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Body Is Not Neutral

The Use of Body in Documentation

by matt lambert
The process of documenting jewelry and adornment is a precarious one.

The accepted “norm” when taking what is often referred to as a “product” image is to use a white or graduated background. But the choice of background immediately influences the perception of the work; since graduated backgrounds are often viewed as dated, most current platforms request full white backgrounds—in part to suit online viewing. While this approach offers a clear view of the object, it prevents an understanding of scale and sometimes obscures how something is used or worn. The solution to giving a sense of scale and function is often to document pieces on or with a body in the image frame. Unlike a solid white background, the body is not neutral. When a body is included in documentation it comes with its own precarity, a precarity that should not be avoided but does deserve thoughtful consideration.

Before we address the use of the body in image-making, we must first acknowledge that the photographic process is not a neutral act. As Ariella Aïsha Azoulay, professor of Modern Culture and Media studies at Brown University, states:

In a split second, the camera’s shutter draws three dividing lines: in time (between a before and an after), in space (between who/what is in front of the camera and who/what is behind it), and in the body politics (between those who possess and operate such devices and appropriate and accumulate their product and those whose countenance, resources, or labor are extracted).

I would like to address the politics of using a body in the process of documenting work. When I say that the body is not neutral, I mean that there is no singular size, shape, color, sex, gender, ability, and so forth of a body. I would argue that to think or act otherwise perpetuates a colonial gaze, idealizing certain bodies over others or exploiting bodies or certain aesthetics for the performance of social awareness. It is asking if we are aware of the message or meaning we are transmitting through our documentation. When photographing work on the body, we are using a body, since it is supporting the intended focus—the work. This use should not be an afterthought; instead it should be considered part of the essential processes of making work. As artist Jemima Wyman states in a conversation with Jasmina Tumbas regarding the documentation of bodies: “A performing body is simultaneously an embodied act and a text to be read.” Who we choose to use or work with in our documentation and how we compose these images is critical; for example, our choice could either allow or prevent a perception of abuse, or be a performative gesturing toward political and cultural discourses. When we view work on the body, we read the body just as the work is read. The decision to document work on the body is not one to be taken lightly.
My intent here is not to discourage the use of bodies unlike that of the maker, but to contemplate approaches that consider solidarity, reparation, and understanding. These considerations require a deeper investment in the people whose bodies we are working with. We must not treat them only as blank canvases for our creations. I have gathered here a group of artists who approach documentation and body in different ways; I engaged each in conversations through a digital document to discover their thought processes and how they approach documentation with a/the body.

**SELF**

Artists and institutions have approached the body in many ways to address the concerns outlined above. One of the most obvious solutions is for the maker to use their own body; the maker takes on the role of both the photographed body and the photographer. Judit Fritz uses her own body, in part because her work grapples with her relationship to ideas of human and nonhuman. She states:

My pieces often have details inspired by typical gear equipment such as straps, large click locks, and adjustable joints, etc. This is to indicate that the idea of a body is not fixed, and that one can choose to wear one’s body as fit to their own ideas, and that it should be both a protected and safe space and a tool that makes us capable. By adding these details, I still feel like my work has a door open for any potential body, but that the way I wear them and what I let the pieces do to my body is my choice and my personal exploration.

Since her research originates from her body, she chooses to document the work on it. In Fritz’s own words, “I would not feel comfortable placing this very personal research onto another body, as I feel it would potentially label that person according to my own ideas.”

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Judit Fritz
*The collecting device (Electrolyte)*, 2021
Borosilicate glass, silicone, silver, brass, pearls
10 x 13 x 5 cm
Photo by the artist
COMMUNITY

Artist Luisa Kuschel approaches the body as a site for extending the intention of the work. When asked how she chooses whom to document work on, Kuschel replied, “The body needs to underline the statement. Jewelry stands in a dialogue with the human body, and in these pieces it was about the jewelry pieces making the emotions of the wearer visible: the pain of the black body being misused and abused.” Kuschel works with people she has connections with and who are aware of what the work is about, allowing the artist and the wearer to be in dialogue.

During the documentation process, the maker does not always have to take on the task alone. If there are more people who want to engage with the work, the process can be opened up into a collaborative experience, which releases the work from the total control of the
“her presence takes my work to new places, and we enter together into a STATE OF HYBRID VIGOR, where the sum is greater than the parts”

maker and allows others to layer their own interpretation and actions onto the work.

