluded in the frame of the second image, the photographs emphasize the play of visibility and invisibility inherent in all types of clothing and in visualizations of bodies more generally.

Visibility is a common topic of breast cancer photography. In her analysis of visual narratives of breast cancer, Stella Bolaki compares visibility and invisibility of breasts in Spence’s earlier documentary photography with contemporary fashion photographs by Sam Taylor-Wood. Bolaki claims that, while Spence’s provocative documentary photographs make mastectomy scars visible and medical culture renders them invisible, Taylor-Wood’s combination of self-portraits with clothes and texts partially cover but do not conceal her mastectomy scar. In their different attempts “to make visible what had remained hidden,” Bolaki argues that both photographers paved the way “for new forms of embodiment in one-breasted bodies.”

Situated between the traditions of documentary and fashion breast cancer photography, Haase’s photographs similarly capture the women’s play with in/visibility of their breasts and other body parts. The women expose and hide their mastectomy scars and other body parts and thereby, as Bolaki suggests, highlight the fragmented nature of all embodiment.

In contrast to the fragmented body, the modern universalized understanding of embodiment values autonomy, separation, and corporate wholeness. In Dangerous Discourses, Shildrick connects concepts of modern embodiment with the psychoanalytical development theory in which the child must suppress this fragmentation in order to achieve self-identification and wholeness. As a result, the adult subject must “avoid the indeterminate physicality of intercorporeality” that characterizes infancy, disability, and especially illness. In the psychoanalytical model, Shildrick argues, the disabled body constitutes an imitation of the “corps morcelé” of the infants’ pre-mirror stage.
Interestingly, Hendrick’s memoir gives insight into the heteronormative fears and fantasies of bodily fragmentation. While Melle wants him to pay attention to her new experiences with her body and kiss and touch her wounds, he misses her idealized and whole female body and conceives of her wounded body as a bloody “Schlachtfeld” [battlefield] that he does not want to engage with:


[I saw a battlefield: Sliced skin, muscles cut through, tissue removed. Skin that got much too large suddenly. Blood leaked through the band-aid, where Uta’s small breasts had been. No more nipples. I missed them so much. I missed the ideal world; I was confronted with the new reality for the first time. I didn’t want to look at everything in detail. I didn’t know how to deal with it].

In contrast to Hendrick’s fear of loss, Anne, one of the Amazons, comments how scars open possibilities for becoming: “Ein Mensch, der durchs Leben geht, trägt manche Narbe und Falte davon. Gerade unsere Verletzungen öffnen uns aber auch. . . . Verluste schaffen immer Raum für Neues, wenn wir über die Trauer hinwegkommen, dann können wir etwas Neues in uns wachsen lassen” [A human being who goes through life carries certain scars and folds with them. Our wounds can also open us up. Loss always creates space for something new, when we move beyond grief, we can grow something new in ourselves]. 54 Through the photo shoots, some women explain, they seek to participate in a community, create new role models for fragmented cancer bodies, and encourage visibility and openness while reducing shame. 55 By emphasizing an aesthetics and politics of visibility and fragmentation, these group photographs reject a molar concept of the whole body and re-envision female embodiment.
While fragmenting body parts, the Amazon group images also connect the women's bodies and body parts: they hold hands, kiss shoulders, move their lips towards each other, hug each other, touch each other's breasts or scars with their hands. For instance, Uta's and Sammy's image shows the two naked bodies intimately close; their heads leaning against each other, with hands resting on the other's shoulder. The images not only highlight difference—thin and curvy, with and without mastectomy, dressed up as devil (with horns) and angel (with white feathers)—but also express new intimate, desiring, and bodily connections between body parts. Rather than showing a molar body of separation and distinction that is threatened by the non-normative other, the photographs illustrate Shildrick's reading of the disabled body through the lens of the Deleuzian notion of the “body without organs.” According to Shildrick, the body without organs does not deny the material body; rather it avoids the psychoanalytical narrative that traces progress from fragmentation to (the illusion) of a normative and fixed organization of the body. At the same time, Shildrick makes clear that the body without organs is not a return to the infantile stage of pre-subjectivity, but a “deconstruction and queering of all bodies.” As Shildrick argues, “in Deleuzian embodiment the body persists by making connections in the flux and flow of desire that is without either a fixed aim or object. It is, among other things, a turn towards the positivity of intercorporeality rather than an anxiety about its dangerous significations.” Similar to the photographs' celebration of intimately connected bodies, Deleuze and Guattari reconceive of the body not as whole or fragmented, ablebodied or disabled, but simply in the process of corporeal and interrelational becoming.

