BODY PROBE

MUTATING PHYSICAL BOUNDARIES
BODY PROBE: TORTURE GARDEN 2

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The couple wanted to design a space filled with natural light, with room to accommodate their newborn baby, as well as Laust’s 6ft 5in frame.
THE SELF MADE FREAK:
HYBRIDIZATIONS AND BODIES IN TRANSITION
by Betti Marenko - IN.SECT.CORP™

The Self Made Freak is a dream that is becoming reality. The promise of monsters is a self-fulfilling prophecy of incredible adaptation, survival and power.

It is undeniable that we are witnessing a widespread interest in freakishness. Different bodies, born as such or made, seem to lurk from every not-so-hidden corner of this millennium ever cultural landscape. Zeitgeist as a giant pea-shoot?

Evidence of what the Voice Literary Supplement calls “The Return of Abnormality” is all around us, from the work of intellectuals like Donna Haraway and her cyborgs, to body building obsessive competitors, who refer to themselves as freaks; from academic and feminist theorist Elizabeth Grosz and her investigations in other corporealities, to the Jim Rose Freak Circus Show and the spectacularisation of altered, manipulated bodies. Different bodies are featured more and more in both low and high culture, once again proving the arbitrariness of their distinction, they appear in advertising, they are the captivating subjects of fiction such as Gisele Lacke, they are researched in a branch of cultural studies called Disability Studies, their in your face monstrosity questioned, probed, turned upside down, is conspicuously eroding the presumptions of normality.

In fact, the very notion of the normal body has come to be confronted by its own dark side, by its own otherness in all its unimagined multiple faces. The culture system of reproduction of knowledge is facing the pitfalls of arbitrariness and is shaken at the fundamentals by the realisation that the other is us, and that the long term kingdom of the binary system which constructs a self as opposed to an other, is collapsing. Binary division cannot win over the life affirming forces of fluidity, movement and change.

The revenge of the monster is close. And the Self Made Freak is a herald of this revenge.

THE HYBRID AND MONSTROUS BODY

I intend to propose a different working approach to altered bodies, a different way of looking at the same reality, a different modality of perceiving. Considering permanently altered bodies as the contemporary embodiment of the monstrous, as one of the possible incarnations of the otherness.

The monstrous body is first of all a cultural body. It is the product of a complex cultural process. It does represent the finest embodiment of culturally instigated and socially repressed fears. It is a collective construction of a giant screen onto which social anxieties and cultural fears are neverendingly projected.

Therefore it constitutes a threat for the system as its shape relentlessly mutates, acquiring always different embodiments. Its power of threatening what is supposed to be normality is located precisely in its own omniscient capacity to undergo processes of change and metamorphoses.

My exploratory theoretical tool is the idea that it is somehow viable to view the permanently decorated body as a contemporary up to date version of the monstrous and hybrid body.

Cross fertilisation could result in a deeper understanding of contemporary body reality and perception through a standpoint which considers this particular breed of monsters as hybridizations and considers permanent body decorations as signs of a metamorphosis that is spreading through iconic contagion.

HYBRIDIZATIONS

Hybrid is the result of a combination of different elements, even unrelated incongruous parts whose combination gives birth to the unexpected, to the potentially endless variations that we find in Ovid’s Metamorphoses, as well as in the Manchester of the future imagined by Jeff Noon in Pollen, where all the inhabitants are creatures resulting from the different combination of human, vegetable, animal and shadow.

Hybridizations, are combinatorial, extraordinary cases where no line is the rule.

Hybridizations: appropriate definition for bodies which contain ink and metal, mixed together with skin, blood and flesh. Bodies which are changing. Changing skin, changing gender, changing shape, form, dimensions, intentionally altering the perspective from which to perceive reality and be perceived by it.

A corporeality which is mutating by effect of hybridization revolves around the process of becoming, rather than on the fact of being.

Further, unpredictable becomings:
This is what the paradox of permanent body marking entails
This body did change once
It can change again, unfolding its purposelessness as the stigma of a joyful unattachment
It can change again.
And it will.
In further unpredictable becomings:
whose coefficient of speed still remains unknown
whose enveloping metamorphic matter moves beyond external resemblance towards internal homologies.

A permanent marked body shares with the monstrous body an uncompromising otherness, a fiercely stimulating force that pulls in more than one direction simultaneously.

