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The Paradox of the Return of the Body in Post 1950s Body Art

Abstract
From the 1950s on, there has been a 'return' of the body in the work of a number of artists who have sought to overcome the 'de-corporealisation' of art by incorporating their own bodies or those of their models directly into the process of creation. Rather than representing the body at one remove, these artists have endeavoured to emphasise the physicality of the body either by its actual presence (as in the case of performance art) or through the direct registration of traces of the body by such means as body casts, body prints etc. where an indexical relation between the body and the resultant artwork is established. In this way, it is hoped that the dominance of the mind over the body which has characterised the history of Western culture will be counteracted.

At the same time however, as there has been a concerted effort by artists to resurrect the materiality of the body from its suppression by Western culture, a profound alienation from the body is evident in many of these works. Thus for example, in much performance art, the body is subjected to extremes where its physical limits are tested, indicating a desire to transcend the limits of the material body rather than be defined or confined by it. Similarly, that art which registers the direct presence of the body through body casts etc., at the same time speaks of its absence. While it evokes a body that was once there, it simultaneously reminds us that it is no longer present.

As I shall argue, this paradox is symptomatic of our contradictory relation to the body in contemporary culture. On the one hand, as Shilling points out, with the decline of trans-personal meaning structures such as those offered by religion or by grand political narratives, the body has become the primary site through which we seek to define who we are. But on the other, the more we try to construct a sense of who we are through the fashioning of our bodies, the more chimerical this proves to be. As Shilling writes: 'We now have the means to exert an unprecedented degree of control over our bodies, yet we are also living in an age which has thrown into doubt our certainty of what our bodies are and how we should control them.'[1]

Artists who use their own bodies in their work highlight this paradox. For such artists, their bodies become sites not for defining who they are, but on the contrary, the arena where the dissolution of the subject is staged. As Thevoz argues,[2] contemporary body art, unlike body marking in tribal societies, is not a sign of enculturation in which the individual is endowed with a social identity but on the contrary, is an attack on the centred, bourgeois subject-a 'return of the repressed' which dissolves the unity of the ego.

Biography
I am currently Senior Lecturer in and Head of Art Theory at the University of Tasmania. I have published a number of articles on fashioning the body and on the role of art and art institutions in postmodern culture in various journals including *Philosophy and Social Criticism*; *Arena Journal*; *Hecate*; *Theory, Culture & Society*; *The European Journal of Cultural Studies*; *Postcolonial Studies* and *Body & Society*.

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As I shall argue, this paradox is symptomatic of our contradictory relation to the body in contemporary culture. On the one hand, as Chris Shilling points out (1994: 2-3), with the decline of trans-personal meaning structures such as those offered by religion or by grand political narratives, the body has become the primary site through which we seek to define who we are. But on the other, the more we try to construct a sense of who we are through the fashioning of our bodies, the more chimerical this proves to be. For, while science has provided us with the means by which to transform our bodies, it is unable to give us any guidance as to how these means should be employed.

Artists who use their own bodies in their work highlight this paradox. For such artists, their bodies become sites not for defining who they are, but on the contrary, the arena where the dissolution of the subject is staged. In this paper, the paradoxical nature of our conception of the body in contemporary culture and its manifestation in the work of artists who utilise the body directly will be examined. The argument to be developed is that body art since the 1960s has been involved in an impossible project, beset with an untranscendable contradiction between a resurrection of the corporeality of the body on the one hand and a sense of the body's obsolescence on the other.

The Return of the Body in post 1950s Art

It is in some of the works of Yves Klein where we see one of the first instances of the eruption of the body as a direct physical presence in art. Feeling a dissatisfaction with the disembodied nature of painting on canvas, Yves Klein in a series of performances from 1958-1962 sought to make it a more bodily process by painting not from models but with them. In his *anthropometries*, which were created through the imprinting of the paint-smeared bodies of his models onto the canvas, the body itself quite literally became the paintbrush.

An even more direct way of foregrounding the body as a palpable, living presence was to dispense with the canvas altogether. Piero Manzoni was among the first to take this route with his *Living Sculptures*. Repudiating the traditional mediums of bronze and marble, his 'sculptures' took the form of live nude models on pedestals whose conversion into art was achieved by the inscription of the artist's signature on their backs.

