

MY SKIN IS **INSIDE** OF ME

By Elke Weissmann



My skin is inside of me. I – the person who speaks – I should explain, am feminine. Female, too, but unable to escape my acculturation, I have learnt to grow my hair long, draw lines around my eyes and put on figure-hugging clothes. I am, in other words, fully contributing to the creation of a recognisable gender and often, worryingly, choosing to do so in order to escape my own judgemental looks. I should also say that I am white, middle-class and German and I don't know how to speak for a black or a working-class woman. It is different for you, I know.

My white, middle-class, feminine skin, then, is inside of me. But what is my skin? Is it the container that holds my organs in? Is it the border that holds me in? Or is it the boundary that separates me from an other outside of me? One thing is sure: skin is a border that relates to me, that defines my space. What this space really is, might be more – or less – than my actual skin contains. Unlike Mark Johnson, who seems to understand the self as contained by the body, my experience of self and body is more that of enclosure, my self existing in this space which is around me. As Christine Battersby writes: 'I construct a containing space around me, precisely because my body itself is not constructed as the container' (1999, p. 347). I am not sure if this is a particularly feminine experience of body and self; unlike Battersby I don't want to draw essentialist conclusions. For now, let me define skin like this: the border which contains the space in which I locate my self.



So why is my feminine skin inside of me? And why do I insist here on this being an essentially feminine experience? To answer the second question first: because being feminine still means being treated and treating yourself in ways that a man wouldn't tolerate. Let's start with the small things first. Everything I do reflects that I don't trust this space that is mine. I sit with my legs crossed, my arms tucked in, my breath holding in my tummy. During the second feminist movement in the 1970s women tried to change this by highlighting how much this behaviour relates to power. Nancy Henley, for example, stressed the parallels between how men and women use up space in comparison to how an employer and employee might behave. As Sheila Jeffreys paraphrases her:

The powerful take up more space. Not only do employers have larger offices but men will have more space in their homes and the world which is theirs alone. They take up more space with their bodies. Thus men may stretch out on a bus seat or on the sofa. Women are expected to keep their legs and arms tucked into their bodies and fit into the space that is left over. Similarly interviewees may not sprawl when in the subordinate position of applying for a job, but the interviewers may do so. (Jeffreys 2006, p. 25)

It is surprising how much this still holds true. On my currently regular train journeys I prefer to sit next to a woman because we somehow manage to share the armrest between the two seats. Moreover I don't run the risk of being constantly pushed or accidentally punched by someone who does not know how to change position in this restricted space. Not to speak of the poking knee that sticks into the legroom in front of my seat where my own knees are supposed to go. And this does obviously not only apply to my experience: when I think of my parents, I see my dad sprawled out on a three-seater sofa while my mom sits prim on her armchair.

What is surprising, though, is that women learn to restrict themselves and automatically make little use of space. This is particularly clear in sports. In an aptly named essay 'Throwing Like a Girl', Iris Marion Young writes:

Not only is there a typical style of throwing like a girl, but there is a more or less typical style of running

like a girl, climbing like a girl, swinging like a girl, hitting like a girl. They have in common first that the whole body is not put into fluid and directed motion, but rather, in swinging and hitting, for example, the motion is concentrated in one body part; and second that the woman's motion tends not to reach, extend, lean, stretch, and follow through in the direction of her intention. (2006, p. 33)

Throwing like a girl means to bring only this part of the body in motion that needs to move in order to achieve the goal of getting a ball from here to there. Throwing like a girl, in other words, is to make the best use of the limited space that we believe we have a right to. But where does this come from, this belief in only a limited space?

There are many answers to this question that also connect back to the way feminine beings are being treated and treat themselves. Let's begin with the bra. A left-over of the corset which was meant not only to hold the feminine body in but also to emphasise and give shape to the breast (see Jeffreys 2006, p. 32), the bra is one of the first items a girl wants to own to signal her entry into womanhood and femininity. Women with big breasts learn that they cannot do without them, and women with small breasts learn to buy the right ones to make their small boobs look bigger. What the bra does, though, is to remind women constantly of the limited space their 'proper' bodies

are allowed to inhabit. The elastic band that is supposedly necessary for the bra to do its job sits close to my body, on top of my ribs which stop short each time they want to expand in a breath. The bra's elastic band reminds me that I'm not supposed to expand, that I'm supposed to keep my body under control. The same is true for figure-hugging shirts. Every time I breathe, I feel my ribs pushing against this boundary, this cage.

But there is more at stake with the bra: the bra shapes my breasts in ways that are considered fashionable at the particular point in time. Young points out what was at stake in the late 1960s and early 1970s when women were discarding (though never actually burning) their bras:

Without a bra, most women's breasts do not have the high, hard, pointy look that phallic culture posits as the norm. They droop and sag and gather their bulk at the bottom. Without a bra, the fluid being of breasts



is more apparent ... Women never gathered in a ritual of bra burning, but the image stuck. We did, though, shed the bra – hundreds of thousands, millions of us. I was no feminist when, young and impetuous, I shoved the bras back in the drawer and dared to step outside with nothing on my chest but a shirt. It was an ambiguous time in 1969.

I had a wondrous sense of freedom and a little bit of defiance. I never threw the bras away; they were there to be worn on occasions when propriety and delicacy required them. Why was burning the bra the ultimate image of the radical subversion of the male-dominated order? Because unbound breasts show their fluid and changing shape; they do not remain the firm and stable objects that phallographic fetishism desires. (2006, p. 83)

A similar fluidity is denied to our other body-parts: our tummies are held in by corsets (back in fashion every now and again) and by tights that – for some unexplainable reason – can always be pulled up to your breasts, even if the legs are too short; tights that usually come with a strengthened body part, designed to firm up your tummy. Similar wonders are performed by control pants and other undergarments. All of these beg the question: why? Why do women's bodies have to be put into a particular shape? Gertrude Stein asked this already during the first wave of the women's liberation movement:

A Long Dress

What is the current that makes machinery,
that makes it crackle,

What is the current that presents a long line
and a necessary waist.

