

Mary Harju

Thesis Project

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John Jacobsmeyer

The Body in Art: Aesthetic Experience and Embodiment During Late Capitalism

My previous research on the gendered gaze led me to investigate the viewer's relationship to the surface of the painting as affected by the artist's relationship to her subject matter. In addition to the ubiquitous “male gaze” of Jacques Lacan and John Berger, I postulated a phenomenology of the female gaze, best described by Bracha Ettinger in her psychological theory of the “matrixial gaze.” This kind of gaze approaches the picture plane as a threshold, or “borderspace,” over which both the artist and viewer “co-emerge” with the subject matter of the painting, so that the division between observer and observed blurs and the viewer/artist begins to inscribe subjectivity onto the work drawn from the margins of consciousness.ⁱ In the wake of this research I moved from a narrative, literary mode of composition in my painting to an inwardly-generated figuration inspired by symbolic longings and direct visual engagement; inevitably, I connected my interest in painting human anatomy with the poetry of movements I know from yoga practice. These paintings express symbolic meanings I feel in the dynamism of an imaginary body; a symbolism whose language was not language at all but a projected series of physical moments. In short, I aim to share an aesthetic experience not just as a being who thinks but as a body that feels its own past, present, and future. This is a way that the viewer and artist merge in figurative art—through an implicit understanding that they will both inhabit an imaginary body: the sensations and physicality of this imaginary body largely determine the meaning and aesthetic value of a work.

The purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the enormous impact of art on humankind's sense of

meaning in terms of embodied cognition, or the belief that the body creates the nature of the mind, both in the artist and in the viewer of art. In the process I will analyze works of art by their effectiveness from the point of view of embodied cognition, I will explain how the artist and viewer meet through their bodies in a work of art to forge new meaning and existence, and I will examine the artistic, political and economic implications of Western thought's reification of the mind over the body.

In contrast to Ettinger's theory of “matrixial gaze”—that shared subjectivity through the matrix of art can create revolutions in thought and behavior—it also appears that this interaction can safely embody and stabilize a culture's Dionysian impulses. An early example of this tendency appears in late Classical and Hellenistic statuary, such as Scopas' *Maenad* (illustration 1).



Illustration 1: Greek, after Scopas, Maenad, 4th century BCE

Even though the limbs have been truncated and the figure is a fragment, its effect is one of surging energy pushing upward through the trunk and spiraling into a vortex. It gives a first-hand experience of the kind of emotions and existence appreciated in ancient Greek culture—the expression of which was

a sublimated frenzy. The *Maenad* gives a demonstration of being that, according to Maurice Merleau-Ponty and other phenomenologists, is more than visual or descriptive—it is primarily through movement, as seen by analogy in the performance of dance:

Dance is a “form in the making,” the activity of creating a form with the body. But the form is not experienced (by either the dancer or the audience) as a visual spectacle. The dancer does not attempt to picture her movements from a bird's eye perspective, and the members of the audience do not watch the dancer as they might a fireworks display. The dancer becomes absorbed in the entire experience of the movements, from head to foot, from inner motivation to external gesticulation... The dancer draws from her body schema the movements that are possible to express the ideas of a piece, which the audience member recognizes by virtually extending his own body schema onto the bodily movements of the dancer. The viewer follows the dancer not only with his eyes but virtually with his entire body and its experience of forces and kinesthetic impressions that are represented on stage by the dancer.ⁱⁱ

Just as ritual or dramatic tragedy could hold catharsis—the experience that expressed dangerous impulses and gave life deeper meaning—the *Maenad* transforms the viewer's body schema, or model that organizes and modifies the body's sensation of position.ⁱⁱⁱ Whatever other contextual meanings this work had, we are sure of its overriding meaning through its form of embodiment.

