

“Why do we have skin” I asked the doctor who inspected me with an ultrasound. I had just realized that the protective film that covers the substrate (the body), when the body does not work, is more of an obstacle than of aid. It doesn’t let you see if and how the organic machine made of flesh and bones underneath is working, doesn’t reveal anything about its gears.

The thought of my sick body and of this exterior surface wrapping it in mystery, was mingling with generalized and generic ruminations referring above all to the history of contemporary art and the subject of my next lecture, *Il corpo come territorio (The body as territory)*. I thought about how the culture of our time had desacralized the body, reducing it to a heap of organs, worshipping cult images, favoring the beauty of the physique (and the physical beauty) rather than its health. I thought about how with the 80’s and the 90’s and their *Blade Runner*’s Tyrell Corporation’s styled slogans, we had gone beyond the idea of the body as a “machine made of flesh” to reach the “more human than human” idea, to the perfection of a non-perishable machine, not even alien anymore, simply artificial. “Androids, replicants, cyborgs and robots can be considered as the symbol of the

actual cross-contamination, fusion and gradual dematerialization that is taking place” wrote in 2004 Francesca Alfano Miglietti in her book *Identità mutanti*. We went through the whole cyborg theory and the post human era which were quickly followed by the new millennium awareness, and its belief that we had already defused in all the sci-fi literature, the works of Dick, Ballard and Cronenberg, all the body art and the most experimental performance art, all the languages and practices that for long years had used the body - wounded, violated, biological, virtual, post organic, social - to make a territory for their cultural and then political battle. I had learned the visionary zapping dystopia of the new technological systems of communication (theorized around 1980, before I was born, and continued until the 2000s) by studying FAM’s and Teresa Macri’s books and digging into sci-fi b-movies filmographies. In 2020 I had the impression that those theories were not so much an outdated but rather an irrelevant issue when, talking to millennials about privacy; I realized how the concept of private space got stripped of its meaning, and, consequently, how we lost sense of its counterpart, the public space, as social, collective and shared space. A philosopher closer to the present, Byung-Chul Han, defines the inert movement of contemporary

social space as little more than a “digital swarm”, a form of social body far removed from the concept of mass learned from physics.

What I mean is that the problem of the body and its relationship with techno and biotechnologies, so dear to the last century, in our century seemed to have slipped into its most dystopian implementation, without even so much interest to how or why we had come to look for hours at a screen rather than meeting the gaze of a human in flesh and blood. This was our reality, no matter what the price to pay, for an alleged individual well-being.

For my part, I never stopped thinking to how we were coming really close to getting fucked by our own doings and to how the Capitalocene was leading us willingly to destroy ourselves and the ecosystem in which mankind was included.

And it is by chance that at the beginning of the year, reading *To Be a Machine* by Mark O’Connell - an incredible discovery, a novel that recounts the latest advances in AI, nanotechnology and the “very modest problem of death” - that I began to tremble when I discovered how many entrepreneurs and inventors of the smart devices that I owned and that I hold right now in my hands, were basically committed transhumanists or coercive supporters of the

great era of the Singularity in which we would be entering (or in which, according to them, we have already entered). These noble thinkers are the advocates of the production system on which we are increasingly dependent, the flagship of Silicon Valley, those who in cities like Phoenix have already invested huge capital to build scientific laboratories that are sanctuaries where some heads have been detached from their mortal vessels to be cryopreserved and used by the future technological progeny that will soon, very soon, replace the finiteness of our organic bodies. Among the imaginative minds implementing this new era are: Peter Thiel (main financier and co-founder of the PayPal and Facebook payment system), Elon Musk (well known for Tesla and SpaceX, but also founder of OpenAI and The Boring Company) and Ray Kurzweil (Google chief engineer).

“Here’s what happens. You are laid on an operating table fully conscious, but rendered otherwise insensible, otherwise incapable of movement. A humanoid machine appears at your side, bowing at its task with ceremonial formality. With a brisk sequence of motions, the machine removes a large panel of bone from the rear of your cranium, before carefully laying its fingers, fine and delicate as spiders’ legs, on the

viscid surface of your brain. You may be experiencing some misgivings about the procedure at this point. Put them aside, if you can. You're in pretty deep with this thing; there's no backing out now". (Mark O'Connell, *To Be a Machine* - 2017)

