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The Body Artist. An Experience of the Sur-Real in the Context of the Embodied and Aesthetic Abnormality

Abstract

In this essay I explore a possibility of experiential synthesis of an abnormal body of a Contergan person with an aesthetic image of the visual body. For a method, the essay uses phenomenology; I therefore lean in on the studies of embodiment conducted by Edmund Husserl and Maurice Merleau-Ponty. In turn, Max Ernst introduces an aesthetic modality of the artistic body. A personal narrative about meeting sur-real bodies serves as a frame for theorizing abnormality. The study reveals how the encounter with the abnormal ways of constitution suspends normality toward producing sur-real effects.

Keywords

body; abnormality; phenomenology; surrealism

Introduction

In this essay I investigate the possibility of approaching the abnormal body as an experiential manifold. Specifically, I argue that under certain conditions, such as an aesthetic encounter, the experience of the embodied abnormality is given as a syncretism of several modes of givenness which produce a multilayered engagement with the sphere other than real. For a phenomenological grounding of abnormality, I call on Edmund Husserl. Maurice Merleau-Ponty enriches the Husserlian insights with his phenomenology of intercorporeality. Dialogically positioned, Husserl and Merleau-Ponty help us understand how the abnormal other could be revealed beyond either representational aestheta or body-in-empathy to appear as an estranged but productive fusion of art and body in the sphere of its own, the surreal. I thematize the surreal with Max Ernst. The phenomenologically motivated argument opens with a personal experience of the abnormal body and its aesthetic context, which serves as the guiding clue for the subsequent analysis.

The encounter occurred in the Kunsthalle in Düsseldorf at the “Surrealismus” Art Exhibit in August of 2005. The actual meeting took place in the Max Ernst section of the exhibit. It is there that I saw a person whose appearance broke any and every

anticipation of an embodied human being. The person “stood” next to Ernst’s painting “The Teetering Woman”. The person’s face, haircut, and clothes indicated the female gender. I could guess her age as being about forty years old. Sunk deeply into the electrical chair, the woman was holding an audio-guide in her toes, bending toward it for better hearing. She had no arms and used her naked feet to adjust her child-like body to change the field of vision. Judging by the apparent ease with which she moved herself in the chair and, simultaneously, moved the chair, her comportment was unreflectively habitual to her; no noticeable disjunction of motility could be detected. After the guided message ended, the woman put the recorder in her lap, and, with the help of her feet, pulled herself up. Then, the short stub of her right shoulder touched the control lever and rolled the chair to the next painting. As she moved further away, I heard someone behind me whisper, “Contergan.” I inquired. The results of that inquiry were various medical, social, and psychological consequences of the condition known as Contergan. Briefly, Contergan is a specific condition caused by the drug “Contergan” that contains the active substance Thalidomid (see Figure1).



Figure 1. Contergan Hypnotikum

Thalidomid was isolated in 1956 by German chemist Heinrich Mueckler and commercialized the same year by the German pharmaceutical giant Gruenthal AG as Contergan, a tranquilizer and sleeping aid. Owing to its presumed safety and effectiveness, the drug became especially popular with pregnant women. However, having been inadequately tested, Contergan proved to be faulty, causing severe side-effects. In its fetus affective capacity, Contergan seems to be potent only during the first trimester. Between 1958 and 1961, about ten thousand deformed children were born to the drug using pregnant mothers, mostly in Germany but also in the Netherlands, Denmark, and Sweden. All the drug-induced deformities concern upper and lower extremities, spinal column, and knee joints, resulting in the condition commonly known as dwarfism (see Figure 2).



Figure 2. Contergan Baby

Mental capacities of the Contergan patients remained largely unaffected. There had been very few post-natal degenerative effects as well. Except for the treatment of the spinal cord in most severe cases, no inpatient medical aid had been required for the Contergan population, only general, albeit involved, home care.ⁱ Those medical specialists who came to research Contergan and its effects in the wake of this social drama noticed that the abnormality of the Contergan people did not connote debilitation but has a productive, generative facet; it turned out that they are extremely adaptable to their environment, treating with extraordinary ease those technological implements that had been abundantly designed to assist them.ⁱⁱ By the same token, the Contergan people exhibited unusually strong artistic inclinations, often tending to extreme forms of abstraction. In the next section, I would like to reflect on the experience of meeting the Contergan person, for it is the lingering unease of that experience that alerted me to its complexity and, at the same time, significance. I begin with the general considerations as they refer to the abnormal body. On the basis of those, I argue for the relationship between aesthetics and corporeality, and, more specifically, between art in extremis and the abnormal body. I end by locating both in the surreal sphere.

