



edited by
Caroline A. Jones

sensorium

embodied experience,
technology, and
contemporary art

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Bill Arning, Jane Farver, Yuko Hasegawa, and Marjory Jacobson, curators.

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utopian body¹

This place that Proust slowly, anxiously comes to occupy anew every time he awakens: from that place, as soon as my eyes are open, I can no longer escape.² Not that I am nailed down by it, since after all I can not only move, shift, but I can also move *it*, shift *it*, change *its* place. The only thing is this: I cannot move without it. I cannot leave it there where it is, so that I, myself, may go elsewhere. I can go to the other end of the world; I can hide in the morning under the covers, make myself as small as possible. I can even let myself melt under the sun at the beach—it will always be there. Where I am. It is here, irreparably: it is never elsewhere. My body, it's the opposite of a utopia: that which is never under different skies. It is the absolute place, the little fragment of space where I am, literally, embodied [*faire corps*]. My body, pitiless place.

And what if by chance I lived with it, in a kind of worn familiarity, as with a shadow, or as with those everyday things that ultimately I no longer see, that life has grayed out, like those chimneys, those roofs that line the sky every night in front of my window? Still, every morning: same presence, same wounds. In front of my eyes the same unavoidable images are drawn, imposed by the mirror: thin face, slouching shoulders, myopic gaze, no more hair—not handsome at all. And it is in this ugly shell of my head, in this cage I do not like, that I will have to reveal myself and walk around; through this grill I must speak, look and be looked at; under this skin I will have to rot.

My body: it is the place without recourse to which I am condemned. And actually I think that it is against this body (as if to erase it) that

all these utopias have come into being. The prestige of utopia—to what does utopia owe its beauty, its marvel? Utopia is a place outside all places, but it is a place where I will have a body without body, a body that will be beautiful, limpid, transparent, luminous, speedy, colossal in its power, infinite in its duration. Untethered, invisible, protected—always transfigured. It may very well be that the first utopia, the one most deeply rooted in the hearts of men, is precisely the utopia of an incorporeal body.

The land of fairies, land of gnomes, of genies, magicians—well, it is the land where bodies transport themselves at the speed of light; it is the land where wounds are healed with marvelous beauty in the blink of an eye. It is the land where you can fall from a mountain and pick yourself up unscathed. It is the land where you're visible when you want, invisible when you desire. If there is a land of fairy tales, it is precisely so that I may be its prince charming, and that all the pretty boys there may turn nasty and hairy as bears.

There is also a utopia made for erasing bodies. This utopia is the land of the dead, those grand utopian cities that the Egyptian civilization left behind. What is a mummy, after all? Well, a mummy is the utopia of the body negated and transfigured. The mummy is the great utopian body that persists across time. There were also the golden masks that the Mycenaean civilization placed over the faces of defunct kings: utopia of their bodies, glorious,

powerful and solar, of a terror disarmed. There have been paintings, sculptures, tombs, those reclining statues that, since the middle Ages, prolonged in immobility a youth that can no longer pass away. Nowadays there are those simple marble cubes, bodies geometricized in stone, regular figures of white on the great blackboard of cemeteries. And in this utopian city of the dead, suddenly my body becomes solid like a thing, eternal like a God.

But perhaps the most obstinate, the most powerful of those utopias with which we erase the sad topology of the body, has been, since the beginning of Western history, supplied to us by the great myth of the soul. The soul. It functions in my body in the most marvelous way: it resides there, of course, but it also knows how to escape. It escapes from the body to see things through the window of my eyes. It escapes to dream when I sleep, to survive when I die. It is beautiful, my soul: It is pure, it is white. And if my body—which is muddy, or in any case not very clean—should come to soil it, there will always be a virtue, there will always be a power, there will be a thousand sacred gestures that will reestablish my soul in its primary purity. It will last a long time, my soul, more than a “long time,” when my old body comes to rot. Long live my soul! It is my body made luminous, purified, virtuous, agile, mobile, warm, fresh. It is my body made smooth, neutered, rounded like a soap bubble.

