

PHANTOM BODIES

The Human Aura in Art



Phantom Bodies: The Human Aura in Art

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Frist Center for the Visual Arts | Upper-Level Galleries

People often feel the presence of someone when no one is there. This may be a way of giving form to the fear of the unknown, the ghost in the closet. It may be a near-palpable memory of an absent loved one, triggered by an article of clothing, a photograph, a scent, an old recording. And it can even be a feeling of being close to the spirit or soul of someone who has died. Regardless of the source, the sense of presence-in-absence fills a deep need to experience a human essence outside the body.

This exhibition includes artworks that indicate such presences through surrogates: shadows, imprints, or masks; objects as memento mori; or forms of pure energy. The title is derived from the phenomenon known as phantom limb syndrome. Those experiencing this have lost some part of their bodies but feel it to be still present. While it is a source of sensation and frequently of pain, the phantom limb here symbolizes the longing to fill the empty spaces that accrue through the lives of individuals and cultures.

Objects and Absence

A number of the artworks in the exhibition use objects, including found photographs and film footage, to posit a special connection to an absent user. The sense of aura in such artifacts may intensify when we know their history, particularly when that history is associated with trauma.

Christian Boltanski's *Untitled (Reserve)* (1989) contains faded photographic portraits, reprinted from the 1931 yearbook for Chase's High School, a Jewish girls' school in Vienna whose students were almost certainly persecuted by the Nazis during the following decade (fig. 1). We are familiar with yearbooks and the promise they hold, but when such images are known in hindsight to show hopeful youths



Figure 1

on the cusp of their own annihilation, the nostalgia for optimism evaporates. It is replaced by the thought that throughout history, innumerable children have been used and destroyed in the pursuit of ideology or power. The victimization of children can trigger a feeling of horror in all who can imagine the young victims' pain and disillusionment upon their first (and often final) exposure to human cruelty, which adults know about even if we don't always understand. For Boltanski, the message is universally recurrent. We may compare the girls in *Untitled (Reserve)* to the Nigerian girls kidnapped by Boko Haram in 2014, or the forty-three students in Mexico who

disappeared (also in 2014) and are presumed to have been killed by drug lords and their police associates.

Below the yearbook photographs is a stack of clothing, reminders of the clothes stripped from victims in Nazi concentration camps during the Second World War. The sense that these items stand for a fraught history comes from the context supplied by the photographs—in themselves, the clothes reveal nothing about the past. But shown with photographs of presumed casualties of the Holocaust, they are stark reminders of the transformation that comes from stripping people naked to decivilize and dehumanize them. Clothes are saved because, to the oppressor, they have more value than the people who owned them.

Shirin Neshat's *The Seasons* (2011) integrates photographs, film, and recorded sound to create a multidimensional experience of the missing, hidden, or dead. This quartet of elegiac films responds to natural and human-made crises in Africa and the Middle East. In *Egypt in My Heart*, Neshat shows footage of a performance by the musician Umm Kulthum, singing to a packed concert hall in Cairo in 1965 about time's passing, love, and loss. This is layered with images of young men and women who participated in the Arab Spring uprisings that began in 2010 and spread throughout the Middle East. With this combination of performance and portraits, Neshat conveys a keen sense of regret overtaking courage and hope now that the forces of democratic change have been dampened or destroyed. The words to the song are no

less moving than the emotional depth of the singer's voice, through which we find ourselves feeling the loss of people we have never met (fig. 2).

Violence, Empathy, and Erasure

Artwork relating to unknown people who have suffered or enacted violence often depicts them as generalized figures in a narrative of crime, war, or social oppression. One may feel empathy for individuals when their identity or circumstances are known, but when the victims are unseen or are too numerous to grasp, empathy may give way to a feeling of helplessness at the endless capacity for inhumanity. Employing memento mori, altered photographs, and masks and body imprints, art in this section alludes to the experience of loss on a cultural level.

