The Body

The Human Figure in the Postmodern World

Excerpts from Themes of Contemporary Art - Visual Art After 1980, by Jean Robertson and Craig McDaniel, Oxford University Press, 2005

The bodies we inhabit distinguish humans from all other species on the planet. According to the view of science, after a million years or more of evolution, our shared human physiology of flesh and bone and blood and muscle (including our unique hands with opposable thumbs), the structure of our sensory apparatus, and the complex network of synapses in our brain shape our physical beings and our sense of our own humanity. Our body functions like a prism through which we perceive the world.

According to many religions (and the worldviews of societies permeated by those religions), the body is also the earthly home for the soul. This idea has had a paramount influence on past Western art. As art historian and critic Thomas McEvilley notes, "Traditional Western sculpture of the figure, from Pheidias to Michelangelo to Rodin, attempted to portray the soul in the body—or rather, the body ensouled. . . . The soul was the essential truth of human nature and the sculptor was engaged in the portrayal—ultimately the embodiment—of that essence."

In the postmodern outlook, in contrast, there is no soul but only the body. We are bodies alone. Postmodern art of the figure deals with this condition, according to McEvilley, by portraying the body as an empty vessel. The figurative works of Kiki Smith, Juan Muñoz, Mike Kelley, Jeff Koons, and James Croak [5-1], among others, are examples McEvilley believes show "the human figure as empty in itself or emptied out, gutted, by experience."[2] Croak, for instance, has made skinlike suits of cast latex that appear hollow, as if emptied of any essence or soul.

As explored by artists of the 1980s, 1990s, and today, the theme of the body overlaps with the theme of identity. The body carries many of the visual signs that mark our own and others' identity as to age, gender, race, and so on. Thus artists who wish to make visible the enormous diversity of identities in our midst and to renegotiate how we value different identites often turn to body imagery. On the other hand, Western culture has inflated the importance of sight, as if identity were simply a matter of surface appearance. As we will see, there are artists who undermine the role of sight in defining identity by showing bodies that give ambiguous visual clues.

Kiki Smith
Untitled
Beeswax and microcrystalline wax figures on metal stands
1990

5-1 James Croak | *Decentered Skin*, 1995
Mixed media
Courtesy of the artist

Is the body a biological organism or a cultural artifact? Bodily experiences are complex. Certainly many characteristics of the body are intrinsically physical. Men and women have different reproductive organs, people age, and physical disabilities and diseases are real conditions, no matter what their causes and consequences. Other aspects of the body are socially constructed, such as whether a person in a wheelchair

has difficulty entering a building or whether someone with gray hair or AIDS is welcomed in a workplace. Contemporary artists show the human form as a material entity, a tissue of flesh and bodily fluids; they also explore the many ways in which the body, like identity, is a cultural artifact, reflecting a society's views of proper behavior, social and economic roles, and power relationships.

This chapter considers contemporary art that is focused directly on the body and what the body means. As we look at this art, keep in mind that theme and subject in an artwork are not synonymous, even though they do, of course, bear a relationship to each other. The two often but not always overlap; while the majority of artworks with the body as a theme include figurative imagery, the reverse is not necessarily the case. Many artworks showing a human form (or parts thereof) are primarily concerned with other themes, such as time, spirituality, and place. Moreover, an artwork can be about the body without depicting the human form directly. For instance, an artist might use an article of clothing or a piece of domestic furniture such as a bed as a metaphorical substitute for the body. Maureen Connor's *Thinner Than You* [5-2] uses a tightly stretched dress form as a metaphor for the pressure American women are under today to strive for extreme thinness. Connor's empty dress also could be interpreted as an instance of the postmodern "empty vessel," a body drained of the illusion of a soul.

Past Figurative Art

The human figure is one of the oldest and most significant motifs in the art of most cultures, other than a few cultures that have prohibited figurative imagery in art used for religious worship. (Both Islam and Judaism are notable as religions that limit figurative imagery in religious art.) In the West, the vast majority of sculptures were figurative forms until artists began experimenting with nonobjective art in the twentieth century. In the European academic tradition, paintings showing the human figure were considered a greater accomplishment than paintings showing a landscape, still life, or other nonfigurative motif, and painters who aspired to fame devoted years to learning how to render figures. From its invention in 1839, photography took the human body as a major subject. Even in twentieth-century modernism, after figurative art had lost its dominance, significant artists continued to take up the challenge of the figure. Among these were renowned artists such as Pablo Picasso, Henri Matisse, Käthe Kollwitz, Henry Moore, Alberto Giacometti, Salvador Dalí, Diego Rivera, Frida Kahlo, and Romare Bearden.

