

## BODY SCULPTING

### Paradessent Strategies in Contemporary Art

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During the 9<sup>th</sup> Berlin Biennale in 2016, three colourful racks loomed on the deck of the Academy of Fine Arts at Pariser Platz (fig. 1). Any visitor who might have considered the gear a playful polemic against the pervasive cult of fitness was corrected by the catalogue entry: "Nik Kosmas' gym equipment is not a statement, installation, or performance. It's neither an ironic commentary on the fitness industry, nor is it a cunningly guised reference to abstract sculpture. These three simple structures are nothing more than foundational pieces of gym equipment: a power rack, a squat rack, and a rig that hold free weights."<sup>1</sup>

A power rack is a power rack is a power rack. At this point, any further commentary seems futile, and were it not for the funny feeling that accompanied the reading of the curatorial statements and the visit of the bb9 as a whole, there would be no need to continue. However, the overall impression was a persistent ambivalence that pervaded far beyond the usual strategies of "unsettling the observer" mentioned in all too many exhibition texts.<sup>2</sup> The concept of the curatorial team DIS (consisting of Lauren Boyle, Solomon Chase, Marco Roso, and David Torro, with "DIS" highlighting the reversing force of the prefix in terms like dis-illusioned, dis-respect, dis-taste) was not just to trouble perception or question truisms, but to radically intrude into the leftist art lover's comfort zone. The biennale was conceived for people who buy local and fair trade, but regularly take planes for freelance work. However, the curatorial key tone was not one of lament or reproach, but "a radical receptivity to the present."<sup>3</sup> Thus, the bb9 was a zero point for the condition of the possibility of

1 DIS (eds.): The Present in Drag, exhibition catalogue (9<sup>th</sup> Berlin Biennale for Contemporary Art), Berlin 2016, p. 306.

2 Cf. Jan von Brevern: Verweigerung, in: kritische berichte. Zeitschrift für Kunst- und Kulturwissenschaften, vol. 35, no 3 (2007), p. 11–15; Peter Geimer: Subversiv, reflexiv, kritisch. Zur rhetorischen Überfrachtung zeitgenössischer Kunst, lecture at the conference "Ist Kunst widerständig?", Frankfurt/M. 26.10.2018.

3 Lauren Boyle in an interview with Gregor Quack: Art Installation or Duty-Free Shop?, in: Magazine. Kulturstiftung des Bundes, vol. 26 (2016), n.p.





1 | Nik Kosmas, *Power Rack, Rig and Squat Rack*, 2016, Berlin, Academy of Fine Arts.

critical art by merging the boundaries between commerce, lifestyle, politics, design, and art in such a way that affirmation and critique became nearly indistinguishable.

Paradigmatic in this respect is the work of Nik Kosmas, a (then) self-declared ex-artist born in Minneapolis in 1985, currently based in Berlin, who—after a successful career as a post-internet-artist—decided to give up art production in order to become a fitness trainer.<sup>4</sup> In interviews, Kosmas explained his career shift with reference to a personal crisis provoked by the ineffectiveness of the contemporary art world: “The inability to effect actual change through art made me safely sarcastic. Everything became a joke. Health is real, and you can change people’s lives through teaching.”<sup>5</sup>

In the first instance, the “actual change” concerned the artist’s own body: Kosmas loves to talk about the transitional period when people at gallery

4 Cf. Q/A Nik Kosmas, in: Spike Art Magazine, vol. 43 (Spring 2015), <https://www.spikeart-magazine.com/articles/qa-nik-kosmas> (accessed 19.08.2020); cf. Nik Kosmas: On Anthropotechnics and Physical Practice, in: Technosphere Magazine (November 2016), <https://technosphere-magazine.hkw.de/pOn-Anthropotechnics-and-Physical-Practice-cp4YLFN7seB-Ki3aSnPFeqy> (accessed 22.08.2020). For the trope of the artist opting out of the realm of art cf. Judith Elisabeth Weiss: Hiermit trete ich aus der Kunst aus. Negation als Position in der politischen Kunst der 1970er Jahre, in: Lars Nowak (ed.): Bild und Negativität, Würzburg 2019, p. 387–406.

5 Nik Kosmas in an interview with Carson Chan: PRODUCERS: Nik Kosmas, in: Kaleidoscope Magazine, vol. 26 (2016), n.p. As representative of the critical approaches to fitness culture cf. Mark Greif: Against Exercise, in: n+1 (2004), p. 360–368.





2 | Nik Kosmas, *Open Workout* during the the 9<sup>th</sup> Berlin Biennale, photography by David Toro, 2016, Berlin, Academy of Fine Arts.

openings were more interested in his physical transformation than in the exhibits. By now, Kosmas has made peace with the art world and is trying to integrate his experience as a trainer and entrepreneur into his artistic practice. He established a Matcha tea trade and a fashion label. The fact that he, in spite of his resignation, participated in the bb9, matched the curatorial programme designated to examine the contradictions of the present—“the virtual as the real, nations as brands, people as data, culture as capital, wellness as politics, happiness as GDP, and so on.”<sup>6</sup> Retrospectively, Kosmas explained that he agreed to use the open space at the Academy of Fine Arts because “it felt grey zone enough.”<sup>7</sup> Incidentally, his project was not financed by the bb9, but by a private patron and Nike. The sponsor was frankly mentioned on the websites inviting visitors to participate in open workshops offered by Kosmas and his trainer friends. Nina Cristante’s *Fitness povero*, for example, promoted “frugality, self-sufficiency, and intuition as a path to self-empowerment”; Helga Wretman offered a workout “mixing intense body sculpting fitness exercises with more experimental movement”<sup>8</sup> (fig. 2).

