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Principal Boy: The body of the sovereign and the political subject

Analogies between the human body and political structures of power, in particular, go far back in history. Written documents of past cultures bear witness to metaphors that connect the human body and its organs with the organizational forms of social communities—be it in the political sphere or in the private economy. As early as the sixth century BCE, for example, the Greek poet Aesop described in his fable “The Belly and the Members” a dispute between the different parts of the human body, which is read as a political message that calls for the constructive cooperation of all of the responsible organs (fig. 1):

The Belly and the Members

The members of the body once began a dispute with the belly and demanded that it work in the same way as the other members if it wanted to be nourished. It submitted to them many times that it required food, but the hand denied it any, and because it was deprived of the necessary nourishment, it soon lapsed into great languor.

The other members also suffered due to the state of starvation in which the belly found itself. They recognized their error too late. The hand now wanted to supply the belly with nourishment, only it was so greatly weakened that it could not accept any. It died, and all of the other members of the body died along with it.

To this day, the book *Leviathan* (1651) by Thomas Hobbes is likewise of fundamental importance for the way politics and the state are thought about in the West. In it, Hobbes systematically defines the foundation of the state as a means for overcoming the natural state of the individual. As a proponent of absolutist monarchy, Hobbes saw a way to transfer human longing, fear, and reason into just and ordered relations by shifting all control to the sovereign. The anatomy of the body politic depicted in the frontispiece of the first edition of the book (fig. 2) clearly illustrates Hobbes’s concept: the head represents the monarch, and, in the role of the people, a large number of human individuals fill—almost invisibly, as they can be mistaken for chainmail—the body of the sovereign. It is the monarch alone, who in his role as absolute ruler is free to decide over the life and death of each individual, and single-handedly confers identity to the entire state.

Numerous political philosophers reacted to Hobbes’s political theory in the subsequent centuries. For example, the medievalist Ernst Kantorowicz suggested that two bodies coalesce in the monarch—namely, the body of the mortal human individual and that of the political-religious representative of the state—who serves as a dual entity embodying the identity of the community.¹ The radical change in the understanding of the political state triggered by the French Revolution and the establishment of a democratic system were thus accompanied by a transformation of the image of the body politic: consequently, the notion that individuals in a civil society now join forces to assume the role of the monarch effectively turned the sovereign body as symbolic representative of the people into a hollow shell in a process referred to in theoretical literature as “disembodiment.”²

When the artist Raphael Sbrzesny places a large number of sculptural steel corsets in his installation *Principal Boy* (2018, fig. 3, pp. 50–51, 168–173), he references precisely this political relationship comprised of representations of power structures and images of the body. The display looks like a cross between

1



Wenceslas Hollar,
“The Belly and the Members,”
published in *The Fables of Aesop*
by John Ogilby, 1665

2



Abraham Bosse,
Frontispiece
of Thomas Hobbes’s publication
Leviathan, 1651

medieval torture chamber, fitness studio, and stage, and by quoting archetypal figures from the theater, Sbrzesny points to the basic principle of the dramatic arts: personification. Depending on his or her talent, an actor easily slips into the roles of his or her figures, brings them to life, and fills their story with his or her own body. Fascinating for the audience to this day, this process takes place without creating a distinct likeness, but is rather a hybrid transformation in which the actor embodies a given figure. If one thinks back to the medieval representation of the king, in which it was possible to maintain regal power by means of a figurative likeness in the phase of transition—the period of time between his death and the legitimization of his successor to the throne—there seems to be an elective affinity here to Sbrzesny's sculptures. In this case, however, the object's constructivist lines depict the mere contours of an otherwise absent body.

