

the liminal body features images from the exhibition of the same name, curated by Alasdair Foster for the Australian Centre for Photography and presented to coincide with the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games. The exhibition included selections of work by seven photo-artists from three continents: Jon Baturin (Can), Rose Farrell and George Parkin (Aus), Sue Fox (UK), Dieter Huber (Ost), Bill Jacobson (USA) and Diana Thorneycroft (Can)

The ACP would like to thank the following for their help and support on this project: the artists, Dr Kit Messham-Muir, Victoria Ryan, Deborah Rando, Lynne Roberts-Goodwin, Dr Peter McNeil, Sara Angelucci, Rebecca Matthews, Sandra Byron, Julie Saul, Edna Cardinale, Leo Kamen, Peter Weiermair and Simon Grennan. The ACP would also like to thank the funders and sponsors listed on page 32 whose generous support made this project possible.

Cover Farrell & Parkin *Traces of the Flood* (detail) 2000

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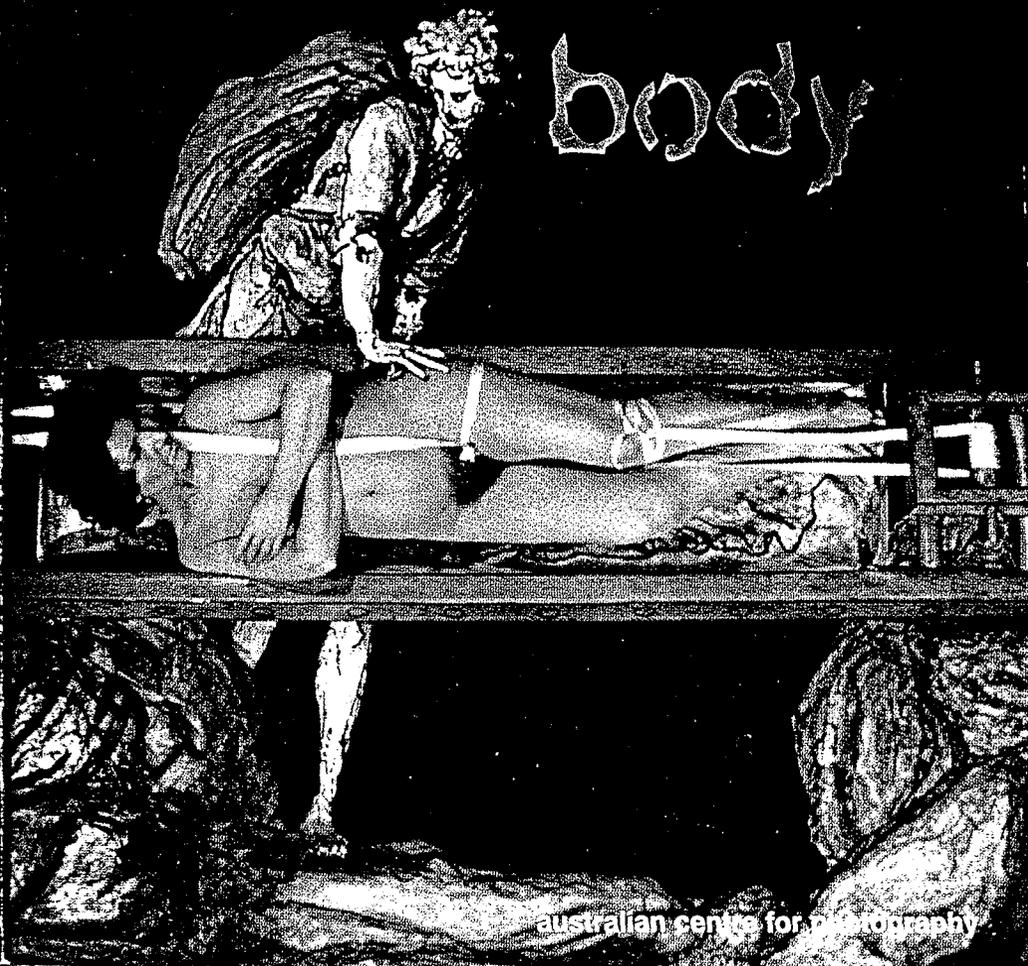
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the liminal

