

# The ruined body?

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It's a late summer evening, and I am standing in a small piazza in northern Spain watching a group of local boys break-dance. They dance in the porch of an elaborate, classically inspired building that dominates the square. I watch as they move, weaving their bodies around and through the solid columns of the portico. I am watching from the edge of the action but am caught up in the fervour of their movement. Closer into the action their girlfriends and young protégés stand, the straight guys to the dancers' funny-guy antics; they are the subjects around which the action unfolds. During lulls in the proceedings, a younger boy occasionally breaks out of the circle of onlookers and moves closer to the centre to try out some moves.

At other points, a dancer will invite one of his admirers through the imaginary periphery into the limelight and a complex push-me-pull-you dance of courtship will ensue. For a long time, I am completely absorbed and without thought, captivated by the daredevil stunts, laughing at the earnest peacock-like displays and appreciating the beauty of bodies in motion. I begin to think of the body itself—the efficiency of its movements and the way that we read the dancers' gestures, the way that bodies have their own language and speak to us.

This moment brings its bittersweet associations around the body: images of bodies in various states of discomfort and distress have become overly familiar, particularly images of war or of natural disasters. I am struck by this disjuncture between the reality of the dancers' bodies and the seemingly less real state of the body at war or in crisis.

*The body. The ruin* addresses the body on two accounts. One concerns the way in which artists use the body as a tool for description or for experimentation in response to their own present moment (that is, a single moment of time with all of its personal, historical and cultural resonances). The second concerns the way that the body is able to operate as this tool—the way in which we read, understand and play with the languages of the body.

Ruth Maclennan's *Calling all workers* (2004–05) draws upon early twentieth-century research into the body at work and particularly the activities of the National Institute of Industrial Psychology (NIIP).<sup>1</sup> Realised as a participatory performance involving staff and students of the London School of Economic and Political Science, *Calling all workers* draws upon research into bodily efficiency in manual labour as well as later developments that recognised that the healthy worker-body was related to the healthy worker-mind—what we now call 'wellness', expressed through group exercise classes and the promotion of health and fitness. In 'Notes on gesture',

Giorgio Agamben related the rise of the utilitarian over the symbolic importance of gesture to the loss of naturalness. He writes:

*For human beings who have lost every sense of naturalness, each single gesture becomes a destiny. And the more gestures lose their ease under the action of invisible powers, the more life becomes indecipherable. In this phase the bourgeoisie, which just a few decades earlier was still firmly in possession of its symbols, succumbs to interiority and gives itself up to psychology.*<sup>2</sup>

Agamben's statement gives a good entrée into a moment at the beginning of the twentieth century that saw the beginnings of industrial psychology in which the body was initially addressed as a mechanical entity only. To a large extent it was World War I that prompted the research and development of industrial psychology. The war effort—the production of enormous quantities of munitions in Britain—meant that workers were enduring extremely long hours, which affected their health and efficiency. As a result, government, philanthropists and industrialists alike became concerned to assess the process of work in order to increase the efficient working of the physiological body.

*Calling all workers* addresses the way these experiments with people's bodies and minds pop up under very different political and economic circumstances, under opposing ideologies, and at different times. It articulates a connection between the current corporatisation of health ('wellness'), work and lifestyle (the maintenance of happy and productive workers), and early twentieth-century experiments into the efficient movement of the body at work. *Calling all workers* contains references to callisthenic exercises in Soviet and British factories in the 1930s, modern dance, army drills, and the sounds and movements of contemporary offices and factories. It relishes the experience of group movement (for the participant and the observer) and the pleasure that it induces. Yet it also offers an important point from which to question the difference in the operations of power through health and exercise. The early twentieth-century collective maintenance of health and fitness was encouraged and patrolled by industrialists and government and was motivated by a sense of responsibility to ensure the health (and therefore productivity) of the worker populace. In contrast, today the maintenance of health and well-being is still a governmental concern but the responsibility for this is diffused, spread among individuals as an almost moral responsibility.

