

## ECCE HOMO: EMPATHY AND VISION

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*What is the role of the depicted human body in visual art, and what does it represent?  
How does a viewer experience the representation of a human in an artwork, and how  
can this inform a visual practice?*

What more can be said about the human body? The past few decades have given rise to a great wealth of writing on the body as a subject in art. Theories of the depicted figure, in all its myriad forms and histories, seem integral to our understanding of visual art: the figure, like art, is reflective. We can trace a clear lineage from Maurice Merleau-Ponty's accounts of phenomenology, and Jacques Lacan's description of vision as the link between the self and the other, to a contemporary understanding of what happens when a viewer encounters a picture of a body (Elkins 1999, p. vii). The most common account of this experience identifies the figure as a counterpart to the viewer's body – there is no reading of a pictorial body that does not take the self into account. The body in art is, at its most fundamental state, an icon of empathy.

In serious critical terms, however, this conception alone is not particularly useful. What can the depicted body be said to represent? *How* does the body communicate empathy? My practice aims to answer these questions by means of reduction: in its current state, my work depicts full scale bodies as neutrally as possible. The figures are naked and passive, stripped of their protean connotations in order to present an objectified view of the body which should, ideally, intensify and illustrate this empathetic connection.

Divided into two sections, the aims of this essay are to delineate three conceptions of the depicted body in art, each distinct yet congruent. In the first section, we begin by examining the semiology of the body, or the body-as-icon: an examination of the body as a discrete iconographic entity. Taking Gilles Deleuze's philosophy of the isolated body as a foundational text, I develop an understanding of the body at its most reductive state, divorced from narrative and its historic or politically-minded discourses.

From here, I look at representations of the body as a form of simulacra; the body-as-affect. Here the body is examined as an object of perception, dismantling the psychoanalytical processes involved when the viewer is confronted with a depiction of a body. There is a clear analogue formed between an observer and a body, which aligns neatly with the ontological concept of alterity, or “otherness” – this chapter examines how empathy acts as a bridge between the self and the other. I also use this section to discuss the role of the figure in my work, and how I contextualise it on objective terms.

In the second section, I outline an understanding of the body as a dual symbol of physicality and humanity: the body-as-organism. Through an historical account of the icon and humanism, the intent here is to deconstruct this divide and discuss how it may be reconciled through depiction. This preempts a lucid discussion of how this is addressed in my work through formal techniques of composure and their metaphoric significance.

## One: Semiology & Simulacra

The human body as an icon in visual art has a rich conceptual history. It is a widespread trend that texts on this subject – at least those published in the last fifty years – tend to introduce their topic by defining its universal presence in the history of art.<sup>1</sup> This is attributed to empathy in very clear terms – it seems a given that we have deep and primal emotional attachment to the human figure. This is a broad and

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<sup>1</sup> Consider: “Every picture is a picture of the body. Every work of visual art is a representation of the body.” (Elkins 1999, p. 1), or: “...it seems improbable that there is any art that does not involve the body, since making art and relating to it are rooted in the material world of encounter.” (O'Reilly 2009, p. 7)

fairly uncontentious assertion, certainly, but it sets a solid foundation for further discussion. This is typically taken as a point of departure into any number of aesthetic and political investigations – a study on the Greek *kouros*, the achievements of feminist performance of the 70s, the semiotic connotations of skin – while the hazy, cosmic discussion of the universality of the body is dropped for a more granular mode of discourse.

My interests, then, are to separate the body from these political connotations and to establish an understanding of the figure as a primal symbol of humanity: the body as a discrete iconography; the ur-body.<sup>2</sup> We can conceive of the body as an index – a radically versatile symbol – inevitably open to any number of inferences, which can be ascribed to its ubiquity. A cognizant viewer is so innately familiar with the bare human form that it recognises (and deciphers) any addition or intervention to this form: through posture, demeanour, deformity, et cetera. This all serves to establish an empathetic baseline which is activated in an encounter of the figure. The iconographic body is versatile, universal, and primal, and in this way we can understand its place in visual art as a closed loop: its versatility defines its universality, its universality testifies to its primacy, and its primacy informs its versatility.

