EMPTY AND BROKEN: CONTEMPORARY ART OF THE FUTURE BODY

Janet Louise Bennett
Cardiff School of Art & Design, University of Wales Institute, Cardiff
Wales, UK

Abstract

In this paper I discuss the ways in which the body, specifically the biotechnologically mediated body of the future, is represented in contemporary art. With developments in imaging and media technologies, the archetypal, substantive and tangible form has lost its mass, solidity and status. It has been superseded by the virtual, empty or partial figure which, for the most part, cannot be exposed or subjected to real world forces and influences. According to Edei, art incorporates ‘visualising, abstracting, imagining, inventing, pretending, storytelling, re-presenting and ceaselessly reinterpreting things’ and art about the future body is no exception. But these bodies rarely appear whole; instead we see fragments – bioart works for example - or parts which signify the whole. Illustrative and media images present us with empty bodies; digitally constructed seamless renderings of virtual skin enclosing a hollow frame or rig. Both types of imagery represent the human as a sum of parts which are individually manipulable and lacking genuine subjectivity, and I discuss their relative merits in terms of their performative potential - their capacity to influence our desires and beliefs about bodies and what they could become.

Keywords: body, bioart, biotechnology

Empty and Broken: Contemporary Art of the Future Body

Introduction

In this paper I discuss changing views and visions of the body, and the ways in which contemporary artworks function as representations concerned with the future of the human body, specifically in the context of recent advances in genetic and biological technologies. I examine four artworks: Daniel Lee’s Manimals series, 1993; Kirsten Geisler’s Touch Me, 1999; Extra Ear Quarter Scale, 2004 by The Tissue Culture and Art Project in collaboration with Stelarc, and Patricia Piccinini’s The Young Family, 2003. I evaluate their potential to influence what might be desirable, acceptable or distasteful in terms of their affective and performative qualities.

Bodies, Old and New

Innovative technologies and medical biotechnologies have improved our knowledge of the body and its component parts, and the potential to interfere, interface and interact with it in a multiplicity of ways has led to increasingly differentiated views of it. Once solid and conceived of as in the round, it is now not just the sum of its parts but an amalgam of different perspectives, each potentially as important as another. The digital era facilitates both the fragmentation of the body and its re/construction on these terms, arguably effacing or the material, corporeal body in the process. We have become increasingly used to thinking of the human body as an entity that can be identified from its genetic material and since the completion of the Human Genome Project in 2003, as one which may eventually be fully comprehended from the digitised sequence of its genetic code. This understanding of the human body and its workings as code, which can be read and re-written as our technologies for decryption and reformulation advance is at odds with more traditional conceptions of the body, which has long been conceived as visually and discursively as a unified, bounded and stable form; its solidity and strength venerated. When penetrated, opened up or anatomised this body disclosed its interior as a configuration of interdependent organs and systems. Now however, the elements of this configuration are considered as ‘…parts of an informational system made of codes producing signals, which are themselves transcribed into certain bodily functions’. They are increasingly externalised visually and textually and viewed as individually controllable; the genetic data that directs their form and function being potentially manipulable so that imperfections of signalling and transcription might be ironed out.

The development of increasingly sophisticated digital techniques for recording and manipulating imagery, and the creation and 3D animation of computer-generated representations or simulations of
the body has led to a simultaneous intimacy with and estrangement from the flesh. Hayles\textsuperscript{iii} contends that the increasing importance and value ascribed to non-material information, such as the human genome, has the potential to effect a diminution of the status of actual embodied states to and also to produce new models of subjectivity. Now, using digital technology, we are able to ‘experience’ the interior of the body in the form of hygienic, digitised renderings of corpses frozen and sliced (The Visible Human Project) and may choose to have a second or even third life; creating aesthetically improved, synthetic versions of ourselves in imaginary worlds.

