Gymnauseum: ‘Pimping’ of Body and Machine

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Supervisors

Principal supervisor: Sebastian Di Mauro

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Abstract

This thesis is based on my PhD studio project, Gymnaseum, which uses chindogu, a Japanese creative form for intentionally producing absurd and useless design objects (Kawakami, 1995), as a starting point. Gymnaseum is a pseudo-gym in which visitors can ride absurd and nonsensical fitness machines that question the obsession with obtaining (and retaining) an ‘ideal body’. The fitness machine sculptures in Gymnaseum are also, in a sense, ‘ideal bodies’: long, lean, and shiny, they are based on customised 1960s’ ‘low-rider’ bikes with ridiculously extended front forks. These mid-life-crisis ‘Harleyesque’ exercycles reinforce the notion that that exercising on the spot on treadmills, steppers and bikes going nowhere is a metaphor for perpetually trying to make up lost ground in an effort to recapture the body of one’s youth.

In this thesis, I engage with the work of relevant critical theorists who explore how power and control are exercised over the body. For example, Michel Foucault’s notion of the docile body is pivotal for understanding how the discipline of repetitive exercise and loss of personal autonomy are linked (Foucault 1979). His analysis of Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon prison system can also be applied to the contemporary gymnasium, whereby the possibility of constant surveillance by other gym users and personal trainers creates a self-regulating system of discipline (Frew and McGillivray 2005). I present absurd ‘fitness equipment’ within a mirrored pseudo gym environment to discuss how power and control over the ‘docile body’ is also perpetuated through our relationship with the machine.

I also invoke Mikhail Bakhtin’s theories surrounding the carnivalesque (Bakhtin [1965] 1984), whereby traditional power structures can be temporarily overturned to allow minority voices to emerge. In today’s gyms, social hierarchies are obliterated as all involved are brought low in their endeavour to make docile the grotesque body in order to lose weight. Traditionally carnival was a short time in which the peasant population could relax before the deprivations of Lent, and then return to their daily lives of hard toil. I argue that in developed Western countries today, we live in a situation of perpetual carnival, whereby we indulge in excessive amounts of alcohol, fattening food and constant entertainment. Thus, in Gymnaseum the notion of the gym as a Lenten site is expressed in darkly humorous works, such as spike-laden punch bags and weights that echo the notion of self-flagellation and repentance in exercise. Gymnaseum critiques the notion of the ‘ideal body’ as a commodity (Bourdieu 1984; Bordo 1993) within a system that has “broken free from the chains of usefulness” (Kawakami 1995, 8).
Statement of Originality

This work has not previously been submitted for a degree or diploma in any university. To the best of my knowledge and belief, the thesis contains no material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the thesis itself.

Signed: Jane Venis
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Work published in the Course of Research
Included in this thesis are papers in Chapters 2 and 5 for which I am the sole author. The bibliographic details for these papers are:


Both of these articles are included in the body of the thesis. I hold the copyright for both articles.