They are both hybrid creatures whose borderline status induces repulsion and fascination at the same time.
They are both creatures in progressive transformation whose fundamental affinity lies in the fact that they simultaneously belong to more than one realm of being.

They both force the viewer to question his/her own assumptions, what he/she considers to be knowledge. In so doing the hybrid creature’s own presence is revealing, as it discloses the reality of the viewer’s attitude in non-human politics more efficiently than anything else.

**ETYMOLOGY AND HISTORY**

The monstrous body works as a mirror which mercilessly reflects deep attitudes and cultural conventions. And not only metaphorically speaking; in fact, the word monster comes from the Latin *monstrum*, etymologically “that which reveals”, “that which warns”.

For this reason, since Babylonian times (2800 BC) a monstrous body was considered indeed a sign of divine prodigy, a visible manifestation of the gods’ supernatural power and will. Therefore, the monstrous body usually served for divination purposes, sacrificed and ritually examined. In the course of history, though, the monstrous body ceased to be a sign of wonder and become a lucrative rarity to be displayed in order to provide widespread entertainment. In the Renaissance we find it in royal courts and popular fairs; during the Enlightenment the monstrous body becomes object of scientific probing, displayed in Cabinets of Curiosities, while retaining its mass appeal, lureng crowds in street corners and taverns; in more recent times American circus side-shows such as the famous PT. Barnum, started a fierce commercialisation of the monstrous body, which can be considered as an antedate of the motion-picture industry.

The increasing visible presence of other bodies in our contemporary culture is thus historically linked with a sequence of differently charged narratives of the monstrous. From a narrative of wonder, to a narrative of deviance, until what nowadays we can call a narrative of difference. Of self-induced difference, even, as in the case of the Self Made Freak.

**MONSTER AS ABJECT**

Traditionally a presence considered either nightmare or metaphor, the monstrous body condenses in its own features the unspeakable face of the abject, the prime terror of the other, thus being the body against which a culture comes to define its own criteria of normality, as a totally informing notion of what is not other.

In this way the very core of a given society values are elaborated through a binary system whose negative and oppositional pattern suffocates the free movement of life-affirming forces embodied in the monster.

Culture invents constantly different ways of representing the otherness, new definitions, unheard of names with which to label the difference and in so doing reducing it to just another predictable sequence.

To name the other is to construct its identity by forcing it within the boundaries of a classificatory cage. This is how the defence mechanisms of a culture attempt to hold at bay the de-stabilising forces of the monstrous body. In fact, in order to reproduce itself and survive, a power oriented structure must annihilate the life-affirming forces of free expenditure, excess and gratuitous exchange, all of which are embedded in the monstrous body.

Symbolic ambivalence in all its possible embodiments must be persecuted as dangerously inspirational, threateningly subversive, potentially borders disruptive.

Every normative structure indexes specific embodiments of the other, calls them monsters and sets up killing machines to eliminate them.

In this way it uses, reaffirms and reproduces its power through exode-termination.

**Ex-termination of the monster**

**De-termination of the other**

by dyadic configuration
which systematically
grows difference away
by torturing
those bodies labelled suitable for the operation
those embodiments invented as such for this purpose
the body of the monster
is the body of the witch
is the body of the rigger
is the body of the freak
is the body of the bigger
is the body of the gypsy
is the body of the lesbian
is the body of the jew
is the body of the gay
is the body of every/other

The monstrous body is always disturbing. It is always impending.

It is a body whose grin threatens to subvert what are considered to be inalienable assumptions of a given system of knowledge. Its danger lies in the fact that it retains the enormous power to disclose and reveal the arbitrariness of such a system.

The visible alterity embodied by the monstrous obliges us to question the category of what is the other, at the same time questioning as well the very idea of the category used to define what is other. The monstrous body operates then as a social indicator, as a cultural litmus test, always in charge of disclosing a great deal of information about the viewer’s attitudes, always greater than expected. Impossible not to look at the monstrous body’s mere presence engages the other’s gaze in a duel whose symbolic trophy would be the affirmation of one’s own identity, individual and collective.
What will you be wearing this season?
THE REVENGE: THE MONSTER GAZES BACK

(by gazing back we do not mean falling in the same dyadic system, back does not mean against back does not mean war, nor conflict back does not mean oppositional force it is not the other side it rather offers itself to sensual rubbing of surfaces a swirling new production of unheard of thoughts by rubbing off onto another surface its electric trails)

The monster's gaze is a de-mystifying one. It is a gaze that has the power to interrupt and let emerge the cancerous cells of prejudice and fear.

