

Sigrid Schade

### Body Concepts in Contemporary Art

"With all the wholes in you already, there's no reason to define the outside environment as alien" (Jenny Holzer, from "The Survival Series", 1983)

My contribution on the topic of the body in contemporary art during the XVI th Video Art Festival in Locarno is based on the reflection, organization and experience of an exhibition of contemporary artists in the Offenes Kulturhaus Linz with the title "Andere Körper - Different Bodies" I curated in 1994.<sup>1</sup> The exhibition was conceived by the advisory board of the O.K. as a show which should reflect in some sense another exhibition organised in Linz ten years ago: "Andere Avant Garde (Other Avantgarde)"<sup>2</sup> which was a women's exhibition within a feminist context.

One of the issues of the exhibition "Andere Körper" was to look at the shifts in conceptualising the body and in the use of body images in the work of female and male artists during the last ten years.

In preparing the exhibition we had to take into account a number of publications and catalogues which had made the topic of the body their issue before. During the last five years there was even an accumulation of exhibitions concerned with body concepts of contemporary artists in the USA, Canada and Europe. For example: Corporal Politics, MIT List Visual Arts Center, Cambridge, Mass. 1992; Post-Human, Deichtorhallen, Hamburg 1993; Abject Art. Repulsion and Desire in American Art, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York 1993; Real Sex, Real Real, Real Aids, Real Text,

Kunstvereine Wien, Graz, Salzburg, Klagenfurt 1994; Suture - Phantasmen der Vollkommenheit, Salzburg 1994; The Body - Le Corps, Kunstmuseum Bielefeld 1994.

This list can now be continued with "Rites of Passage. Art for the end of the century" at the Tate Gallery in London 1995 and the Biennale in Venice 1995, which showed the exhibition "Identity and Alterity. Figures of the Body 1895-1995" as a major conceptual part but without referring to or reflecting the general discussions on body theories and concepts of the last decade. (This can be said also of most of the art criticism written on the Biennale)

I will try to give a general outline of these discussions and theories which had been a challenge and an issue for the "Andere Körper" project and will describe then three installations of artists who participated in the Linz exhibition in whose multimedia work "Video" had or still has a constitutive role. These artists are Valie Export, Vera Frenkel, Maria Klonaris and Katherina Thomadaki.

In contemporary Body concepts we find reformulations of figurative body images (supernatural, fragmented, deformed) of Surrealism and of the staging of the body in the 70' s which was a speciality of women artists. Taken not as the revival of the same but rather as a symptom - the return of the repressed - the new interest in body representations in different media and techniques may be interpreted as a rethinking and reformulation of the precariousness of the perception of (the) body(s), the other and the self. The given instability of identity in perception is confronted today with new technical developments in the fields of genetic engineering, medical

treatment, virtual reality and the decentralization of wars and technical equipment, migrant movements and general mobilization. During the last ten years an analytic approach was developed towards the question of the "Gaze of the Other" and "Difference" as a constitutional element of selfperception which had great influence on the ways in which artists staged body images.

Although it appeared in the early 70's and 80's to be an obvious direction of argumentation that action art using one's own body would be an apparent "liberation" for example from the patriarchal mis-en-scène, or that a more "authentic" view of "female body images" could so be obtained, only a few women artists did actually use this line of argument. The way in which the body image differs from all other signs is, first of all, due to the signification "nature" that it has attained in the past 500 years of Western art and cultural history, that affects all other possible significations.<sup>4</sup> This means that the use of body images, specially of female body images, is always connected to the risk of being understood in a naturalistic way or of naturalizing connected significations. A critical attitude towards Western culture thus must accept the irrefutable fact that every criticism of culture expresses itself within that culture - nature is a reference point of that culture, not just the Other. Every use of the body as a sign for nature, origin or authenticity must fall short of criticism. This is true also for the strategies of contemporary artists to whom the Western tradition is a heavy burden.