There you have it. My body, by virtue of these utopias, has disappeared. It has disappeared the way the flame of a candle is blown out. The soul, the tombs, the genies and the fairies have taken it in an underhanded way, made it disappear with sleight of hand, have blown out its heaviness, its ugliness, and have given it back to me, dazzling and perpetual.

But to tell the truth, my body will not be so easily reduced. It has, after all, itself, its own phantasmagoric resources. It, too, possesses some placeless places, and places more profound, more obstinate even than the soul, than the tomb, than the enchantment of magicians. It has its caves and its attics, it has its obscure abodes, its luminous beaches. My head, for example, my head: what a strange cavern that opens onto the external world with two windows. Two openings—I am sure of it, because I see them in the mirror, and also because I can close one or the other separately. And yet, there is really only one opening—since what I see facing me is only one continuous landscape, without partition or gap. What happens inside of this head? Well, things come to lodge themselves inside it. They enter—and I am certain that things enter my head when I look, because the sun, when it is

too strong and blinds me, rips right through to the back of my brain. And yet, these things that enter my head remain on the outside, since I see them in front of me, and in order to reach them I must come forward in turn.

Incomprehensible body, penetrable and opaque body, open and closed body, utopian body. Absolutely visible body, in one sense. I know very well what it is to be looked over by someone else from head to toe. I know what it is to be spied from behind, watched over the shoulder, caught off guard when I least expect it. I know what it is to be naked. And yet this same body, which is so visible, is also withdrawn, captured by a kind of invisibility from which I can never really detach it. This skull, the back of my skull, I can feel it, right there, with my fingers. But see it? Never. This back, which I can feel leaning against the pressure of the mattress, against the couch when I am lying down, and which I might catch but only by the ruse of the mirror. And what is this shoulder, whose movements and positions I know with precision, but that I will never be able to see without dreadfully contorting myself? The body—phantom that only appears in the mirage of the mirror, and then only in fragmentary fashion—do I really need genies and fairies, and death and the soul, in order to be, at the same time, both visible and invisible? Besides, this body is light; it is transparent; it is imponderable. Nothing is less *thing* than my body: it runs, it acts, it lives, it desires. It lets itself be traversed, with no resistance, by all my intentions. Sure. But until the day when I hurt, when a pit is hollowed out in my belly, when my chest and throat choke up, block up, fill up with coughs. Until the day that a toothache crazes in the back of my mouth. And then, I cease to be light, imponderable, et cetera. I become thing . . . fantastic and ruminated architecture.

No, really, there is no need for magic, for enchantment. There's no need for a soul, nor a

death, for me to be both transparent and opaque, visible and invisible, life and thing. For me to be a utopia, it is enough that I be a body. All those utopias by which I evaded my body—well they had, quite simply, their model and their first application, they had their place of origin, in my body itself. I really was wrong, before, to say that utopias are turned against the body and destined to erase it. They were born from the body itself, and perhaps afterwards they turned against it.

In any case, one thing is certain: that the human body is the principal actor in all utopias. After all, isn't one of the oldest utopias about which men have told themselves stories the dream of an immense and inordinate body that could devour space and master the world? This is the old utopia of giants that one finds at the heart of so many legends in Europe, in Africa, in Oceania, in Asia—this old legend that for so long fed the Western imagination, from Prometheus to Gulliver.

