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by Mark Daniel Cohen

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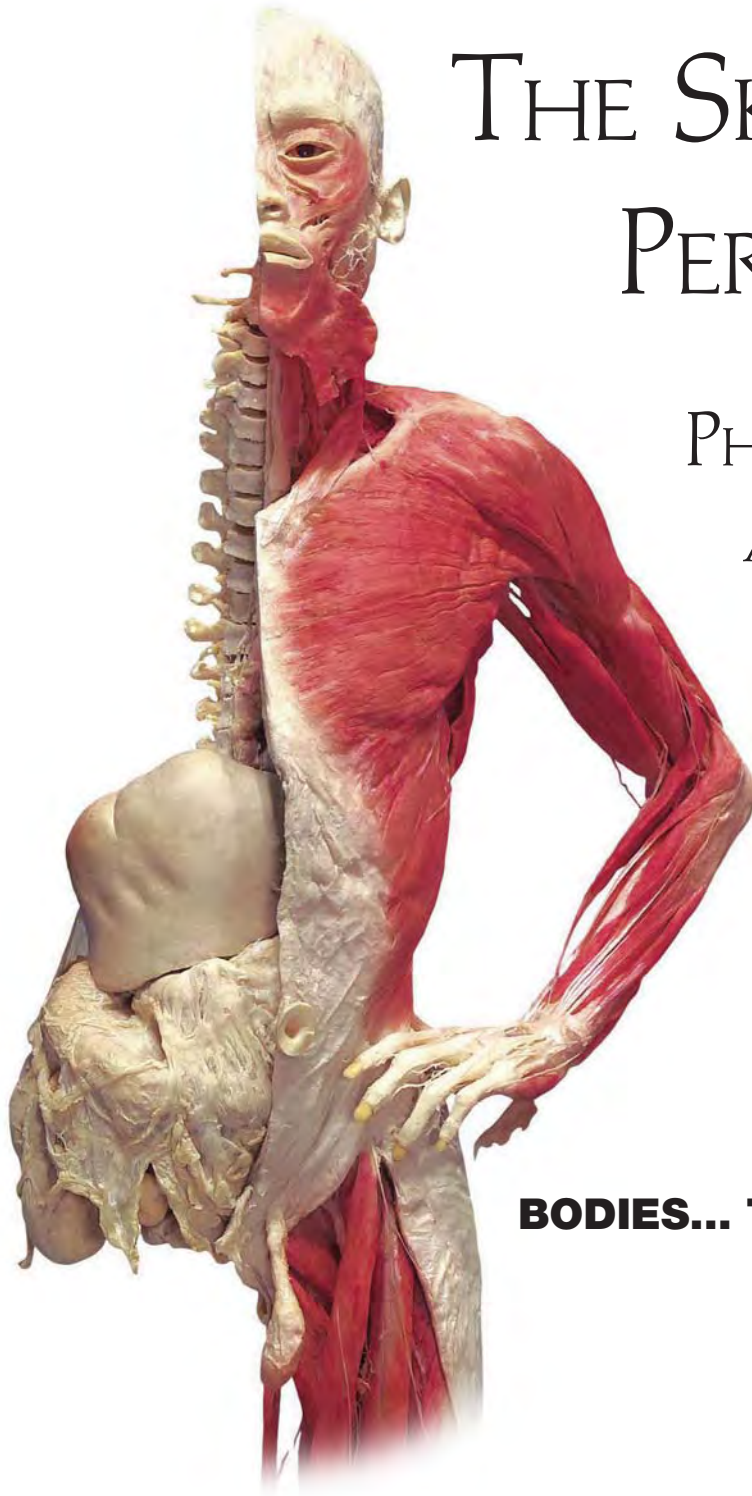
Phenomenology as a Cartesian Proposition

by Mark Daniel Cohen

BODIES. . . The Exhibition

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HYPERION:
ON THE FUTURE OF AESTHETICS



THE SKIN OF PERCEPTION

PHENOMENOLOGY
AS A CARTESIAN
PROPOSITION

BODIES... The Exhibition

by Mark Daniel Cohen

Current Venues:

South Street Seaport Exhibition Centre, New York

Auditorio de Medicina del ITESM, Hospital San José, Monterrey, Mexico

The Shops at Sunset Place, Miami, through Mar 25, 2007

800 Pike St., Seattle, through Mar 31, 2007

Beurs van Berlage Concert and Conference Hall, Amsterdam, through Apr 14, 2007

(Note: Not all venues list closing dates.)

