

“As beautiful as you are told”: A Critique on the Ideology of Natural Beauty in “The Body Project” Exhibition

Maytawee Holasut

บทคัดย่อ

บทความชิ้นนี้มีวัตถุประสงค์เพื่อวิพากษ์วิจารณ์การนำเสนอกระบวนการรังสรรค์ความงามผ่านการทำให้เสียโฉมในนิทรรศการ *ในไลไปไหน?* ที่จัดขึ้นเป็นนิทรรศการชั่วคราวระหว่างวันที่ 24 มิถุนายน - วันที่ 29 กันยายน พ.ศ. 2556 ณ มิวเซียมสยาม พิพิธภัณฑ์รูปแบบใหม่ที่พัฒนารูปแบบการนำเสนอเนื้อหาให้เน้นการปฏิสัมพันธ์และการเล่นกับพื้นที่และสิ่งของที่จัดวางในนิทรรศการเพื่อดึงดูดให้ผู้เข้าชมรับสารจากเรื่องเล่าได้อย่างมีประสิทธิภาพมากขึ้นหากประเมินในภาพรวมแล้วนิทรรศการนี้ประสบความสำเร็จในแง่ของการเปิดโปงกระบวนการการประกอบสร้างผลิตซ้ำ การนิยามและการกำหนดคุณค่าความงามของร่างกายผู้หญิงว่าทั้งหมดนี้ล้วนเป็นผลิตผลทางวัฒนธรรมและค่านิยมของสังคมในบริบทและช่วงเวลาหนึ่ง ๆ โดยผูกความหมายของการรังสรรค์ความงามของทุกบริบทสังคมวัฒนธรรมเข้ากับการทำให้ผิดธรรมชาติ ซึ่งนิทรรศการได้สื่อสารกรอบความคิดนี้ผ่านการออกแบบพื้นที่ให้มีความคล้ายคลึงกับโรงงานอุตสาหกรรมเพื่อชี้ให้เห็นถึงนัยยะของการ “ผลิต” และยังได้เปิดโอกาสให้ผู้ชมมีปฏิสัมพันธ์กับเรื่องเล่าผ่านกิจกรรมต่าง ๆ ที่ถูกจัดวางไว้เป็นส่วน ๆ อย่างเป็นระบบ แต่ถึงกระนั้น การที่นิทรรศการเชิดชูความงามตามธรรมชาติให้เป็นคำตอบของการรังสรรค์ความงามทางวัฒนธรรมกลับเป็นความย้อนแย้งในตัวเองเนื่องจากตัวนิทรรศการละเลยที่จะวิพากษ์หรือเปิดโปงให้ผู้เข้าชมเห็นถึงสถานะและกระบวนการเล่าเรื่องที่มีส่วนร่วมในการผลิตอุดมการณ์ความงามตามธรรมชาติ

Abstract

This article critically analyzes the ideology of the presentation of natural beauty of the female body in the temporary exhibition “The Body Project: Beauty, Brutality and the Reasons Behind” using Louis Althusser’s framework *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*. This temporary exhibition was on

display from 24th June – 29th September, 2013, at Museum Siam – Thailand's leading “New Museum” that emphasizes interactivity and play, whereby visitors interact with the narrative of the exhibition and objects on display for better understanding of the exhibition's message. Generally speaking, the exhibition is successful in exposing the process of constructing and defining women's beauty as a product of a cultural construct or popular values of a certain context. The exhibition presents this message via the association of the cultural process of beautification with body mutilation. This message is then reified through the exhibition's spatial design to resemble an industrial factory, further laying bare, in the Brechtian sense, the idea of culturally produced beauty. The exhibition also organized various interactive opportunities to experience the process of the construction of beautification. Finally, the notion of natural beauty is accentuated in the final room as a stark contrast against culturally produced beauty. The exhibition's sudden turn toward natural beauty as a revocation against body-modification, is in effect an ideological turn that exposes its idealized vision of the female body as a kind of apolitical artifice for ideological subjectification from authoritative agency, including the exhibition itself. Yet, the failure of the exhibition to address its position as an institutionalized authority rendered through its narrative of the value of natural beauty, ultimately nullifies its own message.

