



Art

Richard Dupont's Naked Launch

Talking with an artist who turns his body scan into sculpture

by Daniel Kunitz

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Terminal Stage, a site-specific installation by the New York artist Richard Dupont, will occupy the Lever House Lobby Gallery until May 3. It consists of nine nude human figures, cast in polyurethane, based on the artist's body. Each of the figures has been manipulated laterally and horizontally, distorted so that a viewer can only see each complete body from a single vantage point; from certain angles, for instance, they look flat or disquietingly fuzzy. We spoke with Dupont in the glass-enclosed space, among the 80-inch-tall men he has created as his first public-art piece.

How was working in this space? If you want to connect with people and make people think about how we're being continually turned into information, turned into statistics and data, just generally depersonalized; if you want to talk to them about body mapping—from the genome to surveillance to tracking people and now biometrics—how we are being consumed by the technology that we've created, this is the ideal location because of the transparency of the site, its high visibility, and the tremendous amount of traffic through and around it. Not to mention the fact that Lever House was the first Modern building in Manhattan and is totally emblematic of all the changes in design, architecture, and urban living—all the changes that come after. Also, you have the history of sculpture, because Noguchi designed the sculpture garden here, and this lobby space was designed to show Modern sculpture.

The viewer walks around the figures and gets all these different perspectives as the surfaces change. That's one way the distortions are interesting, because no two perspectives are the same. A lot of people see them and think they're flat, then realize they're objects—that's a hard thing for the brain to process immediately. But it's not just retinal, it's also physiological: There's a queasiness, an anxiety caused by the brain not being able to understand the two things at once.

Tell us about the body scan. This piece is the culmination of a lot of my previous sculpture, and it all really came from this one body model that I made, the result of a full body scan of myself. I did some research and learned that I could do the scan at General Dynamics, on the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base in Ohio. I went to Dayton the day before the general election in 2004, when Bush was re-elected. He was actually in Dayton the day I was there. It was weird, because I was driving onto the base in this truck with this guy from General Dynamics, and Air Force One flew right over us. The whole thing was eerie—I thought maybe my penis would be on Dick Cheney's desk in the morning.

In exchange for the scan, I had to participate in an anthropometry study that some 10,000 people had already done, mostly military personnel. They use the data they get for military design and sell a lot of their data to clothing companies. They did the scan, but they wouldn't let me take my shorts off. So when I came back, I had to make plaster casts of my whole midsection, and also my hands and feet, to get more detail. I then separately scanned those plaster casts in with a small studio scanner and patched it all together. I had to make sure that any time I did an additional casting, I was exactly the same weight, that I hadn't just eaten a sandwich, that I was standing in the exact same position. Because we're constantly changing during the day, radically, and if things were not lined up properly—even if a hand was just a little bit off when I went to graft that separate scan onto the body—it just wouldn't have worked.

Do you feel exposed, having so many copies of your naked body in public? I really don't, because I see them as so generic and depersonalized. That's why I'm interested in them being monochromatic and not painted. I'm not interested in photorealism; I'm interested in them being hyper-accurate. The idea is that they're generic types—anti-portraits, if you will—because they're stripped of many of the defining characteristics of portraiture: no hair, no blemishes, no color changes. So I see them more as abstractions.

Have you had any strange reactions? It's strange to see groups of preteen girls taking pictures of themselves with them. It's bizarre. Somebody came in and was fondling them, just really hooking up with them. Some people don't touch them—can't touch them, even though they want to—and others have no qualms. They just come and feel them up.