

MODIFIED BODIES. BETWEEN FASHION AND IDENTITY PROJECTS

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ABSTRACT

The body has come to play an increasingly crucial role in social context, where appearance represents the privileged sphere for self-expression and identity construction. Among the many ways of decorating, adorning and camouflaging the body, some traditional techniques (tattooing, piercing, scarification) are competing with newer and technological ones (aesthetic surgery, implants) to shape and portray individualities. On the one hand, those techniques are borrowing from the world of fashion purposes and codes of presentation, on the other hand, they challenge that fluidity and continuous change by materializing long term identity projects aimed at resisting transformation. In both cases individuals refer to the body as a privileged realm to narrate and reflect upon their own personal story, they also seem more capable to manage the different techniques, and to mix them for their expressive purposes. The result is a combination of visual codes that can reveal different bodily models as well as different ways of experiencing corporeality and embodiment. The article tries to account for this variety by referring to a research carried out on four techniques (tattooing, scarification, aesthetic surgery and piercing) among a group of users and professionals.

KEYWORDS

Body Project, Identity, Tattooing, Piercing, Embodiment

1. INTRODUCTION

Contemporary theories about the role of the body in society are pointing out the increasing importance of appearance as a privileged realm for the construction and the expression of our individual identity. In this framework modifying the body and working on its surface using different techniques (clothing, makeup, tattooing, surgery) represent the necessary prerequisites to participate in everyday social interactions: a successful look operates as a visa for a successful integration in the social group.

Fashion – considered as a medium of expression of identity – participates in this process as one of the most influential sources for the recreation of the individual self:

Fashion, we have been brought up to believe (and generations of writers in the myriad of journals have contributed to this belief), is a mysterious goddess, whose decrees it is our duty to obey rather than to understand; for indeed, it is implied, these decrees transcend all ordinary human understanding. We know not why they are made, or how long they will endure, but only that they must be followed; and that the quicker the obedience the greater is the merit (Fluegel 1930: 137, quoted in Kawamura, 2004: 44).

Bodily shape and appearance are materialized following the rules of the intangible symbolic system by means of clothing and other techniques of self adornment, which constitute a disposable set of tools. In this framework media and advertisement provide visual materials for the makeover: in a magazine anyone can find a wide array of

suggestions about successful look and bodily shapes for every season. This is particularly evident in the Italian context, where fashion has represented a traditional means of social integration since the Middle Ages and is still regarded as a purveyor of models of acceptance more than of countercultural ways of expression (Mora, 2009). In this context, body maintenance and body modification seem to enter the fashion system as key strategies for the embodiment.

I will try to shed light on these practices to articulate their function of tools for identity; by focusing on four different techniques (tattoo, piercing, scarification, aesthetic surgery) and providing evidences from an empiric research,¹ the role of the body will be questioned and bodily typologies will be outlined as accomplishments of situated, reflexive and embodied identities.

2. MANY SELVES, WHICH BODY?

We live in an ambivalent social world, in which tensions over gender roles, social status, and the expression of sexuality can be found in any social arena, from media to work, for politics to education. Trying to foresee what people will look like seems a risky gamble hiding an extremely uncertain relationship between private self and public identity. Yet, the body has never been as present and crucial in the representations of consumer culture and fashion as it has been in the last decades, and it is suggested as personal possession that anyone can mould as they please, indeed our corporeality has become the equivalent of an object to be manipulated, exhibited and updated, increasingly making invisible the power of social control (Turner, 1985). Is this the same body through which we have experiences and perceptions in our everyday life, and that doesn't only belong to us, but *is* ourselves (Merleau-Ponty, 1954)?

Fashion studies tend to consider corporeality as a non-phenomenon, something that needs to be culturalized, for without the help of clothing it would be mere materiality, which is almost unintelligible (Entwistle, 2000). But after being tamed via precise elements of culture (e.g. clothing, ornaments, tattoos, piercing, make-up, perfume), bodies can enter the realm of significance. Roland Barthes (1993) has portrayed this realm as a show, where the human body is adapted to a model – generally provided by fashion – accessible to anyone who decides to convey the complex role one wants to play. Therefore, while providing garments, which convey what we want to tell about us, the fashion system makes us not only intelligible but also classifiable. In this perspective, let alone its capability to communicate ideas, emotions or to accomplish complicated symbolic and technical operations (e.g. dance, sing, acting, surgical operations), our body becomes the support for a more fruitful social exchange and is quickly transformed into the expression of personal taste and ideas. A new variability in the fashion setting doesn't only involve the social body, but also the physical body, which is increasingly separated from

