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Recensioni, rassegne, autopresentazioni, note

ANNO XLIV, IV SERIE N. 5, 1/2016 **CORPO E SIGNIFICATO**

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STUDI DI ESTETICA

Rivista semestrale fondata da Luciano Anceschi

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a cura di Andrea Gatti

Mimesis Edizioni
Studi di estetica
www.mimesisedizioni.it

25,00 euro

ISSN: 0585-4733
ISBN 978-88-5753-827-3



MIMESIS

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MIMESIS EDIZIONI (Milano – Udine)

www.mimesisedizioni.it
mimesis@mimesisedizioni.it

Issn: 0585-4733

Isbn: 9788857538273

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Via Monfalcone, 17/19 – 20099

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Andrea Gatti

The body as an aesthetic paradigm: form, function, idea

In his chapter against the "Despisers of the body" in *Thus spoke Zarathustra* (1883-85), Nietzsche remarked that the body "is a great reason, a manifold with one sense, a war and a peace, a herd and a herdsman", after observing, somewhat less originally: "Body am I through and through, and nothing besides; and soul is only a name for something about the body" (Nietzsche 2008: 30).

The monism declared in the second quotation sounds less interesting for our discussion than the pluralism implicit in the first. Not because the philosopher's statement is intentionally alluding to the composite structure of the body, but rather because it reminds us of the various, different ways we have of understanding the notion of "body".

From the historical extreme of the vestiges preserved of ancient Egyptian pharaohs – where the body is purely a motionless, lifeless and thoughtless extension or form – to the literary extreme of *The invisible man* by H.G. Wells, where the body is everything except an extension or form, the body is a complex problem starting from the way one decides how to deal with it.

The body has physical, biological, mechanical, aesthetic and many other characteristics, each requiring diffe-

rent and specialized investigative assumptions. We have a visible external body encapsulating another, more secret, body made up of bones, tissues and vital organs. There is yet another body that performs cognitive functions – as Nietzsche and many other philosophers, from Merleau-Ponty to Richard Shusterman, argue (Johnson 1987 and 2007).

We can approach the concept of body as materialists or animists, mechanists or vitalists, artists or scientists, even as formalists or symbolists. In the latter case, the body as a symbol can acquire such a plethora of meanings – political, cosmological, and religious – as to discourage even the most expert hermeneutics specialist (Proudfoot 2003).

My intention is not to produce a summary or an in-depth monographic study of the various philosophical theories dealing with the body. Nor do I wish to take a stand between dualistic and monistic conceptions, or reconstruct their particular influence on the subsequent perspectives, ranging from interactionism, occasionalism, phenomenology, existentialism, up to the most recent hypothesis of “physicalism”, namely the new current of thought for old reductionist assumptions proclaiming the superiority and priority of physical characteristics and physical laws over spiritual ones, in the space-time world (Poland 1994; Stoljar 2010).

Instead, I will take as my cue the observation that, when subjected to analysis, the same thing happens to the body as what happens with any other kind of description, namely, one either discusses a specific body, i.e. *this* or *that* body, or the universal and general charac-

teristics shared by all bodies, i.e. *the* body. The first case lies outside the scope of the subjects I intend to discuss here, while the second leads us to consider the different perspectives I mentioned earlier.

What I would like to do, then, is not to talk about the body, but to examine *what happens when we talk about* the body in aesthetic terms, highlighting the difficulties and limitations shared by the various critical positions which deal with this kind of definition – regardless of their heterogeneous nature – and assessing whether there is any way of avoiding them.

My aim is to consider such difficulties and limitations not in themselves but instrumentally, my purpose being to isolate a specific aspect of the notion of the body which stands as a paradigm for the arts. I will do so by overlooking the mathematical-proportional concept of the body, according to which the body is composed of parts joined together by fixed and invariable numerical relationships, which much of the art theory and practice, as we will see, has made us accustomed to (Squire 2011).

After a preliminary explanation of the concept of body, namely of the strange phenomenon which it represents in theoretical terms, I will be showing how the body has evolved to such a degree in modern and contemporary art that, as an aesthetic paradigm, it is adopted not as a form but as a function. Finally, I will consider the tangible effects of the phenomenology of the functional body in modern and contemporary visual culture.

