



ZIN TAYLOR: FIVE UNITS OF HAZE

UNIT 1. THE BODY-FORMS

There is a long history of exhibiting fragments of the human body. In the Middle Ages, special boxes called philatories were used to store and display small pieces of bone from the arms and fingers of saints. During the Renaissance, the discovery of fragments of artifacts from Greek and Roman antiquity (such as the revered Belvedere Torso) led to the torso becoming one of the most widely studied subjects in art. The nineteenth-century French sculptor Auguste Rodin loved to collect sculptural debris—torsos, busts, limbs—from the ancient world. He filled his studio with them, calling them his “giblets.” In his own work, Rodin placed unusual significance on the fragment, often treating it as a whole in its own right. He frequently disassembled, remodelled and recast figures and body parts for multiple uses. The clay model of *Torso of Adèle*, for example, was used in the *Gates of Hell* (1880-1917), in *Eternal Spring* (1884-85), and again in *The Fallen Angel* (1895). Occasionally he would re-use a part from one sculpture on the body of another, leaving the grafts visible in a way that showed the discordant misfit of a foreign limb.

Leo Steinberg referred to this element of flexibility in Rodin’s work as “thought obsessively thought again.”¹ This is a fitting description for Zin Taylor’s “body-forms.” These speckled black and white polystyrene sculptures are made up of a number of similarly shaped units threaded onto a metal stand. Each body-form looks as though it could be infinitely re-ordered and re-assembled into multiple versions of the same thing. As figures, they don’t readily divulge their identity. They are perhaps most closely reminiscent of geological specimens, plants or large bones, a formal association that takes us back to the organic origins of the word *torso*, which is a word meaning “stalk” or “stump.” Despite this vegetal connection, these forms also feel recognisably human, curvy, limb-like, and roughly human in height. The purpose of the philatory was not only to store and exhibit the bones of saints, but also to invite spiritual reflection. Taylor’s body-forms are not dissimilar. Elemental and without lineaments, they are empty geographies that invite contemplation, deliberation and thought.

UNIT 2. THE MOBILES

There is only a small distance between units that can be reconfigured or re-assembled and sculptures that actually move. Working shortly after Rodin’s time, kinetic artists such as Naum Gabo, Jean Tinguely and Alexander Calder began to experiment with making sculptures that moved, either through their own accord or with the help of mechanised structures. Calder,

in particular, became known for his mobiles, suspended sculptures made of geometric wood or metal shapes dangling from wires. A number of Calder's lithographs link these geometric shapes to letters of the alphabet through titles such as *Alphabet et Saucisson*, *Alphabet et Serpent*, and *Alphabet, Surtout O*.

Taylor takes inspiration from these language-like forms with mobiles that similarly throw letters into the air. It is no surprise if Taylor's mobiles look like suspended sentences, as language is central to his practice. Past works include stories told as part of performances, radio plays, written texts, and narrated audio recordings. As language systems, his mobiles are approximate rather than literal, resembling zigzags, eyeballs and boomerangs as much as they do Os, Ss, and Zs. Jostling and bobbing like a linguistic mob (a word derived, incidentally, from the Latin *mōbile vulgus* meaning "fickle crowd"), Taylor's mobiles are a reminder that language itself is unstable, a fragile tool that is prone to unreliability, to swivels and shifts.

UNIT 3: THE WALL DRAWING

The quick, provisional nature of drawing mediates well between thought and form. It is often used to "sketch out" or test ideas before they are put into production. Drawing, especially on walls, has also long been used as a tool to tell stories and as a stand-in for language. Graeco-Roman architectural interiors were sumptuously illustrated with scenes from mythology, portraits of occupants and elaborate landscape panoramas. Churches from the Middle Ages onwards were illustrated with narrative murals telling the story of the bible to a largely unreading public, a tradition that waned only with the rise of printed matter and a new, literate middle class. Cartoons have a similar function, using abbreviated forms of drawing to communicate complex stories and ideas. In fact, the term *cartoon* as we know it was first used to refer to the *cartons* (preliminary sketches) that were submitted in a competition to decorate the walls of London's Houses of Parliament in 1843. The weekly magazine *Punch* satirized the competition by publishing its own, mock "cartoon" wall murals and the term has been used to refer to comical drawings ever since.