¹ The research has been carried out through a qualitative methodology (1 month participant observation in tattoo studios and 20 in-depth interviews to professional tattooists, piercers, surgeons and ordinary users of the selected bodily practices), modified bodies are investigated as a threshold between individual spring to differentiation and shared need to belong to a community.

biology, modified and moulded thanks to many different devices: fitness, dieting, use of prosthesis, body-building, aesthetic surgery, fetishism, tattooing and cosmetic products are the new tools for the communication. Bodies are thus conceived as a continual mutation, and anyone becomes a “body-flux” (Codeluppi, 1992: 85), which has lost any precise boundary and identity, can be mistaken for its outside context and can have uninterrupted exchanges of flow outwards.

The effects of this process are epitomized by young people’s behaviour in fashion and in minding appearances. Their major presence on the fashion scene at all social class levels has already been illustrated as a pivotal element of the social agenda (Crane, 2000). Moreover, they seem to have become the “chosen ones” in the realm of consumption, due to their capability at mediating their relations to different settings (Mora, 2009). Young people are indeed more keen on decoding messages incorporated in mass culture products and available in the market. Even if their attitude seems less flexible than their body, in that they follow the suggestions of magazines and new media and judge in a negative way bodily performances by people who are not tuned with their stereotypes of age, profession and gender (Pietropolli Charmet and Marcazzan, 2000; Stagi, 2008). They seem to have learnt the lesson by heart about how they should use their bodies and employ the procedures of piercing, tattooing and aesthetic surgery as if they were part of their fashion code, tools for socialization and social recognition.

Recent researches have pinpointed the deep gap severing everyday practices of getting dressed and ideal models conveyed by the media. Illustrating how the representations suggested by the fashion campaigns of famous fashion brands are based on few feminine models and are often extremes, since they basically promote an objectified and subordinated feminine type of woman (Ruggerone, 2006; Diaz Soloaga and Muñiz Muriel, 2008). Nevertheless an attitude to connect individual identity and mediated fashionable representations is not only a “youth’s practice”, but is increasingly involving adult people in different age and social position because the influence exerted by fashion representations of gendered identities conveyed by glossy magazines and newspapers occupies an important part of the cultural agenda (Wykes and Gunter, 2005).

Actually, few of us are supposed to be directly engaged in the dictates of fashion designers, while the majority of people tries to find a way in the supersaturated imagery provided by fashion advertisements. On a more private dimension, young people seem to have developed psychological habits that make them more and more capable for introspection and, as a consequence of it, particularly vulnerable to excessive and negative preoccupation with their own and the others’ perceptions of their bodies (Simmons, Blyth and McKinney, 1983). This same preoccupation, though seems to be a typically Western issue, and it is related to bodily performances in everyday activities, which have rendered the voluntary modification of one’s bodily appearance an obvious action (Le Breton, 2002).

The increasing use of tattooing, piercing and other more invasive or painful practices (e.g. aesthetic surgery and scarification) does not only impinges on an old “naturalistic” mentality, but also on the risk of losing control over one’s life, therefore modifying

one's body represents "a gesture against the body natural and the tyranny of habitus formation" (Featherstone, 2000: 2). The practice of modifying one's body, indeed, allows a sensation of being in control that represents a value in itself and an option that can be selected in order to reduce the risks and anxiety due to an increasingly uncertain social scenario, made up of a host of possibilities of embodiment. Research data have pointed out the importance of showing "the right appearance" in social interactions among young students as the diffusion of a phenomenon called "body tuning", in which individual bodies are adapted to the requirements of the situation, giving way to multiple and sudden identifications and instantaneous transformations of one's bodily appearance (Stagi 2008). Working on the bodily surface on different levels (through clothing, but also piercing and tattoo or aesthetic surgery) becomes a privileged means of production of successful identity in any situation.

This model has been promoted at the end of the 80s by the growing consumer culture, which emphasized appearance as a key feature for social life and intertwined medical precepts of body maintenance and hedonistic suggestions of bodily enjoyment:

Consumer culture latches onto the prevalent self-preservationist conception of the body, which encourages the individual to adopt instrumental strategies to combat deterioration and decay (applauded too by state bureaucracies who seek to reduce health costs by educating the public against bodily neglect) and combines it with the notion that the body is a vehicle of pleasure and self-expression. Images of the body beautiful, openly sexual and associated with hedonism, leisure and display emphasise the importance of appearance and the 'look'. (Featherstone, 1991: 170)

This belief is nowadays shared by any individual who is sensible to social expectations and has learnt that one's bodily image is perceived as a task to be accomplished using technology, biology, culture and any device available in the social context (Shilling, 2003). This task acquires the features of a project for the individual (Giddens, 1991), who erases the differences between what is natural and what has been naturalized and selects his/her own bodily practices to "conclude" the work through lifestyle choices.