This process of becoming-amazon, though creative and often joyful, neither precludes nor denies negative feelings or cancer activism. Barbara Ehrenreich laments that there is “nothing very feminist—in an ideological or activist sense—about the mainstream of breast-cancer culture today” and that “one finds very little anger.” While many digital projects about breast cancer indeed create an individualistic pink ribbon culture removed from broader social struggles, Tembeck contends that some projects can be understood as outward-reaching political interventions seeking to raise awareness, reduce stigma, and heighten the visibility of invisible diseases. Melle's project is one of these; her aim is to publicize the fact that breast cancer is widespread, a “Volkskrankheit” [public health issue] that is rarely talked about, and to respond against public perception of cancer as symbol of death, shamefulness, and isolation. A series of Haase's Amazon group
pictures responds to these stigmas. The images show the women running boisterously through abandoned “Gründerzeit” industrial areas of Berlin as a group of political protestors dressed in party outfits. Crossing through an area fenced off by red-and-white construction tape, this group of Amazons flouts categorization and resists exclusion through embodied expressions of community and protest (fig. 9). Besides the imagery, Melle’s interviews with the magazine *Stern* and the women’s testimonies specify experiences of exclusion, isolation, and stigma, both from family members and from the public. For instance, Melle narrates how many are unable to confront her visible baldness on the street: “Wenn ich ohne Mütze durch die Straßen gehe, lächeln mich nur wenige Menschen an. Die meisten fangen an zu tuscheln, sehen weg oder starren mich an. Oh Mann! Ich bin nicht tot!” [When I walk without hat on the street, only a few people smile. Most start to whisper, look away or stare at me. Oh man! I’m not dead!]. As a result of social exclusion and stereotypes, Melle explains in her selfie diary, some patients do not get jobs after chemotherapy due to the mandatory disclosure of such information and the common assumption among employers that they will be constantly sick. In this process of becoming-amazon the women self-identify as subjects and as a community with fragmented post-mastectomy bodies, effectively enhancing the public legibility of their private health condition and insisting on their intercorporeality.

**Desire and Sexuality in Couple Photography and Cancer Life Writing**

In addition to subverting assumptions about post-mastectomy embodiment and femininity, Melle’s couple photographs, her husband’s life writing, and a series of interviews address directly the challenges and transformations in their sexuality and desires. Initially, the couple mourns the changes in Melle’s body and their established sexual practices. After the mastectomy and the surgical removal of her ovaries, Melle experiences not only a loss of sexualized body parts, such as nipples and breasts, and Hendrick’s playful touching of them, but also an early menopause with sudden sweats, mood swings, vaginal dryness, and loss of her previous desire for the passionate sex that defined their relationship in the past. She acknowledges that “plötzlich reagiert der Körper nicht mehr wie gewohnt—das hat mich sehr lange Zeit zur Verzweiflung getrieben. . . . Ich habe mich lange nicht
getraut, diese Verzweiflung anzusprechen—ich habe gewartet, dass mir mein Körper die alte Leidenschaft zurückgibt. Hat er aber nicht” [suddenly, the body doesn’t react as expected—this made me desperate for a long time. . . . For a long time, I didn’t dare to speak up about this desperation—I waited for my body to return to its old passion. But it didn’t]. 64 Similar to Melle, who relates her bodily changes to a loss of female sexuality and desire, Hendrick describes in his memoir how his masculinity is unsettled by the surgery. So far, he has linked his sexuality to his wife’s erotic and whole body, constituting “das Geschenk des Eros’ an mich, für meine Hände, meine Lippen, meine Augen, meine Zunge, meinen Schwanz” [Eros’s gift to me, to my hands, my lips, my eyes, my tongue, my dick]. 65 As a result, her wounded body and the impossibility of genital sex after the surgeries constitutes a threat to his masculinity and sexuality. In addition, drawing on military metaphors of cancer, he perceives of Melle’s cancer as an invisible unpredictable enemy whom he is unable to defeat, threatening his familiar masculinized desire to control and protect. 66 With an uncontrollable target, Hendrick feels helpless: ”Ich war ein Schäfer, in dessen Herde die Wölfe wüteten; ich hatte keine Hunde, keine Waffe,
nicht einmal einen Stock“ [I was a shepherd in whose flock the wolf raged; I had neither dogs nor weapon, not even a stick]. Hendrick even accuses Melle of threatening his dominant position by directing her own battle against cancer from her loft bed. In the following, he wonders whether he is “überhaupt noch ein Mann?” [still a man?] or whether he is reduced to a “Funktionserfüllungseinrichtung mit Stehpinkel-Anlage” [a functional unit with a device to pee standing].