Many of the body artists who emerged in the 1960s and '70s were strongly influenced by Antonin Artaud's 'Theatre of Cruelty'. Frustrated by the inability of the written word to do justice to the immediate, organic, sensory realm of experience, Artaud advocated a more physical form of theatre where the bodily movements and gestures of the actors were no longer subservient to the script, but, on the contrary, became the primary element. In foregrounding the direct physicality of the actor's gestures, Artaud sought to overcome the gap between representation and reality, thereby provoking in the audience, a more corporeal response than the attitude of disinterested contemplation associated with traditional theatre.

Viennese performance artist Hermann Nitsch similarly conceived of his *Orgies and Mysteries Theatre* performances in the 1960s where the performers participated in a quasi-sacrificial rite in which their bodies were smeared with the blood and entrails of disembowelled animals as an assault on the senses designed to release pent up inhibitions and repressions.

While impelled by very different imperatives, feminist performance artists of the '60s and '70s such as Carolee Schneemann likewise staged performances in which the corporeal nature of the body was highlighted. Seeking to overcome the objectification and de-materialisation of the body which occurs when sight is privileged over all the other senses, Schneemann staged a performance *Meat Joy* in 1964 which was designed to re-activate the other senses. Presented as a 'celebration of the flesh as material', it used not only the performers' bodies but also raw fish, plucked chickens and uncooked sausages. The introduction of actual meat as well as the human body - not metaphor but the thing itself - reflected Schneemann's unwillingness to accept art solely as a formal or mental construct and her concomitant insistence on its active physicality (Sayre, 1989: 100).

In drawing attention to the physicality of the body, many of the body artists of the '60s and '70s such as Vito Acconci and Mike Parr, focused on those bodily functions and fluids which are normally masked or

suppressed in Western culture, doing performances in which the body produced its own crude signs such as sweat stains on the wall, bite marks and saliva which spilt out of the mouth.

Paradoxically however, at the same time as body artists sought to foreground the materiality of the body, their work exhibited a profound estrangement from it. This manifested itself in the fact that in much performance art, the body was subjected to extremes where its physical limits were tested, indicating a desire to transcend the constraints of the material body rather than be defined or confined by it. Lifting the taboo on the marking of the body within Western culture, they frequently violated their bodies in ways which undermined the notion of the body as a self-contained whole with clearly defined boundaries which seal it off from the outside world. Thus, for instance, Chris Burden had himself shot in the arm (*Shoot*, 1971) and had himself crucified with nails driven through his hands (*Trans-fixed*, 1974); Marina Abramovic did a performance where she presented her gallery audience with an assortment of weapons (knives, loaded guns and instruments of torture) and invited them to do what they wanted with her; the feminist performance artist Gina Pane incised her face and arms with razor blades in a performance (*Psychic Action,* 1973) which set out to highlight the destructive nature of patriarchal ideals of feminine beauty while Mike Parr stuck drawing pins into his leg (*Tackline,* 1973) and burned a spiral around his calf (*Leg Spiral*, 1971-2).

In the inscription of their own flesh, the actions of body artists seemed reminiscent of the practices of body marking in tribal cultures. However, whereas the latter were marks of acculturation which served to induct humans into society, the violation of the body by modern-day body artists was intended as an act of desecration, that is, a subversion of the dominant cultural encodings of the body. As Michel Thevoz argues (1984: 118-121), body art represented a 'return of the repressed' which undermined the unity of the centred, bourgeois subject. Thus, at the same time as body artists resurrected the material body from its suppression by Western culture, it did not become the basis for a new, embodied sense of subjectivity but on the contrary, a site where the dissolution of the ego was staged.[3]

In order to understand this paradoxical relation to the body evident in the body artists of the 1960s and '70s, we need to examine the contradictory nature of our conception of the body in postmodern society.

