

The Ideal Deconstructed

A PHOTO ESSAY

By Kira Symington

Today I will discuss the deconstruction of the ideal in relation to the nude, body modification, fashion, architecture, and dance. First, I will illustrate how the ideal is found within the nude. Second, I will lead us through the postmodern concepts behind certain body modification and fashion movements. Thirdly and lastly, I will argue that, although postmodernism fails to fully remove itself from under the shadow of the ideal, the phenomenological principles behind architecture and dance will allow us to step back from the ideology of the ideal and hopefully move past it.

Symington, K. (2022). *Cropping and Makeup*
[Photograph].

Through the careful cropping, chopping off of limbs, flaws, and imperfections and through the meticulous use of makeup to hide what cannot be sawed off, to enhance and create illusions of beauty unnatural to that individual, the artist seeks to present the ideal hidden under the layers of our fleshy reality. As François Jullien states on pages 9 and 10 of his book *The Impossible Nude*, "Head, body, legs are clipped off, while the face, most notably, would always present a risk of our relapsing into a sense of the particular...." The ideal demands we get rid of our individual imperfections to display its universality.



Symington, K. (2022). *Ideal Body Modification*
[Photograph].

Just as photoshop and makeup represent perhaps a more daily reality in search of the ideal, another example of this search for the ideal lies in certain body modifications, such as the braces above, which allow the human's search for the ideal to extend beyond hiding fleshly flaws to removing them altogether. (Note that some body modification is done for the physical health of the individual, but the individual above got them for purely aesthetic reasons.) The unique idiosyncrasies of the individual can be removed in order that they may look more like the ideal. But this alienates the individual from themselves, instead of seeing the is, they see the ought and thus remain at odds with their own present reality.



Michelangelo (1504). *David* [Sculpture].

A more quintessential example of the ideal lies in Michelangelo's *David*. It is apparent to most viewers of the sculpture that the biblical character of the young boy that killed Goliath most likely did not look the way Michelangelo presented him. I would argue that the sculpture was not meant to represent the individual, but rather the ideals associated with him. Drawing from the ancient Greek's idea that the body was the representation of the rational mind, David's body is displayed this way to reveal to the viewers the more permanent ideals that lie within his legend.



As François Jullien puts it on page 54 of *The Impossible Nude*, "The nude "abstracts 'Man' by detaching him from any specific time or social condition. The nude is unitarian-egalitarian; it is atemporal (Adam), and even freezes man in time." Michelangelo's *David* is not a 'man' but a symbol, and through that, it maintains its immortality. In that way, you could imagine humanity's quest for the ideal as an attempt at the avoidance of death.



Teng, S. (2020). *Morly Tse's Collection of Taxidermized Butterflies* [Photograph].

The artist takes the individual, their movement, personality, flaws, and sacrifices them in their search for a universal sense of beauty that represents the higher function of humanity. Jullien says, "I need to make you my object in order to gain access to your infinity" (9-10). To capture the beautiful ideal, the individual is sundered from their form. "I see the being of the model in front of me, whom I have every reason to perceive as being as much of a subject as I am—with a life, feelings, hopes, sufferings, and so forth—and all I retain is the immobilized form; suddenly, through artistic convention, I turn the model into a pure object", Jullien later states (97-98). This is called the pose in terms of the ideal nude. The sacrifice of the individual on the altar of the ideal also renders movement immobile.



Andriessen, H. and Verendael, N. (1640 and 1679). *Vanitas Still Life with a Bunch of Flowers, a Candle, Smoking Implements and a Skull* [Painting].

It is my opinion that this is best expressed through still life paintings, drawings, and photography. It follows that to present the unchanging eternal ideal, one must halt all movement. As I already said, Jullien writes that all one retains within the photoshoot is the "immobilized form". The figures and/or objects are rendered static and thus timeless. The fear of age, decay, and eventual death is fought off by capturing the timeless ideal whether it be through themselves or their models.

Newton, H. (1975). *Yves St. Laurent, Rue Aubriot, French Vogue, Paris , 1975*
[Photograph].

However, with the rise of postmodernism, the ideal seemed more and more outlandish. The ideal woman and man with their prescribed bodies and roles seemed impossible and impractical at the very least.