Those who probe the weirdness of the monstrous body from the self styled safety of their superstitious certainties, are in fact, giving themselves away, by exposing their inner beings to be mirrored in the eyes of the monster.

Yes, because the hybrid creature is among us to return the gaze, the dissecting, curious, terrified, inquiring gaze of those who are anxiously willing to exchange their fear of the otherness with the reassurance, however fictitious, of their own normality.

MONSTER AS EXCESS

Monsters are the embodiment of excess. That's why their mere visibility is enough to disrupt the binary system. Against their body the binary system does not work. It cannot operate where there are life-affirming forces of excess and perpetual change. Forces which are charged with an intensity which does not derive from a binary system.

These forces have something which is not reducible to a dyadic structure of thinking.

These forces dwell into the excess, into what is not definable in one exterminating determination.

Thus, the monster's corporeality cannot be forced into a single classification, cannot be captured by the trap of fixed categories. Ontologically borderline, the monstrous body is the hinge which allows unthought of openings. Untameable body, it makes visible in its own corporeality the arbitrariness of the binary system, a system that proceeds according to a disjunctive apparatus, synthesised by the formula or...or...

It makes that visible because it is not reducible itself to such an apparatus; because it is not taxonomically compatible.

The monstrous body is the living expression of an intermediate state, of a threshold whose unstoppable friction force is eroding the stale binary system.

(Excess is excessive to meaning. It is excessive to words. It does not belong to one world only. It does belong to many. It is a borderline area, the area where change happens.

Multidimensional fertility. Generating power of the interface. Rubbing of surfaces)

The hybrid creature speaks loudly about a metamorphoses of the body and of the mind.

It heralds an ontological shift towards polymorphy, transformation, difference. It indicates new direction, new sensibility and attitude, based on the process of becoming rather than on the fact of being.

Different bodies claim for a different perception, one that will not demand to know-it-all, nor to give definite answers, rather one that will learn different ways to ask questions.

A perception which springs out of that liquidity-in-between where opposite fuses merge one into the other, thus making impossible to pinpoint what belongs to whom. Dis-solution of boundaries of identity. An identity which has to be considered as a process and not as a fact, as an embodiment of strategies of subversion and creativity, a body which is in the world, and at the same time is the world. A body in perpetual becoming.

BECOMINGS

"Becomings is bodily thought (....), the ways in which thought, force and change invest and invent new series, metamorphosing new bodies from the old through their encounter. Process of becoming is when one thing transmutes into another, entering into an arrangement, an assemblage of other fragments, other things, becoming bound up in some other production, forming of a machine, a component in a series of flows and breaks, of varying speed and intensities. It is not a question of being (....), of attaining a definite status as a thing, a permanent fixture, nor of clinging to, having an identity, but of moving, changing, being swept beyond one singular position into a multiplicity of flows, (....); to liberate the myriad of flows, to proliferate connections, to intensify."

— E. Grosz

The process of becoming something other in relation to the contemporary decorated body refers to the exquisite and more often than not exquisitely painful procedure by which a given body is transformed into another one.

We can imagine this process of self induced transformation as a kind of act of pure magic, if by magic we intend a system of compensation which readresses previously lost balances and works towards self-preservation and healing. In this sense, performing an action of body modification which is bound to affect permanently one's corporeality is very much like casting a spell upon themselves. It is a spell which allows one to become what one wants to become, making a very personal dream, or even obsession, true.

It is a self cast spell which distillates a raw vision into the substantiation of the real bodily experience, and acts as alchemic operator of change driven relentlessly by the tidal force of desire.
DESIRE IN THE GENESIS OF THE SELF MADE FREAK

"The sites most intensely invested in desire always occur at a conjunction, an interruption, a point of machine connection, always surface effects, between one thing and another — between a hand and a breast, a tongue and a cunt, a mouth and food, a nose and a rose."
— E. Grosz

This hybrid body is a body whose parts are invested in selective manner, so to become corporeal sites charged with libidinal intensities. The resulting planes, or levels, create constantly fluctuating linkages devoid of any internal hierarchy or fixed structure. Rather, they seem to follow as only rule the idea of transmutation, impulses and free circulating randomised energy.