Representations of possible future forms of human embodiment in both art and science contexts may also function performatively, with the potential to steer public opinion and the direction of future developments. Performativity is an active, affective property of images; their capacity to influence thought and belief, and I am using Mike Michael’s sense of the word\textsuperscript{iv}; he asserts that biotechnological future abstractions are put into circulation ‘to have a performative influence in real time’.\textsuperscript{v} Abstractions in the form of visual imagery including artworks and illustrative scientific imagery may seek to influence attitudes and in so doing, extend the imperatives, concerns or desires of the present into the near future and consequently into the more distant futures of succeeding generations. Performative visions and narratives of the possibilities for future forms of embodiment filter into all levels and areas of visual culture highlighting positive as well as negative aspects areas of debate and enquiry. The artworks described below, give an indication of how images and artworks on the subject of the body and biotechnologies, as flexible and nuanced cultural means of mediating the complexity of human knowledge, desire, experience and understanding, are performative to different degrees and in varying ways.

\textit{Manimals 1993: Daniel Lee}

The fabrication or reconfiguration of digitally created bodies or body parts has allowed us to make visible with a greater degree of realism than ever before our visions or fantasies concerning the body and embodiment, especially those concerning our possible futures. In his 1993 \textit{Manimals} series, artist Daniel Lee produced digital photographic images of imaginary animal/human hybrids, drawing on Chinese astrology and the chimera of mythology to image our evolutionary connection with animals, that is, to make apparent the animal in us; ‘despite being more "highly evolved" than our fellow creatures, we are all still animals....’\textsuperscript{vi} Lee argues that ‘\[b\]ecause technology changes the way we live and the way we create it, it also changes the way we look,’\textsuperscript{vii} By this I understand Lee to mean that access to and exploitation of developing technologies allows us to reshape and review the ways in which we look at the world, look at ourselves and are seen by others – from, for example, laser eye correction to the creation of avatars or the use of cosmetic surgery. Lee’s human-beast images also resonate strongly with certain conceptions of what science may be able to achieve in the future: genetically manipulated, transgenic, no longer fully human beings. One of the \textit{Manimal} images, \textit{1949, Year of the Ox} was featured in the 2004 Future Face exhibition at the Science Museum, London and another, \textit{1982, Year of the Tiger}, was exhibited at the bio-art exhibition \textit{In Vivo - In Vitro} at the Athens School of Fine Arts in 2006. The interpretation of these images as visualisations of possible future forms of genetic hybridity though, goes beyond the original context of their production. That is not to say that their exhibition in different contexts is not legitimate, that is not at issue. What is problematic is the way in which, if it is viewed as alluding to a future possible transgenic form, what that form in fact exhibits is an unsophisticated notion of genetic determinism. This is manifested in the way that the image invites the interpretation of a synthesis of genes from a human and an animal as a smooth mix, where the physical phenotypic, expression of genetic hybridity - the visible outcome of a human-ox or human-tiger genetic mix – shows that some portion of the figure is animal and the rest is human and that the blend is proportionate and seamless. As to a loss of humanity – possibly perceived as more important than a loss of animality as a consequence of the addition of human genes to those of an animal - Lee’s figures appear to have been photographed following traditional portrait conventions, with sepia colours, a studio background and strong directional lighting, and the figures look directly at the viewer. They do not appear to express any emotion, only behaviour – a steady bovine gaze or a restless feline baring of teeth. The focus is on the observable, the surface, rather than the hidden or any sense of interiority, and it is this that ultimately distances the viewer – there is little to empathise with or to stimulate affective response and the works illustrate but do not inform. As a result, I consider that the performative potential of these images are limited.