Embodied Abnormality

From the perspective of the normal body, a Contergan body is abnormal and therefore disabled. The mundane attitude allows for a range of acceptable forms of abnormalities, some of which are symbolically socialized into familiar types. That is how a person in the wheelchair or a person with a cane, or an armless person would have been experienced. Often, these types of abnormal bodies are given with their corresponding contexts that immediately connect us inferentially to the cause of their abnormality, be it a tragic accident, or natural disaster, or simply and, most inconspicuously, age. This type of knowledge was referred to by Alfred Schutz (1970) as *We-relationship*; “it is mediate and descriptive,” that is identificatory (Schutz, *ibidem*: 223). Yet, with the artistic exhibit forming the aesthetic horizon for my perception, other factors notwithstanding, the experience of the Contergan person’s dysfunctional abnormality arrived defamiliarized by other concurrent experiences. These other experiences prevented me from both simply stating the fact of abnormality but also connecting the abnormal body to the lived body of mine in an act of empathetic congruence. It did manage, however, to awaken the sense of wonder, the very awe that arises from encountering something, someone so odd that no available pre-formed measure is capable of giving the encounter any sensible explanation.

The Contergan body was out-worldly. It belonged to a place of which I had no conception, could never visit, never apprehend. This inaccessible homefulness of the other prevented me from assuming a superior position of the normal person, cut short a build-up of empathy, but also precluded blunt objectivization.ⁱⁱⁱ The Contergan woman was wondrous. She was surreal. There was extreme art about her body. The extreme edge of this art made her gender- less, as if she managed to avoid the very powers of subjection that rise to “secure and maintain and put into place a subject as a particularly gendered body” (Butler, 1993: 34). Yet, importantly, her abnormality did not come with or at a distance but pulled myself to itself, as only utter vulnerability could pull. At the same time, this surge of responsibility was frustrated at the very

moment of recognizing the other body, for the Contergan person was absolutely inaccessible to me, and so the call could find no outlet in an empathetic connection. The absolute and uplifted strangeness of the Contergan person compromised the horizontal reach of empathy, preventing me from taking empathy for the foundational structure of apprehending “the sick, diseased, and other abnormal subjects” as liminal subjects, that is, on the threshold of ethics and aesthetics.^{iv} More was demanded of me. But, given the limitations of my own flesh, I could neither abandon my own embodied being, nor en flesh the other body by mine, for as Husserl intimated, my animate organism “holds me wholly”.^v And so, amidst all this experiential complexity, if not confusion, I must begin my analysis at the point of the greatest inflection, by asking, *How can abnormality of the body can be available to us most generally?*

One can proceed answering these questions in a variety of philosophical tonalities: with Kant and the horrific sublime, thus emphasizing the transition from the speculative and manifest (passive) comprehension of monstrosity to the practical moral action as in rejecting the abnormal on the grounds of its abnormality; with Lacan and the drive to transform traumatic experiences into aesthetic manifestations; or with Kristeva and the subconscious abject that passes over any comprehension, a true mania of the ungatherable other.^{vi} Each of these tonalities is worth exploring in itself; yet, none of these perspectives echoes the straightforward simplicity of the experienced awe. My experience was bereft of the other as some sublimated evil monstrosity, a disgusting creature of my nocturnal life; on the other hand, no call of the other moved me to an ethical response to the strangeness of the encounter.^{vii} To me, the Contergan appeared as neither threatening, nor repulsive, nor objectionable. As I have already stated, she appeared wondrous. At the same time, having come from the other side of manifestation, wonder did not linger: after my awe receded, what remained in its most immediate appearance was abnormality itself. This prompts me to set my investigation in the traditional phenomenological register, with Merleau-Ponty’s analysis of the abnormal perception. Importantly, for Merleau-Ponty, the ownership of the abnormal perception is reversible; this conviction gives the analyst an opportunity to touch upon a wholly otherwise experience.^{viii}