I. Framework Overview: The Concept of the New Museum

This article critically analyzes the ideology of the presentation of natural beauty of the female body in the temporary exhibition “The Body Project: Beauty, Brutality and the Reasons Behind” using Louis Althusser's framework *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*¹. This temporary exhibition was set up between 24th June – 29th September, 2013, at Museum Siam; operating as part of the Office of Knowledge and Management Development (OKMD) under the jurisdiction of the Prime Minister Office. First and foremost, “The Body Project” exhibition must be applauded as an excellent representative of the

¹The name of the exhibition will be referred to as “The Body Project” in this article.

“New Museum”; a popularization of the traditional museum as an archaic and static and visual display of knowledge into a quasi-spectacle theme park.

If the degree of popularization is anything to go by, Museum Siam, along with TCDC (Thailand Creative and Design Center), are leading the trend of building the “New Museum”, in which their permanent and temporary exhibitions are designed as a form of edutainment. Far from George Batille’s expectation of the museum as “the most grandiose spectacles of a humanity freed from material concerns, and devoted to contemplation” (Leach, 1997, p. 23), exhibitions organized by these institutions are designed to encourage patrons to engage and participate with the exhibit space. In order to achieve this, the form (the physically designed space of the museum) and the content (the narrative presented through the text of the display objects) must be in harmony to create a unified, immersive experience. Patrons entering a museum or an exhibition organized by such institutions who aspire to be a part of the New Museum experience, will encounter similar design elements: physical architecture represents a literal manifestation of the museum/exhibition’s story arc, display objects are arranged with precision to move visitors to the next plot point, or audio and visual media emphasizing the narrative.

However, the most important element of any New Museum is interactivity. Visitors are able to interact or, to be more precise, “play” with various props and activities that reinforce the narrative of the exhibition. As the author of *Towards a New Museum* testifies how “[e]ntertainment can be a welcome alternative to the museum/mausoleum, but when mishandled it quickly degenerates into crass commercialism that diminishes the art”, while if the elements of interactivity and play are managed properly, “...art *becomes part of a lived experience* (italic mine) as it maintains its own aura [inside the museum]” (*Towards a New Museum*, 2006, p. 191). Hence, the unified and immersive experience is not design purely for edutainment purposes. The deeper connotation of the playful design elements in the New Museum is to bridge distance and proximity of the recognition gap, in terms of understanding the narrative and ideological subjectification, between the attendees and the exhibition. In short, the design of the New Museum aspires toward a ‘lived’

experience for visitors within the symbolic manifestation of its narrative. “The Beauty Project” is no exception.

II. Toward the Narrative and Apparatus of Textual Interactivity

The issue of distance and proximity between the attendees and museum/exhibition is predominantly ideological. On one level, playing and interacting with the exhibition’s prepared activities and props allow for a better understanding and absorption of information. Yet, on a deeper pragmatic level, the notions of play and interaction suggest that the attendees did not just receive the information as an abstract text, but also were made to ‘live’ in the literal manifestation of the exhibit’s textual narrative; experience susceptible to ideological subjectification. Here, Louis Ravelli provides us with two definitions with which to approach the museum/exhibition as a “text”. The first is “texts in a museum”, where written language communicates through traditional print or visual mediums such as the description of display objects, programs, or pamphlets. Another definition is “museums as a text” or an approach that views the unified consistency of the architecture, spatial design, designated walking path, or the arrangement of display objects as a type of text. Ravelli also emphasizes that these two types of text must balance the message of the museum/exhibition along with the attendees’ experience (Ravelli, 2006, p. 1).

