Twisted bodies: annihilating the aesthetic[1]

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An abstract

The claim that architecture is designed for people is not extravagant, as they both occupy architectural spaces and serve as the scale for their design. That is, the human being and body "consume" and, at the same time, delineate architecture. Vitruvius (1st century BC) is rightly believed to be the first theoretician who saw in the human body not only the means but also the aim of architecture. In architectural practice this body has since been perceived as a paragon of excellence and presented mostly as an analogy of perfection and beauty, of a good gestalt and coherent form.

However, in this article I will raise questions about the maimed body in pain, its twisted and not-beautiful shapes. Has the contemporary idea of architecture addressed this body as well? I will introduce the problem, examine its origins and bring examples where the body is analogous to what is abject, distressed and in pain--all this in an attempt to argue that abjectness is inseparable from our lives.

The body-architecture analogy

In recent years various disciplines have shown a resurgent interest in the human body. Always at the forefront of scrutiny, mainly in the arts and sciences, the human body has become a topic of intense debate today also in other fields, such as fashion, industrial design, communications, architecture and, of course, in the classic disciplines of psychology, anthropology, sociology, economics; even literary studies and philosophy resound widely with questions about the status of the human being and body. This emphasis on bodily aspects raises a vast range of questions. Is the rekindled debate merely a revision of what was once debated but later somehow neglected and forgotten, or is this our natural, yet to be exhausted, curiosity eager to probe deeper at a propitious time? Does the preoccupation with the body spell discontent with its roles in many of the disciplines that should have highlighted its share in the definition of the modern human being's status? Or does the return to the body represent a refreshing, previously unknown, point of view after longstanding, deeply ingrained sexual stereotypes have been discarded?

Though we will be unable to offer an unequivocal answer to all these questions, facts

[1] I want to thank Beatrice Smedley for translating and editing this paper.

seem to defy arguments. Thus, one cannot deny that today the body stars in more disciplines than 20 years ago, and even architecture, which boasts a long tradition of focus on the body, has returned once again to this topic, raising new speculations that seemed fantastic and inadmissible a mere generation ago.

Architecture is, indeed, a special case. It does not examine the human being as a body, nor does it claim to present the human body as do the visual arts, fashion, photography, film, and certainly not as do post-modern theories on the connections between the body and sexuality. Still, architecture does deal extensively with the human being, in particular his body,[1] and the publications honoring the body and its connections with architectural values are not fewer than in other disciplines.

If this is how matters stand, and analogous lines run between architecture and the human being, what is, then, the connection between architecture and the human body or, to refine the question, is the reference to the body immanent to architecture, a sine qua non if we are to understand its intentions, or does this analogy serve the pedagogical purpose of better explaining the architect's working process?

I would like to argue that the analogy between architecture and the human body is not fortuitous and certainly not trivial, nor does it merely teach us how to read an architectural work. Architecture and the body are two sides of the same coin: on the one hand, architecture views the human being as its purpose, that is, people populate architectural spaces--cities, their squares, streets and buildings that make up the human environment--and, as such, are the natural consumers of architecture, which plans, designs and builds for them. On the other hand, architecture uses images of the human body to justify its contents as paragons and examples of harmonious and proportional structures, but also as a measure for creating a proper and commendable environment suitable to human needs. Notable examples that address the human body include, of course, Vitruvius, whom I will discuss further below, and Le Corbusier who has designed numerous buildings in Europe, mainly during the fifties collaborating with Nadir Afonso (an architect and an eminent artist) using the 'Modulor' - a 'housing unit'[2] as a principle of proportion. In these two examples,[3] although distant in both time and their visions of the human being,

1. A broader scope of the issue is discussed in *Flesh and Stone: the body and the city in Western Civilization* written by Richard Sennett, W. W. Norton and company, 1994. See especially chapter 8 'Moving bodies' in which William Harvey's revolution in anatomy and its influence on city planning, is presented.

2. In French 'Unite d'habitation' also literarily translated as 'housing unity'.

3. One more example worth noticing is Orlan's *MesuRAGEs* project in which she lies on a floor of a building, marks with a chalk her body, repeating her action till the floor is full with a display of Orlan-corps. See a detailed review in *Carnal Art: Orlan's Refacing* by: C. Jill O'Bryan, University of Minnesota press 2005, p. 8.

the body and architecture function on two distinct levels, with a one-way analogy stretching from architecture to the human body, which serves here as a sort of schema for the architectonic structure. Against this example one can pit the post-modern architectural conception that refers to the body's connotations and not only its limbs, as does Ayn Rand in her novel *The Fountainhead*. Rand describes the limbs of the toned, virile body of the architect Howard Roark as though they were quarried from rock; it is on them he models his buildings. Although there is no direct connection between architecture and bodily features, the very drawing of such an analogy points to a reversal in the architectural view of the human body: from the body as a model--for Vitruvius and Le Corbusier--to an interpretation of the body as a metaphor for the building's power, as evident in the collection of projects *Stud: Architecture of Masculinity*,[1] which discusses images of the masculine body in architecture.

