

Bodies of Art/Bodies in Art: Four Case Studies

In his series of paintings, *Anthropométries* (1960), the French conceptual artist Yves Klein directed nude female models to cover their bodies with ultramarine paint (his patented, International Klein Blue) and then press themselves against gigantic, hanging sheets of white paper. As the title suggests—“the study of human body measurements on a comparative basis”—Klein used their figures like inked, human stamps to make imprints.¹ The sight of erotic bodies, the smell of fresh paint wafting through the air, and the sound of materials (dripping paint, rustling wall paper) against bare skin (another material), mixed with Klein’s verbal instructions and classical music from a small orchestra, likely created a hypnotic, sensory experience for everyone present. It would have been especially striking for the captivated mid-twentieth century audience who, like Klein, were dressed in conservative suits and bowties, dresses and pearls.² During Marina Abramović’s *Rhythm 4* (1974), the artist recorded herself naked in the stark, white cube of the Diagram Gallery in Milan crouched on her knees for 45 minutes. An industrial fan violently blasted air into her lungs until she collapsed and passed out. The rhythmic breathing of her body was overcome by the powerful machine, captured in photographs that still shock viewers more than fifty years later.³ In her monumental work at The Museum of Modern Art, *The Artist is Present* (2010), Abramović again centered and ‘presented’ herself in title and in person to the audience. But this time, her body appeared calm and expressionless. For 700 hours (roughly seven hours a day over a period of three months), she sat

¹ Merriam Webster, “Definition of Anthropometry,” Merriam-webster.com, 2019, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/anthropometry>.

² ArteContemporaneo100, “TateShots- Yves Klein - Anthropometries,” YouTube, March 22, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N5_BsyKNu0M.

³ Carrie Lambert-Beatty, “Against Performance Art,” *Artforum* (May 2010), 209.

at a small table in a large gallery.⁴ Facing the artist, a single, empty chair offered visitors of any age the chance to join her contemplative pose and the opportunity to stare deep into her eyes. Before a curious audience who formed a second layer of spectatorship, Abramović endured an incredulous, zen-like state while also receiving her viewer's searching gaze. Finally, in *Untitled* (Perfect Lovers) (2018), part of a series by the minimalist artist Félix González-Torres, a pair of seemingly identical, battery-operated, analog clocks hung side by side near a classical, bas-relief fragment of two lovers in the Theseus Temple of Vienna's Kunsthistorisches Museum. González-Torres composed the work as a tribute to his partner, Ross Laycock, who died from AIDS-related complications in 1991 during the height of the nationwide epidemic. According to the artist's instructions, the frames should touch, and their wall-mounted position is meant to be eye-level with the viewer.⁵ The expectation was that they would fall out of synchronization, leading to asynchrony and stoppage, requiring new batteries.⁶ At first glance, the objects appear to be only mechanical and readymade. But the longer one looks, the metaphor of two faces, same-sex love, and dwindling lifetimes becomes apparent. We can also listen to their alternating ticking like a quiet conversation or perhaps beating hearts. Their hands also hold our gaze, forming an invisible lifeline between object, artist and beholder. In all four of these disparate but connected works, Klein, Abramović and González-Torres engage the body—human, inanimate and embodied—in order to make, in the words of Walter Benjamin, “auratic magic.”⁷ For Klein, other bodies create the object. For Abramović, her body is the primary object. For González-Torres, absent bodies are implied by or hidden inside of the object. Even the viewers'

⁴ Carrie Lambert-Beatty, “Against Performance Art,” 212.

⁵ Sebastian Smee, “Perspective | a Minimalist Masterpiece with Profound Implications,” *Washington Post*, May 12, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/arts-entertainment/interactive/2023/felix-gonzalez-torres-perfect-lovers/>.

⁶ Jonathan D. Katz, “How AIDS Changed American Art” in *Art AIDS America* (University of Washington Press, 2015), 38.

⁷ Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproducibility” [second version, 1936] in Michael W. Jennings (editor), *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, 1935-1938* (Belknap Press, 2002), 106.

bodies as they “apprehend the object from various positions and under varying conditions of light” in the shared “spatial context” become an essential component to the shape and completion of these conceptual works.⁸ All these body-objects are part of a “newer aesthetic” that establishes a clear relationship between the work, artist and beholder.⁹ It is through the materiality, movement and metaphor of the body that all three artists create open works which invite viewers in to become coauthors of their objects’ auras.

Each artist employs material, movement and texture differently in order to “form a fresh dialectic” between object and viewer, opening the physical space and sharing authorship.¹⁰ Klein, for instance, creates an intimate theater of sound out of animate and inanimate bodies: paper crinkling under models’ weight; paint dripping onto the floor; his own instructional, encouraging voice; violins playing. “Gestural, muscular and motor relationships” flow between models and artist, adding another layer of texture to the space between audience and object.¹¹ In addition, viewers’ bodies move. They shift uneasily in their seats, reacting to the slow-motion, titillating movements. This was, after all, 1960. Klein wore a suit, giving his own body the gravitas of a director or choreographer. Reminiscent of Jackson Pollock who said he “liked to use dripping, fluid paint” and “work from all four sides” and “be in the painting,” Klein also centered his own body.¹² And yet, all the other bodies still participate, react, collaborate, move and are moved, all of which affects the overall materiality and composition of the painting. As Umberto Eco once wrote, “Every experience of a work of art is both an interpretation and a performance of it, because in every reception the work takes on a fresh perspective for itself.”¹³ From the

⁸ Hal Foster et al., *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (Thames & Hudson, 2004), 493.