Hendrick’s feared loss of masculine control illustrates a widespread anxiety in Western culture about more fluid gender norms threatening traditional gendered self-definition. While the sexual other is always a possible threat to self-control, that anxiety, Shildrick argues, is most acute “where the body of the other already breaches normative standards of embodiment.” These socio-cultural fantasies and anxieties relate, according to the psychoanalytical model, to the perceived persistence of bodily disintegration in the pre-mirror phase of the disabled other.

Shildrick links this focus on adult genital sexuality to Freud’s theories of sexual development. While in early development sexuality is highly plastic and children are polymorphous, taking pleasure in every part of the body, the process of maturation leads to the development of and fixation on genital sexuality as the final stage of adult sexuality—the lauded outcome of a process of repression.

Although the Melles think about the possibility of separation, they do not separate. Instead, they discuss openly Uta’s and other women’s (blogged) experiences, mourning the loss of their previous sexuality but eventually coming to redefine their femininity and masculinity. In an interview with the women’s magazine Brigitte, Melle describes that in contrast to her mother for whom (genital) sexuality became impossible after the burning of her genital area through radiation therapy, she has found new forms of sexuality. She explains:


[I miss my breasts sometimes obviously, for instance, when my husband caresses my scars. But there are so many possibilities. Instead of concentrating on the weaknesses, one should focus on the strengths. For instance, I’m lucky that my husband likes feet. And they are still attached].
For Melle, their new sexuality means not only that the couple has sex less often, but that it is always well-prepared; they take more time, have more lubricant on hand, and engage each other without children in the background. What’s more, they pair their new approach to sex with separate sleeping arrangements, so that both of them can relax.\textsuperscript{74}

At the same time, Melle celebrates her sexuality, admits “Ich liebe Sex” [I love sex],\textsuperscript{75} and wants to live breast cancer with “Lust” [pleasure].\textsuperscript{76}

In an article for the German newspaper \textit{Stern} Hendrick similarly acknowledges that even though he still searches for Uta’s breasts from time to time, he enjoys her warmness and softness and has become more conscious of their sexual practices and of life.\textsuperscript{77} Through the writing of his memoir, he starts to question his own dominant masculinity and need for control, and becomes able to confront his own mortality and helplessness.\textsuperscript{78} Beyond the personal, he alludes to cancer politics, linking environmental destruction and the pathogenesis of cancer.\textsuperscript{79} As a result of this process of becoming-woman, for Uta and Hendrick, sexuality and desire transgress notions of molar masculinity, femininity, and genital sexuality, and become more fluid and expansive.

A series of black-and-white photographs that are taken by Esther Haase as part of the Amazon photo shoot stages and captures the couple’s transformed sexuality. In four different poses and images in \textit{Amazonen}, Melle and her husband are shown naked (Hendrick with jeans), curled tightly around each other, playing with each other’s bodies, laughing, and kissing.\textsuperscript{80} While in the first two images her chest is covered by her husband’s hand, the other two photographs expose her chest with scars that are now barely visible months after her initial selfies. One picture that mainly exposes Melle’s chest makes their genders ambiguous; it might show two men kissing each other, or a heterosexual couple with Uta as man and Hendrick as woman (While Uta has very short hair, Hendrick has long curly hair in the picture, fig. 10). The interrelation of bodies shows how the couple moves away from molar and binary male and female embodied identities and sexualities toward fluid, desiring, and playful encounters with each other’s bodies. Rather than embracing a goal-driven and singular approach, the images indicate how sexuality becomes “a network of flows, energies, and capacities that are always open to transformation, and so cannot be determined in advance.”\textsuperscript{81} Grosz contrasts the psychoanalytical model of sexuality that privileges genitality over other sexual practices with temporary and fluid erotic connections between two body parts in lesbian desires (while acknowledging that genitality remains a major site of intensity for adults). She contends that these
erotogenic zones are neither “nostalgic reminiscences of pre-oedipal, infantile bodily organization” nor “regression” but intensive and partial entanglements. Grosz writes:

In looking at the interlocking of two such parts—fingers and velvet, toes and sand—there is not, as psychoanalysis suggests, a predesignated erotogenic zone, a site always ready and able to function as erotic: Rather, the coming together of two surfaces produces a trading that imbibes eros or libido to both of them, making bits of bodies, its parts or particular surfaces throb, intensify, for their own sake and not for the benefit of the entity or organism as a whole. They come to have a life of their own, functioning according to their own rhythms, intensities, pulsations, movements. Their value is always provisional and temporary, ephemeral and fleeting: They may fire the organism, infiltrate other zones and surfaces with their intensity but are unsustainable.
The interviews and photographs illustrate how, for the Melles, desire and sexuality no longer focus on genital sexuality exclusively, but emerge from new fleeting encounters between different body parts such as feet, fingers, and skin, producing molecular erotogenic zones and intensities in their process of becoming-amazon.

Through her photography project and blogging, Melle connects her individual experience to the social stigmatization of sexuality and illness. She critiques the lack of sexuality counseling, or even simply discussions of sexuality, for cancer patients. Often, Melle argues, women’s understanding of “vollwertige” [wholesome] femininity and sexuality pressures them to be a sexual object for men and leads to experiences of pain. Similarly, one of the Amazons critiques the social disregard for sexuality in the medical realm but also among cancer survivors: “Als ich krank war, war ich ohne Mann. Nach Meinung manch männlicher Ärzte und interessanterweise auch mancher Buchautorinnen aus der „Ich-habe-es-überlebt“-Literatur wäre ich das wohl heute noch immer. Ich weiß es besser” [When I was sick, I was single. According to the opinion of some male doctors and surprisingly also of some female authors of “survival literature,” I would still have no partner. I know better]. Shildrick relates this taboo of sexuality and disability to the perceived threat of non-normative bodies and the fluidity and intercorporeality of sexual relations, both of which question the boundaries of the modern self and other. In the cultural imaginary and medical discourse, the relation of the disabled body to sexuality “is either disavowed or seen as overdetermined and abased, a matter of dangerous encounters that cannot but trouble the stability and self-presence of the unwary subject.” In contrast to a culture of silencing, Melle encourages other women to speak more openly and critically about their sexuality during periods of illness, and to ask for new forms of sexuality. This encouragement has helped others articulate their experience with illness and sexuality, including one woman with breast cancer who responded to Melle’s blog by sharing her difficulties in accepting and transforming her post-mastectomy body and sexuality together with her partner. In contrast to the perception that post-mastectomy bodies are undesirable or undesiring, then, Melle’s interactional project creates a community of cancer patients—and, due to its digital accessibility, the public—that engages in discussions about female sexuality, desire, and illness.
Conclusion

While Melle’s visual and collaborative project draws on aestheti-
cized and eroticized ideas of breast cancer, it uses the sociocultural
image of the female Amazon warrior to portray a process of gendered
and sexual subjectivity formation with breast cancer that I have called
becoming-amazon. The documentary and parody portraits, the nude
group photographs and the erotic couple photographs with Melle and
her husband, redefine functional or molar femininity and sexuality as
molecular, multiple, and relational. The process of becoming-amazon
does not imply a return to a previous or ideal femininity, but rather a
playful and affirmative production of molecular women with difference.
The photographic project thus not only develops and fleshes out the
notion of becoming-woman/amazon, but also gives visual vividness
to abstract concepts of (feminist materialist) philosophy, such as the
Deleuzian body without organs, Shildrick’s theorizations of intercor-
poreality, and Grosz’s notion of fluid desires.