King, Queen, Horse, as well as *Soldier, Terrorist*, and *Principal Boy* come together as in a game of chess, each representing coordinates in a system of rules and order with their own specific abilities and qualities. Whereas the delicate skeletal forms of the sculptures reproduce only the silhouettes of the figure, their iron materiality make it explicitly clear that the body that is to fill them will have to adapt itself. These are not delicate shells or flattering regalia, nor are they supporting prostheses. They are unyielding instruments of discipline, agents of control that illustrate status, be it the insignias of the king or the implied perfection of the crest of a dressage horse. However, in the attainment of this representative perfection, the corsets apply pressure inwards, constricting the body and its organs to the point of deformation and functional damage.³

With the iconography of the corset, Sbrzesny designs instruments of discipline in the most literal sense, as he also uses the works as percussion objects that act as valves for making audible the pressure ratios of the body. In performances this allows Sbrzesny to explore and interpret the reactions of his own body,

a topic which is allotted special attention throughout his entire practice in which illness, particularly psycho-somatic afflictions (autoimmune reactions, panic attacks, gout, infections, stress), marks the pivotal point at which the body of the subject no longer outwardly satisfies the demands of social protocol.

In his documentary-like work *Reason's Oxymorons* (2015, pp. 74–77), Kader Attia likewise focuses on mental illness, elaborating on its respective understanding and approaches to its healing in different cultures. On the basis of Michel Foucault's *Madness and Civilization: A History of Insanity in the Age of Reason* (1961), which traces the lineage of psychological illness as a story of systematic exclusion in enlightened, rational societies, Attia brings together a range of talking heads from different geographical contexts in order to reassess Foucault's findings from a multifocal perspective. Attia thus frames a productive conversation out of the different concepts of physical and psychological healing and how they relate to ideals of body image, societal structures, and technological advances.

Sbrzesny, too, manifests how closely the image of the body is connected with social structures, particularly the capitalist work ethic with its roots in Protestant thought. The artist presents the body as a means of (re)production, a labor machine that—as with any machine—must be repaired, maintained, and brought into shape, or, in other words, disciplined. Yet while in centuries past this was controlled for the most part by means of governmental repression, in modern society, work ethics and bodily discipline are now internalized to such an extent that each individual controls and optimizes him- or herself.⁴ The Darwinian rule of “survival of the fittest” is therefore to be taken literally, for in neoliberal working life, success and recognition await only the flexible, efficient, capable, and consuming body. The corset is in this instance an extremely productive metaphor as it renders visible these social pressures in which we are so tightly bound: we at once see before us the “iron cage” of modernity described by



Raphael Sbrzesny,
Principal Boy, 2017

Liminals: Ritual, transcendence, and transformation

Bonajo is not alone in asking whether a deeper engagement with spirituality can alter one's own reality in search of psychological and physical relief.²¹ In a pseudo-ethnographic approach, Jeremy Shaw edits found archive material and self-filmed footage into fictional documentaries that explore collective ritual experience. After producing a series of works that engaged with chemical means of inducing alternate states of consciousness through the use of psychoactive drugs, Shaw has turned his attention to religious and secular strategies of transcending the body through collective spiritual activity. The film *Quickeners* (2014, fig. 13), for example, reworked and augmented 1960s archive footage of snake handling rituals and episodes of glossolalia, or speaking in tongues, within a Pentecostal Christian sect in West Virginia, into a documentary set 500 years in the future.²²

For his latest film *Liminals* (2017, pp.42–43, 174–177), Shaw continues this line of investigation, but this time uses self-produced material to document a spiritual collective of the future who look to rediscover now archaic states of trance by reenacting historical dances and bodily exercises such as yoga and controlled breathing. The film's title alludes to the state of spiritual and social limbo experienced by participants in ceremonies defined by anthropologist Arnold von Gennep as rites of passage.²³ The term "liminal" was later introduced by Victor Turner to describe the ambiguous middle phase of the ritual process, "A realm that has few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state."²⁴

This liminal moment, as an unknown and finite territory harboring the potential for reorientation and accessing new ways of being, is central not only to Shaw's film, but also to the aesthetic

investigations of the artist collective KAYA (Kerstin Brätsch and Debo Eilers, pp. 38, 122–127). Inspired by their muse, the teenager daughter of a childhood friend, the pair addresses the liminal phases of contemporary existence such as the process of becoming adult and becoming gendered as well as the changes of body and identity that accompany them. These moments of transition are enacted in workshops and ritual events during which KAYA's artworks, a transmedial amalgamation of Eilers's sculptural and Brätsch's painterly practices, become the ritual subject of elaborate collective ceremonies. In an attempt to transcend the limits of their respective media, both in formal terms and with regard to the ritualistic production processes, KAYA guide their works through the liminal to a new state of being, posing the question of what would happen if painting or sculpture literally became a body?²⁵