Throughout Western art history the body images were used or misused metaphorically and allegorically to signify various meanings within social contexts.<sup>5</sup> Political institutions, countries, populations, social groups were

represented as (whole) Bodies. Studies (as initiated by Foucault <sup>6</sup>) of the body as a scene of power, as the object of legal, medical and sexual scientific constructs and discourses called attention to the way in which individual and social bodies come into being in the power strategies of institutional intervention. Clothing regulations, codes of conduct, the language of gestures, etc. all contribute to the socially connotated body, which is centered in the respective ideas of order. Even that which is called biology or medical science can certainly not guarantee statements on a biological as a natural body; on the contrary, their historicity has itself become a subject for research.<sup>7</sup> The representations of the body, the way it is presented aesthetically, veiled, stripped naked, fragmented or totalised, are comments not only on the individual but on the state of societies and insofar they are political statements.

From the 70's on Women artists had opened the field of discussion of the body by breaking down the traditional **commandment** of modesty and prohibition on viewing for women and were beginning to experiment with the obscene and fragmented (male and female) body image, as well as with the constructs of inside and outside - Carolee Schneemann, Joan Jonas, Valie Export, Mary Kelly, Cindy Sherman, etc. This led to a discussion on the legitimacy of the fragmented body image which was followed by an analyses of the artificiality of every "whole" body image, which is put together by artistic operations (assembling the most beautiful parts, studies of proportion, **abbreviations** in the perspective, anatomical dissection etc.).<sup>8</sup> As a result of these operations the "seams" will be invisible, a deconstruction of the procedure will make them visible again. This type of approach was not only supported by the reception of psychoanalytic



theories of perception, but also by the experiences of artists themselves who had made curiosity and the "desire for the other" productive elements in their own strategies of image, which were in the 80's mostly conceptual. Like those of Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger and Cindy Sherman in whose work the use of mass media, the relation between high and low art and the effects of the new media on perception was mixed with the question of the body image.

With her photo series Cindy Sherman developed a special method for approaching the subject of body image. She has addressed herself to representations of the female in popular culture, in movies, TV-shows, centerfolds and fairy tales for the last 15 years. Her method is remarkable in that she herself is often the model; that means that she is active as make-up artist, costume designer, stage and light director, as actress and as photographer. Her subject is not only the inability to decide between picture - image - reality, which she brings across by denying the viewer an external identity for the model Cindy Sherman. She makes the distortion and dissimulation a voluptuous strategy.<sup>9</sup> The gaze of the other, to whom the *mis-en-scène* is addressed, is always part of the exhibition. In a way the French artist Orlan is very close to Cindy German: describing ideal femininity as an inscription of a patriarchal culture into the female body. In contrast to Cindy Sherman who presents this topic as a game in which women's wishes are involved, for Orlan the process is one of violence which she tries to represent as a direct violent act on the body. While submitting herself to beauty operations and mediating the process through satellite emissions to an art audience she quits the symbolic order of representation.

In her more recent photo sequences, Cindy Sherman refers to and radicalises the doll photographs by the German artist Hans Bellmer which had been published in the surrealist journal "Minotaure" already in the 30's<sup>10</sup>, which had their place in the discussion on the function of art in society during the Nazi-time.<sup>11</sup>

Making artificiality an issue has certainly been a result of the fact that the interaction between the new media, the methods and insights of the natural and technical sciences, the fine arts and ordinary perception has awakened the interest of artists and art criticism. In the light of these perspectives, the traditional opposition of materiality versus abstraction (or spirit) came under closer inspection and could no longer be maintained in the same manner.

Sign processes and communication were located by the theory of the media in an in-between space: neither material nor spirit, they produce "reality effects" and materializations that function themselves as signs in the process of the production of meaning.<sup>12</sup>

With their own individual means and often using multimedia, artists are addressing themselves to a thus expanded problematic of the body as a body of the Other. The confrontation with death and dying also belongs in this context due, for example, to the new epidemic of AIDS which became an occasion for the discrimination of sexual minorities. The same applies to the confrontation with death in the context of the mass murders of the new wars in Europe following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the protracted conflicts from the periods of colonial rule in the Third World, where the "cleansing" of one's "own" territory of the ethnic Other is just

as much a part of it as the complementary barricading of the European Fortress against the ensuing masses of refugees.

