

# Reinstating the body in Western philosophical and artistic practices

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Recent academic writing emphasises the importance of the body in human meaning and understanding but, surprisingly, a high percentage of researchers turn a blind eye to the fact that the Western philosophical aesthetic tradition played a leading role in this regard. This article aims to contribute to the reinstatement of the body to its rightful place in historic Western philosophy and art practice. The article thus analyses how the Western aesthetic and artistic tradition started out by attempting to conceptualise and actualise a humanist body in art, but ended up deconstructing such a notion and setting up a metaphorical aesthetic body in its place. In my estimation such a metaphorical perspective of the body in art is not only an emancipatory achievement, but also a joyous affirmation of the human capacity for never-ending creativity.

## Die herinstelling van lyflikheid in die Westerse filosofiese en artistieke praktyke

Heelwat onlangse akademiese skryfwerk beklemtoon die belangrikheid van lyflikheid vir menslike betekenis en begrip, maar verbasend genoeg ignoreer 'n hoë persentasie van hierdie navorsers die feit dat die Westerse filosofiese estetika die voortou op hierdie gebied geneem het. Hierdie artikel beoog om lyflikheid tot sy regmatige plek in die historiese Westerse filosofie en artistieke praktyk terug te skryf. Daarom analiseer hierdie artikel hoe die Westerse estetika en artistieke tradisie aanvanklik gepoog het om 'n humanistiese en lyflike eendersheid in die kuns te konsipieer en te aktualiseer, maar later geëindig het met die dekonstruksie van so 'n voorstelling, en die opstelling van 'n metaforiese estetiese lyflikheid in die plek daarvan. Na my oordeel is so 'n metaforiese perspektief op lyflikheid in die kuns nie slegs 'n emancipatoriese prestasie nie, maar ook 'n genotvolle bevestiging van die menslike kapasiteit vir nimmereindigende kreatiwiteit.

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An overview of recent academic writing from various disciplines such as philosophy, media studies, art history, cognitive science and linguistics points to the currency of the human body in inscribing contemporary subject formations.<sup>1,2</sup> Although the author agrees with the significance of the body in the human psyche, he finds that certain writers tend to make a caricature of historic Western philosophy by maintaining that it is a tradition that overlooked the body in theoretical constructs of what it means to be fully human.<sup>3,4,5</sup> This evaluation is astonishing as it overlooks the fact that one significant endeavour of this tradition, namely that of philosophical aesthetics, was mainly an engagement with sensible intuitions, imagination, feelings and emotions or, in short, with the prediscursive body in human meaning and understanding.

This article mainly aims to contribute to the reinstatement of the body to its rightful place in historic Western philosophy and art practice. To accomplish this, the article analyses how Western philosophical aesthetics attempted to write a humanist body into art.<sup>6</sup> In this instance “body” does not mean depictions of the human figure in works of art as such, but physical embodiment, which specifically refers to properties such as weight, balance, containment, in-out, front-back, texture, line, colour, force, gravity and so on. These properties interact primarily with our corporeal, bodily existence, as aspects of

1 Aspects of this article were researched in my doctoral thesis. Cf Potgieter 1999.

2 Cf Lakoff 1999, Ruthrof 1997, Lenoir 2002, Crowther 1993, Schmidgen 2005, Jay 2005 & Berleant 2008.

3 Ruthrof (1997: xii), for example, writes that he questions “a certain blindness to the importance of non-verbal signs both within and without the linguistic”.

4 Aesthetics was of particular interest to continental philosophy which refers to a German lineage that includes Kant, Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Freud, Benjamin, Adorno, Heidegger, Gadamer and Habermas. This lineage was continued by French philosophers such as Sartre and Merleau-Ponty through to postmodern philosophers such as Foucault, Lyotard, Lacan, Baudrillard and Derrida. For an excellent introduction to continental philosophy, cf West 1996.

5 In this article “tradition” mainly refers to continental philosophy and more specifically to the aesthetic lineage and art practice.

6 It must be noted that I do not use “humanist” and “humanism” to refer to a particular historical strain of humanism, but as a generic term for the notion of a common humanity.

works of art do. Moreover, what supposedly makes such embodied properties “humanist” is that philosophical aesthetics thought that they might be a “common essential feature in terms of which human beings can be defined and understood” (Soper 1986: 11-2). Provisionally stated, it was believed that bodily aesthetic properties, as one experiences in works of art, might hold the key to proving the existence of a common humanity. In this regard Kant (1952: 75) remarks that the aesthetic experience derives from “grounds deep-seated and shared alike by all men”. Schiller (1954: 138) writes that “only the communication of the Beautiful unites society, because it relates to what is common to them all”. This section of the article engages with Kant, Hegel and the so-called Western para-Marxists.

This article also demonstrates how the attempt by the aesthetic tradition to write a humanist body into art failed, thereby contributing to the general deconstruction of a humanist body of sameness.<sup>7</sup> Although this may seem like a highly negative strategy to follow for reinstating the body, there are two points on which it is not. First, as a result of poststructural thinking about difference, many academics have come to realise that arguments for a common humanity may not be the magnanimous, innocent business it is usually made out to be. This is because humanism can be unmasked for hypocritically believing that the “other” only needs proper edification to embrace the moral high ground of my tastes and values. West (1996: 211) sums this up succinctly by stating that humanism can be criticised as a “denial of the ‘other’ [and a] reduction of difference to a devalued otherness for the sake of the security of our own identity”. Viewed from this perspective, the deconstruction not of an aesthetic body as such, but of an aesthetic body of sameness, is a positive, emancipatory achievement. Secondly, it will be argued that the traditions of deconstructive engagement with the notion of a humanist aesthetic body of sameness simultaneously revealed a constructive manner in which visual art can be understood as an ideal space for the creation of new meaning through the play of embodied metaphors. This embodied, metaphoric perspective points to art as an excellent space for the endless creation of

7 *Deconstruction in context* by Taylor (1986) is an informative compilation that traces the “tradition” of deconstruction.

new meanings. To demonstrate and unpack the above, this section of the article engages with Nietzsche, Heidegger and Derrida.

