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ART REVIEW

Bodies in Repose? Not at This MoMA Show.

"Vital Signs: Artists and the Body" draws from MoMA's 20th-century collection to show that identity is broader than physical form. But in skipping social media the show can't go far enough.

By [Travis Diehl](#)

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Any show about "the body" has the backhanded blessing of wide appeal. Everybody has one — so what? The thesis of "Vital Signs: Artists and the Body," a survey of more than 65 modern and contemporary artists currently on view at the Museum of Modern Art, is more specific than its title suggests: It proposes that 20th-century artists used abstraction to explore the human body's changeability, and press the limits of identity.



Lynn Hershman Leeson, "Roberta's Construction Chart #2," 1976. James Estrin/The New York Times

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Embodiment can feel constricting. As these artists unfurl their bodies into various intangible designs, the connection to “the body” becomes tenuous — and sometimes thrilling. Why do Lee Lozano’s furious drawings of tools, like a 1963 rendering of a misassembled pipe wrench, evoke the human form? Maybe because we’re seeking new shapes.

If the implications of virtual identities and alternate selves can’t be fully investigated through 20th-century work, the precursors are there: in Lynn Hershman Leeson’s “Roberta’s Construction Chart #2,” 1976, a plan for facial alterations related to a persona she inhabited in the 1970s; and in the systematic approach to corporality taken by Adrian Piper, Charles Gaines and Mary Kelly. Gaines’s eerie manual pixelization of photographic portraits, broken down into a grid and then superimposed on those of other people to make a kind of generalized average face, was a sardonic exercise in 1978. But similar techniques now underpin facial recognition software.