1. *The body as an idea*

Statements about the body almost always make reference to a generic and abstract idea of the body, so that through this process the real body – which is physical and material by its very nature – becomes increasingly evanescent and abstract, like the Cheshire cat in *Alice in Wonderland*, whose body gradually dissolves, symbolically leaving nothing but its sardonic smile to make fun of us.

Even without wishing to engage in facile nominalism, we inevitably have to recognize that when we talk about the body rather than a body, we list the common elements of all bodies, and those elements are something different from the body in itself; and we list them to describe an ideal body which is a synthesis of all the tangible bodies we have experienced up to that point, so that ultimately, if you will allow me to use an oxymoron, we are talking about a “mental” body.

Art itself provides a typical example to illustrate this process. None of the artists who adopted the human body as a model of ideal proportions, from Leonardo to Le Corbusier, imitated a specifically identifiable body, but calculated rationally the optimal and abstract average of fully and perfectly developed real male or female bodies.

We know that a representation of physical perfection was programmatically pursued by most of the artists from the sixth century BC until the modern age. But less well known is that an identical idealization, albeit unwittingly, has been pursued even by those who have distanced themselves from that poetic, and opted for a realistic description anything but idealized bodies.

There have always been artistic currents aiming at the faithful representation of reality. They emphasize the less noble characters and sometimes they come closer to the caricature. In the Hellenistic art, the figures of drunken women and grotesque dwarfs became popular artistic subjects, but these appear to be less a faithful copy of a daily reality than the general embodiment of vices and aberrations.

We perfectly know that every representation is invariably the result of a choice or a selection which takes place in the mind of the artist prior to the eye of the artist, and it implies a rational process of adaptation of the image to the artist's intentions. Looking at Lucien Freud's *Self-portrait* made in 1985, even the most inexperienced observer can sense some universal message or meaning that goes beyond the depiction of the painter's features or the simple display of his extraordinary pictorial talent. Freud has chosen to emphasize certain features of his body and gloss over others, precisely to convey that meaning.

In the realm of aesthetics, the body undergoes the same generalizing process as the spirit. If one describes with utmost fidelity in a literary work a lost and corrupt woman without adding anything to her real biography, that woman nonetheless ceases to be Anna Karenina and becomes the synthesis and the *exemplum* of a class of human attitudes. This process of generalization can be seen especially in the two artistic genres – the painted portrait and the photograph – whose *raison d'être* is the faithful imitation of reality. The portrait always depicts a particular individual, and faithfulness to the original body

is clearly one of the prerequisites of this art. Yet, sir Joshua Reynolds, one of the greatest portrait painters of all times, exemplified in the eighteenth century the impossibility (or the vain expectation) of keeping to a mere imitation of the particular, and encouraged young students at London's Royal Academy of Arts to engage in a process of generalization in this field too: "If a portrait-painter is desirous to raise and improve his subject, he has no other means than by approaching it to a general idea [...]. If an exact resemblance of an individual be considered as the sole object to be aimed at, the portrait-painter will be apt to lose more than he gains by the acquired dignity taken from the general nature" (Reynolds 1842: 71). Reynolds and Freud, moreover, are by no means isolated cases. In Andy Warhol's very well-known portraits, the artist is apparently precluded from engaging a process of idealization, because his portraits are photographic, and the strictly pictorial invention or creative gesture applies purely to his colouring practice. In spite of this, as we look at Warhol's portrait of Marilyn Monroe, what we end up seeing is no longer a historical record, so to speak, of the actress's features, but, rather, the embodiment of an ideal of beauty, or of femininity, tragic destiny, burnt-out youth, or the man-eating star system, and so on, in precisely the same way as what Venus, Hera, Medea, Ganymede, or Marsyas represented to the ancient Greeks.