6 DIS 2016, p. 56.

7 Nik Kosmas, email, 03.07.2018: “No criticism or analysis just something fun outside. At the time I didn’t want to make art so I accept the DIS proposal because it felt grey zone enough.”

8 *Open workouts* with Nina Cristante: <http://bb9.berlinbiennale.de/event/open-workout-5> and Helga Wretman: <https://www.berlinbiennale.de/de/veranstaltungen/2035/open-workout-mit-helga-wretman> (accessed 19.08.2020); cf. Jörg Scheller: Witness the Fitness. Helga Wretman’s Fitness for Artists TV revives the surprisingly long history of art and exercise, in: *Frieze* (August 2013), <https://www.frieze.com/article/witness-fitness> (accessed 19.08.2020).



The reference to “body sculpting” recalls the idea of humans as sculptors and moulders of themselves that has taken various meanings since antiquity.<sup>9</sup> Plotinus, for example, designates human beings as sculptors of their souls—removing what is not beautiful and straightening what is crooked.<sup>10</sup> Pico della Mirandola addresses man as his own “*plastes et fctor*,” namely as a being that is free to decide about its form.<sup>11</sup> Yet, while philosophers used sculpting as a metaphor, modernity addressed the idea of modelling the “New Man” quite literally. The reformation of bodies degenerated by modern civilization was meant to equal individual and social renewal. Nik Kosmas adapts the metaphor to his own physique, the artist’s body, assuming that the change of outer forms will also change personalities. Even though Kosmas might be an extreme case of an artist-turned-trainer, there is a long history of mutual relations between art and gymnastics. The following text will highlight a few moments from the modern history of body sculpting oscillating between art and life, artistic practices and body techniques: (1) art and exercise at the Bauhaus; (2) the idea of the body as an artwork, and two types of critique: (3) a dystopian strand that can be labelled as “modernisme noir” and (4) an ambivalent one linked to what the curators designate as “paradessence.”<sup>12</sup>

9 For the idea of the body as raw material cf. Romana Sammern et al. (eds.): *Schönheit. Der Körper als Kunstprodukt. Kommentierte Quellentexte von Cicero bis Goya*, Berlin 2019.

10 Cf. Plotinus: *The Enneads*, Lloyd p. Gerson (ed.), transl. by George Boys-Stones et al., New York 2018, I.6 (On Beauty) §9: “Go back into yourself and look. If you do not yet see yourself as beautiful, then be like a sculptor who, making a statue that is supposed to be beautiful, removes a part here and polishes a part there so that he makes the latter smooth and the former just right until he has given the statue a beautiful face. In the same way, you should remove superfluities and straighten things that are crooked, work on the things that are dark, making them bright, and not stop ‘working on your statue’ until the divine splendour of virtue shines in you, until you see ‘Self-Control enthroned on the holy seat’”; cf. Wiebke-Marie Stock: *Peintres et sculpteurs de l’âme dans la philosophie de l’antiquité tardive païenne et chrétienne*, in: *Chôra. Revue d’études anciennes et médiévales* vol. 9/10 (2011/12), p. 149–167.

11 Pico della Mirandola: *Oratio de hominis dignitate/Oration on the Dignity of Man* [1486], Francesco Borghesi et al. (eds.), New York 2013, § 22ff., p. 117: “We have made you neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that you may, as the free and extraordinary shaper of yourself, fashion yourself in whatever form you prefer. It will be in your power to degenerate into the lower forms of life, which are brutish. Alternatively, you shall have the power, in accordance with the judgment of your soul, to be reborn into the higher orders, those that are divine.”

12 DIS 2016, p. 36.



## ART AND EXERCISE

The Academy of Fine Arts during the 1890s was not the first Western art school merging art and physical training.<sup>13</sup> In the early 1920s, Bauhaus artist Johannes Itten introduced breathing and exercises into his famous “Vorkurs,” the preparatory course in Weimar. He was convinced that concentration honed by physical exercise was a prerequisite for artistic creation and went so far as to implement a corresponding diet at the Bauhaus canteen.<sup>14</sup> In doing so, he was influenced by the principles of Mazdaznan, a then fashionable syncretistic religion with Zarathustrian, Christian, and Hindu-Tantric elements, founded by Otoman Zar-Adusht Ha’nich alias Otto Hanisch, who pretended to be born in Teheran in 1844. He proposed a fusion of Asian teachings with theosophy, yoga, and vegetarianism.<sup>15</sup> At the Bauhaus, Itten, together with Georg Muche, formed an esoteric fraction that is all too often forgotten alongside the influential rationalist one.<sup>16</sup> Both shared a goal, formulated in Walter Gropius’s famous inaugural address to the Weimar students, to educate not just artists but a “New Man.”<sup>17</sup> According to Oskar Schlemmer, Itten (who stylised himself as a monk with a frock and a shaven head) considered Mazdaznan to be “the only possibility to create the new man. [...] Itten wants to transform the Bauhaus into a monastery, with saints or at least monks.”<sup>18</sup> What this meant, is described in a 1921 letter from Paul Klee:

13 Cf. Y8, an integrated yoga and art space, run by the former Kosuth students Benita (Sita) and Immanuel (Ram) Grosser in Hamburg, <https://www.art yoga.de/> (accessed 19.08.2020).

14 Cf. Christoph Wagner: Johannes Itten und die Esoterik. Ein Schlüssel zum frühen Bauhaus?, in: idem (ed.): *Esoterik am Bauhaus. Eine Revision der Moderne?*, Regensburg 2009, p. 109–149; Ute Ackermann: *Bodies Drilled in Freedom. Nudity, Body Culture, and Classical Gymnastics at the Early Bauhaus*, in: Elizabeth Otto and Patrick Rössler (eds.): *Bauhaus Bodies. Gender, Sexuality, and Body Culture in Modernism’s Legendary Art School*, New York 2019, p. 25–48.

15 Cf. Paul Citroen: *Mazdaznan am Bauhaus*, in: Eckhard Neumann (ed.): *Bauhaus und Bauhäusler. Erinnerungen und Bekenntnisse*, Cologne 1995, p. 87–95; Ulrich Linse: *Die Mazdaznan-Pädagogik des Bauhaus-Meisters Johannes Itten*, in: Peter Bernhard (ed.): *Bauhausvorträge. Gastredner am Weimarer Bauhaus 1919–1925*, no. 4, Berlin 2017, [www.bauhaus.de/de/bauhaus-archiv/2129\\_publicationen/2132\\_bauhaus\\_vortraege](http://www.bauhaus.de/de/bauhaus-archiv/2129_publicationen/2132_bauhaus_vortraege); abbreviated English version: <http://www.bauhaus-imaginista.org/articles/4787/johannes-itten-and-mazdaznan-at-the-bauhaus> (accessed 22.08.2020).

16 Cf. Klaus von Beyme: *Esoterik am Bauhaus*, in: Christoph Wagner (ed.): *Esoterik am Bauhaus. Eine Revision der Moderne*, Regensburg 2009, p. 15–28, especially p. 26; cf. Christoph Wagner (ed.): *Das Bauhaus und die Esoterik. Johannes Itten, Wassily Kandinsky, Paul Klee*, exhibition catalogue (Gustav-Lübcke-Museum, Hamm; Museum im Kulturspeicher, Würzburg), Bielefeld and Leipzig 2005.

17 Cf. Walter Gropius: *Ansprache an die Studierenden des Staatlichen Bauhauses [1919]*, in: Hans M. Wingler (ed.): *Das Bauhaus 1919–1933*, Bramsche and Cologne 2002, p. 45f.

18 According to Oskar Schlemmer, Mazdaznan for Itten was “... die einzige Möglichkeit, den neuen Menschen zu erzeugen, [Er] glaubt an eine Umwandlung der Denk- und Gefühlsweise



“The master [Itten] goes back and forth, ruby coloured, with wide pants [...]. the head is half schoolmaster, half priest [...]. He takes a carbon pencil, his body concentrates as if charging energy and then, suddenly, he breaks loose. We see two energetic strokes, vertical and parallel, the pupils are asked to imitate him. The master controls the work, asks some pupils to repeat, controls their posture. [...] It seems to be a kind of body massage, to train the machine in intuitive functioning.”<sup>19</sup>

Gropius' successor at the Bauhaus Dessau, Hannes Meyer, proposed a different idea regarding the role of physical exercise for universal renewal. The Swiss architect programmatically wore a tracksuit and lived in a functional coop-interior with folding chairs that could be stored for training. In 1926, Meyer sketched his vision of ‘the new world’ characterized by mechanization, standardization, mobilization, and the formation of a global community. Evidence of the transformation for him is, amongst others, the progress of dance and functional gymnastics: “The stadium conquers the art gallery, beautiful illusion is replaced by physical reality. Sport unites the individual with mass, Sport becomes the high school of collective feeling.”<sup>20</sup> Correspondingly, team sports like football and collective gymnastics for women also played an important role at the Bauhaus—famously documented by Theodore Lux Feininger.<sup>21</sup>

While Meyer emphatically welcomed the mechanization of production and bodies, others considered physical exercise, rather, as a compensation for

als Vorbedingung alles Weiteren. [...] Itten will aus dem Bauhaus ein Kloster, mit Heiligen oder doch Mönchen, machen.” Oskar Schlemmer: Letter to Otto Meyer, 14.07.1921, in: Tut Schlemmer (ed.): Oskar Schlemmer. Briefe und Tagebücher, Munich 1958, p. 116f. Translation provided by the author.