The "affair" between architecture and the body, isn't new, then, and Vitruvius was, as noted, the first to refer to the human body and the human being himself as a means that offers architects working methods he deemed crucial if architecture was to serve its aims properly. His treatise *On Architecture* features a hefty compendium of instructions on how to build well-proportioned and properly scaled buildings. The following quote eminently describes the classical architectonic paradigm, which, trickling into the discipline, has become a timeless model:

> Proportion consists in taking a fixed module, in each case, both for the parts of a building and for the whole, by which the method of symmetry is put into practice. For without symmetry and proportion no temple can have a regular plan; that is, it must have an exact proportion worked out after the fashion of the members of a fine-shaped human body".[2]

Let us examine Vitruvius' central claim implied in this passage. First, however, I must refer the reader to a similar position held in the 5th century BC by Aristotle, who claims that an indispensable code underpins a well turned out tragedy that imitates well the characters' lives. The tangents drawn between art and an external factor aren't new, then. Vitruvius is following an already paved road when he uses the human body to establish standardization in architecture. Let us consider the analogy Vitruvius draws between architecture and a 'fine shaped human body' rather than the human body as such. The emphasis on 'fine-shaped' raises the question of what underlies the choice of such a human being, rather than any other,

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1. Joel Sanders (ed.), *Stud: architecture of masculinity,* Princeton, 1966. See also George Dodds and Robert Tavernor, *Body and Building: essays on the changing relation of body and architecture,* MIT press 2002. Susan Bordo, *The Male body: a new look at men in public and in private,* Farrar, Straus and Giroux (New York), 1999

2 Vitruvius, *On Architecture,* translated into English by Frank Granger, Harvard U. press, 1932, p. 159

as analogous to architecture. Are only the proportions of a fine-shaped human being suitable to the temples the Roman architect envisions? What about the person who does not diet and work out every morning, whose bodily proportions are not those Vitruvius set down in his treatise? Are the proportions of an unattractive person not sufficiently human? Furthermore, did Vitruvius' world teem only with perfectly proportioned people, and, therefore, he required the architect to imitate the perfect body as a basis of standard proportions? Or did Rome display the very opposite, people with regular human rather than ideal proportions, and, to correct this flaw, at least in architecture (as Renaissance painters were to do later), Vitruvius set the ideal body as a model, shunning the body structures of regular people. All these questions share yet another question, namely, why Vitruvius chose the human body at all rather than another external factor for his architectural instructions.

Vitruvius' analogy, certainly not trivial but informed by the view that set the human being and his body at the center, was already drawn in the 5th century BC by the ancient Greeks. They addressed the human body from every possible point of view, investing it with a wide range of meanings that were to animate its perception and description throughout Western culture. Quite plausibly, ancient Greece played this role because, unlike in the Middle Ages, no distinct disciplines had yet emerged, such as religion, myth and mythology on the one hand, and painting, sculpture, theater, philosophy and science, on the other. No pure disciplines free of mutual influences existed in ancient Greece, and the myths, the central axis of daily life, were actually the language of artists, playwrights, philosophers and scientists. In poetry, fiction and even the visual arts, such as painting and sculpture, this self-evident influence requires no justifications, but when the language of mythology is used in the sciences, especially anatomy, a rather developed field in ancient Greece, an explanation is called for: must an anatomical description leave the body untainted by defining and descriptive concepts of the period? Must the scientist ignore the culture he lives in, the beliefs of his contemporaries, their religious principles, myths and mythology and examine the object of his study objectively without any apparently external connections or influences? Is the demand for objectivity possible or an unquenchable yearning? These questions, which inflected the attitude of ancient Greeks toward the human body, defined the latter much as did Vitruvius, although his conception of the body transcended its mechanical system of organs and invested it with a metaphoric meaning. To illustrate this point we will return to ancient Greek art, theater and mythology, which illuminate the human body from two angles: the concrete body moving within the space and time of the play's characters and the eternal body transcending concrete time and space as a symbol of balance (or imbalance) between the human being and his fate.

Sophocles' tragedies are a case in point. The first play in the trilogy tells of Oedipus the King, the cause and effect of the moral imbalance that stems from his very existence as a human being, despite his bravery, wisdom and cleverness. A mortal who solves the riddle of the Sphinx, he unsettles the status quo between the gods and people, paving the way for a chain of transgressions that began with his birth, his abandonment, feet bound, on the mountain, his marriage to his mother and the birth of his four children, and up to the grim end when he plucks out his eyes and is banished from his country. At each of these stages the human body is the ground where the drama of unsettled mythical balance unfolds: between the gods' metaphysics and human life, between the cosmic order and the triviality of earthly events, between the concrete body and the metaphoric body. Nor is the human body absent in the trilogy's third play, where Antigone asks to bury her brother in defiance of King Creon's decree that forbids his burial because he betrayed Thebes. This is not the place to examine the complex conflict between loyalty and treason, between the king's decree and Antigone's flouting of the law, though we should
point out that the entire play revolves around a dead human body that functions as a central image in the disturbed balance between the royal decree and Antigone's conscience, between death and Antigone's fate.

Not only tragedies but comedies, too, address the body. Aristophanes' *Lysistrata*, written probably in 411 BC during the Peloponesian wars (430-404 BC) between Athens and Sparta, is among the famous. In the play Lysistrata tries to convince the women of Sparta and Athens to abstain from sexual relations with men to make them stop the war. In the best of Greek writing tradition, Aristophanes does not forgo graphic descriptions of both male and female sexual organs and erotic scenes verging on pornography in order to portray human weaknesses and steer bodily passions into the ideological conflict between Athens and Sparta. Many mythological stories flash through the lines, such as the myth of creation and the birth of Gaia's and Uranus' children, the story of the Amazons, and, of course, all the stories about the gods' seductions and betrayals.

But the ancient Greeks looked at and learned about themselves not only in the theater. The much more accessible arts of painting and sculpture presented the bodies of women and men not only as ornaments or aesthetic expressions. Set in a mythic context, the paintings of women and men depicted impossible imaginary situations. This may be why for the ancient Greeks art mediated between mythology and daily reality, between the metaphysical and the physical, serving as a sort of shield for the individual. It is not fortuitous that Aristotle lists catharsis as an important element of tragedy, as it is the only way to see in art allusions to daily life and so-called realistic scenes, even if these are hard, though relevant, to our lives.

