Essays

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THE ARTISTIC RE-CONSTRUCTION OF THE BODY AND THE AESTHETIC DEATH OF REPRESENTATION

Abstract. The central arguments of this article are built around the question of what happens if there is "no more representation" in modern arts today. The author offers a map of the role the body plays in the contemporary civilization and culture, from the vantage point of artistic body representations caused by the aesthetic transformation of bodies in arts and their respective mirroring in the theories of art. The exposure of the materiality of the body, the penetration of virtual bodies into visual arts, the transmutations of human bodies into forms of aesthetic representation, mortification of the flesh and displaying the nudes as art objects devoided of their corporeal relevance are signs of this transformation. All these "conversions" of the body are seen in their relationship to the changes in the society of the spectacle, as Debord defined it. The author suggests that we are witnessing a change of aesthetic regime, one that, by using the human body for a multitude of representations, loses the reference power of the bodies themselves, by an inflation of representations, lead the forces of desire and imagination.

Key words. Body representation, de-corporealisation, aesthetics, simulacra, post-humanism

Yves Michaud and the question of representation

In the very elegant essay that concludes the third volume of the *History of the body* (a cultural history), Yves Michaud[1] puts down in very expressive terms the role of the body in the contemporary civilization and culture.

In the given conditions of a dominant relativism, the body seems to be, according to the French thinker, our only "element of support", in the total collapse that engulfed the entire world, its elements are pulverized into a myriad of representations and perspectives. The

1 Yves Michaud, „Vizualizări. Corpul şi artele vizuale", in *Istoria corpului*, vol. III, p. 491. *Istoria corpului. III. Mutaţiile privirii. Secolul XX*, volum coordonat de Jean-Jacques Courtine, traducere din limba franceză de Simona Manolache, Mihaela Arnat, Muguraş Constantinescu, Giuliano Sfichi, Bucureşti, Editura Art, 2009, [Histoire Du Corps T.3; Les Mutations Du Regard. Editions du Seuil, 2006]

body remained the "reference point (a privileged reference point) to which we refer to in order to perceive as selves" and to which we go as a last resort in order to observe "with an objectivity that is dissabused, sinister or indifferent, the transformations and tensions induced by social reflexivity".

Using an intercultural citation, Michaud invokes, at his turn, the end of the 1976 book of Michel Foucault, *La volonté de savoir*[2], where the father of social constructivism wrote that sex has become "the **imaginary** (author's stress) unmovable point where everyone of us must go through in order to have access to his own intelligibility, to the totality of his body, to his identity (...). Sex has become more important than our soul, almost more important than our life".

In order to describe the contemporary situation, Michaud suggests a simple, but revelatory substitution: "we must only replace the word 'sex' with the word 'body' and to suppress 'almost': our body has become more important than our soul, he has become more important than our life".

During the three decades separating the two books there have been, according to Michaud, decisive mutations in our cultural attitude towards the body. In the "frozen materialism" that came upon us,

in the meantime not only the classical representation of the body, but **any form of representation** has ceased: "we cannot speak of new representations of the body, with the distancing involved by representation, for the simple reason that there is **no more representation** (author's stress). The images confront us with a nude reality, one that we cannot appropriate anymore, because its symbolic and metaphoric dimension that allowed representation has volatilized. The body coincides, somehow, with itself without the possibility to subjectivize or objectivize it anymore. (...) Where we used to have consciences, souls, phantasies and desires, there is now only a body with its signs (...) The confrontation with oneself has become (...) a confrontation with a body towards which we cannot take distance anymore". No matter how seductive his formulation, Yves Michaud's hypothesis reveals a certain type of ontologically questionable commitment.

At a first level, the definition of the body as a place of identity[3] can generate the confusion that a postmodern writer like Michaud shares a presupposition that is as naïve as that of his opponents: that "veritable" reality is reducible to the physical reality. Because of this presupposition (suspect in itself), we

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2 Michel Foucault, *Histoire de la sexualité*, vol. I, *La Volonté de savoir*, Gallimard, Paris, col. „Bibliothèque des histoires", 1976, p. 205-206 [in Romanian „Voinţa de a şti", in *Istoria sexua-lităţii*, vol. I, Bucureşti, Editura Univers, 2004].

3 Merleau-Ponty suggested the same thing, that "what gives expressivity to the self is the Body", apud Doru Pop, *Ochiul şi corpul. Modern şi postmodern în filosofia culturii vizuale*, Cluj, Editura Dacia, 2005. p. 192.

can draw the conclusion (invalidated epistemologically) that, if something proves to be constructed (culturally instituted, invented institutionally) rather than discovered as already being there, than those things would be, *ipso facto*, altogether un-real (simple simulacra).