19 “Der Meister geht auf und ab, weinrot, mit oben ganz weißen Hosen [...] Der Kopf ist halb Schulmeister, halb Pfarrer [...] Er ergreift eine Kohle, sein Körper sammelt sich, als ob er sich mit Energien ladet, und geht dann plötzlich zweimal nacheinander los. Man sieht die Form zweier energischer Striche, senkrecht und parallel auf dem obersten Schmierbogen, die Schüler werden aufgefordert, das nachzumachen. Der Meister kontrolliert die Arbeiten, lässt es sich von einzelnen Schülern extra vormachen, kontrolliert die Haltung. Dann kommandiert er's im Takt, dann lässt er dasselbe Exercitium stehend ausüben. Es scheint eine Art Körpermassage damit gemeint zu sein, um die Maschine auf das gefühlsmäßige Funktionieren hin zu schulen.” (Paul Klee, letter to Lily Klee, 16.07.1921, in: Felix Klee (ed.): Paul Klee. Briefe an die Familie 1899–1940, vol. 2: 1907–1940, Cologne 1979, p. 969f. Translation provided by the author.

20 Hannes Meyer: Die neue Welt, in: Das Werk 7 (1926), p. 205–224, p. 221: “Das Stadion besiegt das Kunstmuseum und an die Stelle schöner Illusion tritt körperliche Wirklichkeit. Sport eint den Einzelnen mit der Masse, Sport wird zur hohen Schule des Kollektivgefühls.”

21 Cf. T. Lux Feininger's iconic picture of *The Jump over the Bauhaus* (1927–1928, Berlin, Bauhaus-Archiv, Inv. 7983) and his photographs documenting the *Women-Gymnastics on the roof of the Bauhaus* (1930, Los Angeles, The Getty Research Institute, binder 900079).



one-sided physical or intellectual labour, with outdoor exercise as a complement to urbanisation. Moreover, the renewal of bodies was believed to yield a more comprehensive regeneration.<sup>22</sup> The notion that physical education was fundamental for political emancipation stems back to philanthropist endeavours of the 18<sup>th</sup> century based on the emphatic idea of “Bildung,” which echoes Kosmas’s belief in “change through teaching.”<sup>23</sup> Johann Friedrich GutsMuths, gymnastics teacher in Christian Gotthilf Salzmann’s reform school, for example, promoted gymnastics as an integral part of a holistic education of serene and reasonable young men.<sup>24</sup> The enlightened bourgeois belief in individual and social improvement through a holistic education of body, mind, and senses resonates not only in the *Lebensreform* movement, but also in modernist visions of renewal, considering art as a reform catalyst that loses necessity in its final stage. This idea is found paradigmatically in the writings of Theo van Doesburg and the ardent dancer Piet Mondrian, who dream about a time when art will dissolve into life and “beauty will have ripened into palpable reality.”<sup>25</sup>

## THE BODY AS A PIECE OF ART

Whereas Itten considered exercise to be a prerequisite for artistic creation, and Meyer heralded sports as a community-building activity, for Kosmas, training is not only a means to achieve a psycho-physical balance, but a creative practice in and of itself, with the body becoming or rather replacing the artwork. In doing so, he encapsulates an idea that is omnipresent in the gymnastics-best-sellers from 1900 to the 1920s: the concept of the body as a “piece of art” that must be “restored” and—as Ernst Sommer put it in 1902—transformed into a “masterpiece.”<sup>26</sup> In 1912, the physician Johannes Grosse in 1912 even goes as

22 Cf. Bernd Wedemeyer-Kolwe: *Der Neue Mensch. Körperkultur im Kaiserreich und in der Weimarer Republik*, Würzburg 2004.

23 Cf. note 5.

24 Cf. Johann Christoph Friedrich GutsMuths: *Gymnastik für die Jugend*, Schnepfenthal 1793; idem and Christian Gotthilf Salzmann: *Gymnastics for Youth. Or a Practical Guide to Healthful and Amusing Exercises for the Use of Schools*, Philadelphia 1803, p. 166: “Our own feelings tell us, that, for the exercise of thinking, the body is requisite to the mind [...]. If then, it be possible, to preserve and fortify the health, to harden the body and give it strength and address, and to render the mind serene and enterprising, by means of gymnastic exercises; we then lay the foundation both of corporal and mental activity.”

25 Piet Mondrian: *Natuurlijke en abstracte realiteit*, in: *De Stijl*, vol. 8, no 3 (1920), p. 65–69, p. 66; engl. transl. quoted from Hans L.C. Jaffé: *De Stijl 1917–1931. The Dutch Contribution to Modern Art*, Amsterdam 1956, p. 139.