In this sense Aristotle was the first, if not the most rigorous, theoretician who understood that art was not only an aesthetic but also a pedagogical activity. Art seeks to present the imaginary, the desirable rather than the extant at a particular moment, to highlight the probable[1] rather than only concrete reality as such. Art, then, infuses an apparently trivial reality with an ideational, sublime dimension that rhymes with the gods. The implied tone in Aristotle's claim that the artist must present the universal through the particular and set down the concrete as he highlights the general truth is noteworthy, as it opens the door to metaphoric representations--key mediators in the complete presentation of the concrete.

Vitruvius was well aware that art played this role, whose application in architecture was not fortuitous nor devoid of historical context. His argument isn't, therefore, trivial, if only because in those times, too, the body's arena was not exhausted by the circumscribed field of anatomy but symbolized, more than anything else, the Zeitgeist that was to peak in the Renaissance. After all, ancient Greece, Rome and Renaissance Florence, too, were swarming with fat and thin, tall and short people, not to speak of the variously disabled. Nevertheless, Vitruvius and the architects of the following generations ignored these variations and exhorted young architects to learn from the image of the perfect, ideational human body that thrived in their wild imagination or, at least, in the world of Platonic ideas.

Surprisingly enough, the theories of Vitruvius resonate even today among contemporary architects, despite the shifts the images of the human body have undergone in art and science. An unusual example in this context is the fascinating work of the architect Le Corbusier who, unlike his colleagues, boasted he was able to and really did infuse the theory of Vitruvius with a modern meaning when he built, inspired by him, what he termed "the Modulor"--a house adapted to the average human body--with the intention of harmoniously organizing his environment inside and outside his home. Located in Marseille, the apartments feature units with proportions adapted to each family member: the rooms for adults are larger than those for children, the proportions of the family living room differ from those of the bedroom and kitchen, etc. Yet for Le Corbusier, says Anthony Vidler, "the body acted as the central reference"[2] and is considered the last, to some extent even pathetic, if not tragic, survivor among a community of architects who remained loyal to the model proposed by Vitruvius, and although some architects look to the human body for inspiration, most, certainly unlike Vitruvius, perceive the body as a

1. "It is evident, however, from what has been said, that it is not the function of the poet to relate what has happened, but what may happen, - what is possible according to the law of probability or nescessity." Aristotle, *Poetics* IX 1, translated by: S. H., Butcher, *Aristotle's theory of Poetry and Fine Art,* Dover publications, 1951.

[2] Anthony Vidler, *The Architectural Uncanny: essays in the modern unhomely,* MIT press,1994, p. 90.

metaphor.

Vidler attributes the rift between classical architecture, in which the building's adequacy is based on the analogy to bodily proportions, and an architecture free of Vitruvian anthropomorphism, to Edmund Burke, the 18th-century Irishman, known also for his religious stance precisely during the Enlightenment, which has tried to throw off the shackles of religion and tradition. Despite his religious-ethical world view, Burke sees in the human being a limited creature subject to the evolutionary laws of nature rather than to divine powers. There is a reason why we hear Burke anticipate the later Charles Darwin, who saw nothing sublime either in the human being but studied him as yet another link in nature's random evolution. Against this background, as general and sketchy as it may be, Vidler's quote from Burke's famous treatise *Philosophical Inquiry* expresses staunch opposition to the analogy between architecture and the human body. Burke disdains the Vitruvian human being, claiming that

> To make thus forced analogy complete, they represent a man with his arms raised and extended at full length, and then describe a sort of square… It appears very clearly to me, that the human figure never supplied the architect with any of these Ideas…. Men are very rarely seen in this strained posture; it is not natural to them; neither it is all becoming… Certainly nothing could be more unaccountably whimsical, than for an architect to model his performance by the human figure, since no two things can have less resemblance or analogy, than man, and a house or a temple".[1]

Burke's rejection of the analogy dear to Vitruvius and the advocates of proportion who walked in his footsteps unsettles the foundations of the Aristotelian theory that evaluated art by its ability to create sublime, imaginary realities. Instead, art is to be grasped through the human senses, that is, it passes muster as good art if it elicits feelings. If we apply this claim to architecture we realize that Burke does not remove the body from the debate on the discipline's nature, but against the perfect, sublime body depicted in Leonardo da Vinci's famous drawing, he pits the body as it is--the subjective body moving through architectural spaces, with its sensations and impressions as the measure for the building's nature and value.

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[1]Burke, E., *Philosophical Enquiry into the Origins of our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful,* p. 100 cited from Vidler 1994, p. 72. The same passage is cited in the *Opening Statement* by Deborah Hauptman (ed.), in her *The Body in Architecture,* Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 2006. Introducing Burk's challnge of the Vitruvian body in the very first page of her book is of no coincidence, stressing the point that Architecture should not be based on 'a forced analogy, namely, the ideas of regularity, geometry and proportion as deriving from the human body and being considered the *efficient cause* for beauty in architecture'.

The advent of the ugly and distorted

Burke's critique of Vitruvius seeped deeply into architecture, whose quest has shifted increasingly to emotion and surprise, often at the expense of functionality. Salient examples would be the works of such architects as Daniel Libeskind (The Jewish Museum in Berlin), Frank Gehry (Bilbao), I. M. Pei (Javits Convention Center in New York), to mention only a few of the current star architects who seem to have carefully read Burke's brief observation that the test of art, including architecture, is its ability to call forth emotions: fear, anxiety, dread and, of course, empathy, joy, etc. In this context Robert Venturi's well-known book *Learning from Las Vegas*[1] (1972) is noteworthy, as it takes issue with Bauhaus sterility in favor of an architecture that conveys the spirit of the place and, therefore, strikes deeper chords than the universal pretentiousness suggested by buildings aiming at the proportional and the sublime without any reference to their time and place.