The body is also a great utopian actor when it comes to masks, makeup, and tattoos. To wear a mask, to put on makeup, to tattoo oneself, is not exactly (as one might imagine) to acquire an other body, only a bit more beautiful, better decorated, more easily recognizable. To tattoo oneself, to put on makeup or a mask, is probably something else: It is to place the body in communication with secret powers and invisible forces. The mask, the tattooed sign, the face-paint—they lay upon the body an entire language, an entirely enigmatic language, an entire language that is ciphered, secret, sacred, which calls upon this body the violence of the God, the silent power of the Sacred, or the liveliness of Desire. The mask, the tattoo, the make-up: They place the body into

an other space. They usher it into a place that does not take place in the world directly. They make of this body a fragment of imaginary space, which will communicate with the universe of divinities, or with the universe of the other, where one will be taken by the gods, or taken by the person one has just seduced. In any case the mask, the tattoo, the make-up, are operations by which the body is torn away from its proper space and projected into an other space. Listen, for example, to this old Japanese tale, and to the way a tattoo artist makes the body of the young woman he desires pass into a universe that is not ours:

The morning sun glittered on the river, setting the eight-mat studio ablaze with light. Rays reflected from the water sketched rippling golden waves on the paper sliding screens and on the face of the girl, who was fast asleep. Seikichi had closed the doors and taken up his tattooing instruments, but for a while he only sat there entranced, savoring to the full her uncanny beauty. He thought that he would never tire of contemplating her serene mask-like face. Just as the ancient Egyptians had embellished their magnificent land with pyramids and sphinxes, he was about to embellish the pure skin of this girl. Presently he raised the brush which was gripped between the thumb and last two fingers of his left hand, applied its top to the girl's back, and, with the needle which he held in his right hand, began pricking out a design.³



Hisashi Tenmyouya, *Spider Woman*, from the *New Hundred Ghost Stories Series*, 2004, acrylic on paper, 10 x 7 in. Courtesy the artist and Mizuma Art Gallery, Tokyo, Japan.

And if one considers that clothing, sacred or profane, religious or civil, allows the individual to enter into the enclosed space of the monk, or into the invisible network of society, then one sees that everything that touches the body—drawings, colors, diadems, tiaras, clothes, uniforms, all that—lets the utopias sealed in the body blossom into sensible and colorful form. And perhaps, then, one should descend beneath the clothes—one should perhaps reach the flesh itself, and then one would see that in some cases even the body itself turns its own utopian power against itself, allowing all the space of the religious and the sacred, all the space of the other world, all the space of the counter world, to enter into the space that is reserved for it. So the body, then, in its materiality, in its flesh, would be like the product of its own phantasms. After all, isn't the body of the dancer precisely a body dilated along an entire space that is both exterior and interior to it? And the drugged, also? And the possessed? The possessed, whose bodies become hell; the stigmatized, whose bodies become suffering, redemption and salvation: a bloody paradise. Really, it was silly

of me, before, to believe that the body was never elsewhere, that it was an irremediable *here*, and that it opposed itself to any utopia.

My body, in fact, is always elsewhere. It is tied to all the elsewheres of the world. And to tell the truth, it is *elsewhere* than in the world, because it is around it that things are arranged. It is in relation to *it*—and in relation to it as if in relation to a sovereign—that there is a below, an above, a right, a left, a forward and a backward, a near and a far. The body is the zero point of the world. There, where paths and spaces come to meet, the body is nowhere. It is at the heart of the world, this small utopian kernel from which I dream, I speak, I proceed, I imagine, I perceive things in their place, and I negate them also by the indefinite power of the utopias I imagine. My body is like the City of the Sun. It has no place, but it is from it that all possible places, real or utopian, emerge and radiate.

After all, children take a long time to know that they have a body. For months, for more than a year, they only have a dispersed body of limbs, cavities, orifices. And all of this only gets organized, all of this gets literally embodied [*prendre un corps*] only in the image of the mirror.⁴ Stranger still is the way Homer's Greeks had no word to designate the unity of the body. As paradoxical as it may be, on the walls defended by Hector and his companions, facing Troy, there was no body. There were raised arms, there were brave chests, there were nimble legs, there were helmets shimmering atop heads—there was no body. The Greek word for "body" only appears in Homer to designate a corpse. It is this corpse, consequently, it is the corpse and it is the mirror that teach us—or at least that taught the Greeks then, and that teach children now—that we have a body, that this body has a form, that this form has an outline, that in this outline there is a thickness, a weight. In short, that the body occupies a place. It is the mirror and it is the corpse that assign a space to the