26 Ernst Sommer: *Muskelkraft und Formenschönheit*, Berlin 1921, p. 8. Sommer advocates training for the strengthening of will, discipline, self-confidence, courage, and “patriotic virtues” (cf. p. 62ff.).



far as to designate his own method of gymnastics and massage as a “system of artistic auto-plasticity.”<sup>27</sup> The idea becomes most evident in the exercises and writings of German bodybuilder Eugen Sandow, who not only posed after antique statues but also actually transformed into a statue when the British Museum ordered a life-size cast of his body for the Natural History Department.<sup>28</sup>

More often than not, the model for the recreation of modern bodies was antiquity (fig. 3).<sup>29</sup> The protagonist of the German gymnastics movement, Hans Surén, praises the Greek lawmaker Solon for deeming gymnastics a civic duty, the positive effects of which could be seen in ancient statues.<sup>30</sup> Those sculptures—as the gymnastic teacher Bess Mensendieck stated—henceforth were to be “turned into living human material,” which then could serve as a prototype itself.<sup>31</sup> In his 1924 *Mensch und Sonne*, Surén states: “If we want to provide a model with a well-trained naked body, it must resemble a statue.”<sup>32</sup>

In the 1920s, the concept of the “marble body” was increasingly supplanted by the ideal of oiled, sun-tanned skin.<sup>33</sup> The shift from the “Marmorleib” to the “living bronze statue”<sup>34</sup> and, later on, the “steeled” male body fit for military operations, has been brilliantly described by Maren Möhring, who has examined the modern discourse on gymnastics and nudism as an “entanglement of medical-hygienic, physiological, eugenic, reform pedagogical and aesthetic discourses.”<sup>35</sup> In this discourse, strength and beauty, along with willpower and muscle-power were mutually dependent. “The awareness of one’s own strength,”

27 Johannes Grosse: *Die Schönheit des Menschen. Ihr Schauen, Bilden und Bekleiden*, Dresden 1912, p. 315.

28 Cf. Eugen Sandow: *Kraft und wie man sie erlangt*, Berlin 1904; cf. Köhler 1985, p. 283ff.

29 See for instance: Gutsmuths 1803, p. 167ff. or Ferdinand Hueppe mentioning exemplary ancient statues modelled after exemplary bodies. Idem: *Zur Hygiene der Körperübungen*, Leipzig 1910, p. 2, p. 49 and p. 53.

30 Cf. Hans Suren: *Deutsche Gymnastik*, Oldenburg and Berlin 1925, p. 33 and p. 83.

31 Bess Mensendieck: *Körperkultur der Frau. Praktisch hygienische und praktisch ästhetische Winke*, Munich 1912, p. 65; cf. Möhring 2004, p. 172.

32 Hans Suren: *Mensch und Sonne. Arisch-olympischer Geist* [1924], Berlin 1936, p. 145.

33 Cf. Möhring 2005, p. 210. For the concept of the soldier as a “work of art” and the drill instructor as a “molder of men” cf. Klaus Theweleit: *Male Fantasies*, vol. 2, transl. by Erica Carter and Chris Turner, Minneapolis 1989, p. 172.

34 Surén 1925, p. 38: “Der gebildete nackte Körper begeistert nicht nur im Wettkampf, sondern auch im Zeichen der Ruhe gleich einer lebenden Bronzestatue von Fleisch und Blut.”

35 Cf. Maren Möhring: *Marmorleiber. Körperbildung in der deutschen Nacktkultur (1890–1930)*, Cologne et al. 2004, p. 22, 25; cf. eadem: *The German Nudist Movement*, in: Peter Becker (ed.): *Normalising Diversity*, San Domenico 2003, p. 45–61 and: *Working Out the Body’s Boundaries. Physiological, Aesthetic, and Psychic Dimensions of the Skin in German Nudism 1890–1930*, in: Christopher Forth and Ivan Crozier (eds.): *Body Parts. Critical Explorations in Corporeality*, Lanham 2005, p. 229–246.





3 | Napoleon Sarony, *Sandow as the Farnese Hercules*, 1893, Cambridge, Houghton Library, Harvard University.

states the Estonian wrestler Georg Hackenschmidt in 1909, “provides perfect mastery over oneself,” while the “work on the body” in turn required a strong will in order to be rigorously executed.<sup>36</sup>

As disparate as the circumstances might be, many of Kosmas’s statements sound astonishingly similar. In his *Essays on Physical Practice* published in 2018, he provides a tool kit for personal training and describes his “trinity” (“personal experience, science, and tradition”) which is summarised in a self-designed t-shirt showing an inverse (male?) triangle with the concepts

36 Georg Hackenschmidt: *Der Weg zur Kraft*, Leipzig 1909, p. 18.



“MIND—SPIRIT—BODY” grouped around the central term “PRACTICE.”<sup>37</sup> Also for Kosmas, “working on the body is definitely about control” (“MIND” assumes the position at the top); it is “an exercise in willpower,” but also “a form of political empowerment.”<sup>38</sup> It is this belief in the possibility of change through personal discipline and “practice” that at the same time unites and differentiates Kosmas’s approach from modernist visions of renewal.