Reality is more unlikely to influence art than the other way around; and realism in art should be interpreted in a bustrophedic way: that is, applying the process which Oscar Wilde summarised in one of his famous, and for

once not vapid, aphorisms that “nature imitates art”. Art, in fact, provides new elements through which we view nature; it makes us see the reality “in the manner of”, it presents and defines the general classes under which we include the particular types that become the object of our experience. We have all known a Don Juan, a Mrs. Dalloway, a Uriah Heep. And it is difficult for us to name Gertrude Stein without thinking of Picasso’s famous portrait of her, or for us to stand in front of a bunch of irises or a pond of water-lilies without looking at them in the way we have been taught to do by Van Gogh and Monet.

Every time the body is described in verbal or pictorial form, it undergoes a process of generalization and abstraction – a sort of Gadamer’s “transmutation in form” – as a consequence of our categorical approach, in the Kantian sense, to conceptualizing experiential data. However, things do not improve if we move from the general and abstract to the particular and concrete level.

The problem of describing a body as the sum of its concrete and peculiar components is less reliable, in terms of realism, than what may be supposed, and it still implies a process of abstraction: because the individual and concrete part of this particular body should be decomposed into additional parts. The eye, for instance. In addition to shape and color, one will have to talk about iris, cornea, pupil, eyelashes, as well as its hidden parts: the optic nerve, retina, fibers, photoreceptors; and the optic nerve, for instance, is composed of retinal ganglion, cell axons and glial cells, in a sort of infinite regression in which the body ends to be like the philosopher’s table, which appears in a completely different way if you look

at it with your naked eye or under a microscope, not knowing which of the two is the real table, and how many more tables are hidden inside of that phenomenon that we are trying to describe.

In these terms, it is less interesting for us to apply the sorites paradox of Parmenides to determine when a thing (a hand or an eye) ceases to be such for progressive subtraction of parts, than determine what the parts owe to the whole for their connotation.

A famous sketch by Henry Fuseli shows the artist moved by the greatness of the fragments of an ancient statue. In this case too, what lies at the origin of the emotional process of the observer is more than ever an abstract body seen with the eyes of imagination, mentally reconstructed in its lost greatness and perfection. And that emotional feeling would not have been more deeply-felt, if Fuseli had known that the body of the statue was an extremely faithful reproduction of the clearly-identified and specific body of Caesar or Caracalla or Marcus Aurelius Antoninus or Constantine, as we know by experience, having contemplated the Belvedere Torso, or the Nike of Samothrace in a very similar situation, because in these cases our emotion has to do also with the genius of the artist (or the spirit of the times) who conceived it. But let us assume we are admiring in a museum the cast of Michelangelo's, or Mozart's hand. This corporeal fragment is fascinating to us because of the genius for which it was a tool, not as a tangible fragment of a generic body as such. If we took away the reference to Michelangelo's genius, the same cast would be much less interesting to anyone, because in this case the focus

of attention is not the simple body in itself but the complex idea to which it refers.

2. *Objective body, subjective body*

So far, I have been talking about the body as a general idea, as opposed to the body as a physically identified entity. But what happens when we think about our own body? This cannot be conceived as a "general" idea: unlike a chair or a tree, it is not simply an object among objects, and it cannot be only described, but also felt. This is obvious, I know. But what might be less obvious is the fact that for contemporary art and aesthetics the exemplarity of the body is determined precisely by our internal perception of it, meaning the physicalness we feel, not the bodily form we conceive or see.

In the absence of external factors, such as an impact, or situations that cause pain or pleasure, and various other kinds of stimuli, perception of the body is the result of a voluntary focus and conscious concentration on it. Under normal conditions, I am not aware of my forehead unless I touch it with my hand or look at it in the mirror. The same is true of my heartbeat or the movement of my diaphragm. The only other cause of my being aware of my body in physical terms is the alteration of its functional state (a sinus problem in the case of my forehead, or sudden tachycardia in the case of my heart), in other words, we become conscious of our physical body when it loses one of its essential characteristics, namely that of performing vital activities or complying with our will without resistance.

The less the body gives signs of itself, and the more tacit and efficient its functionality, the more it can be

strictly considered as a "body"; in the same way that we might say that our shoes are good shoes if we feel as if we were not wearing any (or they do not give us any pain), or that a pen is a good pen if it writes without any problem. The practical use of things, however, as Schopenhauer has pointed out, ends up concealing their essence, whether it is a body, including our own, or that of any other empirical object.