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australian centre for photography

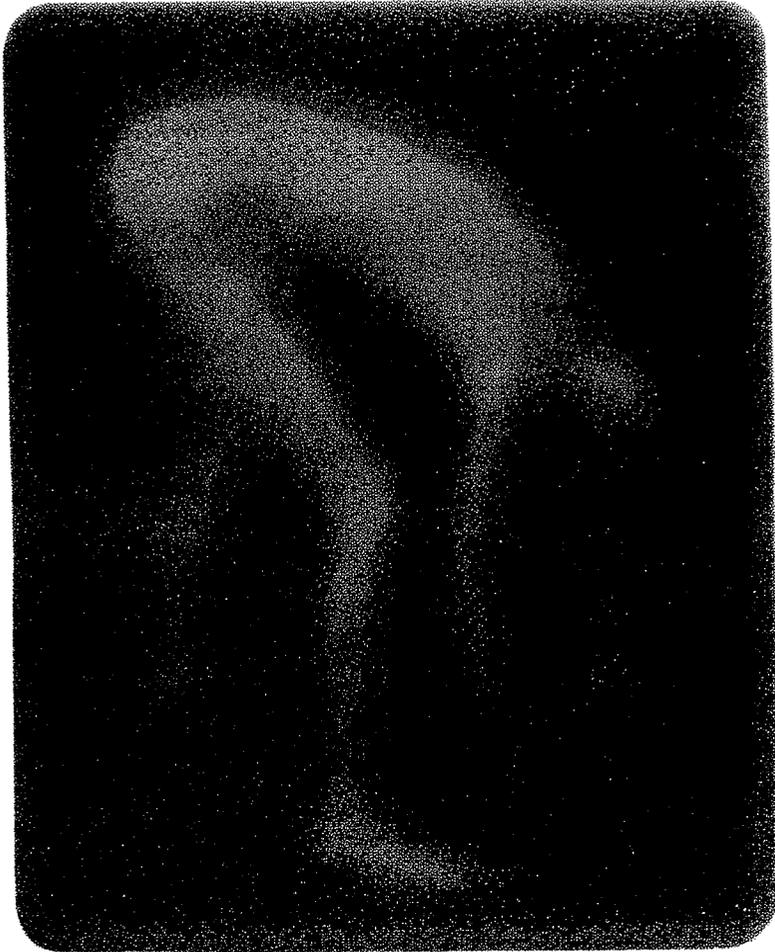


Diana Thorneycroft untitled (coma) 1998

the liminal body

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australian centre for photography with Gallery 44 Toronto



Bill Jacobson *Song of Sentient Beings* (1612) 1995

NO GOLD FOR GARGANTUA

The kick, when it came, was like a bird slipping a cat. Michael Klim had led Ian Thorpe out and paced him up the third of their four laps, stroke for stroke, each staring into the other's face as they turn to breathe.

Leading up to the 2000 Olympic Games, *The Sydney Morning Herald* has shifted its hyperbole into overdrive. The *Herald* is the flagship publication of Fairfax, a major Olympic Partner. Consequently, its usually sober front page has become peppered with celebratory stories that have escaped the Sport section. This quote, from a front-page story by Malcolm Knox, is typical of the media's homogeneous quasi-propagandist enthusiasm for the Games. This enthusiasm is particularly hyped with the men's swimming events. Not only do these events tap into a main artery of a popular conception of Australia's 'national psyche', as a salt-encrusted and bronzed people, but they provide the media with an opportunity to exploit the cultural capital of images of athletic male bodies stripped to their Speedos. Images of swimmers like Michael Klim and Ian Thorpe reify the masculine ideal of the Apollonian body, which derives from Western culture's classical Greek foundations. It is a contained and homogeneous body, figured in terms of its utmost capacity for action and competition, "as a war body".² Our present Olympic culture inherits a refined and intensified version of this ideal, and not-so-distantly resonating through the Master Race idealism of the mid-twentieth century.