⁹ Robert Morris, *Notes on Sculpture*, (MIT Press, 1993) 232.

¹⁰ Umberto Eco, “The Poetics of the Open Work” [1962] in *The Open Work* (Harvard University Press, 1989), 6.

¹¹ Guy Brett, “Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica” in *Latin American Artists of the Twentieth Century* (Museum of Modern Art, 1993), 104.

¹² facs1900b, “Jackson Pollock 51,” *YouTube*, December 1, 2006, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CrVE-WQBcYQ>.

¹³ Eco, “The Poetics of the Open Work,” 4.

perspective of Elena Palumbo-Mosca, one of Klein's former models, the work's physicality sounds almost ritualistic and cult-like: "It led to the impregnation of my body by the blue of Yves, silently in a very intense atmosphere." She recalled, "Yves, like an ancient priest, just told me where to apply blue. My body, impregnated with blue, then became a clear symbol of vital energy."¹⁴ Audio (translated from French) and video of the artist in motion from a studio session underscore his manipulation of the body without ever touching it:

"Go ahead, apply the color...in a nice circular motion over the belly and then onto the thigh there, yes that's it. Over the breasts—yes, that's good. Now, really position yourself against the surface, okay? Good...mold yourself to it completely. Yes, very good. Press down hard, maintain constant contact. There we go, turn very slowly, careful, careful. Really press the stomach against it now...the right breast...come back a little bit. Come back, come back...that is truly beautiful."¹⁵

It is not hard to imagine how entranced and "activated" the audience of potential buyers must have been to witness a painter with no paintbrush, using only the tool of his voice. Klein may have objectified women as "living brushes," but by today's standards only. His models felt respected and "quite lucky to participate" in the exciting work he was making and selling.¹⁶ "Commodifying pure aura" was something the artist mastered well.¹⁷

Abramović, by contrast, uses the weight of her own body to underscore the absence of sound. In the materiality of stillness and silence, spectators are drawn in closer. Her works' auras emanate from the artist's open mouth frozen in a silent scream (*Rhythm 4*), her wide-open, mysterious eyes (*The Artist is Present*) and the weight of her near-motionless body for very different reasons in both works. González-Torres also employs the materiality of sound. The ticking of inanimate bodies both interrupts and pays attention to the quiet of the gallery,

¹⁴ Sotheby's, "The Radical Nudes of Yves Klein's Anthropometries," Sothebys.com, January 21, 2020, <https://www.sothebys.com/en/articles/the-radical-nudes-of-yves-kleins-anthropometries>.

¹⁵ uniklo24, "Yves Klein Anthropométries," YouTube, June 3, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IKAZlqfC4Qs>.

¹⁶ Tate, "Yves Klein – Anthropometries | TateShots," www.youtube.com, January 17, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gj9nHa7FtQQ>.

¹⁷ John Klein, "Dispersal of the Modernist Series," *Oxford Art Journal* 21:1 (1998): 131.

deepening how the beholder experiences time. In that measured space, we synchronize our own bodies to that of the bodies on the wall, making us co-creators in a temporal moment. The materiality of Abramović's performances feels even more fleeting than González-Torres' work, because her pieces "lack physical existence outside the moment of actual enactment."¹⁸ In fact, *The Artist is Present* is like an "older kind of exchange" between people, even though it is ironically "art without form" and thoroughly contemporary.¹⁹ The audience's memory of Abramović's still body is the materiality that endures as much as a tangible photograph or video of it. Her figure—centered like Klein's body; also silent like González-Torres' own body—forms a community with her audience who perhaps longs for human connection in an increasingly digital world. "The role of the spectator expands into that of participant," and the performative becomes a kind of "cultural act."²⁰ In this way, materiality transcends the performance, because it is now held inside spectator-participants' bodies and minds after they leave the space.

With many of González-Torres' objects including this one, the viewer's body plays a critical role. The artist openly states his need for the public to finish his work. "Help me to take responsibility, to become part of my work, to join in."²¹ In the "relational aesthetics" between artist and addressees, González-Torres is directly assigning coauthorship to his viewers. He seeks an "expressive ally, capable of reading meanings that were never stated directly," someone to see that the material of his clocks (wires, dials, gears, batteries, metal, and plastic) holds invisible weight and deeper meaning.²² Because museums in the 1980s and early 1990s refused to exhibit openly gay art, González-Torres camouflaged homoeroticism in ready-made objects like candy,

¹⁸ Zoë Lescage, "How Does a Museum Buy an Artwork that doesn't physically exist," *New York Times* (November 8, 2018), 2.