It is in this vein that we are to read many theoretical works on architecture with ample references to theoreticians who, were it not for the turnabout in architecture, we would have hardly seen their traces in this discipline: Sigmund Freud, Luce Irrigaray, Judith Butler, Andrew Benjamin, Anthony Vidler, Umberto Eco, Tali Hatuka and Rachel Kallus,[2] who have ushered in a new approach to the twisted, ugly, aching, sexual body.

As a gambit to all these, I must refer to Freud's famous essay *The Uncanny* (1919), where he analyzes a feeling that is neither fear nor anxiety but a special emotion that stems from the repression of a childhood experience of dread. Among the many examples he includes the dread triggered by automatons moving in space, the recurrent appearance of an object, event or person in our regular surroundings or on our itineraries, such as a certain number in various contexts, or the sudden looming of a person we just thought about, getting lost in an unknown city, and even identical twins, who offer no apparent reason for the discomfort and even dread such identical doubling elicits. Finally, Freud lists as uncanny also certain literary and dramatic characters and events. The ugly, the distorted and the disproportional encountered in art do not elicit fear or anxiety but, rather, discomfort and at times even an uncanny sense that they are about to unsettle the social order.

To continue Freud's idea, we could say that the sense of uncanniness is contrary to the emotion elicited by the beautiful, the sublime, the harmonious and the proportional. The latter offer an experience of pleasure and tranquility, whereas the

[1]Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown, Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas: the forgotten symbolism of architectural form,* MIT press 1092

[2] Tali Hatuka and Rachel Kallus, "Body", Rachel Kallus and Tali Hatuka (eds.), *Architectural Culture: Place, Representation, Body,* Resling, 2005, pp. 243-254 (in Hebrew)

crippled, imbalanced, wounded call forth discomfort and even dread without any apparent reason. Still, in many cases, something beautiful and harmonious can also provoke dread if presented exaggeratedly with surprising elements.

I have chosen to open with Freud because two brief passages in his essay refer to architecture. I have already mentioned finding oneself in an unfamiliar street in an unfamiliar city: here the dread stems from the tourist's sudden disorientation as he is looking for his hotel yet returns over and over to the same street he wants to leave behind. The second example is our own home when the lights suddenly go off and we grope in highly familiar hallways but are hard put to find our way in the dark. Both cases elicit a sense of uncanniness and disquiet, not because a figure or an object suddenly appeared in our environment or because a jarring sound burst from an unknown source. We experience uncanniness because our place has become distorted and different, and the familiar and predictable are suddenly unclear.

In line with Freud's concept of the uncanny, we could say that from the mid-19th century modern art has aroused feelings that had certainly not been experienced by art viewers in previous centuries. The very reference to non-sublime body images flouts every aesthetic principle prevalent thus far. The aching, the ugly, the dismembered, the bleeding--all these defied the symmetrical, harmonious body, shedding a critical light on the past with a slice of concrete life in all its grotesque and tragic aspects. This transgression also meant to constitute a new but actually familiar image of the human body ever since--ailing, aching and bleeding--though art, literature, theater and architecture had blurred, if not concealed, its representation. Does this omission stem from the dread elicited by gruesome sights? Has the body in pain been hidden by the fear that it might be perceived as trivial and banal compared to the unequalled sacredness of Jesus' martyred body? Could the image of the sick, distorted body have changed the very order of such fields as architecture, which used the healthy, harmonious and symmetrical body as a paradigm for a gestalt worthy of imitation?

With these questions in mind, let us examine the body images that emerged in the wake of the French Revolution and whether modern architecture has been mindful of the shift in body images or has remained loyal to the Vitruvian vision of architecture as an imitation of the beautiful body.

Images of the fragmented body in modernism

I first became interested in body images in art after reading Linda Nochlin's[1] short

[1]Linda Nochlin, *The body in pieces: the fragment as a metaphor of Modernity,* Thames and Hudson, 1994

book *The Body in Pieces*. Its much more enticing subtitle specifies what the title implies, who the body pieces belong to and in what context they are discussed. Indeed, *The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity* not only reveals the book's tenor but also explains how to spot modernity, which, the author claims, "invented" fragmentariness. That is, the consummate expression of modernity can be found in the body's depiction in art: the greater the fragmentariness, the firmer the body's status as image and metaphor, and, as such, it enhances modernism. Nochlin locates the rift between traditional art and modern art during the French Revolution, and, strange and morbid as this may sound, she considers the guillotine a device that "ushered in the modern period, which constituted the fragment as a positive rather than a negative trope".[1]

Loss, fragments, the dismembered body are the most apt counter-arguments against "the nostalgia for the past," Nochlin writes, and, in this sense, the emergence of body parts is to be interpreted as the deliberate destruction of whatever is connected to tradition and to what we wrongly perceive as vandalism in the creation of new, unbiased images in art. The guillotine was the first modern mechanical means of execution that stripped the execution of its punitive aspect, turning it into an icon of modernism that purged society of the burden of the old world. While we shudder at the sight of the guillotine and the executions during the French Revolution, in those years they were perceived as a dramatic change in the politics of punishment. If, up to the revolution, the treatment of the convict's body was driven by fundamentalist motives, that is, the restoration of the old order, as in Socrates' case, or selfish motives (kings executed political rivals), never had people been executed, as during the French Revolution, in the name of the Enlightenment and the promotion of humane values, such as freedom, equality and brotherhood. Not surprisingly, artists from all the arts praised and documented the guillotine as the first soldier fighting for lofty values, and the results of executions--heads, hands, legs, etc.--were presented as symbols of progress rather than mere expressions of cruelty or terror.

