

Alexander Darius Ornella
Stefanie Knauss
Anna-Katharina Höpflinger (eds.)
Commun(ica)ting
Bodies
Body as a Medium in
Religious Symbol Systems

Commun(icat)ing Bodies



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Pierre Bühler, Gerd Folkers, Antonius Liedhegener,
Jürgen Mohn, Wolfgang W. Müller, Daria Pezzoli-Olgiati,
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Body as a Medium in Religious Symbol Systems

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Michael Hedwig: Sterntaler. 9 Zeichnungen zu einem Text von Karin Peschka.
Paper, 42 × 29,5 cm, drawing 6. © Michael Hedwig.

Introduction

Body, Communication and Religion

The supplicant entering the temple is first stripped of all his or her clothes. In everyday life the Nacirema avoids exposure of his body and its natural functions. Bathing and excretory acts are performed only in the secrecy of the household shrine, where they are ritualized as part of the body-rites. Psychological shock results from the fact that body secrecy is suddenly lost upon entry into the latipso. A man, whose own wife has never seen him in an excretory act, suddenly finds himself naked and assisted by a vestal maiden while he performs his natural functions into a sacred vessel. This sort of ceremonial treatment is necessitated by the fact that the excreta are used by a diviner to ascertain the course and nature of the client's sickness. Female clients, on the other hand, find their naked bodies are subjected to the scrutiny, manipulation and prodding of the medicine men.¹

These lines describing the body rituals of the "Nacirema" (an anagram of "American") show that body is a phenomenon constructed through collective practices and socio-cultural imaginations (such as rituals of bathing or excretion), which, vice versa, it helps to order and give meaning to through its performances (by establishing limits of private/public, for example). The fact that in his study, the American anthropologist Horace Miner is not looking at some strange tribe, but rather at his own culture, describing it in a comically and self-reflexively "anthropological" manner, underlines that these meaningful body practices shape our lives, even though – or rather because – we are probably not conscious of them most of the time. The ways in which bodily practices acquire meaning and, on their part, attribute meaning to individual and social life can be understood as communication processes of different kinds and on different levels, of which, as Miner shows, body is not only the product, but instead functions as a medium.

Bodies and bodily communication generate spheres of meanings, are used and abused to privilege one understanding over another and can prompt (scholarly) reflection upon these attempts at meaning making. These processes of body-communication as well as their reception and

1 Miner 1956, 505f.

interpretation are often marked by dichotomous concepts and boundary-drawing processes characteristic of a specific culture and time: private/public, nature/culture, pure/impure, profane/holy, naked/clothed, material/immaterial, female/male. Thus the understanding of bodies according to dichotomous schemes and the communication processes based on them enable specific types of identification processes (such as in stating that “our” bodies are shaped by culture, “theirs” are pure nature, attributing a higher value to bodies that are culturally constructed and thus to the “we”-group) and establish relationships between groups and ultimately a certain worldview and “order.”²

But bodies are more than the sum of such distinctions, indeed they defy any such easy categorisations. This disorderliness or “messiness” of bodies should not be considered a disadvantage, as these terms might imply; indeed it is precisely because of this that they are able to generate, carry and mediate semantic and social meaning that transcends simple dichotomies: bodies are “natural” and “cultural” at the same time, they are both individual and collective, they are a person’s “private affair” and of public interest. Bodies are always more than just the sum of these binaries, although these binaries rely precisely on the bodily dimension of the human being for their construction and reflection and come to form the basis of human activity and cognition.³

Interestingly, Horace Miner directly associates body and social body practices with religion through his choice of terminology (“household shrine,” “vestal maiden,” “diviner”). Although Miner intended this to be a parody of anthropological studies of religious practices, it is worthwhile to spend some more thoughts on the very close connection between body practices and religion he alludes to. Miner uses a definition of religion we call “functional:” what is interesting in the portrayal of the Nacirema body rituals is not their somewhat strange semantics – in fact Miner does not seem to be concerned with their possible doctrinal meaning at all. Rather, he is interested in the function these practices have for structuring the lives and worldviews of the Nacirema. Body rituals, thus Miner’s argument, are practices *based on* and *creating* a shared imagination and normativity. They are the result of, but at the same time markers for and constructive mechanisms of collective worldviews. As “natural” objects in the world and at the same time irreducibly connected to the first-person view and experience of