But for the *Liminals* of Shaw's film, the "betwixt and between" state described by Turner is not a productive or progressive moment of corporeal affirmation, but rather, a nihilistic regression in search of lost idea(l)s of the past, namely the intangible concepts of faith and belief. They instead long to leave their bodies behind and access what the narrator defines as a "[P]araspace where corporeality and egoistic cognition dissolve, giving way to a unified omnipresence of collapsed time, space, and energy."²⁶



Jeremy Shaw,
Quickeners, 2014
(film still)

Infinite Yield: Science fiction, science fact, and Thinking Like a Mountain

While Shaw's post-apocalyptic scenarios draw upon and indeed subvert the narrative logic of science fiction, they decidedly reject its seductive futuristic sheen, instead deploying a desperately nostalgic, grainy, black-and-white film aesthetic, which harks back to the era sought by his *Liminals*. The more fantastically utopian potential of science fiction to imagine vivid alternative realities beyond present corporeal, technological, and social capabilities is manifest in the charged and arresting collages of Wangechi Mutu (fig. 14, pp. 132–137). With a distinctly erotic prowess, photographic fragments of women, machines, and animals merge into brave new hybrid bodies that occupy the space between the beasts of mythologies past and the cyborgs of narratives future.

This prophetic power of the science fiction genre to design new models of thinking and being that harbor the potential to become reality by virtue of their very fabulation is central to the audio-visual composition *G24/0vBβ* (2016, fig. 15, pp. 48, 182–187) by Jol Thomson. In particular, the film looks at how supernatural suppositions made by Stanisław Lem in the novel *His Master's Voice* (1968) are on the cusp of becoming reality on the grounds of new discoveries made by scientists investigating the physics of dark matter, specifically the neutrino. Concepts once condemned to the realms of fiction, such as superluminality, are now being reassessed by physicists in the light of discoveries made about the supposed properties of the neutrino and the Cherenkov radiation it emits on its path across the galaxy.²⁷

However, *G24/0vBβ* looks beyond these quantum-physical hypotheses to pose greater questions about mankind's position within the universe at large. In an almost romantic reconciliation of science and nature, the locus of the experiments documented

in the film, the Cryogenic Underground Laboratory for Rare Events (CUORE), is situated in the heart of the Gran Sasso Mountain in Italy, where a team of scientists has succeeded in creating the coldest point in the observable universe within a cubic meter of Tellurium crystal and copper. In doing so they have transformed the mountain into one of the most sophisticated pieces of technology the planet has witnessed, seemingly imbuing nature with an artificial intelligence in a gesture that Thomson, in a gently cautionary manner, likens to Aldo Leopold's concept of "Thinking Like A Mountain."

First laid out in a short passage in *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), Leopold's concept of "Thinking Like a Mountain" implores the reader to look beyond the imminence of his desires for "Behind these obvious and immediate hopes and fears there lies a deeper meaning, known only to the mountain itself. Only the mountain has lived long enough to listen objectively to the howl of the wolf."²⁸ Leopold appeals for a more holistic, ecologically sensitive approach to the world around us, thinking of the position of our bodies not just in their immediate physical environment, but also the point in time they occupy in relation to geological and universal history. To think like a mountain, that is beyond the physical limitations of our body and the finitude of human existence, could perhaps also be the key to reading Otobong Nkanga's tapestry *Infinite Yield* (2015, p. 139), which shows minerals and stones occupying the place of the brain, heart, and intestines. For as Nkanga says: "What millennium is it today? Does it matter? The land has been there much longer anyway."²⁹

Nkanga's line is ambiguous. Is she disconsolate, aware of the frailty of human knowledge within the vast natural order of the universe? Or is she liberated by this fact, released from the need to position oneself within the immediate context of place and time in the understanding that it is ultimately insignificant? Either way, her statement seems to acknowledge the futility of attempting to comprehend the world around us with our current conventional systems of measure alone.