Doris Salcedo's *Atrabiliarios* (1992–93) features the shoes of people who have been kidnapped and likely murdered as a result of war in her native Colombia. The shoes are mounted within a wall, as if in a reliquary niche, behind an animal-skin membrane stitched in surgical thread and reminiscent of an enclosure of prickly thorns. In viewing the shoes, mostly we feel their emptiness. For family members and friends, intimate objects like this may be surrogates for the victim, toward which, in the absence of a body, they can direct their mourning.

Teresa Margolles similarly addresses the invisibility of people who have suffered violence in Mexico. Her *Lote Bravo* (2005)

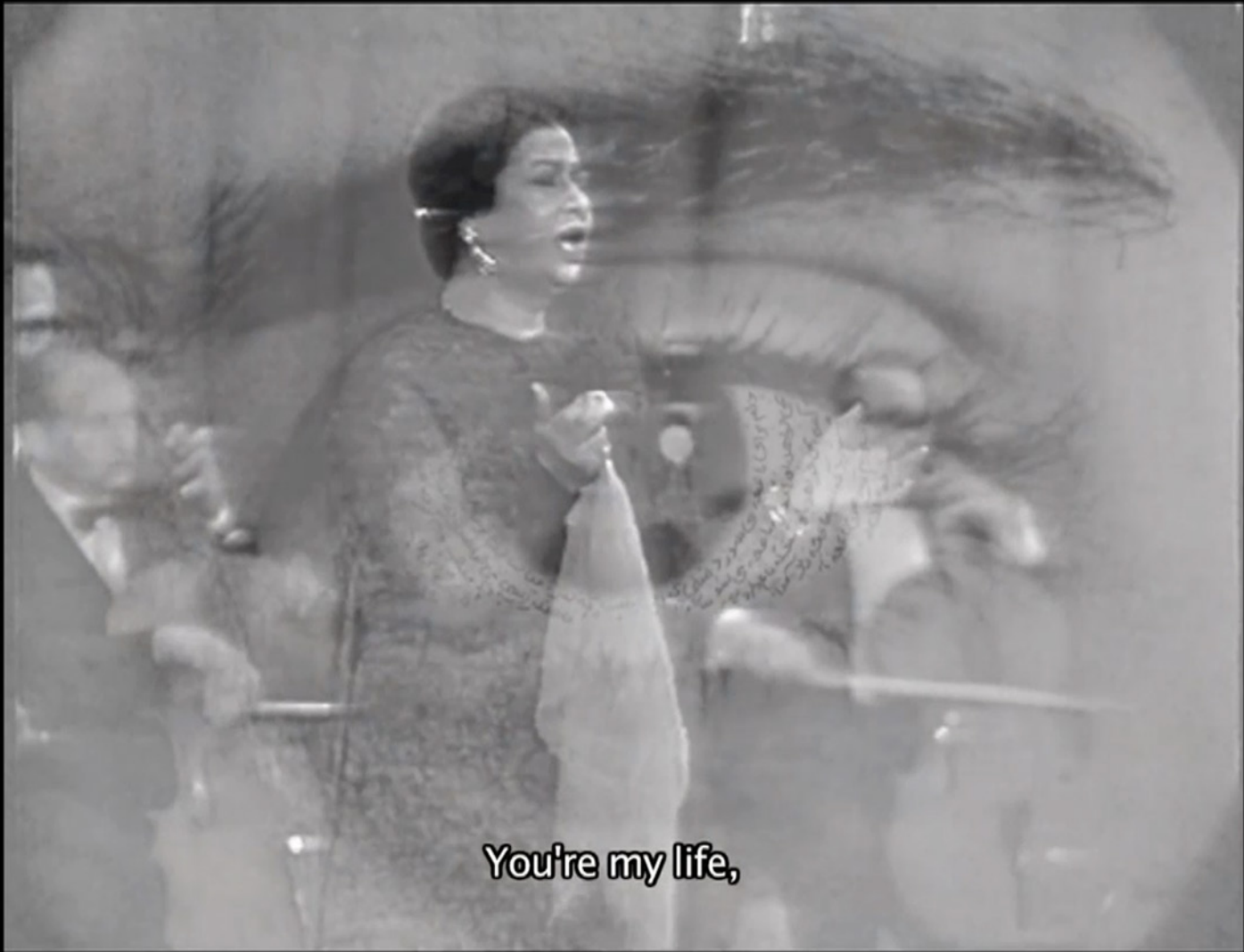


Figure 2



Figure 3

is composed of stacked bricks crafted from sand Margolles collected in Ciudad Juárez, from where hundreds of murdered women's bodies have been found. Her other work in the exhibition, *Ajuste de Cuentas (Score Settling)* (2007), consists of jewelry made with shards of glass she collected from sites of drive-by shootings in Sinaloa. The possibility of residual DNA in the bricks and glass adds emotional power, reminding us that many artworks have the blood of the oppressed to thank for their existence (fig. 3).

Sublimation

In chemistry, *sublimation* describes the passage of a solid material into gas. In this exhibition, the term expands poetically to suggest a purification, substitution, or transformation of the body into other matter or energy.