\textit{Touch Me, 1999, Kirsten Geisler}

The advent of digitally manipulable images of the human figure has caused a perceptual shift: representations of the body of substance (a body highly visible in art from antiquity to the later twentieth century) have been superseded by potentially globally accessible and even interactive virtual versions of the body and its parts. For all their apparent novelty and sophistication, these
representations are basically products of coding and mapping; in other words, they are flat and empty functional vehicles. They are bodies that have little substantial correspondence to human lived reality, being limited to the digital environment; an interior with no exterior, only the interface of the screen. Kirsten Geisler’s artwork Touch Me, 1999, is an example; a beautiful, bald, virtual female disembodied head displayed via a touch-screen interface. When the viewer touches the screen, also touching the face of the image, depending on which part of the face is touched, the facial expression changes from neutral to serious, sad or happy. Engagement with generic, virtual entities such as this, which are viewed without context of time or space, serves to emphasise the interpretation of the virtual part as autonomous, by which I mean that it does not communicate any sense or meaning of a body. If there is any communication or interaction, it is limited to and by the face only, fulfilling Deleuze and Guattari’s description of the facial machine, where all characteristics of the body, personality and so on are reduced to the face so that the individual is judged only according to that. In his writing on cinema, Deleuze described his conception of affectivity concerning the close-up film still of the face which he described as an ‘affection-image’ and which expresses affective qualities or powers. It is not that the face looks sad; what produces affect for Deleuze is, as Rushton elucidates …‘the emotional quality of the face itself, isolated from all other factors: sadness. The affect of sadness is no longer connected to a person or body, but rather floats unaccompanied in a realm of affection which has the quality of sadness’. Although liberated from the social codes that preclude the touching of a stranger’s face (and any distaste or squeamishness that pervades our association with the natural body, its processes and functions), when viewers engage with Geisler’s virtual creation, they physically control the facial expression and thus the characteristics of the affection-image it presents. This manipulation of the face to appear to think or feel diminishes the affective potential of the representation and, in the process, potentially reinforces the corporeal dimension and complexity of the viewer’s own body, undermining the virtual in favour of the material.

Extra Ear ¼ Scale 2004, The Tissue Culture and Art Project and Stelarc
Many artists have embraced the potential of new genetic and imaging technologies, departing from the more traditional forms of painted or graphic image and sculpted figure. Bio-artists have gone further, working within laboratories and using the biotechnologies themselves to create artworks from living material, which is both the medium and the subject. They are seeking re-evaluation through representation, aiming to stimulate new concepts and meanings by bringing the living fragment into full view. In doing so they are able to avoid and even undermine the hype that surrounds new biotechnological developments concerning the body and its imagined or desired future forms and nature. As with popular science, the focus is on communicating and emphasising the significance of these advances and TC & A, by creating culturally evocative objects, take full advantage of the fact that the value given to certain scientific and biotechnological research may be enhanced or undermined by the images associated with it in the public arena. Their stated purpose with these fragile works is to call attention to new ways of dealing with living material, addressing the ontological questions that arise when millions of specimens of living human and animal cells and tissues are stored and replicated, manipulated and hybridised in laboratories around the world. They aim to confront the viewer with works that are too subtle to be considered monstrous, emphasising instead the notion of care and responsibility, that each of their semi-living beings is ‘too fragile to be a threat; [a] benign, dependant being that needs tending if it is to survive.’ The Extra Ear ¼ Scale project involved the culture of a quarter-scale replica of Stelarc’s ear, grown in a bioreactor using human skin cells. ‘The project represents a recognisable human part. However, it is being presented as partial life and brings into question the notions of the wholeness of the body’. With this statement, TC & A acknowledge that as artists concerned to create works which bring new meanings to concepts of the body, a tissue cultured replica of a body part made using human tissue is problematic, possibly evoking associations with Frankenstein despite its scale; hence the emphasis on the notion of bodily wholeness and the work as partial life. The larger problem with a work such as this however, is that without an accompanying verbal or textual explanation, it is liable to be misunderstood or misinterpreted, and so the artists, if they wish to enlighten viewers, are required to provide these in some form, such as catalogue articles, publicity material, conference and symposia presentations or web pages. Catts, has described tissue culture art as the ‘art of disappointment’, and in purely visual terms they have been described as ‘thin’. The necessity for explication lessens the potential for the works themselves to be described as performative; rather it is the texts that accompany them that fulfill that role.