14



Wangechi Mutu,
The Serpent and the Night-Swimmer,
2013

15



Jol Thomson,
G24/0vBβ, 2016
(film still)

N/b
↑
o o
← o → E/q
↓
S/d

CEMENT



liven
marble

BOG
BOD
(HARR)



IES
(LINE 42)

DARM
(AGE 9)



(un)learning

ARTICULATION ISSUES



ORGAN INPUT OUTPUT SYSTEM

((UNMAP) CHALK





Ed Atkins

*1982 in Oxford, United Kingdom

Safe Conduct

2016

Three-channel HD film with 5.1 surround sound

9:04 min

Anxiety. Uncertainty. Paranoia. Ed Atkins's video installation *Safe Conduct* manifests how the airport security check, a system devised to ensure travelers' safety, can evoke the most unsettling human emotions. Over the course of the film, Atkins's hyper-real, animated male avatar figure, a recurring character in his works, is psychologically frisked and probed into what the artist refers to as a "shrill, lunatic dance of tortured obedience choreographed to Ravel's *Bolero*." Directed by an invisible authority in a ghostly, abandoned security zone that seems to stem from his deepest nightmares, the character observes trays full of objects as they are transported through a scanner in a bizarre scene that is as much indebted to the Fordist production line as it is to the meat-packing factory.

In a surreal twist, the now archetypal item of hand luggage, the MacBook, is joined by unexpected and sinister objects, such as a pineapple, a roast chicken, scalpels, a pistol, and small doll-like versions of the main character, as well as an array of dismembered body parts and their secretions. One by one Atkins's protagonist lays bare a multitude of human organs and fluids, slopping a brain, intestines, a kidney, a liver, blood, giant eyes, a copious

amount of teeth, jiggling penises, grubby hands, glasses of piss, and shit into the trays that appear before him. As the disquieting procession of innards advances, Atkins's character appears to crack. Nervous mumblings shift into convulsions and twitches until the character begins to systematically deconstruct his own body, peeling off the skin from his face and severing fingers and facial extremities as if succumbing to the protocol prescribed by the items before him. Dressed in a grey, two-piece outfit that resembles both a prison uniform and airport loungewear, the figure begins to assume a sequence of awkward positions in time to the tormenting variations of the "Bolero." His squats, lunges, and brace positions recall not only airline safety instructions but also the forced positions of arrestees or detainees. Whether issued by the polite and routine cajoling of a flight attendant, or by the authoritarian discipline of a military officer, these orders are given in the name of security and are blindly followed by their subject in the interest of safe conduct. DM

1 – 7 *Safe Conduct*, 2016
(film stills)

1



Cécile B. Evans

*1983 in Cleveland, USA

Sprung a Leak

2016
Mixed media installation
18:00 min (loop)

Belgian-American artist Cécile B. Evans's interest focuses on the form and qualities of human emotions. In particular, she devotes herself to the current unprecedentedly entangled relationship between humans and machines, exploring its social, political, and affective dimensions. In recent years, her work has progressively shifted from video presentations, online platforms, and performances, toward technically sophisticated multimedia installations, for whose development and execution she brings in collaborators such as animators, musicians, programmers, and other specialists in varied fields.

In *Sprung a Leak*, Evans explores the impact of ubiquitous technologies and digital infrastructure on human emotions and actions, which increasingly yields an image of a self-perpetuating and symbiotic, at once absurd and overwhelming interdependency. *Sprung a Leak* is conceived as an automated, looped performance in three acts in which the viewer is directly integrated into the "stage area." The play's action is driven by two humanoid robots, a robot dog, a fountain, and a chorus of human "users" that must deal with the information copiously leaking from a network represented by twenty-seven screens. Their main concern is the alleged death of an animated beauty blogger, Liberty, whose fate seems to hinge on the network's developments. The chorus of "users"—who are represented by three human-sized screens showing three performers perpetually rotating on poles—suggests the helix-like repetition that is

increasingly felt with technology. The combination of non-linear narrative elements, characteristic of the artist's works, intensifies the impression of an inner flood of feelings influenced by a persistently managed confrontation of information by networked media.

