

# Representation and Visual Politics of the Extreme Body

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*Abstract: The beautiful human body has perennially occupied a central space in art. Both art and aesthetics maintain the beauty of the human body as the focal point of artistic expression and philosophical thought. However, modern art has thoroughly overturned the idea of the beautiful body and the aesthetic principles of its expression, creating a completely new form of representing the body—the extreme body. The extreme body has become a mainstream image eagerly embraced by modern artists. Transgressed representations, visual discomfort, and the body becoming a goal in and of itself, has dramatically altered the paradigm of the body in modern art.*

*Keywords: body, beautiful body, extreme body, modern art, aesthetics.*

Art is always tied to the human beings residing at the heart of artistic expression. Therefore, the human body has always been a center of expression in terms of visual art. Especially today, a highly developed visual culture has already pushed the body to the forefront of the cultural stage; not only does aesthetic and art theory deal heavily with the body, but philosophy, sociology, literature, history, and anthropology all consider questions of the body. Some sociologists feel that “the rise of a body society” necessitates that all important political and spiritual questions be explained through the body. Sociologists have suggested an assortment of different body forms to consider, such as the “five bodies” proposed by O’Neill: the world’s body, social bodies, the body politic, consumer bodies, and medical bodies.<sup>1</sup> Shilling proposes yet another method of categorization: classical bodies, contemporary bodies, working bodies, sporting bodies, musical bodies, sociable

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<sup>1</sup> John O’Neill, *Five Bodies: Re-Figuring Relationships* (London: Sage, 2004).

bodies, and technological bodies.<sup>2</sup> The body has also become a popular topic in the field of aesthetics. Richard Shusterman goes so far as to suggest a branch of aesthetics called “somaesthetics.” He writes:

For the moment, we can briefly describe somaesthetics as concerned with the critical study and meliorative cultivation of how we experience and use the living body (or soma) as a site of sensory appreciation (aesthesia) and creative self-fashioning. Somaesthetics is thus a discipline that comprises both theory and practice (the latter clearly implied in its idea of meliorative cultivation). The term “soma” indicates a living, feeling, sentient body rather than a mere physical body that could be devoid of life and sensation, while the “aesthetic” in somaesthetics has the dual role of emphasizing the soma’s perceptual role (whose embodied intentionality contradicts the body/mind dichotomy) and its aesthetic uses both in stylizing one’s self and in appreciating the aesthetic qualities of other selves and things.<sup>3</sup>

Shusterman’s statement focuses on the significance of the body in aesthetics, which has positive implications for contemporary body studies. In my opinion, using the body as an approach to the examination of art can be a unique and productive perspective. Through the body, we can see the evolution of various methods of artistic representation and their paradigms, gain a better sense of the development of artistic thought on the human body through different historical periods, and even gain a deeper understanding of different artists’ unique views on the body. This paper attempts to combine visual culture, social theory, and aesthetics into a “fusion of horizons.” It will examine the evolution of paradigms of artistic representation regarding the body from traditional art to modernist art, and then proceed to analyze how the body, as a cultural issue, has changed along with society.

## **The Presentation of the Body: From Beauty to Extreme**

By using the divide between traditional and modern, we can separate art’s long history into the two general categories of “traditional” and “modern” art, where “modern” primarily refers to “modernism.” The art of these two periods have markedly different paradigms in their depictions of the body. Here, I use Roman Jakobson’s concept of “the dominant” to define the difference in paradigm of the

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<sup>2</sup> Chris Shilling, *Body in Culture, Technology and Society* (London: Sage, 2005).

<sup>3</sup> Richard Shusterman, *Body Consciousness: A Philosophy of Mindfulness and Somaesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 1.

body between traditional and modernist art. As a champion of Russian Formalism, Jakobson defines the “concept of the dominant” as the “focusing component of a work of art: it rules, determines, and transforms the remaining components. It is the dominant which guarantees the integrity of the structure.” The dominant “specifies the work.”<sup>4</sup> He further notes the historical significance of the “concept of the dominant” and suggests that changes in the dominant determine the changes in artistic style during different periods. Jakobson argues that a dominant is “not only in the poetic work of an individual artist and not only in the poetic canon, the set of norms of a given poetic school, but also in the art of a particular epoch, viewed as a particular whole.” For example, during the Renaissance, the “visual arts” were dominant and accordingly shaped the poetry of the period. On the other hand, “Romantic poetry oriented itself toward music: its verse is musically focused; its verse intonation imitates musical melody.”<sup>5</sup> Examining different paradigms of the body in the history of art from this perspective, it is not difficult to see that traditional and modernist art each has its own body forms.