This tension between the individual (personal) and collective body is also explored in Tom Nicholson's ongoing banner project, which involves a series of banner marches undertaken at dawn. The marches trace the lines of national boundaries (created through partitioning, but not only partitioning) onto the place in which the march is to be performed. A comparison between Nicholson's dawn marches and his new work for this exhibition, *Flags for a Trades Hall Council* (2005), highlights an important articulation between the individual and the collective body. The carrying of a banner involve

the forced coordination of four to five bodies, and, like the modernist references in MacLennan's work, this is a case of the individual body being subsumed into a larger 'group' body. A flag is activated by the body in a very different way from a banner; it has a much closer relationship to the body and the way that an individual body moves and expresses itself affects the motion of the flag.

This sense that the body speaks a language expressed through gesture (and through our reading and shared understanding of this gesture) can be related to modernist tensions between the body and the machine, in other words the natural and unnatural body, or the cultural versus industrial body. In *Calling all workers*, this can be seen in the references to modernist development and recognition of gesture, specifically references to the Soviet avant-gardist ideas of dramatist Vsevolod Emilevich Meyerhold, who saw the body as raw material for the expressive potential of the performance. (Interestingly enough, Meyerhold himself was influenced by American time and motion studies, the Fordist relation of the British NIIP.) The essence of Meyerhold's approach was a view of the body as a kind of machine for expression. He developed a method for actors that addressed the body as a material (as distinct from anatomy), to be tailored to efficiently communicate through gesture. Meyerhold wrote that:

The material of the actor's art is the human body, i.e. the torso, the limbs, the head and the voice. While studying his material, the actor should not rely upon the anatomy, but upon the possibilities of his body, as a material for stage performance.

And again there is a tension here between the unified collective language of gesture and the audience group reaction to these gestures, and the individual understanding (as in 'feel' or 'be conscious of') of the body both as a mechanical entity and also as a thing that feels and expresses itself as an active protagonist in the construction of meaning and sensation. Gilles Deleuze, for example, describes the body as having a language of its own and being able to 'speak', and therefore having a subjectivity of its own (rather than simply serving the mind).<sup>3</sup>

This is further articulated in Christian Capurro's *Compress* works (2005), in the way that their lyrical beauty escapes a sense of empiricism and containment (the machine) by transforming the subsumed image of the body as found in pornography or in fashion magazines into something unexpected. The images are given a life and power outside of 'the system'. Similarly, the orchestrated bodily performances depicted in Laylah Ali's visually spare gouaches offer, at first glance, a uniform approach to the ritualistic or ceremonial. Yet through a perversion or distortion of bodily forms, Ali returns the focus to the individual body in a way that is reminiscent of Felix Guattari and Anthony Negri's statement, 'here the body is'<sup>4</sup>, which plays on the idea of the communist collective tradition as a corpse but also a coming-together, a place where being is at its most intense.

Capurro's *Compress* works (2005) are delicate traces of gesture, impressions of a body's presence and movement through space. They are literally the result of the pressure of a hand erasing an image from another page; they are like the ink blotter, the page that sits behind another, quietly recording, bearing witness to the action taking place elsewhere. Gesture and the potential for the expressive qualities of gesture are translated into a secondary medium in Capurro's work, which operates as a kind of trace of gesture. In this way his work often exists between image and anti-image—having a kind of iconoclastic potential to be read as an image but also to subsume the image within its related action. Capurro describes the *Compress* works as the 'fastidious labouring of the body against the image'.<sup>5</sup> The works operate through the tension between the presence of the body and absence of the image, and the action of the body. In this manner they could be seen as being an empirical form of evidence or measure of the body's movement, like the apparatus used by work-place assessors to measure the labouring body.