“

Man is only man at the surface. Remove the skin, dissect, and immediately you come to machinery.

—Paul Valéry

“

Webster was much possessed by death
And saw the skull beneath the skin;
And breastless creatures under ground
Leaned backward with a lipless grin.

—T. S. Eliot, “Whispers of Immortality”

“

When you look at yourself from a universal standpoint,
something inside always reminds or informs you that there are
bigger and better things to worry about.

—Albert Einstein

Our destruction, if we bring it, will not be indefinite. It will be a definite thing indeed, and in deed. Decimation cannot be minced by the power of undecidability, not when it is the house of undecidability that will be decimated. As we ensconce ourselves in ruminations on the undecidable nature of speculation and encounter, as we amuse ourselves by focusing our thoughts on the ever-retreating objective of indeterminate specification draping all we can know and all we can experience, all that is phenomenal, in a shroud of indistinction and pride ourselves on our inability to hold back the tide of deconstruction from anything it is possible for us to know, we find ourselves in a place of growing absolutes. The shadows are gathering all around us and pool into a darkness that is inescapable—the absolute of eventuality. What we are about to do to ourselves falls outside the perimeters of what is in our power to control. If there is an undecidability, it is our inability to decide, for our thoughts are bringing us death, and it appears there is nothing we can do about them.

In his essay “On the Use and Abuse of History for Life,” Nietzsche warned us of the time in the life of the mind in which we live. The will falters with the awareness of history; it folds with the glance in the mirror, with the sense of the self as actor—it is subject to the law of Hamlet, doomed to the fate of Macbeth. We live in an awareness of history unfolding, for history has come to consume the present as well as the past. We see ourselves as agents in a story, even as we act as agents in the story. As Sontag wrote in the beginning of “‘Thinking Against Oneself’: Reflections on Cioran” (in which, in an act of audacious phrasal synonymy, she virtually rewrites the opening section of Nietzsche’s essay), “The human mind possesses now, almost as second nature, a perspective on its own achievements that fatally undermines their value and their claim to truth. For over a century, this historicizing perspective has occupied the very heart of our ability to understand anything at all. Perhaps once a marginal tic of consciousness, it’s now a gigantic, uncontrollable gesture—the gesture whereby man indefatigably patronizes himself.”

The intrepid risk of “the historicizing perspective,” committed as an intellectual “gesture,” is getting behind the curve, and that intrepidity is now harrowing. We are entering a fresh historical period: the era of universal nuclear capability, if it can maintain itself long enough to become an “era.” Given that there seems to be nothing that will withhold it, functionally, meaningfully, we are already there. And we have come to no pertinent determinations of what we will do about it, of how we will survive it. With every statement by a public official or political commentator concerning the number of years necessary for Iran to complete its nuclear program or for North Korea to build a rocket able to reach the contiguous states, we demonstrate our failure to comprehend just where we are. What matters is not the lead-time but the inevitability. It is as good as done. And we have thought of no answers.

And more is coming, for we have invented far more than nuclear power. Our risks are the results of the achievements of our minds, and our failures are the results of the shortcomings of our ability to think. As our technological ingenuities proliferate, the power of decimation disseminates. Increasing degrees of damage can be done by groups of diminishing size, and so by increasing numbers of people, and eventually it will be possible for any one person to destroy every last person. The lead-time does not matter—functionally we are there now. It would be unwise to suggest scenarios, but one need only look at several recent films to construe a sense of the general possibilities: *The Peacemaker*, *The Siege*, *Outbreak*, *12 Monkeys*.

And so, as is always the case, we are always thinking about the wrong thing, and in the wrong way. We all cut our teeth on the self-enveloping intricacies of deconstructive principles, of the protocols of ineradicable indeterminacy, of the implausibility of absolutes of any species, and if we do nothing wise, and if we do not do it shortly, our fate will be soon be decided absolutely. For the first time in history, we have the capability of destroying ourselves utterly. And at just the right moment, we have devised the incapability to see such a thing is

possible. We have surreptitiously postulated our own immortality, for we have become incapable of conceiving of our thorough, universal demise. The timing is perfect.