Taylor's cartoon-like wall murals also tell stories. Sometimes there is actual language, such as a string of alphabet hanging down the wall. More often than not, the drawings themselves narrate. A scene is set—somewhere warm with cacti and palm trees, Florida or California—and there are protagonists: a long-legged ostrich, a short-legged taco or a man dissolving into foam from the waist up. Often, there are motifs and forms familiar to Taylor's practice (stripes, dots, blocks,

and body-forms) set against a backdrop resembling an art gallery or museum. Occasionally there are Willie Wonka-style factories belching out a gaseous haze. Perhaps this is where it all begins, a vent of creative fecundity through which thoughts trapped inside the brain have found a way to bubble out into the world and find form.

UNIT 4: THE HIPPY

The figure of the reclining hippy has made several appearances in Taylor's recent work. A simple, cartoon-like nude—Manet's *Olympia* with a beard—the figure manages to be readable as a hippy with only the briefest of lines. Of course, as Taylor points out in his spoken-word narrative *The Reclining Hippy and the Envelope*, the term *hippy* is itself something of a caricature. It serves as an abbreviation for the social and cultural upheavals of the 1960s and a range of changing meanings—from sophisticated to out-of-step, from failure to folk hero—that continue to fracture and shift. Even without the label *hippy*, the idea itself has a long and complex history, stretching back to the longhaired *wandervogel* that wandered through Germany on the eve of the National Socialist movement and even beyond that to the Cynics of Ancient Greece. Such is the power of the simple line: history, philosophy and ideology can be summarised in one child-like doodle, a trajectory of contour and curve. At the Human Be-In event of 1967, the former Harvard professor and psychologist Timothy Leary famously advised the younger generation to “turn on, tune in, drop out.” It was a plea to resist mainstream society by turning inwards and focusing on the mind. Perhaps the reclining hippy is the vision called forth from this place, or as Taylor puts it, he is “a void [...], a piece of silence [...], a thought-form [...], a geography for ideas.”²

UNIT 5. PSYCH MUSIC

Sound is a mixture of tangible and intangible elements. A spoken word, for example, depends on our bodies. Lungs pump air and vocal chords vibrate, producing a unique “object” with distinct characteristics (smooth, soft, sharp, rasping, shrill): the voice. Music is similarly intangible, and yet it can become fixed in physical form. Consider vinyl records, popular fixtures in domestic homes from the 1920s through until the 1970s. A record is a durable, material object that not only physically stores sound in its grooves, but also comes with a distinctive cover or sleeve that links it to artists, producers, styles, genres, and communities of like-minded people. As such, a record has the unique ability to translate between the interior experience of listening to music and a materialized, external form.

Psychedelic music—a genre that has grown out of the interests and ideals of the 1960s—seeks to use sound as a direct conduit into the intangible world of the mind. The use of feedback, electronics and elements from non-Western and early religious music—such as the drone, a repetitive, sustained chant or chord held sometimes for up to an hour—creates an abstract wash of sound that both vibrates physically through the body and imitates the non-linear nature of thought. The names of psych bands Taylor listens to (Lichens and Datepalms, for example) sometimes directly inform the work, with palms and lichen appearing in several pieces. Not only this, but Taylor employs music as an artistic material carrying equal weight in the overall choreography of the work. It lends itself well to the task, with its meandering sonic landscapes perfectly replicating the creeping, lichen-like amorphousness of thought-turning-into-form that is at the core of his work.

Frances Loeffler, 2016

ESSAY NOTES

¹Leo Steinberg, *Other Criteria: Confrontations with Twentieth-Century Art* (New York: Oxford University Press), p. 362. ²Zin Taylor, *The Reclining Hippy and the Envelope*, audio narrative, Bureau des Réalités, Brussels, 2015.

This electronic publication was produced in conjunction with the exhibition *Zin Taylor: Five Units of Haze* curated by Frances Loeffler, Curator, and presented at Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens from 25 September to 30 December 2016.

Cover: Zin Taylor, *Object on a Cube with Incense (void flower)*, 2016.
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