In the endeavour to reinstate the body in the broader Western intellectual tradition, this article also engages with historic art theory and practice. This compensates for some contemporary commentators who theorise about new media and the body with little appreciation for the manner in which the body has initially been conceptualised in theory and actualised in practice.<sup>8</sup> It appears that the texture, bodily feel and touch of these initial conceptualisations have slipped into such oblivion that people currently seldom feel the urgency to preserve even aspects of the humanist body, making it expedient for academics and artists of a futuristic, post-human orientation to write off concerns about disembodiment as mere nostalgia.<sup>9</sup>

This section of the article focuses on selected aspects of the issue of artistic formalism and the body as it was practised and theorised from the era of romanticism until the mid-twentieth century. Although formalism was obviously an inadequate and reductive art theory, it was not completely devoid of value. This article hopes to show that there are parallels between formalism and the body, and that it is this aspect of formalism that warrants preservation, albeit in a revised form. The broader aim in this instance is to provide a historic art-theoretical background for engaging with the questions of what artistic embodiment is exactly and whether disembodiment matters. This section therefore consists of a revision or reconstruction of an aspect of the formalist tradition to help write the body back into the artistic landscape.

8 Many debates about digital new media focus on the issue of disembodiment and dematerialisation, specifically questioning whether digital new media represents a loss with regard to bodyliness, and if it does, what is at stake in such a loss.

9 The term posthumanism is sometimes used to refer to the radical departure of poststructurally inspired French intellectuals from thinking human sameness to thinking human difference, and other times it refers to the effects of machines and technology, “cyborgs” and artificial intelligence, on human beings. The latter applies more to the present context. Cf in this regard Badmington (2000: 1-10).

## 1. The body in traditional aesthetics

Descartes's so-called mind-body duality is often held to be the start of a tradition of Western philosophy that denigrated the body as well as the objective world, elevating the mind to a position of pristine intentionality.<sup>10</sup> Taylor (1986: 3) explains that

Descartes [...] seeks certainty through doubt [...] until he reaches what he regards as indubitable — his own doubting self. He labels this self-certain subject *res cogitans*, which he distinguishes from all else, described as *res extensa*.

Following Descartes, Husserl's phenomenology is often cited as exemplary of the so-called metaphysics of presence and intentionality where, stated in a nutshell, each self-certain *res cogitans* or individual humanist subject potentially possesses a transparent, unmediated intentionality directed towards a stable *res extensa*.

As outlined briefly above, it is therefore possible to judge aspects of Western philosophy as thinking that exalted the mind to a pristine, centred intentionality with total sovereignty over the body and the objective world. However, it must be added that much philosophy after Descartes did not extol the so-called mind-body duality, but endeavoured to restore it. Kant (1933: 51), for example, writes: "Intuitions [aspects close to the body] without concepts [the mind] are blind; concepts without intuitions are empty". In the Kantian tectonic, meaning and understanding would always be on shaky ground unless reconciliation between concepts and intuitions could be established.<sup>11</sup>

Moreover, in the endeavour to reconcile intuitions and concepts, the so-called aesthetic experience held centre stage.<sup>12</sup> Upon consideration this is an ingenious thing to do. For example, take a tune

10 Falk (2001: 537) explains that "Descartes use of mind relates to pure intellect and excludes sensation, imagination and emotions".

11 Berleant (2008: 1) states this prerogative in contemporary aesthetic terms: "Aesthetic appreciation has typically been described as an act of consciousness, a certain, distinctive sort of consciousness. Such an account is not only inadequate but distorted, for there is no consciousness without body, no disembodied consciousness. If an aesthetic is to be non-dualistic, it must proceed differently."

12 Jay (2005: 145) refers to this as "the sovereignty of the aesthetic experience".

that one hears for the first time. An unknown tune often has immediate harmonious or “organic” appeal, making one believe that it reconciles some conceptual origin (musical scales or laws of harmony) with contingent, bodily intuitions (the immediate catchiness of the tune).<sup>13</sup> Moreover, such supposed reconciliations seem to be an outward “bodily” embodiment of human sameness. I say this as we do not expect others to argue conceptually when we judge a flower as beautiful, for example, but we do expect to be asked for conceptual reasons when we judge a mathematical calculation to be wrong. To sum up, since aesthetic experiences appear to function at a bodily level somewhat removed from interested, animalistic bodily instincts, but nevertheless prior to conceptual thinking, the aesthetics tradition of Western philosophy thought that it may hold the key to conceptualising a common humanity.

### 1.1 The dialectical body

Those who hold that Western philosophy denigrated the ineffable body and attempted to conceptually and discursively rationalise all aspects of life, must first note that Kant (1952: 75) admits outright that it is impossible to conceptualise a universal aesthetic:

It is only throwing away labour to look for a principle of taste that affords a universal criterion of the beautiful by definite concepts; because what is sought is a thing impossible and inherently contradictory.

His admission that the aesthetic experience cannot be pinned down in definite concepts immediately dispels the notion of him being a hard, positivistic rationalist who refused to recognise the limitations of rational intentionality in the human psyche.

Furthermore, the reason why he states that the endeavour to conceptualise a universal aesthetic is inherently contradictory is because if one could say the aesthetic experience, one would not need to make visual art in the first place. Eagleton (1990: 2) expresses this in the following way:

13 In a previous publication I also used this example, cf Potgieter 2006: 39.

Aesthetics is [...] always a contradictory, self-undoing sort of project, which in promoting the theoretical value of its objects risks emptying it of exactly that specificity or ineffability which was thought to rank among its most precious features. The very language, which elevates art, offers perpetually to undermine it.

