

Recent Sources for Representations of the Body in Art

James Elkins
jameselkins@fastmail.fm

Reasons for searching for concepts in theorizing the body
(this is from *Pictures of the Body*):

I. The body in art (representations of the body) are poorly theorized in part because the subject is taken to be inherently untheorizable, inarticulable: it is understood as a refuge against relentless rationalizing

2. The current concepts are becoming dated:

A. Terms from Bataille, Bois, Krauss, and Foster (partly in *Formless*): *part-object*, *abject*, *base materiality*, *pulse*, *entropy*...

B. Terms that are more specifically Foster's: *prosthetic*, *the Lacanian Real*...

C. Terms from Deleuze and Guattari: BWO, *faciality machine*, *hicceities*...

D. Terms from performance theory (Phelan, Amelia Jones): *performativity*, *intersubjectivity*...

3. Science has so far been ignored, but can't be for long

—Cognitive science is becoming more complex

—Consciousness studies continue to take vision as their central example

—There is some (small) hope for neuroaesthetics (John Onians, etc.)

5.

Inside and outside

Another key concept in studies of bodily representation is inside vs. outside.

In general, the skin has long been the “master trope” of the division between inside and outside.

In art, representations of the inside are rare, and generally denote pain and death.

In contemporary practice, however, the skin has become a very diverse metaphor (it is used, for example, in fiber arts, fashion, and painting), and it no longer functions as the simple dividing surface it used to be.

In fiber art, for example, skin metaphors vary extremely widely: felt, paper, rubber, etc., can all function as skin metaphors, and inside and outside are routinely mixed.

A better word for the uses of the boundary metaphor in current art is “membrane”: the medical term for the many divisions within the body that *include* skin as a special case.

There are many examples of membranes other than skin: fibrous membranes, fascial sheets... they expand the expressive repertoire for artists.

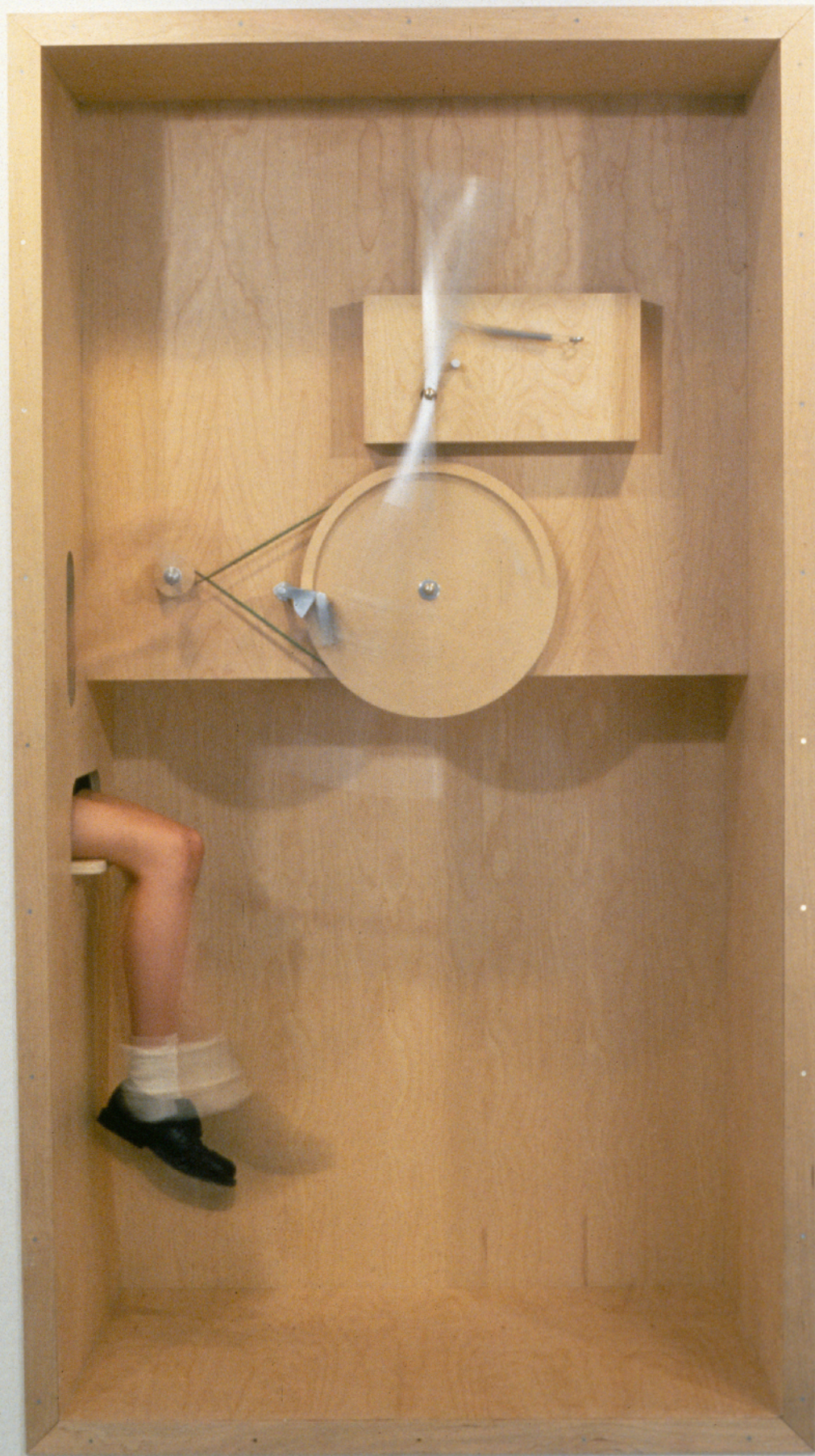
(Tympanic membrane of a moth)

Skin, membrane: muscle tissue grown over a hydrogel in the shape of a spearhead, by Oron Catts, Ionat Zurr and Guy Ben-Ary





Shannon Wright—a piece in which she is immured, and can only kick and wind a lever which causes a rubber reflex hammer to hit her knee







Inside and outside are confounded by the addition of prosthetics; this work also makes contact with the concept of the “part-object”

6.

Skin as the locus of sensation
and sight



The skin has several properties that make it especially interesting for contemporary art practices:

1. It is the traditionally visible portion of the body, and yet it has always been traditionally kept invisible

2. It is the place where sensations are most sharply delineated in space:
i.e., a pain is localized and *visible* on the skin, but diffuse and invisible elsewhere on the body