It's difficult in the 21st century to imagine the body forming our conceptual meanings and sense of existence; the progress of modern analytical philosophy for the last 300 years has separated the mind from the body and given the former predominance. Although faulty, the thesis “cogito ergo sum” reigns supreme within the intellectual circuit, not just in the field of natural science but also in the field of art, which has increasingly discarded the body and dislocated aesthetics from the physical realm. Nevertheless, the influence of spatial, embodied meaning has continued to manifest itself, even in language, as George Lakoff and other developmental psychologists have discovered. The use of primary metaphor in our most essential verbal expressions and thought forms attests to the fact that all our evaluative processes are formed by our sensorimotor experiences: important equals big (“tomorrow is a big day”), time equals motion (“time flies”), seeing is touching (“pick a face out of the crowd”), and so on.^{iv} An exception to dualist separation of mind and body is also found in Christianity:

divine being manifesting itself in a fleshly body and believers engaging in rituals and meditations that privilege embodied experience. Even the mortification of the body sometimes practiced turns on the certainty that physical suffering can shape the soul.^v In art as well, as in a painting like Grunewald's *Crucifixion* (illustration 2), the meaning is brought home primarily through the suffering body's contortions. It is impossible for the viewer too look at the Christ's torn and inflamed flesh and not feel

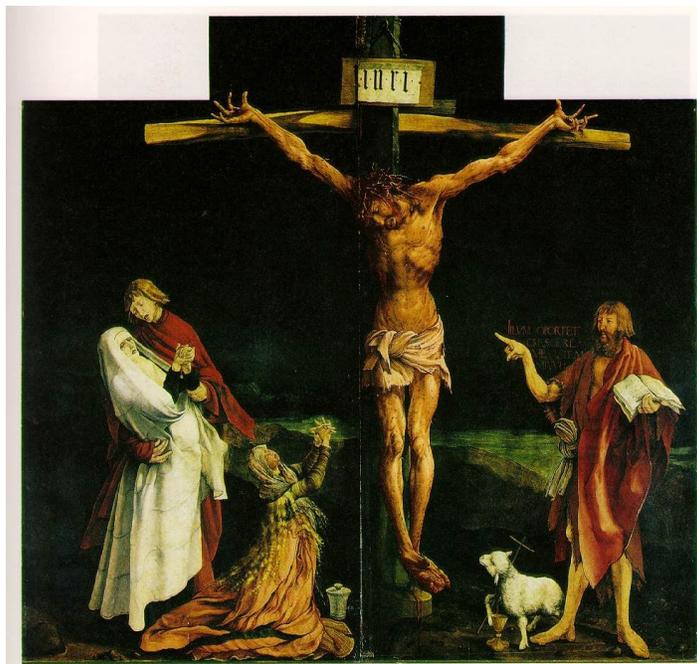


Illustration 2: Matthias Grunewald, Crucifixion, 1513-15

his spasms of pain. It is the misery of a violently porous body that leaks blood, tears and sweat that signals the disordered, humiliating, and ultimately inhumane existence inscribed here on the body.^{vi} The image that Grunewald creates is emblematic of the Reformation that was tearing Christendom apart during the 16th century, and this meaning is accessed immediately through the body, without the viewer needing to be versed in theology or history.

Compare this to the seminal achievements of the 20th century (illustration 3) and the loss of sensibility that occurred in the interim becomes palpable. Art, as it became more engaging to the mind

also paradoxically became less meaningful. When the theories of formal linguistics are imposed onto

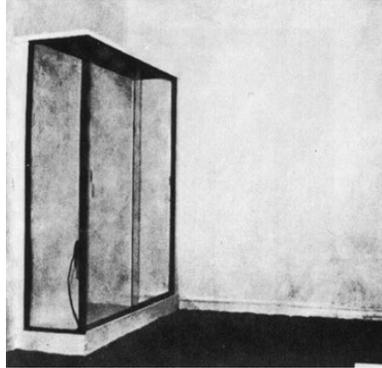


Illustration 3: Yves Klein, Le Vide (the Void), 1958

the visual realm, images become signs that hold no trustworthy meanings and the aesthetic body is nothing more than an illusion.^{vii} This imposition is a clear reification of mind over body—an attitude which, according to feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz, has political and social implications, since the mind is culturally associated with the active, masculine principle and the body with the passive, feminine, “other”. Whenever a binary opposition is created there necessarily must be a self and an other, subject and object, form and matter, reality and appearance, known and unknowable; existence finds it must locate itself in one at the expense of the other.^{viii} Various societies have used this as a starting point for a dialectic that restricts the social roles of women and minorities, leaving “men free to inhabit what they (falsely) believe is a purely conceptual order while at the same time enabling them to satisfy their (sometimes disavowed) need for corporeal contact through their access to women's bodies and services”.^{ix} It also leaves women, homosexuals, and minorities to identify themselves only with the body—but a body stripped of its agency, independent being, and aesthetic acknowledgment.

