In search of meaning: the body, the psyche and the object of art

“In real meaning, the sort of meaning our words and ideas have, is itself an emergent product of originally meaningless processes - the algorithmic processes that have created the entire biosphere, ourselves included.” - Daniel C. Dennett

No one doubts that the grey matter of the brain has its place in the biosphere. While its disputable by-product the psyche has engendered infinite disagreements, the brain’s influent role in the life of the body goes without comment. Art is equally connected to the brain: it would be hard to imagine a truly brainless art (or any other creative process). And if one affirms that all art to be art must leave a trace, all art is inevitably, in some way or another, an extension of the brain’s influence over the body - not necessarily its own. The degree to which the body is involved in an artwork, an installation or performance depends on the strategy adopted by the artist. These strategies evolve and change over time, and when privileged have spawned Action art, Body art, Process art, Happenings and an uncountable number of other, more heterogeneous approaches, many of them recent, which cannot easily be placed under a convenient rubric.

Temporality, process and performance

Artists became acutely conscious (one could say “self” conscious) of the body’s intimate connection to art in the second half of the twentieth century. Once Pollock’s canvas hit the floor, the stage was set for media coverage. Action painting quickly assumed mythic proportions, and the deconstructive attitudes of the seventies and eighties, predominant in Feminist and Postmodernist tactics during those years, were, partly, aimed at dethroning this romantic (white) male figure in action, at attacking the glorification of his persona and partly, but most importantly, at undermining the fetishist quality of his production. For in the fetishism of art an active imagining subject displaces and recodes the art object’s normal function as a vehicle of communication with one of personal purpose. The meaning of the object is neither autonomous nor open to interpretation, but stems solely from the subjective desire of the artist/agent to such extent that it leaves no room for an active imagining spectator; on the contrary, the latter is summarily dismissed and left out in the cold.

In many early attacks on the art object as fetish, and, by default, on the artist as subject, in a paradoxical manoeuvre, the bodily presence of the artist often persisted and its objectivity grew in importance. For Feminist and Postmodernist artists of the seventies and eighties, the body became the real site of art while the formerly centralized, omnipresent subjectivity of the (white, male, heterosexual) artist was increasingly held suspect. The body was given centre stage as the subject made its exit. As the corporeal presence of the artist or other “actors” became seen as the condition sine qua non for art to take place, the painful reality of the body’s ephemeral existence could no longer be ignored.

Carolee Scheemann, “Up To And Including Her Limits”, 1973-1976
Crayon on paper, rope and harness suspended from ceiling.
As early as 1958 the traces of Yves Klein’s “Living paint brushes” were valued largely for their ephemeral and episodic qualities. In the search to give meaning to the body’s temporality, performance, installation and process triumphed over the “subjected” object. Indeed, for many artists, the latter became often little more than a residual albeit fascinating result. By the end of the seventies, in art schools everywhere drawings were left smudged, “mistakes” were only partially erased, and students were much more intrigued by finding a few stray hairs of a colour-field painter, such as Helen Frankenthaler, enmeshed in the heavy swirls of paint covering her canvas, than in the painting itself.

In common with Joseph Beuys, Gina Pane and many others, the corporeal presence of artists such as Esther Ferrer and Nacho Criado in their performances during these years was perfectly consistent with the emphasis on process in the mostly fragile, supposedly “defetichized” objects that they also produced at that time; installation and assembly predominating as a way of further deemphasizing any bid for uniqueness. In much of their performance art, ordinary, everyday objects were frequently appropriated, used and discarded afterwards. However the meaning of these objects, both the appropriated and fabricated, often tottered on the brink of absurdity and was state-dependent on the “touch” of the artist. Once abandoned, when gathered up by others, their reliquary value could bring them uncomfortably close to the fetishistic art objects they were there to displace.
The empowered object

If in Eva Lootz’s “Gestos cosidos”, from 1978, the importance of process is explicitly expressed in the title of the piece, in “Wedding-shoes”, from 1996, it is the object that is empowered. In the latter installation five pairs of hybrid slippers in glass cases seem to speak to us of longing, loss, desire and vulnerability.