However, human beings speak about things that cannot be pinned down in definite concepts, and in this manner they do not prove the improvable, but denote aspects of meaning, including bodily meaning, that occur at the limits of language, so to speak, aspects such as pain, emotions, unlimited time and space, and God. Even while admitting to the impossibility of conceptually pinning down the aesthetic experience, Kant nevertheless makes ingenious attempts at denoting reconciliation between concepts and intuitions in the aesthetic experience. One of these is briefly touched on below.<sup>14</sup>

In the third critique Kant argues that an art work that reconciles concepts and intuitions must look like a product of nature, although it is not one. Kant (1952: 167) writes:

Hence the finality [concept] in the product of fine art, intentional though it be, must not have the appearance of being intentional; i. e. fine art must be clothed *with the aspect of nature* [bodiliness], though we recognize it to be art.

Cleverly Kant (1952: 168-83) then argues that the artistic genius should be able to create a product that resembles a product of nature, although it is not, as the talent for art was received from Mother Nature in the first place. In this manner, Kant's artistic genius supposedly reconciles conceptual and bodily meaning. However, this argument is tautological as the effect is already contained in the cause. This is because the logic it follows is that the artistic genius can produce a product that resembles nature (the body), because nature produced the artistic genius.

In the third critique Kant also attempts to categorise the different arts ontologically by noting similarities and differences between

14 Other reconciliatory attempts in this regard are the idea of "free play" between understanding and intuitions (Kant 1952: 58) and the notion of a universal "common sense" (Kant 1952: 85). Kant considered and discarded these as proof of a universal aesthetic.

them. According to him, fine art and craft have a distinctly bodily aspect in common. Kant (1952: 163) writes:

[...] what one can do the moment one only *knows* what is to be done, hence without anything more than sufficient knowledge of the desired result, is not called art. To art that alone belong for which the possession of the most complete knowledge does not involve one's having then and there the skill to do it. Camper describes very exactly how the best shoe must be made, but he, doubtless, was not able to turn one out himself.<sup>15</sup>

Kant emphasises that a conceptual understanding of a skill does not mean that one has the ability to perform the skill. On the one hand, this observation draws our attention to the uniqueness of bodily intelligence but, on the other hand, it highlights the schism between the body and conceptuality even further, thereby deconstructing the notion of proving a totalising humanist aesthetic body of sameness.

Although Kant is generally not associated with dialectical reasoning, much of his theorising on the aesthetic experience can be regarded as a precursor to Hegel's classic dialectic of attempting to reconcile opposites into a synthesised third, superior position. Following Kant in this regard, the introduction to Hegel's aesthetics abounds with dialectical wordplay that attempts to reconcile conceptual thinking and bodily art.<sup>16</sup> Hegel (1993: 9) draws art into a world teleology, where it has the vocation to represent "... the highest ideas in sensuous forms, thereby bringing them nearer to the character of natural phenomena, to the senses, and to feeling". On the other side of the dialectic, conceptual thinking penetrates to

a supra-sensuous world, which is thus, to begin with, erected as a beyond over against immediate consciousness and present sensation; the power which thus rescues itself from the here, that consists in the actuality and finiteness of sense, is the freedom of thought in cognition (Hegel 1993: 9).

15 Petrus Camper (1722-1789) was a Dutch professor in medicine who wrote a thesis entitled *On the best form of shoe*.

16 Inwood (1993: 140) explains Hegel's dialectic on art as follows: "... art exemplifies the reconciliation of at least one antithesis, viz. that between the sensory surface of the world and its essential nature. In doing this, art implicitly affirms that antithesis are reconciled, that e.g. the world and the ideal are in harmony. By its very harmony of form and content, art conveys a certain content, viz. reconciliation".



After setting up this schism between sensual art and conceptual thought Hegel (1993: 9-10) states:

But the mind is able to heal this schism which advance creates; it generates out of itself the works of fine art as the middle term of reconciliation between pure thought and what is external, sensuous and transitory, between nature with its finite actuality and the infinite freedom of the reason that comprehends.

Hegel therefore perceives art to be an essential sensual component of a deterministic dialectical process, where this sensual component causes history to transform into rational, absolute knowledge. Moreover, Hegel saw his own philosophy as the culmination of this process of obtaining absolute knowledge, meaning that art had fulfilled its historic task, forcing him to reach the conclusion that

The peculiar mode to which artistic production and works of art belong no longer satisfies our supreme need. We are above the level at which works of art can be venerated as divine, and actually worshipped [...] In all these respects art is, and remains for us, on the side of its highest destiny, a thing of the past (Hegel 1993: 12-3).

By arguing so Hegel in fact surreptitiously deconstructs the humanist notion of a world history of aesthetic art that teleologically progresses towards its ontological essence.

Hegel is also the philosopher of *Aufhebung*, in which language words transform from being bodily to being conceptually clear. Hegel (1975: 404) writes:

[E]very language already contains a mass of metaphors. They arise from the fact that a word which originally signifies only something sensuous is carried over into the spiritual sphere [... where] gradually the metaphorical element in the use of such a word disappears and by custom the word changes from a metaphorical expression, because, owing to readiness to grasp in the image only meaning, image and meaning are no longer distinguished and the image directly affords only the abstract meaning itself instead of a concrete picture.

This requires an explanation. Take a bodily expression such as “I see”, which probably originally denoted only the act of seeing, and did not also mean “I understand” as is often the case today. Or take a word such as “sensible”, which probably referred to the senses and not to being reasonable. To sum up, although Hegel deconstructed bodily

art out of an all-encompassing world teleology, his observations with regard to *Aufhebung* — the movement from intuitive, bodily forms of understanding to conceptual ones — warrant further address in the conclusion to this article.

Following Hegel through Marx, Western para-Marxists of the Frankfurt school, in particular, focused on the materiality or bodiliness of art in conceptualising a utopian future.<sup>17</sup> Like Marx, these thinkers emphasised the material basis of the human psyche, where the supposed disinterested, bodily aesthetic experience was conceptualised as the outward embodiment of material substrates and corresponding superstructures on which a new, inevitable, utopian social order could be based. As in the case of Hegel, this argument also works dialectically, as the bodily aesthetic has its origin in a dialectical interaction between human beings and the material word in the first place.<sup>18</sup> In this regard West (1996: 60) explains that for Marcuse “the harmony, proportion and beauty of classical art is the ‘sensuous appearance of the idea of freedom’”.<sup>19</sup> In other words, harmonious, sensuous bodily or “organic” art serves as an outward embodiment of the possibility of attaining an authentic utopia.<sup>20</sup> At this point it suffices to mention that the unfolding of history into the present rampant capitalism (although one does not really know what time scale Marx had in mind) has proved the para-Marxists wrong with regard to the teleological inevitability of a utopian society.