It should be no surprise, then, that feminist artists of the 1970s reconfigured their embodiment on different terms through performance and the plastic arts, and that the body is regaining some of its meaning because of post-modernity's questioning of previous dialectic. This resurgence has created an audience for work by artists like Kiki Smith (illustration 4), whose meditations on different aspects of the body speak a strong but subtle language. Her depiction of the various shapes, forms, and locations

the body can inhabit never fails to elicit a visceral response. When artists relate to their work from the perspective of embodied cognition, they have the unique ability to share that state of embodiment with the viewer, providing an opportunity for the dichotomy of viewer and viewed to be broken and “other”



Illustration 4: Kiki Smith, Untitled, 2002

existences to be internalized and lived. Just as the artist extends her embodiment through her tools into the art work, the viewer is allowed to “retrace” these relationships when he extends himself, through an imaginary body, into the stored knowledge and assessments embedded there.^x This is the same way a toddler develops hand-eye-coordination through trial and error:

The acquisition of habits is what allows a person to have a sense of freedom and personal existence because it extends the stock of general behaviors that he shares with others into unique ways of living. The body schema, Merleau-Ponty asserts, is not an inert set of habits, but “has something of the momentum of existence.”^{xi}

Breaking down the subject-object dichotomy is a powerful event on both sides, and habitual movements shape existence and relationships with others.

Finally, I want to relate the ways historic economic systems have effected embodied cognition within the aesthetic realm. Capitalism, given its free reign, profits from one existence living off of another, and thus is the enemy of fully embodied experience and maintains separation between self and other. The freedom of a the imagined body requires ample time and space to expand and transform, and having a limited number of resources will fragment and freeze embodied movement. In the late-capitalist period there is a tendency in art to break the body into pieces and capture moments of

movement to make it more commodifiable. This is what Walter Benjamin saw in the “fragment,” the scattered pieces of which he spent his life gathering together. Certain elements in an artwork either resist or facilitate fragmentation.

The artist's mark can frustrate commodification, as embodied cognition perceives time and motion, as well as sight and touch, as interweaving, simultaneous events.^{xii} For a body, movement and touch are essential experiences that are constantly creating new states of being. The act of looking, or the “gaze,” has a kinetic and tactile element that an artist captures with each mark on his surface