What is the current ... (1911, cited in Rees-Jones 2005, emphasis added)

Why should women's clothes emphasise and normalise our bodily shapes? And why are women's bodies considered to be too loose, too fluid, too unshapely? Men's bodies are perceived to be naturally more muscular, therefore not in need of taming. Yet you too, I hear, are under the pressure to firm up – in the gym, mind, not with your clothes. Your bodies on the contrary are often hidden away under baggy clothes.

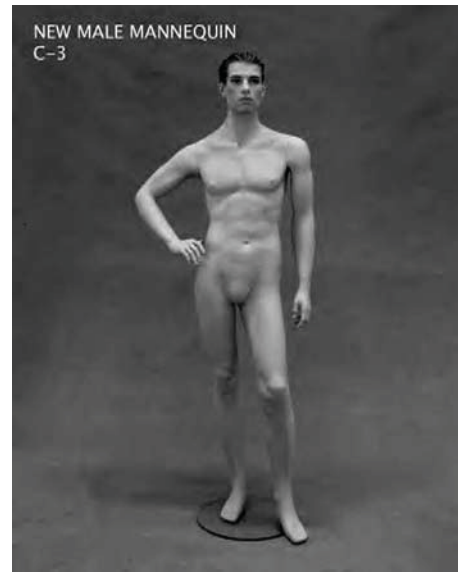
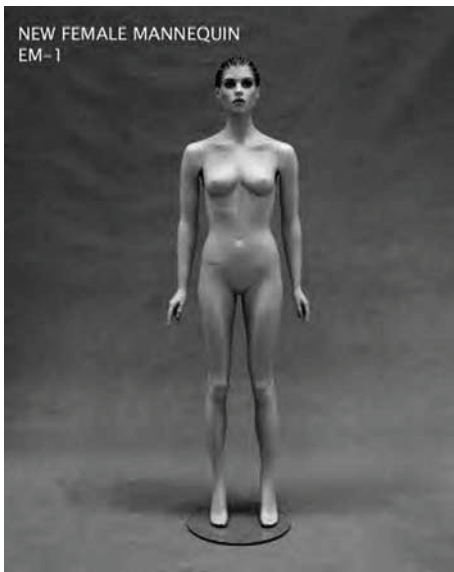
The figure-hugging clothes of proper femininity are part of something larger – namely that women's bodies define us much more than men. While men's bodies are denied through the baggy clothes, women's bodies are put on display. Our looks are hence always important – to ourselves as much as to the world outside. Barbara Brook highlights that by focusing on our bodies we do actually conform primarily to pressures from outside rather than from ourselves: 'There is the woman's active constitution of her body and construction of her femininity in terms of what is perceived as desirable by men, rather than in terms of what may contribute to her desires' (1999, p. 67,

emphasis in original). Brook discusses the study *The Male in the Head* by Holland, Ramazanoglu, Sharpe and Thomson (1998) and stresses that the young women interviewed for this study all lacked a vocabulary to express their own (sexual) desires. As women we learn to matter not for ourselves, but in relation to men. So often we don't know what we want simply because we never learnt that we and our desires are important. What we do learn is that looks are important from fathers and mothers who call us 'pretty', 'gorgeous' or 'beautiful' rather than 'clever', 'brave' or 'strong'. We learn that looks are important from the constant influx of images of women on display who advertise everything from lipsticks to cars. And we learn that looks are important because we become involved and start talking about clothes, makeup and body hair.

Importantly, we're also constantly told that our bodies are inadequate. Spring sees a particular popular time for advertisers to sell us their newest (or not so new) product by suggesting that our bodies are disgustingly fat – all of them, no matter how skinny we already are. We are told it's time to lose weight, get a personal trainer, get into shape so that we can fit back into our bikinis and display our bodies some more. Women therefore learn that we can never lose too much weight and even people like me with a body mass index of 19 (that's the lowest number of normal) still think that it's desirable to do so. No wonder we turn to liposuction or self-starvation. And what do these things do to our bodies? They make them firmer and less fluid, but also skinnier, slimmer, narrower. In other words, procedures such as liposuction and dieting and extreme forms of them such as anorexia add to my experience of my body as proper and decent only if it takes up very little space. The current emphasis on everything to do with dieting and exercise therefore seems in line with everything else I've discussed so far: it reminds us that we as women have the right only to limited space.

Therefore: my skin is inside of me. I might define my border to be there, but I'm constantly reminded that it's really supposed to be here, much closer to my actual skin. And I feel the most pertinent reminder still burning on my flesh. Because my body is on display, because men learn that I am primarily a body – not a person – men touch me, uninvited and unexpected. So I sit with my friend in a pub, deep in discussion, when a man touches me on my lower back because the current fashion cuts the jumpers so short that my lower back is exposed. Or I stand with a group of school friends in a cramped bus when out of the bodies touching mine comes a hand that feels up my groin. Some of it is meant to be harmless, some of it is not. But every time someone touches me uninvitedly and unexpectedly they take away the illusion that I am a person in control over the space around me. No:





the space that is solely mine is this skinny thing that is my body and I have to fit into it. But then, there's always the threat of being torn apart by the rapist who enters even this last space that I thought was mine; and then my skin is not even there any more.

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