

ANOTHER BODY

ESSAY BY
BARRY SCHWABSKY

Having agreed to write something for Alice Channer's catalogue, I have to admit I felt a little miffed when I saw that the show's title would be OUT OF BODY. Precisely because the phrase seemed too damned apt! Didn't that already sum up most of what I had to say about this extraordinarily rigorous yet seductive oeuvre and thereby render anything that I would have to say about it rather superfluous, a series of footnotes at best?

But my dismay was only momentary because, of course, there's so much to say about 'body' and maybe, for that matter, more than you might expect to say about 'out'. But let's start first with 'body'. When you hear that word in relation to art, what comes to mind first? Body art, obviously. That is, a species of performance in which artists use, typically, their own bodies as both material and subject. I say 'use' but of course in many instances one would want to say 'abuse': Chris Burden having himself crucified on a VW Beetle, Marina Abramović rhythmically jabbing a knife between her fingers and repeatedly cutting herself, Vito Acconci masturbating under the floor of the Sonnabend Gallery. Of course body art is not *all* pain, discomfort, or embarrassment; think of the Dionysian ecstasies we see in photographs of Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy*, for instance. But all these efforts to, in one way or another, transcend everyday body-consciousness (which is to say, body-unconsciousness)—in that sense, to travel *out of body*—begin with the actual, physical conglomeration of skin, muscle, blood, bone, nerves, and organs that is the empirically present human person in the world. This blatantly material body became the subject, as well, for artists like Lucien Freud and, later, Jenny Saville, painters who render human flesh as heavy, massive, and burdened by gravity. One thinks, as well, of a sculptor like Kiki Smith, one of whose early works (before she began making the figurative sculpture and prints for which she has become best known) was an ensemble of sealed vessels labelled, in Gothic lettering, with the names of various bodily fluids: mucus, pus, saliva, urine, milk, tears, diarrhoea, blood, oil, semen, vomit, sweat.

Channer's sculpture, as will be clear at first glance, features no pictorial or verbal evocation of mucus, pus, saliva, urine, milk, tears, diarrhoea, blood, oil, semen, vomit, or sweat, let alone any actual material ostension of them—I use a term from religion advisedly, as so much body art takes on a ritual cast. So is it 'out of body' in the sense of voiding any corporeal presence? Maybe it depends on what you think presence is. There are subtle presences as well as blatant ones.

An aside: I remember—it's been quite a few years now—when I was working as a researcher for an anthology of excerpts from an art magazine of the 1960s. It was a strange thing leafing through those old pages, looking at their rather grainy black-and-white illustrations: it struck me at the time that almost everything fell into two broad categories. Either they were austere, minimal, nonobjective objects or paintings, dominated by the rationality of the grid; or else they were orgiastic performances, full of naked bodies and a sort of fertile chaos. Either Donald Judd or the Living Theatre. Agnes Martin or Viennese Actionism.

So does Channer come down on the side of Judd and dissent from the lineage that would include the Living Theatre, Schneemann, Acconci, and the rest? And if so, how *does* the body come into it? The answer is—wait a minute, not so fast! Minimalism was not all bodiless rationality, after all. The Minimalists were fascinated by phenomenology—by the structures of the experiences we have in relation to things. And that meant, for them, the relationship between the viewer's body (and not just his or her eye) and the artwork. They were interested in the body, in other words—but less in the body evoked or represented by a work than in the living body of the person trying to come to terms with that work. What happens when you walk around a thing? 'One is more aware than before that he himself'—can we change that to *she herself?*—'is establishing various relationships as he apprehends the object from various positions and under varying conditions of light and spatial context', as Robert Morris put it. Michael Fried famously

complained, in response, of objects that were 'not just in his space but in his way.' For Fried, such objects were therefore too much like other people—sullen, incommunicative people, but people (with inconvenient bodies) nonetheless.

The body out of which, and about which, Channer makes her work doesn't seem like either of these kinds of bodies that we know so well from the art of the last fifty years. It is not an insistent body. It is neither slushily lymphatic nor implacably armoured, neither rigid nor excessive. In this regard Channer's use of fabric, as material and as reference, is particularly telling—because fabric is not after all liquid; it is dry, one might even say thirsty. And yet it can flow, as liquids do. When you hang it, it seems to pour down. This is something that Gilda Williams, reviewing Channer's 2011 exhibition at The Approach in London for Artforum, has written about with admirable eloquence, pointing out that 'just as a body is solid yet mostly liquid, the fabrics cut and shaped to adorn it exist between wet and dry—first dyed in baths, sometimes industrially pleated by steam, then swirling around the body'. Still, you might think, Channer's art is cool, and seems drier than wetter; its forms tend toward simplicity, and above all there is no overt presentation or representation of the human form in it—surely her aesthetic is really closer to that of Minimalism than to body art? Perhaps, but if it is, it would be despite the inaccuracy of saying—this art eschews the representation of the human body—an issue that we will take up in due course. However, the body with which Channer's art is concerned is not the anonymous one that the Minimalists dealt with, just as the way in which it is concerned with the body is different from the way in which body art is.