After eliminating this error of interpretation we need to address the following question: How is it possible, from the vantage point of a radical constructivism, transgressing the antagonistic conceptual couples characterizing the dualism of Western metaphysics, for the Self to have access to such an ontological objectivity? More precisely and in the terms used by Michaud himself, how can a body, defined as a sort of a "third state" (*tertium datur*), neither objective, nor subjective, constitute (our only) "unmovable point"? Only if, eventually, our body would help us objectivize ourselves, without his being (or without being able to become) neither objective, nor subjective.

The hypothesis formulated by Michaud seems to be disproved even by the radical transformative process the body is subjected to by some artists (see, for example, the esthetic surgeries of Orlan). These artists understood that, for them, the body is not merely a simple

fixed limit, innate and unbeatable, that it becomes interesting only in the sense that the body allows himself to be used as a trampoline for a jump **over** the biological restrictions, into the field of endless self re-invention, according to the mechanisms of desires, modeled by sociocultural conditions.

The message of artists like Orlan, who take the body only as an obstacle that can be overpassed, does not refer to the body as limitation (taken as his facticity, as a given), but to what can be done with the body, transgressing it. So, on the contrary, they refer to the attempt (heroic, eventually) to transcend the body, to deny its apparently irreducible facticity, remodeling it. It is a discourse about the body, one that does not celebrate it, but talks about the body only to suggest the "beyond the body", which represents the real subject of interest. We can distinguish, thus, in-depth similitudes between the two opposite tendencies of the "post-humanism": the tendency of concentrating our attention on the body, on one hand, and on the other hand, the de-corporealisation, in any case, the tendency to divert the attention towards something else, to overcome the body.

If there is any lesson to be extracted, one that these artists involved in Body Art want to administer us, is that, in the end, even the apparently infrangible dictatorship of the body can be usurped and transgressed, the body being reduced to the simple "primary matter" of an infinite number of virtual projects, narcissistic and capricious, of reorienting the self.

Even more controversial is the assertion regarding the representation. Obviously, the human body can be and it was fully employed artistically, from the vantage point of anatomy. Putting aside the fact that, even so, the contours of the body in contemporary images do not overlap the ones it sometimes was, contemporary art used simultaneously the body on both the coordinates that seem to be in a diametral opposition.

On one hand, the option for using the human body, including the body of the artist, as a primary matter, as a support and as a means of artistic expression, was a part of the attempt to build up a new, trans-mimetic aesthetics. The exposure of the body in its full materiality, heavy, un-transfigured artistically and untraversed by the spirit, countermined with the indeed old principle of representation that it rejects, but, in the exact same way, representation was understood as a "beautiful" representation of the human body.

On the other hand and simultaneously, it will become increasingly obvious that there is a preoccupation with the transformation of the body into a *simulacrum*. The tendency can be subscribed to the frame of bodily representations that would have followed, according to Alain Corbin[4], the subsequent scale: the XVII-th century would have belonged to the mechanical logic, the XIX-th Century would have belonged to the energetic logic,

and meanwhile the XX-th Century would have belonged to the logic of informatics. In this sense, the body is treated as a secondary object which, by successive processing, can become a simulacrum of the virtual body. Paul Levinson[5] calls this tendency **de-corporealisation**, the virtual restructuring of identity, starting with the technological extensions of the body, one that makes extremely relative the limits of what we traditionally call *objectivity* and *subjectivity*.

It is still unclear in what sense Michaud considers that today there is "no more representation"?

It is, obviously, risqué to uphold today such a thesis in an era of cvasi-consensual acceptance of the dominance of simulacra. Michaud himself described the contemporary world as a "society of generalized voyeurism".

Trying to give us a series of arguments favoring the hypothesis that today social representations cease to exist (instead of adopting the more prudent position of accepting their existence, only harder to identify), Michaud proceeds, apparently, to ignore the famous theory of G. Debord on the "society of the spectacle". He accepts, by consequence, the fact that Western society continues to be invaded by images, and that, in this iconomania, the event takes the form of the repro-

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4 *Istoria corpului*, vol. I, p. 9 [Histoire du corps T.3; Les mutations du regard. Editions du Seuil, 2006].

5 Paul Levinson, *Marshall McLuhan. În era digitală. Ghid al mileniului informaţiilor*, traducere de Mihnea Columbeanu, Bucureşti, Editura Antet, 2001 [*Digital McLuhan. A Guide to the Information Millennium*, London, Routledge, 1999].

duction and the reality, multiplied and substituted by simulacra[6], is revealed to the contemporary humans especially or exclusively by means of images.

Jean Baudrillard: the representation as "alienation" and "communication"

The argument favoring the extinction of representation as a source of seduction appears in a more complex manner in Jean Baudrillard's books[7]. He detects a new shift of paradigm: today the stage of "the society of the spectacle" is surpassed and, thus, we don't live in the "drama of alienation", but in the "ecstasy of communication", that imposed the imperative of total transparency.