Whilst the science fiction and post-human imagery that I had studied captivated me and the transhumanist ideas that I just read terrified me, for the pandemic imagery (which more recently, thanks to the words of Richard Horton, director of the renowned English scientific journal *The Lancet*, I discovered to be even worse, namely that it is syndemic) I was simply not quite prepared. I was ready to end up cryo-hibernated or replaced by a robot smarter than me, I was ready to end up lobotomized by techno communications (maybe I am already a little) and stripped of all my data (idem) then, for a good price, sold to some corporation, that in return would have made me the best possible consumer; but no, I was not ready for the intra-species spillover, for the possibility of killing my mother with a sneeze, for the fact that the machine of flesh and bone that I and more than a 100 billion other human beings who inhabit the earth are, would be the cause of a global and structural blackout and that we would soon get used to the deprivation (or pri-

vation) of our freedom to breathe, to be together, to get around, to move freely, to live as the history of capitalism had so far very well accustomed us to. I was not ready for all this. To think that the world would end for an atomic bomb, yes I was, but that it would be the bodies, the substratum that is under that skin that we can see and transform, remodel and reinvent into countless different digital identities, that this body of mine would become considerable as a social entity only in its deadly encounter with as many bodies like mine, fragile and helpless in the face of the system of values that I helped to create, for this no, I was not ready.

The *NFZ#3* exhibition (the third one of *No Fly Zone* project) was scheduled to open in July, then in September, then in November. The year 2020 has trained us to reschedule in the very short term and never in the long one. Together with a sense of conscious resignation, we have developed new skills, not so much as a society built on the ground of the bodies in alliance (cit. Judith Butler) but rather based on individual strength, seeking its definition in EU's economic activity classification codes (ATECO); it was specifically the prosperous category of the 'cultural workers', so little accomplice of the economic-commercial system

and already rather precarious, who were called to reinvent its forms of sustenance, and were now prompted by the need to maintain a lucid and critical thought, aware but not desperate, with the right amount of cynicism but subject to an openness to possibility likely driven by nothing more than a renewed and perhaps senseless spirit of survival.

The *NFZ#3* exhibition was meant to address the ambiguous relationship between reality and fiction, the forms of communication of contemporaneity, in connection with the use of 'data' within different systems of reality (political, economic or media) and how this data is used for fictional narratives whose authenticity is hardly equivocal. The starting point was Silvia Hell's project, *A Form of History*, a systematic reading of the last 150 years of European history through the re-engineering of a space-time coding system that reshapes some countries according to the expansion or withdrawal of their borders. The history of Europe, a region of recent geopolitical interest, is in Silvia Hell's project, a critical analysis of the very idea of territory. Not complying with the language of traditional cartography, with the real, physical space of 'occupation', the project discloses a redefinition of the very idea of State, that looks at how in time and space that same State

has given more or less voices to its colonialist spirit.

The new rendering methodology of *A Form of History* forces us to consider that there may be new forms of representation, more mindful than norm-abiding. From the assumption of reframing a State's body as an abstract surface intended as an organic set of precise historical factors (space, time, territorial expansion), the idea to focus on the consideration of the body seen as a political, border line territory, between oneself and the other, between an inside and an outside, between the norm and its alteration was born.

In the exhibition, Ruth Beraha's "body without organs" (cit. Deleuze-Guattari) naturally fit into place: the piece is an X-ray self-portrait, supplemented by several radiographs of strangers. The work as a whole suggests the impossibility of identification between the self and one's own body. Mary Shelley would have nicknamed her *Frankenstein*, we look at it as the reflection, the mirror, of a formal regime that is not an absolute structure: it is the possibility of being anything, without identification of gender, age, race; it is the frontier between the embodied and the impersonal. The skeleton portrayed by the x-ray is a symbol of death in whose presence life is reflected, in a close correlation between iconography and iconoclasm. Who is

the subject and what is the object of the representation? Ruth Beraha's BwO is the representation of an unorganized body, therefore dis-functional for any specific purpose.

“By body we mean, in a generic sense, any ‘limited’ portion of matter. With reference to humans, the body is the corruptible element that every religion has opposed to spiritual matter or the soul. More precisely, in physics, a discontinuous set of elements of matter (corpuscles or particles) which are attributed the properties of extension, divisibility, impenetrability, i.e. the macroscopic properties of matter.” (*Treccani*)

Among the political territories of the systems presented by Silvia Hell's coding and the philosophical and iconoclastic systems of Ruth Beraha, appears the “new flesh” (Cronenberg) photographed by Alix Marie, depiction of those “beings of contemporary contamination” (FAM) that are nothing more than identities morphed beyond the very idea of gender, extra-gender so to speak. Alix Marie's series of hand casts (any hand, that of the artist, mine, yours), hold ex votos hibernated in glass wax; they are different flowers of the *Proteaceae* family that reference mythologies and popular beliefs of cultures far apart (such as Greek and South African) to celebrate the

mortality of human beings. The flowers of the biological genus *Protea* chosen by Alix Marie take their name from the Greek god *Proteus*, a sea divinity who was able to change shape. The variability of the species makes it impossible to define a simple and diagnostic criterion for the identification of the members of the *Proteaceae* family, thus leaving theirs one of the few genera in nature not subject to classification.