In summary, the failure of Kant, Hegel and the para-Marxists to reconcile concepts and intuitions dialectically points towards the impossibility of proving a common aesthetic body, contributing to a detotalising ethics of difference.

17 Cf Adorno 1991 & 1997, Horkheimer & Adorno 1979, Benjamin 1969 and Marcuse 1978.

18 Fischer (1963: 15-48) makes for fascinating reading on how the aesthetic experience arrives from the relationship between human labour and bodily matter.

19 Cf Marcuse 1978.

20 This has to be understood in the context of the battle between capitalism and Marxism. Marxists understood capitalism to be a barbaric, corrupted phase in human progress, and Marxist art theorist hailed the “purity” of art as revolutionary as it kept the possibility of an authentic future alive.

However, their failure to prove a reconciliation between concepts and intuitions logically does not mean that in real life performative artists do not at times make works in which one experiences a sense of harmonious, “organic” wholeness (in non-metaphysical terms, works that move one for whatever reason). Moreover, if one removes all metaphysical speculation from the philosophers discussed above, their dialectical theorising reveals the possibility that metaphoric interaction between traditional bodily art and conceptuality may be an ideal space for the creation of new meanings.

## 1.2 The metaphorical body

In this section there is no need to argue that failing to conceptualise reconciliation between concepts and intuitions proves the point, as the line of thinking traced from Nietzsche through Heidegger to Derrida culminates in the conclusion that a final reconciliation between concepts and intuitions is impossible. Provisionally stated, the reason for this is that human beings make sense of the world by means of labile mediation structures, where the interaction between material signifiers and that which is conceptually signified is arbitrary. Since nothing escapes this infinite play of transferral and deferral (one thing standing for another in an arbitrary fashion), the only signification one can know or experience is radically metaphorical.

Nietzsche (1986: 218) was ahead of his time in grasping the arbitrary relationship between a material signifier and a conceptual signified, by asking:

What is a word [a concept]? The image of a nerve stimulus [an intuition] in sounds. But to infer from the nerve stimulus, a cause outside us, that is already the result of a false and unjustified application of the principle of reason [...] The different languages, set side by side, show that what matters with words is never the truth, never an adequate expression; else there would not be so many languages. The ‘thing in itself’ (for that is what pure truth, without consequences, would be) is quite incomprehensible to the creators of language and not at all worth aiming for. One designates only the relations of things to man, and to express them one calls on the boldest metaphors. A nerve stimulus, first transposed into an image — first metaphor. The image, in turn, imitated by a sound — second metaphor.

Nietzsche implies that languages are derived from sensual bodily processes. One can explain further by stating that when human beings sighed, groaned, smacked, laughed, sneezed and made lustful bodily sounds these were transformed into words. However, the fact that there are so many languages proves the absolute arbitrariness of these processes. In other words, Nietzsche argues that the transferral and deferral between bodiliness and concepts are arbitrary and metaphorical.

However, in this metaphoric relationship Nietzsche (1967: 428) prioritises the material signifier, to the sensible intuition that cannot be said: “Compared with music all communication by words is shameless; words dilute and brutalize; words depersonalize; words make the uncommon common”. In another remark Nietzsche (1967: 427) refers to a physiological process that occurs in the gut (think of a gut feeling) to prioritise the body in artistic creation. He asks “If we subtracted all intestinal fever from lyricism in sound and word, what would be left of lyrical poetry and music?”

In a manner of speaking Nietzsche applies his own arguments as a high level of emotive performativity is perceivable in his own writing. This indicates that he must have been aware that the failure of conceptual thinking to reconcile concepts and intuitions does not mean that in actual artistic metaphoric performativity there are no occasions when conceptual and bodily knowledge do interact to create a new synthesised meaning. For example, while engaging or contemplating the ineffable parts of a painting, one sometimes conceive a conceptual insight one would not have had if one had not been in the vicinity of the painting.

In the passage quoted below Nietzsche resorts to metaphoric writing about the priority he is inclined to give to pre-conceptual meaning, thereby demonstrating—I believe convincingly—through his own metaphoric performance the limitations of conceptual thinking and the potential of bodily metaphoric performativity to persuade where conceptual analysis fails. In this passage Nietzsche attempts to bring to consciousness, mainly by using metaphors that are rooted in the body, that uncanny moment, that creative tension between intuitive meaning and conceptual thought that is so preciously typical of artistic creation:

Alas, what are you in the end, my written and painted thoughts? Not long ago you were so brightly colored, so young and wicked, so full of thorns and secret spices that you made me sneeze and laugh — and now? You have taken off your newness; some of you, I fear, are ready to turn into truths, so immortal do you already look, so heart-breakingly decent, so boring! And was it ever otherwise? What sort of thing do we copy down, we mandarins with our Chinese brushes, we immortalizers of the things that can be written? What are we able to copy down? Only, alas, what is about to fade and lose its fragrance! Only departing and exhausted thunderstorms, alas, and belated yellow feelings! Only birds, alas, who flew till they were weary and lost their way, who can be caught in the hand — in our hand! We immortalize what has not long to live, what can no longer soar — tired and hollow things! (Nietzsche 1955: 238).

Like Merleau-Ponty, Heidegger “developed [his] views in opposition to Husserl’s insistence on the philosophical priority of the analysis of the representational content of individual intentional states” (Dreyfus 1982: 2-3). For Heidegger, as for structuralism and post-structuralism, human beings make sense of reality by means of mediation structures, of which language is an example. However, in the wake of Heidegger’s contribution to the language turn, it is often overlooked that he also theorised the body as a mediating structure in his endeavour to deconstruct the metaphysics of presence and decentre the subject.

