

Why I Don't Talk About 'The Body': A Polemic

How we speak matters, because the language we use shapes how we understand the world. Language is also viral—how we talk transfers to others in the communities we participate in, and we take up the speech patterns of others, often without realizing it.¹ Over the last several years, I have been focused on a particular turn of phrase widely used in the English-speaking art world: “the body.” I’m not referring to any possible use of the combination of these two words. I’m focused on the way this term gets used to mean something akin to “bodies in general.” As in “the creation of objects and scenes that are intimately connected to *the body*.”² Or, “known for his drawings, paintings, and sculptures that explore identity, the body, and masculinity.”³ These examples and countless others substitute a multiplicity of possible bodies with this singularized concept-form: “the body.”

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- 1 The international English-speaking art world shares linguistic norms and standards, as described by Alix Rule and David Levine in their 2012 essay *International Art English*, published by *Triple Canopy*. Sociolinguists refer to the ways people in communities establish linguistic group norms and pursue socially stratified speech patterns as Communication Accommodation Theory.
 - 2 “Julia Phillips’ *Failure Detection, April 15 – September 3, 2018*,” Exhibition text, MoMA PS1, accessed on moma.org. Italics mine. This short text has several more examples in it, which strikes me as particularly puzzling because Phillips’ work seems, at least to me, to be examining very specific, though absent, bodies, often through physical impressions left in the surfaces of her works.
 - 3 “Pérez Art Museum Miami Announces Nada Acquisition Gift,” Press Release, December 6, 2019, *Art Forum*, accessed on artforum.com. Italics mine.

Speaking about “the body” is a way of referencing bodies that do not belong to anyone in particular, but that have ceased to be multiple. This usage is pervasive. I easily found dozens of examples of it in print from the last couple of years in texts from every major art museum and art magazine in the English-speaking world. And I regularly hear it used by artists, critics, curators, and students at studio visits, panels, conferences, and in casual conversations about art. Despite its ubiquity, I have never heard its use questioned. I decided it is time to figure out what is motivating my rejection of this term.

It’s certainly not that I think we shouldn’t be focused on bodies. I think and talk about bodies all the time, not to mention look at them, imagine them, and respond to them in countless ways in my life and work. I think about my body and the bodies of other people—people who are similar to me and those who are different. I think that in this political moment of accelerating environmental destruction, labor precarity, and technological transformation, we need to be concerned with bodies perhaps more than ever. But for the last six years I have been engaged in these investigations without the term “the body.” My rejection of it was gradual, first a feeling, then a decision that I have stuck with in text and in person—in essays, press releases, and interviews about my work and in studio visits and critiques in educational contexts.

The first and what seems to me the most obvious objection to this term is that it generalizes across bodily difference. Insofar as it does not refer to a plurality, it creates one body as a stand-in for all of us. Depending on the specifics of where this term is used, this singular body is usually one that walks, is of a standard vertical adult height, and that sees and hears and senses in “normal” ways. This body is not in a wheelchair, not deaf, not blind, not autistic, not ill, not high, not any of the other endless ways that our bodies and senses deviate from a normalizing standard. In other words, “the body of the viewer”

is almost always a non-disabled and typical body, as close as possible to a normative ideal body, in other words, a body that is arguably a non-existent fantasy.⁴ The term “the body” disregards the full range of bodily differences in favor of prioritizing typicality, standardization, and predictability. In so doing, it aspires toward an inaccessible world, designed for the typical and disregarding the different.

There are, of course, many scenarios where we need to speak about bodies without specifying exactly how each particular body moves and perceives. It would be impossible to talk about bodies at all if this kind of specificity was mandatory in every instance. But talking about “bodies” instead of “the body” is more than a semantic difference. A body that we haven’t specified is not the same as a body in general. *Bodies*, plural, means something distinct from “the body,” even when we don’t describe in detail the differences between the singular bodies that make up the plurality of “bodies.” An implied multiplicity is very different than the substitution of a monolith. In many cases “the body” could be replaced with specific qualifiers as to what body or bodies we are talking about: “my body,” “your body,” “his/her/their body,” even “our bodies.” Though these designations might not be fully described, they give the bodies in question context, place, and position—all prerequisites to an adequately diverse theory of human beings. Wherever there are bodies, there is the possibility, even the guarantee, that there is difference. Our use of language should reflect this. This critique of the way “the body” generalizes could also be applied to the two other major categories of bodily difference: race and gender. The bodies of “the body” are not complicated by difference—they are raceless, genderless, and sexless. Not only does