In the majority of cases, the functionality of the body (or of its individual parts) forces itself upon our attention when that functionality fails. And it is precisely within this dialectic between the interruption of functionality and becoming aware of the body that the body becomes an artistic paradigm, in a less obvious sense than applying golden rules or proportional standards. That is because art makes us aware of things in the same way as the body makes us aware of itself, that is, by invalidating the functional aspects of things. Considering the body in functional terms rather than formal terms, it is thus possible to account for one of the essential processes of art, which consciously causes a break in our normal pattern of perceptions. An extreme case of this is ready-made art, in which an ordinary object is taken out of the context of its practical everyday use and is located in a space of pure contemplation, forcing the spectator to concentrate on its form, its nature, and on its meaning or plurality of meanings. This is the case in Duchamp's *Fountain*, Warhol's *Brillo boxes* and Cattelan's horses hanging from the ceiling. The goal and intention of contemporary art is to recapture the meaning of things, to restore the vision

and foster understanding of them, as Duchamp anticipated at the beginning of the twentieth century.

By interrupting the practical approach, contemporary art encourages the adoption of an enquiring vision, through the same process of functional suspension whereby the body ceases to be a conventional idea and reminds us of its physical reality.

3. *The body and art*

Now, the final problem: does this function of causing a break, which art shares with the idea of the internally perceived body, also concern the represented body? In other words, do we derive a particular meaning, a new awareness or consciousness of the body from the way in which it is depicted in contemporary art?

In the Classical era the representation of the body was concerned with its perfect and ideal form. This was at the heart of an extraordinary artistic revolution which no artwork prior to the V century BC could have foreshadowed. Thanks to its representation of ideal bodily beauty, classical statuary art still arouses the viewer's wondering admiration, and even today they are still considered unattainable apogees of formal perfection.

Indeed, in *Phaedrus*, Plato himself identified bodily beauty as being the only sensible manifestation of ideas. To him, the beautiful form of the body attracts and entrances beyond the sensible world and lifts the lover onto the world of ideas. It is therefore the beautiful body, seen from its outer form and visible beauty, that brings about the shift between the world of illusion and the world of truth, the escape from the shadows of the cave

towards visions in the light. Greek artists – whom Plato nevertheless condemned since he was talking about the kind of beauty which engenders love for the truth, and not merely aesthetic pleasure – offered a practical transposition of those teachings, and if the body was the means to attain a vision of truth, then the more beautiful the body was, the easier it would be to attain that vision. Hence the artistic effort to achieve ideal beauty, as both a promise and an invitation to experience something beyond the sensitive world.

In art theory, this connection between beauty and truth remained unchanged from Plotinus to the Renaissance. In Dante's *Comedy*, Francesca da Rimini complains her lost "bella persona", the "fair body" which "entangled" Paolo's "gentle heart" and originally caused his love.

The real shift from the form to the function in the meaning of the body as an aesthetic paradigm took place in the modern era, coinciding – not by chance – with the birth of Science.

Consistently with Hobbes' materialism, the Cartesian philosophy of the passions, and La Mettrie's theory of *l'homme machine*, in modern thinking and aesthetics the body means above all the perfect functioning and harmony of the parts in the performance of functions. As joint action performed by various parts aiming towards unitary action, the body became the object of the most wide-ranging allegories. Think about the state as a body in Hobbes' *Leviathan* or of the universe seen as a body by the freethinkers. To the men of the Enlightenment, above all, the world is a body and the body is the world,

since all of our perceptions, knowledge and assessments concerning reality originate primarily at the sensory and bodily level. Empiricist philosophers from Locke to Hume – to whom physical limitations were at the same time gnoseological limitations – did exalt the primacy of reason, but reason also warned them that every one of its contents depend on eminently physical processes. Hence the strong focus on the fabric of the body and the way it functions, which in the eighteenth century applied to widely different fields, ranging from the scientific to the artistic sphere.