The idea of the body as a project does not entail that everyone has the willingness or the ability radically to transform their body. It does presuppose that people are generally aware of these transformative developments, and that there is a strong tendency in contemporary Western societies for people to become increasingly associated with, and concerned about, their bodies. (Shilling, 2003: 174)

But what are the means for our transformation? In this paper I will first analyse the role of body modifications as part of a shared (fashionable) bodily idiom and as a point of reference in social interaction; then I will reflect upon the representations providing this kind of knowledge for the situated activities. After having outlined the typologies of bodily models resulting from the empiric research, I will discuss the possibility of other bodily types and identity performances.

3. BODY MODIFICATIONS AS FASHIONABLE PRACTICES

We belong to an institutionalized system of conduct in which a common knowledge exists about our appearance and that we use to evoke in the others what we perceive as part of our expression, this can be called a ‘body idiom’ and regulates the ways in which anyone has to mind appearances (Goffman, 1963). For our social performances, we can count on a series of techniques to take care, use, show our body in society. These “body techniques” (Mauss, 1950), which allows us to share the body idiom are learnt very early in our life, and they imply a double experience of embodiment and rearrangement, in the subsequent steps of our socialization. Bodily techniques are not only part of a wider set of useful information for social life and to pass on social cohesion, they represent a perfecting of this knowledge, when we use them we recreate what we know about our body and the way in which society accepts it (Leveratto, 2006).

Mainstream media frame and represent cosmetic surgery, tattooing, and body piercing as methods of body modification. Evidences derived from analysis of newspaper articles on cosmetic surgery, tattooing, and body piercing, show how cosmetic surgery and tattooing are positively presented as consumer lifestyle options, while piercing is often negatively framed as an unhealthy and problematic practice. Similarly, findings indicate that risks associated with cosmetic surgery and tattooing are frequently downplayed, as are tattooing’s associations with deviance. Potential risks related to body piercing instead are overemphasized (Adams, 2009).

These framing techniques reflect rooted social understandings of body modification practices and simultaneously inform and shape our common knowledge about bodily/identity performances.

Following this interpretations tattoo, scarification piercing and aesthetic surgery become part of the knowledge about how bodies can be used in Western societies and what they should avoid in social contexts. This division is marked through specific social norms about bodily presentation and it has been normalized via an increasing attention to use appropriate tools for body maintenance, abandoning restrictions and rigidity: a global tendency can be detected to discard puritan limitations about aloofness, modesty, slowness distance from the other bodies (Ory, 2009). Outcome of a democratization in the field of body care and of the aestheticization of bodily appearance – amplified and supported by the growth of the make-up industry – the newest parameters for the definition of our body are written using the “most fashionable” body techniques available in our culture. These rules have been redefined in a few generations and have asked people to interpret their bodies as a pliable surface:

“Our body can be understood as a canvas, on which anyone can draw his best painting”. (T8)

“I think we should interpret our body as our home, we embellish it, we decorate it, it is the only thing we have in our life, so it’s our right to decide how it should appear”. (S3)

If, on the one hand, ordinary people seem to look for constant changes, on the other hand, professionals work on the role of the body as a living material and standpoint in any uncertain situation. The opportunity to transform one's self and bodily appearance is constructed as a limited or relative freedom. Even though unfinished, in the body we find precise limits to the materialization of what is perceived as "our self" and the problem for everyone becomes the materialization of the boundary between materiality of the body and immateriality of cultural meanings.

"We are back to the previous discourse, on fashion. The images broadcast by media, television etc. push forward models which compel us to bring people back to the Earth. You cannot think that you can change yourself like you can change your shirt this morning, from white to blue. The tissue of the body is not fabric, cotton or linen, that can be cut and sewn! it is living" (CH1)².

Giving a particular shape to their bodies and making them more seductive through aesthetic surgery or more tribal through scarification social actors materialize the fundamental principle of classical theories about fashion: they want to show their membership to a precise group while distancing themselves from another one (Simmel, 1904).