As a loose concept, this taxonomy of the body-as-icon is fine, but this is still firmly rooted in the vague, cosmic vernacular I typified earlier. So, let's get concrete: in defining the figure on iconographic terms, what we are really describing is an ideation of the human body as an object, rather than a subject. Though simpler, this is a discomfiting binary to work within. Objectification of the body into an abstract symbol – that is, the dissipation of the individual in place of an idealised body – has a clear and imperious history, and it's easy to conflate this conception with the patriarchal gaze that dominated visual art until the last century. This blurred line between the object and the abject takes a special prominence in studies of the nude.

Kenneth Clark, in the opening to his seminal text *The Nude: a Study in Ideal Form*, begins by making a clear and notorious distinction between the naked figure and the nude. The naked figure in art is defined as a cold imitation, or “direct transcription” of the body (Clark 1953, p. 5). Nakedness, he asserts, implies a kind of personal shame, describing the naked body as a “shapeless, pitiful model” (ibid.). Conversely, the nude is a more redemptive and perfected form – the intent in creating a nude is “not to reproduce the naked body, but to imitate [a] view of what the naked body should be” (ibid. p. 7). At first glance this aligns fairly well with my prior definition of what an iconographic body communicates – he goes on to state that “the human body, as a nucleus, is rich in associations, and when it is turned into art these associations are not entirely lost.” (ibid. p8) This is a pretty totalising viewpoint, however, and some problems arise when we look at this process of idealisation in gendered terms. Clark's depersonalisation of the model may seem rich and edifying when applied to the male, who we identify as a triumphant, Apollonian idol. Through this same lens, however, the female is marginalised, made into a Venusian expression of beauty and fertility. Inherent to this female nude is a proprietary sense of utility, of warranted oppression.<sup>3</sup>

In his essay collection *Ways of Seeing*, John Berger makes a critique of this (essentially European) conception of the nude, highlighting the one-sidedness of this now-antiquated rationale:

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2 It bears mentioning that I recognise the futility in this task. By no means should these cultural associations be considered somehow ancillary or extrinsic to the semiology of the human body, as they cannot be truly separated from its contemporary understanding – what I am trying to outline is a grounded and universal metric, in which further discussion of the body-as-icon can be framed.

3 This stark objectification runs so deep that it is literally prehistoric. Consider the perverse expression of fertility in the fattened breasts and engorged vulva of the *Venus of Hohle Fels* [fig. 1], believed to be the earliest known depiction of a human. As a point of interest, the ivory carving dates to around 40,000 BCE, the assumed earliest presence of *homo sapiens*: the birth of figuration coincides with the birth of humanity.

“The nude in European oil painting is usually presented as an admirable expression of the European humanist spirit. The spirit was inseparable from individualism. Yet the tradition contained a contradiction which it could not itself resolve. ... On the one hand the individualism of the artist, the thinker, the patron, the owner: on the other hand, the person who is the object of their activities – the woman – treated as a thing or an abstraction.” (Berger 1972, p. 62)

His polemical point is that through this gaze there is a fundamental imbalance between the artist and subject, and though the artist may feel a great deal of reverence for the sublime body, it is a possessive reverence. Empathy requires equivalence in order to operate. Through this reading we begin to recognise the danger in idealising the figure, yet there is an important distinction to be made between this perfected form and our earlier notion of the body-as-icon: ours is a contemporary understanding that takes account of this gendered gaze. The aim is not to create an ideal but an essence; not to represent a perfected human, but humanity as an abstracted whole, which is apolitical and ahistorical. We are moving closer to a contemporary semiotics of the body.

Despite their moral differences, Clark and Berger share the same premodern conception of the pictorial body. For a more subversive discourse, the body should be addressed outside of these mythic ideals – if we are considering the body as a truly singular iconography, it should not be beholden to these classical traditions of narrative figuration. Gilles Deleuze, in *Francis Bacon: the Logic of Sensation*, applies a methodical and pointed anti-figurative rhetoric to the paintings of Francis Bacon. Bacon's work is especially pertinent to our discussion, typified by its depictions of solitary bodies devoid of identity – this isolation of the body has deeper implications than matters of composition, though. Deleuze's philosophy is essentially anti-representational. He begins his text by identifying a duality between the figurative and the “figural”. Figurative work, associated with symbolism<sup>4</sup> and narrative, tends to nullify the formal vibrancy or “violence” of the paint. This is seen as a heresy: “painting has neither a model to represent nor story to narrate” (Deleuze 1981, p. 6). Representation places the figure in servitude to illustrated meaning; the figure thus has “two possible ways of escaping the figurative: toward pure form, through abstraction; or toward the purely figural, to extraction or isolation” (ibid.). Figural painting liberates the figure from the strictures of narrative; Deleuze suggests isolation of the body as a strategy towards this figural essence. By Deleuze's account, Bacon's figures exemplify this isolation through their encasement – a rounded prism or contour which defines a boundary between the figure and the painting's outer field (ibid. p. 13). The contour is a membrane, guarding its figure against external impositions of narrative and identity, permitting its existence as an unreadable, self-contained icon.