## MODERNISME NOIR

With the optimism of the avant-gardes proven wrong, modern concepts of hygiene, health, and rational planning were increasingly considered to be co-responsible for totalitarian violence. In fact, several of the so-called “reformers” had sympathized with National Socialism. Surén, for instance, who had repeatedly criticized the military drill of the *Turner* movement in the 1920s, was later involved in the conception of physical exercises for the Reichswehr and the NS Labour Service; from 1935 onwards, his book *Mensch und Sonne* was published with the subtitle *Aryan-Olympic Spirit*.<sup>39</sup>

One of the first critics of the disciplinary aspects of sport was the sociologist Thorstein Veblen. His *Theory of the Leisure Class* (1899) constituted a starting point for Theodor W. Adorno’s critical reconsideration written during World War II: Sport, for Adorno, is “a means of adaption to the rising industrial spirit,” which “attempts to restore to the body a part of the functions it has been deprived of through the machine. This attempt, however, is made in order to train men the more inexorably to serve the machine. Sport virtually transforms the body itself into a kind of machine.”<sup>40</sup> As such, it is part of the cultural industry and, consequently, part of a machinery of oppression.

In the post-industrial era, the mechanisms of oppression have changed. The exercise that Kosmas promotes no longer prolongs Fordist motion sequences but encourages a holistic education to develop innate potentials and favour self-empowerment. Yet, by supporting voluntary discipline and privi-

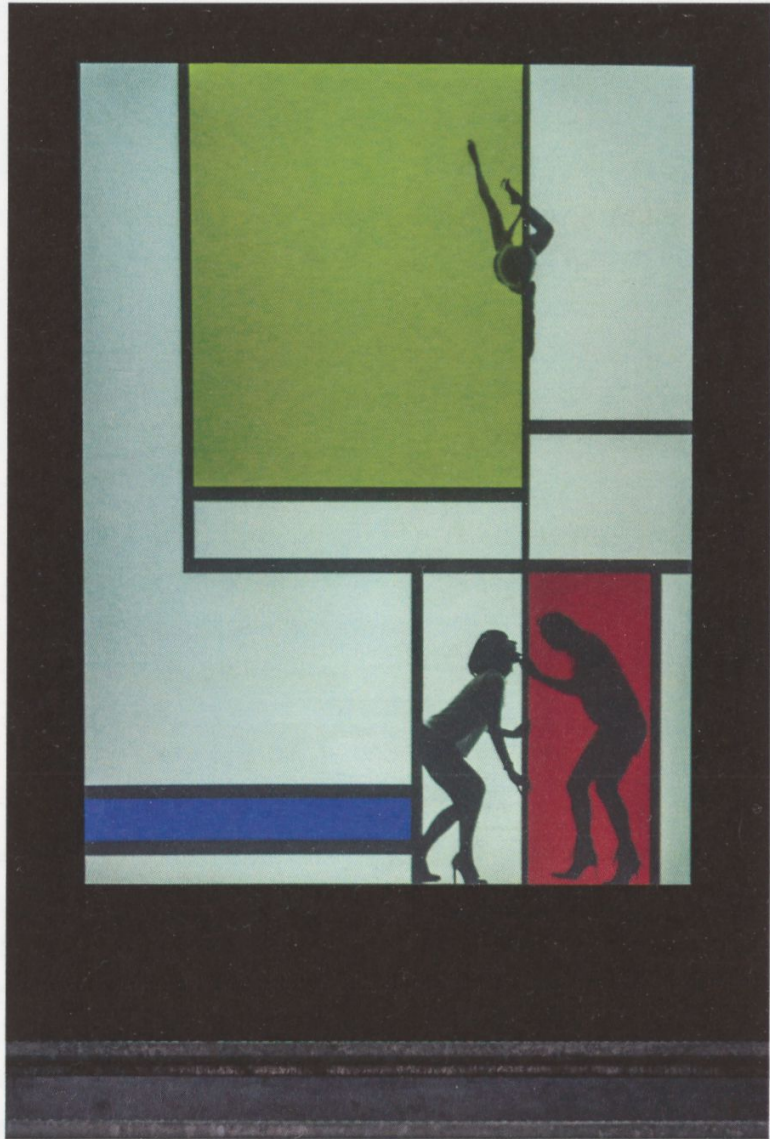
37 Cf. Nik Kosmas, in: <https://kosmas.systems/shop/trinity> (accessed 19.08.2020); cf. Nik Kosmas: *Essays on Physical Practice*, Berlin 2018, p. 47.

38 Kosmas and Chan 2016: “Recognizing that personal decisions are agents of change is incredibly empowering.”

39 Cf. Roman Mürkens: Taking Stock of Hans Surén’s *Deutsche Gymnastik*, in: *Sport und Gesellschaft*, vol. 12, no. 1 (2015), p. 69–90.

40 Cf. Theodor W. Adorno: Veblen’s Attack on Culture, in: *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, vol. 9, no. 3 (1941), p. 389–413, p. 395. Adorno expressed himself in a more differentiated way in 1966, when he attests to sport both an “antibarbaric” and an aggressive tendency. Idem: *Education after Auschwitz*, in: Rolf Tiedemann (ed.): *Can One Live after Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*, Stanford/CA 2003, p. 19–33, p. 25.