2 For bodily constructions of the “other” see e.g. Hall 1997; Lanwerd 2010.

3 Cf. Eagleton 2000, 2–3.

the subject, bodies are characterised by an “aura of factuality” and associated with strong emotions and motivations, to use terminology from Clifford Geertz’s famous definition of religion, which makes them a most appropriate medium to establish and transmit order and meaning, thus contributing to a religion’s functions in a society.⁴

Miner’s look at the US-American culture of the 1950s reproduces the perspective of an anthropologist looking at a foreign society or “tribe.” Parodistically drawing on the scientific categories of his discipline, he shows that by imposing preconceived categories on bodies, the observer in fact constructs certain bodies and gives meaning to them and the body rituals he or she observes from an apparently objective perspective. But the observer is never a neutral outsider; rather their perspective and understanding is strongly shaped by their own context and background, which emphatically also includes their own bodily constitution and experiences. The observer’s embodiment and situatedness in a concrete space and time gives form to the observed “material,” in this case body rituals. Miner shows that in interpreting the material, the observer often draws on categories derived from the observer’s own context, rather than from the one of the observed, and thus imposes their own sense of body and practice as relevant on what they see.⁵ Miner’s text is a helpful reminder that social meanings connected with bodies and body itself as a material entity are never “pure nature” but culturally constructed, polysemous, dynamic, chaotic, unstructured, evasive, spilling across categories. The definition and regulation of bodies through social norms, interpersonal relationships as well as religious traditions and worldviews are an attempt to establish order in this messiness and turn them into unequivocal signifiers of precisely these norms, relationships and worldviews.

In just a few lines, the initial quote from Miner’s article condenses the themes of the book at hand. Its title, “Commun(ica)ting Bodies”, ambiguously combines two different theoretical approaches to bodies, on which we will focus: a communication-theoretical approach and a focus on social collectivity. Combining these perspectives, “communication” is here understood as dynamic and multi-layered, a process of *communicating*, precisely. Communicating in this understanding is strongly connected to the body, not only because it presupposes the human (biological) ability to form

4 Cf. Geertz 1987, 84.

5 For the interrelation between the observer and his/her research topic, especially focusing on religion, see e.g. Pezzoli-Olgiati, 2008; Heller 2010.

sounds or move hands and arms in gestures and the (cognitive) ability to “understand” these sounds and gestures in meaningful ways, but also because in a broader sense, as Paul Watzlawick stated, communication and behaviour are nearly the same.⁶ One might say that we cannot be as bodily beings without communicating at the same time. Communicating, then, is not simply the transmission of meaning, but it also generates new forms of meaning. It is a creative process in which bodies are involved as active agents, not as passive objects.

The term “communing” in this book’s title, then, refers to the collective basis of communicating bodies. Bodies are not solely individual and personal, although this is often the main perspective under which they are considered, both in everyday experience and in academic studies, but they are collectively generated and establish community through their communicative ability.⁷ This focus on the socio-cultural aspects of communicating and communing in and through bodies means that in the following, the psychological, intra-personal dimension of bodily communication will be marginalised in favour of a focus on interpersonal aspects. Yet given the mutual relationship between these aspects, our emphasis on the social-collective dimension does not preclude, but rather open up further reflections on their individual psychological role.