It is difficult to apply this objectification-through-isolation retroactively. Deleuze's philosophy, like Bacon's paintings, are fundamentally postmodern. On phenomenological terms, though, it is possible to see his theory borne out in works that carry an intense solitude: take, as an example, Austrian sculptor Anton Hanak's bronze figure *Der Letzte Mensch*, or “The Last Man” [fig. 2]. The cruciform body inhabits its space with a sense of elegy and humanity which surpasses its figurative form – the sheer materiality and physical presence of the body takes precedence over the work's representational scope. Whatever backstory or identity might be present here is eclipsed by the sculpture's objectifying humanity. Although he could never have conceived of the work in this way, Hanak's sculpture is resonant with Bacon's figural spirit.

We can find contemporary examples of this isolation in the work of artists like Euan Uglow or

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<sup>4</sup> We're heading into complex territory here so it might be worth clarifying a point: in defining the body as an icon, I am not talking about the same thing as in Deleuze's use of “symbol”. When I refer to an icon, I refer to a singular image that has a set of inherent and abstracted connotations, concerned more with universal concepts than a specific meaning or analysis; Deleuze discusses the symbol as a coded structure or concept which is defined by its narrative utility.

Michaël Borremans. An especially strong example is Marlene Dumas, whose wavering figures exist in a total pictorial void – in *Pissing Woman* [fig. 6] the figure sits against the white field of the paper. Her body in its transience is barely recognisable by its components – individually these gestural streaks contain almost no visual signification – yet they resolve themselves into a cohesive form. Contrast Dumas' figure with Rembrandt's treatment of the same subject [fig. 7]. In Rembrandt we see a specific woman urinating against a specific tree, and its narrative context constructs itself neatly before our eyes. In Dumas, the figure is completely inspecific – not representing urination, but embodying it. The figure in its Baconian isolation seems barely like a person's body at all, of course, but the fact that this is essentially *bodily* seems universally undeniable. In a broad sense, Dumas has created the essence of a urinating figure; the essence of catharsis.

Although Deleuze does not explicitly address his works in iconographic terms, it is easy to read Bacon's painted bodies as sites of intense semiotic activity. Look at *Portrait of George Dyer Staring at a Blind Cord* (1966) [fig. 3]: the figure is seized in some terrible embryonic flux; painted in dark fleshtones, roiling outward, both physical and liminal; all of this is part of a graphic expression of suffrage that seems fundamental to every one of Bacon's paintings. Deleuze characterises this in relation to the viewer – the pain of Bacon's figures is meant to include the audience in its violence. This is done through the depiction of the bodies as resolute, utterly physical entities, as “meat”, equal to the body of its viewer. It is made clear that Bacon pities this meat, as we are expected to.<sup>5</sup> The audience, therefore, is not external to this tension – Bacon wants to “paint the scream, more than the horror” (Deleuze 1981, p. 34) – the pain is felt, rather than observed. Through this pity we can see Bacon's bodies, in tandem with Deleuze's theory of figuration, as foundationally dependent on empathy.

We can envision the body-as-icon as a kind of *tabula rasa*. Its neutrality and isolation lend it a certain emotive potency – it becomes less an individual identity and more a homogenous imago of humanity. The process of objectification is also a process of distillation, which deconstructs the human psyche into its fundamental components, heightening the icon's communicative spirit and opening it to whichever inferences and loadings its audience would like to create. It is worth noting that this emotive distillation via reduction is in no way limited to figural works: consider the intense emotional charge which projects from the roiling colour fields of Rothko's later works – in a 1957 interview, he stated “I'm interested only in expressing basic human emotions ... tragedy, ecstasy, doom and so on – and the fact that people break down and cry when confronted with my pictures shows that I *communicate* those basic human emotions” (Rodman 1957, p. 93-94). Although his works forsake a human presence they nevertheless contain an urgent, almost transcendent human empathy.