A single performer's voice is used for each of the characters, making it impossible to distinguish them as separate entities, reinforcing the sensation of a closed circuit. This dually enhances the separation between the human and post-human relations and the all-controlling system that surrounds them.

With the title of the work, Evans plays with the recent "leaks" occurring in the political, economic, and social spheres, which aroused great attention, but also with the mounting permeability of private spheres, and the public breaking down of binaries such as truth and fiction. Additionally, the artist refers with the title to William Shakespeare's comedy *Two Noble Kinsmen* from 1634. In this case, the crisis manifests at precisely the moment the jailer's daughter, who has been brought to the brink of madness and loses control of her emotions, sees a damaged ship and calls out, "A leak is sprung, a sound one." In Evans's *Sprung a Leak*, the moment of the expansion of reality is also clearly understood: for one, in the entanglement of human emotions and controlled systems; and for another, in a collapse in the structure of the piece itself, which is implied by a leap in time to the past in the third act. AS

1 *Sprung a Leak*, 2016,
Installation view,
Haus der Kunst, Munich, 2018

2 Test card X, 2016

3 Test card V, 2016

4 Test card I, 2016

5 Test card VIII, 2016

6 Test card VII, 2016

7 Test card VI, 2016

8 Test card IV, 2016

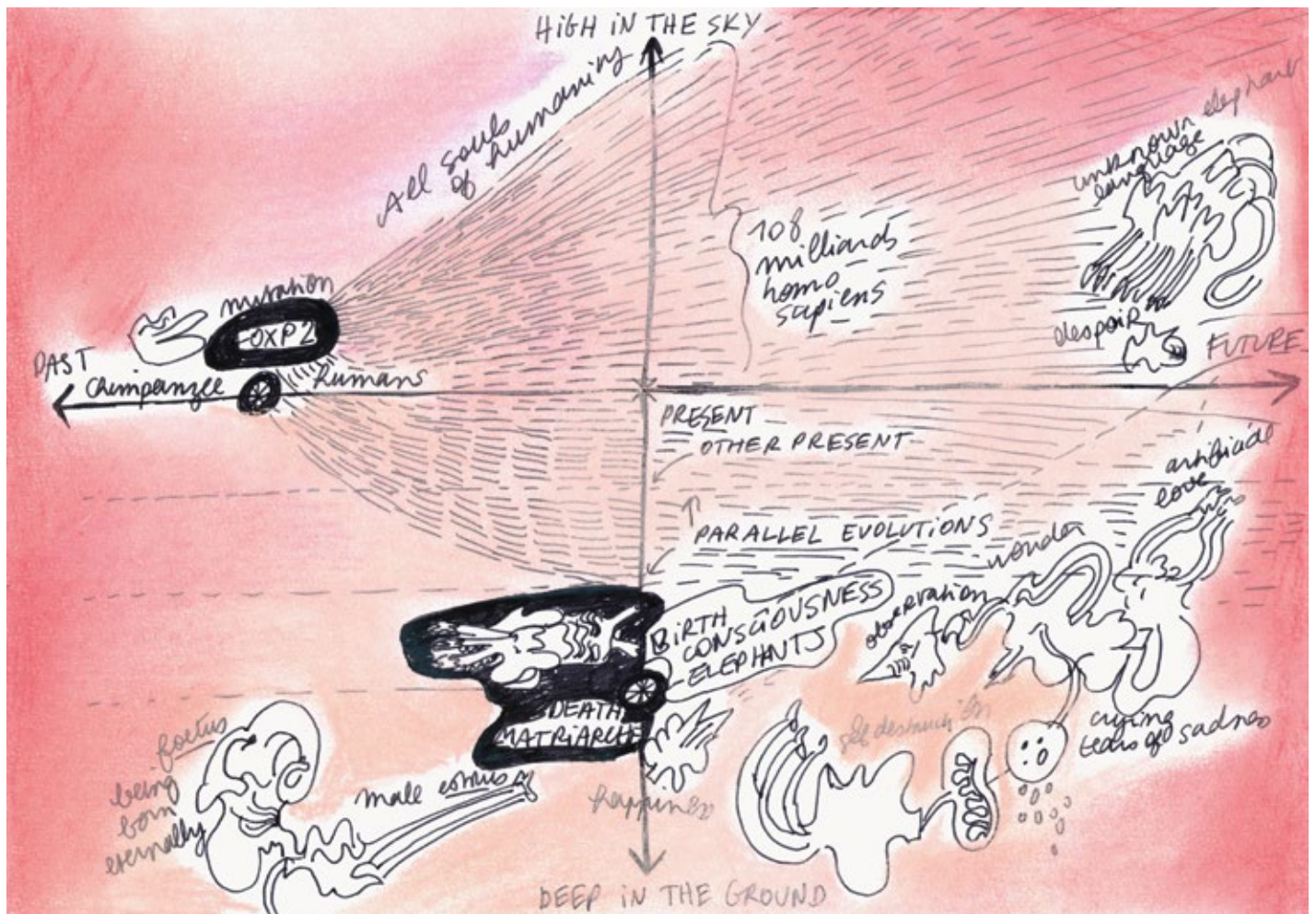
9 Test card II, 2016

10 Test card III, 2016

11 Test card IX, 2016







Wangechi Mutu

*1972 in Nairobi, Kenya

The Birth
The Birth of Cackling
Meat Grind
Mountain of prayer
The screamer island dreamer

2011, Mixed media collage, 30.8 × 22.2 cm

2011, Mixed media collage, 29.2 × 21 cm

2011, Mixed media collage, 26 × 35.6 cm

2014, Collage painting on vinyl, 89.2 × 101.6 × 7.3 cm

2014, Collage painting on vinyl, 173.83 × 203.68 × 8.9 cm

Contradictory elements lie at the heart of the wondrous worlds created by Wangechi Mutu. Simultaneously primal and futuristic, tropical and post-apocalyptic, dystopian and utopian, these sumptuous and terrifying stages provide a platform for the artist to undertake an investigation into the profound cultural, psychological, and socio-political forces that impact and delineate contemporary modes of representation. Combining and sampling images and signs from across the history of visual art, African traditions and myth, politics, fashion, science fiction, medicine, the philosophy of science, as well as high and low culture, Mutu's works continually foreground the inherent and ongoing complexity of subjectivity formation, all-the-while confronting hegemonic modes of representation.

