

The Rhetoric of Containment - On Aya Ben Ron's Hanging

Hanging is a site-specific work installed in the Wellcome's Trust building in London. In its long vertical format (25 meter), the work, a colorful banner printed on fiberglass fabric, is suspended inside the building's stairwell. In order to be viewed in its complete form the work demands its viewers either descend or ascend the stairs. This installment strategy infuses the act of viewing with both corporeal sensations and temporality. This condition of corporeal involvement becomes, at a certain point of viewing the banner's seemingly seductive ornamental images, a compressed somatic response to what has been slowly deciphered as disturbing medical imagery of bodies and organs. This kind of imagery acquires a new kind of visibility, and therefore a new mode of perception, when it is viewed as part of a work of art situated in an institute dedicated to both the production and preservation of scientific and medical knowledge. Moreover, by embedding visibility with somatic sensations, ranging from attraction to repulsion, the work suggests the inseparability of modes of perception and visual pleasure. *Hanging* thus seems to point to the ways in which the body's visibility and its modes of representation intersect with knowledge about the body. It is in this particular site of intersection, between representation, knowledge, visibility, power and pleasure, that *Hanging* as a work of art can be located.

The Opacity of Pain

The images circulating on the banner's colorful surface were all taken from scientific and medical textbooks, and then digitally redrawn on the computer as line-art images. The different styles of representation of the original images, which derive from different media (photography, drawing, lithography, engraving), were erased in favor of a clear and even line. But it is only through this severe mode of appropriation that the digitally drawn images both intensify and expose the particular visual rhetoric of scientific representations, what could be termed "the rhetoric of objectivity". This rhetoric is usually understood to be solely functional, "naturally" deriving from the use-value of these scientific images, which are meant to serve as didactic illustrations in professional medical manuals. Yet, there is nothing "natural"

about this rhetoric, and it actually points to the troubling epistemological threshold upon which these images are situated. What these images can display is the visible symptoms and effects of different diseases and malfunctions, pointing to the disease as a highly abstract epistemological entity involving both physiological and functional processes which occur inside the body, therefore remaining basically invisible. As Michel Foucault eloquently states in his discussion of the modern episteme of knowledge in his book *The Order of Things* (1966): “To classify, therefore, will no longer mean to refer the visible back to itself... it will mean, in a movement that makes analysis pivot on its axis, to relate the visible to the invisible, to its deeper cause, as it were, then to rise upwards once more from that hidden architecture towards the more obvious signs displayed on the surfaces of bodies.”

What constitutes the disturbing effect of the “rhetoric of objectivity” as it is exposed in *Hanging* is the unrepressed hiatus between the body’s violent exposure to the viewer’s gaze and the profound opacity of illness itself and, by the same token, of death. Violence in this context refers to the visual objectification of concrete human bodies, displayed to be “merely seen” by being “merely given”. Following Foucault, it can be said that in such a rhetoric of representation the visible body does seem to refer back to itself. But it is actually this “muteness” of both the body and the image, ranging from institutional signs of anonymity and effacement to clear expressions of displeasure, that both conditions and triggers the production of articulated meaning in the first place. Therefore, the work points to (scientific) knowledge’s conditions of possibility: subjection through objectification.

Hanging contains a depiction of what appears to be violent practices directed at the body itself. These practices operate as strategies of containment directed at restoring the body to its putative and secure bounds or limits. The images included in the banner show different surgical methods (amputation, dissection, transplanting); bandaging methods; before and after operation procedures; medical apparatuses for the straightening and stretching of bodies suffering from congenital diseases; different body organs with tumors or with bones and joints diseases; and also abstract scientific models of viruses and immunological symbols. The stable economy of differences in the body: between inside and outside, surfaces and interiors, organic structures and functions, has been shattered in the work. It has been both displaced and dislocated by an uncontrollable flow of excess and lack - missing organs and redundant organs. These images expose the

tremendous efforts that are being made by medical practices to keep the body in form, that is as a close, impenetrable, and therefore intelligible entity. Different strategies of containment such as sewing, stitching, bandaging and framing, are all meant to sustain the difference between the visual external surfaces of the body and its “dark interior”.

In *Hanging* medical methods and procedures appear as if they were violent tortures due to what seems as intensive amount of physical strength directed towards the body. Moreover, both in its mode of composition and method of drawing the work echoes some of the surgical procedures it depicts. Different body organs and parts appear detached from a complete body, and then these detached organs are doubled and combined, “stitched” to each other in what looks like a particular morbid, if not obscene imagery. This digital mode of drawing creates well delimited shapes, figures and surfaces, and enforces the surgical aesthetics of “form making”. Following this mode of depiction, all the images in the work are drawn with a thin and even line without any shading, color is used only as a filler, the figures looking extremely schematic and tactile. The work as a whole evokes a very clean, almost sterile, impression.