Indeed, many paintings feature a severed head held by a revolutionary, recalling paintings of David holding Goliath's head or of Judith beheading Holofernes (the latter by Artemisia Gentileschi, 1635). Despite the time gap and horror, in both cases the severed limb is meant to elicit not only revulsion or dread but also positive connotations. Once the dismembered body settled as a legitimate display in art, the door opened, mainly from the 19th century onward, for many artists who saw the body in general, but also their own, as a ground to express social, national and existential values. Let us recall that during the French Revolution, when both France

[1] Ibid. p. 8

and Europe were plagued by social and political disorder, quite a few members of the middle class used the circumstances to tout libertine ideas. Contrary to traditional society, which venerated the family and social status, the revolution granted, mainly to men but also to quite a few women, the freedom to meet in cafés, bars and pubs. Free to consume, among others, luxury, fashion and pornographic literature, many, as noted by Margaret C. Jacob[1], became aware of their erotic body, of their passions and appetites, which could at last be quenched.

People suddenly discovered that life was not underpinned only by ideas, values and religion, that there were bodies and objects, that the human being had a body whose behavior did not depend on the soul only. The body turned out to be a historical entity but, unlike most other objects, not to speak of the ideas, values and laws by which we live, it has not undergone changes and upheavals in its appearance and functions, nor has it become more sophisticated. Throughout history the human body has remained constant: a complicated, complex system of organs and limbs, whose deviation from normative functioning is perceived as an unusual event, leaving us powerless before the body's overall definition. If anatomical changes did occur, they were external and artificially introduced in order to police the body and restore its normative functioning.

Our insights about the body's essence call for, then, the solution of the following paradox: on the one hand we are aware of the concrete private body, which, as noted, has not changed and will most probably not change dramatically in the future; on the other hand, we cannot ignore the body images depicted by scientists, theologians, philosophers, artists, playwrights, writers and poets, but also architects, who do look at the physical body yet build around it images that do not dovetail its concrete existence. Given this paradox between the concrete body and its images, we cannot but ask where the body is, and which of the above possibilities describes it better. The human body seems to be an enigma: since we have a body, it is accessible and familiar to everyone but its definition in a historical context, the attendant images, the philosophical and psychological dilemmas it raises in the arts and sciences indicate that the body is a "chameleon-like concept" that functions in our discourse as both a physical object and a metaphor. It was Théodore Géricault, in the fledgling years of modernism, who offered the most arresting metaphorical expression of dismembered, scattered human limbs. In a series of paintings of severed limbs he underscored absence, setting hands, legs, heads next to each other

[1] M. C., Jacob, "The materialist world of pornography", in: Hunt, L., (ed.), *The Invention of Pornography: obscenity and the origin of Modernity 1500-1800,* New York 1993, pp. 157-202, See especially p. 159

as though in an anatomical display of lifeless body parts devoid of context and meaning, as though they were mere limbs bereft of any address or identity, limbs that belonged to no one in particular, lacked history and could not explain what they were doing and how they entered the painting.

Théodore Géricault, *Severed limbs*, 1818

Many artists who came of age with the French Revolution, among them Théodore Géricault, painted the maimed human body. Without memories of the revolution, these paintings would have hardly been accepted. In 1816 Géricault painted also an execution in Italy, wounded soldiers lying on a cart (1818) and a man with a leg prothesis standing in front of a Louvre guard. As noted, these paintings offered harrowing depictions of the guillotine and of France's status and situation in the wake of the Napoleonic wars, as though to remind us that against Napoleon's imperial image (he had been painted by Géricault himself) were pitted human shards as a historical warning of a leader's hubris, a leader who disdained no means to glorify himself. These paintings, says Nochlin, are a reminder for art historians who address the human body only from the iconographic point of view, ignoring its physical, aching and tormented corporeality, which represents, as in the above example, events in the history of France. Nochlin's claim would have been tenable had Géricault been the only one to paint such sights at the time. In this case we would have had to interpret his paintings as historical documents rather than as a metaphorical expression of the human condition. But since Géricault did not work in a vacuum, and since quite a few artists of that period and even later used the body as a central theme in their work, we could hardly accept uncritically Nochlin's claim that this is not iconographic painting. The artists of the French Revolution, as well as those of the 20th century, such as Cindy Sherman, Franco B, Orlan, the Chapman brothers and others, whose work we will examine further below, would not have won such acclaim and legitimacy were it not for the shifts in the vision of the human body with the emergence of scientific materialism several years prior to the French Revolution. This is not the place to expand on this subject, yet it should be noted that scientific materialism emerged concomitantly with the spreading of Protestantism and, later, Calvinism.

There were not only essential theological differences between Catholicism and the

surge of Protestantism and Calvinism. The new radical Christian movements, in particular, exerted a marked influence on science and, therefore, on the definition of the human body in the arts. Science saw this turning point in the work of William Harvey[1], who studied the function of the blood vessels, heart and heart valve structure and defined them contrary to the then prevalent approach influenced by Galen, who had written about the structure of the human body and even drawn sketches, now lost. A Platonist, Galen had described the circulatory system in spiritual terms--oxygenated blood carried "vital spirits," whereas the blood returning from the body lacked them.

