

Logic to the Lack Des Hughes's sculptural dismemberment

He felt as if the limbs did not fit each other.

Paul F. Schilder recounting the effects of mescal intoxication upon E Forster in 1917, in *The Image and Appearance of the Human Body* (Routledge, 1999), p. 117.

so-called . . . all that together . . . imagine! . . . whole body like gone . . . just the mouth . . . lips . . . cheeks . . . jaws . . . never— . . . what?

Samuel Beckett, *Not I*, 1972

Ruin is [...] this memory open like an eye, or like the hole in a bone socket that lets you see without showing you anything at all, anything of the all.

Jacques Derrida, *Memoirs of the Blind: The Self-portrait and Other Ruins*, 1990

Severed limbs and the silver screen go hand in bloodied hand. *The Beast with Five Fingers* (1946); *The Crawling Hand* (1963); *And Now the Screaming Starts* (1973). *The Thing* (1982); *Re-Animator* (1985); *Severed Ties* (1992). In *Dr Terror's House of Horrors* (1965), Christopher Lee assumes the role of pompous art critic Franklyn Marsh, who victimises, dismembers via vehicular assault, and pushes the painter Eric Landor (Michael Gough) to the point of suicide, only to be tormented by the merciless digits of the artist's reanimated hand. In taking that hand, Marsh stripped Landor of his craft; the hand returns and claims the same from the critic: his vision, which causes another car crash and the loss of another life. An eye for a hand leaves the whole world blind – or dead at the wheel.

Why is absence of the body, signified by its partial presence, such potent terrain for horror? Why is the 'phantom' limb a greater source of shuddering anxiety and palpitation than, say, a fully formed beast? Some options: There is, as always, the Freudian sensation of the 'uncanny', which manifests (or re-emerges) upon being confronted by an amalgamation of the familiar and the eerie. (Freud found this in the pages of Wilhelm Hauff's *The Story of the Severed Hand*, 1827; my livelier example would be the scuttling 'Thing' in *The Addams Family*.) Then there is the dread of latent retribution. Why would a once-known, once-trusted limb reanimate and seek vengeance were it not for an injustice of sorts? Or could it be the heralding of a relapse to something that has been psychologically, by way of physically, banished. Matthew 5:30 reads: 'And if your right hand causes you to sin, cut it off'. Something once seen as a risk to the corpus, and promptly amputated, now returns, indicating that the cut was far from clean. That the rot has not stopped. That 'sin' persists.

The slight suggestion of evil, as opposed to the depiction of evil compléter, plays upon a scepticism that lingers deep within each of us – residue of the survival instinct. When we see an unabridged version of a beast, a boogiemán, a Brando in *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1996), we are able to comprehend, process, and place said ghoulish within a wider context. As a result, the creeper lacks the agency that it once had to terrorise. But place affront a fragment and you deny us the possibility of completion. Because with rupture comes lack and with lack comes an absence waiting to be filled

– by ghouls and gremlins that no longer crawl from directors’ notebooks but from the dusty bookshelves of our minds. Like children walking in the woods, a hint will suffice to convince us that something macabre is lurking in the shadows.

This creative potential of absence (for grizzly imaginings are imaginings all the same) has long been adopted for means more generative than those of our scaremongering Hollywood producers. Take iconoclasts, hell-bent on tearing it all out of shape. What does fracture mean to them? It means to debase, destruct, debunk, yes, but it also represents a clearing of space for construction – propagation via a pulling down. To fold in Linda Nochlin in *The Body in Pieces* (1994): the ‘lost state of fecundity and totality’ must inevitably be ‘displaced into the past or the future; nostalgia or Utopia are the alternatives offered.’ We can lament lost wholeness if we must, but what is fragmentation of the customary but an unveiling of malcontent? And what is an unveiling of malcontent but a heralding of change?

Visual art has witnessed various mutations of the dismembered body stagger through its halls. ‘Classical’ artists invoked rupture, the body shattered, to remind of the inevitability of decay; in the 18th century, it was an ideologically-charged call to reduce, refigure and rebuild; for the modernists, it became an emblem of both the psychological fissures of the post-war period and the hapless figure forced through, mangled by, the machines of industrialisation. To lift an oft-quoted aphorism of Friedrich Schlegel: ‘Many works of the ancients have become fragments. Many works of the moderns are fragmented at the time of their origin.’ To paraphrase a lesser-quoted belief of George Bataille: ‘humanism’ is an idealized concept that we should neglect as we push towards ‘informe’ (formlessness), as through liberation from accepted notions of form, we might push towards anything else.