In this kind of "Return of the Repressed" the untreated traumata of two world wars overlay each other in the western world at the end of the 20th century. The issue of death and illness also appears to be a "return of the repressed", even in the area of the fine arts; this is the theses that Hal Foster implies in his book "Compulsive Beauty"<sup>13</sup>. In the radicalised reopening of certain aspects and methods of surrealism in contemporary art, he sees an impulse to make that which is repressed in surrealism itself an issue. As he convincingly argues in his book, among the repressed elements in surrealism are the experiences of the First World War on the one hand, which many of the surrealists shared, often as doctors or medical assistants; on the other hand are the avoidance and denial of the death drive in the discussion of Freud's writings, which Freud had developed through addressing himself to an aesthetic concept, specifically that of the uncanny - which was also central to surrealism.<sup>14</sup>

Other images are being designed by female and male artists as an antidote to "purged" recollection. An interesting strategy of artistic production in this context is going on currently in the United States under the term "Abject Art".<sup>15</sup> Artists such as Kiki Smith, Robert Gober, Mike Kelley, even Bruce Nauman, but also precursors like Louise Bourgeois and Claes Oldenburg are counted among this art. With the term "Abject Art", a play on the term "Object Art", the traditional opposition of a given subject and the opposed object is called into question. The term is used for artistic stagings with body fluids, products of excretion and body parts, as well as allusions to illness and death - in other words for everything that can be

linked to a feeling of disgust. Julia Kristeva gave the name "Abjection" to the process of rejecting and separating "disgusting" objects, in the face of which the subject takes an ambivalent stance, because they almost appear to still belong to one's own body.<sup>16</sup> In the strict psychoanalytic sense, this term is superfluous, because the entire process of becoming a subject is conceived as constituted from the separation from or occupation of partial objects. In this way, the analytical term of the object is already no longer identical with the traditional philosophical term.

It is possible that "Abject Art" is pointing out a way of resistance against the aesthetization and clinicification of the body, against the suppression of suffering, violence, disgust and death that these tendencies create, within collective perception.

I will close this short survey on theoretical and artistic discussions on body concepts with a quotation from Lacan: "Symbols enwrap the life of a human being so completely in their net that, before he even comes into the world, they have brought together those who conceive him of 'flesh and bones'..."<sup>17</sup>

### **Different Bodies**

The concept of the Offenes Kulturhaus Linz is on one side to charge guest curators with the task to organise shows with a specific topic, on the other side to give the participating artists the space and help to create a new work for the occasion. The space is a former school building with a lot of small rooms<sup>18</sup>, in the case of the "Different Bodies" exhibition the artists chose the form of the installation for their work.



Most of them used mixed media, old and new. I will introduce now three works which were specifically interesting in this concern.<sup>19</sup>

### **Valie Export - Anagrammatic Body**

The Austrian Artist Valie Export who has addressed the image, the perception and the cultural construction of the body for many years began in the 60's with the conceptual visualization of the function of language for the constitution of body perception. In films and actions she showed that the speaking body already is a spoken body. The body which moves in symbolic systems "embodies" materializes these, for if there is nothing outside the symbolic, yet the body marks the boundaries of the symbolic at the same time.<sup>20</sup>

In the 70's Export often used her own body to explore the theme of the cultural, gender specific inscriptions on the body. More recently she has addressed primarily the experiences of perception that have become possible and common through the use of new media and technologies.