The tension and causality between the action of the body and the presence and absence of the image is implicit in Tom Nicholson's *Flags for a Trades Hall Council* (2005). On the most basic level, a flag is activated by the body in a way that is similar to the manner in which the pressure of the hand creates the image in Capurro's *Compress* series. The association of the flags with activism (human agency) directly relates to the site where they are displayed, the Victorian Trades Hall Council (VTHC) building<sup>6</sup>, and it is also drawn out in the imagery used in the flags themselves. Nicholson bases the flags' imagery on the face of Marat depicted in Jacques-Louis David's *Death of Marat* (1793), and he begins the process of constructing the imagery through a series of charcoal drawings which are then printed onto the flags through a commercial print process (again a translation from an individual process that takes place 'on the body' to an industrial, mechanical manufacture). In addition, the use of the image of Marat articulates a very particular moment in history—revolutionary France. Making reference to this moment coupled with the reference to trade unionism activates a complex political resonance. The complexity here is again one of differing states of collectivity and defiance: while the traditionally black anarchist flag represents the freedom of individual association and action (it is carried by hand and therefore activated by the body), the flag flying on the flag-pole can also be seen as a declaration, almost a staking out of the territory of a shared value system (and is not sited on the body).

There is another neat indexical relationship between the formal content of the imagery and the physical operation of the work in *Flags for a Trades Hall Council* that is echoed in Santiago Sierra's *POLYURETHANE SPRAYED ON THE BACKS OF 10 WORKERS* (2004). For example, Nicholson's use of Marat's face connects breath with life and with movement—both the movement of the flag, the movement of the individual body and the movement of the collective body as change. (*Lorsque les désirs d'avenir ou les regrets de souvenir s'éveillent dans une partie quelconque de ce crâne géant, le Globe—le vent se lève*. When the desires of the future or the regrets of memory awaken in some part of this giant cranium, the Globe, the wind blows. Saint-Pol Roux). On a formal level, David's Marat has an ambiguous relationship to life and breath; his portrait of Marat apes the form of a death mask and one of the painting's French titles is *Marat a son dernier soupir* (Marat's last breath). The way that the image centres around breath is important for the life of the image as a flag, which never stops moving ever so slightly in the gallery space and is, of course, constantly in motion when flying on the flag-pole. Of *POLYURETHANE SPRAYED ON THE BACKS OF 10 WORKERS*,

Sierra writes:

*Ten immigrant Iraqi workers were hired for this action. They were protected with chemically resistant clothing and a thick sheet of plastic, then they were placed in various positions and sprayed on the back with polyurethane until large formations of this material had been obtained. All of the elements employed in the action were left in the space.*

The look of the resulting sculpture references and mimics minimalist sculpture. Sierra empties out the content of the image and plays with the expected connections between aesthetics, content and form.

By enacting this reference to minimalism, Sierra leads us to have a certain expectation of the work; minimalism was after all intended to explore a new physical and spatial relationship between the viewer and the object. But what if this object is literally constructed from and by the human body? Suddenly, what we thought was a clever play on form has become a powerful political statement about the invisibility of a particular group of people within our society. This invisibility evokes Capurro's statement concerning the presence/absence of the image within his *Compress* works as being a case of the 'image working against the image', as the resulting sculptural forms both resist and swallow up their 'human content'. Yet the knowledge of the identities and the context that underlies the act of erasure have the effect of forcefully articulating the socio-historical context that the work operates within.

The ruin is a useful conceptual tool or metaphor for fixing the body within a particular context or environment. The work in *The body. The ruin* activates a series of 'nows', which up until this point I have been describing in terms of the body—action and sensation. And yet, the ruin is itself a perfect example of a unit that is located in the present moment but with a complex, labyrinthine relationship to the past. The ruin exists in the present but can only exist because of the past—an event or events in the past have caused the state 'ruin'; conversely, the relationship between this past event and the ruin is only able to be kept alive by the present. As Maria Tumarkin suggests through her definition of the 'traumascape' (which is connected to the ruin), they are 'places with non-linear time and the categorically intertwined time and space flows, which are set apart from other or real or imagined places by (a) history'.<sup>7</sup>