4 “Instead of a traditional stage, artist nibia pastrana santiago’s “choreographic events” unfold in charged spaces, often outdoors, and implicate both the gaze and the body of the viewer.” Quoted from “nibia pastrana santiago: objetos indispuestos, inauguraciones suspendidas o finales inevitables para un casi-baile, June 6, 7, 8, 2019,” Exhibition text in conjunction with the 2019 Whitney Biennial, accessed on whitney.org.

this often end up resulting in an implicit default to the norm of the white cisgender male body, it also disavows the possibility that these kinds of distinctions could make much difference to what these bodies see, feel, and do.⁵ “The body” reifies bodily norms in all of these ways. It is curious to me that in this particular moment in which many in the arts are focused with zeal on diversity, inclusion, and difference, we continue to use a term that is so incompatible with these investments.

My second objection to the term “the body” is that it implicitly sets up a binary between bodies and other capacities, qualities, or modes of experience. To speak of “the body” is to distinguish it from what it is not: “the soul,” “the spirit,” or, most commonly, “the mind.”⁶ Rooted in Judeo-Christian religious thought, this way of thinking has even been discredited by Western biological science, which over the last couple of decades has had to grudgingly admit that thoughts, emotions, and experiences have bodily effects that are every bit as real as viruses and pathogens.⁷ And so, though we might be getting incrementally closer to admitting that a binary made up of “the body” and “the mind” is empirically inaccurate, our language still supports this theory of human life. Further, within this mind/body binary, we tend to align ourselves with our minds—the self exists in the immateriality of the mind and not the materiality of our bodies. In this construction, we are our minds, existing “inside” our bodies as vessels. I can’t really blame us, because the English language requires us to say things that have this distinction built into their

5 For example, the frequently maligned “the body” of the viewer of Minimalist sculpture, as described in Robert Morris’ foundational 1966 essay, “Notes on Sculpture.”

6 For example: “These works consider the ways in which art is experienced—how an artwork is seen by the eyes, felt through the body, and perceived by the mind.” Quoted from “Shahryar Nashat: Life Force, MoMA, February 1-March 8, 2020,” Exhibition text, accessed on momaa.org

7 There is an enormous amount of scientific literature about the adverse bodily effects of anxiety, trauma, and weathering—a term used to describe race-based health disparities caused by chronic stress.

very structure. For instance, the sentence “I have a body,” while totally normal, is not the sentence I really want to say, because I don’t believe in what it implies. Who is this “I” who “has” my body? Is my body something I own? Am I inside of it? Am I distinct from my body? What I really want to say in this instance is not that I have a body, but that I am fundamentally and completely my body. There is absolutely no version of me that is not this body. My mind, my spirit, and my sense of self are all aspects of my embodiment. Of course, there’s no easy way to say this, because even the sentence, “I am my body” sets up the distinction just to erase it. “I - body” might be closer to what I mean, cornered into making up a word to describe this non-dualistic understanding of bodies. We are linguistically prevented from thinking otherwise.

My third objection to “the body” is that it tends to situate our bodies as perceptual tools that operate according to established rules that are prior to ideology and interpretation.⁸ In this version our bodies are the keepers of our basic needs and the tool through which we perceive the world. But even if we agree that most bodies have the same basic needs and functions, this does not foreclose the reality that these needs and functions are also historical, cultural, and constantly changing. Not only do we see, hear, and feel in radically different ways, one person to the next, but the ways we use our bodies and our senses are historical: what we see and feel is made possible by the cultural conditions that structure our understandings of what is possible, what is impossible, and what is

⁸ For example: “Shaped by the lines and proportions of the dancers, the installation repeats and draws out the Madlener House’s existing architectural elements that relate closely to the body—such as thresholds and windows—creating an acute awareness of the body moving through space for both dancers and spectators alike.” Quoted from the exhibition text for Brendan Fernandez’s *The Master and the Form* at the Graham Foundation, January 25 – April 7, 2018. Accessed on grahamfoundation.org

even there to be sensed, at all.⁹ Our bodies cannot be understood as either non-ideological biological entities or as neutral perceptual apparatuses.