In their modification practices on their bodies social actors suggest what they know about the cultural code for self-presentation and what are the techniques allowed in their group: from our dress, to the colour of our skin, from our tone of voice to the size of our neckline, we always prove that we know many things about the ways in which a body has to appear. If this fact seems obvious, it does not mean that the reason is evident, it seems to support instead a microsociological convention according to which a whole series of notions have to be performed with competence in order to be perceived as natural (Garfinkel, 1976).

Modifying the body involves indeed a complex of socially guided perceptual, interactional, and micropolitical activities that cast particular pursuits as expressions of "selves". When we view the expression of the self as an accomplishment, we consider identity as an achieved property of the situated conduct of an individual. Rather than as a property of individuals, the self is conceived as an emergent feature of social situations: both as an outcome of and a rationale for various social arrangements about one's bodily appearance (i.e. the body project).

The cunningness of the body project is taken for granted and reinforced by its appearing a natural and internal feature of our reality. If we can recognize at least two categories of bodies – fashionable and not fashionable – the ways in which they have been materialized are many and they represent clever applications of precise rules of bodily maintenance and strategic skills that individuals have to know and to use as competent members of their group (Garfinkel, 1967).

These techniques are not free from gender differentiation and the effects on the bodies are aimed at strongly connoted gender performances. Aesthetic surgery, for instance, is the most connoted from the point of view of gender, being used by a majority

² (CH1) is referred to surgery, first interview. In this particular case the speaker is a man, 50 years old, Italian, surgeon.

of female patients and meant to modify the body accentuating the sexual features from a typically masculine and heterosexual point of view (Davis, 2002): by having recourse to it women reinforce the focus on appearance as a feminine task and suggest a precise feminine cultural model (i.e. having a big breast, voluminous lips and tiny nose). This same insistence is communicated to other techniques (e.g. tattooing, piercing) that are used to give shape to a feminine seductive model of self-presentation in tune with mainstream representations of gender.

Since it is in the use of the body techniques that the knowledge about the social use of body is perfected, then it is through these same techniques that the social use of the fashionable body is naturalized according to a shared code. This implies that contemporary social actors show through their bodies their will to participate in the so-called “culture of appearance”, subscribing distinctions between men and women who are successful and pay attention to their skin, weight and “look” and the others who neglect and, subsequently, marginalise themselves (Vigarello, 2003; Robin, 2005). On the other hand, the work on the body is suggested as a free choice, on the other hand it has to be made selecting the right symbolic materials and the suitable practice for the best result.

How, then, social actors succeed in their selection of fashionable and successful bodily images?

4. FASHIONING THE BODY: BETWEEN DICTATES OF BEAUTY AND PERSONAL STYLE

Women’s fashion can be interpreted as a major field to provide representations of the female body, which becomes a significant text of how culture constructs femininity and how it addresses that representation to women (Evans and Thornton, 1991). In particular, the sexual erotic elements of fashion (Steele, 1985) and the participation in fashion practices by those belonging to the low and peripheral social strata have contributed to build a mainly feminine representation of fashion and preoccupation for appearance. The relationship between beauty, bodily appearance and identity has been an issue not only in feminist thought, which has insisted upon the performances related to one’s personal bodily attire and the structural reproduction of inequalities for some social categories (Davis, 1995; Wolf, 1997), but has also fostered a wider reflection upon the role of the images of precise bodily models that which have drawn the scholars’ attention and problematized the role of the media and the practices of embellishment (Goffman, 1979; Vigarello, 2003).

Even if it is rooted in the feminine world, the work on individual appearance is increasingly becoming a universalized task, to be accomplished using the resources available in the market and affordable per census. This second issue related to the fashionable construction of one’s body has been developed after some recent transformation in the fashion and beauty industry, who promote models for a masculine audience who learns how a personal style can be created, or achieved, and show that a “fashionable self” is made up of different solutions offered by lifestyle magazines. Every selection is effective because it is described as already experimented and approved, therefore a man only has to look up in the pages and can find the right apparel and psychological attitude in any

situation (Materassi, 2010). Finding and putting into practice the suggested solutions appears as the answer to a spontaneous need, but an ambiguity can easily be pointed out. On the one hand, studies on fashion advertising (Bordo, 1993; Crane, 2000; David *et al.* 2002) have emphasized the role of fashion images in the creation of social representations of bodily models and gender roles, going through which anyone can find a useful solution to the problem of communicating oneself. On the other hand, since fashion is less and less dependent on imitation between social classes and increasingly related to the individual need of self-expression (Crane, 2000; Volonté, 2003; Bovone, 2007; Mora, 2009), its strength as a source for collective representations seems to be regulated by the individual's capability of letting one's own identity appear through gestures, words, clothing. In both cases such a relationship depends on the fact that nobody can be an outsider in the fashion system, and people have somehow to mind how to construct and interpret their appearances as they have no other means to represent themselves (Wilson, 1985).