Considering art history from the perspective of the dominant, we have reason to believe that beauty is the dominant in traditional art’s representation and paradigm of the body, and beauty is naturally the core category of traditional aesthetics.<sup>6</sup> Other categories of aesthetics (such as the sublime, the ugly, the grotesque) clearly fall below the beautiful in terms of significance. Thus it can be said that traditional art and aesthetics keep the beautiful body at the center of its artistic representation and thought; the beautiful body is thus the dominant in traditional art. For example, in traditional Chinese painting, there is much discourse on the creation of beauty including a great deal of methods, rules, and theories regarding the depiction of human bodies. There is a large body of classical Chinese paintings of people from Buddhist images to court ladies to monarchs to scholars. Examples such as Gu Hongzhong’s *Night Revels of Han Xizai*, Wu Daozi’s *Presentation of Buddha*, Zhou Fang’s *Court Ladies Adorning Their Hair with Flowers*, and the cave paintings at Dunhuang have many features modeled after the ideal of Buddhist saints and fairies.

In the West, the traditional paradigm of human beauty is rooted in models of the nude. Due to Western scientific and rational enquiry, there are numerous experiments and studies of human body-beauty: from the proportion in Ancient Greece, through the Renaissance application of the golden ratio to human figures,

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4 Roman Jakobson, *Poetry of Grammar and Grammar of Poetry* (The Hague: Mouton, 1981), 751.

5 Ibid., 752.

6 The traditional art and classical art mentioned here reflects a broad concept of periodization referring to the art before the mid-nineteenth century whereas art following this period will be referred to as modernist art.

to contemporary scientific aesthetic studies and experiments on face-beauty. Throughout the history of Western art, artists have not only been enamored with the beauty of the real human body but have pursued even further a kind of ideal beauty. Kenneth Clark writes that the concept of beauty, from the Ancient Greek tradition to the Renaissance down to the modern era, is a myth as well as a model. He says: “It is no accident that the formalized body of the ‘perfect man’ became the supreme symbol of European belief.”<sup>7</sup> If one but looks at Western art history, one sees that the beautiful body is the most basic subject of Western painting and sculpture. From Greek sculptures such as *Hermes and the Infant Dionysus* or the *Venus de Milo*; to the works of the three Renaissance masters such as Da Vinci’s *Mona Lisa* and the *Virgin of the Rocks*, Michaelangelo’s *Creation of Adam* and *David*, and Raphael’s *Three Graces* and *Sistine Madonna*; to the period of neoclassicism and formalism with works such as Ingres’ *The Source* and *La Grande Odalisque* as well as Courbet’s *The Source* and *Woman with a Parrot*—it is not difficult to find the expression of and the quest for the ideal of human beauty running through these works.

Since the mid-nineteenth century, however, with the rise of modernism, representation of the body in art has radically shifted. The “first principle” of art, expressing the beauty of the body, was challenged and paradigms of the human form underwent dramatic changes. Modernist artists started experimenting with new paradigms of the body: the strange, the alien, the vague and revolutionary body. This was a completely new image of the body and the evolution of this style continues to this day. If we wish to encapsulate this concept in one word, we can call it the “extreme body.” This is a form of the body that is not beautiful, opposed to beauty, and overturns beauty. Abandoning the beautiful body for the extreme body has become the dominant of modernist representations of the body, becoming deeply and widely distributed among different fields such as painting, sculpture, installation art, and performance art. Although ugly and grotesque bodies existed long before modernist art, the latter has made the extreme body its dominant, and the extreme body has now become the basic form of representing the body. A traditional style dominated by beauty has been gradually replaced by a radical, modernist style in which the concept of the unbeautiful and anti-beautiful is the mainstream. This trend is consistent with the general trend of modern art that rejects and disdains beauty.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, one point that must be especially noted is that the extreme body is not ugly; unbeautiful and anti-beautiful do not mean ugly. Some scholars of aesthetics like to divide beauty and ugliness into binary opposites

7 Kenneth Clark, *The Nude: A Study in Ideal Form* (New York: Doubleday Anchor, 1959), 54.

8 See Wendy Steiner, *Venus in Exile: The Rejection of Beauty in 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Art* (New York: Free, 2001).

to explain art, but this approach is problematic when one attempts to explain the historical shifts in styles of depicting the body. One cannot simplistically say that traditional art has the beautiful body as its dominant while modernist art has the ugly body as its dominant. The extreme body and its meanings are more complex than that of the ugly body; it is also different from the aesthetic categories of the grotesque and the absurd.