However, contemporary notions of 'the human body' – as a culturally transcendent ahistorical truth – are actually particular to certain moments in the history of certain cultures. The reinstating of the classical body ideal and the subsequent return of the Olympic Games in its modern form correlates with the rise of rationalism and the culture of the Enlightenment. The modern version of this classical ideal begins to emerge with the Cartesian notion of the self as a 'single agency', singular, embodied and closed, and the later Kantian idea of 'transcendental unity'. However, it is a notion of the body which was absent from European culture for almost two and a half millennia.

A century before Descartes, François Rabelais' novel, *Gargantua and Pantagruel*, records a very different conception of bodies which dominated French folk culture in the medieval age. Rabelais' work is abundant with images of bodies from which appendages protrude and 'abject' materials flow. For example, Rabelais' protagonist, Gargantua, is a giant born through his mother's left ear and inclined to piss on friends in greeting.³ They are not classical bodies – clearly defined, completed and finished – but bodies understood as indistinct and indeterminate or, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, "in the act of becoming". Bakhtin calls this understanding of the body 'the grotesque body'. As Bakhtin argues, it "is not the body and its physiology in the modern sense of these words". Bodies are not understood as hard material truth, but rather they are regarded in their contingent local social relations. In this sense, grotesque bodies had no ideal form, no single unifying archetypal template. In this way, it is an understanding which is incongruous with the idealism manifested in the Olympic Games.

Eventually, as Bakhtin notes;

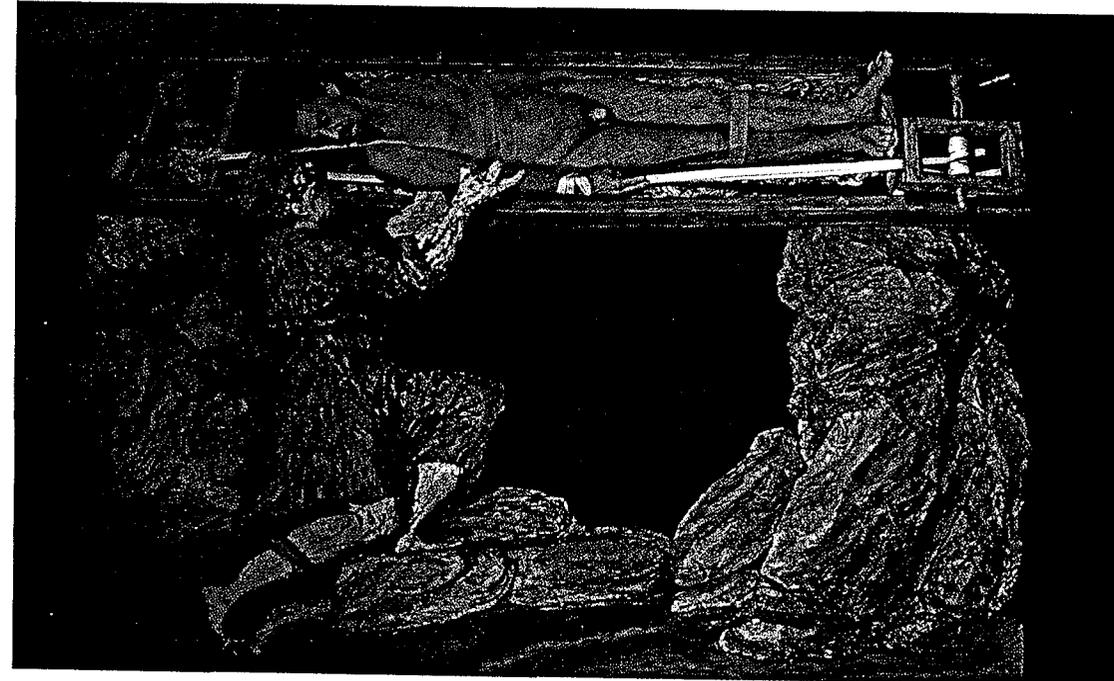
The greater role of rationalism, particularly in the age of the Enlightenment, combined with the Christian notion of the individual, played an instrumental role in the demise of the self of the grotesque body.