Bodily communicating and communing can be observed in all different spheres of social life and culture, from the forming of queues at bus stops to bodily behaviour while waiting in train stations to the organisation of bodies in prisons or hospitals.⁸ In this book, we concentrate on one particular, although not strictly separable sphere of culture, namely on bodily communication processes in religions. Miner’s article quoted above and in more detail and a less parodic mode the articles collected in this volume, show that bodies play an important role in religions as carriers of meaning, which they both construct and interpret in a metaphoric and concrete way.⁹ Our thesis is that bodies are, due to their polysemy and their (potentially problematic, but also productive) messiness, a particularly suitable medium to communicate meaning, to establish community and thus to contribute to the creation of a particular worldview and a horizon of meaning in which individual occurrences can be integrated, providing stability and flexibility at

6 Watzlawick/Beavin/Jackson 1972, 23.

7 See Furey 2012; Koppetsch 2000.

8 Cf. Emmison/Smith 2000; Foucault 1991.

9 See also Coakley 1997; Furey 2012.

the same time. But bodies are not docile building blocks out of which to construct a religious system. Through their ambiguity and polysemy they develop their own dynamics within communication processes and often tell their own stories, rather than those intended in their inscription.

In religious systems, bodies perform different functions in various ways and consequently, most of our contributors, though not all, have chosen to approach religion from the perspective of a study of bodies and their function in religions, understanding both body and religion as a model of the world as well as a model for the world.¹⁰ As such, bodies also contribute to religion's function as a meaning-generating system which provides orientation in a contingent world made up of controllable (occurrences of everyday life) and uncontrollable aspects (such as death, disease, war). Religion both problematises the tension between these controllable and uncontrollable aspects of human life and provides a more or less stable resolution of them.¹¹ Since bodies both submit to the regulative intentions of meaning-making processes and pose resistance to them by having "a will of their own," they play an important part in this.¹²

In order to better understand what the role of body is and how it is performed, we propose to use the concept of "medium," understood as both the basis, the channel and the product of communication processes in religious contexts. These occur on different, although overlapping levels. In communication *about* the body, religions can ascribe a particular meaning to the body or body parts and prescribe particular, appropriate bodily behaviours. These meanings are transmitted in communicative processes *through* the body when practices are performed and their meaning is thus reaffirmed. The resistance of the body, what we called "messiness" before, or what might be described as its *Eigensinn*,¹³ i.e. the moments when underneath regulated and regulative body practices more or less radically different forms of being and doing emerge from the body's own dynamics of being, provides for a third form of mediumship of the body, when its being itself becomes the origin of new meaning and new relationships. The use of the term "medium" stresses the agency of the body in processes of communicating. Bodies are not (only) the result of socio-religious discourses, but also active participants in constructing and transferring religious mean-

10 Cf. Geertz 1987, 48.

11 Cf. Stolz, 2001, 33.

12 Cf. Douglas 1966.

13 Cf. Reuter 2011.

ing. Thus following Marshall McLuhan, we argue that the body not only creates and forms messages (through speaking or signing), but is itself medium and message at the same time in interpersonal relations.¹⁴ These bodily messages are by “nature” of the body polysemous and dynamic both on a synchronic level and on a diachronic level. Synchronically, bodies and their messages are discussed from different perspectives and in different contexts and thus meaning ascribed to them varies whether it is established in a medical text, an advertisement or sacred scripture. Diachronically, bodies have a history of interpretations which influences the processes of their reception through time.

The articles collected in this volume reflect on how body functions as a medium in religious symbol systems in processes of communicating and establishing community. Drawing on different cultural and historical contexts, case studies or the history of a discipline’s engagement with body, they show how the concept of body as a medium can contribute to a better understanding of the relationship between body and religion as well as the role of body within religious systems. From these, three main forms in which bodies are medium in religion emerge, namely by mediating experience, boundaries and reflexivity, which we use as categories to organize the articles collected here. Since the body always defies categorisations, this is not meant as an exclusive or exhaustive list, but as a first approach at understanding and a starting point for further reflection and research. Not least, several of the papers collected here would easily fit two or all of these categories and thus establish interconnections between these three parts, showing that the proposed categories interrelate, as indeed, they have to, if they are to play any role in a complex system like religions.

