

Beirut as a Body Politic

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[Ali Cherri, Give Me A Body Then, Istanbul, 2013]

Where does the **body** begin? Does it even have a beginning? The question is at the heart of both the entire body of theories of perception in the 20th century and the visual arts. [Maurice Merleau-Ponty](#), one of the pioneers in the study of the body as an epicenter of consciousness postulates, "*The body is our general medium for having a world*"—undermining a long tradition of consciousness based on dialectics and positing the body in an ambiguous existence as both subject and object. The body as a total medium unleashes a free performance of reality in which artistic production becomes a specific site of intervention, both unstable and permanent. **Art** is no longer pure subjective expression but an open field of negotiation not between subject and object, but

between the concrete historical world and pure experience; the mapping of an aggregate of relationships larger than those of the individual.

Coinciding with the age of [bio-politics](#), social and political power is applied on the human body not only as a restraining force (through institutions, laws and the concept of mental health as an extension of technological power) but on the body as an organic entity subject to the administration and bureaucratization of its functions; a body politic. A [body politic](#) is an extended metaphor in which the nation is thought of as an entity likened to the human body: The "corps-état" developed in the Renaissance on the basis of then prevalent medical knowledge, made analogies between the apparent causes of bodily disease and their equivalent in the field of politics, to be healed by similar means. The growing bureaucratization of the body politic of **Modernity** evolved into encompassing economic power as well as the newfound social sphere, incorporating the body by engineering sexuality and behavior.

Lebanese artist [Ali Cherri](#)'s performance "[Give Me A Body Then](#)" (2005) presented in Istanbul in 2013 in the context of the project "[Transition](#)," uncannily explores the temporal (both ephemeral and psychological) space shared between the body politic and the individual in a tripartite sense: As medium, as consciousness and as dislocation of subject-object. Cherri, a topographer of absolute memory environments (here defined as untraceable) from the decades-long **Civil War** in his country, attempts to map out in this performance not the spectacle of war as a problem of representation, but its effect on the body. We are not dealing here with wounds and sores but with larger units of psycho-physical configuration. If the body is a medium, such as the space of war—Euclidean geometrical space—what is the definite shape of this container? What does it contain? Where is it located?



[Ali Cherri, Give Me A Body Then, Istanbul, 2013]

Cherri's body, nevertheless, is not a usual body (politic); his is a rotten organic continuum that refuses to constitute itself. The procedure at work here is almost **Gnostic**: a self-referential irrederentism that accesses cognitive reality through a vision of truth beyond the physical world. The defining factor here is not the image of his own body—since this image cannot be traversed—but the relationship between his body as an apparatus of consciousness and the images of objects of desire that variegate between existing subjects and potential objects. The textures of **war**—synthetic, elliptical and concentrated—produce not only memory sites but what **Roland Barthes** called, an image-repertoire: A set of images that function as a misunderstanding of the subject carried out by the subject himself. His apokatastasis sees the restitution only as the constitution of his present self without duality or illusions of the past.

The **artist** lays out the plan of the work in his performance statement: *"I used to search for pictures of naked people, stealing glances at any nude photos I could find. There was no Internet at the time, and I did not have access to pornography, so I would try to find these photos anywhere possible, including biology books. More than once, I found pictures of naked, often dead, people in newspapers. I did not care what photos were trying to say: I was just looking at what they showed. I would collect these pictures and look at them every now and then. When I grew up, I continued collecting pictures of people, but not all of them were dead."* Cherri understood these images not in terms of linear meaning but as a vehicle of dynamic exchanges between optics and bodily sensations, without the narrative illusions associated with consciousness.

In a previous video work from the same year, "**Un Cercle Autour du Soleil**" (2005) Cherri states: *"I was disappointed the day they announced the war had ended. I used to be elated by the idea of living in a city that was eating itself, like excess stomach fluid that digests and gradually eats the stomach."* An apocalyptic imaginary is set free not as an escape into a remotely distant future but as a possible eschaton, it is a time freeze.