Nina Johansson works collaboratively with costume designer Hanna Kisch and performer Shirley Harthey Ubilla to make custom silicone pieces and components for performance. This long-term collaboration and shared interest in posthuman and liminal conditions opened a space for Ubilla to wear Johansson’s and Kisch’s work. In the words of Johansson:

Making work for another person’s body is a privilege, and it requires a lot of trust, both ways. With Shirley, I build my silicone pieces onto a plaster cast of her torso, which means not only that the pieces fit her perfectly, but also that they fit only her. Her body is the birthplace of my work, and where it gets activated. But it is a mutual exchange, since the pieces seem to merge with her and erase borders, transforming her into a being that is not only human. What it means in a very direct sense is that her presence takes my work to new places, and we enter together into a state of hybrid vigor, where the sum is greater than the parts.

Because Johansson’s work is custom-made, mutual and ongoing dialogue is essential to the making process. Through multiple conversations, the maker learns about the intellectual and physical aspects of the performer’s practice. Through fittings and rehearsals, the performer can provide insight on what it feels like to wear and move in the work. The long-term engagement makes room for different perspectives and meaning-making, each an additional layering on both the work and the image of the work.
During pandemic lockdowns in 2021, Märta Mattsson began conversations with queer, trans, and drag artists through social media to develop collaborative projects, engaging in dialogues toward making custom works to be documented collaboratively. This way of working creates an interesting shift in the image, questioning if the image itself becomes its own object. Mattsson states:

When I collaborate with other artists, I base my trust in them and their creativity from their previous work. If I have seen things that they have made that impress and inspire me, I will happily reach out to them to initiate a collaboration. For me, it’s important to give the trust and freedom to the other body and mind. The collaborations make me grow as an artist and take my pieces into new dimensions. I enjoy the process of the unknown and letting go of control. It’s my body and mind trusting another body and mind. Their bodies can tell a different story than mine, and I love that!

Even though Mattsson has not always met her collaborators in person, she engages through extensive conversations and planning. Her process allows collaborators to share their interests and navigate the practicalities of how things can be worn or attached to the body in the best way possible. As collaborator Philipp Basener
states, “I think collaborating can create amazing energies. We can draw on our own creativities and on each other’s talents to create something bigger.”

Collaboration can also be a balance with an institution. During the exhibit Periferi PINK at Kunst 1 Havgapet (Interlude Art Lab) in Sleneset, Norway, curator Benjamin Slotterøy approached the artists who were exhibiting jewelry with an invitation to document their work on local fisherman. This resulted in the 2022 exhibition *Art in the Sea Gap*. The goal of the project was to show the roles jewelry could play in different environments. Working with photographer Lena Knutli, Slotterøy engaged in dialogue with local fishermen to wear the work in their everyday lives. This engagement elicited reactions from the fisherman around challenging their own masculinity; they saw the project as a chance to show their solidarity with environmental, feminist, and queer perspectives, which were the focus of Periferi PINK. As artist participant Philipp Spillmann states:

As a maker, I like the idea to have control over the making process and then letting go, giving the piece its freedom to become part of a new narrative. It might be surprising or unexpected. It’s a dilemma, because a neutral studio photo can often not show the scale of the piece and how it looks while worn. However it often is necessary to do photos on body. I have mostly used my own body in everyday clothes. Since I am the maker of the piece, I feel this is almost as neutral as it gets. But in this case somebody made a decision for me and I really love this result. A fisherman in his working clothes. The context is wonderful. The piece is made out of an object found at the coast of Northern Norway, a plastic ring that serves as a float for fishing nets. Being worn by a northern Norwegian fisherman is like a full circle and there is still plenty of space for interpretations.⁹

**POSSIBILITIES**

What all of these approaches provide is an acknowledgment that documentation on a/the body does not only provide a single understanding of the work. There are numerous ways that meaning and understanding are created through documentation. Different levels of control and release allows for experimentation and opportunities to think of and see

“**COLLABORATING CAN CREATE AMAZING ENERGIES.**
We can draw on our own creativities and on each other’s talents to create something bigger.”
the work in a different light. Once a piece leaves the hands of the maker, it will independently accumulate meaning on its own. Documentation, which lives between the maker’s hand and the wider world, is an interesting space where the maker can dial back the self and invite collaborative meaning-making from others.

The use of a/the body in documentation is something to be approached with care and thoughtfulness. It is an opportunity to make deep connections in the image-centric world we live in today. It can also alleviate the pressure from the object to carry the entire weight of its meaning or to bring out nuance and subtlety. How we navigate from using a body to working with a body is always worth further consideration.