To represent humanity as stone or ash, fire or light is often to imply that the body is one with the elements of the universe. The ignited white powder in Ana Mendieta's *Volcán serie no. 2 (Volcano Series no. 2)* (1979) makes it seem as if energy is coming from the earth through the body-shaped cavity she dug, and then traveling out into the atmosphere in a dynamic transfer. The human as volcano appears again in Anish Kapoor's sculpture *Mother as a Mountain* (1985). The opening on the mountain's angled face is, like Mendieta's silhouettes, an anthropomorphic threshold between earth and sky. The aureole of powdered red pigment surrounding the base of the mountain connotes lava and the dried blood of the maternal body.

Photography has a long history, both duplicitous and scientific, of translating humanity into other matter, often through attempts to capture invisible energy fields. Nineteenth- and early twentieth-century spirit photographers used double exposures, other darkroom tricks, and illusory tableaux to convince gullible viewers of the existence of invisible auras, spirits, and ectoplasm. Sally Mann's photographs evoke this tradition as they portray her husband, physically diminished from muscular dystrophy, as an amalgam of flesh, light, shadow, and aqueous atmosphere. In *Hephaestus*, from her *Proud Flesh* series, he seems to be dematerialized, suspended between being and nothingness (fig. 4).

While Mann's photographs are neither spiritualist nor literally reflective of a medical condition, they are