But we should know this, for it is by principle that we are always thinking wrong. If we recognize the broad applicability of the distinctly Heraclitean proposition of the *enantiodromia* of C. G. Jung (and a solid Nietzschean he), a proposition it appears more broadly applicable than even Jung thought, we should recognize that a time in which we are absorbed by the cutting-edge theorizations of indeterminacy must be a time in which adamantine implications are facing us, a time in which we confront eventualities that, once occasioned, cannot be corrected. Our thoughts convey by their “gestures” precisely the opposite of what they say—this is our nature, at least, our nature when we gather together in sufficient numbers and then attempt to think. For we should know that when enough people agree, the idea must be wrong. An individual may be possessed of insight; a congregation will delude itself. This is the true implication of the herd instinct—when the euphuism of the time leans to fathomless degrees of intricacy, a stark fate is looming.

And it is not a faltering of the will that is the issue at hand, for it is not that we cannot act, but that we do not see. The face in the mirror does not mesmerize; it obscures. We know not where we are; we know not what we do; we know not what we think, for there are structural patterns in thought that preclude our grasping our dilemmas, that put us at the mercy of ourselves.

For there is a gulf, there is a gap in the seal of perception. As much as our awareness of the world is determined by the laws that pertain to the epistemological conditions of knowing, as much as laws of thought rule the manner in which we may know and the decisions we may think to enact—knowledge and decisions that may well be capable of infinite parsing, of interminable splitting into ever subtler shades of indistinction, that may well refer to phenomena of ultimately indecipherable aspect—we commit actions that occur not among phenomena but in the world, that are as real as is the world without the range of our perceptions, and whose ramifications obey the laws not of thought but of objective reality, of physics: that are not implications but eventualities. For we are minds, but we are as well bodies, objects in a world of objective facts—facts among an ocean of facts. If the world is beyond our capacity to know with perfectly defined accuracy, with precision, so are our bodies, so are we, and so are the actions we devote. If our knowledge cannot be perfect, then our knowledge of ourselves must be imperfect, for we are, in the end and as Nietzsche knew so well, each of us a piece of nature. And unless we are incapable of surprise, unless we are competent to live through only what we can conceive, we will do to ourselves what we cannot predict. However uncertain our knowledge is, we are bodies and subject to absolutes, for as physical realities, the surest thing we are capable of is death, and death cannot be diced.

For finally, we live and, ultimately, we die not in the “world” we perceive

but in the world, and the world has the power to eradicate phenomena—to eviscerate our minds of every perception and thought, to extirpate our minds themselves—not just the phenomena of decimation but the very potency of conceiving phenomena itself. The world is apart from our power to encounter it, for the world will remain when we have erased ourselves from it. The scorched earth will be left behind when we all are gone, and the power that will flame it to a cinder is found at a level of magnification beyond the range of our senses, outside the precincts of the phenomenal. We will call down the thunder from a source we cannot conceive, but it will come as a result of what we will have created.

Such thoughts enter the mind when viewing “BODIES... The Exhibition,” not merely because the exhibition space is filled with what seem to be, and essentially are, coagulated renditions of what we are about to turn ourselves into, but because the experience of observing the quasi-scientific specimens of human remains itself invokes a pointed instance of the essential anomaly of our position as creatures of the world and as knowers of the world, as those who know ourselves as particles of the earth no better than we know the world of which we are fragments.

The exhibition in New York is only one installment of an enterprise of entertainment presentations—not quite art exhibitions and not quite science museum shows—continuing to arrive in a series of cities around the world. “BODIES... The Exhibition,” as seen in New York, presents 22 whole-body human specimens and 260 organ and partial body specimens preserved through the use of liquid silicone rubber. The technique involves the dissection of human bodies to expose inner structures and the substitution of the bodies’ water with a liquid silicone mixture that hardens to transform the remains into permanently preserved specimens with the texture of rubber and the appearance of the originals, meaning the appearance of authentic cadavers, which these apparently are, in that the original tissues evidently are transformed but not removed. The body parts are displayed with palpable sobriety, and the full-body specimens are opened to reveal muscles and organs and are posed: running with muscles streaming off in the seeming breeze, sitting in the posture of Rodin’s *Thinker*, playing football, and committing other such pantomimed antics. *

For those who will not make it to any of the venues: The alter-ego version of the New York exhibition (refer to the note at the end of this text) serves as one of the sets in *Casino Royale*, providing a reasonably clever reflection of the biological Calvinism that establishes the underlying value system for the Bond stories and that hasn’t been seen in the film series since the middle of *Thunderball*.