In his “Phenomenology of Perception”, Merleau-Ponty demonstrated that normally we constitute the world synesthetically, by and through gratuitous acts of self-centered intentionality. In other words, we rely on a unity of senses that, inseparably from each other, form a whole for our encounter with the whole of the external world, an alterity. Taken as a stage for apprehending this world, normality presents abnormality as a break in the unity of the sensorial input, in general, but more importantly, between the abstract and the concrete apprehensions. In introducing the distinction between the abstract and the concrete, Merleau-Ponty alters the Husserlian distinction between the active and the passive way of perceiving. Merleau-Ponty prefers the distinction between the abstract/reflective and the concrete/unreflective. The distinction is grounded in the function of the perceived background. Merleau-Ponty (1962) writes, “The abstract movement carves out within that plenum of the world in which concrete movement took place a zone of reflection and subjectivity; it superimposes upon a physical space a virtual or human space” (Merleau-Ponty, *ibidem*: 111).

In other words, the normal modality possibilizes abstract movements through projection, filling the open space with what does not naturally exist by making it take semblance of existence. The fillings are words, gestures, and motions, all that which signify a human being capable of connecting to the world beyond its actual presence.^{ix} From this perspective, the abnormal body appears to be ill-disposed of projecting meaning on what Merleau-Ponty calls “free” space; it dislocates, mangles

this space. Using his favorite example for ab-normal perception, Mr. Schneider, Merleau-Ponty (1962) elaborates, “Schneider’s abstract movements lost their melodic flow. Placed next to each other, like fragments, end to end, they often run off the rails on the way” (Merleau-Ponty, *ibidem*: 116). In other words, in the abnormal perception, the immediate synthesis is replaced by the interrupted stop-and-go activity predicated on the linear relationship between various senses. The abnormal perception is no longer at ease with the once familiar world; it constantly battles against its own failing memory.

From this account, I can interpret my experience of the Contergan’s body as a rupture in the constitution of her free space. However, if I attend to her body as an origin of this rupture, I will inevitably fall into the mundane mode of appropriating the abnormal other vis-à-vis my normal constitutive self. In that regard, I will be taking the Contergan person as an assimilable aberration, a human freak performing the spectacle of abnormality for my voyeuristic gaze. I will be able of understanding her presence as an exemption from the normal world, its expectations and anticipations. Or, from a similar perspective, I can perceive her body as a disabled sick body, a reminder of human frailty and mortality. However, as I pointed out earlier, the Contergan body’s abnormality did not indicate either a social deviance or a medical dysfunction. To me, she was simply, or as the following analysis intends to demonstrate, not so simply, wondrous: odd and, at the same time, inassimilable.

What does this mean, inassimilable odd? What recourse does this definition have to our mundane experience? In order to answer these questions we need to shift our focus, for Merleau-Ponty’s medicalization of ab-normality clearly requires a modification. Based solely on the Schneider’s case, Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions posit the abnormal as an actual breach of normality (Schneider was a war veteran whose specific perception of the world resulted from a wound in the head). In contrast, the Contergan person’s abnormality is an inborn condition, something that precludes the self or other comparative analysis. Simultaneously, we need to switch from the abnormal perception to the perception of the abnormal, as its only trough my perception of the Contergan woman that I came to know her. Although mutually implicated, abnormality as the perceived and the perceiving abnormality do not coincide already because I cannot possibly access the other’s abnormal perception. It will be counter to the phenomenological explication not only to suggest that I can assume the other’s experience, but also that I can perceive them in the same way as myself. I can typify my experience as to the other, but never access it, not even partially. This requisite becomes prohibitive in the case of the Contergan’s body, whose radically different experiences I cannot even surmise.