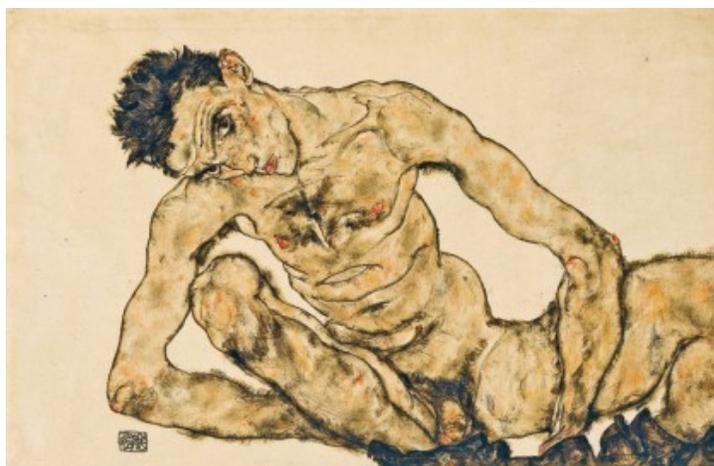


Illustration 5: Egon Schiele, Self Portrait, 1916

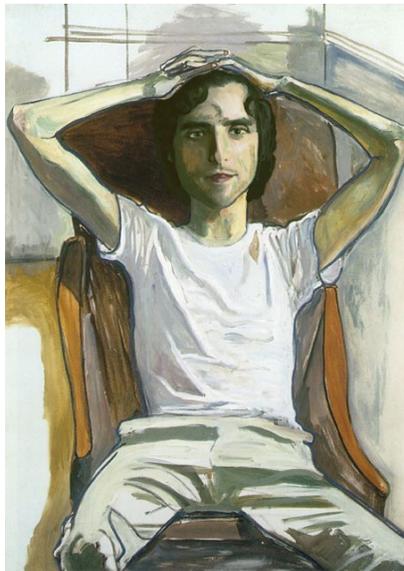
(illustration 5).^{xiii} The kind of experience epitomized in the work of Egon Schiele is nothing less than a deeply confessional moment that unfolds with a continuous intensity of flow conveyed by his undulating and sinuous line. Sensation and time are also captured in the painterly vision of Alice Neel (illustration 6), who gives her subject the freedom to move and exist autonomously even while existing under her gaze. Merleau-Ponty theorized that “as carnal, the aesthetic image is not merely a sign of movement... but the very embodiment of movement, the transposition of movements from kinesthetic impressions to the colors and lines of the artwork... it is by means of the deformation of ordinary experience that the painting is able to expose the imagining body to a deeper sense of its experience of time and motion”.^{xiv} Moments of extension of the imaginary body also create what Benjamin called the

“aura”:

What is aura, actually? A strange web of space and time: the unique appearance of a distance, no matter how close it may be. While at rest on a summer's noon, to trace a range of mountains on the horizon, or a branch that throws its shadow on the observer, until the moment or the hour becomes part of their appearance—this is what it means to breathe the aura of those mountains, that branch.^{xv}

Inside the extension of time and space provided by the mark, the “looker” and “looked-upon” suddenly coalesce into a mutual subjective beyond the power of language: this is the neglected and potentially revolutionary power of aesthetic embodiment.

The rise of photography coincided with the success of industrial capitalism because certain



*Illustration 6: Alice Neel,
Hartley, 1965*

elements of its favored images tend to facilitate commodification.^{xvi} The very nature of the photograph is to stop time, to freeze a moment; this is infinitely useful for analysis but stultifying for full embodiment. When looking at the photographic locomotion studies that Eadweard Muybridge undertook at the University of Pennsylvania (illustration 7), it is hard to tell at first what each subject is doing. One must approach it with the mind to read it and appreciate what it is—by studying motion in this way he has changed movement from an experience to an idea. Looking at the series reveals that the woman is hopping, but most photographs exist as isolated events and don't provide an image before

and after. This is not to say each of these snapshots, taken on its own, cannot hold the body of the viewer; but it deconstructs movement, pauses the element of time, and erases the tactile element of the artist's eye in service of a mechanical one. Because the body is stilled and its sensitivity quantified we interact with it more or less as an object.

The effect of stasis and fragmentation not only occurs in photography (which was harnessed



Illustration 7: Eadweard Muybridge, Locomotion Study, 1880s

early on for commercial purposes) but translates into the plastic arts of the late 19th and 20th centuries as well. A painting like Degas' *Place de la Concorde* (illustration 8) would never have been conceived of before the advent of photography. The way it expresses modern alienation is by cropping the figures and arranging them in the random way a photograph would, putting a separation between the viewer and the meaning of the painting, which relates primarily with the body as an outside object. Its meaning is in the very way it frustrates our understanding of how to imagine it, just as purposes, categories, and relationships at that time were confused by the accelerating changes of industrial capitalism. That the viewer prefers to be disembodied within this photo-influenced aesthetic would be

no surprise considering the decadent, de-personalized culture of the “crowd” that Baudelaire sings in



Illustration 8: Edgar Degas, Place de la Concorde, Les Fleurs du Mal. Something must fill the space of personal meaning embodied in experience, and capitalism rushes in to fill the gap with objects, commodities, and “fetishes.”^{xvii} Benjamin expresses this phenomenon best when he describes loss of “aura” due to mechanical reproduction:

Every day the need to possess the object, from the closest proximity, in a picture—or rather a copy—becomes more imperative. And the difference between the copy, which illustrated papers and newsreels keep in readiness, and the original picture is unmistakable. Uniqueness and duration are as intimately intertwined in the latter as are transience and reproducibility in the former. The peeling away of the object's shell, the destruction of the aura, is the signature of a perception whose sense for all that is same in the world has grown to the point where even the singular, the unique, is divested of its uniqueness—by means of its reproduction.^{xviii}



Illustration 9: Robert Mapplethorpe, Derrick Cross

In no way, however, do I mean say that photography as a medium must necessarily prevent embodied understanding or not possess an “aura.” The most gifted photographers (oftentimes more than painters these days), such as Robert Maplethorpe, have managed to provide a movement and touch in their work that strongly engages with embodied meanings (illustration 9). Maplethorpe's work was controversial precisely because it poetically embodied the marginalized movements and feelings inherent to alterity in a society that preferred to relate safely to the idea of a contained art “object.”

In contrast, painters such as Chuck Close (illustration 10) de-personalize their subjects using techniques influenced by commercial or scientific photography: de-humanizing them by blowing them up over-life-size, preventing the body from speaking by closely cropping small details, and separating them from our sensations by using his mark to imitate mechanical modes of reproduction. Again,



Illustration 10: Chuck Close, Maggie, 1996

Close gives us the conceptual aesthetic of the art “object”; this kind of work drives and will be welcomed by capitalism because it reinforces disembodied meanings.

The series of discoveries related here were put in motion by dynamics I sensed in my own work and life. They go beyond such arguments such as formalism vs. conceptualism and functional vs. aesthetic to reveal another world of meaning in art that was there all along, but seldom discussed. Embodiment theory when applied to aesthetics sheds light upon not only our visceral responses to

beauty but also the contexts that shape it and that it shapes. When embodiment is accepted as a goal of art, it moves the artist out of the world of the mind and the product into a spontaneous, integrated experience of creation. By recognizing that the body shapes the mind we liberate our existence from that which is grounded in a world of external objects and see different possibilities for political and economic life.

My own work has shifted in vital ways in response to this orientation. Since one of the ways I became aware of embodied cognition was through the practice of yoga, I have started to paint a series of bodies in yoga poses that come out of the extension of my own imaginary body and play with



Illustration 11: Marichyasana, 2011

possible forms the viewer will understand in his own body. To this end the careful study of anatomy is essential, because it refines understanding of the position and movement of the forms of the body.

Color is also a vital component as it gives further meaning to movement, rhythm and emotion through the workings of synesthesia while announcing the event as a painted surface. By isolating these factors in my painting I find an intense unfolding of being and materiality that both conveys a direct poetry of simple existence and gives an opportunity to imagine new forms of embodiment, language, and ideas.

- i Bracha Ettinger. "Matrix and metamorphosis", *differences: a Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, vol. 4, no. 3 (Fall 1992), p.1.
- ii Steeves James B. *Imagining Bodies: Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy of Imagination*, Duquesne University Press, Pittsburg: 2004, p. 60.
- iii Head, H.; G. Holmes. "Sensory disturbances from cerebral lesions". *Brain* **34** (2–3), 1911: p. 102.
- iv Lakoff, George and Mark Johnson. *Philosophy in the Flesh: the Embodied Mind and the Challenge to Western Thought*, Basic Books: 1999, pp. 50-54.
- v Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington: 1994, p.5.
- vi Grosz, 190-192.
- vii Brink, Ingar. "Situated Cognition, Dynamic Systems, and Art: On Artistic Creativity and Aesthetic Experience," *Janus Head*, 9(2), 407-431, ed. Shaun Gallagher, Trivium Publications, Amherst, NY: 2007, p. 418.
- viii Grosz, 3-4.
- ix Grosz, 14.
- x Brink, 421-427.
- xi Steeves, 22.
- xii Lakoff and Johnson, 54.
- xiii Brink, 421.
- xiv Steeves, 64.
- xv Benjamin, Walter. *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael Jennings, trans. Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter, Harvard University Press, Cambridge: 2008, p. 285.
- xvi Benjamin, 274.
- xvii Benjamin, 293.
- xviii Benjamin, 285-286