



The Erased Body: A Theoretical Approach to the Body in Contemporary Artistic Thought

Dr. Antonio Sustaita

University of Guanajuato, Mexico.

It was from the great change that began in the 17th century, the rise and subsequent consolidation of a new class—the modern bourgeoisie—that a series of transformations took place in various areas, such as politics, economics, society, and aesthetics. This change brought with it a set of strategies that had, as one of their goals, the body. While still an object of knowledge, it was approached as a means of production. It was thought of as a machine. It was no longer just a question of theological knowledge about the body—provided by Christian thought—or aesthetic knowledge—provided by classical and Renaissance art—or medical or philosophical knowledge. New knowledge was needed to move from the interpretation of the body as a machine to the realization of the body-machine. As Barker states, the body is more than extra-historical, unchanging and mute residue; It is the site of an operation of power, an exercise of meaning (Barker: 1984)

The French thinker places the emergence of a novel strategy in the second half of the 17th century, which consists of erasing a body lacking the attributes of power in order to inscribe on that structure the signs of another body that is, from the visual to the performative dimension, an emblem of power and capacity. In this way, we understand that the body of the modern subject is a matter of rewriting (Foucault, 1998). The body-machine would be the product of the application of mechanism to the normalization of the body. A product of the discovery of the body as an object and target of power, the machine man (to whom the body-machine corresponds) is the product of the combination of a materialistic reduction of the soul and a theory of normalization-education, whose main purpose is docility. A docile body is one that can be subjugated, used, transformed, and perfected (Foucault, 1998). It is a body that is entirely institutionalized and, precisely because of this, functional in its entirety, because the norm has been inscribed in each of its features and movements.

The process of erasing the body would result in the separation of the individual body from the social body, as well as from itself, since it implies its integration into a multiple system of production of power, commodities, discourses, and bodies. Being administered by normalizing and disciplinary power, the process would seek to erase any trace of particularity,

individuality, and spontaneity. The absent, disappeared body is the body that has been inserted into a disciplinary grid, the body-machine. A body alien to the individual insofar as it is totally present and available to the institution.

The body, Grosz asserts, has remained a conceptual blind spot in traditional philosophical thought, as well as in contemporary feminist theory (1994). Domingo Hernández holds a similar view when he states that for a long time, the body has suffered various types of exclusion. The most serious of these is not achieving the status of a subject (2003). The male-female opposition, correlative to the mind/body opposition characteristic of Cartesian philosophy, associates men with the mind and women with the body. It should come as no surprise, then, that in this research the problem of bodily disappearance appears more frequently and intensely in the works of female artists than in those of male artists. In this sense, philosophy would have developed as a form of knowledge based on the negation of the body, to the point that the body would have become a source of interference for the operations of reason (Groz, 1994). This is a clear legacy of Christianity. In contrast to non-corporeal knowledge, 20th-century art promoted a corporeal dimension to make the body one of the main sources of knowledge, especially based on Nietzsche's ideas.

Based on developments in the arts during the first half of the last century, Grosz identifies three lines of research on the body in contemporary thought that are heirs to the Cartesian tradition (1994). In the first, the body is seen as an object for the natural sciences. On the other hand, it is thought of in metaphorical terms as an instrument, tool, or machine at the disposal of consciousness. Finally, the body is considered a signifying medium, a vehicle of expression that allows what is essentially private to be made public and communicable.

In accordance with the latest line of research discussed in the previous paragraph, and in clear opposition to Cartesianism, Grosz proposes, in six points, an alternative analysis of the body (1994). First, he says, the Cartesian body-mind dichotomy should be overcome. Second, corporeality should not be associated with a particular sex or race. Third, the model or canon that posits the superiority of one type of body should be overcome. As Foucault does with regard

to belonging, in the fourth point Grosz proposes that the body be seen as a space of social, political, cultural, and geographical inscriptions, without losing sight of the fact that, at the same time, it opposes culture. Fifth, she proposes a conceptualization of the body that incorporates the psychological and social dimensions. Finally, she calls for an escape from dualistic thinking, in order to think of the body as a threshold or borderline concept, which would allow it to be situated precisely as the axis of social construction processes.