The Body in Postmodern Society

In postmodern society, the body has become increasingly central to people's sense of self-identity as evidenced by the proliferation of features in newspapers, magazines and television concerned with the health, shape and appearance of the body. Individuals are now expected to undertake regimes of body maintenance designed to sustain and improve their health and physical appearance and failure to do so is seen as a sign of moral laxity.

Shilling suggests (1994: 2-4) that this growing investment in the body as constitutive of self-identity is symptomatic of the decline of trans-personal meaning structures such as those offered by religion or by grand political narratives. In a context where there no longer exist shared systems of meaning which construct and sustain existential and ontological certainties residing outside of the self, individuals have turned towards the body as a foundation on which to reconstruct a reliable sense of self.

This focus on the body as the source of self-identity has been aided and abetted by the proliferation of products and technologies for modifying the body such as diet pills, exercise programs and cosmetic surgery. Furthermore, medical advances in the use of prosthetics and other bio-technologies which take over the biological functions of the body such as IVF have opened up apparently limitless possibilities for transforming the body and the way it functions.

However, while these new technologies ostensibly provide us with an unprecedented degree of control over the ways in which our bodies can be modified, they have in fact provoked an increasing degree of uncertainty about what our bodies are and how they relate to our conceptions of self. As Anne Cranny-Francis points out (1995: 93), such technological interventions into the human body have given rise to a re-examination of the assumption that the body is easily delimited. With the addition of artificial parts to the human body, at what stage does it cease being human? If human bodies are so accommodating of prosthetic

devices of various kinds, will there be a point at which what results is more prosthetic than human? And if so, what then will be its status?

Arthur and Marilouise Kroker suggest (1987: 21-2) that our contemporary preoccupation with the body can be seen as a 'panic reaction' to our increasing sense of its obsolescence. The prevalence of discourses about the body in contemporary popular culture masks the disappearance of the 'natural' body and its replacement by technological devices. This sense of the obsolescence of the body has become particularly acute in recent times with the growing ubiquity of the virtual world of cyberspace. In such a context, invocations of the corporeality of the body represent a last ditch attempt to rescue the 'real' from its absorption into the realm of simulation where the original referents have been lost sight of, as Baudrillard argues (1984: 128).

Baudrillard describes the body in cyberspace as a 'pure screen'. Plugged into an infinitely expanding network of communications, the body loses a sense of itself as bounded and separate. No longer a site for the interiority of the individual, the body becomes 'a switching centre for all the networks of influence' (1984: 133). As a consequence of this disembodied form of communication, we lose a sense of our presence in the here and now and our capacity for sensory experience is undermined.

Several theorists including Steven Connor and Renata Salecl (2001: 31-2) see the current-day practices of body marking such as tattooing, branding and piercing as attempts to re-assert the 'reality' of the body as a living presence. Whereas in the Christian tradition, the mortification of the body was intended as a means of transcending the physical body in order to attain spiritual redemption, contemporary forms of mortification on the contrary, aim to 'transfix the body in its presence.' 'Disfiguring the skin is a way of keeping it visible' as Connor puts it (2001: 50). At the same time, however, such attempts to fix one's identity in one's body are doomed to failure for the more one tries to 'take possession' of one's body, the more elusive it proves to be as the boundaries of one's 'body' become harder and harder to define.

While the contemporary practices of body marking in popular culture represent the culmination of this fruitless search for a grounded sense of self in the exterior surfaces of the body, the inscriptions of the body engaged in by body artists reveal this search to be chimerical. For, at the same time as they re-instate the body as a corporeal presence, they destroy its unity and integrity through acts of desecration, thereby undermining its capacity to serve as a secure basis for self-definition. What is highlighted in their performances is a conception of the self as 'de-centred' or 'fragmented' - a self which is constantly shifting and mutating with no fixed parameters. It is the 'self' spoken of by such theorists as Judith Butler (1990) - a 'self' which dissolves into a constantly changing plethora of guises behind which there is no fixed essence.

Two recent body artists whose work makes acutely evident the paradoxical nature of our relationship between the body and the self are Orlan and Stelarc. In both, the crisis provoked by the development of bio-technology in our conceptualisation of self-identity is explicitly thematised, though they themselves do not see it as a crisis. It is in this light that their work will be examined in the concluding section of this paper.