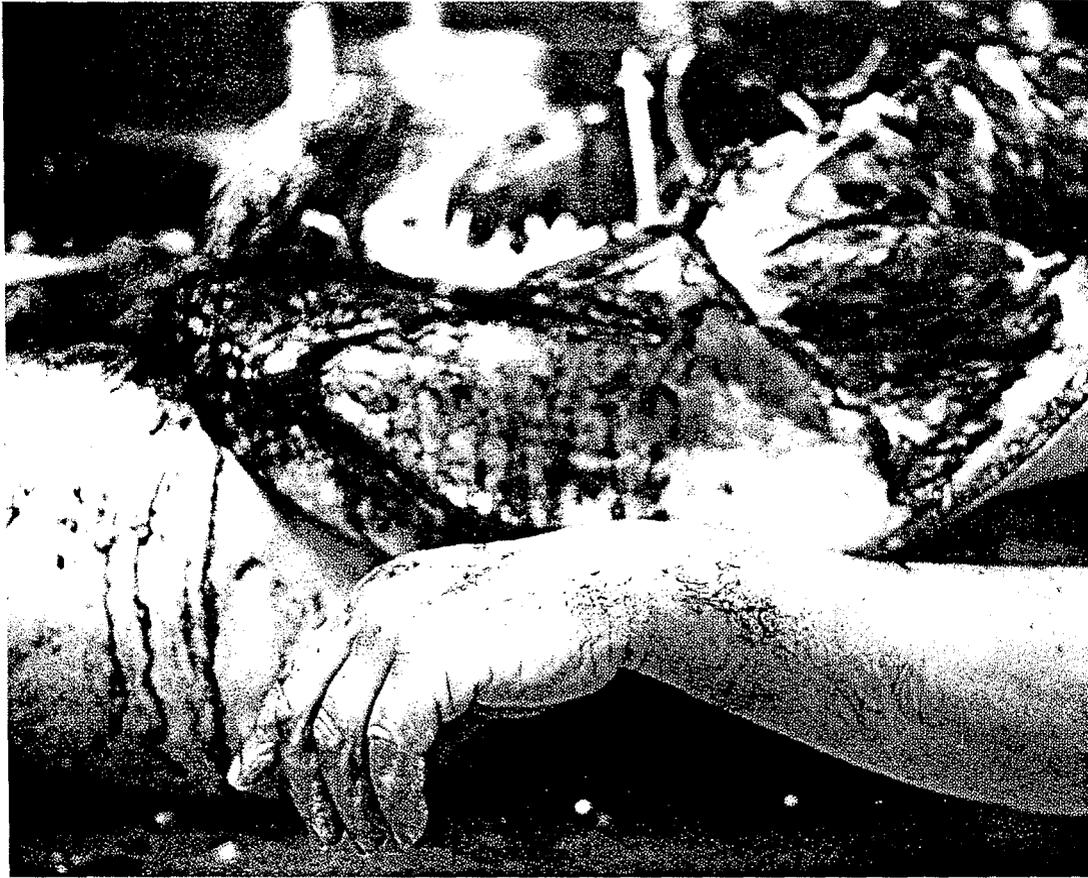
With the Enlightenment, Western culture saw the re-emergence of a kind of singularising Platonic universalism as the new official culture, founded in rationalism and classicism:

In the new official culture there prevails a tendency toward the stability and completion of being, toward one single meaning.

Thus a "'universally historic form' was created and was expressed in Descartes' rationalist philosophy and in the aesthetics of classicism". These new prevailing notions of the body were presented as 'eternal truths' by the new ruling class.