The Alien Abnormality: Toward the Body Art

Since Merleau-Ponty’s notion of ab-normality stems from Husserl’s analysis of the aesthetic body, we might benefit from visiting “Ideas II”, where Husserl addresses both the issue of the body and its ways of constituting the world and the other.^x In contrast to Merleau-Ponty, in his analysis, Husserl situates abnormality within the normal experience. Although his notion of abnormality is devoid of the radical breaks in the perception of the world, his formulaic might be beneficial to our purposes. Its thrust is as follows: when an unfamiliar experience arises from its own anomaly, the body overcomes the anomalous by normalizing it, making it an optimality, even if temporarily. When the world challenges the body’s normal way of proceeding with its

Being-in-the-world, the body engages the same mode; it will seek to familiarize foreign experiences by making them optimal for the future encounter with them. As a result, Husserl's analysis shows that the structure of normality presupposes the encounter with the abnormal as an everyday occurrence.

In line with this reasoning, Husserl distinguishes between assimilable and inassimilable experiences. Assimilable abnormality is what can and becomes optimal for our perception. For example, a crutch creates optimality within the body's abnormal motions. In comparison, the experiences impossible to incorporate are called "alien." Such experiences include animal experiences (unattainable by definition), madness (an experience that cannot reflect on itself), childhood experiences (these become lost in the secondary repetitiveness of adulthood), and the experience of the cultural Alien. The animal case aside, only the cultural Alien falls into the category of the genuine alien, the alien that is given in the paradoxical mode of accessibility in the mode of original inaccessibility, according to Husserl. It is the intergenerational historical mode of constitution that makes the cultural Alien completely inaccessible. The Contergan body stands as the alien for two reasons: because, although accessible as a body, it is inaccessible in its very abnormality and because its specific abnormality is a group abnormality. Unlike the sick body getting better, that is granting access to itself through association or empathy, the alien body throws a radical challenge to the intersubjectively normal ways of constitution by constituting itself in and through a history of its own unique species.^{xi}

At this point, I would like to offer a more detailed description of the Contergan body as belonging to a species of its own. Since the normal body is given as a spatially situated body but also a body moving itself and reaching outside of itself, I will focus only on three aspects of the Contergan abnormal motility: bodily spatial orientation, distance motions, and body proxemics. The three aspects are intricately interconnected and, most clearly seem to depend on the function of the upper and lower extremities. The upper extremities travel the body in space, constituting it at large and in relation to other moving objects and persons; the lower extremities, on the other hand, make the body at home in a place of its own, manipulating the most immediate environment and creating a reachable and graspable habitat.

Roughly, we might draw the distinction between the movement that intends to cover distance and the movement that "fixes" what has been attained by these other movements. The first kind deals with the constitution of space, the latter constitutes a place for the body to rest. In rest, the body may lie, or stand, or sit, or cuddle, or lean, or hang, or be in a number of statically justifiable positions. In motion, the body is directed toward something by moving itself or by moving what is about and around it. The normal body's reach is not unlike the one depicted in Leonardo da Vinci's famous drawings of the body and its proportions (see Figure 3). This is the normal body able to create a tree of projections and actions around it. Next to the painting of Leonardo's human body is a photograph of a Contergan person (see Figure 4). The person is visibly deformed. His arms are cut at the shoulders and his legs are shortened. If put in the Leonardo's drawing, his tree of projections will be more of a desert brush, dried up and crooked.

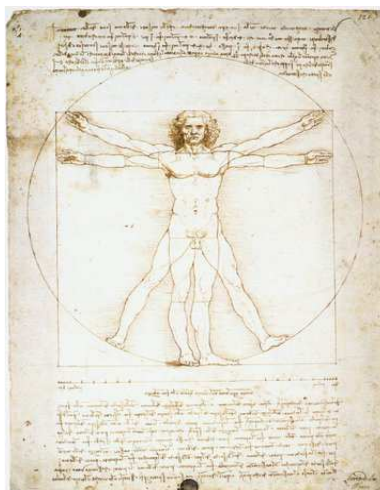


Figure 3. Leonardo da Vinci, 1510



Figure 4. Foto: Aktion Mensch, 1971. A Study in the Human Body Proportions
Abulmueen Al Ahmad