Ravelli’s definitions reframe the entirety of museum/exhibition design as a kind of text that operates through narration and narrative. This renders the museum/exhibition readable much like a literary text. “The Body Project” behaves similarly to a novel or a play, simply in a different form. It is a text that requires the reader’s subjectification into its narrative frame by means of interactivity. Here, the alteration of the attendees’ subject position during the interaction with the exhibition’s text recalls Louis Althusser’s theory of interpellation. Althusser proposes that ideology has “a material existence” that “always exists in an apparatus and in the practice or practices of that apparatus” (Althusser, 2014, p. 184). Ideology, in the Althusserian sense, does not come into effect via social reinforcement. Instead, it is embedded in the material existence of everyday rituals, practices, or acts such as “a small mass

in a small church, a funeral, a minor match at sport club, a school day or a day of classes at university, a meeting or rally of a political party, or of the Rationalist Union, or whatever one likes" (Althusser, 2014, p. 186). It should be appropriate to add the act of attending an exhibition to the list of ideological apparatuses. Althusser then advances that ideology "'transforms' individuals into subjects (it transforms them all) through the very precise operation that we call *interpellation* or *hailing*" (Althusser, 2014, p. 190). Hence, one is subjected or interpellated into a preexisting ideology through the engagement in rituals and actions. This formula could be applied to the interaction with the textual narrative of "The Body Project". After all, what could be more apparent in the act of hailing into an ideology than a museum/exhibition that conditioned its narration with various interactive apparatuses?

The Althusserian's ideological framework allows us to examine the ideological interpellation inside the textual narrative of "The Body Project". As the name implies, the exhibition is successful in its goal of exposing the construction and reproduction of definitions and values of female beauty. The exhibition's hypothesis is that all female beauty is a product of cultural, economic, or political values of a particular social and historical context. The exhibition then ties the production of female beauty to the process of body mutilation such as wearing a corset or undergoing plastic surgery. The narrative of the cultural production of beauty is conveyed through the industrial like-spatial design of the exhibition; reifying the metaphor of beauty as a *mass product*. Predictably, there is also an interactive area where the attendees can engage with different tools of beautification from various cultures. Lastly, the final room of the exhibition inscribes the attendees with the message of individual beauty and uniqueness. In this instance, the entire exhibition becomes a textually interactive apparatus that antagonizes the idea of the cultural production of beauty, while simultaneously celebrating the underlying message of 'natural beauty'.

III. The Narrative of Cultural Beautification in “The Beauty Project”

This part of the article will provide an analysis of the textual narrative and interactive elements of “The Body Project”, including its various design apparatuses. The apparatuses of the exhibition are also paralleled with its plot structure narrated through three divided sections. I would like to call the first section of the exhibition ‘The Beauty Factory’ as it lacks an official name and also because of its obvious resemblance to an actual factory. It is comprised of two stories of hall space with multiple static and interactive displays exposing the beautification process of each particular cultural context. Moving on, the second section is officially named ‘The Dressing Room’. This is where visitors can directly engage with the narrative of culturally constructed beauty standards by trying on various beautification cosmetics shown in the previous section. The last section of the exhibition is a single room on the second floor that declares natural beauty as the solution to acquire a truly unique value of beauty. In this section I will focus on mainly the first and second sections of the exhibition.

The textual narrative of “The Body Project”, and its interactive apparatuses, begin even before the attendees physically enter the exhibition. The attendees are given a ‘safety helmet’ after registration prior to entering the exhibition. The safety helmet carries an ideological function aside from acting as a prop for the exhibition. Once the attendees put on the helmet and enter the exhibition designed to resemble an industrial factory, their subjective position changes from a museum goer to that of a factory engineer. The newly interpellated factory engineer is ideologically subjected to fulfill the duties of inspecting the quality of the assembly line and participating directly with the production of beauty values. This means the attendees are, more or less, ideologically posited to assist in the construction and reproduction of the values of beauty presented in the exhibition.

