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BODY of KNOWLEDGE

Embodied Encounters: The Role of the Body in Art Criticism

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In “The Body/Body Problem”, Arthur Danto argues that while the medical and biological sciences deliver new kinds of theoretical and practical knowledge about our bodies, art cannot do so. Rather, we understand artworks through engaging our “folk” embodied knowledge. I survey three ways that the body enters into the interpretation of artworks and argue that while embodied knowledge can be an essential tool and a corrective to certain theories of artistic representation, it also has sharp limits.

First, bodies are represented objects, and are therefore sites of interest, attention, and empathetic engagement. Mimetic theories such as Kendall Walton’s give a central role to imagination and pretense. Embodied cognition also emphasizes simulation in understanding bodily and mental states. But the limits of mimetic theories show up when encountering art that deals with detached or disassembled bodies, and thus aims to subvert these reactions.

Second, artworks, like bodies, exist in space, with surfaces and skins, interiors and cavities, skeletons and supports. Attending to these helps show the limits of philosophical theories of depiction, which treat images as if they were disembodied or purely formal structures. Our bodies are vehicles for spectatorship, and viewing artworks requires specific standpoints, postures, and contortions, which can produce their own emotional and discursive responses. Theories of interpretation that rely on a “disembodied” relationship to artworks, treating them as abstractions, overlook crucial facts about critical appreciation.

Third, bodies are a reservoir of analogies and metaphors. James Elkins argues that the body often serves as an abstract formal grid that can be projected as a scheme for interpreting the non-bodily world. But not all images and objects fit this formal grid, and where they don’t, embodied spectatorship breaks down. It is an open question how much remains comprehensible in artworks that stretch or break the limits of bodily metaphor.