As new artistic discourse developed to explain modern art's creation of the extreme body image, modernist aesthetics has surpassed traditional aesthetics on a central paradigm by transitioning to a more open, varied, and complex interpretation.

## Iconology of the Extreme Body

The extreme body is a concept difficult to define; inherent in its definition is a bias toward a certain body type in modernist art. Although the image of the body in modernist art is varied and complex, one finds that this body image abandons traditional art's method of representing the beautiful body, overturns the aesthetic principles of traditional visual art, and portrays a body with which we are not familiar. The Spanish philosopher José Ortega y Gasset discovered after the First World War that there was a tendency toward "dehumanization" among the neo-art in Western countries. In Ortega y Gasset's writings on the "dehumanization," he notes that contemporary youths can fall in love with the *Mona Lisa* but not Picasso's *Girl before a Mirror*. What exactly is the great change that has taken place here? From the *Mona Lisa* to the *Girl before a Mirror* one can see the transition from the humanized to the dehumanized in the representation of the body. According to Ortega y Gasset, dehumanization works through distortion and abstraction, turning what is familiar into that which is strange, turning the human body into an unrecognizable entity. He writes: "By divesting them of their aspect of 'lived' reality the artist has blown up the bridge and burned the ships that could have taken us back to our daily world. He leaves us locked up in an abstruse universe, surrounded by objects with which human dealings are inconceivable, and thus compels us to improvise other forms of intercourse completely distinct from our ordinary ways with things. We must invent unheard-of gestures to fit those singular figures."<sup>9</sup>

The extreme body in modernist art is, to a certain degree, a "dehumanization" of the body. Of course, this dehumanization is not merely the abstraction and distortion noted by Ortega y Gasset but is much more complex. If we must define

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<sup>9</sup> José Ortega y Gasset, "The Dehumanization of Art," in *Criticism: The Major Texts*, ed. Walter J. Bate (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 662.

the extreme body, then we can say that it is a kind of unfamiliar, strange, deviant, and novel representation of the body. Here it would be helpful to consider what Jean-François Lyotard said concerning the avant-garde. He wrote: “Modern painters discover that they have to form images that photography cannot present ... Avant-garde paintings escape *ex hypothesi* from the aesthetics of the beautiful, its works do not call for the ‘common sense’ of a shared pleasure. These works appear to the public of taste to be ‘monsters’, ‘formless’ objects, purely ‘negative’ entities.”<sup>10</sup>

An overall survey of modernist art will find a varied range of extreme body types. From perspective of iconology, I can summarize them into at least the few kinds of extreme body representation paradigms outlined below.

## The Strange Body

The strange body is clearly a form of the dehumanized body. It deviates from the human figure or hints at the human form, but is completely different from a regular body. Examples of this include Salvador Dalí’s *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans (Premonition of Civil War)* in which heads and arms relocate and recombine in a fantastical way (fig. 1); Francis Bacon’s *Painting* with its monstrous, phantom-like human shape; and Willem de Kooning’s *Woman I*, a painting that is shocking to viewers.



1. Salvador Dalí. *Soft Construction with Boiled Beans (Premonition of Civil War)*. 1936. Philadelphia Museum of Art.

<sup>10</sup> Jean-François Lyotard, *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1991), 124-25.

The strange body either departs from the human form or dramatically alters and rearranges it. It deliberately exaggerates certain body parts or dismantles them into bizarre, new, fragmentary arrangements. The strange body wavers between the human and the inhuman, giving people an entirely new construct of the human body. The tension clearly contained therein gives the body a “negative” and “explosive” visual effect. The appearance of various kinds of strange bodies in modernist art has taken experiments in body image to great heights. To some extent, these experiments delve into the frailty of the human body, revealing two aspects of the body. First, the body’s complex relationship with society serves as a symbol. The body cannot withstand the harsh blows of a great society and the powers of nature; its weakness is readily apparent. Second, the strange body reveals various hidden desires of the body, even its dark side. In Bacon’s *Painting*, for instance, the blood-stained figure and the butchered animal in the background comprise a relationship that betokens the darkness which drives man to start wars and destroy lives.<sup>11</sup>

The strange body poses an antithesis to beauty. It shows through form and style a rejection of all rules. The beautiful body is an embodiment of rules and standards. Whether adhering to the golden ratio or some other principle, representation of the beautiful body is based on the rules. The strange body, however, represents a different path, reacting against every rule and standard of beauty. In this respect, it is somewhat akin to Kant’s analysis of the sublime as the formless.<sup>12</sup> If one considers the beautiful body as leaning toward a standard pattern of beauty, then one could say that the strange body is formless, thus retaining limitless possibilities of form. From this perspective, the legitimization of the strange body in the art world can be seen as a sort of liberation of artistic expression. Because of this we encounter all kinds of experiments and innovations in the representation of the body in modernist art where it can be said that nothing is too bizarre.