Both the implied and the explicit forms of violence depicted in the work evoke a somatic response in its viewers. Following that, the viewers invariably transfer their own troubled response to the work into the figures depicted in the work. These figures seem to be in pain. “Seeing” pain can result in feeling pain. In that sense the medical images belong to an historic visual paradigm in which pain is still visible and the body still has a concrete corporeal presence due, among other things, to an analogical mode of representation. In contemporary medical imaging such as MRI (magnetic resonance imaging) and CT (computerized tomography) the body appears weightless, insubstantial, a colorful abstract entanglement of tissues and surfaces. These technologies provide direct accessibility to the body’s “dark interior” without applying invasive procedures, but only through the reduction of the body to a series of mathematical data. The inside is digitally simulated and not directly seen, thereby making it easy to repress the troubling presence of the open living body with both its pains and pathological anxieties. *Hanging* is therefore a genealogical work, implicitly pointing to historical difference by carefully tracing the conditioning relations between different visual historical paradigms with their particular modes of representation, and the ways in which the body is both conceptualized and formed in scientific corpuses of knowledge.

The Anatomy of Pleasure

If the “rhetoric of objectivity” relates to the efforts to put the body in form, then what is suggested in this essay as a “rhetoric of containment” points to a slightly displaced strategy, namely the highly aesthetic effort to turn the body into form. *Hanging* displays the body as colorful and glowing ornamental pattern.

In recent years Aya Ben Ron’s works have focused on the relation between design and ornamentation as forms of pictorial abstraction and the encoding of scientific and medical knowledge into graphic models. In a series of works entitled *Strips* (Finesilver gallery, San Antonio, 2000) she created vertical web chains of images depicting fragmented bodily organs invaded by surgical tools such as scalpels, hacksaws and scissors. The images were taken from surgical manuals and drawn digitally as in *Hanging*. They were then printed on white laminated photographic paper. At a distance, body parts turn into abstract graphic icons, and the works looked like molecular models such as the DNA double helix. It is only at close examination that the disturbing figurative imagery revealed itself.

In the works following *Strips* the fragmented body organs are combined into a much denser structure, resulting in rich and symmetrical ornamental patterns. These patterns have a circular and harmonic kaleidoscopic structure, somewhat hallucinatory with no spatial distinction between figure and ground. And where the single icon was monochromatic, these ornamental patterns are highly coloured. In her latest works Ben Ron also examined 3D images.

In *Clastic* (Loushy Art & Edition, 2000) circular ornamental patterns, created also through digital drawing using similar corpus of images, were cut and pasted to create a multi-layered image. The work was inspired by 16th century “Fugitive Sheets”, a particular type of illustration in which cut images of the body’s internal parts are superimposed on a flat illustration of the body. The body thus appears to the viewer as dissected into layers. This strategy of depicting the body is still used, mostly for children’s pop-up books where upon opening the book cut and folded body parts pop out of the flat surface of the book. In a different body of work printed on transparencies, entitled *Particles and Strip 17* (bilis, 2000), Ben Ron used a particular light arrangement in the installment of the works, thereby giving them the deluding appearance of 3D holograms.

Transforming or abstracting the body into an ornamental figure thus relates in Ben Ron's works to different illustrated methods which both code and encode the body. More than appropriating existing visual models of viruses, diseases or concrete molecular structures, the works actually fabricate and exaggerate the visual structure of scientific diagrams and models. In *Hanging*, and also in *Particles*, Ben Ron employs the particular structure of the mandala, a Buddhist symmetrical diagram. Mandalas are painted either on textiles or on flat surfaces with colored powder and are meant to serve as aids for meditation. Mandalas have highly codified structure: they are concentrated around a single center and generally divided into four quadrants of equal size. This structure serves as a map of both the cosmos and human body since in Buddhist philosophy all the phenomena and entities in the world relate to each other and each of them contain aspects of the absolute. In its philosophy Buddhism represents a highly nominalist view of the universe in the sense that the processes of ordering, differentiating and classifying between entities originates and exist only in our consciousness. Therefore, during meditation the individual concentrates on the center point of the mandala which represents the absolute, the "divine source", in an effort to liberate or purify his consciousness from what is termed the "delusion" of the individual self.

In *Hanging* the combination of the mandala's structure with medical images, as two kinds of practical and didactic images, has a double and contradictory function: to offer a seemingly coherent and well organized structure, and, at the same time, to expose it as a fraud. The mandala's structure organizes the flow of images in *Hanging*, but in a way that subverts analytical modes of thought which are specifically concerned with clear cut distinctions and classifications. The quadrantal structure of the work operates as a multiplication and proliferation system that seems to be out of control. *Hanging* presents a universe which is composed only from doubles, simulacra, and hybrids, and in which neither origin nor essence can be found. Moreover, the combination of the mandala's structure which is meant to serve as an aid to concentration, with the overall appearance of *Hanging* as a seductive work seemingly offering the pleasures of aesthetic contemplation, results in a highly intensified sense of frustration.

Consequently, *Hanging* displays contaminated logic by literally and metaphorically exposing the somatic dimension of scientific and analytical modes of thought. That is, it cunningly points to the relation between medical terms such as "dissection" or "anatomy" and rationalist modes of thought which ask to

think about a problem, “see” through it by analyzing it into distinct parts, and finally discovering a “purified” essence or a cause. By the same token, *Hanging* also seems to evoke the relation between artistic practices as historically “form making” or alternatively “form distorting” practices and medical procedures. In this context one can point to the long history of anatomic illustrations in which artists dissected corpses as part of their professional artistic training, a macabre habit which eventually led to the production of quite disturbing images. A good example would be the mid-16th century treatise *The Fabric of the Human Body* created by the Flemish anatomist Andreas Vesalius, and in which the display of corpses was meant to evoke emotional references to suffering and torture. After all, the word perspective does mean “seeing through”.