Through history, the body has provided artists with both form and content. Human figures are challenging, versatile forms that can strike many poses and provide a multitude of contrasting, complex shapes and visual relationships. As content, human figures have served to express deeply cherished cultural values, including beliefs about religion, sexuality, politics, and personal and social identity.

Figurative art has had a tumultuous history in the West since World War II. The most critically acclaimed art in the 1950s was nonobjective (although some of the Abstract Expressionists also made figurative works, such as the *Women* paintings of Willem de Kooning). At the same time, much attention was given to artists' gestures and creative process; think of the well-known photographs of Jackson Pollock making his drip paintings. Artists' self-consciousness about their own physical actions and creative process helped open the way to live-art forms such as Body Art, where the artist's

Willem de Kooning
Figure
Oil on canvas
1950

body literally served as the medium, as well as the Fluxus and feminist performance art events that flourished in the 1960s and 1970s. Meanwhile the Pop Art that emerged by the early 1960s reintroduced the human figure into avant-garde painting. Pop representations were clearly artificial, secondhand images appropriated from popular entertainment and mass-media advertising. Also in the 1960s, abstract, nonfigurative art continued and evolved in the form of Minimalism.

Beginning in the late 1960s, art by women focusing on bodily themes surfaced overtly and dramatically.[3] Building on the consciousness-raising and activism of the political movement for women's rights, pioneering feminist artists claimed women's experiences, emotions, dreams, and goals as legitimate subject matter for art. Female sexual desire was a major topic they addressed from the outset, along with many others such as women's history, women's spirituality, and activist issues of equal access to education, jobs, and income. Early feminist artists explored a liberated sexuality through a range of media, from painting and sculpture to photography, video, installation, and performance.

Because women's sexual side had been repressed and unacknowledged for so long, artists at the outset used a sort of shock therapy to claim female sexuality as a theme. Women artists often breached the boundaries of the hitherto private realm of the female libido with sensational public displays. In some cases women artists of the 1960s and 1970s, including Carolee Schneemann and Hannah Wilke, flaunted their own hypersexualized bodies in erotic performances that celebrated their new-found sexual power. These works have been characterized as narcissistic and exhibitionist by some critics, but the approach was effective in asserting women's active libido and subjectivity.

A New Spin on the Body

Starting in the 1970s in Europe and booming in the United States in the 1980s, Neo-Expressionism moved figurative art to center stage. Buoyed by a frenzy of interest from well-heeled collectors, prominent German, Italian, and American Neo-Expressionist artists, such as Jorg Immendorff, Georg Baselitz, Sandro Chia, Mimmo Paladino, and Julian Schnabel, turned art's brightest lights back on the human body and, not

coincidentally, back on painting. Neo-Expressionism, with its emphasis on the physicality of the creative process and the tactility of the materials used, proved a perfect vehicle for representing the corporeal body, as well as the body of myths and dreams. Neo-Expressionist art, however, was often about history, personal psychology, or mythology and literature rather than about issues of the body per se.

The dramatic increase in the 1980s in artistic representations of female sexuality from a female point of view can be traced back, in part, to the recognition that body images and sexual identities are, to a large extent, culturally and psychologically constructed. Women artists have debated, through both verbal and visual means, how much of sexuality is simply physical and how much is intellectual.

In the 1990s and early 2000s artists reinvigorated and reinvented figurative art, emphasizing the physical and the tactile. To a greater degree than ever before, such art has not only shown the figure but has been about the body. Artists have given visual form to previously tabooed aspects of sexuality; they have explored the impact on the body of developments in medical science and computer technology; and they have vigorously expressed what it feels like and what it means to inhabit a mortal, physically changing, and vulnerable body, in all its aspects.