What I have in mind is Heidegger (1962: 403-15) drawing our attention to the importance of intuitive, precognitive bodily meaning by means of the example of the carpenter and hammering. By contrast with Kant’s Camper — the academic who knew all about the best form of shoe, but could not make one — Heidegger’s carpenter does his job without having to think about his task; it is only when the hammer breaks that discursive thinking enters the picture. The point that Heidegger wants to make with this example is that we do not, and for our survival cannot, intentionally conceptualise all our daily actions. Think of the problems encountered in switching between countries that drive on opposite sides of the road, where a change-over initially overwhelms our intentional, conscious minds, making it awkward to drive. It is only once new precognitive, bodily patterns have been established that one feels at home with the change. In summary, one depends on precognitive bodily intuition for one’s daily survival.

By emphasising this prediscursive dimension of one's being in the world, Heidegger deconstructs and decentres the intentional *Cogito* of traditional metaphysics. However, he makes a kind of turn around by theorising an authenticity in the bodily past. To unpack this, it is necessary to start by pointing out that Heidegger held the view that the present had lost an authenticity that existed at the point when language came into being. Hofstadter (Heidegger 1971: xvi) explains that for Heidegger

[...] the ancient thought — an original discovery of the poets and thinkers who spoke the Indo-European languages into being — is the one that is truest to the nature of the thing as it is knowable in and from living experience.

In this regard Heidegger (1986a: 257-8) notes that with the appropriation of Greek words by Roman-Latin thought:

[*b*] *υποκειμενον* becomes *subiectum*; *υποστασις* becomes *substantia*; *συμβεβηκος* becomes *accidens*. However, this translation of Greek names into Latin is in no way the innocent process it is considered to this day. Beneath the seemingly literal and thus faithful translation there is concealed, rather, a *translation* of Greek experience into a different way of thinking. *Roman thought takes over the Greek words without a corresponding, equally authentic experience of what they say, without the Greek word.* The rootlessness of Western thought begins with this translation.

Heidegger implies that with the translation from Greek words into Roman-Latin thought, the concrete bodily kernel, around which these words had originally formed, had become transformed into a conceptual abstraction of the original, authentic experience. One can explain what Heidegger meant by speculating that in the English language a word such as “imagination” originally meant forming concrete images in the mind, and not being creative or original. In all likelihood the word “body” itself originally referred only to the bodies of human beings and animals, and was not used to distinguish between ethereal and concreteness, as in the flexion embodiment. Similarly, abstract euphemisms such as “pork” for the meat of pigs, “mutton” for sheep and “beef” for cow and ox remove one from the authentic, concrete, bodily reality of the practice of eating the actual carcasses (also an euphemism for dead bodies) of animals.

Importantly, like Nietzsche, Heidegger also moved into a level of performativity with regard to reinstating the body, and in his case he did so by using “old” bodily words as well as creating metaphoric words that make one feel something of what the original authentic experience must have been like. Hofstadter (Heidegger 1971: xvii) writes the following about this:

Read what Heidegger has to say about the thinging of things [...] and you will begin to re-collect in your own thinking a basic human grasp of the meaning of things, which will open up afresh a basic human relationship to them [...].

Heidegger’s philosophical writing is not only inundated with bodily words such as “thinginess”, earth, falling, ground, opening, caring, equipment, preservation, and so on, but also abounds with new bodily metaphoric creations such as *Dasein*, present-at-hand, ready-to-hand, being-in-the-world, *Ereignis* and *Gelassenheit* that all aim to make one feel something of the supposed authentic bodily past.

I believe that Heidegger’s most important contribution to the philosophy of art, apart from his performativity, is the move from the habit of understanding art as mere representation to an understanding of art as presentation. However, in Heidegger’s case this is not a presentation of an ethereal fantasy, but a presentation that creates concrete, bodily reality. Norberg-Schulz (1983: 64) explains Heidegger’s insight as follows:

The bridge gathers the earth as landscape around the stream. It does not just connect banks that are already there. The banks emerge as banks only as the bridge crosses the stream.

In other words, the concept of “river banks” only realises once a river has been bridged. Norberg-Schulz (1983: 1966) also notes how Heidegger describes a Greek temple in terms of the spatiality and gravity of the human body:

The natural and man-made things which constitute the boundaries of the between, also stand, rest and tower, to recall the terms used in Heidegger’s description of the Greek temple. Thus they embody characters which mirror man’s state of mind (*Befindlichkeit*), at the same time as they delimit a precinct which admits man’s actions.

According to Norberg-Shulz, Heidegger does not think that art simply re-presents the bodily world, but that the interaction between bodily reality and art in fact brings reality into presence. In other words, for Heidegger art unlocks and creates the world. It is interesting to note in this instance that Heidegger illustrated this point during lectures by himself “performing” metaphorically in front of Van Gogh’s painting of shoes. Exhibiting the painting Heidegger (1986b: 423) states:

From the dark opening of the worn insides of the shoes the toilsome tread of the worker stares forth. In the stiffly rugged heaviness of the shoes there is the accumulated tenacity of her slow trudge through the far-spreading and ever-uniform furrows of the field swept by a raw wind. On the leather lie the dampness and richness of the soil. Under the soles slides the loneliness of the field-path as evening falls. In the shoes vibrates the silent call of the earth, its quiet gift of the ripening grain and its unexplained self-refusal in the fallow desolation of the wintry field...

Heidegger points out that it is not merely true that one makes art, but also that art makes one. The work of art challenges one with questions that necessitate new interpretations that reveals the world, as it were. Moreover, for Heidegger (1971: 62) it is not merely a case of art bringing new ideas or concepts to light, but through metaphoric actions (“projective saying” in his words) new concrete, bodily realities are created. In *On the way to language* he suggests that even scientific accomplishments such as space travel are made possible by metaphor, by projective saying. Heidegger (1971: 62) explains as follows: “If the word framing that order and challenge had not spoken: then there would be no Sputnik”.