The installation "Anagrammatic Body" was situated in a darkened room where four bassins with oil were placed reflecting the laser projections of computer generated writing. The surface was used like a skin which is injured by inscription. On entering the room one was confronted with acoustic impressions that originated from a cassette recording of mentally handicapped people speaking. Export refers to the procedure of the Anagram as a possibility for making an issue of the linguistic constitution of the body, as Hans Bellmer also did in his photographs of dolls. However the confrontation with a disturbance through a mentally handicapped person is much closer to Bellmers friend, Unica Zürn's anagrams and texts, in

which the borderline experience of the impossibility of coming to terms with the symbolic order finds speech. The use of laser metaphorically transfers Kafka's machine in the "Penal Colony" to the newest technical medium, a medium that can be used both in medical treatment and also as a weapon.

#### **Maria Klonaris/Katherina Thomadaki - XYXX Mosaic Identity**

The two artists of Greek origin living in Paris since 1975 are also experimental film makers, critiques and themselves organizers of Video festivals.<sup>21</sup> In the installation they used material from former exhibitions, photography and video, specially from the so called "Angel-Project 1985-1994"<sup>22</sup>.

The installation immersed the room and those entering it into fluorescent light. The multi-media staging had its secret center in a large format photograph mounted on aluminium and hanging from the ceiling. The photograph shows a hermaphrodite. The original comes from a medical archive, a fact which refers to the category of pathological deviation. The title XYXX is the expression for the presence of both combinations of sexual chromosomes in the body cells of one individual. The artists formulation "mosaic identity" on one side relates to the medical concept of the androgyne, but on the other side also to an aesthetical concept. A processed and modified photograph of the androgyne was lying on a lightbox bed in the right corner of the room.

Opposite the door there were "mutations" of the photograph that are a result of certain technical manipulations, these include processing multiple layers of film, chemical treatment etc. The four photographs hung in front of partially opened venetian blinds. The row of photographs appeared to

multiply endlessly in the reflections left and right on the plexiglas against black walls and in the mirrors against the white wall in the back. The process of mis-en-abime continued in three monitors placed one above the other in which visually transformed photographs of the "Angel", the adrogyne, caressed by a magical hand passed by.

There was an aesthetic fascination that emanated directly from the photograph of the **hermaphrodite** itself, which as Klonaris and Thomadaki describe, is due to the staging of the body and its posture, to the element of the blindfolded eyes and the association with the iconography of angel representations. Mosaic identity thus defines an aesthetic quality which is expressed in the media multiplication of the fascinating image of the angel. It proposes the multiplication and the dissolution of polarizing structures in a pattern which results in a liberation from assumptions.

The **hermaphrodite** in Western culture always had been a symbol of wholeness or completeness. But it always stayed a representation of difference. **Intersexuality** thus appears as the representation of a utopian or atopian ideal, implying much more the splitting within every individual person than a possible totality. The angel becomes a positive figure of difference dissolving into countless differences.

### **Vera Frenkel - Body Missing**

The Canadian artist Vera Frenkel who is well known for her video-installations, specially for the installation at documenta IX in Kassel, where she showed "From the Transit Bar"<sup>23</sup> gave the topic of body concepts a metaphorical shift. In her installation "Missing Body" the term body is used as a possibility to deal with historical facts otherwise not really accessible.

She decided to do site specific work in Linz and after she had found out about the plans of Hitler to build up in his hometown a "Führer"-Museum for which a lot of the illegal art theft of the Nazis had been foreseen, she made this the issue of her installation.

As in much of her former work Vera Frenkel made the representability of memory and history/ies the theme of her three part work, which consisted of the videoinstallation in the Offenes Kulturhaus stairwell and the hallways, the images in its front windows and her contribution in the catalogue.<sup>4</sup> Six monitors, each showing a six minute tape loop, the photomontages and the catalogue texts could not be grasped **simultaneously** or with a single look. The video tapes were not only separate from each other but were themselves the site for a trail of fragments: people in motion, current scenes on the steps and in the halls of the Academy in Vienna, casual meetings, **personifications** of art and of victory, descents into the cellar, corridors of crates, the "Pestsäule" and hands raised in the Hitler salute in the Main Square of Linz, a painting in progress. The integrated historical material consist of photos, records and lists documenting the National Socialists' continuation of systematic art robbery in the occupied territories during the Second World War, which began with the confiscation of Jewish private collections, as well as Hitlers' urban development plans in Linz in the early 40's, in which a **Führermuseum** the size of the Uffizi (or even the Louvre!) was planned. A large part of the stolen art works was intended for this museum and was stored in a nearby salt mine in Altaussee until the liberation by the Allies (more than 6000 paintings, among other objects in this location alone). The whereabouts of parts of this and similar collections remain still unclear: a Body Missing.