On matters of composition, the paradigm of representing the strange body is often a combination of elements with characteristics; it combines unrelated elements of an image in fantastical ways, thereby creating a unique and strange figure form. This is especially prominent in Dalí’s *Premonition of Civil War* (fig.1). Chimerical arms and bodies assemble together with a face contorted in pain, the

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11 Kleiner points out that “*Painting* by British artist Francis Bacon (1910–1992) is an indictment of humanity and a reflection of war’s butchery. The painting is a compelling and revolting image of a powerful, stocky man with a gaping mouth and a vivid red stain on his upper lip, as if he were a carnivore devouring the raw meat sitting on the railing surrounding him. ... [A]n attempt to remake the violence of reality itself,” as Bacon often described his art, based on what he referred to as “the brutality of fact.” See Fred S. Kleiner, *Gardner’s Art through the Ages* (Boston: Wadsworth, 2010), 747.

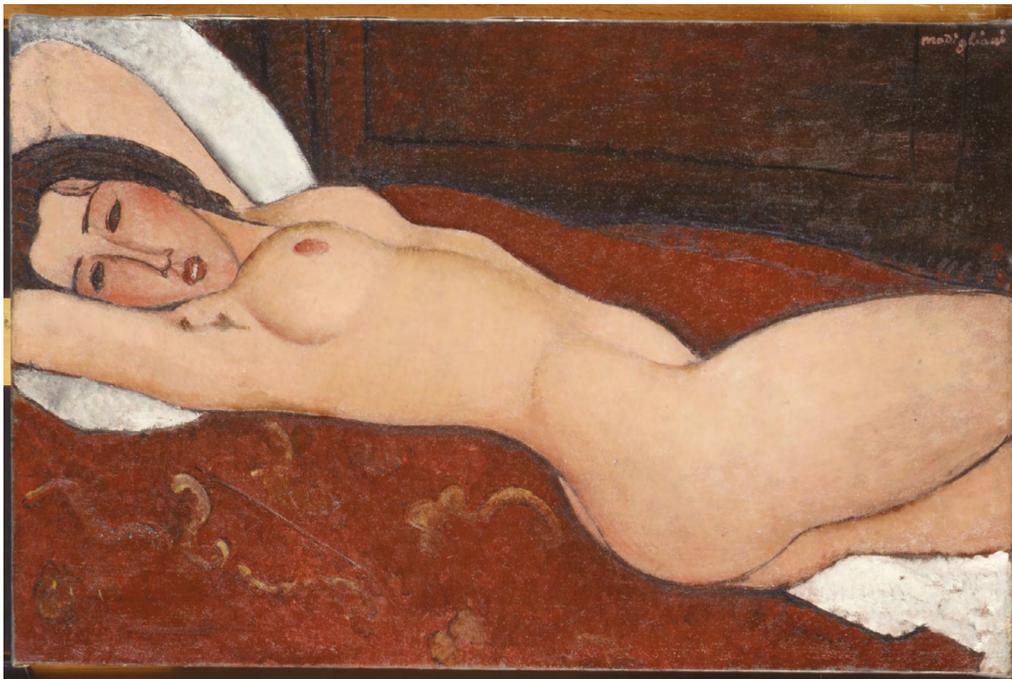
12 See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Judgment* (New York: Hafner, 1951), 82-105.

resulting image bursting with imagination, giving viewers a strong visual assault.

## The Deformed Body

If the strange body is a complete overturning of the body's image, then the deformed body is a transformation of it, with the exaggeration of regular human features into abnormal features as its primary characteristic. Although deformation as an artistic technique existed before, as seen in El Greco's many religious paintings featuring elongated figures, it was only after the post-impressionists (van Gogh, Cézanne) that modernist art saw the widespread, deliberate use of deformation. Later, art historians would say, "There is a tendency toward deformation in modern art which is essentially negative. The artist deforms an object not in order to reveal it but to deny the normal and to disappoint expectations."<sup>13</sup>

Deformation of the body has great allure for artists because it is a bold exploration and experiment of the plasticity of the human form. There are many convincing examples of this, including Amedeo Modigliani's *Reclining Nude*, which stretches the human figure beyond normal proportions, creating a peculiar image (fig. 2).