What I have begun to define is an idea of the figure as a discrete and singular entity: one which functions through pictorial isolation, as I've established, but which also communicates beyond this isolation – not into the void of the picture, but relationally outwards to the viewer. As an analogue to the body of its viewer, it is reflective; it transfigures itself from an “other”, resolving this alterity by inviting an imposition of its audience's “self”. The semiotic body operates best as a simulacra: in this way we can consider the role of empathy simply as a blurring of the boundary between the other and the self. This is the function of the body-as-affect.

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5 “Pity the meat! Meat is undoubtedly the chief object of Bacon's pity, his only object of pity ... Bacon does not say, “Pity the beasts,” but rather that every man who suffers is a piece of meat. Meat is the common zone of man and the beast, their zone of indiscernibility; it is a “fact,” a state where the painter identifies with the objects of his horror and compassion.” (Deleuze 1981, p. 21)

In discussing the body-as-affect, I am referring to the body as an object of perception. In basic terms this is an ideation of the depicted body as a reflection of its audience; as a simulacra. By way of an analogy, take this quote from Jorge Luis Borges' short story *On Exactitude in Science*:

“... In that Empire, the Art of Cartography attained such Perfection that the map of a single Province occupied the entirety of a City, and the map of the Empire, the entirety of a Province. In time, those Unconscionable Maps no longer satisfied, and the Cartographers Guilds struck a Map of the Empire whose size was that of the Empire, and which coincided point for point with it.” (Borges 1998, p. 181)

As an ideal, the body-as-affect is a representation of the body drawn in perfect geometric scale to the body of its viewer, coinciding point-for-point as in Borges' imagined map. It exists as an invitation of equivalence: for the viewer to impose a parallel sense of self onto the pictured body. In the extreme, we could conceive of this imposition as reflexive, wherein our encounter of a represented body reconfigures our understanding of our own bodies – this is very much in line with the philosophy of Jean Baudrillard, who more-or-less owns the contemporary conception of simulacra. Baudrillard emphasised the transformative nature of simulacra to a radical extent, using the term to refer to an image that has eclipsed and replaced the thing it is meant to represent (Emerling 2005, p. 89). We can identify a similar process occurring with the body-as-affect in that it bridges the gap between the self (the viewer) and the other (the image). In this sense the body-as-affect could be defined as an especially pure expression of empathy.

Before we continue, I should solidify my definitions of the “self” and the “other”. I'm borrowing the concept of alterity, or “otherness”, established by Emmanuel Levinas – his conception of the other is characterised as the “not-me, that which is beyond or exterior to my self-understanding and experience of the world” (ibid. p. 197). In pictorial terms, the other is the isolated figure, extending to and reshaping the conditional passivity of the viewer's self. This notion of alterity as a transformative product of the reflective body also has deep ties to psychoanalytic theory. Take Jacques Lacan's concept of the “mirror stage”, a foundational theory in Lacan's oeuvre. Originally conceived of in terms of developmental psychology, the mirror stage refers to the child's first identification of itself in the mirror; this is said to mark its first true exposure to an external order between the self and the other, between representation and reality (the Imaginary and the Real, as Lacan defines them). Before the advent of the mirror stage, it views itself and the world as totalities; the child as a singular self, and the world around it as an encompassing other. The boundary between the self and the other is immutable and absolute. Upon the child's recognition of its own visage, the boundary is blurred, and the child is made to see its own body as a self and an other concurrently.<sup>6</sup>

On phenomenological terms we can find a residue of this system in the viewer's encounter of the body-as-affect. The mirror stage is a huge and complex developmental process, and in seeing a body-simulacrum we are experiencing a synecdochic fragment of this process. To whatever minute degree, we autonomously project our perception of self onto any depiction of the body, and in turn we allow that depiction's alterity to shape our understanding of self. Although it feels uncomfortable to speak with such a stark teleological conviction, this process of reflection appears to be the ultimate directive of the representational body; this is the method by which the figure conveys empathy.