Using metaphors from pathology, Baudrillard identifies the following three situations or stages of modernity: one corresponding to *hysteria*, which is the "pathology of putting on stage an exacerbated subject, a theatrical and

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6 Following Rorty, Doru Pop (*op. cit.*, p. 265-266) puts the contemporary culture under the sign of heterogeneity, which, in the "absence of a (lost) 'identity' that pre-exists in the world, promotes versions and variants, in exchange for the traditional 'search for The Truth'. Not only that we do not have access to 'the real', but the very fact that we say we understand the world when we imagine it as if it is present, means to transform it into an object (of perception or of possession), to which we, again, have access only by mediation."

7 Jean Baudrillard, *Celălalt prin sine însuşi*, traducere de Ciprian Mihali, Cluj, Editura Casa Cărţii de Ştiinţă, 2004 [*L'autre par lui même*, Paris, Editions Galilée, 1987], p. 15.

opperatory conversion of the body", another characterized by *paranoia*, with the "pathology of organization, the structuring of a rigid and jealous world", and, finally, a third, in which we live today, equivalent to the "promiscuity of the immanence", of *schizophrenia*: "that terror state characteristic to the schizophrenic – a too great approaching to everything, an infectious promiscuity of everything, one that invades and penetrates without resistance, without any halo, any aura, not even that of its own body, to protect him (...). What is even more characteristic is not the loss of the real, as we usually call it, but this absolute proximity and this total instantaneity of things, this overexposure to the transparency of the world. Lacking any scene and penetrated without resistance, he cannot produce the limits of his own being, he cannot produce himself as mirror. He becomes pure screen, pure surface for absorption and resorption for influence networks".

The mutation thus consisted of the substitution of the **mirror** with the **screen**. By consequence, instead of the "scene" (the putting on stage), "theater", "illusion", today we are left with nothing more than the pure transparency and the excess of visibility; "what used to be lived as a metaphor is now projected without any metaphor, into the absolute space of what is simulation". The representation was substituted by immanence, and the imagination, by becoming impossible after all the "horizons were overpassed", "to manipulate images and their screens".

If we were to keep the old divisions of classical philosophy, then the new society could be (in a bizarre way) described in terms of an "ontology of pure surface" (Aurel Codoban) or of an "immanence plan" (G. Deleuze). It must be noted, though, that both these suggestions, like the ones of Baudrillard, who recognizes that he accepts contradictions, are made in opposition couples, that they pretend to have suppressed: because how can there be a surface without depth, and how can immanence offer a relative opposition to transcendence, constituting, in the same time, a stage where immanence is nothing else but immanence in itself? In other words, what is the relevance of the distinctions between immanence and transcendence, surface and depth in a philosophical discourse that is designed to suppress the ontological distinctions (appearance and essence) or the epistemological distinctions (true and false, grounded and not grounded) of the Western metaphysics? A fundamental indecision hovers over this type of approach, which, on one hand, seems to be tossed overboard by the traditional epistemology, and on the other hand creates oppositions like the one between the object and its image, between simulacrum and the real, exactly when it pretends to have given up any ontho-episthemic distinction, to cross "beyond", in the intermediary, in the interval, where such a distinction is indispensable.

I think we can charge sociocultural constructivism not only with a systematic gliding of levels, favored by the typical lexical arsenal of these authors, but also a tentative to transvestite the battle for power into the language, often imprecise and slippery, of the simulacra.

It is, by consequence, obvious that things are only apparently as Michaud describes them. In fact, there is no death of representation or an installation of an absolute transparency. At best we can talk about a transparency simulated in itself, thus deceitful. Even accepting that some artists intend to reach an effective transparency, this does not mean by itself that they actually get there.

By the very fact that it is displayed in a controversial diversity of situations, the unity of the idea of "body" is at risk to be pulverized. It is not the "triumph" of the BODY, but a shear multitude of **representations** (some of them mutually contradictory) of the body.

Also, the displaying of the bodily fluids should be considered as a type of representation (because they are signs for something else). The procedure has nothing to do with the "lived" body (and in this case the secretions are in a dynamic unity with it), but with the "displayed body", by the fact that it compels us to think them as productions of the human body, as something else than themselves. They are thus introduced as cultural mediations, which redirect the attention of the spectator.

Gunther van Hagens
and the mortification of bodies

Following, we should address the project of Gunther van Hagens, where he exposes plastified bodies, in something that looks like a reflexion of an Appolinaire poem about the cemetery of "death on public displays"[8], represents, at the same time, a modality in which one can generate a crisis of conscience towards one's own body.