Piccinini
Patricia Piccinini’s The Young Family, created for the her 2003 Venice Biennale exhibition We are Family, is a highly finished sculptural depiction of a genetically engineered, transgenic human-animal hybrid female, nurturing a young litter. Through this work, Piccinini unites themes of domesticity,
farming practices, reproductive technologies and laboratory experimentation and invites the viewer to anthropomorphise. It represents forms of imagery which are grounded in reality, formed in the imagination but rooted in the physical, terrestrial or marine world we know such as a mermaid and as such is less unsettling or frightening than a representation of an entity which is more familiar but unpleasant. This work is not just about the physical outcomes of genetic engineering; by imbuing her sculpture with maternal sensibilities with which many viewers can identify, it elicits an emotional as well as an intellectual response from the viewer, underlining the importance of social relations and our responsibility towards future generations. Piccinini’s hybrid family of creatures reference fears of scientific excess and breached boundaries, but as transgenic animals they also bring to mind those which have been developed for medical purposes – for example, cattle which produce milk containing human proteins for the treatment of emphysema. Like Lee, her interest is the ‘animalness’ in us, her focus is not our evolutionary connection, but concerns the similarity of traits such as the care of offspring. The self-sufficiency of the group though, effects our disengagement, but in doing so creates a space for the viewer to reflect on the conflicting concerns it embodies. This space may be smaller where the body part or fragment is concerned principally due to the failure of the image of a part to act as a referent for or signifier of the emotional, social and intellectual as well as physical whole. This work then is affective, presents whole rather than partial bodies, and represents a future abstraction that functions performatively. However, that performativity is compromised to some extent by that space created by the disengagement for reflection. Because The Young Family is open to multiple or conflicting interpretations, any performative influence may well be weaker than with a work that is less equivocal.

**Conclusion**

Biotechnologies for the therapy and potential enhancement of the human body include genetic, germ-line and gender engineering; nerve-silicon interfaces; ‘spare-part’ tissue/organ engineering; implants for monitoring and control; cybernetic body modification and extension; reproductive cloning; nanobiotechnology; transgenics and augmented human intelligence. Together these offer a wide scope for visual representations across a breadth of media, which might function to illustrate, promote, provoke or repel. Virtual bodies and digitally manipulated body imagery carry the potential to become platforms for the technologies they epitomise or depict, but in the absence of 3D stereo technologies or aids, these bodies are always revealed in only two dimensions, however three-dimensionally they have been rendered. Thus our image of the body represented in this way is flattened - not only by the screen but also by our tacit knowledge of its source as computer code. Besides indicating what particular technologies might be capable of doing for or to bodies, images of bioengineered parts such as limbs, systems or organs, may also suggest that these are developing a degree of significance and autonomy previously only enjoyed by the unified whole. Bernadette Wegenstein asserts that now, every organ may stand in for the whole body, that the face ‘has ceased to be the most representative signifier of human appearance’ and that the ‘the age of the synechdoche’ (where the part is by definition a part only in relation to a whole) has come to an end. Accordingly the body has been defaced by new technologies and has lost the quality of faciality, so that it no longer acts as a locus of signification and subjectivity. Wegenstein’s view may help to explain why the fragment or part is more prevalent in artworks and cultural imagery of the future body than the whole: where sensitive ethical, social, political and cultural issues are concerned, images of empty bodies and parts may generate a sense of unease but they do not usually generate anything more than that; neither empathy nor outrage.

Having considered a number of images and artworks including those described above, it is my view that the capacity of a visual future abstraction to influence visions, desires and beliefs - to function performatively, is effected by the presence or absence of the expressive, responsive and legible face. Imagery with a strong affective content might reinforce some perspectives or challenge others. If the affective content is weaker or absent, subject matter other than that associated with the physical or emotional body may assume precedence, again reinforcing or challenging points of view. Images of body parts where the face is absent do not appear to function performatively in the same way or to the same extent as those where the face is present. It would seem that the age of the synechdoche might still be with us.

---


v Ibid


viii Deleuze, G. and Guattari, F. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, University of Minnesota Press, 1987

ix Deleuze, G. *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, University of Minnesota Press, 1986


xiv Statement made at Designer Bodies: Towards The Posthuman, International Symposium, Scottish National Gallery of Modern Art, Edinburgh on 3rd April, 2004


xvi Nanobiotechnology is nanotechnology with potential biological and biochemical applications and uses


xviii Ibid