There have been expressions of shock and outrage over the exhibitions. Directors of the Seattle Museum of the Mysteries issued a statement declaring the exhibition demonstrates “a gross disrespect for the dead” and labeling it “a violation of basic human rights and dignity.” In England, Tory MP Teddy

Taylor remarked, "This will only appeal to ghoulish groups in our society. What possible benefit can a normal person gain from looking at dead bodies?" Also in England, a spokesperson for the Nuffield Foundation, a charitable trust in the United Kingdom, announced, "Human tissue should not be bought and sold or otherwise treated as an object of commerce. Body parts, anatomical specimens or preserved bodies should not be displayed in connection with public entertainment or art." A spokesperson for the British Medical Association said, "We feel uncomfortable with the money aspect of it." In Austria, the Dean of Mannheim objected that the exhibitions violate the sanctity of the human body for the purposes of commercial art. And from the art contingent, there has been little support forthcoming—David Lee, editor of *The Jackdaw*, an English newsletter on the visual arts, stated, "I will go and thousands of others will go too. But in the end it is a freak show."



It is notable that none of the objections quoted here, nor those observed by this writer elsewhere, give reasons for the outrage. The ghastliness is taken to be self-evident, which is to say that the arguments are made by fiat—without reasoning. Yet, there does seem to be something if not reasonable then at least predictable about such expressions of dismay. It seems as if one should not be surprised by them—it seems sensible that one would be shocked by this visual material, even if one cannot specify what there is in it that is shocking. There is the suggestion of something purely reactive here, something deeply rooted and not deliberate. And it is as in all things, the reactive is a mental lock, a willfulness not to think, a willfulness not to see. It is the vacuum gap of the mind.

So the question establishes itself: What about the viewing of preserved human corpses is shocking, shocking in a way that the viewing of manufactured models of the same structures would not be?

It is clear at the first degree of consideration that these specimens invoke

in the thoughts the mind / body dichotomy—they are virtually, in perhaps a reverse application of the contemporary meaning of the word and reflective of the near ambulatory postures into which the complete bodies have been maneuvered, a dramatization of the essential dilemma. As the chafing reactions make equally evident, a certain position with regard to the mind / body dichotomy is necessary to our equilibrium. The stability of the equation with which the two concepts are contemplated determines our stability in contemplating them—if the balance of halves is recalibrated, the balance of large numbers of people is disturbed. A nerve is being touched, which is to say a need is being disdained.

The reason for the sensitivity is clear: We die. More precisely, we know that our bodies die, and unless the dichotomy is maintained, and maintained as a parallel dispensation—such that the two do not intersect, do not coincide at any point, but retain each a status independent of the other, even given the need for a principle of interaction across the distance of categorical difference—we die with them. What is touched by the very suggestion of the mind / body dichotomy is not just a nerve, but the nerve, for as Schopenhauer observed in a remark that sets the “fulcrum absolute,” the discretionary fixed point of speculation without which speculation is not possible (and in this case, not so discretionary), to philosophy: “Indeed, without death there would hardly have been any philosophizing. . . . All religions and philosophical systems are directed principally to this end, and are thus primarily the antidote to the certainty of death which reflecting reason produces from its own resources.”

The reported responses from von Hagens to the outrage his version of the exhibition has provoked indicate a lack of awareness of the intrinsic sensitivity. His explanations regarding what he claims are the educational values of the exhibitions, the effort on his part to dispel the elitism of the medical profession and return to a time, as he sees it, in which the function of scientific inquiry was to promote the general enlightenment and during which dissection arenas held public examinations of the dead, possess a touch of blithe insouciance—in short, he gives little indication that he gets it. The tone of it all resembles the responses we often encounter from contemporary artists when they manage, as they seem to do with diminishing frequency now, to outrage the general sensitivities. (One may consult a list of Turner Prize winners for a typical roster; other line-ups will do as well.) They often respond with a “who, me?” attitude, as if not quite aware of what all the fuss is about. Their defenses and explanations are unconvincing, mere excuses tailored to the audience, the dropping of words that appear suitable for forgiveness, a vocal pantomime of penance, and particularly so in that their statements so often seem off the point—a deliberate or unconscious shifting of the question, discussing their intentions in place of their unwitting insults or abuses, coupled with a tone of naïve astonishment, which might entirely be sincere, that anything seems wrong to anyone. Other than in their implicit testimony to the insularity of the art world society—an inadvertent diagnostic, an unintended confession—these sensitive souls defend themselves by claiming a complete lack of comprehension of how anyone else feels: a distinctive confession on the part

of anyone claiming to be an artist.