Such a proposal considers the body as a series of ongoing processes rather than a finished reality.

So far, we have discussed one cause of the disappearance of the body, which is due to institutional body coding through disciplinary strategies. The other cause is related to the confrontation arising from political issues and power conflicts, which analytically assigns certain bodies roles of subordination and spaces where it is impossible for them to express themselves, thus condemning them to disastrous invisibility. The study of the body-space relationship in contemporary art necessarily involves the inside-outside dichotomy, which allows us to speak of an absence resulting from disappearance through concealment and confinement.

The theme of bodily disappearance is a fundamental part of studies on the body in contemporary art. Although some authors deal with the subject of the body in general terms, without emphasizing the problem of disappearance, this is part of their research as an unavoidable feature of the body in culture and art since modernity. Notable among these researchers are Jane Blocker, Amelia Jones, and Patricia Mayayo, for whom disappearance is due to issues of gender and the construction of sexuality; Jean Clair and Juan Vicente Aliaga emphasize the monstrous, abject, and filthy body that is unworthy of being seen; For Veronique Mauron, Claire De Ribaupierre, and Giorgio Agamben, the body exists as a ghostly projection. Shinichiro Osaky and Georges Didi-Huberman understand that the body is reduced to a trace or a trail, enhancing its indexical dimension; Lynda Nohlin understands that the body only exists as a fragment resulting from a catastrophe since modernity; Francis Barker and Paul Ardenne explore the textual dimension of a body that also exists as intextualization.

This debate has brought to light a set of issues that seemed non-existent, such as the body engulfed by disciplinary and labor power, gender issues, queer studies (relating to sexual orientation and gender identity), and issues arising from confrontation with medical, as well as political institutions. For this reason, the biographical aspect is one of the most important elements of body art.

The body took on a crucial role in art and art history in the 20th century, resulting in a contradictory obviousness and invisibility in its discourses and practices (Jones, 1996). Both strategies, obviousness and invisibility, would seem to be opposites, but they are not: the invisibility of the body would

be achieved precisely because of its obviousness. Western discourse on the body, generated from Cartesian thought, as Elizabeth Grosz has explained in *Volatile Bodies*, through repetition, makes it obvious. Such discourse would erase the real body to the point of making it invisible, pure disembodied discourse. In a book with a title that is unavoidable for this research, *The Body of the Artist*, Jones says that the artist experiences this disappearance, this condition of invisibility, as a challenge. Therefore, the struggle against repression, in search of bodily expressiveness, would restore the body that had been taken away.

The Body as Support and Writing: A Second Approach to Body Art

In the first part of *History of Sexuality*, Foucault presents a novel analysis of political power which, in contrast to the traditional view—characterized by asymmetry, verticality, and a top-down approach—he conceives as a three-dimensional network structure that develops in all directions and in all senses (1989). However insignificant it may seem, each action serves, through its insertion and interrelation in networks, to shape grand strategies of power. In this way, one participates in power in two ways: as a subject of action, as an actor, and as a subject in the sense of being subjugated, imprisoned. Having a body, being a body, places the subject in the network of power, in its construction. We can understand that body art artists have sought, through their works, to participate in the fabric (that is, in the text), in the construction of the unofficial and non-institutional discourse on the body—their body.

Cruz points out that, precisely in the contemporary era, there is a widespread and conscious vindication of bodily experience (2004). From a theoretical point of view, we are living in the moment of the body. With regard to the importance of the body in contemporary art, Tracey Warr considers that it has been up to performance artists to strive to inventory the language of a body that struggles to manifest and assert itself. This is a precarious body language: unstable, inflexible, and flexible.