The *NFZ#3* exhibition, scheduled to finally open on January 2021, leaves this past year behind and, with the works of the three artists, invited to present their research in a collective dialogue, tries to provide notes as a starting point for a lucid reading of the present destiny of bodies: political bodies, in their abstraction, alien, because they refer to mythology, biological and therefore mortal, but for this reason also otherworldly. The skin then, as the surface or rather the territory that defines our space of relationship (or boundary) with ‘the other’, suggests nothing but the impossibility of an identification between the individual (the self) and the context in which we live (the environment) in connection to how that individual and that context were previously used to sharing their relationship of mutual sustenance.

Roberta Pagani

NFZ#3 - The Body ad Territory

Ruth Beraha
Silvia Hell
Alix Marie

curated by Roberta Pagani

January 2021

Ncontemporary - Milano
ncontemporary.com

Ruth Beraha was born in Milan in 1986. After graduating in Milan and Jerusalem, in 2014 she specialized in Visual and Curatorial Arts at NABA, Milan. Between 2013 and 2016 she participated in several group exhibitions including: *Dishumanisms*, curated by Marco Scotini, at the Galleria Biagiotti, Florence. In 2017 she won the residency-studio at the Bevilacqua La Masa Foundation in Venice and was invited to participate in the collective exhibition *Take Me (I'm Yours)*, curated by Christian Boltanski, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Chiara Parisi, Roberta Tenconi, Pirelli HangarBicocca, Milan, within the Generosity program. Her first solo show in an Italian institution was held in 2019 at Museo della Città di Livorno, curated by Paola Tognon. She has also exhibited at MAMbo Bologna, Ncontemporary Milan, Mimosa House London and AplusA Venice. In 2020 she was the recipient of the *Premio New York*, selected by Cecilia Alemani and Stella Bottai among others. She is now one of the artists in residency at MAMbo Bologna within the *Nuovo forno del pane* project curated by Lorenzo Balbi.

Silvia Hell (Bolzano, 1983) lives and works in Milan. Her research is situated in actions and ways of thinking, establishing forms of tension within the method, between conventional objectivity of reference and original models of presentation and formalization of the Real. The resulting work proceeds through points of balance and test, swinging to opposite extremes of thought and systems. She has participated in numerous exhibitions including *Scored Air screening*, curated by Frida Carazza to at the Museion in Bolzano, 2019; *The Uncanny Valley*, curated by Sarah and Kathrin Oberrauch, within the Futurdomo museum housing project in Milan. In 2018 his solo show *Increasing the Wind Pressure* was held, curated by Gabriele Tosi at the A + B Contemporary Art gallery in Brescia. Other exhibitions include: *Another World*, project by Tracey Emin, Deutsche Bank, Frieze London in 2018; *Theater of Measurement*, curated by Post Brothers, Kunstverein München in Munich, 2017; *Between There and There: Anatomy of Temporary Migrations*, curated by Neli Ružić & Duga Mavrinac, at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Rijeka, 2017; *Geomertry of History*, curated by Anna Fatyanova, at CCI Fabrika, Moscow, 2017. In 2013 she participated in the exhibition *Parole, Parole, Parole...*, curated by Stefano Pezzato at the Pecci Museum Milan, Milan.

Alix Marie (born in 1989) is a French artist, who works through photography, sculpture and installation. She graduated from Central Saint Martins College in 2011 and later from the Royal College of Art. Her work explores our relationship with bodies and their representation, through processes of objectification, fragmentation, enlargement and accumulation. Her practice proceeds in new directions by investigating the potential of materiality and three-dimensionality of photography considered as an object. Marie has participated in international exhibitions such as *Athens Photo Festival*, Benaki Museum, 2020; *Peer to Peer*, SCOP, Shanghai, 2019; *Peer to Peer*, Look Biennale, Open Eye Gallery, Liverpool, 2019; was selected for the eleventh edition of *FOAM New Talent 2017*, FOAM museum, Amsterdam, 2018; *Sucer La Nuit* (show only), Musée Des Beaux Arts Le Locle, Switzerland and numerous solo shows at the Roman Road gallery in London.