The radical architect Lebbeus Woods writes, 'architecture is at the very centre of the event and the broad range of controversies around it',<sup>8</sup> and in Diann Bauer's *Meijius* (2004), architecture can be seen as an organising principle within the work itself. Woods is interested in spaces of violence or of trauma, what he calls 'zones of crisis'<sup>9</sup> that he characterises through the metaphor of 'the fall': spaces of extreme change and trauma in which the human presence is extinguished.<sup>10</sup> Woods's approach to post-war architecture challenges expectations of how such spaces may be inhabited, acknowledging the life experience of buildings rather than seeing rebuilding as an act of erasure. He proposes a process of 'architectural healing' that involves the 'injection'—whereby 'freespaces are injected into sites of destruction', the 'scab'—the 'first layer of construction'; and the 'scar'—a deep level of construction that fuses the new and the old.<sup>11</sup> In this way, time and space, history and memory are layered and disjunctive.

*Meijius* draws us into a swirling confusion of space and time using tricks of perspective, fractured spaces and layered imagery so that our eyes are drawn into a seeming vortex of violence and horror. Bauer creates this confusion through deliberately crafted and controlled manipulation of the visual triggers that we use to ground or locate ourselves. The perversion of space in *Meijius* is phantasmagoric rather than cinematic: rather than looking *onto* a visual construction of illusionary space, we are taken up *into* that space as if we are present within it, rather like being caught up in a dream from which we cannot escape. This division between being 'outside' and 'inside' the space of the image, and between being an onlooker and being *present* within the chaotic temporal moment is made evident in Bauer's *Uchi Jini no uchi* (2003), a colourful wall-painting depicting a swirling, violent eruption of movement around a central figure, a fierce warrior who has just impaled his victim with a spear. As we move closer into the image, we are drawn into the vortex that culminates at the warrior's eye, itself a window through which we see a silent modernist metropolis. We are led towards this metropolis through Bauer's manipulation of our vision—a manipulation akin to cinematic special effects—and while we are conscious that we are being guided towards it, at the same time the metropolis at the vortex repels us—it is flat, monochromatic and seemingly dead in comparison to the vibrant swirling mass of the larger wall painting.

If we could say that *Meijius* entraps us within its chaotic interior, Laylah Ali's drawings and gouaches involve us with similar intensity, but a sense of agency accompanies our involvement. We are involved as witnesses, and an ethical decision is demanded of us: what is going on? what is right and what is wrong? who has power and who does not? And, are such simplistic decisions valid? Ali's work suggests a subtle language of its own, a disturbing language based on the ambiguity of gesture, but involving violence, division and conflict. The pared-down and restrained aesthetic that Ali pursues in her work acts to draw us, as viewers, into a moral and ethical involvement in order to attempt to position ourselves within their uncomfortable narratives of power. For example, in the *Greenheads* series (1996–2004), power seems to be exerted along lines of racial divisions, among other hierarchies, but as a viewer it is extremely difficult to draw constant and consistent lines to demarcate these ethical boundaries of good/bad, dominant/oppressed.

While Ali's work articulates a sense of 'being there' by absorbing us in its conundrums, Williamson's *Lives of the saints* (2002) translates the 'live' moment in performance art into documentation and 'dubious witness accounts'. Rather than provoking a sense of involvement and agency, he sees the documentation of these moments resulting in a legacy that 'sustains the narratives of individualism'. Ian Burn's *Four glass/Mirror piece* (1968) further articulates this tension between our presence and absence in relation to the work. Comprising a mirror placed behind four sheets of glass, *Four glass/Mirror piece* simultaneously affirms and denies our presence in relation to the work. We look into the work and our presence is acknowledged through our reflection, which in turn obstructs our ability to see into the work; we attempt to look into the work and our view is curtailed and denied by the mirrored surface and the repetition of our own image. The dual effects of this invitation and denial affirm our presence within our own moment; it is as if through disavowing our ability to escape into the space of the image we become more conscious of our own present. Conversely, Williamson performs and films his performances in isolation, building and crafting each work as he plays back and watches the previous footage. In this way, our role as a viewer in the 'live' moment is denied and we become of secondary importance. In removing the viewer from the immediate action as it unfolds, Williamson makes clear the ambiguous relationship between performance and documentation by essentially delighting in his own bodily play.