The argument could be made that because “the body” generalizes, we can respond by reinserting categories of difference. If “the body” is based on normalizing standards, why not use the term “the disabled body”? Or if “the body” has been historically unmarked and thus implicitly coded as white and male, why not talk about “the female body” or “the trans body” or “the black body”? As these terms are widely used, they are one response to this need for reinserting the specificity of various bodily categories. But, in solving this problem, they create a variety of new ones. I have found that I can still speak about communities of bodily difference without using this language.

I feel entitled to go after the term “the trans body,” in that this kind of body is apparently the one that I have.¹⁰ From my position in a community of transgender people, I can conclusively state that there is nothing in particular that makes our bodies feel or appear the same as one another. Some of us “look” trans, while others of us don’t. Some of us want to look trans, while others of us want to blend in and pass. Some of us have what the medical world refers to as “dysphoria,” while others of us don’t feel anything that we could describe as being “trapped in the wrong body” (the body as a vessel appears again!). Some of us have had surgeries, taken hormones, or undergone other

9 Two excellent examples of the cultural and historical variability of perception include Jonathan Crary’s book *Techniques of the Observer*, and Irit Rogoff’s essay “Studying Visual Culture.”

10 For example: “The trans body exceeds and spoils the tidy organization of archival categories.” Quoted from “Opening Reception: MOTHA presents The Veil of Veronica, March 21 – April 20, 2018,” Exhibition text, Handwerker Gallery, Ithaca College. Accessed on events.ithaca.edu. And, “Seeing the trans body as not impaired but as talented, as occupying a space of special knowledge and special skills, the event turns to the archives and ways of knowing particular to the gender talented and invites pronouncements, manifestos and interventions” Quoted from “Introduction, Charming for the Revolution, A Congress for Gender Talents and Wildness, February 1-2, 2013,” Text by Jack Halberstam accompanying film series at Tate Modern. Accessed on carlosmotta.com

procedures to alter our bodies in the ways we wish, and some of us haven't. Millions of "non-trans" people surgically and hormonally alter their bodies every day as well, often in ways that also have to do with the pursuit of a set of gender ideals, so it seems hard to argue that this could be a defining characteristic of transgender bodies. There are gender-nonconforming people, non-binary people, cross-dressing people, people who feel they are half squirrel or puppy or centaur and every other possible iteration of gender-difference. "Trans" is a term that didn't even enter into the popular or medical lexicon until the early 2000s, and it is one that many of us have taken up primarily to access services or explain ourselves to others using the most commonly accepted language we can find.¹¹ It's possible that transgender people have more in common with everyone else than we usually admit. What's more ubiquitously human than feeling bad in relation to our bodies? Or what bodily experience is more common than voluntary and involuntary bodily transformation, from puberty, pregnancy, aging, and illness to make-up, electrolysis, fitness routines, and the acquisition of gender-appropriate speech patterns, facial expressions, and gestures? So not only is there nothing that makes us similar enough to each other to describe us as having "the trans body," I increasingly wonder if there is anything categorically distinct about us at all, except for the ways the medical and psychiatric communities have diagnosed us.

"The female body" suffers from a similar problem in that it makes singular a massively diverse group of bodies, more than half of all "the bodies" on

11 For a fascinating analysis of the history of the term "transgender," see: David Valentine's *Imagining Transgender: An Ethnography of a Category*.

earth.¹² It is usually not clear what criteria are being used to determine who is included. Is “the female body” the one that looks female? The one a medical doctor would consider female? Is it the body that self-identified women have? Is it the body that has breasts and a vulva, menstruates, can get pregnant, and undergoes menopause? Is it the body with the XX chromosome? That wears a skirt? That has curvy hips? I can easily think of examples of individuals who consider themselves female who don’t meet every one of these criteria. As most people in the art world seem to believe in the existence of transgender people, this belief should certainly complicate our ability to use this term, since transgender women’s bodies don’t do many of these things and transgender men’s bodies often do. But of more concern to me in fact is the existence of so many cisgender women whose bodies don’t do typically “female” things, or appear readably female from the outside. Do these women have “the female body”? How is it different to say “female bodies” or “women’s bodies? Or to be as specific as we can, “the ways female bodies have been represented in Western portrait painting,” for example? Why not describe what version of the meeting between femaleness and bodies we are really speaking about? Like “the female body” and “the trans body,” “the black body” accomplishes a similar smoothing over of the differences between a massive group of people, depending on how the term is being defined. The term is either confusing in regard to who it describes or exclusionary against those who don’t meet whatever criteria are being set forth. If “the black body” is being used to describe bodies that