This challenge is most evident in the nearly hallucinatory figures that inhabit Mutu's fantastic landscapes. A composite of the biological and mechanical, mostly female, and almost always exuding great power, these protagonists shift between the grotesque and the alluring in what has been termed a sort of "Afro-futurist/Afro-punk" critique of the power hierarchies that lie dormant behind discourses of colonialism, consumption, ritual, and displacement.

At the same time, Mutu's collages demonstrate a pervading interest in the history of art, and in particular, the deployment of collage as a political weapon within the works of artists such as

Hannah Höch and John Heartfield. Mutu's compositions combine ethnographic photography with illustrations taken from nineteenth-century medical journals and magazine pornography in order to develop a critique on the manner in which the historical misuses of science continue to subconsciously inform issues concerning the contemporary use and abuse of female bodies within the media.

The deployment of chimera-like creatures also plays a defining role in a later set of works that mines a series of East African coastal mythologies in the search for counter-hegemonic narratives. In particular, the artist's interest in the Kiswahili stories pertaining to *Nguva na Nyoka* (Sirens and Serpents) are indicative of a more redemptive approach by which to counter the gendered and racialized politics that have come to define much of Western popular culture and myth-making. The Nguva (or dugong/manatee), is a large sea mammal with a hippopotamus-like head and fish-like tail. Sometimes conflated with mermaids, Nguva were commonly deployed in stories told about errant fishermen and their mishaps at sea. In contrast to the image of the serpent (Nyoka) and its evident biblical associations, Nguva are deployed within works, such as *The screamer island dreamer* (2014), as powerful, liberated beings; ones that push back against—or invoke fear within—the patriarchal structures that define contemporary mythology. DL

1 *The Birth*,
2011

2 *The Birth of Cackling*,
2011

3 *Meat Grind*,
2011

4 *Mountain of prayer*,
2014

5 *The screamer island dreamer*,
2014





