

The Body and its Image

“As long as there have been human beings, or as long as we have records generated by humans, there have been images of the body that seem to represent the inner fantasies of a culture about the way bodies are supposed to look, not the way that bodies actually look.” This was the central conundrum of the October 4 roundtable, *The Body and its Image*, as encapsulated by moderator **Sander Gilman**, Distinguished Professor of the Liberal Arts and Sciences and Professor of Psychiatry at Emory University.

Professor Gilman went on to give a brief history of somatic studies, describing the work of Austrian doctor Paul Schilder, a friend and confidante of Freud, who in his seminal work, *The Image and Appearance of the Human Body*, postulated that the body was made up of three separate but inseparable constituents. The social body was the body in the context of social networks; the physiological body was the body of the endocrine system and neural networks; and the body of the psyche was the body shaped by the interiority of the individual. Schilder’s ideas were absorbed into the fields of psychoanalysis, sociology, somatic medicine, and somatic psychiatry, but society continues to wrestle with the separation, sometimes alienation, of these conceptions of the body. “When you look in the mirror at your body ... you see one of those three bodies,” Gilman observed. “Haunting us in the background perhaps are the other two bodies that we can’t imagine or don’t want to talk about.”

The primary focus in the work of **Sabine Wilhelm**, Associate Professor of Psychology at the Harvard Medical School and author of *Feeling Good About the Way You Look: A Program for Overcoming Body Image Problems*, is the body of the psyche distorted by Body Dysmorphic Disorder. The condition arises when an individual becomes preoccupied with a flaw in their appearance that others can’t see. More profound than simple self-consciousness or vanity, body dysmorphia can cause shame or depression, leading its victims, in some cases professional models considered beautiful by most objective standards, to engage in severe social avoidance. While the roots of the anxiety can be traced to childhood fears that lock a person into an outdated conception of their own bodies, Wilhelm conceded that socio-cultural factors, like the incessant imagery of idealized bodies in mass media, can exacerbate the condition.

Paul Campos, Professor of Law at the University of Colorado and author of *The Obesity Myth*, became fascinated by the contemporary obsession with body image while observing media coverage of the Clinton impeachment, when hundreds of stories referred to Monica Lewinsky as *zaftig*. “Why was Monica Lewinsky’s fatness, not to mention her Jewishness, being signaled,” Campos quipped. The saga prompted him to question what he called our “moral panic about fatness,” and he concluded that fatness is a social construct that is not necessarily based on scientific or medical evidence. He noted that our notion of a normative body is one that only describes about 30% of the population, leading us to incorrectly pathologize a huge percentage of the population.

Fortunately, art looks on bodies in a much more indulgent light. “In performance you don’t care about fat bodies, ugly bodies, strange bodies. Everything is welcome because it’s just another medium,” insisted **Marina Abramovic**, a performance artist whose work, *7 Easy Pieces*, was presented at the Guggenheim Museum in 2005. The difficulty in using the body as performance material, she said, is that the performer has to be both the subject and object of her work, creating a mental construct and then entering into it physically. In doing so,



An audience member contemplates body imagery

Abramovic endeavors to present the embodiment of two major fears—the fear of suffering and the fear of dying—offering the audience a mirror through which they can witness the possibility of perseverance.

Where Abramovic sees the potential to embody inner states through performance, **Marcel Kinsbourne**, a behavioral neurologist and Professor of Psychology at the New School, focused on the difficulty of translating abstract thought into movement and behavior. “Whereas we present ourselves to others in a stylized fashion, our brains are running wild the whole time, because the neurons never stop firing.” According to Kinsbourne, the turmoil of the interior leaks into our bodies in ways beyond our control, since we can only express in gesture, speech, or writing a small fraction of thought. As a result, we betray many cognitive abstractions through subtle, unconscious movements. These movements lack the intentionality achieved by the performance artist. From time to time, Kinsbourne concluded, we are forced to match the image of the body in our minds with what confronts us in the mirror, a trauma that leads some to anorexia or body dysmorphia.

Reflecting the panic of body image, specialized body modifications are increasingly embraced, so much so that, as Professor Campos noted, “Breast enhancement is kind of like black-and-white TV.” In a roundtable that sounded alarms about a culture in which feeling anxious about one’s body has become the norm, Abramovic’s insistence on inner beauty was all the more refreshing. “The most fat body, the most ugly body, the most strange body can be incredibly beautiful if the real spirit is inside.” *A.L.*