In “Histoire des robes” from 1990, Annette Messager laid out 5 dresses, also in glass cases, and placed tiny, framed texts, b/w photographs or drawings here and there like so many objects chosen to accompany the dead to their grave. Any fold, stain or tear captures our attention like a beloved face in a photograph - a witness of the present or the past that we wish to externalise. One hopes for, even suspects a narrative and a kind of “everywoman” story does unfold, but finally these framed words and images are as fragmented as pottery shards. And yet, this dress did belong to someone, or did it? And does it matter?

These works mimic the world of the fetishist: the object chosen in both Annette Messager’s dresses and Eva Lootz’s slippers is, after all, a feminine article of clothing. And as in the fetishist’s investment of an object, there is a turning away from one’s individual experience to a turning towards the other. However unlike the fetishistic object, whose existence only gratifies the fetishist, these works aim to seduce not only the artist, but also the other. However unlike the latter, which implies a choice that first and foremost gratifies the fetishist, these objects (of Art) aim to seduce not only the artist, but also the other. Their meaning is transmissible; through the active participation of the onlooker they lead back to “every” body, communicating the pleasure and pain of a sexual(-ized) being.

Identity games

By the mid-seventies, in a climate of an almost sadomasochistic denial of subjectivity, many artists embraced the potentially liberating force of an identity-in-crisis, rendered protean and multiple since loosed from its moors. In 1975, Carlos Pazos produced “Voy a hacer de mí una estrella”. A series of 21 photographic “self-portraits”, each resembling a different “star” from Marlon Brando to Rudolph Valentino, this work is just as much about losing one’s self as it is about creating a self. Throughout the seventies and beyond, Adriane Piper would explore issues of social and sexual identity in manipulating her own image (that of a black woman who can “pass” for white) to attack racial stereotypes in American culture;
Hannah Wilke would go on to objectify herself every more radically, courageously communicating the ravages of time and cancer on her own body in cruelly stark documentary images; Cindy Sherman would photograph images of the “other” that used her “self” for decades and Orlan would finally go one step further than anyone else by repeatedly manipulating her facial features through plastic surgery to “become” Diane, Europa, Mona Lisa...“. My work, she says, fights against innate, inexorable, nature, DNA (our direct challenger as Artist of the portrayal) and God.” (2)

In Ana Carceller’s and Helena Cabello’s “Identity game” from 1996, a ping-pong table is the site of a dual confrontation and fusion, where “who is who” is irrelevant. The body-ego of the spectator is activated, the reaction is as much visceral as it is cerebral, the gaze is no longer disembodied, but rather celebrates a multivalent and polymorphic corporeal reality. Meaning is no longer a revelation coming from a single fixed identity, nor is it aborted into the absurd, but rather it has become an entity open to constant reinterpretation while mediated through the body/psyche of the spectator.

**Visual strategies**

“The prime Egyptian unit, the cubit, was the length of the forearm from elbow to the middle finger extended, and we can assume that it was chosen because it was/is the pre-eminent working unit of the body. Similarly, the English foot rule is not merely the length of the average foot, but the distance between the rungs of a ladder; as such, it relates sensibly to the amount of energy required by both legs and arms in the act of climbing.... the tip of the outwardly extended arm and thumb and is (or was) associated intimately with the measuring of cloth or rope. “ (3)

In Antoni Abad’s video-installation “Medidas menores” (1994) time “becomes the central theme of a work that measures, palm by palm, the distance covered during the course of an ordinary day. This work is both a sculpture of a sequence of palms cast in aluminium with each one of the activities that motivated these palm measures described in detail, reminds us how, before the invention of the metric system, measure had little to do with arithmetic, but instead, was intimately related to the potential energy and the human dimensions of the body.

In 1999, at the Venice Biennale, Esther Ferrer had the entire wall at one end of a room covered with a mirror and had a picture frame that hugged the floor, walls and ceiling, placed a few meters away. Titled “Step into the picture”, the installation was an invitation to do just that: the visitor, by
doing so, animated the space and what was installation became performance. Only this time, in this “happening”, Esther Ferrer herself was absent, and if there were any fingerprints to be found, they most probably were not hers. It is now given the spectator, through the sense of his own body, to become one with the work of art, to gaze on him/herself as an object of form and colour. His/her ordinary self suddenly enmeshed in a work of art, the spectator lets the artwork step inside and literally incorporates it. For a moment, the two become one entity bound in a metaphor of temporality and space. The body is not the place of the subject anymore but an object of its environment.