2. Amedeo Modigliani: *Reclining Nude*. 1917. The Metropolitan of Art.

Some art historians have pointed out that in the Neoclassical painter Jean Auguste

<sup>13</sup> Karsten Harries, *Meaning of Modern Art* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1968), 63.

Dominique Ingres's *La Grande Odalisque*, he elongates the figure to express the graceful slenderness of the female back and was castigated for violating the principles of realistic portrayal. In Modigliani's rendering of the deformed figure, however, there is another interpretation, the interpretation of body deformation as a new method of representation. Because deformation had become the new aesthetic principle in modernist art, not only would it avoid criticism but would receive significant attention from artists and critics alike. Alberto Giacometti's *Man Pointing* is even more dramatic, elongating the body completely out of proportion. The lanky, emaciated figure is extremely symbolic, producing a vivid example of the existentialist view of contemporary life. While Modigliani's and Giacometti's portrayal of the human figure is a deformation toward the vertical and slender, Picasso's *Women Running on the Beach* exaggerates in the opposite direction, horizontally stretching the human figure, making it thick and solid. Awkward and thick bodies and limbs run blindly along the beach, illustrating the body's inexhaustible energy. Attempting to interpret these deformed bodies, one can sense complex internal meanings. Perhaps Giacometti's and Picasso's completely opposite representations of the body can be seen as a sort of symbol of modern human existence. Giacometti's long, thin bodies represent the weak, lonely state of modern man while Picasso's robust images are a parable of the obesity epidemic brought by modern consumer lifestyles.

In my opinion, deformation of body is not so much a change in the state of the subject as it is a shift in the way the artist observes the body. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the French painter Maurice Denis proposed the theory of "double deformation" of artistic expression. He believed that there existed two kinds of deformation in modern art: subjective deformation of nature seen through a temperament and objective deformation to make their imagination comply with the eternal laws of decor.<sup>14</sup> In reality both these kinds of deformation comply with artists' perceptions of humans. Deformation signifies that the traditional concept of expressing the body as it originally is has become ineffective. Replacing the traditional are various new ways of looking at the body. Modern art's exploration of body deformation shows an imagination of the body's possibilities. Just as Einstein's Theory of Relativity shows that space and time can be bent, so can any body in the experimental space of modernism become deformed in previously unimaginable ways. Through deformation, artists express the body's most minute and intricate meanings.

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14 Maurice Denis, "Subjective and Objective Deformation," in *Theories of Modern Art: A Source Book by Artists and Critics*, eds. Herschel B. Chipp and Peter H. Selz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 106.