profoundly and originally utopian experience of the body. It is the mirror and it is the corpse that silence, and appease, and shut into a closure (for us now sealed) this great utopian rage that dilapidates and volatilizes our bodies at every instant. It is thanks to them, thanks to the mirror and to the corpse, that our body is not pure and simple utopia. And yet, if one considers that the image of the mirror resides for us in an inaccessible space, and that we will never be able to be where our corpse will be; if one thinks that the mirror and the corpse are themselves in an invincible elsewhere, then one discovers that only utopias can close in on themselves, and hide, for an instant, the profound and sovereign utopia of our body.

Maybe it should also be said that to make love is to feel one's body close in on oneself. It is finally to exist outside of any utopia, with all of one's density, between the hands of the other. Under the other's fingers running over you, all the invisible parts of your body begin to exist. Against the lips of the other, yours become sensitive. In front of his half-closed eyes, your face acquires a certitude. There is a gaze, finally, to see your closed eyelids. Love also, like the mirror and like death—it appeases the utopia of your body, it hushes it, it calms it, it encloses it as if in a box, it shuts and seals it. This is why love is so closely related to the illusion of the mirror and the menace of death. And if, despite these two perilous figures that surround it, we love so much to make love, it is because, in love, the body is *here*.

NOTES

234

1. Editor's note: "*Le corps utopique*," translated by Lucia Allais in consultation with Caroline A. Jones and Arnold Davidson from Michel Foucault, *Utopies et Hétérotopies*, a CD release of two 1966 radio broadcasts published in 2004 by the Institut National d'Audiovisuel, Paris. Of the two broadcasts included on this CD, "*Le corps utopique*" is the second (broadcast December 21) and has never been published as a text; "*Les Hétérotopies*" was the first (broadcast December 7). "*Les Hétérotopies*" generated a related lecture, "*Des espaces autres*" (written while Foucault was in Tunisia and delivered at *Conférence au Cercle d'études architecturales*, March 14, 1967). Included in *Dits et Ecrits* and published in *Architecture, Mouvement, Continuité* 5 (October 1984), 46–49, it was translated and published as "Of Other Spaces," *Diacritics* 16 (Spring 1986), 22–27. See <http://foucault.info/documents/heteroTopia/foucault.heteroTopia.fr.html>.

2. Translator's note: In this reference to the opening pages of *Swann's Way* (where the narrator continually falls in and out of sleep), Foucault borrows both Marcel Proust's description of his body as a literal place, "the point on the earth he occupies," and the trope of dissociating the speaking subject, I [je], from "it—my body" [*lui—mon corps*]. See *Swann's Way*, trans. Lydia Davis, ed. Christopher Prendergast (1913; new translation, London: Penguin, 2003), 5–6.

3. Editor's note: This unidentified passage is excerpted from Junichiro Tanizaki's "The Tattooer," a short story published in 1910 when tattooing had been outlawed in Japan. The English translation provided here is from Junichiro Tanizaki, *Seven Japanese Tales*, trans. Howard Hibbet (New York: Perigee, 1964), 160–69. Note that Seikichi has had to drug the resistant object of his desire, to still her body artificially, in order to produce upon it the designs that, for him, will call into being a utopian body for his gaze. A revealing example of the play between bodies with which Foucault also concludes.

4. Editor's note: Foucault makes a clear reference here to Jacques Lacan's theory of the "mirror phase" of infant development, when the body is assembled into a coherent unit with the assistance of the gaze and the distanced apparatus of the mirror. Lacan first developed this theory in 1936, but lectured extensively on it throughout the '60s, incorporating it in his best known work, *Ecrits* (Paris: Editions du Seuil, 1966), published just prior to Foucault's broadcasts.