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<sup>6</sup> As a brief excursus: Lacan defines his conception of the body – an entity built of multitudes – in a way which entangles itself neatly with my earlier definition of the protean body-as-icon. Naming the body as a *gestalt*, he identifies it as “replete with the correspondences that unite the *I* with the statue onto which man projects himself, the phantoms that dominate him, and the automaton with which the world of his own making tends to achieve fruition in an ambiguous relation.” (Lacan 1977, pp. 2-3) Lacan's *gestalt* accounts for how our body-as-icon relates the self to the other.

I consider every point raised here to be an important facet of my own practice – through my work I aim to present the human body with these considerations of semiology and simulacra in mind. In *Jim (Lateral Study)* [fig. 5] we see a pale figure standing in a void. The figure is drawn in a 1:1 ratio to the body of its subject. As with Lacan's mirror and Borges' map, this is meant to represent an absolute simulacra; the equivalence of the work's object to the body of the viewer is meant to establish empathy through familiarity alone – if the drawn body was any smaller or larger it would become proportionally more alien to the viewer, and therefore less essential. The transmission of empathy is conditional on the analogy formed between the work and the viewer.

As with Bacon's figures the body is completely isolated – the void that surrounds it removes all suggestion of environment or narrative, and in this sense the body is situated outside of space entirely. This clear lack of grounding is meant to establish its iconographic context, as any sense of Euclidean space would bring this figural work a step closer to figuration. The male form is naked, but could hardly be said to represent Clark's Apollonian envisioning of the nude: he is calm, unpoised, seemingly absent of any specific emotion, desire or thought. This is the body at its most neutral – an immutable form, open to empathy, not representing any individual body but rather *all* bodies. In the same way that Brancusi, in *Torso of a Young Man I* [fig. 4] aims to represent the most essential image of a body through abstraction, I intend to do this through figural drawing.<sup>7</sup>

The depiction of the body in profile was another important choice in signifying the body-as-icon. This was meant to explain a total passivity of the figure to the viewer's presence: the work does not confront the audience directly, which would negate its figural isolation. Turned away, ignorant of the viewer's gaze, the passive body implies objectivity – drawn wholly within the field of the paper, the indifference of the figure places it beyond the realm of external affects.<sup>8</sup> Due to its isolation, empathy is not transferred through a direct interface with the figure. Although this may seem counterintuitive, what I'm trying to achieve is a figure-viewer configuration that is more a transfer of emotion than a dialogue: any empathic connection should be necessarily bodily.

## Two: Human Physicality/Physical Humanity

So far I have outlined two ways of looking at the depicted human body through its role as a relational symbol, wherein the body's function is dependent on its observation. This is a relatively recent ideology: the 20<sup>th</sup> century has seen an upheaval of art's relationship with the human form, as outlined by Sally O'Reilly in *The Body in Contemporary Art*. She discusses the body's move from “passivity to active agency,” so that it is “no longer a static, optical phenomenon, but the embodiment of dynamic human relations and even a medium of change and influence within the artwork itself” (O'Reilly 2009, p. 17). From this basically postmodern point I would like to diverge toward developing an historic understanding of the body's *innate* qualities, of what can be said of a body defined by its physical limitations.

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7 Consider it this way: in the account of his travels in Italy in 1786, Goethe wrote of his search for the “Urpflanze,” his name for a plant that would be the archetype of all plants. In his mind, the Urpflanze was an ideal plant, embodying the essence of “plant-ness” - the Platonic Ideal of botany. (Gray 2010, p. 71) By a similar token, in drawing individual depictions of humans I am trying to represent the totality of “human-ness.”

8 Of course this is a completely self-defeating aspiration. The picture is rife with the hand of the artist and could in no sense be referred to as an “objective” depiction – I mention it here more as an ideal. Indeed, this is paradox that runs throughout this entire essay – the biggest concession in any “universal” theory of iconography is that a semiotic object requires a subjective viewer, and is completely nullified without one.

In his text *Pictures of the Body: Pain and Metamorphosis*, art critic James Elkins makes a clear distinction between the abstract study of the body in Deleuze's Bacon text, and a study of the body as physiologically-limited object: "Deleuze's theories are suggestive, but as acts of imagination they cannot approach the complexity and metaphorical richness that exist in the body's actual membranes, or the varieties of pressure and turbulence in Bacon's paintings. For thinking about ways that a boundary can divide two regions, I would rather read *Morris' Human Anatomy* than Deleuze" (Elkins 1999, p. 39). His point is that for all the abstruse deconstruction of the body we might make, it will never approach the mystifying intricacy of the human organism. We can conceive of the body as a symbol of physicality, foremost, but also as a symbol of humanism; there is a clear history of the human form as a representation of a redemptive human spirit. These two aspects reverberate throughout the figure – in works concerned with the body these aspects are inevitably addressed, though one typically manifests at the expense of the other. This presents us with a new conception of the body as a dual symbol, a hypostatic union, defined by a schismatic divide between its physicality and humanity: the body-as-organism.