There is testimony to a severe lack of conviction in this. The simple fact that they are not prepared to outrage, that they claim not to get it, distinguishes them from those who have in the past found the need to outrage to make a crucial point. Think of the Surrealists, the Futurists, even the Dadaists—they knew precisely what they were doing. And of course, we know how this situation arises, how such a falling-off is there: like professionals in any field, artists now follow the money, they do what the industry asks them to do, they attempt to master the game they wish to play in order to get along in the world, to make their way, to make their living. Young artists appeal to established expectations, knowing frequently nothing of them other than that they are established expectations. The dedication is circumstantial, a commitment to whatever standards and expectations presently prevail, to whatever it is that will get them into the sub-society in which they wish to dwell. Unlike the truly dedicated, who are not slaves to circumstance but the authors of it, elsewhere they would do or have done differently. Had they been born in another place, at another time, they would have done what would have served there and then, they never would have fallen upon what they now dedicate the only life they will ever have to accomplishing. Here is the herd instinct in full flower.

Of course, one has no business speculating about the personal motives of specific individuals, von Hagens or the organizers of the exhibition under consideration here—one cannot possibly know. It is sufficiently difficult to know one's own motives. However, the apparent tone of these defenses, the touch of blithe if bemused unconcern that seems to be there, is not anomalous—it is authorized by the age.

We live in a time of philosophical oblivion. In fact, we are in the business of philosophical smugness. We find the inherited dichotomies and the questions they entail to be quaint, as if we are smarter than the entire tradition of philosophical inquiry, as if we were naturally capable of out-thinking, by dint of our historical position, many of the greatest minds who have bequeathed us their most ardent intellectual efforts. Several months ago in these pages, I wrote about the naivety of disregarding Pascal's horror at the infinite spaces in which we figure so little, about the continuing, the permanent pertinence of his observations. The same should be said of Descartes and his conception of the *res cogitans* and the *res extensa*. The mind / body distinction is not so easily dismissed, not so easily relegated to the scrapheap of historical reflection, not so readily dispelled with posturings about the folly of dualistic thinking, which, like poised cadavers, strike a pose of pretended intellectual animation but fail to argue an alternative formulation. To disregard out of hand Descartes' dichotomy is comparable to shrugging off Pascal's dread. It is simply obtuse, and, like our art, fails to comprehend how other people feel. Descartes speaks to a perception that not only has a certain self-evidence—the most rudimentary examination of the quality of circumstance demonstrates that the aspects of the mind are all categorically alike, as are the aspects of the body, and each group is categorically different from the other. Further, his perception



Right Left Anatomy
BODIES... The Exhibition

appears to be a necessary view of the species regarding its own condition.

The recognition of the mind / body distinction is not only necessary—necessary by all appearances to the emotional equanimity of the typical person—it is necessarily religious. For the Cartesian position postulates this world and then another world beyond this one, it posits something outside this world. And, as an intellectual formulation that requires a parallel arrangement of equal status, the dichotomy collapses, for the localization—the identification of my mind as *my mind*, tied to *my body* and no other, and vice versa—necessitates an intersection that violates the conditions of the formulation, and as a result, one of the two worlds becomes paramount. This world becomes a dependent of the other world—the mind, or what is now the soul, possesses the body as an attribute, until it doesn't, when it is free to waft to its proper environment. The mind becomes essence. In the end, the other world becomes the truth, this world the veil of appearances, and we have the core religious proposition, and the core metaphysical proposition, as Nietzsche employed the word. Thus, the

complaint concerning the violation of the sanctity of the body, a complaint that ought to be a contradiction in terms, for the body is the mundane portion of the pairing. But the body obtains its sanctity from the mind, from that of which it is an attribute, from that which provides it its nature. And thus the shock at seeing the body opened to reveal mere machinery, immediately below the surface.

And as a religious proposal, the dichotomy is reactive, or if one likes, an article of faith. One can argue it forward to tease out the implications, but one cannot argue it backwards, to work through the premises upon which it rests. There