

Body Signs

Deviance, Difference, and Eugenics

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Washington Project for the Arts
Washington, D.C.

TRANSPOSITION



Courtesy of Mr. Lee Russell

THE CHIMPANZEE WHO DID NOT LEARN TO TALK

Prince Chim with one of his best friends

Grigely has blown up, mounted and hung the title page and frontispiece of a 1917 eugenics textbook. In the book, the frontispiece would have been on the left, so the cliff in the picture stood at the outer edge of the text. A boy reaches out to the scary void beyond and before the book, while an angel, her wings spread over the boy and girl like an open book, beckons them back to the safe ground of the text. But Grigely has transposed the title page and frontispiece, revealing the sinister aspect of the text. The cliff that stood between the book and the world now divides the painting from itself. The boy's hands and gaze now reach out to the cloudy promise of EUGENICS as his feet approach the abyss. It's hard to tell, now, whether the angel is beckoning the children back or pushing them toward the cliff. Where the world had been (the abysmal world that eugenics offers to save us from) has been confined to a strip of wall between the canvasses, and where image and text had been bound together is now the open space around the canvas. So what happens to the reader of the book in becoming the viewer of the painting, seeing as how the book has been turned inside out?

JUXTAPOSITION

Two heavily-posed old portraits have been blown up and juxtaposed: girl reclining smiling loosely, boy standing scowling stiffly. The discipline that arranges the bodies of children into coquette and choirboy is exposed by Grigely's juxtaposition of the too-perfect pair and the too-perfect divisions and alignments of their features.

EVIDENCE

The cover of a supermarket tabloid appears among the paintings, unmanipulated and unretouched. Finally, the disreputable *Weekly World News* achieves the status of pure, self-evident fact as it could only be by the artifice of exhibition.

A while ago, the cover of this same tabloid showed a close-up photo of the Head of Elvis, reclining (supposedly) in his coffin, but the sweat-trails on his cheek showed that he'd been standing when the picture was taken, and that the photo had simply been rotated 90 degrees.

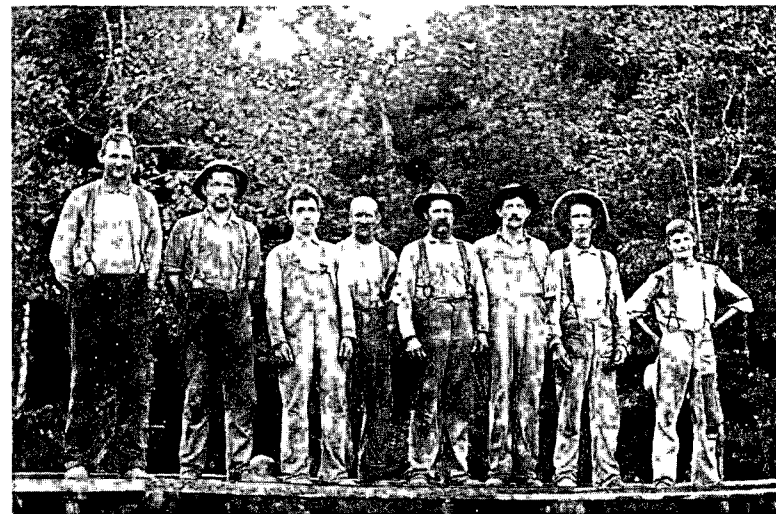
A thousand Baroque statues of Christ-in-his-tomb, on view in any number of Catholic churches around the world, show trails of blood running horizontally along Christ's reclining body, not in defiance of gravity, but as a *sign* that places the image in a narrative sequence, a bit of (planted) evidence that the blood-trails had dried on his body while it was vertical on the cross. The side edges of Grigely's painting of eight standing men ("Self Pollution") are marked by a curiously related bit of evidence. Tarry drips of glaze run perpendicularly away from the painting's surface; evidence that it was painted as it lay flat on the floor. The artist must have been dancing around it, brush in hand; the Last Action Painter? How does this evidence stand the artist and the painting relative to the Head of Elvis and the Body of Christ?

What do they tell us, the relations between the stained edge, the arc of the heads of the eight men in the painting, the white edge of the bowed plank on which they stand, and the straight white swath of margin that runs just beneath it? The position of the body of the painter while making the painting, the relative heights and weights of the men, the load-bearing capacity of the plank on which

they stood, the angle of the photographer, the conventions of framing and posing, the position of the viewer's body? Grigely has assembled a constellation of traces of bodies, real and fictional, into a set of questions.

But the body is already a constellation of traces: otherwise, how would they (and how do we) know where and how to stand and look? Why does the boy in the photo stand on the end, arms akimbo, awkward grin, slightly apart from the others? Because he's the youngest, and not yet quite part of the group?

One of the glaze-smudges that play across the canvas rests over the boy's crotch; some darker drops have dried on his pant-legs. Were these smudges and drops posed carefully as a question (about stigma and shame), or just happy accidents? Do more of the smudges cover the men's crotches than a random distribution could account for?



Has this ambiguity been arranged by the artist, working the gap between the broad strokes of Action Painting and the meticulous placements of Conceptual Art, to catch us in such an embarrassing calculation?

GLAZE

A large, irregular smudge hangs over the heads of the eight men in the picture like a congealed cloud. Some of the smaller bits of glaze bead up, like dark oil on water, and their negative images—circular spots of light—dot some of the dark surfaces where air bubbles in the glaze have broken. Swaths of dark glaze are streaked by brush-bristles, broken up further where the glaze has shrunk away from the surface, like a drying mud-puddle. Are these traces of a chemical ecology, of how substances behave and interact, any more or less posed than the eight men? Any more or less choreographed than the dance of the painter around the canvas or the calculating gaze of its viewer?