The most striking feature once patrons enter ‘The Beauty Factory’ is the elaborate architectural design that mimics a factory assembly line. This section is built into two stories of factory floor complete with cargo hold and assembly line of female mannequins dangling from the ceiling. The assembly line occasionally comes to life reminding the factory’s visitors that they are

inside an operational factory. The architectural design of the 'The Beauty Factory' reifies the metaphor of beauty as a cultural product, no different from those of mass produced commodities, reinforcing the statement at the entrance that declares the values of beauty as “**molds**” [that] are specific to diverse cultural contexts that determine and define beauty for women, and they are shaped by social circumstances that dictate what is “**beautiful**” and what is “**ugly**”. Beauty, therefore, is inevitably intertwined with social context.”²

The narration of culturally constructed beauty in 'The Beauty Factory' is similar to that of the Brechtian Theatre³. The cultural construction of beauty is “laid bare” through various mediums through ten galleries resembling steel freight; further connoting how values of beauty are produced in response to a certain social demand. The displays of beautification on the ground floor range from⁴: 1) The display of the Mursi Tribe's lip plates used to enlarge the lips of Mursi women to a disproportionately beautiful size, 2) a video clip of Lady Sita's elegant dancing⁵ accompanied by the recitation of a poem praising her feminine delicacy, 3) the display of the Kayan women's heavy brass neck rings, 4) a

²The quotations in the article are directly taken from the actual descriptions at “The Body Project” exhibition, emphasis mine.

³Brechtian Theatre refers to the dramatic style pioneered by the great German dramatist, Bertolt Brecht. It is Brecht who coined the term “Verfremdungseffekt” (weird effect) in theatrical production as means to prevent the audience from over identifying with the illusion of the theatre. According to Brecht, “Verfremdungseffekt” is initiated through the technique of “laying bare the device”. This essentially means that the play will constantly make a nod to the audience of its status as a play; that they are watching theatrical illusion, not reality. A simplified example of this technique would be to have an actor, who is playing the role of a capitalist character, appear on stage and blatantly declare to the audience how he/she is playing a capitalist character in this play. Another example is to have a stage design to resemble the backstage to show the audience the origins of the theatre and how the very meaning of the term is basically a “production” of illusion. Likewise, the architectural design of 'The Beauty Factory' is, in a Brechtian sense, the “laying bare the device” of beauty as social and cultural production.

⁴The numbering of the displays is the writer's own. The numbering begins with the display nearest to the entrance to the furthest, dividing between the first and second floor of the exhibition.

⁵Lady Sita is the leading heroine in the Thai's *Ramakien*, an adaptation of the Indian epic, the *Ramayana*.

video gallery of beauty products heralding the Western beauty standard of whiteness, 5) the Chinese lotus shoes used to bind women's feet to an absurdly small size in order to conform to the desired social standard of beauty, and 6) a mock-up dressing room with corset dresses signifying the importance of having an extra-small hip during the Victorian era. The displays on the second floor include: 7) a photo gallery of carved sandstone of Indian women's bosom from different temples around Asia, 8) a display gallery of "pin up" prints from Thailand and America reflecting the Americanization of beauty standards during World War II, 9) a mock-up living room decorated with items and memorabilia of Korean pop stars influencing Thai shift in attitude toward plastic surgery, and 10) a video screen showing the transition of privileging the masculine body as a product of nationalism which draws attention to male's grooming as a product of contemporary fashion trends.

It is noticeable that the exhibition has a certain level of postmodern self-awareness of its own ability to bare the devices of the construction of beauty. The text specifically made this point clear when it stated how the exhibition design is akin to the cookie-cutter beauty factory, the first one and only place where various models of "beauty" are manufactured according to the cultural specifications. Such as: M-01 lip plates of the Mursi tribe, M-02 traditional Kayan neck rings, M-03 Chinese bound feet, or M-10: the skin-whitening culture of modern day Thailand.

Even so, the display objects in 'The Beauty Factory' are absent of proper chronological or historical progression of the relationship between the beauty standards of each culture. The absence of meta-information on the contextual ties or historical development of these beautification processes is translated into the lack of proper walking direction for museum visitors. Visitors are free to walk wherever they please as the numbering of the cargo freight is inconsequential to understanding the contextual relationship of beautification on displays. Hence, what appears to the attendees is a sweeping over-generalization of how every culture and society manufacture their own standards of beauty at any given time.

