

Topography of the body, the intervention of identity

by Nathalie Goffard, art critic

Seen from a conventional point of view, medicine and the visual arts would appear to be two opposing disciplines. The first relates to health and to the bodily, belonging firmly within the scientific area; the other, given less importance, deals with reflections and sensations. However, artists and doctors share much common ground: both scrutinise reality, either symptoms or signs depending on the subject, in order to see things that others cannot. At the beginning of the twentieth century Walter Benjamin compared the painter to the magician, and the producer of technical images (photographers and cameramen) to the surgeon. Through the metaphor of the surgeon Benjamin predicted how technical images would mediate our relationship to and way of perceiving reality, and—the tautology is worth it—our own reality: the body. So if medical science and its corresponding imaginary remind us that our bodies are mere flesh and blood, a collection of cells, fluids and organs, art on the other hand insists that we reflect on our humanity, on our “being in this world”. However one could also argue that medicine is a social science, subject to interpretation and human error, and that, conversely, artistic production has moved towards pragmatic forms of investigation and a systemisation that has little to do with inspirational muses.

Art and the sciences have been in dialogue since our world became anthropocentric and rational. For example both Leonardo Da Vinci’s anatomical studies and Rembrandt’s painting *The Anatomy Lesson* are symptomatic of the beginnings of a modern society eager to understand the secrets of the human machine. Relatively recently in 1895 when Wilhelm Röntgen discovered X-rays, he made visible and transparent to the naked eye the inside of the human body. Additionally, within the frame of the inventions and scientific advances that marked the Industrial Revolution and which then multiplied exponentially during the twentieth century, it is worth mentioning cellular theory, pasteurisation, blood grouping and the first discoveries in genetics, and the DNA sequencing which would go a long way to explaining the complexity of the human body and revealing its mysteries. Far removed from the occasional dissected corpses that were exhibited for entertainment in the 17th century, we are now familiar with the many medical techniques of visualisation such as ultrasounds, computerised CAT scans, endoscopies and MRI scans (magnetic resonance imaging). Our physical reality is now mediated through techno-medical imaginary and abstract knowledge that we can easily access via the internet. The result was a new way of perceiving and understanding our own bodies and those of others. In this era of the image as primordial—foretold by Benjamin—this interaction with reality is subject to interpretation and therefore to error. In fact anyone who has experienced seeing the inside of their own body through one of the various technological procedures, or has looked through their laboratory examination results, may remember how the process is always somewhat disturbing, codified and hermetic; it leaves us grasping to understand the signifiers implicit in those elements contained in the body’s superficial aspect that we usually take for granted as being the only reality.

The era of the image as primordial implies a culture of appearances and the “society of transparency”¹ in which the contemporary individual exhibits and shares everything, thereby generating new paradigms concerning identity, the public, the private, the virtual and the real. In all of these spheres the limits of the visibility of the body have been extended and have mutated into a spectacle². So it is no surprise that the organic consciousness of our body and its media potential has gone beyond the limits of the medical field and is widely used as material for art.

The *body art* of the 1960s was ground-breaking in that it conceived of the body as organic material and not as an idealised representation. From that moment on many multi-disciplinary dialogues

¹ The title of the book by the philosopher Byung-Chul Han, who thereby describes a society over-exposed in the internet and social media era.

² For example we are now familiar with the fact that a pregnant woman can publish on social networks the 3D ultrasound images of the foetus, sharing them with people beyond the intimate social group. It is no longer family photographs and *selfies* that are shared, but also images of the inside of the person’s own body.

have developed both formally and conceptually between art and the sciences. In passing it is worth mentioning the plastic surgery that the artist Orlan subjects herself to, Gunther Von Hagen's "plastinated" corpses, Sterlac's post-human man-machine relationship, the use of reconstituted MRI scans in the sculptural objects by Marilene Oliver, the DNA codification used by Joe Davis among others, all work that testifies to the strategies of displacement of information and technical-scientific procedures towards the field of contemporary art in an era of cloning, the neurosciences, artificial organs and the cyber-culture.

In her project *La Fisonomía del Sentido* ("The Physiognomy of Meaning") Justine Graham makes the academic community of the Faculty of Medicine at the Clínica Alemana Universidad del Desarrollo the subject of four types of medical images: the carotid artery doppler ultrasound, the oral smear test, the retinography and the haemogram, that are accompanied by oral statements explaining the motivation for studying those particular fields. As well as questioning what defines our identity, as has been expanded upon above, the exercise is also interesting for the way in which it inverts the use of medical procedures, applying them to the future health professional and not to the patients being diagnosed.

We have learned that a photograph says nothing of itself, and in the same way we have lost any naivety concerning what a photographic portrait really communicates about the identity of a person. Beyond an individual's physical attributes (colour of the eyes, hair and skin), it reveals little about their personality and even less about their genotype or blood group. For this reason Justine Graham, like many contemporary artists, conceives of the photograph as a tool at the service of artistic investigation in which systemisation, repetition, the use of typologies and above all the complementary use of texts, replace the opacity, the hermetic element of the photographic image. More than this, the medical images that the artist uses often appear to be abstract scenes, topographical views or maps of a body viewed as land to be explored. An eye seen from its interior, a blood test that defines our blood type or a saliva swab that gives us our precise DNA makeup informs us of new plastic and conceptual possibilities that allow us to question what really makes up our identity. In an era of excessive use of *photoshop*, a widespread use of plastic surgery and the standardisation of beauty, perhaps it's time we looked inside our bodies to understand their uniqueness?

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