The papers collected in the first section, “Bodies Mediating Experience,” focus on the maybe most obvious way in which body is a medium in religious symbol systems: they mediate the experience of transcendence in the reality of human life and the experience of being part of a community whose collective identity is based on a shared way of making meaning of these experiences, with both an individual and collective dimension. The concept of medium helps to understand the role of body in making experiences and making sense of them: body is far from passive, a mere window that lets sense perceptions enter to be elaborated by a disembodied mind. Rather, to think of body as medium underlines its active involvement and constructive role in this process. *Stefanie Knauss’s* article discusses this in the

14 Cf. McLuhan 1964.

context of Christianity. Although traditionally, body and the material dimension play an important role as spaces where God reveals Godself and encounters humanity, theology has tended to overemphasise the role of spirit and soul in the God-human relationship. Using the example of sexual experience, Knauss sketches the outlines of an embodied theological anthropology that sees body not as an obstacle to the encounter with God, but rather as that which enables such an experience.

Marcello Neri finds a similar, positive ability in body to mediate experiences of the divine: combining theology with literary analysis, he draws on Pier Paolo Pasolini's efforts to find a poetic language for body that does justice to its evasive paradoxicality and captures its capacity to present – in the twofold sense of rendering present and giving as a present – the experience of what Pasolini calls “origin,” the religious dimension or the sacred. Here, the limits of language and body alike become occasions for overcoming them and experiencing a new reality.

In *Christian Feichtinger's* study of Seventh-day Adventist conceptualisations of body, the relationship between body and religion is more straightforward. Bodies are perceived as indicators of a person's moral and religious state, and even more, the way in which they are treated and cared for can, vice versa, positively or negatively influence this state. Here, body is the interface where religious, moral and medical discourses meet and interrelate in the attempt to make sense of experiences at different levels

If in Seventh-day Adventism, food regulations are a way to keep the individual body and the person pure (in both a physical-dietary and a moral-religious sense), in *Wioleta Polinska's* article, eating and food-related practices are attributed meaning on an intersubjective, global and even eschatological level. Green Christian and Buddhist traditions draw upon bodily experiences of raising animals or cultivating vegetables, food preparation and mindful eating and understand them as contributions to the eschatological healing of the whole cosmos.

In a different approach to the theme of body mediating experience, *Bernadette Wegenstein* interrelates experiences of being body with other media and their representations of body and shows how these feed back into bodily experiences and practices, drawing on diverse examples from current documentary film to the cult of a Catholic saint and contemporary makeover shows on TV. Her analysis of representation and experience highlights the interaction between the aesthetic and the ethic, in particular in religious contexts.

In the second part, contributions are collected that focus on the theme of “Bodies Mediating Boundaries.” As mentioned above, it is one of the most salient aspects of body that it defies categories and boundaries. Paradoxically, as the articles in this section show, it is precisely this messiness of bodies that allows body to acknowledge and symbolise as well as to overcome boundaries, to help understand the need for boundaries and to help complicate them so that rather than separating one sphere from the other, they can become moments of limit experiences that open up new realities, identities, ways of being and knowing. Again, it is noticeable that body understood in its mediating role is not only an instrument used by others to establish or uphold boundaries, but develops a critical and constructive agency precisely as a medium. In his contribution, *Alexander D. Ornella* reflects on the question of the body’s boundary and shows how the idea of a clear bodily boundary becomes ever more complicated, in particular when technology begins to permeate body. This problematises the assumption of body as a symbol of boundaries, in particular in the context of religious identity formation processes, and attributes a positive value to the body as liminal and to the in-between or borderland as a space of new meaning.

Rafael Walthert’s Bourdieuan analysis of Parsi death rituals focusses on boundaries in different respects: boundaries between death and life, in-group and out-group, different groups of believers. He shows how bodies in their material resistance (decaying bodies) can provide a challenge to religious order and also points out just how important bodies are in marking distinctions, dealing with them and thus upholding order in a community.

Reflection on how bodies establish boundaries and thus identities and functions within a religious community and how they mediate these boundaries both in the sense of communicating them to others and of complicating or overcoming them is according to *Isabelle Jonveaux* a major task of a sociology of religion of the body. In her contribution she outlines some possible approaches to these questions, in particular regarding the role of ritual, discussed also by Walthert, and of asceticism as a bodily practice.