Despite Heidegger’s insight in the metaphoric creation of new meaning — the fact that art not only represents, but also presents the world — his insistence on the authenticity of originary bodily language can of course be questioned, both from a de-totalising political and a post-structural position. This article will not investigate his political conservatism and Nazism, which are well documented, but it needs to be mentioned that his “path” to an authentic past is problematic. Heidegger (1971: 126) writes that “within language as saying there is present something like a way or path”. This is reminiscent



of a kind of reverse Hegelian teleology, one that has been thoroughly deconstructed. I say so because Derrida and post-structuralism have made it clear that when one starts to play this game, one starts a game that concludes with the eating of its own tail: as the past is supposedly exposed, the present changes, and as the present changes, the future changes, and as the future changes and becomes the present, the past again becomes something else. Endless possibilities exist and one will never track these threads to their final origin. Derrida (1986: 417) states this aptly: “[H]as anyone thought that we have been tracking something down, something other than tracks themselves to be tracked down?” He also explains:

No doubt life protects itself by repetition, trace, *différance* (deferral). But we must be wary of this formulation: there is no life at first which would then come to postpone, or reserve itself in *différance*. The latter constitutes the essence of life. Or rather: as *différance* [...] Life must be thought of as a trace before Being may be determined as presence [...] It is thus the delay which is in the beginning (Derrida 1978: 203).

The point is not that one cannot write backward-looking, metaphorical prose or poetry and bring the past into the game: the point is simply that one cannot trust what one brings forth in this manner.

An important point is that whether one focuses on the body or the mind, intuitions or concepts, one does not have unmediated access to reality. In this regard Derrida (1984:125) writes: “The subject is not some meta-linguistic substance or identity, some pure *cogito* of self-presence; it is always inscribed in language”. Furthermore, this structure is not a stable structure, but a changing, fissured, labile one. Moving away from the use of the term “language” as meaning only discursive language, and considering the prediscursive bodily dimension of our being in the world as another form of a mediation structure, one must not make the same mistake as Heidegger, namely to regard one’s bodily being in the world as possessing an authenticity that transcends human differences and languages. This is because I have no reassurance that the pain that one feels, the colours one sees, the sounds one hears, the tastes one tastes, the emotions one feels, or a combination of these and other bodily awarenesses correspond completely with mine. Although Kant rightly said that concepts and

intuitions interact in the human psyche, much of this interaction is never fully assimilated by concepts, as is borne out by the fact that I cannot even remember or conceptualise my own pain, not even to mention yours. I say so, because if I could actually remember or conceptualise my own pain, I would hurt all over again. However, on the positive or constructive side, this conceptual impasse does not mean that metaphoric performativity which is grounded in the body cannot reveal new meanings and concrete realities, as was the case by means of the actual metaphoric performativity of Nietzsche and Heidegger. This aspect will be considered further in the conclusion.

## 2. The body in traditional art

As stated in the introduction, this section will focus on one manner in which the body was initially inscribed in the tradition, namely formalism. However, this should be understood in a broader sense than a self-conscious formalist movement as such, but rather as an aspect of all art. That is why the romantic body, the craft body and the connoisseur's body are also discussed.<sup>21</sup>

### 2.1 Romanticism and the body

It is fair to mention that the romantics tried to apply in practice what Kant tried to prove in theory, namely the reconciliation of concepts and intuitions. As stated above with regard to a potential reconciliation, they did have a point, because one does sometimes feel a sense of organic harmony, which can be understood as a union between concepts and intuitions, when one experiences works of art that are totally new to one. No wonder the romantic artist was venerated as a kind secularised prophetic, as a person gifted with the ability to outwardly reconcile in works of art the tensions that sunder human experience.

21 At one point in writing this article I considered discussing the "the body in art as artifact", the fact that the work of art is more than a transient experience of consciousness, as it is also an embodied testimony to memory, but abandoned this project because of the space constraints of an article.

However, one also needs to consider the aesthetics of the sublime (also theorised by Kant), which complicates the matter; for when a reconciliation between concepts and intuitions fails, as it constantly does in everyday life, the artist is left with the task of expressing the anguish and the awe, sometimes even the terror of such failure. In addition, experiencing sublime terror via art can be pleasurable due to one's body not being in immediate danger.<sup>22</sup>

One should also consider romanticism against the background of the demise of the religious world view and the rise in what can best be described as scientism (the view that the natural sciences have a prerogative over all meaning and understanding, and are also immune to ethical considerations). In this regard, romanticism can be understood as a reactionary movement that tried to relativise the rationalising tendencies of modern life through emotional, artistic intuitions.<sup>23</sup> In this regard Van den Berg (1985: 11/7-8) writes:

In due course it became apparent that the mechanisation of human labour and technique threatened human freedom, and the genesis of an alternative 'irrational' freedom was found in the production and reception of works of art — in artistic processes that became further and further divorced from technique and technology [my translation from the Afrikaans, FP].

Viewed as such, intuitive, emotional, bodily art is a *pharmakon* for the effects of scientism on the human psyche in the modern world.

To regard bodily art as a relativisation of the excesses of extreme scientism made sense to the romantics and in my opinion still makes sense today. The aspect of the romantic movement which is regarded as somewhat archaic, even quaint, is not their hunch that bodily intuitions count in life and art, but rather the deeply metaphysical, humanist claims they made for art.

22 Schmidgen (2005: 77) refers to a predecessor of this realisation, namely Burke.

23 Van Gerwen (1992:112) puts this as follows: "In het algemeen kunnen we zeggen dat de romantici zoeken naar een interpretatie van het leven die bevredigend is voor onze emoties en verbeelding en die deze bevrijdt van de druk van het rationele; zij vinden deze (nogaal logisch) in ons emotionele en creatieve leven."