THE PERFECT COUPLE

A road (vanishing into the fictional depth of a photo) divides woods from woods in a blue landscape; a wall (real and flat) divides (blue) landscape from (black and white) portraits; a gap divides portrait (of woman) from portrait (of man): road and wall, woods and woods, color and black-and-white, landscape and portrait, fictional and real, man and woman: somehow the differences between these differences becomes confused. We cannot quite focus simultaneously on both the landscape and the portraits; we cannot quite exhaust what is happening by a list of features. The perfect complementarity of these coupled differences is (always) interrupted by (another) irreconcilable difference. Far from allowing them to divide the world neatly between them, Grigely seduces the divisions

to produce a shifty interference pattern.

BLACKWASH

What is the status of the blackwash that covers the surface of some of the *Body Signs* images? Is it the same as the black of the black-and-white that makes up the images? Does it deface and flatten the image or intensify it by pulling it seductively deeper out of our reach? What clues give the answers to these questions? Are they perceptual facts (textures of blackness) or conventions of representation (the sense that there must be a clear black-and-white image before or behind this haze)?

WHITEWASH

Does the whitewash that covers the surface of some of the *Body Signs* texts work in the same way? Does it distinguish text from image, or assimilate them into similar black-and-white arrangements behind the same black-or-white cloud? Does it make the texts more compelling because we must work harder to read them, because they seem old and dustily monumental? Or does it undermine them completely because they are revealed to be simple artifacts, unlike the whispering in our heads as we read books, under whose spell we forget that the text is also an object?

THE CHIMPANZEE WHO DID NOT LEARN TO TALK

The economical caption, "The Chimpanzee Who did not Learn to Talk;" conceals more than it reveals. *Why* not? Because he could not? Because he would not? And in not learning to talk, how did he differ from his fellow chimps? The chimp rests his long black hands on the white dress of "one of his best friends." His limp hands conform, without grasping, to the shape of her bosom and back:

hands that might have learned to talk have instead been disciplined to lie still. The woman's hands are withheld to show how effective the training has been. The disciplinarian has also been disciplined.

ASYLUMS

The word *asylum* is among the most brutal and ironic of euphemisms that the disciplinary regime has produced. Idyllic postcard views of asylums dot the wallscape of *Body Signs*, extending up and beyond the viewer's field of vision. Grigely *doubles* the logic that places disciplinary institutions out of sight. The doubling works to expose the sinister, eugenic function of asylums: they are out of sight, like the discipline that placed them; but they are always among us. Like upholstery buttons, they stretch and fixate the fabric of the disciplinary landscape in which we live. How could we ever really be either outside or inside what is always among us?

BODY SIGNS

Disciplinary power dreams of a regime of perfect visibility, where each sign and symptom, every deviance from normalcy would be visible on the body (habits of sex, race, disability), each effect fixed to a single cause (like the current delusion that violence is attributable to genes or television), disease and health perfectly opposed and isolated. The yellow star, the pink triangle and the concentration camp are among the crowning glories of this regime.

Disciplinary power fixes deviance and disability to certain individual bodies to subject them to *invasion, control, help, cure*. The way that power fixes deviances and disabilities to bodies is compelling partly because it resembles the way that individuals are fixed to certain

bodies. It seems there is no room for interpretation here, just the brute and inert self-evidence of fact: I am here and not elsewhere, this (and not that) is my body (and not someone else's).

Even without titles or signatures to identify them, artworks seem inert enough, fixed safely enough in place, like our bodies as we move among them, except that we move and they don't. But it is they who draw us in and move us among them.

What if, instead of being fixed to bodies, identities are relations between kinds of bodies and the kinds of interactions their culturally-engineered environments demand that they navigate; environments that also control the options and consequences for doing otherwise? What if bodies are not self-evident and discrete, but shifty creatures that emerge from sets of relationships, never really emerging but in a state of ongoing emergency? These are bodies in the realm of signs.

No stranger to discipline, the artist must also work with the visible. But by posing and exposing, juxtaposition and transposition, Grigely's *Body Signs* work to tease out the marks of discipline rather than affixing them to bodies, to put signs into play between bodies and bodies between signs.

What emerges out of the logic that brings the artifacts of *Body Signs* together and divides them from each other: photos and postcards blown up and not, affixed to canvas and not, painted and not, paired with text and not, paired with other images and not; colored and not, whitewashed and blackwashed and not, titled and not, hung and stretched and leaning and heaped and not? What emerges is another question: how are differences divided up and distributed among us? The logic here is not representa-

tional (so many of each gender, race, sex) but works to estrange discipline and to queer the way differences are assigned.

A synapse is the gap between neurons in the brain, across which pass the electricity whose patterns make up our thoughts. The work of *Body Signs* is to produce gaps between paired or multiple works or between text and image, gaps within single works (such as between photo and glaze or between states such as postcard and painting). What emerges out of these gaps could be called a *brain*; a constellation of differences that together make something to think with, play with, work with.

What if a time-lapse film could show the movement of people through Grigely's exhibition? What if computer-imaging could show the movement of each viewer's eyes, how they moved from work to work or rested in place, how they danced between images or scanned back and forth across text (as they must be doing now)? What if vision were visible? What would this exhibit of the exhibit look like? A jarful of fireflies, the electrical activity of a collective brain, a sea anemone with paintings and texts at the tips of its tentacles?

The traces of the movement of multiple bodies makes a collective body that is shaped and moves differently from the bodies that make it up. The movement of bodies is like a brainful of thoughts. The figures that are always emerging from these movements are body signs, works in process, lived as questions.

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