<u>The Deconstruction of the Self in Orlan and Stelarc</u>

In 1990 Orlan embarked on a project, *The Ultimate Masterpiece: The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan* involving a number of cosmetic surgery operations designed to transform her face in ways which destabilised male-defined notions of idealised female beauty.[4] In an endeavour to convert plastic surgery from an instrument of domination into a means for re-inventing her own body, Orlan produced her own blueprints for the surgeons to follow. She also refused a general anaesthetic so that she could stage-manage the actual operations themselves, transforming what is normally a medical procedure carried out behind closed doors into a theatrical performance which featured the reading of psychoanalytic and literary texts, interactive communication with an often international audience via fax and live satellite telecast, music, dance and outlandish costumes often designed by famous couturiers.

The blueprints consisted of computer composites, combining her own facial features with those derived from five famous Renaissance and post-Renaissance images of women - the nose of an unattributed sculpture of *Diana* from the school of Fontainbleau; the mouth of Boucher's *Europa*; the forehead of Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*; the chin of Botticelli's *Venus* and the eyes of Gerome's *Psyche*. By combining distinctive elements from each face, she sought to disturb the notion of the perfected, the fixed and the

standardised, producing a result which is at odds with conventional ideals of beauty. At one stage she went so far as to have implants into the upper cheeks and the sides of the forehead to give the impression of budding horns.

Insofar as Orlan alters her body in a directly physical way (rather than simply through virtual manipulation), her work has been interpreted by some as a reinstatement of the corporeality of the body in an age where the electronic imaging and coding of the body has all but displaced 'real' flesh and blood. As Julie Clarke argues for instance:

> Orlan's 'reincarnation' highlights corporeality at a time when body status is defined by electronic imaging…Orlan does not just reveal the surface of her face and body creating more images to be consumed; she shows the abject, bloodied subcutaneous layers beneath the skin that signify the organic and the imminence of death. (1999: 188)

She points to the fact that as well as televising the surgical process itself, Orlan has produced a series of post-operative photographs revealing all the bruising and wounds from her surgery and also a series of 'reliquaries' consisting in 'souvenirs' from her operations such as blood-stained gauze, bits of her bone and fat removed through liposuction, which serve to highlight the body's carnality.

Others however, such as Jane Goodall, Michelle Hirschhorn and Parveen Adams, have suggested a very different reading of Orlan's work. In their view, the numerous surgical reconstructions of Orlan's face, far from confirming the materiality of her body, represent a denial of it. In treating the body as something which is infinitely malleable, Orlan is seen as rejecting the notion of the body as a biological organism with natural constraints. Orlan herself has gone so far as to say that with the advent of technologies such as cosmetic surgery which enable the radical re-fashioning of the body, the natural body is obsolete (cited in Hirschhorn, 1996: 120). She describes her body as 'a sack or costume to be shed' (Rose, 1993: 86), declaring that her work 'is a struggle against: the innate, the inexorable, the programmed, Nature, DNA (which is our direct rival as...artists of representation) and God!' (cited in Goodall, 1999: 152).

Viewed from this standpoint, Orlan's constant re-configurations of her face to incorporate a pastiche of elements derived from other faces, are seen to 'de-naturalise' it, highlighting its status as a social and cultural construct. Furthermore, they serve to undermine any notion of identity as stable and unified. As Parveen Adams argues for instance (1996: 145), rather than providing a grounding for subjectivity, Orlan's body becomes the site for its 'emptying' out. The detachment of Orlan's face from her body, which occurs during her operations, has the effect of presenting the body's exterior simply as a 'mask' behind which there is no self. Whereas the intention behind cosmetic surgery is normally to achieve a more unified and complete sense of self by making the body conform more closely to the subject's ideal image, the aim of Orlan's cosmetic surgery is to destabilise the fixity of identity.

The fact that Orlan's work has been interpreted both as foregrounding the corporeality of the body and as indicating its obsolescence, is symptomatic of the contradictory relation that we have to our bodies in postmodern culture where, at the same time as we seek to fix our sense of self in our bodies, the body itself becomes increasingly volatile as a result of our technological transformation of it. What Orlan's work does is to make explicit these two conflicting imperatives, highlighting the impossibility of this project.

