

Eros and Living Statuary Tableaux

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This is the story of a practice called living Greek statuary tableaux that originated in the 1930s at Springfield College, Massachusetts (and exists today) within the field of physical education and gymnastics in which living human bodies are constructed into statue-forms that mimic ancient Greek statuary. On first analysis, we may talk about this seemingly bizarre (“bizarre” because “recipes” for transforming oneself into a Greek statue included mixtures of bronze powder, concrete, wall-paper paste ingredients) practices in light of the times in which it evolved. For instance, the interest in things ancient and Greek in different realms of modern culture was mirrored in the Greek revival period in the United States that has been widely studied in fields such as literary criticism, philosophy and architecture.

Additionally, invented ancient Greek athletic traditions were vehicles for not only Hitler in his 1936 Berlin Olympic Games, but also for American patriotism. Moreover, specifically within the American physical education field, living statuary tableaux “performed” or solidified a link to the ancient Greeks. In turn, the possession of an ancient Greek heritage legitimated the embattled position of physical education within education and academia.

In terms of culture and the bodies that live in culture, what does this ritual of living statuary mean? In my work, I study the tableaux as an example of an image, an art form, that links nature and culture. The tableaux was theater, both a place and a performance in which the body permeated culture, and culture permeated the body. What is the nature of this permeation? I propose in my research three inter-related themes within which living statuary can be contextualized: First, the study of the specific combination of “image” and “practice” embodied in living statuary ideally fulfills Guttman’s observation of eros in sport and his call to scholars to note such eros as connected to sport. Guttman states:

“(1) The spectator’s admiration for athletes and their performances is to some degree tinged if not positively steeped in erotic impulses;

(2) The pleasure that athletes experience in their performances may have roots in these same mysterious impulses;

(3) It is better to investigate and test these possibilities than prudishly deny them.” (Allen Guttman, “Eros and Sport,” in Donald G. Kyle and Gary D. Stark, eds., *Essays on Sport History and Sport Mythology*, pp. 139-154. College Station: University of Texas at Arlington.)

Second, living statuary is an example, just one, of the means by which culture abstractly and hegemonically passes itself on. Images made into concrete motifs, such as living statuary, are transhistorical gifts. These ideological gifts, souvenirs, mementos, or markers are replicas of important motifs in culture. “Ancient Greece” and petroglyphs of human bodies are such motifs. These motifs continue to exist and inform our making of history because they are successively revived in culture through ritual and performance like that of living statuary tableaux. Why are these motifs perpetuated? And what of living statuary itself?

Within the confinement of the socially acceptable living statuary, spectators and participants could become intimately linked to the body and erotic posturing, for the practice was contextualized to be patriotic, to pay homage to the ancient Greek tradition, and to be a suitable pastime of the members

of “high” culture. Living statuary was (is) a cultural “gift”, a “passing on” of what we have created our past to be. The “gift” enables participants and audience to become voyeurs to that which is normally off-limits and restricted by rules, etiquette and ideologies.

In living statuary, humans become voyeurs to a history they themselves will never be part of, except through images they themselves create. In culture, humans are driven to understand, to envelope, history and the body. One of the ways that they attempt to do this is by blending nature and culture through performances like living statuary. It is OK to stare, enjoy, fantasize about past history and the body if the living and sensual are presented as steadfast, immobile, ancient Greek statues.

The art critic Joanna Frueh uses the phrase “fear of flesh that moves,” to describe models of feminine perfection, writing that “the flesh that moves disgusts the self that is designed out of Western thought.” (Joanna Frueh, “Fear of Flesh that Moves”, *High Performance*, Fall 1991, p. 71.) I believe that Frueh’s concept can also be used to understand the popularity of living statuary within physical education. The flesh displayed in living statuary did not move. It was gilded and pasted to picture the human body as if it were sculpted, from a material like marble, static, with distinct boundaries that are physical. The spectator and the actual participant of the statuary were able to gaze upon and act out what Camille Paglia in *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (1990, New York: Vintage Books, p. 5), calls the repressed “chonthian” nature of the west, “chonthian” meaning the “earth’s bowels, not its surface,” “vulgar pleasantries”, “the blind grinding of subterranean force, the long slow suck, the murk and ooze.”



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