People tried to rebel against the ideal through various movements such as androgyny. They wanted to uplift the individual in contrast to the depersonalizing ideal. But, as Adam Geczy and Vicki Karminas state in their book *Critical Fashion Practice*, "Although well founded in its intentions as a strategy to destabilize gender along with the bedrock of masculinity, androgyny prioritizes the masculine signifier and its gender-associated sartorial stylings: shirt, tie, short hair, monocle, and suit" (113). By removing themselves from the ideal woman, they fashion themselves in the likeness of the ideal man. In most of these movements, as illustrated above, they fail to fully remove themselves from under the shadow of the ideal.



Symington, K. (2022). *Postmodern Body Modification* [Photograph].

In their reclamation of the individual's body, the postmodern society takes body modification and uses it to enhance differences to the individual's preference. This was to deny the ideal's sacrifice of the individual in its search for universality. Victoria Pitts says in her book *In the Flesh*, "The stigmatization of the tattoo allowed for it to become a mark of disaffection for groups who sought to stage symbolic rebellion and create a subcultural style, and, eventually, to create personal and political body art" (5). Tattoos were a mark of a subculture which allowed the individual to express or enhance less culturally acceptable traits. However, although ignoring the majority's ideal, they followed a subculture's ideal which too could alienate people in the same way.



Wilton, D. (2011). *Harbisson* [Photograph].

To escape the ideal, the cyberpunk community transforms the body from a static rendering of the ideal to a fluid site of technological change. Harbisson is a perfect example of this, to create art, he implanted technology that would allow him to “hear” color by sending vibrations through his skull with visual stimulus. The cyberpunk community in their quest for the deconstruction of the ideal reimaged the body.



However, this was undermined by their reliance on technology to do so. As Pitts puts it, “The individualist rhetoric often dominant in cyberpunk discourse belies the ways in which technology is linked to hierarchies and systems of power” (160–1). A major question is who can afford to use technology in such a way. Another point of contention is that in their imagining of cyberpunk future, they are rejecting their present reality and relying on some future ideal world.



Green, G. (1976). *Poet* [Photograph].

The ideal was not fully removed from the postmodern society despite its attempts to do so. Instead, it was divided up into pieces, recognized as being dependent on culture and subculture, time, and location. It took the form of trends, with the ideal body shifting quickly between things like almost anorexic bodies to the rise of implants and fillers. Subcultures, such as punk, too had their own ideals that overtime became more and more mainstream as evidenced by Vivienne Westwood's now enormously successful fashion line. These individualist movements became swallowed up in competing ideals and then distributed to the public.



Symington, K. (2022). *Consumerist Complications* [Photograph].

This easy packaging and repackaging of various ideals was made possible largely by capitalism. Designs were easily reproduced and then distributed. The consumption of subcultures and culture at large was now efficient and available to most everyone. With the rise in smartphone usage and the widespread effects of technology, the competing ideals were now given an even larger stage. Capitalism ultimately undermined the postmodern escape from the ideal.

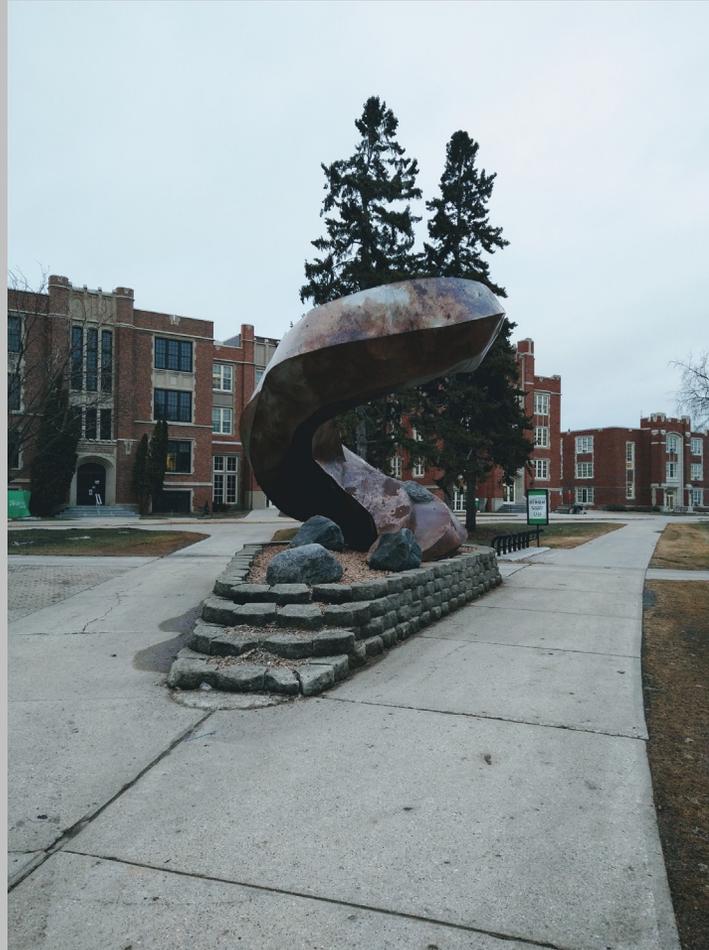
Symington, K. (2022). *A Silent Conversation with the World* [Photograph].