They follow as their only rule the generating force of desire, the same very force which pulsates in the hybrid body. The embodiment of the Self Made Freak is a visible manifestation of desire. A desire so intense to become flesh and blood, to become incarnated.

To consider the body in these terms means to emphasise the role played by desire in the shaping of reality and in the production and communication of meaning; most relevant for the analysis of bodies which choose deliberately, thus for the pure delicious superficiality to the general economy of the bare necessities, to undergo a process of radical transformation.

"Desire... is a mode of surface contact with things and substances, with a world, that engenders and induces transformations, intensifications, a becoming something other. Not simply a rise and fall, a wasting and warning, but movement, processes, transmutations. That is what constitutes the appeal and power of desire, its capacity to shake up, rearrange, reorganise the body's forms and sensations, to make the subject and body as such dissolve into something else, something other than what they are habitually... Desire... (may end...) in the production of sensations never felt, alignments never thought, energies never tapped, regions never known."
— E. Grosz

Desire is always already there. It pre-exists the body, it pre-exists especially contextual definitions of body reality. Desire is already there, ready to be unleashed, diffused, perpetuated, through the appropriate vectors, implemenets and tools that can operate on the body reconfiguring its territory, remapping circuits, interstices, openings and closures, creases and folds, redesigning temporarily and/or permanently surfaces by heavily changing them with intensities of liberating flows...such surfaces free to interact with each other, free to connect, to establish previously unthought of, unheard of, unseen linkages with other surfaces... whose effects are bound to eramate a proliferation of pure distilled divisible molecules in perpetual mutual disconnection.

Desire is produced and liberated as cause and simultaneously the effects of a conjuring of parts.

Desire is already there.

At the intersection point.
Where the needle meets the flesh.
Where ink meets blood.
Where metal meets the bone.

MARKS, MAPS AND SKIN

"Body markings create an erotogenic surface; they create not a map of the body but the body precisely as a map"
— E. Grosz

To mark one's skin is excessive and contagious.

Excessive as it induces a proliferation of intensities, an expansion of surfaces that feel by connecting, intersecting, overlapping and skimming with other surfaces, themselves expanded, prone to open and be opened in an unstoppable flux of flowing, incarnated desire. Yeah, desire.

Just desire, with no declination whatsoever, primeval force that sweeps away stagnation of compressed energies, releasing them from the clive of foreclosure and setting them free to leave their trace, chaotic imprinting of randomised and fragmented paths which emerges as tactile relief on marked/mapped skin.

A skin that becomes a map, a blind cartography of possibilities.

To mark one's skin is to produce excess and contagion.

Contagion as the generated expansion of bodily surfaces allows and increases the possibility of otherwise unlikely linkages, of a spreading infection which unfolds and flourishes in devastatingly beautiful ways.

It is precisely the unexpected link with other surfaces which generates the atomic wonder of an interface, of a fold, of a crease: which creates in-between territories whose borders are not decipherable and where hyphenation forces are at display; which produces the interspace where contamination of borders is at work; which engenders the boundless territory where nothing fits into a prefixed structure.

SELF MADE FREAK AND IDENTITY GAMES

The Self Made Freak is against the idea of the modern tribe as an attempt of finding a panacea for all identity anxieties. The Self Made Freak does not want to own a fixed identity. She rather dwells in an indecipherable borderline state, both within and without the boundaries of the structure she belongs to. Perpetually finding a ford, and if the ford is not there, relentlessly inventing it, a ford extolling and celebrating the power of the margin.

Liquid liminal surviving, liquid like the language that translates into discernible words the ceaselessly unfolding fluctuation of body matter.

Liquid liminal identities, liquid like the interface contadiction...
The power of self-induced transformation proves that the attempt to impose a name on diversity had failed together with the collapse of the binary century.

The hybrid body, the Self-Made Freak does not accept the limits imposed by ex-terminative de-termination.

Its own ontological liminal state makes of its own fluctuating body an extremely resilient surface that bounces back every attempt to be forced into a classification, to be pigeonholed within a pre-fixed taxonomy, to be constricted in the cage of the binary logic.