As you can see, the options outlined for the normal body are not available for the abnormal body. More concretely, the Contergan woman that I saw at the exhibit had no arms; only a short right-shoulder stub. Her feet were deformed at the ankles preventing her from long-distance, if any distance, movements. At the same time, her toes had an unusually high level of dexterity that allowed her to use them for reaching, grabbing, and holding, as well as manipulating held objects. Yet, if not for the electrical wheelchair, she would not have been mobile; the chair was not just a needful thing but a place that held her, suspended her body in a sitting position of a normal body. But sitting her body was not, moving in the chair freely as a child would in the adult size arms chair (we should not forget that the Contergan torso is also dwarfed). In addition to the shoulder stub, she also used her toes to move the machine and herself in it. At best, she was slouching upwards, half sitting, half-lying. In this skewed configuration, the range of her outward movements and motions was limited but not devoid of precision and grace.

Despite its radical difference, however, the Contergan body does not exist outside of the relationship with the normal body, whether it is a relative, hired help, or any other “normal” person. The normal and the abnormal co-affect and co-constitute each other as both actual bodies and virtual projections. *How do they share this*

space? In the Husserlian account, what relates embodied subjects is empathy which makes “nature an intersubjective reality and a reality not just for me and my companions of the moment but for us and for everyone who can have dealings with us and can come to a mutual understanding with us about things and about things and about other people” (Husserl, 1940: 91). Sameness in the constitution of space and time is a given; if an anomaly arises for one body, the other body would ignore it, carrying out the task of correcting the anomalous perception. In this set-up, the abnormal body of the other will remain abnormal unless the community, together with its source, accepts the abnormal way of constituting the world as optimal and thus normalizes the formerly abnormal perception.

If, however, the normal and the abnormal meet as radically different species, as a socially accepted fact, their co-affective constitution will not result in sameness but simultaneously unraveling differences. The projection onto the free space will bring about rupturing disjointedness, albeit given in abstraction. Since all the bodies are free to access, that is, constitute the free space, the interaction between the bodies is inevitable. This is what makes living bodies and the surrounding objects to interact in the fashion that allows for the perception of the world as *the life-world*: “between myself and the perceived world, there is a certain density of things in my body that permits the two to ramify in one another, to be accessible in and through the midst one another” (O’Neill, 1989: 19). The other’s body, whether normal or abnormal, serves as a completion of a social system, but also introduces constitutive possibilities as to the world itself. Merleau-Ponty explains: “This disclosure of the living body extends to the whole sensible world, and our gaze, prompted by the experience of our body, will discover in all other ‘objects’ the miracle of expression” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 197).

The body confirms and elaborates the pre-existent world. Due to its freedom to accomplish human history, the body ceases to be a mere fragment of the world, and turns it into a theatre, a remarkable prolongation of its own dealings. Merleau-Ponty writes, “Insofar as I have sensory functions, I am already in communication with others taken as similar psycho-physical subjects” (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 352). The co-affective constitution of the world endows the abnormal body with the freedom that extends beyond a momentary disruption of the normality, turns it into a productive force capable of projecting the kind of meaning that can only be described as artistic.^{xii} “The body”, writes Merleau-Ponty, “is to be compared not to a physical object but rather to a work of art” (ibidem: 150). He further elaborates this analogy in “The Prose of the World” (1973) and “The Visible and the Invisible” (1968), where the question of the body transforms into the question of pictorial art which “assumes and transcends the patterning of the world which begins in perception” (Merleau-Ponty, 1973: 61). A painting is thus not a product and certainly not a replica but precisely an extension. Moreover, what is extended is not the viewer’s monological perception, but rather a dialogue: the painted trees paint the painter.

These connections echo certain Husserlian considerations introduced in “Ideas” I. There, Husserl’s insights link art to abnormal perception. For Husserl, a painting is given as a quasi-being, or “neither as being nor as non-being” (Husserl, 1931: 287). In his “Logic of Sense”, Gilles Deleuze alerts us to this paradox when he talks about the givenness of color: the trees are given to us in action, “they green to us” (1990: 24). Less affected by the poetic and more so by the technical side of artistic givenness, Husserl explores it as a neutrality modification of perception, meaning a partial suspension of normal perception of the world. The reduction is partial because of the body that can never apprehend the painting fully. But, even in its partial function, neutrality modification lifts the veil of the everyday, implicating the body. Husserl calls this kind of perception “fancy consciousness.” In other words, a leap of

imagination is required to achieve the act of suspension. A combination of imagination and straight perception makes fancy consciousness a synthetic consciousness capable of fulfilling several acts simultaneously.