Figure 4

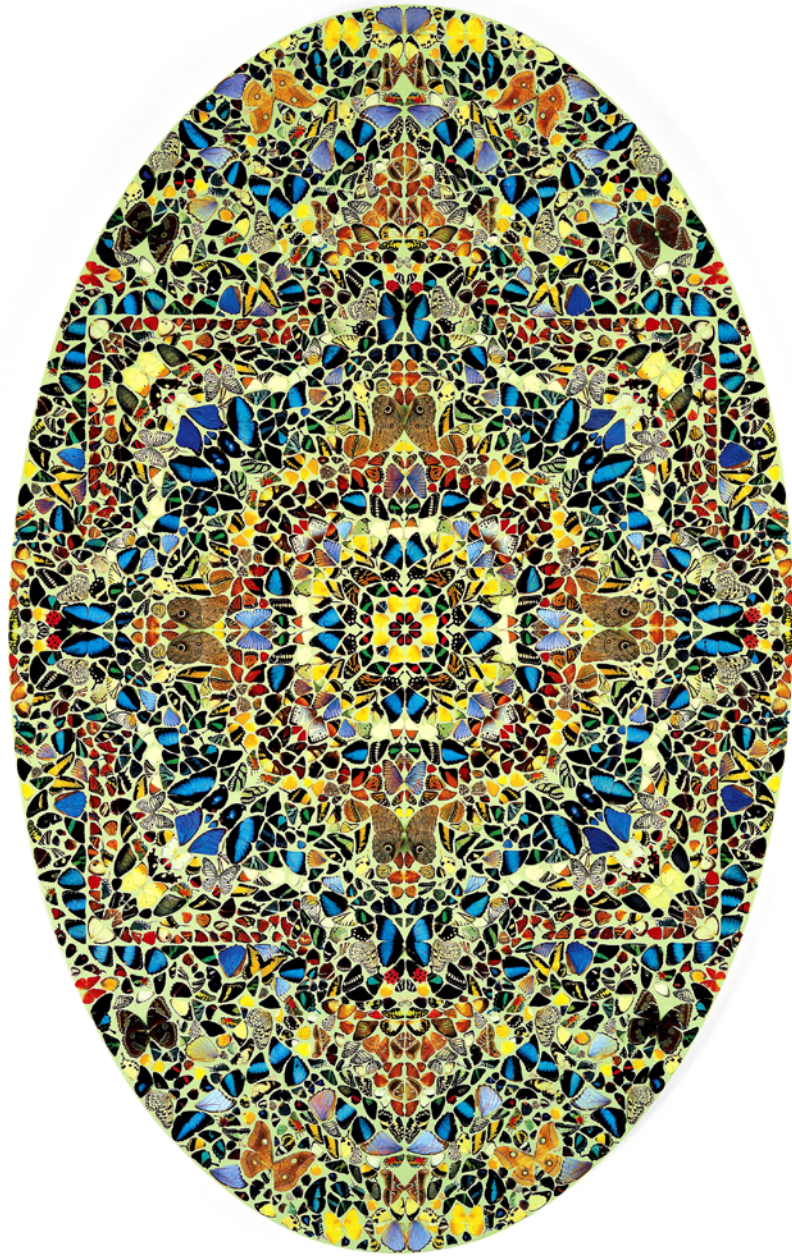


Figure 5

reminders that spirit photography shares the luminous ghostliness of medical imaging technology, from X-rays to brain scans, which translate bodily interiors and electrical charges into glowing forms and lights. In Ana Mendieta's film *Butterfly* (1975), shifting areas of colored light suggest infrared thermal imaging, which measures variations in radiation relative to changes in heat. Similarly, Ross Bleckner's *A Brain in the Room* (2012–13) evokes a magnetic resonance imaging (MRI) scan, which translates blood flow and neural activity into areas of gray or pure color. Today's medical technology demonstrates that the body is animated by invisible forces, which may be viewed as quantifiable human auras.

The Mind-Body Problem

The exhibition concludes by moving from science to philosophy in considering the relationship between mind and body—are they dependent on or independent from each other? The question, which has engaged philosophers for millennia, carries with it connotations of the soul and an afterlife. While notions like these are often considered irrelevant in today's artistic discourse, religious iconography can provide contemporary artists a vocabulary with which to explore the question of the body's relationship to its animating spirit.

Gerhard Richter's *Abstract Picture (Rhombus)* (851-1) (1998) was originally commissioned for a Franciscan monastery. The painting interprets the traditional Catholic belief in the mystical transference of the stigmata—the wounds of Christ's crucifixion—onto the body of St. Francis as a sign of his own sanctity. Houshiary's meditative painting *Ode* (2013) shows the influence of Sufism, an esoteric branch of Islam that is based on a belief in the unity of the physical and spiritual realms. Even a work by noted iconoclast Damien Hirst, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (2003), has religious connotations. This collage of butterfly wings takes its name from Milan Kundera's novel about an existentialist's pained sense of being unmoored from the past and the future. Paradoxically, the collage evokes religious iconographic traditions, which often depict the sublime beauty of the afterlife: the stained-glass windows of Christianity, the woven carpets of Islam, and the mandalas of Hinduism and Buddhism (fig. 5).