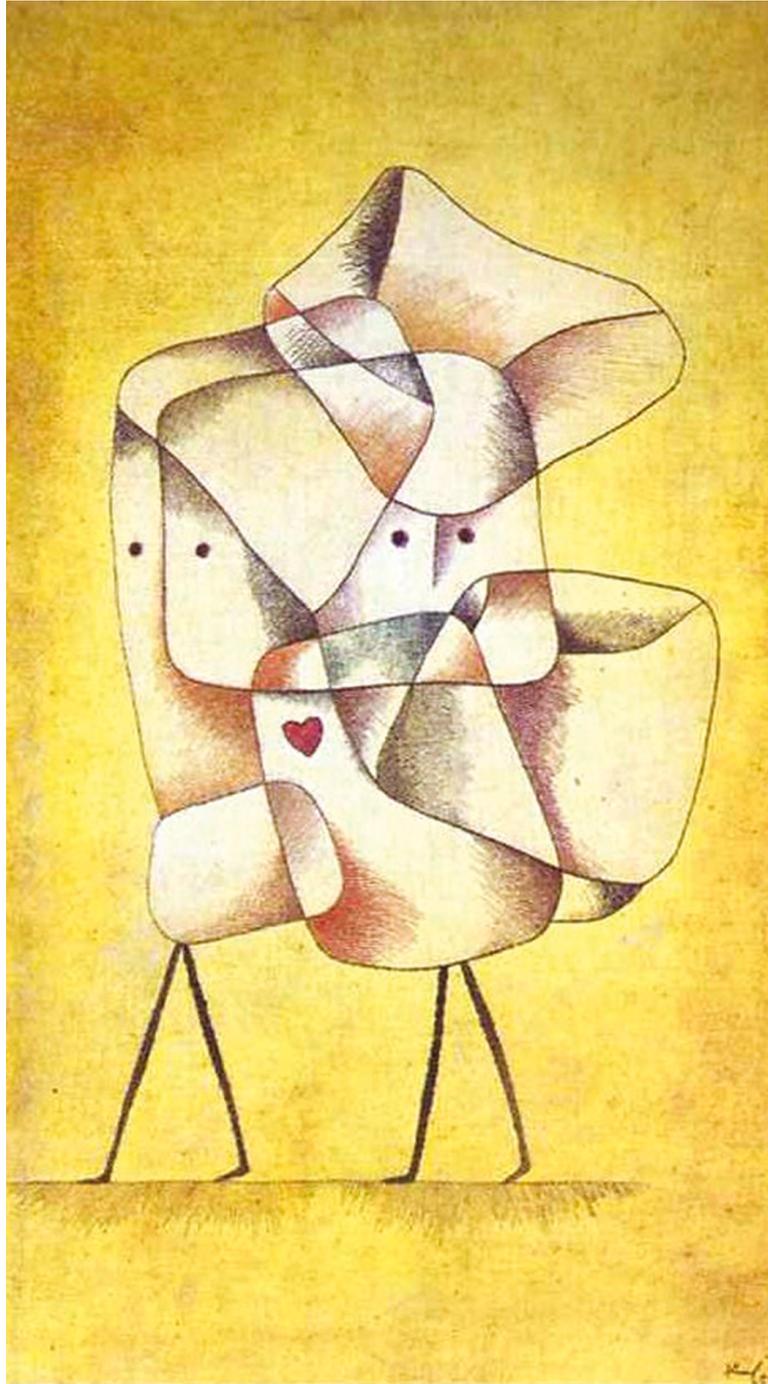
## The Abstract Body

Abstract art is one of the great inventions of modernism. Both European abstract artists (such as Kandinsky, Malevich, and Picasso) and American abstract artists (such as Pollock and de Kooning) represent modernist art's tremendous change in methods of visual representation. In Clement Greenberg's opinion as summarized by Timothy Quiqley, "Modernism reasserts the two-dimensionality of the picture surface. It forces the viewer to see the painting first as a painted surface, and only later as a picture."<sup>15</sup> In other words, modernist painting returns to the two-dimensional flatness of the picture surface through abstraction, allowing the art to be criticized for itself.<sup>16</sup> Abstract art traces its origins to the Post-Impressionist painter Paul Cézanne's abstract landscapes, and later developed into the abstract treatment of the human figure in the Cubism of Georges Braque and Pablo Picasso. Abstract techniques have thoroughly changed the world with which we are familiar, with abstract bodies becoming a hallmark of modern art. Cubism turns the human figure into an abstract conglomeration of geometric shapes, changing the concrete and identifiable into the unrecognizable and abstract, thus "dehumanizing" the familiar people and objects of daily life. Picasso's *Three Musicians* features no concrete human figures but rather creates new bodies from various geometric shapes. Paul Klee's *Brother and Sister* uses a group of intersecting lines to form two connected images (fig. 3).

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15 ([http://timothyquigley.net/vcs/greenberg-mp\\_sum.pdf](http://timothyquigley.net/vcs/greenberg-mp_sum.pdf))

16 Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," in *Art in Theory 1900-2000: An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, eds. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 773-779.



3. Paul Klee. Brother and Sister. 1930.

Braque's *Female Figure* reduces the human body into even simpler geometric shapes and lines.

Abstract art is a method of observing and representing the body. Its appearance stems from deep social and cultural reasons. Some art historians believe that abstract art is uniquely modern in the sense that it represents the particular acceptances and rejections of men living under the conditions of modern

times.<sup>17</sup> According to a popular view, modernism is a movement that pursues the autonomy of art, so abstract art and the flatness of painting are the inevitable result of such a pursuit, which is to say that de-emphasizing the people and objects one sees in daily life can give prominence to artistic media, form, and style.<sup>18</sup> Simply stated, this downplays *what* is expressed to emphasize *how* it is expressed. I think, however, in terms of the artistic representation of the body, there seems to be even more complex reasons behind abstract art. Making the body artistically abstract gives artists the chance to bid farewell to traditional, imitative renderings of the body and provides a new path of exploring the body as artistic expressions of the subject. In abstract art, the human body can be changed and transformed. As abstract depictions of the body hide the familiar, it recreates an unfamiliar body; as it remolds viewers' visual understanding, it manifests the oft-ignored features of the normal body.