## 2.1 The craft body

In an article entitled “Crafts, perception, and the possibilities of the body”, Boden (2000: 289-91) reiterates Kant’s view that fine art is typified by free artistic expression, whereas handicraft is bound to practical ends.<sup>24</sup> She draws a further distinction between what she calls indicative and enactive theories of art and perception. Indicative theories apply to fine art where one is “drawn to think and to emote — but not, or not primarily, to engage in some bodily act” (Boden 2000: 291). By contrast, enactive theories apply to craftwork that is

... potentially functional, it engages one on a bodily level. This bodily engagement can involve not just touching the surface, but also other actions — such as hugging, draping, stabbing, and drinking. Fine textiles, from silken gossamers to rough-woven hessians, prompt one to feel their texture against one’s skin, and to drape them over our bodies or furniture (Boden 2000: 294).

Boden (2000: 294) writes that such “actions are grounded both in our specifically human embodiment (two eyes, two hands, flexible fingers, and so on) and in our human sociality”.

However, Boden makes a tentative about-turn by citing borderline or crossover cases where fine art is enactive and craftwork not. On careful consideration this turnaround points to the possibility that although works of fine art may ultimately make one think, it may very well be that it is the enactive bodily aspects of such works (eg seductive surfaces, colours and forms) that draws one in and engages one bodily, that entices one to make the effort to conceptualise new meanings. Kant’s theorising also indicates this as, according to him, the conceptual freedom of fine art must respect bodiliness:

[... ] In all free arts something of a compulsory character is still required, or, as it is called, a *mechanism*, without which the *soul*, which in art must be *free*, and which alone gives life to the work, would be bodiless and evanescent [...]. (Kant 1952: 164).

24 Boden (2000: 289) reminds us of the following well known distinctions between craft (mentioned first) and art (mentioned second): functional/non-functional; predicated on traditions of skills and materials that must be used “correctly”/sets individual aesthetic standards and work methods; repetitive/novelty and surprise; about skill/about ideas and emotions; anonymous creators/signed creations; handmade/produced by any means.

According to Kant, even the freedom of fine art must be rooted in the bodiliness of craft. To my mind this makes sense, because, as stated above, it may very well be that it is the bodiliness of works of art that draw one in to make the effort to conceptualise new meanings.

## 2.2 The connoisseurs' body

The function of the art connoisseur is to establish the authenticity of works of art, often distinguishing between original works and fakes. Often connoisseurs are also appraisers, putting monetary value to works. Famous art connoisseurs are, among others, the nineteenth-century Italian Morelli and his twentieth-century American successor, Berenson. They both wrote about their respective "scientific methods", with Morelli emphasising individual traits, for instance the depiction of details such as hands, ears, feet and drapery, and Berenson developing this into a "more elaborate set of criteria" (Hatt & Klonk 2006: 57).

In his book *Exhibiting authenticity*, Phillips (1997: 29) recalls a court scene where despite the connoisseur being unable to give reasons for his judgement, it was accepted on the grounds of him being the expert. My suggestion in this instance is that although the so-called "methods" (rules that can be learned and described) of the famous scientific connoisseurs are obviously useful in some cases, such methods only tell one side of the story of authentication. The other side of the story is the ineffable, uncanny, bodily empathy of works of art. I am by no means a connoisseur, but I have often been surprised by my own ability to authenticate simply by empathy with the bodily application of paint, by feeling the bodily marks of the artist or school. An obvious example is Van Gogh: even those with a little exposure can recognise a Van Gogh. It is no wonder that one's signature, the way one writes one's name with one's hands, pens and pencils, still remains the major method of juridical authentication.

### 2.3 The formalist lineage and the body

Following Kant from the late eighteenth century through romanticism and writers such as Baudelaire, Wölfflin, Fry and Bell (to mention but a few) to Greenberg in the second half of the twentieth century, one can distinguish a formalist line in art-making and aesthetics which argued that there is a universal, disinterested, ontological aesthetic quality, and attempt to discover and actualise this quality. In theoretical constructs this aesthetic quality is typified by aspects such as order in variety, idealisation, perfection, balance, proportion and harmony, as well as the discord of harmony, namely the sublime. This pure, disinterested harmonious or sublime quality does not arise from content but from artistic form. Kant (1952: 67) writes: "In painting, sculpture, and in fact all the formative arts, in architecture and horticulture, so far as fine arts, the design is what is essential".

Furthermore, perhaps starting with artists such as Goya and Rembrandt, visual art had somehow turned kinaesthetic in the mid-twentieth century. In an article on the art educator Lowenfeld, Arnheim (1983: 19-29) makes the point that in the wake of modern art, Lowenfeld's visual art education didactics gave preference to "haptic" (kinaesthetic) bodily sensation over "conceptual" seeing. Arnheim (1983: 27) agrees with Lowenfeld:

Lowenfeld believed that aesthetic expression was the privileged contribution of haptic experience. It was subjective in the sense of the theory of empathy, which held that observers project their kinaesthetic experiences upon the objects they perceive.

If I understand the point correctly, it means that although visual art is perceived through the sense of sight, the nature of much twentieth-century art was such that it actually appealed to the kinaesthetic sense. Or, in Nietzsche's words, it appeals to one not as conceptual seeing or hearing, but as haptic "intestinal fever". The supposed conceptuality of hearing and seeing can be considered further, because recent interesting debates by Korsmeyer (2004) and others scrutinise the manner in which traditional philosophy has theoretically elevated certain senses above others. Broadly speaking, the argument is that the philosophical tradition, with its supposed bias for the conceptual, had hierarchically elevated the more conceptual

senses of seeing and hearing above the more bodily senses of touching, smelling and tasting.<sup>25</sup> My response to this argument is that one cannot draw such distinctions in any stable manner, as one often reacts to paintings with one's sense of taste, or taste food with one's eyes, or hear music via the sense of touch, or dance in colours, and sometimes one tastes by smelling, seeing and touching, and so on. Moreover, sensate stimuli have to interact with conceptuality, otherwise they remain utterly meaningless. No wonder Kant starts theorising about a humanist aesthetic at the level of intuitions (which he thinks may be disinterested and thus universal) and not at the level of the senses (which he thinks are interested and thus subjective).