12 For example: “Nicola L., the French Moroccan artist whose sculptures, performances, videos, and designs borrowed elements from Pop and the Parisian Nouveau Réalisme movement to examine the female body, died on Monday.” Quoted from “Nicola L. (1937-2018,” Obituary for Nicola L., *Art Forum*, accessed on artforum.com. And, “I’ve chosen to stick with the subject of the female body as a platform for what we feel about ourselves as humans.” Quoted from “Audio Feature, Wangechi Mutu on *The NewOnes, will free Us*,” released in conjunction with Wangechi Mutu on *The NewOnes, will free Us*, The Met Museum, September 9 – June 8, 2020. Accessed on metmuseum.org.

are invariably read as black, then the term excludes all the people who identify as black but don't *appear* to be so.¹³ Or, if we are using it to describe all the bodies of people who identify as black, it would also inadvertently include all the bodies of those who appear to be black but don't identify as that, or as only that.¹⁴ So the phrase "the black body" certainly encounters challenges from the existence of white-passing or mixed race individuals who would be wrongly included or excluded from this designation, or who come from national contexts in which the American idea of blackness doesn't necessarily translate. Further, even though most people are some combination of these designations (trans and black and female, for example), these terms are profoundly non-intersectional, accounting for only one category of difference at a time, at the expense of accounting for the complexity of people's embodied lives. Is it useful to talk about "the black body" as opposed to "black people's bodies" or a specific "black person's body"? Because I am white I wouldn't let myself think about these questions for many years, even as I shifted my own use of language to reflect my changing conclusions about the broader significance of these terms. However, I have come to feel that there are implications to this way of speaking that are serious enough to warrant critique.

My discomfort with this way of speaking is not just that it can be confusing, non-specific, generalizing, exclusionary, or erasing. Though these are not minor objections, I believe that there is something even more serious at stake. In using these terms, we

13 An example of this usage of blackness as appearance, from Evan Moffitt's essay "What Can't Be Read": "Racist epithets and laws use language to marginalize the black body, but poetry deconstructs syntax in ways that could set it free." *Frieze*, December 18, 2017.

14 An example of blackness as identification, from Carl Paris' response to The Artist's Voice: *Ishmael Houston-Jones in Conversation with Wangechi Mutu and Thomas Lax* co-presented by Danspace Project and The Studio Museum in Harlem as part of their series *PLATFORM 2012: Parallels*: "I also reject the notion that black dance is any dance that the black body does, as Bill T. Jones suggests. Such an assertion can only make sense if we specify that we are talking about what we are projecting onto the body irrespective of the dance's and/or dancer's intent." Accessed on danspaceproject.org.

linguistically create a culture in which people are interchangeable with one another within categories of difference. When we talk about “the black body,” we inhabit a gaze that understands one black body to be effectively indistinguishable from another. This way of speaking positions us as outsiders looking in to see only the most visible markers of difference, loading them with significance that eclipses the particularity and diversity of the individuals within an identity category.

When we parse human beings in this way within art institutional structures, we participate in a culture in which artists’ bodies are used as visual evidence of their demographic categories. Speaking in this way makes it possible for institutions to frame artists primarily in terms of their identities. Over the last several years I have been observing the ways that various forces within the arts relate to artists of non-normative identity categories. I am disturbed by some of what I see, and disheartened because this conversation is not at all new.¹⁵ I want to describe what I have observed, towards the aim of shifting away from these practices. In what are perhaps well-intentioned efforts to diversify the artists and exhibitions in museums, curators seek out artists from non-normative identity categories who depict their particular form of bodily difference in their work. Whether it is figurative depiction, portraiture, documentary, or live performance, the bodies of non-white and non-cis artists are expected to appear in the work functioning as a representation of an identity position. Often, especially in the case of performance, these events happen in exceptionally