Indeed, in the same way that ideas were seen as having sensory roots, the formal beauty of the body pursued by Neoclassical art was founded on observations of a functional nature. Together with real-life drawings, anatomical studies became a vital part of the programmes followed by art academies throughout Europe: in the preparatory drawings and sketches of the leading eighteenth-century artists – even the most classical and idealizing ones – there transpires an obsession with the search for the internal structure of the body, with a clear awareness that the wrong form can jeopardize appreciation as much as a wrong content (Postle, Vaughan 2003). As the painter William Hogarth used to point out to his idealist colleagues in his *A burlesque on Kent's altarpiece at St. Clement Danes* (c. 1725), an error of functional anatomy in the representation of a hand playing the harp is as ridiculous as an unfounded or anachronistic *exemplum virtutis*, just like portraying Caesar riding elephants across the Alps or Hercules blinding Polyphemus.

I will not be talking at any length about the body's loss of formalistic relevance in nineteenth-century art up to Decadent movement by which time the bodily form really does seem to have lost all value, judging by the proliferation of subjects with an ambiguous, confused, undefined and almost transgender-like identity. I would like to conclude instead by illustrating the ways in which the functional body has been used as an aesthetic paradigm particularly in the most recent contemporary art experiences, and I apologise for the all-too predictable reference to body art, where nature and artifice, function and form, paradigm and copy produce something like a play of mirrors with a succession of wildly confusing cross-references and parallel allusions (Siebers 2000).

In this artistic current, bodily dysfunction is not only a paradigm for art, but becomes Art to all intents and purposes. Forms of Body Art like tattoos, piercing, scarification, branding, mutilations, the extreme dance performances leading to utter exhaustion by Marina Abramovic, or the self flagellation of Hermann Nitsch (1974), or Orlan's constant body redesigning operations, appear like rebellions to a purely formalistic vision of the body. Without wishing to tackle anthropological issues, there is reason to believe that contemporary social phenomena, such as the new vision of the body in commercial, aesthetic and performing terms, have led to a loss of meaning and value of the body which art seems to be seeking to reinstate.

The play of mirrors I was referring to earlier, applies, on the one hand, to the new cult of the body and the pursuit of eternal beauty and youth; and on the other, to

the desecration of that cult by Body Art. In this play, in fact, nothing is what it seems. Among the implicit consequences of Body Art is the fact that in the apparent mortification or violation of the body, there actually transpires a celebration of the natural body, and presenting the body in an artificially degraded state evokes the loss of its original perfection. On the contrary, in acting upon the body to adapt it to a stereotype of superior perfection and formal beauty, there is an implicit mistrust of and dissatisfaction with the natural physical state.

Body Art is thus, more than ever, a sign of cultural malfunctioning which, in this case, applies to the new myth of the formally perfect body of contemporary society: a myth which art opposes by denouncing the absurdity of the ideal and abstract body and drawing attention to the real and physical body. In Body Art, the scarred body is like the child who, tired of receiving unfair punishment, decides to really behave badly. And the performer is the believer who decides to destroy the temple so as to witness its constant profanation. Never has the parallel between art and the body seemed so legitimate as in this case. What Body Art is challenging is the false contemporary myth of the body as art, as pure form devoid of goals. The play of mirrors thus becomes even more complex: the beautiful body which presents itself as art for its own sake raises the same suspicion as that which has always been raised by art pursued for purely aesthetic purposes in the representation of bodies.

In Athens, in the full flourishing of Classical art, a disenchanted observer – namely Socrates – would stroll

around the sublime and imperishable masterpieces of the Acropolis, objecting that, among so much splendour and magnificence, in the end, a simple ordinary object, with its useful and functional qualities, is preferable to Fidia's statues and their purely formal beauty. Socrates (and our contemporary artists as well) may seem excessively intolerant towards the cool and static ideals of pure and perfect beauty, including that of the body. But the reasons for their reaction are not difficult to understand: we cultivate with care and respect those vital aspirations which we feel will make us happier with ourselves and possibly wiser; empty and sterile ideals are ultimately destined to dissolve under the corrosive and resentful cynicism of our disappointed expectations.

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