The function of the mythical shield of Athena, that of reflecting the terrible in order not to be frozen in horror, is multiplied in the **fragmentation** and **multimediality** of the installation. For Frenkel, the multilayered reflection and the fragmentation not only have the function of allowing us to look at the trauma, but also that of making it possible to acknowledge and remember an event erased from history. They have as well the function of awakening a need for knowledge that has been and still is thwarted by the usual historiographical methods and compulsory school learning.

But is this the story that we become involved in, when we see Frenkel's videos? Narrated fragments of text provide us with the segments of a different story that we must piece together like detectives. Like the woman barkeeper, who constructs the narrative from snatches of overheard conversations, we follow the clues to the existence of a discretely active group of artists, who have taken upon themselves the task of reconstructing the lost works from the inventories, transport lists and written orders. We become uncertain of the differentiation between **documentation** and fiction, and it is not until afterward that we comprehend a story, of which we have unconsciously long been a part. In the weaving of the tale, an absence becomes tangible, a "Body Missing" which has been formed through the multiple reflections of the installation and the mirroring function of narrative.

The boundaries between documentary and fiction have become more obscure even in the afterlife of the exhibition. While Frenkel was constructing the narrative of the group of artists searching for the whereabouts of the missing art works during her stay in Linz, other participating artists like Piotr Nathan, Alice Mansell and Joanna Jones started to really do what the

frame narrative of Vera Frenkel suggested. Meanwhile "Body Missing" has become an internet project with participating artists from Canada, Germany and Austria which is accessible for everybody who wants to enter the website.<sup>5</sup>

The artists and the visitors of the website altogether form a body of images and text surrounding the Missing Body (missing objects, narratives, people) thus creating a never completed body representing an absent cause.