Everything is in a sense put-on-scene, inserted into a frame, albeit invisible, as it is the case of a *happening*: although it takes place in the streets, the participants still behave differently from what they would in a similar, yet non-performative,

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8 Referring to the poem "The house of Dead" in the Guillaume Apollinaire book *Alcooluri*, (Alcohols) in *Scrieri alese*, ediţie alcătuită şi îngrijită de Virgil Teodorescu, cuvânt înainte de Vasile Nicolescu, Bucureşti, Editura Univers, 1971. The poem is a free adaptation of the story entitled *L'Obituiare* (published in 1907, in the „Soleil" magazine, 1907), inspired by the view of a cemetery in Müchen, visited by Apollinaire in March 1902, where the bodies where stacked in a sort of a window display, publicly, before being burried, p. 559.

situation. Much more, the sheer fact that the artists are performing their own bodies[9] it makes, by this fact alone, the body to become a *representation*: a sign of the idea of body.

Even in the media, the presentation of the human bodies (as it happens in *reality shows* designed for the use of popular culture) as a simple piece of meat, following a treatment similar to that of pornographic industry, is not what it seems to be. On one hand, the procedure shows that the lifting of facts once considered anodyne to the level of *show*, and on the other hand, the type of images offered are based on a selection, *close-ups* and the details generate an eerie effect, thus they are a construct, and the camera itself becomes the foreign element, one that modifies the reactions and denounces the representation.

It is the same with cinema. It is true, as once noted by Antoine de Baecque[10] that the fury with which the bodies on the screen are "stripped of their decent form, re-exposed, wilder and violated" has destroyed the old magic of the bodies, "whose effects of fascination have deformed almost thirty years of appearances (1930-1960) from the history of cinema". By this, the representation is not over, yet: the effect seems rather

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9 When Marina Abramovič brushes her hair to the flesh in face of the audience she does this as a silent expression of her aesthetics.

10 Antoine de Baecque, „Ecrane. Corpul în cinematografie", in Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine, Georges Vigarello (coord.), *Istoria corpului*, vol. III, p. 443-445.

hallucinatory, one that turns the bodies denuded towards "phantom appearances", real black and white specters, populating the primitive origins of the cinematograph. Experiments like those of the French New-Wave explore the same, enhancing the effects of (un)real put into place by Jean-Luc Godard, who "cuts the bodies, re-framing them, breaks their moves into false continuity, mutilates their voices in post-production or covers them by sound, under-exposing or super-exposing the natural light".

The body is re-elaborated culturally and is delivered to us as a support of a new ideology. Here it seems that any mediation (representation) has ceased, in fact mediations are so numerous, yet subtle and undetectable.

It seems that Michaud confuses the transparency of some representations with their total nonexistence. As a matter of fact, even the epistemological metaphor of transparency itself entails the idea of a mediating instance, one that at its turn would become transparent. We are not talking about a death of representation, quite the contrary, about an abundance of representation, the only problem being that they become imperceptible, transparent. The more these representations are polished, the less they attract attention towards themselves.

So, what we are witnessing today is rather a change of regime.

The body is, indeed, apparently nude. Its representations are, still, more present than ever, so much so that even when it is nude, the body is dressed up in ideology. We were never farther away from the body than in modernity, a moment when apparently the body is promoted so arduously, since the interest shown to the body today is in a proportionately reversed relationship to the proximity towards it. Trying to get closer to the body, even by this very fact we become more distant, interposing other mediations, more subtle, so harder to detect. A cognitive interest towards the body represents a self-destructing tendency, which leads only to a transformation of content (or referent) of some representations we have of it. Or, the representations entail mediation, distance. They undermine proximity.

So, once again, we are not talking about the death of the (i-material) representation of the self, but, quite the contrary, we are witnessing rather an **inflation** of (i-material) representation of the self, moulded by the powerful forces of desire and imagination. (We should add, maybe, the fact that it is not very clear if this excess of representation is equivalent with the effective liberation, including sexual, but, rather, as Foucault suggests, the increasing of the controls, under the disguise of their apparent relaxation).

Without going through the so vividly looked after argumentation, we can conclude that, in the late modernity:

a. on one hand, the human body becomes banal, paradoxically, before it can become assumed, liberated, "lived", generating rather an estrangement more

than ever, from the body of the empirical self;

b. on the other hand, being on-staged, even when it is offered as nude, the body disappears somewhere behind the kaleidoscope of the representations of the body, thus becoming *representation* or *simulacrum* of itself, with the caution that, unlike his old representations, the new ones are more difficult to detect, or even elusive.

Finally, the representation can be considered a persuasive illusion. In the

moment of total denuding, when everything is exposed, the mediations, in their turn, are quickly multiplied.

We can agree with the statement of Yves Michaud, according to whom the body remains our only "unmovable point", only if we assume totally the lessons of Foucaultian relativism, as suggested by his works, and take the substitution (see above) until the final consequences: the body has become for us an "**imaginary** unmovable point"

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