As it often happens in science and, of course, also in art, the paradigm for a turning point does not originate in the field itself but is animated by external factors. One influential paradigm was philosophy, which, at least in the period under discussion, was closer to science than it is today. Indeed, materialism is usually seen as straddling the religious turning point and philosophical positions, from Thomas Hobbes, through René Descartes and up to Julien de la Mettrie[2] (1709-1751), a physician and philosopher who is, I believe, the most pertinent to our context: in his book *L'Homme Machine* (1748) he mocks the Platonic view, stating that the human being is a machine. De la Mettrie expands here the thesis about the human body elaborated by Descartes, who may have been among the first to propose the machine as a model for understanding the body but, as a rationalist, he remained loyal to the soul's role and God's centrality. De la Mettrie bypasses these two elements but, fearing persecution by the Church, he uses Descartes' reference to God as a ploy that would enable him to publish his work.

De la Mettrie wrote works on dysentery and asthma, and when *L'Homme Machine* was published a coalition of Protestant and Catholic priests protested his view that

> Man is so complicated a machine that it is impossible to get clear idea of the machine before-hand and hence impossible to define it. For this reason, all the investigations have been in vain, which the greatest philosophers have made *a priori*, that is to say, in so far as they use, as it were, the wings of the spirit. Thus it is only *a posteriori* or by trying to disentangle the soul from the organs of the body, so to speak, that one cam reach the highest probability concerning man's own nature, even though one can not discover certainly what nature is.[3]

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[1] See an extensive discussion on Harvey's contribution to the understanding of the cardiovascular system in: Jonathan Miller, "The Pump, Harvey and circulation of the blood", in: J. M. Bradburne (ed.), *Blood, Art, Power, Politics and Pathology,* Munchen 1990, pp. 149-155
[2] Julien Offray de la Mettrie, *Man a Machine,* La Salle, Illinois 1961
[3] Ibid. p. 89

In other words, the materialist de la Mettrie seeks to replace the Platonistic, non-empirical research methods prevalent until Harvey's time with scientific materialist methods that treated the human body as a machine not driven by the soul.

It is not clear whether Hobbes', Descartes' and, later, de la Mettrie's materialism directly influenced the artists of their times, but the very circulation of this theory in many intellectual venues at the time must be given its due in a discussion of the body's place in the visual arts. I cannot review here the entire baroque period, which seems to have responded more than any other to materialist principles, but paintings by such artists as Caravaggio *(The Crucifixion of St. Paul*, 1601), Rubens (*Descent from the Cross*, 1611) and, especially, Rembrandt's painting *The Anatomy Lesson of Dr. Tulp*,
1632, which depicts a guild of surgeons headed by Dr. Tulp operating on the just executed young criminal Aris Kindt, leave no doubt about the sharp divergence from the Vitruvian, that is, beautiful, human being worshipped 150 years earlier, during Renaissance.

Rembrandt, *Doctor Nicolaes Tulp's Demonstration of the Anatomy of the Arm* (1632)

It is in this vein that we are to look at the works of Géricault, and although I don't know whether he had read de la Mettrie's *L'Homme Machine*, the very reference to the human body and its parts indicates that the physician's work was known and had somehow reached the painter's doorstep. Because, if any visual representation does loyally depict de la Mettrie's thoughts about the body's materiality, it is in Géricault's morbid paintings. Let us recall that in those years, when he painted these paintings and *The Medusa's Raft* (1818-19), Mary Shelley published *Frankenstein* (1818), which blends pseudo-medical anatomical descriptions with the typically romantic desire for immortality.

Still, the force of Géricault's works lies not only in the depiction of severed limbs but in the highlighted absence, the disappearance of the concrete body, with the remnants as sole testimony to its existence. Do Géricault's paintings anticipate Jean Baudrillard's idea of simulacra? Do they foresee the condition of the postmodern

human being, whose life is steered by an invisible hand? Though these were probably not Géricault's thoughts, one can easily read his works also a prologue to the works of many artists, such as Man Ray, Gilbert and George, Cindy Sherman, Maurizio Cattelan, Vanessa Beecroft, Sally Mann's corpse photographs, Dinos and Jake Chapman, Sigalit Landau, Robert Maplethorpe, and such performance artists as Ron Athey, Franco B and Orlan. All these represent the simulacra, the remnant or the ersatz of the concrete, so much so that the real connection with the reality to which they are doomed is lost. They all share, then, the dilemma between concreteness and fantasy, between the object as it was meant to be - complete, full, apparently extant - and what the artist actually presents, what seems, at least at first sight, partial, a remnant, an allusion from which we are to infer the complete narrative.

Does not the reference to the body in the works of these artists conceal an unruly desire to look at the *I*, at any *I*, even the homely, and don't the gaze at the distorted and ugly, the scouring of the body and its remnants aim to breach body images in order to reach out to the concrete, to the true? To answer these questions I will examine three notable artists whose work features the body as a central theme. While their place in postmodern art and their influence on many other artists is indisputable, I would like to show that individually, and certainly as a group, they created body images that resonate in other fields as well, including architecture.