In exploring the theme of the body, contemporary artists have utilized a range of strategies and motifs. Artists have dealt with the body in unusual ways—by multiplying it, by fragmenting it, by isolating body parts, by using hair or bodily fluids such as blood as stand-ins, and by showing organs and other elements of the body's interior. Moreover, a great deal of art evokes the body without presenting any human image or including an actual person. Clothing has served as a metaphor for the body, as have household furnishings such as beds, which are in intimate contact with the body. Negative spaces in sculptures record imprints made by the body. Installations resemble empty stage sets, waiting for a human presence. At the same time, contemporary artists have continued to use the body as an artistic medium in both live events and recorded performances.[6]

Barbara Kruger
Your Body is a Battleground
1989

The Body Is a Battleground

"Your body is a battleground," proclaims a text in a 1989 artwork by Barbara Kruger. Kruger was referring specifically to the pro-choice movement and women's struggle for reproductive rights, but the slogan more generally encapsulates the notion that the body, including its expression in sexuality, "is one of the great political arenas of our times," as Thomas Laqueur puts it.[7] Cultural battles over bodies are waged in the mass media, in the streets, in halls of government, and in sleeping quarters the world over. Controversies address the following issues and more: conventions regarding the most socially preferred size, shape, age, and color of bodies; taboos against specific forms of sexual expression; attitudes about what constitutes mental and physical well-being; moral and

legal ramifications of medical decisions affecting the dying; and rules governing the treatment of prisoners, patients, and other institutionalized people. Battles over bodies generally boil down to the question: who should be in control? Who is in charge of how we see a body, when we see it, why we see it, and what it means to us when we see it?

Artistic explorations of the body in contemporary art reflect attitudes about the body in the culture at large, but attitudes about the body are seldom clear-cut and totally one-sided. The "culture wars" in the United States over the past two decades have turned frequently over issues of control of bodies, particularly as artistic representations challenge mainstream commercial representations. Much of the most widely debated art of the period—such as Robert Mapplethorpe's photographs of homosexual subcultures and Karen Finley's performance pieces in which sometimes she smears food on herself (chocolate, eggs, kidney beans) to present herself metaphorically as an abused woman—confronts the viewer with the often shrouded but everyday occurrence of bodily processes and physical desires. The culture wars were concerned with protests against sexually explicit art as well as politically activist protest art and art that some deemed religiously offensive. The distinction in types of content can be blurred. For instance, sexually explicit art, especially if it is homoerotic, came under attack because religious fundamentalists often viewed such depictions as immoral on religious grounds. As artists have transgressed taboos, controversies have erupted and attempts at censorship have reached courtrooms and the halls of the U.S. Congress, primarily through attempts to pressure politicians to cut off public funding for art exhibitions.

The Body Is a Sign

The body has value, and it is often measured relative to the value of other bodies. In contemporary society, for example, thinness is a highly valued characteristic of female bodies. Size and strength are highly valued characteristics of male bodies. These values are communicated by the preponderance of messages in the mass media linking thin female

Robert Mapplethorpe
Derrick Cross
gelatin silver print
1985

bodies and strong male bodies with other qualities that are valued. For example, a study conducted by researchers at Michigan State University showed that thin female characters in television shows are far more likely to be involved in romantic relationships than their heavier counterparts.[8] This linkage of values involves viewers in the interpretation of the body as a sign; when a thin female body is seen, we are trained to read into it sexual potential. The body is a sign in a language of social meaning. Connor's sculpture *Thinner Than You* [5-2] exaggerates the quality of thinness to such a degree that its positive value is called into question. The thinness is so excessive that it no longer functions as a sign of sexual appeal but, according to Alison Ferris, refers "directly to the extreme consequences of the current fitness and slimming mania—anorexia and bulimia."[9]

Identification of a person by gender is a key area where we rely on bodily signs to name someone as "male" and "female." In chapter 4, we discussed the fluidity of identity as understood by postmodernists and multiculturalists. In terms of gender, this perspective suggests that gender identities, such as masculinity and femininity, are roles influenced by culture. Hence, gender roles are open to challenge, negotiation, and redefinition. The fluidity of gender and sexual identity is one theme of Collier Schorr's posed photographs taken in Germany of young models. In her photo "In the Garden (Karin in Grass)" (1996) [5-3], the body of the model is displayed as an erotic object, while the model's gender is ambiguous. The model lies in a reclining pose that is part of Western male artists' conventions for depicting the female. The model wears makeup and a gauzy bra bound tightly across the chest, yet displays signs of "maleness" such as a short haircut, hairy legs, and underwear bunched at the crotch in a phallic shape.

5-3 Collier Schorr | "In the Garden (Karin in Grass)," 1996
C-print, 9 x 13 1/4 inches
Courtesy of 303 Gallery, New York

Reactions to Schorr's photographs also reveal national differences; for instance, German viewers do not automatically see unshaven legs as male.