Earlier in the text I described my envisioning of the depicted body as a "primal symbol of humanity," an "ur-body." This could use some expansion – language like this is so abstract and uncontentious that it precludes any deeper rationalising. I'm working within an especially grand discourse, and making a lot of assumptions. For instance: is humanism necessarily a strong ideal around which to base a practice? As a counterpoint, see José Ortega y Gasset's essay *The Dehumanization of Art*. Written in 1925 – around the advent of nonrepresentational art – Ortega sets himself against the previously-ingrained notion that humanism was essential to art. He defined figurative art's interest in "human destinies" as illusory, and uses this to establish a complex apologia in defence of abstraction, taking great pains to distinguish the patrons of the blooming modernist movement from the "bristling masses." Of humanity in art, Ortega writes "Not only is grieving and rejoicing at such human destinies as a work of art presents or narrates a very different thing from true artistic pleasure, but preoccupation with the human content of the work is in principle incompatible with aesthetic enjoyment proper." (Ortega y Gasset 1968, pp. 9-10)

We can look at this assertion as a precursor to Deleuze's theory of the figural, insofar as the two men were opposed to art's function as an expression of human narrative. Ortega, however, seems less concerned with aesthetics than with the moral utility of art – his prose advocates a particularly toxic elitism in its segregation of "human art" from the higher-order "artistic art." Although he makes an effort to consider the potential fallibility in such a sweeping assessment, I am troubled by the extent to which Ortega's politics colour his critique (Ortega y Gasset 1968, p. 53). If we are to discuss art and the body on universal terms, it is counterproductive to work in a dichotomy of high- and low-art. It might be worth redefining humanism, then – like Deleuze and Ortega, I have no interest in the figure as a means of communicating "human destinies," and I am not concerned with humanism on moralistic terms. The "human content of the work," by my definition, denotes a sublime beauty which is intrinsic to the body on an elemental level, in terms of both its spirit and its physicality.<sup>9</sup>

To discuss the physical side of the body I will return for a moment to the icon. Early iconic art concerns

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<sup>9</sup> The concept of the sublime was in many ways antithetical to the seeds of postmodernity that Ortega was planting. As an aside: in the introduction to the essay collection *Sticky Sublime*, Bill Beckley writes fluently of the sublime as it relates to humanity and emotion - "The sublime depends on what it means to be human, because it is the response *of* a human – physically, emotionally and intellectually – to the expansiveness of literature, art or nature, that makes possible the "hyposous," or "state of transport," that is the spark of sublimity." (Beckley 2001, p. 4)



itself specifically with the divide between an identification of the body as a physical entity and as a symbol of divinity. Christianity's conflation of the two through iconography was considered by many as blasphemy: to circumscribe God through physical representation was to deny his infinite authority.<sup>10</sup> In the early 9<sup>th</sup> century, Byzantine Patriarch Nicephorus I wrote his three-volume *Antirrhethics*, a series of diatribes against the growing trend of iconoclasm. In *Antirrhetic II*, he makes a case for the representation of divinity by redefining the act of circumscription:

“Spatially speaking, all bodies are circumscribed, since circumscription is a quality of everything that is contained within spatial limits. As for time, everything which, having no prior existence, starts to exist in time is circumscribable. This is the case with angels and with those spiritual faculties that are said to be circumscribed.” (Feher, Naddaff & Tazi (eds.) 1990, p. 157)

In this case, the spatial limitation of the mortal body is what unifies it with divinity, as the act of circumscription is equated to an act of inscription – it imbues the body with meaning, rather than limiting it (ibid. p. 158). Circumscription suggests a physiological complexity that links a man's body with the Holy Spirit – the parity of the two does not confine God but elevates man. If we can comfortably attribute a sense of sublime beauty to the human body we overturn iconoclasm; the reverent attitudes toward the figure which permeate this essay can therefore be read as iconophilia.