In this respect the installment of *Hanging*, as a site-specific work in the Wellcome Trust building, is highly suggestive. Housing one of the biggest resources for the study of the history of medicine in the world, the Wellcome Trust building both embodies and symbolizes a medical and scientific ideal. Designed as a neo-classical building and inaugurated in 1932, the building conveys a sense of reverence and grandeur towards both its contents and their academic and intellectual ends. Its facade, for example, includes Ionic columns which evoke Greek and Roman classical monuments, thereby suggesting a historical continuity between the “glorious” origins of Western civilization and the pursuit of knowledge, as it is often implicated also in national museums, which employ the same style of architecture. And indeed the building originally contained large-open exhibition spaces for Sir Henry Wellcome’s historical and scientific collections.

Hanging is installed in the building’s marble stairwell, its richly colored fiberglass cloth glimmering like an electronic advertisement sign. But, as with the work’s mode of appropriation of medical images, it is mainly the rhetoric of advertising that is appropriated. In the context of the building’s severe marble stairwell, the work’s highly seductive and colorful appearance looks conspicuous, out of place in the serious “temple of knowledge”. In terms of its imagery, it contaminates the sterility and purity of scientific knowledge by pointing to the conditioning relations between knowledge, pleasure and power. Pleasure enters the work not only through sublimation, that is, by turning sights of pain into a delightful spectacle. It is not a detached, disinterested, emotional response to the beautiful, severed from the pursuit of empirical knowledge. The work points to the complete entanglement of pleasure in the formation of knowledge itself.

Pleasure that is both the drive and outcome of the production of “scientific truth”, mainly the pleasure of analysis.

In his book *The History of Sexuality* (Vol. I 1976) Foucault points to the ways in which knowledge, power and pleasure condition and trigger each other through the ritual of the confession. In the West, Foucault states, the confession became one of the most highly valued techniques for the production of truth. The confession functions as one of the practices and procedures through which sex became both objectified and medicalized during the 19th century. In it truth is constituted as a secret which is hidden and “is driven from its hiding place in the soul, or extracted from the body”. For Foucault, the obligation to conceal is just another aspect of the duty to admit. Moreover, because (sexual) truth is located in the “depth of the soul” or in “the dark interior” of the body, it becomes the cause, the origin of individual identity. So, in the 19th century certain sexual acts (such as sodomy), which were considered illegal acts, turned into classification categories which defined individuals by conferring upon them a case history, a life form, an “indiscreet” anatomy, and a “mysterious” physiology. Now it was not the acts that were judged, but the individual himself, whose personality was defined by the institutional medical terminology as normal or pathological.

Both the medical examination and the psychiatric investigation are related therefore to strategies of power that centre around the endless particularities of the individual. These strategies are based on physical proximity and on the interplay of sensations: In Foucault’s words: “The power which thus took charge of sexuality set about contacting bodies, caressing them with its eyes, intensifying areas, electrifying surfaces, dramatizing troubled moments”. Thus these power mechanisms become infused with sensual pleasure. And consequently, the sensualization of power becomes embedded with the pleasure of searching after the individual’s irreducible truth: “The pleasure that comes of exercising a power that questions, monitors, watches, spies, searches out, palpates, brings to light”. So for Foucault the pursuit of medical knowledge always assumes the pleasure of both discovering and knowing, and eventually also to the fascination of exposing it: seeing and telling.

Hanging positions its viewers in a similar economy of power, knowledge and pleasure as described by Foucault. At first its viewers are seduced by the colorful and shimmering work, and therefore they feel confident to approach the work’s surface, and their eyes start to “examine” it, carefully tracing and seeking

meaning. But when the realization of the disturbing imagery comes to mind, it is too late in a sense, because the pleasure they gained from deciphering the images, seeking after their “truth”, is much stronger than any discomfort they might feel somatically, or conversely, ethically. Therefore, it is not only, or not primarily, the images that are disturbing, it is the work itself that positions its viewers in a highly complex, and in a sense “contaminated”, territory.

Finally, *Hanging*'s enclosing images include on one end an image of an infant, whose malleable body is being held by adult's hands, and on the other end an image of an apparatus for the inhalation of anesthesia followed by images of rickety skeletons. From birth to death? A theological narrative? Very far from this - an axis of opposing forces in which two endlessly alternating and unstable poles face each other: the human and the mechanic, the organic and the inorganic, the normal and the pathological.

Vered Maimon, New York 2001

Notes

Michel, Foucault. *The Order Of Things* (New York: Random House, Inc.,1994.orig.1966), p.229.

Michel, Foucault. *The History Of Sexuality - An Introduction* (New York: Random House, Inc.,1990. orig. 1976), p.59.

Ibid., 44.

Ibid.,45.