The videos of Bill Viola often link reflections on spirituality to the philosophical question of the mind's relation to the body. His *Isolde's Ascension (The Shape of Light in the Space After Death)* (2005) interprets Wagner's opera *Tristan und Isolde*—a medieval tale of a forbidden love affair that ends in tragic death for the lovers—as a meditation on a love so deep that it

transcends the flesh (cover illustration). In the video, a beam of light plays on the surface of water; it seems to come from above, a heavenly source, until we realize that the camera is inverted and underwater, so the light is really coming from below. The beam is suddenly broken by the entry of Isolde's dying body, arms spread as if in a crucifixion. Impossibly, the body has risen toward the light like an ascending soul while it sinks to the depths, to oblivion.

A practitioner of Buddhism, Viola seeks to reflect the struggle between the inner and outer realms and considers the body to be “the area where this [struggle] is being played out. It is the old philosophical ‘mind-body’ problem coming to a crescendo as an ecological drama where the outcome rests not only on our realization that the natural physical environment is one and the same as our bodies, but that nature itself is a form of Mind.”¹ The spirit and consciousness are one with the body and the world.

It seems fitting to now return to the idea of the phantom limb. When an arm is lost, there is a body to feel its vestigial presence. But where does phantom pain reside when a person is lost—when a family or a community is erased? And how does this relate to art? The question may be metaphorically approached through science. Neuroscientist V. S. Ramachandran asserts that phantom pain originates in the brain, not in the stump with its severed nerves. He has shown

that the brain's surface contains a map of the body's surface. As was described in an interview on NPR, when a limb is amputated, the area mapped to feel its presence is “deprived of sensory inputs it was used to receiving—and bec[omes] hungry for new sensations,” which it invents in the form of phantom feeling.² Not merely a chart of what exists, the brain map is an active force that reconstructs something that is not there—a kind of biomimetic artistry.

In healing phantom pain, Ramachandran has developed ways to remap the brain, deceive it, retrain it, and help it adapt to the loss. This provides an analogy to what artists can accomplish, as they can similarly interrupt reflexive reactions to loss and adjust our mechanisms for coping with a painful absence.

Mark Scala, chief curator

Notes

1. Bill Viola, *Reasons for Knocking at an Empty House* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995), 236.

2. “V. S. Ramachandran's Tales of the ‘Tell-Tale Brain,’” National Public Radio (NPR) books blog, February 14, 2011, www.npr.org.

Illustrations

Cover: Bill Viola (American, b. 1951). *Isolde's Ascension (The Shape of Light in the Space After Death)* (still), 2005. Color high-definition on plasma display mounted on wall with stereo sound, running time 10:30. Performer: Sarah Steben. Courtesy of Bill Viola Studio. © Bill Viola Studio. Photo: Kira Perov

Figure 1: Christian Boltanski (French, b. 1944). *Untitled (Reserve)*, 1989. Clothing, black-and-white photographs, and lights, 111 x 64 x 7 in. overall. Rubell Family Collection, Miami. © Christian Boltanski

Figure 2: Shirin Neshat (Iranian, b. 1957). *Egypt in My Heart* (still), from *The Seasons*, 2011. Blu-ray Disc, a project commissioned by the *New York Times*, running time 4:25. Courtesy of the artist and Gladstone Gallery, New York and Brussels. © Shirin Neshat

Figure 3: Teresa Margolles (Mexican, b. 1963). *Ajuste de Cuentas (Score Settling)* (detail), 2008. Installation of 18-karat gold jewelry and glass. Collection of Museo de Arte Contemporáneo de Castilla y León (MUSAC). © Teresa Margolles

Figure 4: Sally Mann (American, b. 1951). *Hephaestus*, from *Proud Flesh*, 2008. Gelatin silver print, edition of 5, 15 x 13 1/2 in. Courtesy of the artist and Gagosian Gallery. © Sally Mann

Figure 5: Damien Hirst (British, b. 1965). *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, 2003. Butterfly wings on household gloss on canvas, 96 x 60 in. The Broad Art Foundation. © Damien Hirst and Science Ltd. All rights reserved, DACS 2015. Photo: Gareth Winters

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Downtown Nashville
919 Broadway
Nashville, TN 37203