The practice of using the body symbolically in visual art is long-standing. For example, in ancient Egyptian sculptures and paintings, the pharaoh is often shown much larger than ordinary mortals, to emphasize his higher status; moreover he stands in an erect, stiff posture that signifies his unyielding majesty and authority. Artists utilize a range of symbol-making strategies.

People Are Bodies

We experience the world through our body. Our body's sensory apparatus allows us to gain knowledge about the world and to seek pleasure and feel pain. People are tactile, physical, visceral beings. Artists have focused on this fact with great intensity, using actual bodies as tools or body materials as art media. For example, Anne Wilson created a series of fiber artworks by embroidering human hair into remnants of antique table linens, and Adrian Piper, in her work-in-progress *What Will Become of Me?* presents in honey jars the artist's own hair, nails, and skin saved since 1985.

Janine Antoni, an artist who grew up in the Bahamas and now lives in New York, has become well known for works she creates by using her body as a tool. Antoni is interested in how the body and its physical processes can manipulate and mark objects, and what meanings different viewers infer when they perceive the residue of bodily actions.

Janine Antoni
Saddle
Leather and mixed media
2000.

Why have many contemporary artists focused on the body? In some cases, this focus is a result of an activist stance towards art making, in which the personal becomes political. In an essay analyzing the formation of the feminist art movement in the United States, artist Suzanne Lacy provides a list of key ideas that helped propel the work that feminist artists were making in the 1970s and into the 1980s. Among these, she notes that the body became a primary site for works of art. Lacy explains: "Not only was the body a site, it was an important source of information. Much of women's social status was seen as based in the body, so issues like violence, birthing, sexuality and

beauty were frequent subjects."[10] In other cases, artists using the body have made an aggressive decision to blur the boundaries between art and life. Linda Montano, discussing a work of performance art in which she was tied by rope to the artist Tehching Hsieh for one continuous year (1983–84), explained the consequences of viewing all their bodily actions as forms of art: "because I believe that everything we do is art—fighting, eating, sleeping—then even the negativities are raised to the dignity of art."[11]

The Body Beautiful

Although the human body is a perennial theme in art, not all body images are equally valued; in any culture, some images have high status while others are despised and even censored. Western concepts and images of the human body owe much to the ancient Greeks, who believed the gods took human form and that the most physically perfect humans reflected the ideal beauty of the gods. Greek figurative art typically showed an intact, young, healthy body with proportions that the culture considered most desirable—a model of the perfection they believed humans should aspire to. From the Renaissance onward, classical Greek ideals of physical beauty pervaded European art. Even today, some artists, including sculptor Robert Graham, photographer Jock Sturges, and painters Mel Ramos and Carlo Maria Mariani, continue to produce variations on the classic image of the young, beautiful body.

While the specific Greek ideal of a young, classically proportioned body has been influential, alternate ideals of physical beauty can be found in many cultures. For example, although contemporary Americans make a fetish of the slim female body and well-toned male body, in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe an ample body was most admired as evidence of a person's wealth and power. Cultural ideals dominate the representation of bodies in art even though few real bodies resemble the images. Whatever the culture's dominant body ideals, people see so many images of the preferred body types that they may think those types are innately superior and that other kinds of bodies are lesser and defective. But a look at history destroys the illusion of the natural superiority of any one culture's ideals of what is beautiful.

Different Bodies

Every culture constructs images of attractiveness. Certain body types are presented as the ideal objects of desire and they dominate advertising, movies, and other areas of visual culture, while other body types are denigrated and characterized as undesirable. In Western culture today, for example, the sexual ideal for women is defined within incredibly narrow parameters—they must be young, thin, and fit—and there is enormous pressure on women to strive for this ideal, however unrealistic. As Ynestra King writes, discussing disabled women in particular, "It is no longer enough to be thin; one must have ubiquitous muscle definition, nothing loose, flabby, or ill defined, no fuzzy boundaries. And of course, there's the importance of control. Control over aging, bodily processes, weight, fertility, muscle tone, skin quality, and movement. Disabled women, regardless of how thin, are without full bodily control."[12]

Over and over we find artists making works that critique the narrow standards of beauty and sexual attractiveness, which stunt people's perceptions of their sexual potential. Some artists, among them Hannah Wilke, Joanna Frueh, Laura Aguilar, Jenny Saville, and Jo Spence, challenge the assumption that the "perfect" body found in media

images is the only attractive one by representing people who are aging, physically large, disabled, or scarred who are also erotic. Such bodies provide a spectacular contrast to the sanitized, frozen-in-time images found in the world of fashion and advertising. Other artists, including Martha Wilson and Maureen Connor, explore the psychic stresses that accompany eating disorders, excessive plastic surgeries, restrictive clothing, and other self-punishing attempts at conforming to the social ideal. Some artists, including Lorna Simpson and Barbara Kruger, strive to "lay bare the ideological underpinnings (including sexism, ageism, and racism) of ideals of beauty."[13]