- <sup>1</sup> Catalogue: Andere Körper - Different Bodies, Offenes Kulturhaus Linz, ed. by Sigrid Schade and the Offenes Kulturhaus Linz, Vienna 1994. The lecture in Locarno was based on my introduction, p. 10 ff.: Different Bodies. Art, Politics and Representation in the 80's and 90's
- <sup>2</sup> Catalogue: Andere Avantgarde, ed. by Linzer Veranstaltungsgesellschaft mbH, Linz 1983
- <sup>3</sup> The concept of the exhibition included theoretical work on the image of the body of the last ten years which will be published as a book. Sigrid Schade: *Schau-Spiele des Körpers. Diskurshistorische Lektüren zur bildenden Kunst und Fotografie des 16. - 20. Jahrhunderts*, Köln, Weimar 1996
- <sup>4</sup> Sigrid Schade, Silke Wenk: *Inszenierungen des Sehens. Kunst, Geschichte und Geschlechterdifferenz*, in: H. Bussmann, R. Hof (ed.): *Genus. Zur Geschlechterdifferenz in den Kulturwissenschaften*, Stuttgart 1994
- <sup>5</sup> Sigrid Schade, Monika Wagner, Sigrid Weigel (ed.): *Allegorien und Geschlechterdifferenz*, Köln, Weimar, Wien 1994
- <sup>6</sup> Michel Foucault: *Überwachen und Strafen. Die Geburt des Gefängnisses*, Frankfurt a.M. 1976; *Sexualität und Wahrheit Bd. 1, Der Wille zum Wissen*, Frankfurt a.M. 1983; etc.
- <sup>7</sup> Thomas Lacqueur: *Auf den Leib geschrieben. Inszenierung der Geschlechter*, Frankfurt a.M. 1992
- <sup>8</sup> Lynda Nead: *The Female Nude. Art, Obscenity and Sexuality*, London 1992; Sigrid Schade: *Der Mythos des Ganzen Körpers. Das Fragmentarische in der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts als Dekonstruktion bürglicher Totalitätskonzepte*, in: I. Barta et. al. (ed.): *Frauen, Bilder, Männer, Mythen*, Berlin 1987
- <sup>9</sup> Sigrid Schade: *Mediale Weiblichkeit und weibliche Künste. Zu Cindy Shermans Fotoserien*, in: *Amerikastudien*, H. 3, 1992, p. 471 cont.
- <sup>10</sup> Catalogue: Cindy Sherman. *Arbeiten von 1975-1993*, München 1993
- <sup>11</sup> Cf. Sigrid Schade: *Die Spiele der Puppe im Licht des Todes. Das Motiv des Mannequins in der Auseinandersetzung surrealistischer Künstler mit dem Medium der Fotografie*, in: *Fotogeschichte*, no. 51, 1994, p. 27 cont.
- <sup>12</sup> Cf. the approach her to the theme of the exhibition "Les Immatériaux, Paris 1985; Jean-Francois Lyotard with others: *Immaterialität und Postmoderne*, Berlin 1985. The problematic of the "spirit and material" dichotomy is also reflected in the discussion on sex-gender differentiation, which produces a resistance to biologicistic interpretation that must then be onerously transferred back into the conception of gender as a cultural construction. Cf. Judith Butler: *Körper von Gewicht. Über die diskursiven Grenzen des Körpergeschlechts*, in: *Neue Rundschau*, No 4, 1993, p. 57 cont.
- <sup>13</sup> Hal Foster: *Compulsive Beauty*, October Book, Cambridge, Mass. 1993, Preface
- <sup>14</sup> Sigrid Schade: "Der Spuk ist durchschaut!" Rück-Sichten auf Darstellbarkeit von Kubin bis zur Abject Art, in: M. Sturm, G. C. Tholen, R. Zendron (ed.): *Phantasma und Phantome. Gestalten des Unheimlichen in Kunst und Psychoanalyse*, Catalogue of the exhibition in the Offenes Kulturhaus Linz, 1995

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- <sup>15</sup> Catalogue: *Abject Art. Repulsion and Desire in American Art*. Whitney Museum, New York 1993
- <sup>16</sup> Julia Kristeva. *Pouvoirs de l'horreur. Essai sur l'abjection*, Paris 1980
- <sup>17</sup> Funktion und Feld des Sprechens und der Sprache in der Psychoanalyse, in: *Schriften 1*, Frankfurt a.M. 1975, p. 120
- <sup>18</sup> The space is under reconstruction during the next two years, then the structure will be changed
- <sup>19</sup> For further information on the three works see the catalogue *Andere Körper* (Note 1)
- <sup>20</sup> Cf. Catalogue: Valie Export, Oberösterreichisches Landesmuseum, Linz 1992; Anita Prammer: *Valie Export. Eine multimediale Künstlerin*, Wien 1988
- <sup>21</sup> Maria Klonaris, Katherina Thomadaki (ed.): *Mutations de l'image*, Paris 1994
- <sup>22</sup> Cf. Catalogue *Andere Körper*, p. 125
- <sup>23</sup> Catalogue of the documenta IX, Kassel 1992; catalogue: Vera Frenkel. *Raincoats, Suitcases, Palms* Art Gallery of York University, Toronto 1993; catalogue: Vera Frenkel. *...from the Transit Bar, The Power Plant Gallery*, Toronto 1994
- <sup>24</sup> Cf. Catalogue *Andere Körper*, p. 61-68
- <sup>25</sup> address: <http://www.yorku.ca/BodyMissing>