Furthermore, the abstract body reveals artists' rich imaginations as well as how they have visually transformed the concrete world. This transformation of the body reflects the deep influence of Machine Age science and technology on art, and also serves as a metaphor for external societal forces molding the body, signifying how disciplining the body is not only possible but also realistic. Various contemporary societal powers collude with body knowledge, disciplining diverse body types into a mechanical, cold, stiff image, into the type of body society needs, what Michel Foucault called the "docile body." Interestingly, while Cubism enjoyed its height from 1907 to 1914, some people ascribe its abrupt conclusion to the effects of World War I. The use of new weapons and technology inflicted unprecedented damage on mankind, destroying artists' awe for technology and machines in but a moment, extinguishing the desire to geometrize the abstract body. Thus, Cubism, which employed abstract imagery as its basic technique, met its end.<sup>19</sup>

Through the above three types of extreme bodies, we have discussed how this modernist invention has undermined the traditional beautiful body, its principles of expression, and concepts, as well as how modernist artists bursting with imagination are wildly experimenting the extreme body. In short, the human body in modernist art is like an opened Pandora's Box; to many modernist artists, only representations of the extreme body have allure.

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17 Robert Motherwell, "What Abstract Art Means to Me," in *Theories of Modern Art*, ed. Herschell B. Chipp, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), 563.

18 See Clement Greenberg, "Modernist Painting," Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, eds., *Art in Theory 1900-2000* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003).

19 See Geoff Dyer, ed., *John Berger: Selected Essays* (London: Bloomsbury, 2001), 77-78.

## The Visual Politics of Representation of the Extreme Body

As the dominant of modernist art, the extreme body thoroughly transformed the state of the body in art. At the very least, the extreme body has posed a serious challenge to aesthetics in the three following ways.

First, the appearance of the extreme body was a type of “transgressed representation.”

For many centuries, the beautiful body historically occupied a key space in Chinese and Western art, developing many aesthetic principles and paradigms of representation. The beautiful body was an idol revered and adored in art. The extreme body favored in modernist art, to some extent, fostered a movement of fierce “de-idolization”; as it abandoned the principles of the beautiful body, it created a series of transgressed representations of the extreme body. As noted earlier, representation of the extreme body has no form and is formless. It is an overturning of all rules (especially the rules of classical beauty). Lack of rules and opposition to rules are its rule, for this is what makes possible the creation of various kinds of extraordinary bodies. In classical paintings, perspectives and body positions must be formulaic and structured to achieve the standard of perfection; as seen in Chinese paintings of courtly ladies or Western paintings of nude goddesses, these must all follow a prescribed pattern of production. Modernist art, on the other hand, radically transforms the shape of the human body, imposing no limits on the body’s shape, lines, tones, or poses, but rather tends toward the strange, dramatic, and extreme. Not only has the principle of beautiful bodies been broken, but even more principles of classical beauty have lost their influence. In terms of visual perspective, portrait art typically uses either an eye level or low angle. A level view conveys a sense of equality and intimacy while a low angle view reflects a reverent or even awed perspective. In modernist art, however, even these principles of perspective have been overturned, making all kinds of visual angles and relationships possible. Not only is modernist Western art like this, but Chinese contemporary art is also this way. For example, in the contemporary Chinese artist Mao Yan’s *My Poet*, the perspective is that of one looking down at the subject, a view not often seen in traditional portraiture. From the angle of social relationships, looking down when examining the subject conveys a feeling of condescension for the artist or viewer. It distances the viewer from the subject of the portrait, emphasizing the superiority of the artist and viewer while placing the subject in a passive state of being looked at, judged, and diminished. Another example is the contemporary Chinese artist Yue Minjun’s repetitive large-mouthed, laughing man, which completely goes against the rules of portraiture. Somewhere

between poster, advertisement, and portrait the same limitlessly repeatable image is structurally arranged, creating a startling visual effect on viewers. Clearly, the body in modernist and contemporary art has broken away from traditional principles of aesthetic expression. Their creation now adopts the philosophy of “anything goes.”

Second, representation of the extreme body has led to “visual discomfort” (or “visual offense”).