Cindy Sherman, Franco B and Orlan

The artists Cindy Sherman, Franco B and Orlan may not be innovative in setting the body at the center of their work. Already in the 1960s and 1970s quite a number of artists, such as Marina Abramovic, Chris Burden and Joseph Beuys staged similar body performances.[1] Still, there is something new in Sherman, Franco B and Orlan, manifested in their vision of the body not as a means to rebel against earlier, traditional, art, which dealt with the beautiful, the aesthetic and the artistic object. On the contrary: unlike the artists of the 1960s and 1970s, which were the first to use the body to chart a new artistic path, Sherman, Franco B and Orlan have been seeking a new reading of the body itself or, rather, to restore a long since abandoned reading of the body and to present what is abject, aching, rejected and twisted as an inextricable part of our lives. Of these three Orlan is the most extreme with the live broadcast of her surgeries.[2] The various objects inserted under her facial skin distort

[1] An extensive overview of the subject can be found in Tracy Marr and Amelia Jones, *The Artist's body*, Phaidon 2000

[2] Quoting Orlan: Carnal Art open 'a new Narcissistic space which is not lost in its own reflection… So I can see my own body suffering … look again, I can see myself down to my entrails… a new mirror stage', in: Kate Ince,

her image in a sort of simulation of plastic surgeries people undergo to improve their looks. On the other hand, Franco B, who also cuts into his living flesh, offers once every few months a performance of blood dripping from his veins. In this sense Cindy Sherman is the only one of the three not to slash or change her body through real bodily intervention; at most, she disguises herself in her works, creating a fascinating gallery of figures from the repertoire of Hollywood films and sights glimpsed in New York.

In a video of her early work, in which she stages herself in scenes reminiscent of 1950s films, but also in later, more mature, works, where she disguises herself as imaginary figures, Sherman repeatedly raises the question: "Where, then, is the real Cindy Sherman?" Where is the real Cindy Sherman realized--in simulacra, in the artificial look she has created, or in the flesh-and-blood person living her daily life in New York? If so, where, then, is the simulacra? In art, which reveals Cindy Sherman's real passions and desires, or in daily life, which forces her to curb her passions and desires and abide by cultural principles set down by others? To which arena--the one called art or the one called reality--are we to ascribe truth values? And what is the body's place in this story? Is it invoked because it is physical, a concrete object that cannot be disowned and, as such, enables concrete reference, as to other objects surrounding it, such as a chair, table, etc., or does this object's ontological status differ from that of others and, therefore, raises questions about identity, memory, consciousness, which are not the share of regular available objects? Would it be correct to say that Sherman, like other artists who address the body, expresses dichotomies that haunt contemporary culture but were already discussed by Aristotle: concreteness / fantasy, reality / simulacra, true / imaginary?

These questions emerge more poignantly in Sherman's last works from the 1990s, in which she has replaced costumes with dummy parts--hands, legs, faces--to stage morbid scenes reminiscent of horror movies. I will first address her work and show that the body images she has created are neither fortuitous nor trivial, and that their influence on the conception of the human being as a whole and on disciplines touching on the visual arts, such as architecture, helped shatter several mainstream views.

Throughout her artistic career Sherman has used herself as the central theme of her works. In her early works from the 1970s she photographed herself in urban environments, her attire evoking film noir and Hollywood classics. Only in the 1980s do we notice a shift with her imitations of horror film scenes, later echoed in the

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Orlan: Millenial Female (Dress, Body, Culture), Oxford 2000, p. 49. For a broader discussion on Orlan's works, see C. Jill O'Beryan, *Carfnal Art: Orlan's Refacing*, University of Minnesota press, note especiallychapetr 2:
'Looking inside the Human Body'.

dramatic scenes featuring medical dummies and twisted dummy parts. Indeed, after presenting herself as a pig, she photographed vomit and scraps of used clothes; starting in the 1990s she has used dolls as a sort of simulation of the human being and his condition in modern society.

Cindy Sherman, untitled, 1992

While Sherman was not the first to include dolls in her work--Man Ray preceded her with a series of dummies in erotic, at times rather provocative, postures--the very reference to the body as a still life, and not just any but a doll imbued with all our cultural connotations, paints its use in somber colors. Sherman replaces the concrete body with slashed, twisted, maimed, injured dolls. In some works the dolls look at us, laughing madly and grimacing, at times they look at us straight, horrified by what is happening around them. Almost all the works refer explicitly to sex, pornography and death, with special emphasis on the face, sexual organs, severed hands, legs and gaping bellies. Here and there figures wear masks sported in S&M clubs and marginal communities, flaunting body parts with various accessories inserted in them. The abject, disgusting, repulsive, compounded by distortions and crippleness, offer a highly painful visual experience reminiscent of Géricault's, Man Ray's and even Maplethorpe's works. Still, there is a vast difference between Sherman and other artists who address the body in their work, if only because she uses artifacts rather than real body parts, which animate her work with a hysterical aspect that reflects sweeping despair and loss of humanness brought about by the nihilism we are steeped in. In an interview she stated that her works are not meant
to please and comfort. On the contrary, they seek to wake up, "to bite" and elicit self-awareness about the place of the distressed, tormented, aching body as an archetype of modern life and its demands for considerable level of alienation. The shocking effects and added value of this series stem from its intensity, which elicits in the sensitive viewer familiar with art history a self-reflexive response about the body's and his own place vis-à-vis the raw erotic images of these staged photographs.

Elizabeth Smith rightly compares this series to Francisco Goya's well-known work *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters* (1797), which depicts what may happen when human logic falls asleep: the sinister forces hidden just beneath the surface would burst out and settle among us like familiar family members. It is generally assumed that in this work Goya meant to herald the advent of surrealism, but in our context, g despite the distance in time, there is no doubt that Sherman, too, also sees the rotesque as a faithful expression of our *Zeitgeist*. The twisted body is a metaphor for the culture, politics and fragmented life typical of modernity and its nihilism, cynicism, competitiveness and lack of values.