At this point, we are entitled to ask, *How?* Husserl remains ambiguous on this issue. Merleau-Ponty's concept of style might help us with an answer. For him, style is a unity of tactile and visual percepts. Style is intrinsic not only to bodies but also to artistic expressions: "A novel, poem, picture or musical work are individuals, that is, beings in which the expression is indistinguishable from the thing expressed, their meaning, accessible only through direct contact" (Merleau-Ponty, 1962: 52). It is in this sense that our body is a work of art. In the same sense, the work of art has a body. Merleau-Ponty calls a painting a nexus of living meanings that speaks the primordial silence. It is from this silence that a subjectively oriented style arises. Visually, the silence is given as depth. Yet, the depth itself is not reachable by any visual means. It does not belong to the painting. Likewise, it does not belong to the body. But it does belong to the world. We understand art "only if we place, at the center of the spectacle, our collusion with the world" (Merleau-Ponty, *ibidem*: 429). The abnormal body gives away its specific unreplicable style. Its style emerges from the silence of the inassimilable alienness. Let us return to the description of the Contergan body.

She moved as if she was not assembled properly, as if her body parts were disjointed at the points that put the whole frame of her body in question. She was a collage made of odd objects; her arm stub and her twisted legs looked as if they came off from a non-human creature. Her stately head, much larger than her body, had a solemn expression giving her a distinctly nonaligned look. Her body, small and fragile, half a body, appeared to be torn apart by some mechanical mangler of flesh. This strange assimilation of incompatible parts made her movements as bizarre and as majestic as if she was a royalty raised from some underground dream-world, invading one's peace and usurping it, leaving us with nothing but emptiness in the wake of explosive astonishment and awe. In a helplessly powerful way, she took away our so-called reality, making us realize that it does not really belong to us, that reality we are used to call home. The alien of her style awakened a being that could not be incorporated in the dynamic duration of normalizing. This style came into a remarkable constitutive relationship with the style of the normal body. The interaction between the two suspended the normal, giving birth to the surreal. It is time to ask ourselves, *What does it mean for the abnormal body to be given as surreal? What does the surreal body express?* Before we proceed answering these questions, a brief visit of key surrealist concepts is in order.

The Body of Surrealism

The major tenets of surrealism were summed up by the end of its maturation in 1936 by André Breton who delivered the last surrealist Manifesto in Brussels to an audience associated with the movement. There, Breton confirmed the ongoing voyage of the surrealist "thought" as "it came normally to Marx from Hegel, just as it came normally to Hegel through Berkeley and Hume" (Breton, 1936: 3). The allusion to philosophy was not made in jest; it indicated an intellectual tradition linked to the history of humankind. The thought erupted in surrealism through expressive action, instantly gaining into "a living moment, that is, to say a movement undergoing a

constant process of becoming” (Breton, *ibidem*: 4). The key principle of surrealism, as Appollinaire called this idea in action, was to seek after new values in order to confirm or invalidate existing ones. Unlike the precursor of surrealism, Dada, the surrealists did not seek to destruct or shock. The search for the new values should result in bringing about “the state where the distinction between the subjective and the objective loses its necessity and value” (Breton, *ibidem*: 13). Reverberations onto the phenomenological view of the social world raise clear in the first definition of surrealism as “pure psychic automatism” (Breton, *ibidem*: 7). In order to reach this state, one needed to perform a kind of reduction that placed the surrealist outside all aesthetic or moral preoccupations in the collective subconscious of a Freudian kind.