This is why, well into the second half of the last century, precisely during the decade of global youth movements, the body began to be used as an art language by visual artists. Pere Salabert gives a good account of this in his book *Pintura anémica, cuerposculento* (Anemic Painting, Succulent Body). Seeking to reestablish the relationship between the individual and the external world, in work that was, in most cases, rebellious, artists such as Joseph Beuys, Yayoi Kusama, Vito Acconci, Carolee Schneemann, Hanna Wilke, and Jo Spence imposed an egocentric and egotistical function on the body: they sought to replace canvases, pages, and lectures with the artist's own body in action. A body that broke rules in an attempt to break down the disciplinary systems that had constrained it.

To inhabit the world, Francesca Alfano asserts, one needs a body. Therefore, if one wants to be in the world, if one longs

to participate in its production, it is essential to acquire a body or, in other words, to appropriate one's own body. That would be the main objective of body art: to appropriate one's own body, the one denied, the one confiscated by institutional power. A body that is "psychological, anatomical, organic, a body that changes with events, with actions, with behaviors (Alfano, 2003)."

Infinite reality, insofar as it lasts, never identical to another or to itself, the body finds itself inserted into an endless process of construction. Through the concept of provenance (Herkunft), Foucault allows us to understand that the unique marks that intersect in the body, giving it its individual reality, form a network that is difficult to untangle (2004). Provenance manifests itself in both the hidden and visible dimensions of the body. The marks are inscribed in the nervous, physiological, and digestive systems, in the most recondite and unreachable parts of the organism, as well as in the most visible: the skin, the hair, the gaze. In this way, the body becomes such in a historical articulation where power is at stake at all times. In its exhibition, always determined by specific scopic regimes, the different discourses and practices that make it possible and visible are revealed.

Against a totalitarian power shaped by political, clinical, philosophical, and artistic aspects, among others, the body emerges. It has done so after a fierce and painful struggle, breaking through layers of symbolism, discourses, and practices of all kinds, to exhibit and assert itself. That is why contemporary art is permeated by political and ideological discourse. Different social disciplines, such as sociology, anthropology, and semiotics have addressed the issue of social space. This is important not only because it is where

the bodies of social actors/subjects are found—which refers to the body/environment dialectic and the symbolism it produces—but also because this space allows for the relationship between bodies and actions that acquire an unavoidable symbolic and political charge.

REFERENCES

1. Alfano, F. (2003). *Extreme Bodies. The Use and Abuse of the Body in Art*: Milano, Skira
2. Barker, F. (1984). *Cuerpo y temblor*: Buenos Aires, Per Abbat.
3. Cruz, Pedro (2004). *La vigilia del cuerpo: arte y experiencia corporal en la contemporaneidad*: Murcia, Tabularum.
4. Dikovitskaya, M. (1989). *The study of the Visual after the Cultural Turn*: London, The MIT Press.
5. Foucault, M. (1998). *Historia de la sexualidad*: México, S. XXI.
6. Foucault, M. (1998). *Vigilar y castigar*: México, S. XXI.
7. Foucault, M. (2004). *Nietzsche, la genealogía, la historia*: Valencia, Pre-textos.
8. Grosz, E. (1994). *Volatile bodies*: Bloomington, Indiana University Press.
9. Nelson, Robert S. and Shiff, R. (Eds.). (1996). *Critical terms for art history*: Chicago, University of Chicago.
10. Mitchell, W. (1986). *Iconology: Image, Text, Ideology*: Chicago, The University of Chicago Press.
11. Salabert, P. (2003). *Pintura anémica, cuerpo succulento*: Barcelona: Alertes.

Citation: Dr. Antonio Sustaita, "The Erased Body: A Theoretical Approach to the Body in Contemporary Artistic Thought", American Research Journal of History and Culture, Vol 12, no. 1, 2026, pp. 1-3.

Copyright © 2026 Dr. Antonio Sustaita, This is an open access article distributed under the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.