¹⁹ Zoë Lescage, "How Does a Museum Buy an Artwork that doesn't physically exist," 3, 6.

²⁰ Joseph Roach, "Culture and Performance in the Circum-Atlantic World," in *Performativity and Performance*, ed. Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Routledge, 2013), 46.

²¹ Katz, "How AIDS Changed American Art," 40.

²² Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (Fall 2004): 61; Katz, "How AIDS Changed American Art," 25.

light bulbs, stacks of paper, and clocks. That way, “beneath the veneer of obedience to external dictates, the artist could create works ripe with meanings that coalesced in the viewer’s imagination.”²³ This kind of “call-and-response” between an object’s materiality and the mind of the viewer creates a poetic postmodernist, auratic magic.²⁴ Like Klein (and to some extent Abramović as well), González-Torres considered himself a theater director. He redefined and reimagined the audience’s role through physical objects.²⁵ In addition, an irony or tension exists between floating objects suspended on a wall and the body of a rigid art institution within an even larger, controlling body of society.

In contrast to these works’ materiality, the metaphor of the body also resonates—as an immune system, the viral bodies attacking it, or spy (González-Torres); as a vessel for pain or love (Abramović); or as a bridge to the abstract blue of the universe (Klein). Similar to the “retraction of the artist’s hand” in objects by the minimalist artist Donald Judd whose work preceded and influenced González-Torres, the metaphor of clock hands in place of human ones feels intentional.²⁶ His object embodies other bodies attacked by disease, so multiples are contained within their frames like trillions of cells living inside a human being. The object also symbolizes the collective trauma of AIDS patients and their families. Behind its simple, numerical face is a complicated, messy reality where homosexuality was treated like a crime. The clocks mark the ordinary passage of time, but they also symbolize that our days are numbered. The word, *Untitled*, is vague, but the subtitled, “Perfect Lovers” metaphor is specific, and its meaning is not lost on the viewer. Moreover, the object recalls Roland Barthes’ theory that “the birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the Author.”²⁷ For

²³ Katz, “How AIDS Changed American Art,” 37.

²⁴ Katz, “How AIDS Changed American Art,” 38.

²⁵ Katz, “How AIDS Changed American Art,” 40.

²⁶ Annie Ochmanek, “Bernstein Brothers Sheet Metal Specialties, Inc.” in *Judd* (Museum of Modern Art, 2020), 166.

²⁷ Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author” [1967] in *Image, Music, Text* (Fontana, 1977), 148.

González-Torres, though, death “ceases to be a metaphor when a grim social reality overwhelms its connotations,” and death becomes real.²⁸ Could Sherrie Levine’s appropriation of Barthes’ words—“the birth of the viewer must be at the cost of the painter”—apply to Klein, as well as González-Torres?²⁹ Klein’s hand never touches the canvas, and the viewer is transfixed by and immersed in the blue. Live nudes also make beholders more aware of their own bodies and presence as co-creators.

In *Anthropométries*, female bodies signify beauty and mystery. Their two dimensional imprints without heads, arms, and feet, echo Greek and Roman statues. “It was the block of the body itself, that is to say the trunk and part of the thighs that fascinated me...the hands, the arms, the head and the legs were of no importance,” Klein once said.³⁰ This embodied self has “no identity of its own but is defined by the relationship to the subject’s fantasy,” a notion that Guy Brett observes in Lygia Clark’s work but could also apply to Klein’s.³¹ More connections between object, artist, viewer and now a longer history of classical nudes. *Rhythm 4* similarly embodies the poetics of a broken body. The artist’s physical collapse, filmed and then reproduced in six, sequential photographs, is a metaphor for the human condition: fallible, out of control, and powerless against machines. In *The Artist is Present*, Abramović also exposes herself—metaphorically speaking—making her body vulnerable to the gaze of onlookers. Her posture and unknown thoughts again echo Lygia Clark who also “moves inward and away from the external, to articulate something as yet formless and incoherent in the psyche.”³²

These four case studies in painting, performance and sculpture show how the body plays a pivotal role, connecting artist, beholder and object in an open space, troubling Jean

²⁸ Katz, “How AIDS Changed American Art,” 34.

²⁹ Johanna Burton, “Sherrie Levine, Beside Herself” in *Sherrie Levine: Mayhem* (Whitney Museum of American Art, 2012), 18.

³⁰ Sotheby’s, “The Radical Nudes of Yves Klein’s Anthropometries.”

³¹ Brett, “Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica,” 104.

³² Brett, “Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica,” 103.

Baudrillard's theory that human beings have become "absent" from one another.³³ Each body of work is also one in a series, thus multiple bodies forming a network of shared color, texture and meaning. The artists' imaginations are almost like connective tissue, binding to the viewer's own thoughts in a fluid dynamic. They supply the audience with a nutrient-dense flow of ideas and images, transporting us on a cellular level into the mysterious realm of an object's aura.

³³Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects* [1968] (Stanford University Press, 1988), 29.

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