

## The Aesthetic Relevance of Severed Limbs

The hand may be the most recognised symbol of human interaction. Recently however, the once token of togetherness has been redefined as a reminder to keep our distance. As early as Medieval times, remnants of touch give clues as to how religious and important objects were revered. During WWI, the Val-de-Grâce, a military hospital, was a point of reference for French Surrealist thinkers, who used dismembered body parts as a commentary on the re-building of society after the war. Later, abstract expressionism rose as a means of protest against the order instilled by the Nazi Party, resulting in the portrayal of the body disappearing from art for a long while. We can look at the representation of a deeply familiar form, the human body, in art to explore our personal, social and cultural anxieties in a time of global unrest.

To consider our relationship with our bodies, it is useful to look at artefacts surviving the Medieval Period. From the 12<sup>th</sup> Century it was common for reliquaries to be in the form of limbs, bringing a physicality to the act of worship. An arm, for example, could be waved above a crowd as a means of ceremonially animating a saint. In a society ruled by the Church, the hands of those in power were praised. It was widely acknowledged the Kings hands could heal sickness, and touch would relieve those suffering. Kissing the hands of the Pope, a tradition still relevant today, would bring you closer to God. These interactions extended to Medieval literature, where repeated handling has worn away parts of pages; loving strokes from the reader caressing idols or even hateful scratching and purposeful damaging images of evil. The Yad is an object developed for this exact purpose; to prevent unclean hands from damaging holy scripture. The interaction between bodies and objects in Medieval times shows that even before scientific progress, the body was understood to hold answers on how we navigate the Earth.

The use of the body to convey messages of the familiar, or indeed the unfamiliar, has not ceased throughout history despite our growing ways to communicate with one another. The distorted body appeared in Surrealist art and literature as a critique of the order of society. The Freudian fear of castration extended to other limbs within Surrealist expression, destroying the illusion of perfection surrounding the human body; by severing an arm or a foot, we are faced with the reality that the human body is not a perfect entity, but is made up of conflicts. Surrealist writers such as André Breton and Louis Aragon, having trained at the Val-de-Grâce as physicians, were at the forefront of WWI. They would have been exposed to terrorized bodies of soldiers, seeing first hand the violent consequences of war. In 1929, Breton stated:

Surreality will be in any case a function of our willingness to completely defamiliarize everything... right up to the point of defamiliarizing a hand by isolating it from a man.

Towards the end of the war, the French Government used images of soldiers bodies to promote a 'back to normal' attitude. The Val-de-Grâce was later turned into a museum to solidify the act of war as a means to rebuild, as a birth of new thinking. Surrealists turned this upside down, dismembering the male body to question a return to how things were before the War; fragmented bodies were a commentary on the inconsistent response of the French government to the rebuilding of society. Deformed bodies were urging a pause in the inevitable return to normal, an attempt to question what is normal, and why we would return to it.

Prosthetic limbs were becoming more common, and the idea of the 'partial' was seized by Capitalism, appearing in adverts - many of which were designed by surrealist artists. Prosthetics were being fetishized as a different kind of wholeness to that we knew, and an understanding was forming of a different kind of man returning from war. Before the war, supported by Freud's psychoanalytical research, it was widely accepted that so-called irrational hysteria was linked to the female brain. As distressed soldiers returned home, the change in emotional state of these men was criticised as feminine, or homosexual. The emasculation painted onto men suffering these emotions, along with visible mutilations of their bodies fed the fear of male castration.

Surrealist thinkers attempted to redefine this hysteria and reject the rational attempt at forcing normality; artists such as Max Ernst took to distorting the female form, as an object of sexual desire and therefore a great erotic anxiety; they aimed to disrupt the status quo. Art began to show a different perspective to the propagandized bodies of soldiers, and the disparities of war. Photography as an artistic medium was gaining popularity, and collage was an avenue to physically re-piece disparate parts, and create an alternate reality.

It is interesting to consider how the body is represented in art when the mood of the world is altered by a global event such as a war, or a pandemic. After the Second World War, the use of bodies in art was discarded completely, as modernism and abstraction came to the forefront of creative expression. Representing anything but the human form was vital after the catastrophic eugenics attempted by the Nazi Party. Hitler's obsession with sterile order extended to materials in the Reich's artwork, namely porcelain; the "clean" surface was a fetishized smoothness, and a metaphor for correctness. Not by coincidence, art movements in the coming years contrasted with explosions of abstract colour. The Porzellan Manufaktur Allach built near the Dachau concentration camp portrays the obvious irony; those held captive at the camps being given their lifeline if they were able to make perfect porcelain characters for those who held them there. These contrasts are a reminder that although we may strive to progress towards an ideal society, there will always be an opposing natural force.

There was a shift in artistic mediums following the end of the War and artists such as Jackson Pollock paved the way for abstract expressionism. The use of the readymade within art grew as artists and makers strove instead to explore our relationship with objects around us. In 1940, Salvador Dalí explains:

I try to create fantastic things, magical things, things like in a dream. The world needs more fantasy. Our civilisation is too mechanical. We can make the fantastic real, and then it is more real than that which actually exists.

The use of the figure in art is not seen in full force again until after the horrors of the war had somewhat faded. An exhibition titled, *"Exquisite Corpses: Drawings and Disfiguration"* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 2012 explored the reoccurring theme of the abstraction of the body in art. The curated pieces investigate disrupting the human body to question our relationship with nature, the machine, and ourselves. The collection of artwork in the show disorientates us from the most familiar, playing on our personal, social, and cultural anxieties.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century there is an underlying quest to become more than human; as medicine and science advances there are missions to alter genes, cryogenically freeze ourselves for future breakthroughs, and even move planets to give humanity a new environment. Technology has ensured individuals can communicate more than ever, and a global pandemic has seen us physically separated from one another. It is ironic that while we test these newly developed technological and scientific abilities during this strange time, the thing humans long the most for is touch. We have been reminded of our primal needs, something perhaps necessary to connect us back to what it means to be human. The act of using the body in art now, is a way to explore the new meaning of humanity. The use of dismembered limbs is suggestive of our imperfections, hopefully questioning the future rebuilding of society, enquiring whether a strive for progress for progress sake is the answer.

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