From an anthropological perspective, *Ruy Llera Blanes* focusses on the issue of possession and how the concept of body as a medium can contribute to understanding the mediation and crossing of boundaries between human and divine in this phenomenon. Interestingly, he also points out how body, and in particular the possessed body, as a subject of anthropo-

logical study has also contributed to the problematisation of disciplinary and methodological boundaries.

In *Regula Zwicky's* contribution, too, bodies can be seen to mediate boundaries on several levels and in different senses: the tattooed bodies of seafarers she studies are media in identity formation processes in the sense that they provide both for distinction of and continuity between different spheres of life, national and religious groups, showing thus the role of boundaries as not just separating, but also connecting.

The third part collects contributions on “Bodies Mediating Reflexivity” within religious systems and in reflections about religion, providing thus also a kind of meta-reflection on our endeavour to study body and religion from the perspective of body as medium. Again, this is to be understood to happen on different levels and in different respects. Most fundamentally, it means that bodies are indeed part of and agents in reflective processes and meaning-making, that they themselves have a reflexive dimension. It also relates to the way in which bodies are involved in communicating and interpretation and thus contribute to one of the primary functions of religion as making meaning out of the confusing plurality of life. Further, this phrase refers to the fact that bodies themselves are accessible to us only as reflected, never as “raw material.” And finally, it draws attention to our situation in studying body because we can approach our subject of study only from within our own embodied situation, which mediates whatever we might know or think to know. *Anna-K. Höpflinger* opens this section with an application of Paul du Gay et al.’s circuit of culture to the intersection of body, religion and gender. The circuit of culture provides a useful tool for understanding the interrelation between these elements with regard to various aspects of individual and communal life and their role in the overall meaning-making process as which culture might be understood and thus provides an example for how bodies mediate reflexivity.

Enzo Pace approaches the theme from a slightly different angle in discussing religion from the perspective of system theory. He shows how religions negotiate relationships to the outside world through the incorporation of different, often divergent parts into a whole. Here, body plays a primary role as “communication about communication” and a unifying factor allowing for the productive integration of determinacy and indeterminacy at the same time.

Communication also plays a role in *Rebecca Sachs Norris's* contribution, but on a different level, namely as the scholarly approach to and exchange about body as a subject of study. Her overview of theoretical and method-

ological approaches to the study of body is organised according to degrees of presence of body in each, both with regard to the studied body and the studying body, underlining how the embodied situation of scholars mediates their reflexivity and scholarly activities.

The two papers that complete this section continue the theme of bodies mediating reflexivity with a focus on historical reflexivity: *Sophie Caflisch's* study of the account of a medieval play, its role in Christian mission and the importance of body as both a missionising tool and resistant to missionising provide space for reflections on the possibility to study bodies across centuries when nothing but a written record of them has survived.

Paola von Wyss-Giacosa also draws on historical sources in her study of representations of “idoltrous bodies,” but visual ones, in order to analyse the use of body and bodily categories in early modern reflections on orthodox Christianity and idolatry. She shows that bodily practices were clearly used – and are still used today – as a means to facilitate reflection and distinction.

From a variety of perspectives – both with regard to their methods and approaches, their background in different academic cultures and their reference to various religious communities, both contemporary and historical – the papers collected in this volume draw on the concept of body as a medium in order to better understand the role of body in religious systems and how it functions, both individually and collectively. Several shared themes emerge from this diverse material, which we hope will contribute on a broader level to both methodological and theoretical reflections as well as their concrete applications to case studies in the field of body and religion research.

Understanding body as a medium provides a perspective that helps to clarify the particular way in which body functions in religion and to understand how bodies enable religious systems to fulfil their functions in human existence. As several papers in this collection show (e.g. by Neri, Knauss, Blanes, Caflisch), this capacity of bodies is primarily due to the ability of body to mediate between different spheres of being and knowing, such as language and experience, immanence and transcendence, determinacy and indeterminacy, past, present and future, because it defies such binary categories and spills across clear-cut definitions. Thus the experience of the limitations of bodies in their finite, mortal existence are transformed into limit experiences, no longer obstructing, but enabling experiences of new and different realities which do not negate, but incorporate bodily limitations.