The power of communicating something about the subject is a feature of every consumption practice, through which anyone learns the need and duty to convey his/her identity using objects as supports and indicators of his/her positioning in society (Douglas and Isherwood, 1979). Tattooing, piercing, scarification and aesthetic surgery are suggested in the media (old and new), as accessories of the body and, especially in fashion advertising campaigns, they are depicted as part of the postmodern bodily panoply. The models contained in the images have the task to regulate the terms of our contacts with other people, our emotions and intentions (Goffman, 1979). Moreover, as they have no need to reflect the facts, they portray the ways in which *we think* men and women should behave and we accept them as such. However, much of what we assume to be individual preference is influenced by deeper social and cultural forces (Bourdieu, 1963; Davis, 1995) and minding appearances acknowledges that corporeality is always the place for contingent self-truth, outcome of the procedures used to transform one's body and to make it visible. In this perspective the body has to be questioned about the process expression of the self in order to reveal the intertwining between competences about bodily appearance, situated activity and identity as an achieved property.

5. QUESTIONING THE BODY. AN ETHNOMETHODOLOGICAL SENSITIVITY

In which way the body should be interrogated? The methodology of this enquiry has been measured on the interpretation of the relationship between transformation of the body and recreation of the self. Four different typologies have been chosen in order to produce a useful representation of a *continuum* in the universe of body modifications, ranging from more artistic and fashionable – an therefore accepted – practices (i.e. tattooing and aesthetic surgery) and more subcultural and niche ones (i.e. piercing and scarification). Therefore, to depict the events of the embodiment via body modification a qualitative methodology has appeared the most useful instrument in order to let taken for granted situational elements emerge and hidden knowledge about focused

bodily activities be revealed. Adopting participant observation and in-depth interviews³ has depended also on a typically ethnomethodologist perspective according to which identity – a thus the expression of one’s self – has been read in a performative sense. In this perspective, focusing on the methods used by the members of the social group of ‘body modifiers’ to give a meaning to their activities has helped to avoid the divergence between practices and theorizations of the process of embodiment.

In the realm of *gender studies* particular attention has been paid to the issue of the methodology that has revealed almost the same importance of the object of research.⁴ In this theoretical scenario a tendency can be found to privilege a psychoanalytical approach and to consider it pivotal in the embodiment – of gender in particular (Irigaray, 1978; Butler, 1990; 2003). As a consequence if this, corporeality is interpreted as a textual structure diverging from the issues related to the lived materiality of the body. This latter is indeed analysed in the practices from that peculiar distance produced between bodies and texts in concrete activities and meaningful social contexts (Howson, 2005). Observing body modifications as parts of a process based on a tacit knowledge (Garfinkel, 1967) about the body has revealed the everyday operations made to classify one’s own and other people’s actions of embodiment. In this perspective both participant observations in tattoo studios and in-depth interviews are the activities whereby members produce and manage settings of organized everyday affairs [are] identical with members’ procedures for making those settings “account-able”. The “reflexive” or “incarnate” character of accounting practices and accounts makes up the crux of that recommendation. When I speak of accountable my interests are directed to such matters as the following. I mean observable-and-reportable, *i.e.* available to members as situated practices of looking-and-telling. (Garfinkel, 1967: 1)

The common sense about the process of embodiment has emphasized the relationship between fashion and body modifications as instruments orienting the individual behaviour. Even if something is always implicit in the explanations, due to the fact that an individual takes for granted the membership of all the participants in the practice, observing and collecting accounts of body modification has allowed a deeper comprehension of the rationality beyond this social behaviour and has revealed its strongly rooted nature in the realm of the reproduction. Four specific bodily answers have been found to the question about subjectivity: the *screen* body, the *monumental* body, the *differed* body, the *consumable* body. I will describe these typologies in the following paragraph,

³ The first has been adopted to investigate taken for granted practices along a one-months fieldwork in a tattoo and piercing studio in Strasbourg (FR), 8 one-day participant observations in selected tattoo shops in Milan and in the hinterland, and on the occasion of the annual Milan Tattoo Convention in 2008. This fieldwork has implemented the comprehension of the process through which individuals attribute a meaning to the practices of self-modification. The second has been focused on four different techniques: tattooing, scarification, piercing and aesthetic surgery. Interviewees (12 women; 16 men) have been selected among three categories of professionals: surgeons, tattooist, piercers, and several different – as to age and activity – typologies of common users (Clients/patients): students, managers, free-lance journalists, employers, workers in the mechanical industry (see Tab. 1.), to provide a varied and efficient sample.

