

So Close, So Far
On the installation *B.O.D.Y.* (2009) by Erika Matsunami

Dr. Miya Yoshida /
art historian and curator

Erika Matsunami, an artist based in Berlin since decades, has been indefatigably working on issues of the human body and of physicality in time and space. With her rich and solid experience as a choreographer and performer in the field of the performing arts as a significant background, her series *B.O.D.Y.* has emerged and developed since 2000.

B.O.D.Y. is a collection of works devised by Matsunami in and for different media. Adopting methodologies of installation art, *B.O.D.Y.* to the artist has become rather like a treasury of valuable ideas and meaningful fragments, gathered one by one, over a long period of time. *B.O.D.Y.* originates in a performance titled *Sensation of Motion in Time* (2000-2003), conceptualized and choreographed by the artist, which staged simultaneous projections of images of parts of the performer's body. Inspired by the potential of an unusual manner of self-presentation that was granted to her in a group exhibition of GEDOK artists in Berlin and Hamburg, she produced an installation consisting of three elements which influenced each other: four rectangular, slit-shaped, rather large-scale photographs, synthesized sound (a unit with a duration of 3'41") through a pair of head phones, and a book combining twelve smaller scale photographs and a short text on the work.

The photography in *B.O.D.Y.* presents extreme close-ups of different parts of a body. These images, however, are not merely of an illustrative nature, but full of texture, as if seen and at the same time felt, with a touch that is unconsciously implied and invested in the photographer's gaze, then carefully trimmed into specific proportion and composition. Subtle reflections of light reveal the details of the skin down to the pores, the surface reminiscent of rippling waves in an ocean, meeting an horizon at the far perspective point that softly fades out into thin air. After a certain time in which the viewer may familiarize herself/himself with the photographic "facts," she or he may begin to see a nightly desert landscape, or the scenery that would present itself to an astronaut landing on a new planet, in a mystic cosmos made of lights and shadows only. There, the object of photography almost entirely fills up the two-dimensional space, and the fragment seems to aspire and achieve becoming one and whole and abstract. Although these images originate from human bodies (different parts of different bodies), the microscopic gaze on our bodily nature reveals the existence of a universal world that presents us with a mixture of the familiar and the unfamiliar. Matsunami's visual conceptualization implies both feelings of closeness and of distance from the self. However, it is not the putative "masculine gaze" with its tendency of "objectification", as thematized in video and photographic works like, for example, selfportrait from performance art in the 1980's and *Corps Étranger* (1994) by Mona Hatoum. Presenting a scientific photograph of the inside of her body, Hatoum provocatively formulated a body aesthetic, at the same time refusing to be "seen" according any standards. Matsunami remains unirritable by such standards and intentionally creates a poetic beauty derived from the physicality of the cosmos around her in her work – an abstraction of traces of the everyday that might imply a degree of fetishization, but not any kind of reductionism or willful fragmentation.

While close-up viewing reveals a new world within that which we have come to call the self, this adventure of translation certainly demands an intense relationship between image and viewer. Together with the doubled intimacy of her acoustic setting – a physically “attached” way of listening through headphones, synthesized sound that evokes a visceral imagination of the workings of the inner organs (regular rhythm of heartbeat, breath and intervening noises of organs) -, the sensuality of skin is even more emphasized. The intensities, both in the acoustic and in the visual realm, stimulate the imagination of the viewer – leading to a confrontation with otherwise invisible details around the living skin. Matsunami accordingly manages to produce a virtual world of sensitive touch, maybe even of the air sphere around the body as a sense shared with the other.

Matsunami chooses the “models” of her body images at random – i.e. from her encounters with people she meets in her daily life. It is not so easy to recognize the fact that the models are quite diverse, we see particulars of the bodies of men, women, old, young, big, small, of different “ethnicities” etc. The discipline of her selection lies in the concept of what can be called “onceness”. “Onceness” is a Buddhist concept that invites us to regard every encounter as a unique event, a perspective which augments attention and appreciation towards each and every form of life: “Once is all.” She never works with the same model twice. In this sense, *B.O.D.Y.* is an attempt to represent not a photographic relation of domination-subordination between subject and object, but quite another way of relating the self to the world, which is outside of domination as conceived by linguistic models. Sensualizing the new world within the self, *B.O.D.Y.* represents a perception of bodies (both of the self / the other) – beyond age, gender, class, color, race, morphologies and other human inventions.