The abstracted body

Every thought provokes a biochemical reaction in the body, and biochemical reactions in our bodies can warp our thoughts. Biological and social-environmental factors collide in mood disorders, psychosomatic disorders and other borderline states that blur all cause and effect between the two. However, in spite of our awareness of this duality, today the body fallen sick is studied, cared for, and sometimes cured, in an environment of symptom classification and statistics that crowd out the human aspect of being ill. The integrity of the body-psych is annulled in the name of maximum efficiency. Medical and scientific “authorities”, inspired by cultural precepts, define, design and control the rhetoric that surrounds the sick body and determines its representation.

Out of my personal experience of caring for someone in the terminal stages of cancer came the installation, “Corro de rosas” (2001) in which thirteen cupping glasses like so many miniature hothouses shelter the pills leftover - painkillers, antihistamines, tranquillisers, etc. - after the death of the person they were intended for.

However, artists such as Pepe Espalui and Felix Gonzalez-Torres worked from their own battle with AIDS to address these issues until their premature death in the nineties. Pepe Espalui is perhaps best known for the performances known as “Carryings”, which attracted large numbers of people in Madrid and San Sebastián in the late eighties, who joined together to pass the artist into the arms of one, then on to another, and so on, across town, ensuring that his bare feet never touched the ground, in a moving display of solidarity for victims, like himself, of crutches “support” each other, and mask-like objects communicate the need to protect one’s identity.
The first time Felix Gonzalez-Torres saw the results of a blood test he was struck by the absence of red, the fact that “nowhere was there a drop of blood”, just sequences of numbers in a minimalist grid. “Untitled (21 days of Bloodwork-Steady Decline)”, is a series of diagrams he drew of mostly descending lines, which refer to the T-cell count. These drawings, from 1994 onwards, parody the cold inhuman quality of the medical reports. However passing through his “Untitled (Blood)”, a large hanging curtain of red and white plastic beads from 1992, is a sensuous experience. You might pause to run the strands through your fingers; there is the rustle of the beads, their coolness against your skin.

The way we symbolise our own bodily rhythms and functions is implicated in the way we relate to these works - and this in turn influences the way they work within us. In accentuating the abstract quality of the medical discourse, in abstracting the body, the pleasure of mimetic recognition is replaced by the pleasure of active interpretation. Analysis is replaced by empathy.

The age of the cyborg

In 1970, just before her suicide, photographer Diane Arbus spoke of her admiration towards “freaks”: “Most people go through life dreading that they’ll have a traumatic experience. Freaks were born with their trauma. They’ve already passed their test in life. They’re aristocrats” (4)

In the nineties, Marina Nuñez represented the body in numerous paintings exploring the socio-cultural context of madness. Then the physical and metaphorical signs of madness in her work gave way to an increasing fascination with the cyborg. She is not alone in her fascination, the cyborg, whose ancestor is automaton, is presently a source of inspiration for artists as diverse as Tony Oursler, Moriko Mori, Gary Hill, and Takashi Murakami, to name a few. For in the cyborg, we recognize ourselves; our bodies colonized as they are by prosthesis limbs, electronic pacemakers, implanted corneal lenses, etc. The body has been invaded by technology; electronics and virtual reality are testing the limits of its physiology. This “mad body”, created by the complicity between Medicine and Science, is “a cybernetic organism, a fusion of the organic and the technical forged in particular, historical, cultural practices”(5) and, as such, is not recognized as superior but rather as introducing a profound difference that splits the body’s integrity down to its foundations and throws into question its very appurtenance to the biosphere.

- June Papineau

Marina Nuñez
“Madness” 1997 (above)
Untitled (Science Fiction), 1999-2000
Notes

Bibliography (selection)
Le Breton, David. Contemporary Obsolescence of the Body. www.body-art.net/Articles/us/DLBtxt.3.html