Such a sweeping generalization is appropriate at the level of presenting a framework of beauty as a social and cultural product, but it should not be articulated at the expense of prejudicial risk. It is objectively undeniable, even without having to attend this exhibition, that society and culture influences standards of female beauty. The question is not whether they bare any influence, but rather *to what extent?* The act of putting on lipstick in the morning, also a socially constructed beauty standard, is entirely different from wearing a lip plate. The point here is this: the selection of beauty “molds” and “stereotypes” presented in this exhibition leans vehemently toward any act of beautification involving the excess of body mutilation. It is as if the exhibition’s narrative is associating every form of culturally constructed beauty with unnatural body mutilation.

The most obvious example of the narrative of beauty as mutilation, besides the apparent brutality of the Mursi’s lip plate and the Kayan’s brass neck rings, is the presentation of the Victorian corset. What is striking is how the display vividly describes the preference for extra-small hips for women by wearing a corset during the Victorian era, and in the Thai Royal Household, in a scathingly sarcastic tone⁶ as follows:

[w]omen had to suck in their stomachs and squeeze themselves into the torturously small and rigid steel frames that were perhaps meant for someone a few sizes smaller. The display text then goes on to dully explain that the reason these women had do wear corset is because **“[w]ell, that was the trend. When** influential fashionistas, such as elite ladies, singers, performers and dancers, were glimpsed around town with 16-inch waists, **everyday girls couldn’t help but dream of having teeny tiny waists,** too (emphasis mine).

⁶The sarcastic tone of voice is used to narrate and explain the origin of every beauty standard represented throughout the exhibition. It is as if the scathing narration will somehow further drive home the adversity of social and cultural production of beauty.

The purpose of the display text is not solely to discuss the origins of the popularity of using a corset, but also to criticize and ridicule women who want to conform to the contemporary mold of beauty as if it is some sort of cardinal sin to even desire to reach such beauty standards. Even more disturbing is the fact that this prejudicial narrative is reinforced through the spectacle of an interactive 'peephole', depicting the women who wear a corset as a monstrous object of the visitor's gaze.

Of course, the transparent moving images of women inside the peephole exist as representations of the Victorian's standard of beauty. Yet, to make visitors observe the women through a peephole is equivalent to objectifying them for entertainment's sake. One could even go on to say that the images are disconnected from their very own social and historical contexts. The peephole serves no purpose in helping explain the social standard of beauty. Instead its only function is to exist as a pure ideological state apparatus redoubling the denouncement of women's conformity to social standards of beauty as an unnatural and grotesque desire. For this reason, it is appropriate to gaze upon them with disdain. The critique and denouncement of women's conformity to socially constructed beauty standards is elaborated further in the second section, 'The Dressing Room', where visitors interact with samples of body mutilation from each culture in 'The Beauty Factory'.

'The Dressing Room' is an ironic name as in reality the spatial design is closer to that of a prison yard. The room is surrounded by steel cages on all sides, littered with samples of beautification props from the previous section. The sample props are placed into a 'zone' for the attendees to try out. They consist of a plastic stick to simulate the Mursi's lip plate, two Victorian corsets, high-heel shoes for men to try and balance, a table comparing normal size feet to Chinese bounded ones, and five-kilogram necklaces to mimic the burden of the Kayan women in having to conform to their cultural standard of beauty.

This room is the equivalent of the climax of the plot in the narrative arc. This is because the attendees are completely interpellated into the ideological subjectivity of the exhibition as they proceed to wear beautifying props. The act of trying on beauty props in the designated zones is no different than putting on

a helmet at the entrance of the exhibition. Both are acts that interpellate the attendees into the ritual of beauty production. The striking difference is that being hailed into the position of a factory engineer is a painless process, while trying these props involves servitude into body mutilation. Hence, the act of trying on each beauty prop leads to the inevitable conclusion of how the cultural production of beauty leads to certain pains and unnatural deformities.

