

The Emancipated Gender

My readings themselves [body art projects] are offered as 'performances,' as suggestive, open-ended engagements rather than definitive answers to the question of what and how body art means in contemporary culture.[1]

- Amelia Jones

What do we mean when we use the word “sex” as a noun? What is its history? The term “sex” has often been associated, if not mistaken with, the term “gender.” According to the *Online Etymology Dictionary*, [2] “sex” is first used in the late 14th century to describe “males or females collectively.” The word is drawn from the Latin word *sexus*: “a sex, state of being either male or female, gender, of uncertain origin.” One can see why people confuse “sex” with “gender.” At one point they meant the same thing. However, the recent critical awareness to separate gender from sex suggests that while sex is biological and material, gender is socially constructed. The body that bears socio-cultural meanings has been re-considered independently from the property of the material or biological dimensions of the body: gender is a historical situation rather than those of the flesh.

The question is, what are the ways that we both de-construct and construct gender as a source of subjectivity and representation? It matters because how gender is represented produces a series of effects in our everyday experience of sexual identity. In the dominant culture one is either male or female. Only recently has “trans” begun to be an acceptable identity but even still it is constantly under threat. For instance, in her discussion of “gender performativity” in *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler gives the example of a boy who was killed because of his feminine way of walking. In other words, as a boy he should walk as a boy. But because he had a feminine walk he was neither normative male nor female. For this reason “he” was deemed unacceptable and therefore attacked. Butler uses “normative” in a way that is synonymous with “pertaining to the norms that govern gender.” If we can use the phrase “symbolic legitimacy” to describe the assigning of gender according to normative notions of “male” versus “female,” he had no symbolic legitimacy.

Amelia Jones takes this notion of symbolic legitimacy in Western art when she observes: “The female nude is not only disempowered as the object of heterosexual male desire but also retains their status as ‘art’ rather than ‘pornography’ by maintaining an attachment to signifiers of purity (whiteness) that are racially determined.”[3] Jones explains how the society legitimates the female nude as white and an object under the name of “art.” In Western art history, the female nude had been painted without body hair under the name of a goddess called “Venus.” The body is not “naked” in a sense of being deprived of clothes, implying shame, but the body without hairs is a “nude” as a signifier of purity of the goddess. The male could formally enjoy the female nude under the guise of the signifier of purity.

How do we associate and dis-associate the materiality of the body with the subjectivity of gender? Especially when bodies may experience gender in formations such as the body

with testes and a penis and no breasts that experiences its subjectivity as “female.” With the transgendered body what kind of a material signifier is that body? Here the body must be seen as a “subject” within a certain context. For instance, neither thing nor sign and yet both, the body as an abstract universal signifier is indeterminable because of the way subjectivity shifts and changes the meaning of a body depending on its social and historical circumstances.

Here is where Amelia Jones’ work in *Body Art/ Performing the Subject* is quite helpful. She proposes open-ended approaches rather than definitive answers to the question of what and how the body in art means. The body can perform the characteristics of a mother, a father, a teacher, a student, a male, a female, a history, a gay man, a lesbian, an artist, an artwork, and a sculpture. Gender is *emancipated* from any determinable signifiers. Marcel Duchamp turned himself into Rose Sélavy. Contemporary artists Cindy Sherman, Nikki S Lee, Yasumasa Morimura change themselves from one gender into another. Those artists are both subject and object, conceiving of how they look and how they are looked at.

[1] Amelia Jones, *Body Art/ Performing the Subject*, University of Minnesota Press, p10.

[2] sex. Dictionary.com. Online Etymology Dictionary. Douglas Harper, Historian.

<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/sex> (accessed: November 05, 2013).

[3] Amelia Jones, *Every man knows where and how beauty gives him pleasure, Aesthetics in a Multicultural Age* (edited by Emory Elliott), Oxford University Press, p218