Yes, as in Minimalist art, Channer's work deals with a body that manifests itself only in relation to that of the viewer; 'In a way'—she told Ryan Gander and Rebecca May Marston in an interview that goes back to what I suppose should be called the very beginning of her career, not even five years ago—'all of the work is an attempt to make a pattern that only exists when someone else enters the space and tries to put it back together

again'. This is not, in other words, the expressive (or even expressionist) body of certain performance art, in which sensations emerge from the anguished or jubilant interior of the artist in the first person. And yet, despite the reserve that Channer maintains, and contrary to the Minimalists, the body in her work is always at least possibly to be referred to her own. Her work retains something of what you might call *the personal*. Or perhaps it would be better to say, in any case, that she does not disclaim identification with this body. And that brings her closer, somehow, to Acconci or Abramović than to Morris or Judd.

The presence of the artist's body in this work is understated, one might even say occulted. But that reticence never amounts to a denial. Take LUNGS and EYES, the two multi-part wall pieces shown at the South London Gallery. You've heard of the iron fist in the velvet glove? Well, there's no fist here, that's for sure, but how about the aluminium arm in the spandex sleeve? These linear objects, 'drawings in space' as they might once have been called, seem to be about how the imaginary body and the literal body meet in abstraction. I actually feel a little hesitant to mention what I know of how the piece was made—what its sources were—because the making of the piece had to do, I think, with the withdrawal from or break with its sources rather than their re-evocation; a viewer not clued in to them might not be missing anything. If you think about the scrunched-up fabric around the vaguely biomorphic metal shapes jutting discreetly from the wall, about how these soft-on-hard outlines that never 'get in your way' have had their definiteness so qualified, so mitigated by the way the stretchy fabric's colour patterns swirl around them, you're already on the right track. I'm not sure how much more helpful it is to know that the metal forms have been based on fashion drawings by Yves Saint Laurent and that the pattern printed on the spandex derives from the contours of Channer's arm, stretched out. That's funny, come to think of it: a shape taken from the body of an imagined woman is 'wearing' a pattern derived from a real one. But what really counts, I think,

is that looking at these odd objects that are almost not there, that you see through more easily than you see, you sense that their origins, however distant or distorted, are corporeal.

Something similar is true of REPTILES and AMPHIBIANS, a pair of serpentine floor-based sculptures made mostly of mirror-polished steel. There's a distinctly animated air to these pieces, as if they were abstracted from an image of some unidentifiable sea creature—Nessy?—momentarily making an appearance above the surface. That's to say, they momentarily turn the gallery's good solid floor into metaphorical water. On the arches of steel rest, without quite fitting, smaller pieces of a different metal, of a duller, more matte quality, richly textured. They are aluminium casts of leggings—as if casually tossed aside and somehow fossilized. Smooth marble cylinders have eccentric planes carved into them; the lines of these cuts (like those of the patterns in the spandex used in EYES and LUNGS) have been taken from the artist's body. Again, you wouldn't know this without being clued in, but that's not the point. The point is that in looking at these works, you might first register their seemingly impersonal, machined and polished perfection—but then you can't help but feel that there is something more personal, eccentric, and physically awkward that gives them the air of something lived, something organic, without an organic appearance. Perhaps that's as if to say that even when we make things with the help of machines, it's still we—imperfect, embodied, striving, complicated, contradictory—who are making them, and the things can't help but reflect ourselves as much as they reflect the machines we use.

I still haven't mentioned the three grand hanging fabric pieces, COLD METAL BODY, WARM METAL BODY and LARGE METAL BODY—the ones, in fact, that elicited from me an involuntary but audible 'oh wow' when I first walked towards the open door of the gallery. The digitally printed photographs they carry are the closest thing to recognizable figurative imagery Channer has yet used: unlike the more oblique use of her own body or of the Saint Laurent drawings, the distortion to which these images

have been subjected does not hide their origin. They are draperies of classical marble sculpture (but with any representation of the body itself excised). As with the other works, the body is conspicuous by its absence here – but in this case, very conspicuous and very imposing. These bodies from the distant past tower over us, but they don't belittle us. Instead they seem to call us to imaginatively rise to their height.

It's odd that these works' titles refer to the bodies they picture as metal. Maybe this is a reminder to read them back into the other sculptures, which do make so much use of metal. The bodies that Channer evokes are both cold and warm at once, just as they are fluid yet adamantine, planar and volumetric, corporeal and ideated, abstract and intimate, systematic and open. One feels enormous potential here. And clearly I needn't have worried that Channer's title might obviate my interpretation. This art invites you to participate – not in the trivial relational-aesthetics sense, which is more like when the singer invites you to clap along at a concert – by moving with it and thinking with it. This thinking turns out to involve the body too. And while you can be out of work, out of time, out of luck, in this world you can never be out of body. There's always more where that came from.