The described relational process of becoming-amazon is reflected
in the collaborative and multi-media format. Drawing on a politics of
visibility and connection, different women, writers, photographers, read-
ers, and viewers assemble across digital spaces, memoir, art book, and
exhibitions. While the project generates numerous femininities, different
embodiments, and multiple media representations, its aesthetic and
digital approach invites a mostly urban, white, young, and middle-class
public to engage with breast cancer. It also excludes some feminini-
ties with mastectomy; women who do not have the self-confidence to
model in photo shoots, for one, but also those who are not attracted
to provocative nude aesthetics or digital culture. However, the digital,
collaborative project creates connections that carry private and individual
experiences of cancer and death beyond the medical realm into the
public sphere. The photographic performances open up and politicize
conversations about neglected topics of sexuality, gender, and cancer
which are a prerequisite for expanding restrictive notions of femininity
and sexuality that are often central to concerns and anxieties about
breast cancer and illness more generally.
NOTES

1. The first mainstream public image of a woman after mastectomy appeared on the cover of the *New York Times Magazine* in 1993. It shows the self-portrait of Matuschka, a model and photographer, with a mastectomy scar that disfigures her but also projects elegance (DeShazar, “Documenting Women’s Postoperative Bodies”).

2. Bell, “Photo Images,” 11–12.

3. Collaborative book projects feature images of women of varied ages, races, ethnicities, and body types, identified by name and accompanied by commentary written by the women or sometimes by the photographer and medical professionals. Other examples include Art Myers’s *Winged Victory: Altered Images Transcending Breast Cancer* (1996); Charlee Brodsky and Stephanie Byram’s *Knowing Stephanie* (2003); Jila Nikpay’s *Heroines: Transformations in the Face of Breast Cancer* (2006); and David Jay’s *SCAR Project: Breast Cancer Is Not a Pink Ribbon* (2011). In *Caring for Cynthia: A Caregiver’s Journey through Breast Cancer* (2008), the photographer and nurse Amy S. Blackburn offers a visual and verbal narrative of the illness of her best friend, Cynthia Ogden (DeShazar, “Documenting Women’s Postoperative Bodies,” 448).


6. The historian Adrienne Mayor explains that the myth emerged in the fifth century BCE, when “amazon,” a foreign word, was given a Greek etymology as originating from the Greek word for breast *mastos* and the prefix *a-*, creating the meaning “without breast” (Mayor, *Amazons*, 85).


14. However, Deleuze rejects an opposition between molar being and molecular becoming, but argues for a multiplicity of dimensions and lines (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 216–17).


19. All translations of Hendrick Melle’s memoir are my own.


22. A notable exception is Melle’s performance of David Bowie’s cover “Aladdin Sane.” Melle has an orange-blue Bowie-style lightning bolt across her right eye and face, and wears a red wig in Vokuhila style with a smile. Inspired by the image of the splitting lighting bolt, Melle’s performance without breasts blurs the biological distinction between female and male bodies and highlights the androgynous body (Uta Melle, “Amazonen–Uta Melles Blog,” https://utamelle.com/utas-fotos/fotos/shooting-uta-juni-2009-jackie-hardt/).


41. Uta Melle’s “titoo” and her interest in bringing mastectomy out of the closet connects with Deena Metzger’s portrait “The Warrior” (1977), which shows her mastectomy and the tree branch she had tattooed around the scar and that reached cult status (Jain, “Cancer Butch,” 501).
52. Shildrick, *Dangerous Discourses*, 90.
56. Deleuze developed the concept of the body without organs together with Guattari in their works *Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (1972) and *Thousand Plateaus* (1980). The body without organs does not intend to transcend material organs; rather its goal is to resist the organism as the organ’s singular and fixed organizational principle and form. It is a surface on which organs circulate freely as zones of intensity.
65. Hendrick Melle, Amazone vom Kollwitzplatz, 56.
68. Hendrick Melle, Amazone vom Kollwitzplatz, 56.
69. Shildrick, Dangerous Discourses, 84.
70. Shildrick, Dangerous Discourses, 90–91.
71. Shildrick, Dangerous Discourses, 99. At the same time, Shildrick recognizes some ambivalence about the possibility for mature polymorphous pleasure in Freud’s writing.
72. Wehr, “Diagnose Krebs.”
73. Wehr, “Diagnose Krebs.”
74. Wehr, “Diagnose Krebs.”
76. Albers, “Schönheit.”
78. Melle, Amazone vom Kollwitzplatz, 62, 102.
79. Melle, Amazone vom Kollwitzplatz, 66.
80. Barth, Amazonen, 102.
81. Shildrick, Dangerous Discourses, 132.
82. Grosz, Space, Time, and Perversion, 134.
83. Grosz, Space, Time, and Perversion, 182.
84. Wehr, “Diagnose Krebs.”
85. Barth, Amazonen, 48.
86. Shildrick, Dangerous Discourses, 137.

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