4 | Cristina Lucas,  
*Abstraction Licking*, 2013,  
Linz, ooeKulturquartier.

leging certain (healthy and mobile) bodies over others<sup>41</sup>, Kosmas's system neatly matches current concepts of optimisation. Paula-Irene Villa has perspicuously described the ambivalence of such techniques functioning as a form of empowerment (making men the designers of their own lives) but at the same time as a submission to social norms.<sup>42</sup>

As a formal structure, as long as they are not in use, Kosmas's racks resemble abstract sculptures or Mondrian paintings. Consequently, they also evoke satires like Cristina Lucas's video *Licking Abstraction* (2013) with pole dancers

41 A different example would be Artur Żmijewski's multi-channel video *Realism* (2017) showing men with amputated limbs performing everyday movements and training.

42 Cf. Paula-Irene Villa: Habe den Mut, Dich Deines Körpers zu bedienen! Thesen zur Körperarbeit in der Gegenwart zwischen Selbstermächtigung und Selbstunterwerfung, in: idem (ed.): Schön normal. Manipulationen am Körper als Technologien des Selbst, Bielefeld 2008, p. 245–272.





5 | Nico Joana Weber, *The Gym*, 2007.

animating the grid of Mondrian's compositions (fig. 4) or Nico Joana Weber's video *The Gym* (2007), where ant-like gymnasts in colourful tricots seemingly emerge from the gym floor markings (fig. 5).<sup>43</sup> Both works could be described as examples of what Gert Blum and Johan Frederik Hartle designated as "modernisme noir"—an artistic strategy that formally draws on modernist aesthetics while confronting its utopian claims with the catastrophes of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>44</sup> In a mode of "double mimesis" (Thürlemann), abstract forms are filled with concrete motifs. Thus, when Mondrian associated the vertical and horizontal with the female and the male principles, perfectly balanced in his paintings, Lucas materialises Mondrian's grid and reintroduces sexualised bodies that had been excluded from purified modernity.<sup>45</sup> Nico Joana Weber, for her part, presents uniform bodies subjected to the structural violence of geometrical or gymnastic regimes. With the figures replicating the artist's

43 SD, color, sound, 04:00 min.

44 Gert Blum and Johan Frederik Hartle: Modernisme noir. Revisionen des Modernismus in der zeitgenössischen Kunst, in: Christoph Bertsch (ed.): *Cella. Strukturen der Ausgrenzung und Disziplinierung*, Innsbruck 2010, p. 225–234.

45 Cf. e.g. Piet Mondrian's notes on lines in Robert p. Welsh and Joop M. Joosten: *Two Mondrian Sketchbooks 1912–1914*, Amsterdam 1969, p. 16 and 22; cf. Hans L.C. Jaffé: *Piet Mondrian*, New York 1970, p. 54.



body, the video is also a commentary on the dialectics of individual and mass, choreographed by an abstract principle.

An analogue interpretation of Kosmas's Mondrianesque structures, as critically referring to modernist dreams of improvement, though, would contradict his own statements and the *bb9*'s catalogue entry according to which the racks were neither an ironic commentary on the fitness industry nor "a cunningly guised reference to abstract sculpture."<sup>46</sup> Without there being explicit clues of irony, a critical stance—expected in contemporary exhibitions—is not obvious: In several respects, Kosmas still believes in the modernist project of optimisation, with the difference that art, for him, has ceased to be a catalyst for change. Thus, his statements resemble Meyer's idea of sport replacing art or "the stadium defeating the art gallery"<sup>47</sup>. Yet, through the fact that Kosmas's installation was presented in the grey zone of the *bb9*, it lost part of its unambiguousness or, rather, displays its equivocality.

## PARADESSENCE

The ambiguity defying Kosmas's and the catalogue's affirmative statements can be grasped by the neologism "paradesence," a compound from "paradox" and "essence" coined by the American novelist Alex Shakar in 2001.<sup>48</sup> In his novel *The Savage Girl*, set in the world of trendspotting, Shakar has an advertising expert define a product's "paradoxical essence" as its promise to satisfy opposing desires like "stimulation and relaxation" (coffee) or "exoticism and familiarity" (air travel).<sup>49</sup> This strategy matches the new, "postironic" stage of consumerism: "Our culture," the trendspotter explains, "has become so saturated with ironic doubt that it's beginning to doubt its own mode of doubting. If everything is false, then by the same token, anything can be taken as true, or at least as true enough."<sup>50</sup> Transferred to the art world, DIS use the term "paradesence" to describe ambiguous sites and artistic positions that are ironic and serious or illusionary and authentic at the same time—or that can at least be presented in that way. The insight into the impossibility to circumvent the contradictions of the contemporary world and to find an external standpoint from which to criticize it, led DIS to curatorial decisions that present the viewer with works, the critical status of which is not readily visible or maybe—like in Kosmas's case—not even intended by the producer himself. Whereas Nik Kosmas's writings sound rather unironic, statements like "a

46 DIS 2016, p. 306.

47 Meyer 1926, p. 221.

48 DIS 2016, p. 36.

49 Alex Shakar: *Savage Girl*, New York 2001, p. 60f. and p.67.

50 Shakar 2001, p. 140.



power rack is nothing but a power rack” point, rather, toward what Shakar describes as “postironic” as a mindset that blurs “the boundaries between irony and earnestness in ways we traditional ironists can barely understand, creating a state of consciousness wherein critical and uncritical responses are indistinguishable.”<sup>51</sup>