The combination of dream and reality was what defined surrealism primarily. The surrealists were also keen on psychologizing chance; their ways of doing so included the technique of “anticipatory chance-making” when an artist would create by the means of chance, e.g., abrupt disruption of the artistic activity.^{xiii} In opposition to the bankrupt values of the petite bourgeois that feared everything that is wondrous, surrealism offered the rediscovery of the wonder in the abnormal in the sense of the most surreal. At the same time, this very surreality should never leave reality; it should “reside in reality itself and will be neither superior nor exterior to it. According to Breton, “The marvelous is always beautiful, anything marvelous is beautiful; indeed, nothing but the marvelous is beautiful” (Breton, 1936: 9). The search for the beautiful involved initially incompatible objects, states, and events. Taken outside of their respective nexuses of meaningfulness and recombined in new states, meant to explode the solid mundane go of the world, on the one hand, and create an insight into the world before the socialized formulae.

Breton identifies three periods for surrealism. The initial, “intuitive” period is fascinated with psychoanalysis, the Freudian uncanny. It was also the period that sought to undermine any kind of self-moralizing normality. The second period that settled in the early nineteen thirties is characterized by the rational drive to turn dreaming into a myth of the dream, bring the myth from the recesses of the forgotten memory. The third and the final period, the one yet to come, for Breton, and the one that was ceased midway by the war, dealt with the history, the creation of an inter-generational narrative that would secure the transition from one generation to another. The three periods of surrealism find their representations in different kinds of arts: painting, photography, and narrative. Likewise, the abnormal body finds its surreal horizon, figure, and speech in these three interconnected modalities. I would like to begin by establishing the surrealist horizon.

The Surreal Horizon of Max Ernst

In the description of my experience, I mentioned that the Contergan woman was situated next to Max Ernst’s painting “The Teetering Woman”, also known as “Equivocal Woman”.^{xiv} Let us examine the painting closely (see Figure5).



Figure 5. Max Ernst, Teetering Woman, 1923

In the painting we see a woman whose body is suspended above the dark surface. It appears that she is trying to balance herself. However, it is not quite clear in relation to what she might be trying to achieve this balance. Her suspended state is suspect for the normal perception; she is not walking on any surface; nor is she leaning against any surface. She rather floats in a relation to the machine, being somewhat attached to its ambiguous mechanics. The machine also seems to be suspended. The green bars that go down into the darkness of the opening between the two columns are the only connecting structures that nonetheless fail to disambiguate the purpose of the woman and the function of the machine. As the second title for the painting suggests, the woman is equivocal; her only purpose is to maintain equilibrium at some limit. The woman's eyes are hidden behind the pipe that comes out of the machine but does not have its quadra-linear geometry. The pipe looks more organic than the woman herself, who, in her brownish, machine-matching color scheme looks dead, doll-like. The hair on the woman's head suggests that the body was inverted back to the upright posture from the original upside down position. The background of the painting is reminiscent of Chirico's landscapes: industrial columns, indefinite perspective, and an incidental object that gives the arrangement of figures in the painting a unity of focus. Yet, the depth of the appearance is compromised, broken. *How shall we interpret such a painting in relation to our topic?* First, we can say that the painting gives the encounter with the live abnormal body of the Contergan woman a context by way of horizon. Uniquely, the woman blends into the painting as it--the painting—creates a sense of indifferent dehumanizing environment, an environment, where the human body is dulled, robbed of motion and sight, suspended to meet its own dream as it walks without walking to gain a place it cannot by definition reach. The painting is a classical, for the early twentieth century, critique of technology that assists the person by delivering the person to sleep in a place where the sleeper walks erect, as if in the waken state. Her dream is a psychoanalytic dream of the broken memory, a history interrupted by its own deception. The woman blends with the machine, dependent but unaware of her dependence, just like the Contergan person, a product of the technological panacea mixed on the desire for a relief from being. She is also one with the machine in a phenomenological way as it is the machine that co-constitutes her movements. It suspends her by providing the ground upon the ground we share.