¹⁵ A couple of particularly salient moments in this history of this critique include Charles Gaines’ catalog essay for the 1993 exhibition he curated at Fine Arts Gallery at University of California, Irvine *The Theater of Refusal: Black Art and Mainstream Criticism*, and Adrian Piper’s statement on her withdrawal of her 1973 performance video *The Mythic Being* from the 2013 exhibition *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*. Sohrab Mohebbi takes up this challenge to the identity-representation model of curating in his 2019 exhibition at SculptureCenter *Searching the Sky For Rain*, for which he writes in the press release that the artists in the show “defy the fracking of particularities into niche-marketed, T-shirt formulations of “identities” for institutional meaning and value production.”

public ways: a performance in a lobby, outside the museum, in a public festival.¹⁶ These displays of the bodies of artists-of-difference are further reflected in the language used in exhibition texts, press releases, public programs, and reviews. This approach frames artists as examples of their demographics, publicly displayed in an effort to signal the changing priorities of institutions that have been historically terrible at investing in the careers of female, non-white, and non-cisgender artists.

This strategy has several undesirable effects. Firstly, it flattens the specifics of artists' practices and their individual works, because when artwork is functioning as an example of a demographic type, it is usually not being taken seriously as worthy of critical investment. Since the purpose of the spectacle is one of inclusion, it does not actually matter very much what is specifically happening in the work. In these contexts, artworks are elevated and then glossed over.

Secondly, in many cases, these types of engagements do not actually reflect a lasting curatorial and financial investment in an artist's practice, because these sorts of inclusions tend to be temporary and forward-facing, especially in the case of performance and other public programs. Our institutions still have an incredibly long way to go to meaningfully change which artists they collect, invest in, and offer career support to over the long term, and these types of spectacles-of-difference arguably have very little to do with these fundamental changes. Or worse,

16 One origin of this critique was watching Jacolby Satterwhite perform in the lobby of the Whitney Museum of American Art during the opening of the 2014 Whitney Biennial.

they can be used as a cover for the lack of these more long-term investments.¹⁷

Finally, from the point of view of a museum or a curator who is operating within this body-as-evidence-of-difference rubric, artists-of-difference who do not make this difference publicly visible in their work are essentially useless, because they do not help create a moment of public visibility of inclusion. This creates a system in which these artists are effectively pressured into framing their practices to be useful toward these curatorial ends, performing their identities through their work in such a way that invites, and thus endorses, this kind of curatorial attention. This is very serious, because it means that artists still don't feel welcome to make whatever work is in them to make, no matter how inscrutable their own body might be, for fear of risking being passed over by a museum looking to visibly diversify their program.

I'll call this the *Bodies As Evidence Curatorial Model*. Or, the *Voguing In The Lobby Model*. Or maybe *The Spectacularly Naked Trans Performance Model*. As long as these institutional approaches continue, the work of artists-of-difference who engage these strategies will continue to be simplified and misread, while others who don't work in these ways will continue to be marginalized. And, perhaps most importantly, museums will continue to cover their own asses while rendering substantive change forever on the horizon. Institutions *must* consider the diversity of the identities of those they include, but this cannot mean that white men get to continue to be artists while everyone else must be female

¹⁷ According to a study conducted by *Artnet*, between 2008 and 2018, only 11 percent of the work acquired for the permanent collections of the US's top 26 museums was by women, and only 3 percent of those were African American. See: "Female Artists Made Little Progress in Museums Since 2008" *The New York Times*, September 19, 2019. A group of researchers at Williams College conducted a survey showing that in 2019, 85 percent of the works owned by the US's top 18 museums are by white people and 87 percent are by men. See: "Survey Finds White Men Dominate Collections of Major Art Museums" *Smithsonian Magazine*, March 21, 2019.

107 artists, black artists, and trans artists, representing “the body” specific to their identity categories.

There is no part of this argument that favors particular kinds of artistic work above others—figurative, abstract, body-based performance, and so on. Instead, I am critical of the framing devices that surround artists’ work—how what we do gets described, presented, contextualized, and circulated. One primary way that these processes take place is through the use of language, including the ways that artists describe ourselves and our own work. Which returns us to “the body” and its identity-specific varieties. By describing bodies in generalized ways that rely on the most visible markers of difference, we serve ourselves up in simplified, consumable representational bites in ways that painfully undercut the complexity, particularity, and multiplicity of our work and lived experiences. This language conjures a world in which our bodies have value only insofar as they serve as public examples. This is not a way of being valued that we should accept for ourselves or promote for the benefit of institutions and their publics. Our job is to make specific artworks with our many different bodies, whether we ask to be read or refuse to be visible at all. ☯