

Book Reviews

Hilary Robinson

Amelia Jones

Body Art: Performing the Subject
(Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) ISBN 0 8166 2773 8

This is a book which, I feel, will have a far-reaching effect upon the development of the theoretical discourses around performance, representations of the body, and body art in particular. Amelia Jones develops models for thinking through the representation of the artist's body/self in artworks and the associated problematics of the mediation of subjectivity between artist and audience. Using a phenomenological basis for developing understanding of body art as intersubjective (rather than subject/object), Jones traces body art's disruption of the normative values of the modernist art world. The significance of the particularity of the body used is demonstrated through close readings of certain works: any artist's body/self used in an artwork becomes explicitly non-universal, non-transcendent. In this lies body art's potential for radical (including feminist) practices. Works by Vito Acconci and Hannah Wilke are

analyzed in depth against this background, enriched by readings across a host of works by other artists, demonstrating the delicate but insistent play of intersubjectivity.

This is not a book '*about*' body art, then (and still less is it one '*about*' particular artists), so much as one which aims to develop the critical vocabulary and shape the discourses of body art, opening spaces for gender-aware and anti-racist practices. This it does productively and provocatively. Its language is rich and challenging (if with a decided American accent - many nouns extended into adjectives and verbs). Its main fault for the researcher-reader is its lack of separate bibliography: one has to trace back through the notes, which is frustrating, as they take up over a quarter of its pages.

My main problem with the book's argument is tangential to its aim: it lies with one of Jones's definitions of "*body art*", which I feel is an over-protective handling of a methodological problem. Early on, Jones stresses that body art is dependent upon photographic documentation (p.13), later adding that it **[depends] on documentation to**

attain symbolic status within the realm of culture (p.33). While photographic documentation is crucial for the retrospective researcher, it is important to distinguish between body art intended to be mediated in photographic format (like some of Wilke's work under discussion), and that which is documented through photographs - in which case the photographic evidence remains highly contingent and partial, and the structures of discourse around them differ. A few photographs taken during (say) a 12-hour non-stop body art work can only be understood as a trace record, rather than privileged access to the artist/subject; the most reductive critic would at this point mourn the loss of such access, deeming it only possible through attending/participating in the performance itself. The significance of this distinction is not clear in the book (indeed, the import of time in the processes of body art is notably absent from the discussion). This point (and my terminology) cut across Amelia Jones's intentions of elucidating the intersubjective nature of body art, but it is crucial in the thorny debate about the representation of body art and the

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possibility not only for adequate documentation but also for a radical (feminist) retrospective critical analysis. Jones positions the reading by Alan Kaprow of Hans Namuth's photographs of Jackson Pollock as crucial to the development of Happenings; but this could only happen with the imaginative leap from reading those photographs as indexical of the (unmediated) subject '*behind*' the paintings, to reading them as indexical of a possible repertoire of gestures of mediation. Only then can the subjectivity of the artist be constructed as particular and contingent. What is indicated here is that the strategic reading of the documentary photograph is at stake. This could, I think, have been explored in the book; however, this removes little from Jones's overall, and considerable, achievement of shifting the models of thinking about body art away from the prevalent idealist notions of unmediated access to the artist/subject and into a more radical realm which can only be of benefit to developing feminist critical thought.

Whitney Chadwick **Framed**
(London: Macmillan, 1998)
ISBN 0-353-71950-6

If there are aspects of Art History which are akin to crime solving – trying to see with fresh eyes, collating evidence, and resolving questions through interpretation – then there are aspects of feminism which resemble a never-ending thriller – the frequent twists of the plot, the need to find out why all this outrageous stuff is happening, and the desire to see wrongs righted. It is hardly surprising, then, that most of the feminist art historians I know confess to loving thrillers with female protagonists. The sites of identification and fantasy are not hard to find: good woman finds bad mess, is jeopardised by bad men, and triumphantly restores order through her own wit and tenacity.

No wonder, then, that *Framed* by art historian Whitney Chadwick hits all the right buttons. Chadwick has created in Charlotte Whyte a character who is a nice mixture of independence, snottiness, and vulnerability. An art historian working in San Francisco, she is invited to hear a gay male colleague,

Michael, lecture on David. The lecture never happens: Michael is murdered minutes before he is due to start. The grieving Charlotte is invited to finish Michael's work on a David catalogue, and manages to piece together not only the art history but also the murder mystery. Lacking the all-singing, all dancing scientific talents of Dr Kay Scarpetta (Patricia Cornwell's heroine), and the reams of accident-prone or conveniently employed relatives of V I Warschawski (in Sara Peretsky's books), Charlotte Whyte is a believable woman in a believable setting. *Framed* is marred in places by clumsy editing (it gives nothing away to say that the penultimate paragraph implies that the Arena chapel is in Tuscany), but would make a great holiday read.

Hilary Robinson teaches Fine Art theory and practice at University of Ulster, Belfast.