This new, different reality is rendered present in a particular way by body thought of as a medium: it is not an insight that emerges, but then disappears again quickly without leaving traces. Rather, because body functions as a medium and thus gives shape to the world and what we know about it, the insight or reality that is encountered through the body, leaves traces in our embodied existence and thus acquires a certain kind of concreteness and materiality – presence (Neri) – in our lives, resisting obliteration even across centuries, as Cafilisch’s study of missionising and missionised bodies shows. Because of its capacity to render present and to mediate, body as a medium is so uniquely able to commune and communicate in the context of religion and beyond in a way that both enables inter-subjective exchange and social community and leaves space for individuality, that provides unifying structure, but is flexible enough to incorporate difference (see Pace, Ornella).

Most papers collected here subscribe to the notion of body as being constructed by social, cultural, historical context, at the same time as shaping these contexts. What is noticeable here in contrast to other constructivist studies of body, is the role that religions play in this complex combination of influences upon body: not only are religious bodies subject to the formative influences of their religious community in the shape of ritual, doctrine or other regulations of being and doing body, but these various regulative powers also shape “secular” bodies when they move beyond explicitly religious spheres, such as in regimes of dieting or eating today, which continue to work with moral concepts of sin and temptation, as Polinska mentions, or beauty ideals equally interwoven with moral categories, as Wegenstein shows.

Yet, it is important to note that although all contributions depart from body and have body as their primary subject of study, they all problematise and question their subject of study in one way or the other: Ornella and Pace discuss the problem of boundaries defining bodies, something that Wegenstein illustrates with the idea of body as a Moebius strip where inside and outside are not clearly distinguishable; Norris points out the methodological problem of body being at the same time subject and object of study; Polinska, Feichtinger and von Wyss-Giacosa underline the difficulty of bodies being both realities and symbols; Cafilisch and Zwicky refer to the problem of diachronic body studies when the bodies studied are no longer present – but then, is the body ever really present when we study contemporary bodies or how could it be rendered present? Indeed, Blanes points out that it is precisely the ubiquity of body that makes it so difficult

to study. As several authors underline, there is no universal referent of “body;” what we mean by “body” has to be defined ever again and if this is the case within the western context that provides the background for most of the studies in this volume, how much more is it necessary not to take for granted a given universal “meaning” of body when we cross cultural boundaries.

In all their diversity regarding bodies, themes and contexts, the articles collected here show a remarkable convergence in their approach to religion. This is not to say that they resolve the cumbersome issue of definitions of religion (a question not any more resolvable than the definition of body), but they show that a shared concern with the role of body in religion and the focus on mediality and communication, leads to an approach to religion that starts with the human being in all the ambiguity of his/her embodied existence and uncovers within the conditions of this existence, in particular in its corporeality, the possibility for making sense of the world and of ourselves in it and for possibly going beyond it in an experience of transcendence.

One final aspect deserves mentioning and that is the idea of intermediality: several articles choose to study body as a medium through other media or refer to the interaction between body-medium and other media (e.g. Höpflinger, Jonveaux, Knauss, Wegenstein), reflecting on how the interaction between different media can have particular consequences. Taking body seriously as a medium means that this issue deserves closer analysis: are there patterns of interaction between the body-medium and other media, which aspects are highlighted, which are downplayed in these interactions and what particular influence does the context of religion have on their interactions? Body becomes a medium for other media, as well, and communicates with and through them by how bodies are represented as ideal, enhanced, clothed, excluded, disabled, normative or non-normative bodies. Michael Hedwig’s illustrations, included in this volume and introduced by Elisabeth and Gerhard Larcher, also express this communicative, interactive and intermedial aspect of body. Religion, too, is practised in and through the interaction of several media, of which body is certainly the most fundamental and ubiquitous. Because body is always with us, it is probably also least consciously conceptualised as a medium, something for which we have aimed to raise awareness in this volume. The application of the concept of intermediality to body-and-religion studies could provide a fruitful opening for future studies, continuing the thoughts that were developed in this volume.