Is there a specific syntax in the body? Using his body—and other bodies—not as a metaphor but in their entire ordinary spatiality, his distance from the limitations of representation is total and hence, the body, an analytical corpse in this case, opens to a variety of readings. The artist goes far enough as to confront the viewer with the possibility of discontinuous consciousness and even, of consciousness as an apparatus of ideology.



[Ali Cherri, Un Cercle autour du Soleil, video, 2005]

Perhaps the most effective metaphysical transgression of the modern era does not come from the demise of traditional religion rooted in the breakdown of metaphysics but in a more elementary operation at the hands of **Freud**: *"He was the most significant among those prison guards who released the old prisoner (the soul) from the prison cell (the body), now to send the body into the prison cell of the soul, or at least to unmask the body as phantom soul, and as its own prison guard."*¹ Having effectively eliminated the concept of "spirit," both body and soul become complex but ambiguously related entities. Out of this ambiguity, Ali Cherri allows himself to be possessed by his imaginary, by his image repertoire, once the referents to a continuous reality are absent from the outset or have gone—temporarily—missing.

What if an image is not an opinion? What if this power of representation entirely depends on a relationship between referents to each other? What if this power can be lost? In his video-installation "**Triptych—Studies from a Human Body**" (2012) shown in the exhibition "**A Territory of Resistance**" (The Running Horse, Beirut, 2012), Cherri stretches his body horizontally across three different channels. The impersonal body—thus fragmented—becomes a site of violence. This violence is here not the spectacle of suffering, but rather mere abeyance, the abeyance to the merciless of biological processes. Ubiquity—the preferred metaphor for

globalization—is revealed as anonymity, and the inability to appear in the world as a continuous and stable self, fractures the body politic in terms of function. Different bodies constitute a singularity that goes beyond the public bureaucratization of gender.

*"Human persons do not experience themselves as a homogeneous self,"*² writes **Agnès Heller**, therefore a grand narrative about the body—as there exists about the body politic since the Middle Ages—cannot as much consolidate our existence in the plurality of appearance that participating in the public domain requires: *"Moreover, we also live in more than one world, at least two or more, and it is by far not the same self that is best suited to live in all of them."*³ At deliberately disfiguring the emotional content of the body, Cherri contends with the major difficulty of **video art**, in dealing with heterogeneity to create something with a unifying conception.⁴ Yet it is but the unified theory of man—inherited from Christian anthropology—what has impaired the ubiquitous self to find himself at home in his multitude of appearances and representations, of which the body is an intervention site.



[Ali Cherri, Triptych - Studies from a Human Body, 2012]

The binary morphology of embodiment is researched furthered by Cherri in his project "**Some Body To Love**" (Janine Rubeiz, Beirut, 2013), where, inverting the procedure, the morphology of the male body is created in the most external possible manner, through a series of screens mounted on a vaguely abstract wired body, he reduces the body to a micro-physics of biological processes and presenting it as a phenomenon in which the image and the body stand in a dialectical relation. This battlefield of the body reminds us how (in 20th century medicine) the terminology applied to describe treatment of cancer is derived from military jargon, with terms such as attack, invasion, colonization, and bombardment.⁵ In this arresting video-installation we experience anatomy as something entirely abstract and therefore, break down the traditional categories of thinking about sexed beings as morphological units.

The body, traditionally speaking, is an institution radically private and incommunicable. Admitting of no metaphor for it, the entire tradition of political theory excluded the body from the preoccupations of politics as being a slave to necessity, and gave preferences to the coincidence between appearing and Being.⁶ Overlooking the natural fact that the essence of the human condition, the earth, is primarily sustained by the activity of labor—*homo faber*—as the fundamental activities through which appearance and action can transcend. It is but through the figure of the *homo sacer* (a Roman legal figure for a man who is no longer a citizen and can be killed by anybody) that in the modern era the breakdown of universal human rights occur: those who have been stripped from civil rights are nothing but a body, and on a body political power can be inflicted boundlessly. A body is deathless biology.