One strategy popular today is the use of humor, parody, or excessiveness to subvert stereotypes of the ideal body. Drawing on the work and terminology of the Russian literary critic Mikhail Bahktin, writers and artists use notions of *carnival* and *the grotesque body* to discuss works that borrow "tropes from the traditions of the carnivalesque, the tradition of licensed subversion in which hierarchical rank and prohibitions are suspended via vulgar humour, profanities, and costumes and masks."[14] For example, Nancy Davidson takes inflated giant weather balloons and molds them with fetishistic props such as fishnets, corsets, and G-strings into camp versions of voluptuous female buttocks and breasts. Davidson says, "I am interested in humor, excess and the gigantic woman. It comes from being a longtime feminist and being aware as a woman, feeling powerful. When you feel in control, you can take a risk. You can play the part of the clown or the fool."[15]

In contemporary consumer culture—in advertising and popular media such as television and films (especially in so-called action films)—narrowly defined ideals of physical beauty continue to dominate. In art in contrast, the human body appears in great variety. Not only do artists represent bodies of all types, some expose the narrowness and artificiality of having an ideal of physical beauty in the first place. For her 1998 performance *Show* at the Guggenheim Museum in New York, Italian-born Vanessa Beecroft posed fashion models (a few in the nude, most wearing black bikini underwear) in triangular formations. Her tableau presented living, breathing women, yet the models were so similar in their tall, thin proportions that en masse they appeared bizarrely dehumanized, lacking in the individuality we expect to see in crowds. *Show* can be read as a deconstruction of the artificial ideal of the female body promoted by consumer culture.

Along with representations of bodies that are diverse in size and shape, we find a range of bodies expressing diverse cultural identities in contemporary art. This trend began in the 1980s and 1990s as issues of multiculturalism, fueled by the civil rights and feminist movements of the previous twenty years, received attention in the mainstream art world. Representations of ethnically and racially diverse bodies by artists such as Faith Ringgold, Hung Liu [color plate 10], Guillermo Gómez-Peña [4-7], James Luna [4-3], and Shirin Neshat [5-9 and 5-10] became visible in prominent art museums and art publications. These representations of difference also served to undermine the notion of a universal standard of beauty for human figures.

VB 35 GUGGENHEIM MUSUEM
NEW YORK PERFORMANCE
by VANESSA BEECROFT (1998)

Body Parts

An important motif in contemporary art that is decidedly anticlassical is the use of a partial body or body parts. While relating to such historic masterworks as the Venus de Milo (a well-known classical Greek statue with missing arms), contemporary fragmented figures are deliberate, not the result of accidental breakage.[16] For example, British artist Marc Quinn created life-size figurative sculptures carved in marble, whose pristine white surfaces at first glance evoke classical statues that have lost limbs or exist only as fragments. A closer look reveals that the sculptures are portraits of actual people who are missing one or more limbs. Quinn's sculptures "challenge and displace the classical ideal of 'beauty' and the category of the heroic and perfected nude," an effect that was accentuated in a 2001 installation of his sculptures in a hall of Neoclassical statues at the Victoria and Albert Museum in London.[17]

Sculptures by artists such as Bruce Nauman, Kiki Smith, Dinos and Jake Chapman, and Robert Gober have featured dismembered body parts (such as heads rotating on a carousel-like contraption by Nauman and a single leg protruding from a gallery wall by Gober). Matthew Barney's film *Cremaster 3* features an actress, Aimee Mullins, who has a prosthetic leg [color plate 13]. (The film cycle itself is titled after a muscle in the male body, the cremaster, which raises and lowers the testicles.) According to Helaine Posner, who curated Corporal Politics, an important exhibition of art showing fragmented bodies held in 1992 at the MIT List Visual Arts Center, "The dismemberment of the body in late-twentieth-century art is no accident. It is the result of living in a world in which violence, oppression, social injustice, and physical and psychological stress predominate. We may long for the secure ideals of beauty and wholeness embraced by past generations, but experience tells us that this worldview is obsolete."[18]

Robert Gober
Untitled (Leg)
beeswax, cotton, wood, leather and human hair
1989-90