This volume shows how rich and at the same time challenging the study of body and religion can be, because body is not a stable object we could place in front of us to study from the outside. Instead, bodies – the bodies we study and the bodies we are – are changing, developing, never the same. Because we can do something with and to our bodies and because bodies certainly do things with us, because we as bodies do things, they are meaningful for each of us in his/her embodied situation. Body, then, provides religious communities with a thick (and often stubborn) medium to mediate meaning and intangible realities.

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Bodies

Michael Hedwig's Art

Long before body became a popular topic in aesthetic and social discourses, and quite outside the contemporary fashions of the art world, the Austrian artist Michael Hedwig, originally from Lienz (Austria) and today working in Vienna (at the moment also teaching at the College of Art in Vienna), made the body the main focus of his artistic production. For more than two decades, body, embodiment, in its various individual and collective constellations, in all its facets, forms of realisation and modes of being has been the red thread weaving through his work.

The title of the present volume, “Commun(ica)ting Bodies,” subtly expresses what is a continuous topic in Hedwig’s painting: the connection of “community” and “communication,” possibly also evoking the Christian “communion.” On the one hand, “communing” suggests being close to somebody and intimately getting to know one another. On the other hand, “to communicate” means expressing oneself, sharing information or feelings with someone else. “Communicating bodies,” then, is literally body language as it is repeated, condensed and concretised in gestures and spatially enlarged in the phased dynamics of Hedwig’s drawings. “Communing bodies” includes this and more: namely an implicitly presumed depth dimension of being-body that creates connection or community established pre-reflexively on the level of embodiment. Hedwig’s interlaced bodies and body parts, without individualising traits, with their outlines blurred in colour, are significant for the interaction between these meanings. The subtle distinction and yet association of both, of bodies that commune in that they are body through and for each other as “transcend-

1 This reflection on Michael Hedwig’s art is loosely based on: Larcher, Gerhard, 2010, Michael Hedwig – Communicating Bodies. Körper in Kunst und Religion, in: Larcher, Gerhard/Ornella, Alexander D. (ed.), *Commun(ica)ting Bodies*. Michael Hedwig, Brochure for the exhibition “Commun(ica)ting Bodies,” available online: http://www-theol.uni-graz.at/cms/dokumente/10011580/3cc12a69/Hedwig_Katalog_2010.pdf (30/04/2013); and: Larcher, Elisabeth/Larcher, Gerhard, 2011, *Zur Arbeit von Michael Hedwig*, in: Anja Werkl (ed.), *DolomitenDomino*, Wien, 1. Folio Verlag, 2011, 28–29. Translated from German by Stefanie Knauss.

dental bodies”² precisely, and bodies that communicate with expressive bodily and pathos gestures – both taken together results in the association with “communion” as concrete empathy, mutual exchange, communication.

All these aspects, blended together as the title of this volume suggests, characterise Hedwig’s work in form and content, his paintings, etchings, lithographs and drawings. With this, Hedwig did not simply follow a fashion; ever since the 1970s, he has revolved around the human figure, struggled with the form of the body, engaging with “body artists” like Francis Bacon, maybe also Max Beckmann and Pablo Picasso and the ever-present Austrian colouristic tradition from Herbert Boeckl to Maria Lassnig.

Hedwig’s visual language does not remain one-dimensional or singular when dealing with the body, but always develops body in several dimensions (as *bodies*) and in the plural forms of communality. Hedwig’s bodies are nearly always naked, although they cannot necessarily be defined as nudes: they are neither individualised, nor idealised enough, mostly without face or gender. The figures often move in orderly paths reminding of classical friezes or of ritual performances and choreographies, although not concentrically and hierarchically organised ones. Like in a dance, figures and groups move, their arms touch, their gestures interlace, they embrace without necessarily engaging in dialogue with each other. They act as if on front stage, moving so closely to the viewer that s/he is drawn into the composition of which s/he becomes a part and cannot elude the presence of these groups of figures.