⁴ The feminist reflection on gender, indeed, has recognized the importance of thematizing this aspect and has pointed out a relation between research practices and the possibility of developing adequate social practices (Oakley, 1981; Fox Keller, 1989).

explaining how each one can be read as the outcome of a particular conception of the bodily techniques used and can be part of an identity performance.

6. SELF-FASHIONED BODIES. A TYPOLOGY

We can detect different bodily models, which seem to result from the practices of minding appearances, and that can illuminate the concept of self-presentation in the process of body modification.

From the interviews and the ethnographies collected the variety of bodily typologies available in the social context can be reduced to four main models: the *screen* body, the *monumental* body, the *differed* body, the *consumable* body. Each one subscribes a conception of the ways in which men and women are supposed to use the body idiom, but consists on a simplification of the complex reality reproduced through the situated activities of self expression. The types in this series are not to be meant as mutually exclusive, each one represents features which appear as a combination with those of another type in the praxis. Moreover, they have to be meant as typical figures, following a weberian framework (Weber, 1904), according to which a process of abstraction is operated by isolating and idealizing some characteristics belonging to empiric cases.

The first bodily type emerges from the arena of international media and resembles a neutral surface over which an individual can endlessly operate and project the bodily images accepted and promoted by the mainstream culture. Using the words of a woman tattooist interviewed, it is:

“A body as maintained as possible, using also aesthetic surgery. Maybe tattooed. A body that doesn’t allow thinking to give in. That’s it. Also in physical terms. And tattooing can be ok. Because, it is usually attributed to young people, anyway. If you pay attention to what many women say: «But I can’t do it, I’m already in my 45!»». Actually, they’re not going to be dead tomorrow, though!!”. (T5)⁵

It can indeed be understood as a *screen body*, because many acts of embodiment follow each other and are adapted to produce an identity fit for the situation. If anchor-men, pop-stars, movie stars dedicate themselves to an almost radical redesign of the body, common people have to follow their teachings and their habits to spectacularize one’s self. In this process, corporeality becomes the always insufficient place for a *bricolage* of the self, a temporary play of one’s presence (Le Breton, 2008). Nevertheless, this body is not shapeless, or chaotic, to summarize it in the most suitable adjective, it could be defined “instantaneous”, a materialization of a hidden logic: the exhibition of the self. Identifications and embodiment are then accelerated to create a continuous flow, adapted to the acceleration of everyday routines.

Since the fashion system suggests the way in which our appearance should be innovated, our body participate in the process of innovation acquiring the “right” details

⁵ (T5) is referred to tattoo, fifth interview. In this particular case the speaker is a woman, 45 years old, professional tattooist.

thanks to the newest bodily technique: a little nose through aesthetic surgery, a provocative belly-button thanks to piercing, a sensuous hip via tattooing. Every part should be exhibited to materialize a seductive, metacultural and young body. Body projects are focused on crossing the threshold of rejuvenation to reach the goal of eroticization or decoration for sexual performances. The implicit knowledge about the presentation self is a capability at using a kind of ready made corporeality that can contain all the features of the moment, even if contradictory.

Even if it is ambivalent this bodily model can't be too detailed: exotic or subcultural features have to be translated in more captivating suggestions and to be absorbed in the mainstream fashion. The user are indeed an undifferentiated and wide community, who has absorbed the beautiful, successful and young globalized model, while it has become dependent on the information and the definitions legitimating the dominant groups (Wilson *et al.*, 1995), because:

“We need information, we watch them and we store them, but we never wonder why, or if they are true or false. // We need fiction”.
(T3)⁶

This model is opposed to the *monumental body*, outcome of a process of domestication, through which individuals learn to pay attention to the techniques and the procedures of embodiment. This voluntaristic typology is organized and controlled by the professionals (surgeons, tattooist, piercers) in order to produce a disciplined individuality.