*The body. The ruin* is primarily concerned with the question of the body as a unitary measure for reading, recording or experiencing what is going on around us. Yet in exploring and reflecting on the expressive potential for the body, we must not ignore questions around the broader social status of the body. In a recent series of gouaches, Laylah Ali addresses the state and status of the body today with images that seem to exist in a crossover space between human and object, or the devaluing of the human (subjectivity, autonomy) into object. For example, in one gouache, three red forms (two round on either side of one conical) sit in a row along the bottom of the work; their legs, clad in long white socks and black lace-ups, kick up into the blue sky above. It is as if the rotund little bodies have been rolled onto their backs and are kicking in the air to right themselves. Or, lying on their backs with their bodies hidden by a screen, their cavorting legs just visible, are they performing a 'legs alive' cabaret show?

The powerful thing about this work is what is not revealed: What is the exact form of these bodies? Are they simple mounds with legs (and stick-like arms)? What does it mean if they are? What 'type' of bodies are they (all the legs are brown but some of the stick-like arms are pink and some are brown)? In another work, a small blue and white football form sits motionless. It is a neat, compact little body tied up in white swaddling clothes or perhaps bandages with its bottom in blue and white striped cloth. Along the top of its body are six stick-arms that poke out the top of visibly striated skin. A thin black belt is passed between each arm down across the body, having the effect of holding the body together, of control and confinement. The whole effect is one of vulnerability, of a contained little object that looks easy and handy to pick up (those arms are so grabbable), a little something to take home. But there is also an air of the sinister and violent that is constructed through our own questioning of the presence of the bandages, of the black belts, and through the bodily forms themselves.

Joy Hester's drawings make an immediate expressive connection to an historical moment. After the newsreels showing the first footage of the concentration camps, Buchenwald and Bergen-Belsen, was shown in Melbourne in May 1945, Hester made two works, *Victim* and *Victim by a fence* (both 1945), which show the rawness and immediacy of her emotional response. She later made *Mother and child* (c. 1945) after seeing footage from the Ravensbruck camp. Like *Victim* and *Victim by a fence*, *Mother and child* gives a literal depiction of the horrors of the war—emaciated and skeletal bodies lie or are suspended. The energy and sense of immediacy of Hester's brushwork in these works convey a sense of 'being there', so much so that we feel an almost visceral physical sensation. And yet the power in Hester's work is the closeness of sensation as it is related to the body, to visceral and corporeal senses, the emotional and spiritual. Hester's response to war was raw and it was spiritual—*Mother and child* and *The agony in the garden* (c. 1945) express this. Hester's work strongly communicates a sensation; it conveys a strong feeling of the body and about bodily states that we almost feel rather than see. *From an incredible night dream* (c. 1946–47) shows the body in an uncontrolled or perhaps ecstatic state caught mid-motion as it curls awkwardly across the paper. It is almost as if a sympathetic physical recognition is communicated in a bodily rather than visual manner. It is this that best highlights the 'stuff' of Hester's work, the sense that the physical, visceral and sensual body is at the centre of things.