Throughout Ali Cherri's practice, the body does not emerge merely as a site but also as a context. Anatomy is that site of attacks, invasion, colonization, and bombardment because it is impossible to conceive of a human community—that is, of a body politic—without being shaped by social geography. Mapping out physical space as a measure of experience is not a question of pure dimensionality, because space contains no spaces. Spaces in turn, receive their being from locations and not from space.⁷ Measure in units of memory and time it is our relationship to locations that construes real space. There are no pure spaces inasmuch as there is no pure experience or consciousness; everything is filtered and corrupted by the medium of personal time: the body, the screen, language. Embodiment and disembodiment are not dialectical binaries but intermediate forms of appearance.



[Ali Cherri, Some Body To Love, 2013]

Turning to the medium—environment is as well—as a context, Cherri's latest project, the short film "[The Disquiet](#)" (2013), a documentary investigating the seismic history of **Lebanon**, with a number of violent earthquakes that have shaped the country's history since antiquity, as a result of its geographical position on several fault lines. Surrendering to a total medium, the film steers clear from metaphors in an attempt to dislocate the lack of critical distance by means of exploring catastrophe and disaster as natural phenomena. Is the decay of this rotting body unavoidable? Another Gnostic turn here speaks of a subterranean force and begets the question

of whether the medium itself—a social reality—is not naturally endangered as to permit reading the political and bio-political history with a different lens.

The orgy of Beirut appears in Cherri's work de-mystified and devoid of its capacity of dying a normal death. The metaphysical horizon between life and death is shattered and replaced by an abyss, by an interstice, in which the politics of the body can be reversed into something rather primal and hence free from the constraints of history. Dying is here not enough, cries an embattled Beirut; living is not enough, responds an emboldened performer, speaking to his own territory of resistance with the assurance of uncertainty. What if the capacity of understanding spaces as living places can be lost as a consequence of an imposed image-repertoire? The terse qualities of Ali Cherri's performances, sometimes extravagant and sometimes mysterious, don't provide any answers. A perspective on suffering inundates the work not as a circumstance but as a condition.

A winged man is seen on flight on video at the end of "Give Me A Body Then." Perhaps the most allegorical aspect of the work—usually free from references not immediately available—confronts us with a basic paradox of Modernity: disappointment about itself is part of its basic survival mechanism. Is the flight into freedom or into madness? Agnes Heller commences her discussion on Freud's metaphysical transgression with the following idea: "*No one will know absolutely, least of all ourselves. We will not have a world in the way in which we once did. We will keep our distance, and also suffer from the distance. The bodies, after having touched one another, will part.*"⁸ A crucial imbalance remains. The body as a medium will never be fully ours, but the totality of the experience will then prevent us from making ourselves at home in the world. What if my body were mine?



[Ali Cherri, The Disquiet, film, 2013]

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¹. Agnes Heller, *A Theory of Modernity*, Blackwell, 1996, pp. 197

². Agnes Heller, *The Crisis of Metaphysics, Embodiment and Disembodiment* in *Aesthetics and Modernity*, Lexington, 2010, pp. 127

³. Ibid

⁴. Agnes Heller, *Autonomy of Art or the Dignity of Artworks* in *Aesthetics and Modernity*, Lexington, 2010, pp. 58-59

⁵. Susan Sontag, *Illness As Metaphor*, Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1978, pp. 64-65

⁶. John Tambornino, *Locating the Body: Corporeality and Politics in Hannah Arendt in The Corporeal Turn: Passion, Necessity, Politics*, Rowman & Littlefield, 2002, pp. 15-34

⁷. Martin Heidegger, *Building Dwelling Thinking* in *Poetry Language Thought*, Harper Perennial, 2001, pp. 152

⁸. Agnes Heller, *Theory of Modernity*, Ibid., pp. 195-196

"Give Me A Body Then" was presented in August 2013 at Yapi Kredi Cultural Center, Istanbul, in the context of the project "[Transitions](#)," curated by Basak Senova and Fatma Bucak. "Triptych - Studies from a human body" was shown in October 2012 in the group show "[A Territory of Resistance](#)" at The Running Horse, Beirut. "[Some Body To Love](#)" was shown in October 2013 at Galerie Janine Rubeiz, Beirut. "[The Disquiet](#)" was premiered at Toronto International Film Festival in September 2013. Ali Cherri's upcoming show, "[On things that move](#)," at