The painting's history testifies to its significance. Ernst did it in 1923 breaking a long stride of collage making. After many years of experimenting with collages, Ernst

came to the realization that collage often lacks in the ability of creating a meaningful interface between different originally unrelated components. His new idea required a synthetic medium, a medium that would create a unified impression. But, some of the collages that immediately preceded the painting alert us to the possibility that the main constituents of the image were a female acrobat, a sleepwalker, and a machine for spreading oil on water. Ernst combined the acrobat and the sleepwalker in one image while “freezing” the oil coming out of the machine. The images were cut out from the medical, popular, and technical journals. The precursor to the teetering woman is the mechanical monster, “Celebes” (see Figure 6).^{xv}



Figure 6. Max Ernst, Celebes, 1921

The elephantine meat grinder machine is in fact a reproduction of a photograph of a Sudanese corn holder. It was common for Ernst to re-use ready-mades, adding or deleting certain fragments so that the new reality would spell a different, often sinister, world. There is also the German rhyme that is associated with the painting: “The elephant from Celebes has sticky, yellow bottom grease...” By positioning the female torso in the front ground of the painting, Ernst indicates that she might be the end product of the machine’s workings: creating sublime dreams of beauty and horror. As much as Ernst himself was teetering on the edge of abnormal and absurd, the abnormal body of the Contergan person was teetering on the edge of the surreal; beautiful as only surreal dreams could be beautiful. The encounter between the two-dimensional art and the abnormal body that spawned the experience of the surreal was serendipitous and unavoidable: sheer body art.

Endnotes

- i After the drug was taken off the market, in 1971, a class malpractice suit against Gruenthal AG was brought up in the civil court. At the end of the trial, the 2.5 thousand plaintiffs won over 26 million D-marks in lifetime pensions.
- ii The term used to describe this facility is “mimetism”.

- iii For an in-depth analysis of the monstrous sublime, see Kearney (2003).
- iv In her examination of empathy, Depraz (2001) names four different stages that provide for the empathetic link on the level of the body. Among them, there are “a passive association of my lived body with your lived body and an imaginative self-transposal in your psychic states” (Depraz, *ibidem*: 172).
- v Husserl (1940: 315). Also, see Bernet (1998). In examining Levinas’s claim of self-abnegation vis-a-vis Merleau-Ponty, Bernet agrees with the latter who poses the skin as the limit to the Other’s claim.
- vi The sources mentioned here are Kant [1998]; Kristeva (1982); Lacan (2004).
- vii Here and elsewhere I use the term “other” to designate both the Other as person and the other as otherness more generally. The reason for such merger is implicated in the essay’s argument: the experience of the Contergan person allows for the experience of both dimensions.
- viii Levin emphasizes this very feature as crucial for the understanding of the perceived perception: “the chiasmic dynamics of the flesh suggest that certain *reversibility* take place in the perceptual field” (Levin, 1999: 84). This means, paraphrasing Merleau-Ponty (1962), that one may not know if he perceives or is perceived. At the same time, the perceiver’s body is always hers, although it may not be known as such.
- ix In his argument for the ambiguity of the body Gallagher suggests that “[body] appears as an ability or as an available potential to interact intentionally with the world” (1986: 143). In other words, between the present and the non-present body, there is a space of being connected to other bodies, in flesh. Most importantly, the latter faculty is not a function of the body itself but rather a contextual feature, a call of the world, as it were.
- x Following Behnke (2004), it might be more correct to speak about Husserl’s program being indicative rather than expository of intercorporeality; yet, given the phenomenological ground of Husserl’s indication, it can as well as be taken for a guiding clue into intercorporeality.
- xi For further elaborations on the home/alien structure, see Waldenfels (1996) and Steinbock (1995).
- xii The possibility for the artistic meaning to shine through the eye-to-eye encounter is also consistent with the Merleau-Ponty’s reversibility thesis. According to Dillon, seeing and being seen is an asymmetrical event that develops within visibility (Dillon, 2004: 304). The importance of seeing or being seen “as” is predicated on the function of the background or horizon. In the case of a painting, the horizon becomes a figure, hence the possibility of what is being seen to be being seen “as.”
- xiii In great detail, Dali (1932) describes this process of painting “unnaturally”: sudden seizures in front of the easel, “accidental” misapplications of colors, leaving sub-tasks unfinished, etc.
- xiv The painting is housed in Kunstsammlung Nordrhein-Westfalen, Düsseldorf, Germany.
- xv The painting is housed in the Tate Modern, London, UK.

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