However, following Kant in the most reductive manner possible, Greenberg (1961: 139), the spokesperson of abstract expressionism, writes:

A modernist work of art must try, in principle, to avoid dependence upon any order of experience [such as conceptuality] not given in the most essentially construed nature of its medium [...]  
The arts are to achieve concreteness, 'purity' by acting in terms of their separate and irreducible selves.

Greenberg also theorises the essence of painting as "flatness". He does this in an attempt to suppress all conceptual, effable content so that the raw sensual, bodily quality of concrete paint can come to the fore. Regarding the artist's body, Jackson Pollock "performs" his paintings as if he has cleared his mind of all conceptual thinking to enable him to allow paint to drip, swirl and spatter according to "raw" bodily dictates.<sup>26</sup>

25 Korsmeyer (2004: 84-103) gives a feminist angle to this by arguing that philosophy denigrated the senses of feeling (that supposedly goes with nurturing), and tasting and smelling (that supposedly go with cooking) as these had traditionally been the domain of women.

26 At one point in writing this article I considered tracing the modernist emphasis on the bodily mark of the artist from the rise of the autonomy of "sketching" and, in particular, the autonomy of brushstrokes, possibly from Goya to Impressionism and Van Gogh, through to abstract expressionism, but had to abandon this project due to the constraints of the article.

Abstract expressionism and so-called action painting turned both the embodied medium of art-making and the artist's body into all that counts in art. However it is well known that this endeavour, like other formalist movements such as cubism, constructivism, abstract expressionism and minimalism which all attempted to discover an ontological visual aesthetic body, ended in a *kenosis* — solid black paintings and erased drawings. To my mind this is the self-realisation that no autonomous, meaningful, ontological visual aesthetic body exists to be discovered.

At this point it is important to reiterate that, although Kant regards the form or body of a work of art as of paramount importance, he never theorises a work of art as consisting solely of formal qualities. As argued in the section on the craft body, for him the formally embodied aspect of the work is a kind of precondition for conceptual creativity. When considering the artistic practices of early and late modernism, it is wrong to “blame” Kant in a simple causal manner for the pure abstraction of a movement such as abstract expressionism. It would be more correct to say that in the modernist drive to discover an ontological humanist body through abstraction, the focus was only on one pole of the Kantian dialectic between bodily intuitions and concepts.

However, the reductive endeavour to discover an aesthetic essence through abstraction also had an upside: the *kenosis* of formalism highlighted that bodily intuitions and concepts cannot function independently, but that some form of dialectical interaction between them is necessary to actualise meaning, both in life and in art. Stated in Kantian (1952: 58) terms, “aesthetic meaning is dependent on the free play between the imagination [read: embodied images] and our powers of cognition [conceptuality]”. This foreshadows contemporary explanations of the metaphoric creation of meaning, as discussed in the conclusion below.



### 3. Conclusion

One of the aims of this article was to analyse how the involvement of the aesthetics tradition in the artistic body contributed to an ethics of difference. The section, *The dialectical body*, analysed how attempts to reconcile concepts and bodily intuitions in the aesthetic experience failed, thereby not instating but rather deconstructing the notion of a humanist aesthetic of sameness. In the section on the metaphorical body it was shown how Nietzsche deconstructed the dialectic by arguing that the relationship between material signifiers and concepts are radically arbitrary. Heidegger's theorising of the body in everyday life decentred the subject of the metaphysics of presence, but it was also shown how he constructed an alternative "authentic", originary body. Finally Derrida's deconstruction of Heidegger's authentic bodily origin was analysed, leaving us with the impossibility of proving a humanist aesthetic body of sameness; as the aesthetic experience was thought to be exemplary of a common humanity, this contributed to a broader ethics of difference.

The constructive aim of this article was to show that the deconstruction of an aesthetic body of sameness by the aesthetic tradition simultaneously revealed that visual art may be exceptionally well appointed for the creation of new meaning by means of the play of bodily metaphors. The section on the dialectic argued that the failure to reconcile bodily intuitions and concepts revealed that metaphoric play between bodily intuitions such as art and conceptual thinking, may be an ideal space for the creation of new meaning. Furthermore, Nietzsche and Heidegger's attempts to overcome the failure of the aesthetic dialectic through metaphoric performativity indicate that, although it is impossible to prove a dialectical reconciliation between bodiliness and conceptuality in the aesthetic experience, theoretically this does not mean that in real life artistic metaphoric performances such as reconciliations do not sometimes occur. This crucial realisation, along with the observation in *The body in traditional art* that it probably is the bodiliness of works of art that seduces one into creative, conceptual play, now puts one in a position to propose that the metaphoric play between embodied visual art and concepts is an ideal space for the creation of new meaning.

This view of the metaphoric creation of new meaning contrasts markedly with the manner in which the metaphoric creation of new meaning is generally explained; ie as a process of linguistic consciousness where metaphoric linguistic expressions gradually transform into conceptual clarity. One can now propose that the metaphoric creation of new meaning should be extended to include a movement between concrete, bodily intuitions (such as visual art) and conceptual discursiveness. Although Hegel's theorising of *Aufhebung* primarily concerns linguistic creation, it also supports this idea as it describes a metaphoric movement from base concrete language which is close to the body, to abstract conceptual language which is divorced from the body.<sup>27</sup> Current research by Gibbs & Wilson (2002: 524-40) and others also indicates that the more words approximate bodiliness, the more metaphorically open-ended and creative they are with regard to the creation of new meaning. If this is the case with words, then it is likely that it should be even more so with embodied visual art, again forcing one to infer that visual art is particularly well-suited for the creation of new meaning by way of a metaphoric movement between bodiliness and conceptuality. I intend to clarify this question in follow-up research and to apply my findings to new media art and its supposed disembodiedness.

27 Interestingly, this movement is still prevalent especially in philosophical language, where, for example, the word objective can refer either to objects or to unbiased thinking, or consider the word original that can refer either to a bodily origin or to being creative.

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