While the former characteristic concentrates on the relationship between the artist and the representation of the body, the latter focuses on the relation between the representation of the extreme body and viewers’ visual psychology. As the representation of deviant bodies discards the beautiful figure, it leads to the appearance of various forms of the extreme body. When viewers look at the extreme body, they feel a sense of strangeness, novelty, and alienation. Also present might be a feeling of “visual discomfort,” “visual unpleasantness,” or even “visual offense.” This is completely different from the experience of viewing classical paintings of body beauty. When admiring the splendid masterpieces of the human figure, the viewer often sinks into contemplation, forgetting oneself before the beautiful object, the distance between viewer and artwork seemingly vanished. Viewing the extreme bodies of modernist art, by contrast, is often joyless, accompanied by a feeling of rejection and despair. In the words of Walter Benjamin, the visual effect of the extreme body is “shock” in which viewers are not drawn to the artwork but rather distanced from it. The beautiful body allows the viewer to forget the self while the extreme body strengthens the viewer’s sense of self along with a sense of visual shock. Therefore we can conclude that the beautiful figure represents the characteristic of normalcy, without revealing the peculiarity or inner meaning of the body discovered by and interesting to the artist. Today, artists are captivated by the idiosyncratic and extreme representations of the body.

From an aesthetic perspective, the beautiful body and its expressions allow viewers to forget themselves in delight while immersing in the artwork while the visual discomfort, joylessness, and even offensiveness of the extreme body stirs one’s emotions and stimulates introspection. In this regard, the ability of the extreme body to visually shock and touch people is perhaps more deeply penetrating and thought-provoking than the visual longing induced by the beautiful body, just as we try to diagnose our symptoms when our bodies are feeling ill but tend to ignore our bodies when we are feeling fine. It is the extreme body and its representation that distinguishes the hidden and turns viewers from the familiar and uninteresting to that which shocks the senses. Contemporary Chinese artist Zhang Xiaogang,

when explaining his works, writes: what looks like a drawing of a photograph is actually a deliberate “hand-drawn ‘sense of deviation’ to create a feeling of illusory, detached coldness and distance.”<sup>20</sup> It is precisely this sense of “coldness” and “distance” that pushes people to reflect upon the bodily issues they usually ignore.

Lastly, the extreme body makes the body the ultimate goal of artistic representation.

In traditional art, the beautiful body often serves as a utilitarian symbol through which established concepts and ideals of beauty are conveyed, thus making it difficult to prevent the beautiful from becoming typical and common. Modernist art strives for an unbeautiful and anti-beautiful image, leading to a deep shift that turns the body from a means into an end in and of itself. Here, it is helpful to borrow a saying of Jacques Derrida which states, “[A]s if with the help of a new optical device one could finally see sight, could not only view the natural landscape, the city, the bridge, and the abyss, but could ‘view’ viewing.”<sup>21</sup> What Derrida means is that, with the help of some device, we could not only see an object, but we could see sight itself. Similarly we can say here that the beautiful body, because it pleases viewers and allows them to submerge themselves in a state of static admiration, easily eliminates viewers’ desire to reflect and probe their thoughts. The extreme body, by contrast, often creates a sense of discomfort and distance for the viewer, using unconventional or even extreme methods to illustrate the body, thus distinguishing the body’s essence and stimulating viewers’ thoughts and questions. In other words, the commonly occurring beautiful body obstructs viewers’ contemplations about the body itself whereas the extreme body, like a kind of device that allows one to view viewing itself, lets viewers see “the body itself.” If the beautiful body is meant to evoke people’s admiration, reverence, and yearning, then the extreme body is meant to help people reflect, explore, and question. Therefore, unlike traditional artists who hold the body in sacred reverence, modernist artists view the body as an object that needs reconstruction and deformation to push the limits; this passes through the beautiful body’s outward appearance to directly reach the body’s most basic level. Perhaps we have reason to say that the beautiful body is self-explanatory, clear, and natural while the extreme body is always a formless, obscure, unknown, and uncertain world of possibility. It is precisely this characteristic uncertainty that draws artists to explore this direction. Thus, unlike the categorical, stiff, and standardized beautiful body; the extreme body tends toward diversity and singularity, thereby approaching the

20 Huang Zhuan and Zhang Xiaogang, “Experience, identity, and cultural judgments—An interview.”

Accessed February 27, 2014. <[http://www.china001.com/show\\_hdr.php?xname=PPDDMV0&dname=8P2Q541&xpos=56](http://www.china001.com/show_hdr.php?xname=PPDDMV0&dname=8P2Q541&xpos=56)>

21 Jacques Derrida, *Eyes of the University: Right to Philosophy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004), 154.

authenticity of the body which—along with identifying markers such as gender, ethnicity, and class—reflects different ways to look at the body.

## Endnotes

**Photo credits:** Salvador Dalí, Gala-Salvador Dali Foundation/[billedkunst.dk](http://billedkunst.dk) 2014 (1), Metropolitan of Art (2), permission free (3).

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