To a certain extent, Kosmas’s racks are what the catalogue states they are not. They unequivocally *do* evoke modern sculpture and they certainly *could* be read as a critical commentary on fitness culture and its promises. Even though Kosmas might promote a normative idea of body and health adaptable to commercial interests, the curators use his position in their own concept of ambiguation. When Kosmas states: “If I tell you that I can teach you how to get a healthier body, I really can do that—whereas I don’t know that I can change your worldview or confront capitalism by selling sculptures,”<sup>52</sup> DIS also states that a biennale cannot change worldviews or confront capitalism but can, at least, demonstrate our entanglement within the system. The exhibition does not pretend to be a zone apart from neoliberal market logics or body politics. A viewer may have fun partaking in the workouts instead of enjoying your insights into “bodies that matter”—or both.

In this ambiguous context, Kosmas’ installation might provoke as much thought as an overtly “critical” performance, like that of the transgender artist-cumbodibuilder Cassils, who deploys training not only as an expression of individual mutability, but also as a means of visually inscribing structural violence into their own body (fig. 6). In the performance *Becoming an Image*, they frenetically hit a lump of clay—primordial human material marked by the artists’ fists.<sup>53</sup> Performed in the dark, the violent strokes become visible only in short flashes of lightning, which are imprinted in the viewer’s memory as “live photographs.”<sup>54</sup> Whereas Cassils adopts the figure of the bodybuilder in order to criticise society’s claims to determine individual physiques and biographies, Kosmas clings to the idea of autonomous individual development and a straightforward notion of “training.”<sup>55</sup> The framing of his installation in the bb9, however, complicates this affirmative perspective. For the curators, exercise constitutes a metaphor for the contemporary condition in general. Their

51 Shakar 2001, p. 140; for the transfer of “postirony” from advertising to the art sphere cf. Johannes M. Hedinger: Postironie: Geschichte, Theorie und Praxis einer Kunst nach der Ironie, in: Kunstforum, vol. 213 (2011), p. 121–125.

52 Kosmas and Chan 2016.

53 Cf. Cassils: *Becoming an image*, <https://www.cassils.net/cassils-artwork-becoming-an-image> (accessed 19.08.2020).

54 Cassils: *Becoming and Image*, Wiener Festwochen, Mumok, 15.07.2018.

55 The concept of “training” (German: “Übung”) is central e.g. for Sloterdijk’s theory of self-optimization (Peter Sloterdijk: *You Must Change Your Life*, transl. by Wiland Hoban, Cambridge and Malden 2013).





6 | Cassils, *Becoming an Image*, 2013, National Theater Studio SPILL Festival, London.

introductory statement starts with the line: “As a theme, ‘the present’ strikes a slightly desperate tone. Like a spin-class instructor trying to power through a massive hangover.”<sup>56</sup> What is it that provoked this hangover? When, in 2006, the *documenta 12* posed the question “Is Modernity our Antiquity?”<sup>57</sup>, in 2016, DIS welcomed the visitors to the “post-contemporary,” where “the future feels as familiar as the past”; whereas “it is the present that is unknowable, unpredictable, and incomprehensible—forged by a persistent commitment to a set of fictions.”<sup>58</sup> “In this climate,” the curators state, “anyone can begin to build an alternative present, reconfigure failed narratives.”<sup>59</sup> One of these failed narratives might be the emancipation of individuals and society through physical exercise. The ambivalent framing of Kosmas’s work, however, simultaneously highlights the dream and its failure. The final line of Chus Martínez’s contribution to the biennale catalogue is an example of what Rob Horning described as the “compulsive self-parody”<sup>60</sup> characteristic for a part of the contemporary

56 DIS 2016, p. 55.

57 Mark Lewis: Is Modernity our Antiquity?, in: Roger Buergel and Georg Schöllhammer (eds.): *Documenta Magazine*, vol. 1: *Modernity?*, Cologne 2007, p. 28–53.

58 DIS 2016, p. 55.

59 DIS 2016, p. 55ff.

60 Rob Horning: *Fear of Content*, in: DIS 2016, p. 66–68, p. 68: “Being oneself always means being a self-parody, and being a parody of oneself is the process of self-discovery. Self-parody precedes selfhood.”



art world: "It is a funny coincidence that the etymology of the word cynic—*kunikos*—means dog and that the main posture in yoga is the 'downward-facing dog.'"<sup>61</sup>

Translated from the German by Christina Wheeler.

61 Chus Martínez: *The Complex Answer*, in: *DIS* 2016, p. 82–86, p. 86. The ancient cynics advocated ascetic practices in order to achieve liberty from the pursuit of wealth, power, and fame. For Diogenes' concept of mental and bodily exercise cf. Philip R. Bosman: *Meat, Muscle and Mind. Diogenes and the Athletes*, in: *Scriptura. Journal for biblical, theological and contextual hermeneutics*, vol. 90 (2005), p. 660–669.