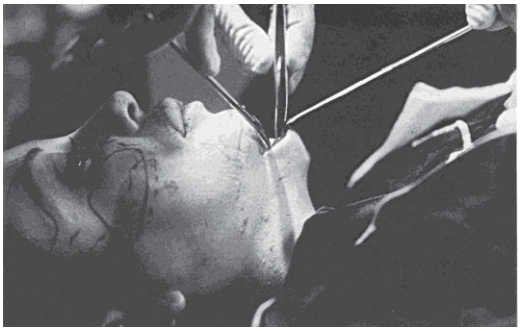
While Sherman expresses her insights through the fantastic realities she builds with dummies, Franco B[1] goes one step further. In his performances he exposes abjectness, distortion and ugliness with his own body, as though sacrificing himself in the very presentation of what is despised, bleeding, wounded and maimed.

Franco B 1998

Most of Franco B's works are very hard to watch, as they touch on sights we would rather avoid. In a television interview he said that his performances touch the raw nerves of the bourgeois who averts his gaze from wretched cripples, beggars, AIDS patients, homeless, refugees from the East, foreign workers, singers and musicians in subway stations, servants, home cleaners and cab drivers who roam the streets of the
big cities in the thousands yet are hardly noticed.

[1] See Susan Hiller's paper "Part of what art is about is to find ways of beginning to say things about the darkness of culture" in: *Franko B*, Block Dog Publishing, no pages indicated. For a much more elaborated analysis of Franko B's works in the context of Carnal Art, see Fransceska Alfano Miglietti "About wounds", in *Extreme bodies: The Use and Abuse of the Body in Art,* Skira, pp. 17-41

In Franco B's work, the bruised, wounded, twisted, aching, punctured, tortured body wallowing in its own blood functions as a lighthouse whose beacon reaches out to our bleak culture. Perhaps, through his performances, he wishes to help us, the viewers, to imagine the evil that may be yet our share in the future. Perhaps he is writing the looming apocalypse on his body, now that the illusions about the eternity of Western culture--with everything it implied about the future of the human species--were shattered. Franco B's performances are unsettling and haunting, his chalk-white painted body casts a spell on the viewer, its shocking self- sacrifice recalls ancient myths in which humans and their body parts were sacrificed to appease the gods. To top it all, Franco B the Catholic believer grants his body sacred status, evoking Jesus' body, and his bleeding veins raise associations familiar to every Westerner. All these elements dialogue with the familiar past and the alienated present, with quite a few clichés about the tragic axis of the modern human being who, despite progress, is unable to escape his body in pain. The very use of the body as a medium, with emphasis on pain and abjectness, is certainly not the only factor that has influenced postmodern architecture, but I have no doubt that the legitimacy Franco B has enjoyed in presenting the ugly and the twisted has sent ripples through other disciplines too, including architecture.



Orlan, *The second mouth*, 1993

Franco B's self-flagellation and Orlan's surgeries function not only as metaphors, they have also deeply affected our conception of human essence. Invasive body performances have triggered an epistemological upheaval not only in the concept "body" but also in the latter's very way of being. For Orlan the body is not a means of artistic practice; she has turned her body and public surgeries, broadcast live throughout the world, into the very purpose of her artistic practice. Facial changes made with a surgical scalpel (it should be noted that only Orlan's face, but never her body, is operated on) offer, on the one hand, a new reading of the concept identity when surgical metamorphosis "grants" a new identity. On the other hand, Orlan's

work suggests that the body is flexible and can be changed any time, that the face is not cast in stone, it is neither sacred, nor beautiful, nor something wrongly perceived as the ideational blueprint of the human body, but a sort of appearance, a battlefield that teaches us about our life. The predilection for pain and distortion in art, for ugliness and the body's decay, its presentation by Sherman, Franco B and Orlan as an assemblage of fragments, a random, trivial collection of limbs--all these indicate to what extent the body, though deemed sacred, is actually a *material* like any other, and hurting it desecrates nothing but only offers a new channel of addressing it. As noted, Orlan is far ahead of the others, as she uses plastic surgery to create natural distortions permanently marked on her face. Instead of correcting and embellishing, as the consumption culture of plastic surgery urges us to do, Orlan uses the same technique and surgical scalpel to offer a subversive reading of the hankering after beauty, perfection and eternal youth. This inversion reflects a cultural ambivalence: people sway between the desired imaginary body and the material body living here and now or, specifically, between Orlan's slashed face expressed in art and the yearning for the perfect face and beautiful body touted in ads. Orlan is, then, the mirror image of our consumption culture and, showing the ugly and distorted other, even if deliberately and artificially created, she offers an alternative to what is perceived as beautiful and perfect.

Epilogue

Can we translate Orlan's, Franco B's, Cindy Sherman's and many other artists' vision of the body into architectural language? Can the twisted and ugly be applied to architecture? Is the Vitruvian analogy valid also when body images do not even skirt the ideational body? Would it be correct to say that the conception of space, envelope and structure in postmodern architecture has been influenced by the aforementioned artists' vision of the body? If so, can the Vitruvian analogy between the body and architecture predict, over and over, architectural "fashions," or is it a pedagogical tool meant, at most, to elucidate and help us better understand architecture without claiming that it deals with factually determined laws? I cannot offer a reply to these questions within the scope of this article, but there is no doubt that Vitruvius' intuition is neither trivial nor lacking implications for contemporary architecture. A considerable number of buildings sport an innovative, revolutionary expression of architectural principles--structure, space and envelope--that challenge prevalent views. It is enough to look at the buildings of Frank Gehry, I. M. Pei, Daniel Libeskind, Zaha Hadid and many others, who, even if they have not been directly influenced by the sweeping shifts in artistic body images, have, for the most

part, defied traditional conceptions in architecture and created dissonances that could not have been realized during Vitruvius' times, when body images were slanted toward beauty, harmony and perfection.