Through the ethnography in the tattoo studios and observing interactions in the waiting room of hospitals and clinics the monumental body has appeared as a goal reachable only if four features are present in the individual process of modification. It is characterized by being *cellular*, determining the spatial distribution of bodies; *organic*, assuring that the activities are “natural” for the bodies; *genetic*, controlling the evolution of the activity; *combinatory* combining the strength of many bodies in a unique mass. The result is a corporeality obtained after a selection of shaped and habituses thanks to information transmitted from professional to patients/customers to provide an experienced know how and to stimulate self surveillance and a self-controlled behaviour.

Basic competences about one's anatomy, psychology, reactions to surgery and medicine, or homoeopathic treatments are functional to develop a knowledge about the body as it is, while the willingness to accept the bodily regimes is a way of creating a community who considers the body modification as a serious commitment and voluntary works for it.

In this frame the relation to pain is not the main feature, but it is still a presence in the work for embodiment, basically influenced by a gendered interpretation according to which women are more experienced with pain, and more pushed towards painful practices of bodily domestication. In addition, it represents a significant similarity with more common practices of body modification like sport competition where an individual

⁶ (T3) refers to tattoo, third interview. In this case a man, 30 years old, user, Italian, worker in the mechanical industry.

has to master oneself, one's desires and weaknesses in order to reach a higher level of performance.

The concept of performance is pivotal for the third bodily typology: the *differed* body. This corporeal ideal model is partly inspired to subcultural instances, but at the same time it is distanced from the extremeness of body performers and radical body modifications, that are considered risky – and sometimes useless – deviations from the body idiom. Aesthetic taste is depicted as a feature distinguishing one's personal culture and lifestyle, thus becoming the aim of professionals who aspire to bring up their customer's/patient's in the process of embodiment.

“What I try to do is finding a better shape to the desires of the customer, this does not mean changing his/her ideas, sometimes they simply arrive and don't know that something can be done in a different way, in a way that is tuned to their personal aesthetic taste.” (T4)⁷

The materialization of identity is thus based on a deconstruction of cultural representations, but at the same time it is made up of the symbols and meanings available in everyday life. Applying to a practical conception of symbolic creativity (Willis, 1990), individuals are engaged in a collaboration for the re-interpretation of bodily models conceived as too stereotyped and at the same time useful for a more competent and comprehensible situated activity. The similarity with fashion is here evident, but it is strongly rejected in the narratives of the interviewees as it represents a homogenizing and weakening force for the expressive use of one's corporeality.

Taste is partly interpreted in a bourdieusian perspective, being the expression of one's education, and transpiring in bodily habits and manners (Bourdieu, 1979), on the other hand, it partly differs, including a widened conception of “aesthetic” as the attribute of bodily expressions without concepts, supported by being physically involved in the everyday experience (Maffesoli, 1990).

A last typology is the outcome of the so-called consumer culture, therefore I will call it the *consumable body*. In this perspective the individual body becomes a support for any kind of fashionable accessories, aiming to show off in interaction. Similarities can be found between this type and the screen body if we read it as a body “on show”, but it is different from that first model because its reduction to a commodity via bodily techniques is even more important than its continuous metamorphosis.

Through commodification indeed any feature can be bought and sold, and identity or gender identity can become part of this process as well as dresses or surgical implants and can cross the boundaries of national identities. In the contemporary world, indeed, the material market moves a flow of products from any part of the world to every corner of the world and the global cultural supermarket circulates a flow of information and potential identities from every place to any location. These two forms of the market contribute to build a context within which individuals can locate their narratives and give a structure to their modulation of identity (Mathews, 2000).

⁷ (T4) fourth interview, tattoo, a professional tattooist, woman 30 years old.

In theory anyone can have access to the techniques for the maintenance of the body if one would. Moreover, the desire to be worth enough to invest money in one's improvement and bodily appearance, as suggested by international media to fit in the context, can be translated into the need to support any kind of product. The principles of this theory can be found in a catalogue promoting a famous Italian clinic for aesthetic surgery

Why not entering the dressing room and try any kind of swimsuits on, without saying "not this because it makes me fat, not this because it doesn't make the most out of me, not this because it doesn't contain my belly". Think instead how beautiful it would be if you could tell yourself "I could buy them all, my body suits every model!". That shopping bag on your arm carrying a micro-bikini would be a true conquest to like yourself more.⁸

These principles of embodiment can be applied to women as well as men, who have learnt how a beautiful and well maintained body is part of a collective ritual of socialization. Society doesn't impose any uniform, the consumable body becomes the only uniform everyone can wear while minding appearances. No typical feature is required for this activity, only the helpfulness to replace one's personal characteristics with more functional ones. Like any goods the consumable body subscribe one's identity and gender competences.

