

216 HOT! BERENICE OLMEDO

TEXT BY
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What is normal? What is not? In any field, be it sociology, culture, economics or politics, an attempt is made to identify a “standard.” Somehow, the idea that a rule to which everything must conform has become the norm. Perhaps it also has to do with our need to mark out a context, a field of action in which to dwell. What does not fall within this framework is thus considered abnormal, as if it were an aberration, an obstacle. And this is what happens with minorities, with those who think differently, with people with disabilities; it even happens with minor physical defects such as a simple hip dysplasia. What does not comply is forcedly made to do so, because that is normality. The Mexican artist Berenice Olmedo focuses on these reflections and themes, explores them, and creates publications, sculptures, installations and performances. Her exhibitions are preliminary reports of all research. The question of the norm, which she investigates in the most varied cases, thus becomes for Olmedo a deep analysis of very different aspects, including contrasts and contradictions, legal conflicts and painful personal stories.

In addition to her work, the artist teaches as a volunteer in an art workshop of the CRIT (Children’s Rehabilitation Institute of Teleton) attended by children with neuromuscular disabilities, in the municipality of Nezahualcóyotl, in Mexico City. This experience flows into Olmedo’s work because her research always involves the opinions, experience and knowledge of other people and disciplines.

With the title *The Bio-unlawfulness of Being: Stray dogs*, Olmedo developed a multidisciplinary project which she worked on from 2012

to 2015 and which was carried out in different stages, performances and exhibitions. What social and legal conditions determine the life of a dog in Mexico? By delving into this question, the artist examines the life of dogs in regard to biopolitics and thanatology. In contrast to the existing contradiction (from a legal point of view, in Mexico dogs are either addressed as dangerous fauna or as plain “objects”), Olmedo has produced a series of installations. In *Canine TANATOCCommerce; or, the political-ethical dilemma of merchandise* (2015), she exhibited a few items of clothing and two rugs made with the skins of dogs which had been run over by cars. *Jabón hecho a partir de grasa de perro* (2015) are several pieces of soap that the artist produced using the fat from some of these dogs’ corpses. The project is supported by extensive documentation of her research and work, and the images document the production process step by step, including showing the artist in a white lab coat, assisted by doctors and chemists. The artist thus examines the conflict between living body and object in a law system which, from a legal point of view, not only decides on the life but also on the death of dogs. The life of a dog is determined by humans: the animal is in fact trained, conditioned, rewarded or punished. It becomes part of a system created by humans as a *zoon politikon*, a social and political being in the polis in the Aristotelian sense. The irony inherent in making soap, intended for personal hygiene, using the “dirty” corpses of dogs, emphasizes the incongruity within the system. The images of the artist wearing the dog-skin attires evoke the practices of early eras and play with the common belief according to which dogs resemble their owners and vice versa.

Janis, 2018 (opposite) Homonymy, 2018 (pp. 218-219) Courtesy: the artist and Jan Kaps, Cologne







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Man, or rather the human body, becomes part of the artist's installations only at a later time, even if the exploration of this theme had begun in 2012. In 2018, I saw Olmedo's work for the first time during her solo exhibition, entitled *Anthroprosthetic*, at the Jan Kaps gallery in Cologne. On the gallery floor lay two leg prostheses, artificial devices that replace missing body parts. An orthosis, which is a corset that, externally applied to the body, modifies the muscular and skeletal system of the body, was hanging on the wall. Size and decorations suggested they were children's orthoses, and wear made them look older. The titles *Olga*, *Anastasia* and *Efélide* (all works from 2018) give a sort of personality to the sculptures and deprive them of their aseptic functionality. On the one hand, one feels upset, challenged: these children's orthoses also represent the vulnerability of small, innocent bodies. At the same time, however, the observation of these sculptures has an entrancing element. The "being different" is therefore as fascinating as the technical aspect of these bodily extensions/corrections. The two contrasting impressions are enhanced by *Olga*'s kinetic effect: by means of thin, almost invisible nylon threads, the prosthesis is constantly raised, looking like it were trying to stand up on its own, only to keep collapsing again, failing in its attempt. Beyond an interest in the child as a being that needs help, protection and knowledge from adults, Olmedo focuses primarily on the child as a human being that is not escaping from social forces or biological restraints. A child must learn to walk and speak, to read and write and much more to become a functioning element of society and not an "impediment." In the second room of the gallery, the situation becomes less involving. Respiratory masks hang on the wall, with their tubes dangling down to the floor. Again, these devices do not seem to belong to this world, but feel alien, from somewhere else. Placed on pedestals, the metal elements of the medical devices shine under light, evoking precious relics capable of improving life.

In her most recent exhibition, at Lodos gallery in Mexico City, Olmedo's work takes on a more conceptual and sculptural character. In *héxis* (2019), five polyurethane torsos are lined up along the walls. They are supported by aluminum cast structures, resembling so-called anthropometric calibrators used to take measurements on patients. The sculptures are positive molds employed in the production of custom corsets for the correction of lateral curves of the spine (scoliosis). Here, neither ideal bodies nor sick bodies are represented, but rather torsos at an intermediate stage of

development. In *áskesis* (2019), another group of sculptures, again real orthopedic devices are used. Alternating-pressure mattresses rolled up or folded over are placed upright in the room, strapped in their middles by lumbar supports (orthopedic back braces). Removed from their original function, which is to stimulate blood circulation in bedridden patients, they are now placed vertically like the torsos in the gallery room. Both installations play with the original purpose of orthopedic devices, i.e. to keep the human body erect, in a vertical position, helping it to maintain its specific biological functions. What is wrong must be corrected. The medical images created here by Olmedo take on a symbolic value and represent a society that constantly expresses rejection, discrimination and marginalization of people with some kind of disability, and thus concern those groups of people who are considered marginal by society on a political and social level.

A healthy body exists in nature, if we think of nature as ecological balance, but a problem arises when we speak of an ideal body which, in many cases, is achieved through correction. There are many art works that deal with human beings, their bodies and spirits, and discuss the way in which the aspiration to a standardized ideal of social beauty can become an addiction, constantly focusing on wellness and well-being. However, Berenice Olmedo goes one step further: she questions the dominating models of thought and categorization in our society, models that always depend also on social class and income. With her works, the artist critically addresses the difficult issue of homogeneity of object and body within our society, thus our seeing the body as an object, which implies it being granted very few rights. In all of this, the dissolution of borders is most interesting: technical objects become fragile bodies; bodies are transformed into objects and devices. The close link between work and research allows us to see Olmedo's sculptures and installations not necessarily as "finished" objects, but as complex matters ranging from language to politics to medicine and law.

héxis, 2019 Photo: Ramiro Chaves Courtesy: the artist and Lodos, Mexico City (opposite) Paroxysme, 2018 Courtesy: the artist and Jan Kaps, Cologne (pp. 220-221)