I mean to describe a method by which the physicality of the body describes its humanity. A contemporary representation of the body should aspire to the same goals. The depicted body edifies the human organism by its expression of an immutable order – in a brief essay on Nicephorus' text, Marie-José Baudinet draws an analogue from this edification of man through depiction to God's creation of Christ: “the supreme administrator, the great economist, is God the Father *who gave His essence in order that it be distributed in the visible world through his own image* – the natural image of His Son.” (ibid. p. 149) As God constructs Christ through His own essence, man draws the body to convey the essence of humanity. The circumscribed body is made special by virtue of its physical limitations, and empathy is drawn from this new cogency through which we view our own bodies.<sup>11</sup>

In the body-as-organism we see a clear divide between humanism and physicality, which parallels a fairly universal binary between materiality v. immateriality, man v. nature, divinity v. secularity, ad inf. Though any work of art depicting the body will draw from one at the expense of the other (i.e. Hanak's *Der Letzte Mensch* [fig. 2] is a resolutely physical body, whereas Brancusi's *Torso* [fig. 4] is pared back to form a minimal vestige of divine humanism) it is a rare work that addresses this dualism in equal measures. I identify this rare equality in Hans Holbein the Younger's altarpiece *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*. This work depicts Christ – a figure of absolute and infinite divinity – in terms of utter physical abjection. The grotesque sorrow of his death is heightened by his corporeal presence: grey-fingered and putrefied, the emaciated body is beginning to sallow, its muscles sinking inwards and its skin pulled taut in defiance of Christ's usual radiant splendour. This is not a painting of the dead Christ in the tomb; this is *the body* of the dead Christ in the tomb. The fundamental antinomy of Christ's physicality was apparently so captivating that it brought the author Dostoevsky to the verge of epileptic seizure.

10 This idea is echoed in Deleuze's text on Bacon, although he sees the abolition of icons as a process of abstraction, wherein “the Figures are relieved of their representative role, and enter directly into relation with an order of celestial sensations ... a properly pictorial atheism, where one could adhere literally to the idea that God must not be represented.” (Deleuze 1981, p. 11)

11 This notion is not exclusive to the church: the mathematicians of Ancient Greece were obsessed with the perfection of the human body through geometric definition of its properties and boundaries. Indeed, this is a universal notion that informs our understanding of the depicted body today. Kenneth Clark relates this in the closing paragraph of *The Nude*: “The Greeks perfected the nude in order that man might feel like a god, and in a sense this is still its function, for although we no longer suppose that God is like a beautiful man, we still feel close to divinity in those flashes of self-identification when, through our own bodies, we seem to be aware of a universal order.” (Clark 1972, p. 370)

I make explicit compositional reference to Holbein's painting in my 2010 drawing *Corpus* [fig. 8]. Here, I was less concerned with forging empathy through simulacra – the figure is drawn as a monument, five metres across. In this work my main concern is with a representation of the body as an icon of biological complexity. I wanted to portray an intricate, corporeal humanity. As a cellular entity, we can think of the body as an infinitely divisible structure. In this work, the figure is composed of a vast network of interstitial lines intended to reflect that divisibility. I have come to refer to this process as “cellular drawing”: the figure is constructed from a dense assembly of small, faintly-ruled lines – each curve and concavity is composed of a vertex of rigid lines [figs. 9-10]. I circumscribe the body through these gradually defined, oscillating lines, devoid of gestural expression. Through this system of drawing I aim to represent the body as a macrocosm.

An essential component of my practice is the ubiquitous consideration of sensitivity. The monolithic scale and technical intricacy of the drawing reflects the macrocosmic nature of the body: I wanted the viewer to engage with on an intimate, exploratory level. This was achieved through the drawing's faint presence – standing away from it, a viewer can get a basic understanding of its pale form, but in examining its individual marks they lose the vision of its total fidelity. It is impossible to perceive, with acuity, the drawing as a whole. This is meant as a relational tool: I am trying to engineer a radically intimate mode of engagement, using this narrow proximity between the work and its audience to allow for a direct communication of bodily empathy.

In more recent works, I have tried to intensify this intimacy to a point where the figure has practically dissipated; my practice is becoming more and more an exercise in obliteration. Even in a well-lit space, the paper containing my drawings appear blank from a distance beyond around two feet. I intend to take this “engineered intimacy” as far as I can in order to force the viewer into confinement with the work, potentially constructing a constraining space reminiscent of Bruce Nauman's *Performance Corridor* (1968). I consider this spatial comprehension to be an important factor in distinguishing my works from the bluntly figurative art that Deleuze and Ortega seemed so opposed to.