A revered troupe of surrealists (Miró, Morise, Ray, Tanguy, et al) once looked to give form to formlessness via the game *Cadavre exquis*, ‘exquisite corpse’. If you have not had the pleasure, allow me: I take a sheet of paper, at the top of which I draw a head. Leaving nothing visible but the two lines demarcating the walls of the neck, I fold the sheet, and pass it your way. You take the torso, fold, pass, and we continue, until we have a monstrous patchwork beast whose head, thorax, abdomen, line-up to the tee, but are born in different minds. For Rosalind Krauss, in *Formless: A User's Guide* (1997), this authorial relay represents ‘the struggle between eros and death, between chance as the unbridled upsurge of endless possibility and chance as the ultimate version of determination and control.’ It is a collaborative challenge to the traditional notions of form – what it is allowed to do, what it can do, when given the space, the time, the license to breed.

‘License to breed’, to cultivate in near-autonomous fashion, is something that Des Hughes has long-since granted with his broken bodily sculptures. *Monkey’s Paw* (1999), the solitary eponymous lying heel and palm up; *Chewed Up Hand* (2000), a human but cartoonish reiteration whose stuffing puffs from the wrist; *Pixie Boots* (2001), four sets of black clay kickers standing, empty, in line. Padding out these orphaned body parts is a sense of anticipation – an expectancy of an arrival that might herald completion. But for now we wait, ruminating on the various beings that

might one day fill the open void. A Big Hand (2001), for instance, gives us just that: a severed hand of unprimed, unfinished clay, standing on a stumped wrist as if set down to dry. So, shall we create? Perhaps an arm gloops down from the outline of the wrist, widening into a globular, pinkish mass – bell shaped, almost oozing. From the severed pink feet and ankles of Dogs and Legs (2003), which lie in what might be a bed, I see a tangle of limbs, interweaving in figure-of-eights only to resolve in an opposing collection of saccharine stumps and little piggies. Another work from the same year sees an assortment of limbs held within a sphere of tightly-wrapped yellow plastic, their respective forms kept clandestine bar two fingertips that, pink again, poke through a seam – either winding themselves to safety or risking escape. Accordingly, the reticence is titled: Why don't you find out for yourself.

In Hughes's words, 'it's about taking everything away from the work until it disappears' – leaving the majority of the construction to a second, third, fourth party. This technique of involving, implicating, collaborating with an audience is not employed here to inspire intrigue alone; rather, it is central to the process. Flip through the pages of this book and you will see old friends meet, separate, and reconvene – twisted fingers and crooked thumbs; thought-lacking heads and the very hands that grace the cover. Hughes is less concerned with suturing these parts, offering something mimetic and composed, than he is with mirroring a life that remains relentlessly fragmented and resolutely transformable. Thus, the many taxonomies that litter both his work and studio. The rudimentary objects organised within these piles are identical in the sense that they each serve the same purpose as those around them – whether hands, feet, funnels, sticks, stones or baskets. But they are each and every one of them different incarnations of their own forms, different imaginings of their own definitions, and in this they pay testament to the near-limitless potential of the present and, in turn, the sheer impossibility of our ever arriving at something truly 'final' – hands, feet, funnels, and so on. To draw in Hughes's reaction upon having somewhat atypically reconstructed a broken body: 'It was all too closed. [...] And in a way it was quite terrifying'. Rather than strive for this terrifying notion of perfection, which, as in life, will always remain out of reach, one should instead 'let the circumstance decide'. Here: life as process; process as art; art as life. There is logic to the lack.

Following this prioritisation of unerring reiteration, reconfiguration, over faux-unity of form, it is apt that, upon our cognitive completion of these bodies, our avatars (for imaginings are nothing but projections of our own selves) disappear into nothingness, clearing room for other forms to be tried, tested, taken to task, taken apart. Bataille muttered: '[Art] is born of a wound, that does not heal'. And nor is it meant to. Because with the stitching of a wound, with its closing, everything draws to a halt. And nothing ever really draws to a halt, does it? And nothing is ever really defined, is it? Rather, it is constantly reassessed and reworked, and this is what Hughes's absent figures allow for. They are frameworks of possible forms, identities. They are vacant lots upon which one can break down, build up, and break down once more. A sprightlier metaphor: They are geckos whose tails are repeatedly lopped to facilitate further (re)growth.

To revisit that title once more: Why don't you find out for yourself? Hughes's wanting limbs are a testament to the fact that we will never finish. They are testament to the fact that we will always have gaps to fill. Here, of course, there is scope for failure (Nochlin's nostalgia), but more astoundingly there is scope for change (her Utopia) – the idea that said filling might herald something far from 'ordinary'. To lift an anonymous quotation that is frequently attributed to the aforementioned surrealists and their aforementioned high-jinks: 'the exquisite corpse will drink the new wine'. So get drawing. Connect the lines and see what emerges from the nothingness. See how the new wine tastes.