7. TOWARDS A MORE REFLEXIVE EMBODIMENT?

The sources providing information about what should be perceived as socially useful are many today, ranging from the family to international media, from the peers' group to consumer culture, from body art to fashion, science and health. What is common to these different sources is the participation in a process of production of an aesthetic of the body that is derived from a typical movie system: it is extreme as it wants to appear provocative, accurate and calculated and makes the body the most beautiful object of consumption (Vigarello, 2003). These schemes of conduct, entailed in the practices of body modification, are far from being neutral and harmless, as they participate in the everyday task accomplished by men and women: conserving a precise social order (Goffman, 1979). This order does not derive its strength and durability by the fact that it is true or evident, but by never being questioned, never being discussed and always taken for granted, as part of the reality of the situation (Garfinkel, 1967).

Since it is the outcome of a series of procedures of questioning, looking for answers, thinking – and not only manipulating information – the scheme through which we interpret and materialize our self depend on the techniques provided by a society to its members. In the last decades the work made in face to face interactions has increasingly involved the body work (Turner, 1984) and the range of bodily techniques has been widened as well as the group of people resorting to tattooing, aesthetic surgery, piercing to boost their own social performance. Fashion has given a strong impulse to this process and has defined

⁸ Cfr. www.laclinique.it, 29/08/2010.

the ways in which our body has to be conceived: an object that expresses our identity and that should be regularly (or better, as soon as possible) innovated.

After the models depicted above, a last one has emerged in the accounts of people interviewed. It appears as an abstraction in contrast with the four typologies mentioned above and to the dictates of fashion. It seems transversal to all of them and I will call this a *convivial* body, an identity achieved through a less functional and more reflexive communication of one's self in everyday life.

“It is not a matter of doing one thing or another one. It is a matter of analysing anything that is happening, to learn how the body is healed, and reacts, how it changes. It is a discipline that you can bring about in your life, that can change the way you are”. (S2)⁹

It is an accomplishment allowed by slowing down and reducing the impact of the representations, more than selecting among the countless suggestions broadcast by the media, neither following the logics of the discipline nor cultivating the peculiarity of taste.

“I try to persuade people that they shouldn't be in a hurry, they shouldn't force themselves to do things, there are natural limits that should be respected, times, you have to be patient, look out, observe what happens to the body, understand and reflect upon it”. (P3)¹⁰

In the interviewees' opinions, this last model entails a more aware relation to the body and can find many obstacles ranging from education, that has reduced personal responsibility to a masquerade, to the discovery of pain that has become an avoidable physical trouble; from consumer culture, whose excessive importance dims the desires and imposes the stereotyped images related to them, to our personal care, whose mechanical conditioning can end up in a mere domestication to the mass aesthetic taste. To succeed in this work, the influence of images should be redefined and weakened, through a reflection upon one's desires. This typology produces more questions than answers as it appears as a model of reflexive embodiment, searching for a meaning in a scenario increasingly saturated with objectified models, finely chiselled and capable to impose themselves through the illusion of competent self expression.

Though identity can be understood as the outcome of a work aimed at moving dialectically between self narration and use of a shared code of embodiment, creating a comprehensible self narration seems to be the most urgent problem influencing the practices of modification and orienting them towards aestheticized more than subversive materializations of bodily typologies. The tradition of fashion in Italy has helped to produce a model of self representation which is strongly dependent on mainstream definitions of bodily appearance and still reluctant to big innovations, up to a point that

⁹ (S2) is referred to scarification, second interview. In this case a 35 year-old man, French piercer, specialized in the practice of scarification.

¹⁰ (P3) is referred to piercing, third interview. In this case a 36 year-old man, Italian piercer, specialized in different techniques of body modification.

fashion can somehow appear conservative (Mora, 2009). This tradition seems to have influenced the bodily practices and to foster bodily models that are in tune with the mainstream representations in fashion images. An effort to keep a distance from these types appears today only as a niche behaviour. It is a slow work on reflexivity carried out by professionals in their studios and consulting rooms, but it can lead to identity performances as accomplishments of more critical and responsible practices of embodiment. This different perspective seems to abandon the interpretation of fashion as a mere proliferation of styles (Polhemus, 1998; 2004), in favour of a different way of entering its symbolic space focused on a long-lasting body project and an increased capability of asking for better results. Monitoring the ways in which this process is being developed can be a useful resource also for the fashion system in itself, which is undergoing a process of transformation both in its material and symbolic dimensions. ✍

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