The self-made freak does resist being given a name, and thus, executed.

*De-termination is Ex-termination*

It does not accept the logic of binary opposition, as it places itself at the intersection point where a multiplicity of trajectories meet, clash, merge into each other.

It rather becomes the catalyst of opposite sides, tinctorially divergent forces...

It induces both attraction and repulsion, it seduces and disgusts, cruelly forcing the viewer to walk on a thin rope suspended between the two banks of fear and desire.

The hybrid body is not and never will be assimilated, yet it inhabits our surroundings, it lives just around the corner from us, nearby. It is the very embodiment of the idea of abduction.

Therefore it constitutes a threat for the system, its structure and its borders, a potentially positive, life enforcing threat of cross-fertilisation, desire and subversion.

"Abduction is what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite."

— J. Kristeva

**THRESHOLD STATE**

...the body not only as a text to be read, analysed and dissected, but also as something which has to be felt. Painfully felt. Sensually felt...

Méreau-Porjy says that the enigma of the body is the fact that the body is at the same time seen and seen.

It is exactly in this space in between where what is supposed to belong to the body and what is supposed to belong to the mind merges one into the other, that they cannot but show the arbitrariness of such a division. This fertile territory in between is where polarities get loose and an unbound creativity can develop. It is the space of the mutual fertilisation between an inner vision that has become pure poetry embodied into the flesh and the politics of conscious differentiation.

This is also the place where it is possible to elaborate a knowledge whose main concern is not to produce an eternal and fixed truth, or to look for definite answers. It is rather a situated knowledge, linked to a specific place, time and context and not necessarily always valid.

In order not to slip in the quicksands of absolute relativism, though, it is necessary to politically motivate the production of knowledge. By saying politically I mean a wide spread notion which includes personal awareness, commitment to change and to the well being of humanity, and the standpoint of a borderline position is a key to open more than one door simultaneously.

(it is a 360 degrees overview.

one day we all will have compound eyes)

From a borderline position one is both within and without the boundaries, thus able to challenge the structure avoiding the risk of being assimilated. Boundaries constantly move because always new incarnations of the monstrous body keep them fluid and slippery.

Bodies which are others, and among them the permanently adored bodies, are the heralds of a new epochal mutation. They are just confirming once more that the production of knowledge is a consequence of corporeality, pure function of intensities.

Pure function of desires.

The hybrid creature

s/he exudes the power to annihilate the logic of binary oppositions

s/he gazes back and forth, scanning the inscape with its antennas

s/he moves with visible insolence across a landscape of no definitions, incongruity, visual puns

randomised bits of forgotten languages float into space

imprinting patterns with their trails

animals on the run

fragments of meaning ceaselessly melt into each other equally got dismembered again

skin dweller

the creature moves furtively through the inscapes of an apocalyptic desert

neither prey nor predator

its body stops

its nostrils quiver

smelling electromagnetic waves as it scans the infosphere

it intercepts signals

drifts along interferences

secretes emissions

waving its antennae

it perceives rumbling vibrations

memory downloads microcommunications

real time unfolding among the network of cases

the feedback is as powerful as the interweaving of zillions of messages

the feedback is as distorted as the collapse of tons of brain matter

the feedback speaks of mutation

after which nothing will again be the same

the unexpected is flourishing like mould

bodies are changing shape and dimension

the final results of this metamorphosis are still unknown, yet predictable

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its body is undergoing a process of radical mutation
the unexpected creation of a new ecosystem
conveyed by the perennial shedding of a remodelled skin

only compound eyes can foresee through time
catch a glimpse of what it was
only compound eyes can dive into space
grasp a hint of what it will become

this is a threshold
the body itself is a threshold
and the new emerging creature is
what it needs to be in order to do what it is supposed to do
because its condition is the threshold

white fire
metal melts with blood
megabyte melts with thought
insect melts with human

Notes:
1) See D. Haraway, "The Promise Of Monsters: A Regenerative
Politics For Inappropriated Others", in L. Grossberg, C. Nelson,
P. Treichler, eds, Cultural Studies, Routledge, New York and
2) See M. Dery, "Freak Chic", in Voice Literary Supplement,
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