Phenomenology offers a new route of escape from the ever-present shadow of the ideal. It calls us to take a step back so we might take a step forward. What this looks like is, rather than interpreting the world through the alienating lens of the ideal, through having a sort of “conversation” with the world. As Fred Rush states in his book *On Architecture*, “Merleau-Ponty holds that the body is the point at which the mind and the other parts of the world overlap” (16). Through our sensory experiences, we may understand and perhaps come to accept our physical reality without ideological filters.



Flexhaug, C. (1996). *Camp Depression Tribute "Persistence"* [Sculpture].

As the body is the site in which the world and mind overlap, architecture offers new ways for that world and body to interact with each other and the mind. Through the changes in the environment, in the feel of objects, the relative roughness or smoothness of a piece, or through the shadow and light, the sensory experiences that offer the basis of our conversation with the world suddenly expand even to the realm of play. Architecture is the world shaped by humanity which then in turn shapes us. This is the interaction with the world on clear display.



Symington, K. (2022). *The Individual* [Photograph].

In the phenomenological acceptance of body not as a signifier of the ideal but as a site for interaction with the world, the individual comes into clearer focus. It is the individual's experiences that inform their perception of the world, not some ideological narrative dictating that perception.



Thus, they can more fully accept their body as it is without being trapped by the thought of what it "ought" to be. It becomes a site that details their interaction with the world, each scar, wrinkle, and particularity tell of the sensory experiences in their conversation with that world.



Symington, K. (2022). *Time Passing* [Photograph].

As the ideal tears the individual from their form, it too renders it static and immobile. However, in the phenomenological approach, the passing of time is to be understood not feared. The eternal ideal is no longer imposed on the body as it acknowledges its own process as a fluid being changed by the world and its processes. As Maxine Sheets-Johnstone puts it in her book *The Phenomenology of Dance*, "According to recent phenomenologists, temporality and spatiality are inherent structures of human consciousness-body. They are rooted in man's foundational pre-reflective awareness of himself, and not in the more abstractly refined notions of 'real' time and 'real' space: the immediate lived experience of time and space is epistemologically prior to our notions of objective time and objective space" (11). The ideal must surrender to our lived experiences as beings in time.

Lunde, E. (1987). *School Dance* [Painting].



Part of the rejection of the static nature of the ideal involves not only the acknowledgement of time but also of movement. Maxine Sheets-Johnstone says in her book *The Phenomenology of Dance*, "Any lived experience of the body incorporates a pre-reflective awareness of its spatiality through the bodily schema. Consciousness body knows itself to be spatially present in-the-midst-of-the-world, not through a factual kinesthetic perception of its parts, but through a pre reflective awareness of itself as a spatially present totality. To apprehend the totality of the body is to live the body and not to reflect upon it as a given object or as the sum and sequence of kinesthetic sensations" (17).

Understanding the body as a site of constant interaction with the world requires the understanding of the constant movement of both the site and the world. The ideal must kill and dissect its subjects in its attempt to reach immortality, but phenomenology allows for the reality of our physical experiences as embodied consciousnesses as we age, change, and grow in our communion with the world and ourselves.

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