Stelarc's work, like Orlan's, can be seen as simultaneously highlighting the body's materiality and signalling its transcendence through modern technology. Beginning in the mid 1970s and continuing through the 1980s, Stelarc staged a number of performances in which his body was suspended in space by meat hooks. These performances on the one hand, served in a very dramatic fashion, to highlight the presence of the body as 'flesh' as his body assumed an unnerving resemblance to a carcass on display in a butcher's shop. As a viewer, it was impossible to experience these performances in anything other than a direct and visceral way.

At the same time, however, the subjection of his body to such extremes of pain and endurance suggested a desire by Stelarc to transcend the biological limits of the body. Seen from this point of view, the stretching

of his skin to an almost unbearable degree serves as a metaphor for the idea that our bodies are not confined by the skin which covers them but that they have the capacity to exceed this boundary.

This desire to transcend the physical constraints of the body became even more pronounced with his inclusion of various technological devices such as robotic arms and laser eyes in later performances. In these works, the relationship between the body and technology became the focus, expressing his conviction that the body of the future will be a hybrid entity in which biology and technology are indissolubly intertwined. It is his view that the biological body is becoming obsolete and is being superseded by a new hybrid 'post-human' entity in which nature and technology are combined. As Stelarc has stated (quoted in Marsh, 1993: 108): 'We are at the end of philosophy and the human form as we know it...meaning now resides only in the network - the relationship of the body with technology.'

In these performances, Stelarc undermines the idea of the body as the site of an autonomous human agency or individuality, since it is often unclear who is the controller and who is the controlled as the boundaries between man and machine become blurred. Take for instance his performance *Scan/Signal: Event for Strong Arm and Surveillance Systems* (performed in Kansas, USA in 1993) where the body was attached by a harness to the rotating arm of a robot manipulator. At the same time as Stelarc had some control over the movement of the robotic arm through an arrangement of electronic signalling devices which were triggered by his feet, his body was forced to move in ways not willed by him as the robotic arm rotated. Similarly, in a later performance - *Fractal Flesh* (1995) - Stelarc's muscle movements on the left side of his body were controlled by signals sent via the internet by people who clicked on the corresponding limbs of a stylised body image on the screen. This was taken one step further in his performance *ParaSite - Event for Invaded and Involuntary Body* (1997) where the signals were generated by a customised search engine which gathered, analysed and randomly scaled images of the body from the internet.

While from Stelarc's perspective, such performances challenge the assumption that the internet inevitably leads to the disembodiment and dissolution of the subject by offering new strategies for 'projecting body presence and extruding body awareness', they can at the same time be seen as perpetuating these very processes. For, in his disassociation of agency from a particular human body, Stelarc takes to the extreme, the alienation of the mind from the body. As a result of his uncoupling of the self from the body, the body comes to be seen as a non-sentient thing which is infinitely manipulable and no longer limited by any biological constraints. Such a view, as Cranny-Francis points out (1995: 102), perpetuates the patriarchal myth of transcendence of nature through technology and its associated premise that the 'natural' body is an 'abhorrent material prison'.

Thus, as in Orlan's performances, so in Stelarc's, the body becomes the site not for defining who one is, but on the contrary, the stage for the subject's deconstruction. For both artists, modern technology has rendered the body largely obsolete, thus undermining its capacity to serve as the basis for a secure sense of self. While neither Orlan nor Stelarc seem perturbed by this, I see their work as symptomatic of the crisis which has arisen out of our contradictory relation to the body in contemporary culture where, despite our attempts to resuscitate the corporeality of the body, we are more alienated from it than ever before.

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[1] Shilling, C. *The Body and Social Theory* (London, Sage, 1994): 183
[2] Thevoz, M. *The Painted Body* (New York, Rizzoli, 1981): ch. 4
[3] Marsh (1993: 96) makes a similar point.
[4] Hirschhorn (1996: 110-134) provides a useful account of Orlan's practice.

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