Returning to Borges for an analogy, I can explain the interests of my practice through his short story *The Circular Ruins*, in which a wizard, in his dreams, gradually constructs the body of a human, beginning with the heart: “He dreamt that it was warm, secret, about the size of a clenched fist, and of a garnet colour within the penumbra of a human body as yet without face or sex; during fourteen lucid nights he dreamt of it with meticulous love.” (Borges 1993, pp. 41-42) Like the dreamer in Borges' story, my interests are in creating an individual body in order to communicate my reverence for its physical form. It can be stated as simply as that. I mean to dream an entire man.

It seems clear enough that the human figure is, by far, the most convoluted and enduring icon in the history of representation, and the historical account of its depiction is by all means a troubled one. To portray the body as the sum of its meanings is perhaps the most ambitious and doomed ideal to which an artist can aspire. It is difficult to come away with any one explanation of what the body represents.

If anything can be broadly stated of the body in art it is that it is fundamentally an object of sight – any encounter with the depicted body relies on a visual line of communication. As a singular figure or as an iconographic metaphor for the whole of humanity, the body carries a psychic weight that we cannot help but identify an aspect of ourselves within. At its core, the body is a vessel of empathy, and through its depiction we begin to recognise the infinite scope of our own bodily complexity.

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Fig. 1: *Venus of Hohle Fels*, c. 35,000-40,000 BC

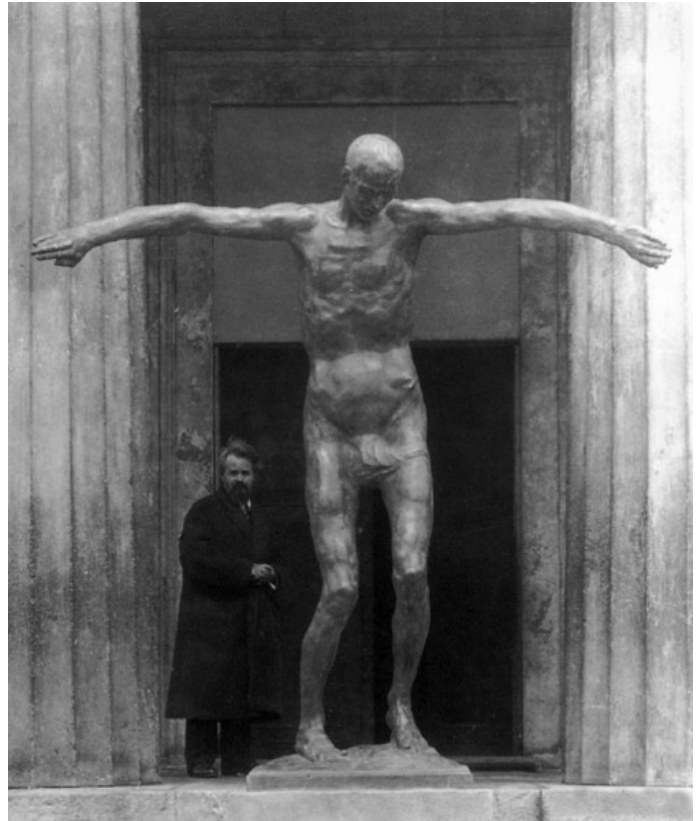


Fig. 2: Anton Hanak, *Der Letzte Mensch*, 1917-24 (pictured with the artist)



Fig. 3: Francis Bacon, *Portrait of George Dyer Staring at a Blind Cord*, 1966



Fig. 4: Constantin Brancusi, *Torso of a Young Man I*, 1917





Fig. 5: Michael McMaster, *Jim (Lateral Study)*, 2011-12



Fig. 6: Marlene Dumas, *Pissing Woman*, 1997



Fig. 7: Rembrandt van Rijn, *Woman urinating under a tree*, 1631



Fig. 7: Hans Holbein the Younger, *The Body of the Dead Christ in the Tomb*, 1520-22



Fig. 8: Michael McMaster, *Corpus*, 2010



Figs. 9-10: Michael McMaster, *Corpus*, 2010 (detail)