

Atrophy

written by Yang-En Hume, 2014

'[...] But what of that sense of social, psychological, even metaphysical fragmentation that so seems to mark modern experience – a loss of wholeness, a shattering of connection, a destruction or disintegration of permanent value [...].'
Linda Nochlin, *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity*, (1994)

Today there is an unprecedented level of media reportage and imaging of tragedy and atrocity being transmitted into the privacy of living rooms and electronic devices everywhere. It is inescapable: images and inferences of the body fragment have ultimately made their way into the collective psyche. For thousands of people, this fragmentation of bodies and societies is an actual and immediate threat, while for those in the West it usually remains a mediated experience, one drawn from many sources all over the world.

In *Atrophy*, four artists – Yang-En Hume, Veronica Habib, Juliette Furio and Thomas Quayle – collaborate to explore contemporary significations of the body fragment from a Western perspective. Far from being comfortable with their position, they explore the anaesthetising effects that relative wealth and privilege have on a sense of community and human connectedness.

Body parts and found materials are combined *en masse* to create a sensory experience of chaos, uncertainty and isolation. *Atrophy* highlights the desensitisation towards trauma and violence that this unrelenting exposure induces within those living in affluent societies. The work considers the artists' own position of living in the west, and the impact that media exposure has on their view of the world. The glimpses of the personal in the body casts remind the viewer of the real human experiences behind our mediated observations of global events. Further to this, it is a response to the depersonalising nature of the consumption and waste of neoliberal, capitalist societies.

Art historian, Linda Nochlin takes up the possible readings of fragmentation in her 1994 essay, *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity*, where she traces various, historically separate representations of the fragmented body throughout art history. Nochlin traces the representation of the dismembered body in the paintings of Theodore Gericault, through to paintings informed by the medium of photography where bodies are cropped and divided by the photograph's edge. In each case, the representation of the fragmented body signifies social, psychological and at times metaphysical fragmentation associated with the experience of industrialisation, technological innovations, revolution and war that characterised modernity. Artists used the fragmented body as a metaphor for the disintegrative effects and perceived loss of wholeness in society, which these changes brought about. Moving on to the Postmodern era, Nochlin uses the work of Hans Bellmer, Cindy Sherman and Robert Mapplethorpe to outline how the fragmented body is often used as a transgressive resistance against unambiguous sexuality, gender and modernist rationality.

It is within this context that *Atrophy* is situated. Its use of the dismembered, fragmented body to highlight disjuncture and alienation in human society is reminiscent of early modernist artists' use of the body fragment to depict social upheaval and change. Yet the work is also transgressive in its desire to destabilise hierarchies in art, institutions and social relationships, in the hope of re-building a paradigm that will offer solutions to what the artists witness as a world, not so much in flux, but free-fall. The installation overwhelms the viewer with gritty overabundance, destabilising the privileged position of the 'white-cube' art gallery. The collaborative nature of *Atrophy* problematises the authority and 'heroism' of the solitary artist. These artists have opted for a democratic approach to art making; shifting away from art as independent object making, to art as a form of exchange and co-operation. *Atrophy* refuses to be didactic, universal or objective. Instead it confronts the complexity of contemporary Western society, by drawing attention to the personal, while overwhelming the viewer with the mass. It confronts the human paradox of being simultaneously fragile, yet also capable of destruction.