Our contemporary notions of 'the body' and the Apollonian ideal, which is the leitmotif of the Olympic Games, are exactly such 'eternal truths'. Particularly in the ideological climate of 'Sydney – The Olympic City', images of bodies which do not comply with the classical idea, which are grotesque or abject, whose boundaries are indistinct or





Sue Fox *untitled* 1993/4

disintegrating, whose form is not figured in terms of its optimised capacity, seem all the more dissonant with this ideal. Take the figure in one of Bill Jacobson's images (p2). It coincidentally resembles an image of Ian Thorpe used for the *Herald's* 'Good Weekend' cover earlier this year in which he is shown in his swimming gear, ready for action. Jacobson's image resonates with Thorpe's pose, but the body is faceless, dissolved and indistinct from its background. The body itself is a 'grey-area'. This image conceivably undermines the solidity of the athlete's body that it echoes.

Similarly, Sue Fox's images show the disintegration of bodies during a post-mortem examination and in a crematorium. The gaping incision down the length of the torso in one image, which reveals the fat, blood and bone, looks like meat in a butcher's shop. They give the body a bestial quality which further intensifies the grotesqueness of its image. These images record bodies in a state of un-becoming, in processes outside of the common experience of bodies for the vast majority of us. Jon Baturin's images are potentially as confronting. However, by juxtaposing images of movement with anatomical photographs his uses of bodies undergo a conceptual shift, from bodies (with a social dimension) to cadavers (as scientific models). These images betray the fragmentation of bodies that lies at the underside of the homogenising imperatives of the discipline of physiology.

Diana Thorneycroft images her body under restraint or attack. The raw materiality of the objects in her images force upon her own corporeality. As with Fox's images, she depicts bodies in crisis. However, while Fox registers the material entropy of bodies, in Thorneycroft's images the integrity of a living body is at stake. Thorneycroft's images also have a materiality which is grotesque, particularly with the addition of hoofs and tails. The grotesque materiality of Medieval culture is evoked more directly in the images by Rose Farrell and George Parkin, via aesthetic devices as well as the brutality depicted. Contemporary expectations of the space occupied by bodies are possibly unsettled by the awkwardness with which their bodies fit into rudimentary machines. Similarly, there is certainly a kind of Rabelaisian humour in Dieter Huber's perplexing orifice/appendage. His sharp medical journal-like images

problematise boundaries, disorganise organs and make the sex of his subjects indeterminate. They are visual fictions that effectively fragment fundamental molarising understandings of bodies in our culture.

Indeed, in this contemporary recuperation of 'the body' we are certainly seeing something other than the return to the "bruised but whole bodies of modernism".⁴ Seeing many of the works of these artists, it is tempting to make the grandiose claim that they perhaps register something of a resurgence of the grotesque body within the faltering of grand narratives of modernity. However, this would be neither an accurate understanding of these works or their context in this exhibition. Indeed, what gives the images in *The Liminal Body* their vitality is the friction they generate against predominant notions of the body manifested in the popular visual culture of the Olympic City. These images register dissonant and heterogeneous elements within a culture in which body idealism has become normalised – their best effect at this time can be as 'free radicals' in the corpus of received notions of corporeality.

Kit Messham-Muir

¹ Malcolm Knox 'Another world record as Thorpe sinks Klim' *Sydney Morning Herald* 16 May 2000 p1

² Catherine Waldby 'Destruction: Boundary erotics and Refigurations of the Heterosexual male body' *Sexy Bodies: The Strange Carnalities of Feminism* Routledge 1995 p268

³ François Rabelais *Gargantua and Pantagruel* [trans. J. M. Cohen] Penguin Books 1955

⁴ David McNeill 'Body' *Art + Text* #60 February/April 1998 p82

All other references from Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin *Rabelais and His World* [trans. Helene Iswolsky] Indiana University Press 1984

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Dieter Huber *Klone* #136 (detail) 1998/9