In his essay on Francis Bacon, Deleuze writes of sensation that:

*... it is Being-in-the-World, as the phenomenologists say: at one and the same time I become in the sensation and something happens through the sensation, one through the other, one in the other. And at the limit, it is the same body which, being both subject and object, gives and receives the sensation.*<sup>12</sup>

And it is to this body as both 'subject and object of sensation' that I would like to finally return. I've wanted to reflect on the way we ourselves might understand (as in 'feel' or 'be conscious of') our bodies as a mechanical entity but also as a thing that feels and expresses itself, as an active protagonist in the construction of meaning and sensation. Deleuze describes the body as having a language of its own and being able to 'speak', and this sense of the body that speaks a language expressed through gesture (and through our reading and shared understanding of this gesture) can be seen as both a continuum of and reaction to various modernist attitudes to the body. The twentieth century almost began with the Futurists' cry—'the body is a machine!'—and the body has certainly been a continuing human preoccupation. The wounded body, mutilated by war, could be seen as the fulcrum around which the status and value of the body have revolved since this time. Questions of the natural and post-natural body, of the relationship between the body and the image, and the fundamental experience of the body as 'Being-in-the-World' cannot but be invigorated by the war-pornography created by US soldiers serving in Iraq and Afghanistan. For example, the posting of images of the bodies of people they have just killed or maimed on the internet.<sup>13</sup>

<sup>1</sup> The National Institute of Industrial Psychologists was founded by Charles Myers, a doctor turned psychologist, and Henry Welch, a company manager, in 1921. Myers is known for being single-handedly responsible for the development of British psychology at the beginning of the twentieth century. However, the rise of industrial psychology as a discipline for research was dependent on a number of factors, including Myers's manifesto, 'Mind and work: the psychological factors in industry and commerce' (1921); the government's interest in the welfare and productivity of munitions workers and the formation of the Health of Munitions Workers Committee during the war; and the progressive labour policies of Quaker industrialist, Seebohm Rowntree, who appointed the first psychologist to his factory in 1922. (See Geoff Bunn, 'Charlie and the chocolate factory', *The Psychologists*, vol. 14, no. 11, 2001.)

<sup>2</sup> Giorgio Agamben, 'Notes on gesture', in *Means without end. Notes on politics*, trans. Vincenzo Binetti & Cesare Casarino, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis & London, 2000, p. 53.

<sup>3</sup> Gilles Deleuze, 'Pierre Klossowski or bodies-language', in *The logic of sense*, Columbia University Press, New York, 1990.

<sup>4</sup> Felix Guattari & Anthony Negri, *Communists like us*, Autonomedia, Brooklyn, New York, 1990.

<sup>5</sup> Email correspondence from the artist, 25 April 2005.

<sup>6</sup> Tom Nicholson's *Flags for a Trades Hall Council* is a two-part work. The sites for the work are the Victorian Trades Hall Council (VTHC) building and the Ian Potter Museum of Art. The proposal to fly the flags on the VTHC building is set into the context of the current situation in Australian politics in which the Federal Government is preparing radical industrial relations legislation. This will affect the function of trade unions to organise and act collectively and to articulate symbolically—through images, words, actions—a conception of work, indeed all economic relations, alternative to that which dominates under capitalism.

7 Maria Tumarkin, *Wishing you weren't here ...: thinking about trauma, place and the Port Arthur massacre*, <[http://www.api-network.com/cgi-bin/page?archives/jas67\\_tumarkin](http://www.api-network.com/cgi-bin/page?archives/jas67_tumarkin)>.

8 Lebbeus Woods, 'The fall', in Paul Virilio, *Unknown quantity*, Fondation Cartier, Paris, 2002, p. 152.

9 Woods, 'Taking a risk: nine experimental scenarios', in Tracy Myers, *Lebbeus Woods: experimental architecture*, Carnegie Museum of Art, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 2005.

10 Woods, 'The fall', loc. cit.

11 Lebbeus Woods, 'War and architecture part I: meditations and principles', *A+U*:

*Architecture and Urbanism*, no. 77, 1993.

12 Gilles Deleuze, 'Painting and sensation', in *Frances Bacon: the logic of sensation*,

Continuum, London & New York, 2003, pp. 34–5.

13 Andrew Brown, 'The new pornography of war', *The Guardian*, 28 September 2005