Quite obviously, these body configurations do not attempt to mimetically represent specific historical or social scenes; rather they are visual metaphors of a general connectedness in bodily communication – as the blending of communing and communicating – with a tendency to decentre the subject in the group while at the same time aiming for communication. The relevance that embodiment has had in Hedwig’s work for years, is even more significant today given that body has become the epistemological and hermeneutical focus par excellence in humanities and cultural studies, which ask again about the human being as a whole, not to mention current wellness and fitness trends in society that function as projection screens of human desires.

For more than ten years now, Hedwig has increasingly dedicated himself to lithography. This technique requires great technical precision and

2 Cf. Knauss 2008.

knowledge, especially when using multiple colours. In the Neuhauser Kunstmühle in Salzburg, where Michael Hedwig has found ideal working conditions for this complex technique, he realised a precious book project, of which four etchings have been chosen to accompany and embrace the texts in this volume bodily-visually. The work is conceptualised as a folding book, in which the artist visually accompanies a very dense text by Karin Peschka about death, “Sterntaler.”³ The artist reflects the increasing confusion and despair about her lover’s death congenially in nine colour lithographs and eight etchings.⁴ This work, shown for the first time at the Frankfurt Art Fair in 2008, shows impressively the masterly use of this difficult printing technique. The etchings and lithographs express the metamorphic inconceivability of the experience of death, the encounter with death in its suddenness and ephemerality: “Ich stelle mir den Tod vor, er bildet sich zwischen den Büschen, eine Gestalt aus wirbelndem Sand. Was weiss ich über ihn? Nichts, er ist nur das zerbrechende Geräusch in der Lunge [...] Was willst du, um ihn freizugeben? [...] Was, wenn ich an seiner Stelle sterbe?”⁵

Without doubt spiritual currents, in close vicinity to religious questions, are present in Hedwig’s work in subtle, but clearly recognisable ways, which permit a cautious theological approach. The formally contained, but always pulsating movement of bodily visual elements and the symbolism of colours or shades of grey fascinate the viewer and transmit at the same time a particular aesthetics of empathy, not to say a “spirituality of belonging,” of being a part of the current of life or “*élan vital*” (Henri Bergson). This can be comprehensible within a secular frame of reference, but it also finds resonance in the sphere of the sacred and can be open for religious themes. This religious resonance is also noticeable in the symbolism of Hedwig’s colour scale: it comprises nearly exclusively reds and browns of variable intensity depending on lighting, between salmon red and rose madder, from flesh-colour to blood-red. Josef Fink, an early patron of Hedwig, referred to the colour of the incarnation in the mystical tradition, according to which crimson is the colour of the Son of Man. In form and colour, there is

3 Peschka 2010.

4 Hedwig 2008.

5 Peschka 2010: “I imagine death, he forms between the bushes, a figure of whirling sand. What do I know about him? Nothing, he is just the breaking sound in the lung [...] What do you want in order to set him free? [...] What, if I die in his place?” (translation S.K.).

something like a spirituality of the body, an esoteric of the body in the best sense of the word, in Hedwig's work. As said above, what is important is not the individual human being, but rather his or her integration into a natural network, a social group, a spiritual-embodied whole, maybe a cultic community.

With his focus on bodies, both communicating and communing bodies, Michael Hedwig's artwork can provide fruitful visual stimuli for theological traditions and theological reasoning. A critical correlation with tradition, an experimental reference to tradition through its alienation appears to be possible with regard to body and its hidden, Christian iconographic lines of connection. The unusual application of traditional iconographic elements opens them up for new contexts of meaning. In all this there is no pathos of simplistic unambiguousness, no pious visual drama that one might enjoy from the outside. Hedwig is too restrained, too careful for this. His works ask questions, first of all, which cannot be answered without the viewer's personal engagement; they are, as in his studies on Moses's final speeches (Dt 29ff), only glimpses of the promised land, which the artist himself is not allowed to enter.

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