The suffering of unnatural body mutilation is conveyed through the language describing these beauty props in the same manner as the description of the display of the Victorian corset. The description is ridden with irony, sarcasm, ridiculing, or defying tones of voice such as “Have you hit puberty yet? Let’s experience the Mursi rite of womanhood. Instead of sporting a real clay plate in your lower lip, try holding this whole twig in your mouth. You would look so gorgeous with the little stick stretching your lip wide open.”, “Let’s try on this necklace that weighs about eleven pounds. It’s considered quite light for Kayan women, who bear these weights and are still able to do every task such as picking vegetables, collecting water, and cutting firewood.” Or “Why don’t you try on a pair of stilettos, five inches high, to see how long you can bear wearing them?” These sensationalist descriptions of the qualities of these beauty props are both written to entertain the attendees and to warn them of the item’s unnaturalness. The description of the weight of the steel neck rings or the invitation to try on the plastic Mursi twigs offers subtle hints that you (the attendees) should not follow these cultural standards of beauty as every beautifying ritual involves some form of mutilation to the female body. These abnormal beautifying rituals deprive women of their normal bodily functions, i.e., the binding lotus shoes and suffocating corsets are items that dispossess female wearers of the natural ability to walk and breathe.

Needless to say, the implied meaning of the production of beauty with body mutilation in ‘The Dressing Room’ is deeply problematic, especially if the design of the room is taken into account. The narrative of body mutilation in this room is told specifically through the frame of decontextualization. Ironically, this narrative framing is already inherent in the physical separation of ‘The Dressing Room’ from ‘The Beauty Factory’ as well as the placing of beauty props in a

single space. These design choices decontextualize the beautifying tools from their original contextual values. For example, the exhibition clearly states how Victorian women believed that wearing a corset to attain a socially preferable waistline was a normal fashion trend in the context of the Victorian era. The preference for a tiny waistline by stuffing one's body into a corset is a product particular to the Victorian social and cultural context, to state the obvious. When a corset is put on display for trial in 'The Dressing Room' it is no longer a product of the Victorian standard of beauty. Taken out of its original context, the corset exists in 'The Dressing Room' as an instrument of torture and body mutilation; a perfect companion to the prison-yard spatial design of the room. What the decontextualization of the beauty props in 'The Dressing Room' signifies is the intention to tell only the abnormal dimension of social and cultural beautification. It should come as no surprise that the contextual production of beauty is always painted negatively in this narrative frame and is finally denounced in the last room of the exhibition, which heralds the notion of natural beauty; a supposedly timeless and innate quality of beauty unbounded from physical mutilation.

IV. Let Me Tell You How Beautiful You Are: The Ideological Inscription of Natural Beauty

The attendees must walk up a flight of stairs to see the conclusion of the narrative arch in the final room of the exhibition on the second floor. The point of interest as the attendees walk up toward the stairs is that there is a sign that says "Want to be Beautifully Unique? Come this way" plastered on the wall. The provocative and inviting message on the sign is similar to the one on a brochure of a beauty parlor. But, this sign suggests that any beautification performed at the top floor is better than any of the culturally produced beauty seen in the exhibit. Since, there is no name given to this room, the author takes the liberty of naming this final section 'The Ideological Clinic'.

'The Ideological Clinic' is designed to literally inscribe the ideology of natural beauty on the attendees' bodies. The attendees will encounter a giant multi-section black mirror inside the room not unlike one in a dancing studio. Lines of laser light protrude from within the mirror. There is an instruction on how to interact with the apparatus of the room written on the opposite wall to the mirror. The instruction is also a resolution to the exhibition's narrative which affirms how women "are beautiful in their own unique ways are considered authentic and original. We are beautiful in our way, as they are in theirs. Acceptance [of individual uniqueness] is true beauty. Copying beauty values [reproducing social standard of beauty] is not necessary at all." The text then elaborates on how the reproduction of social standards of beauty are not necessary because the "factory has a strict policy of making sure everyone can and does become his or her own prototype of beauty. Reproduction is outdated. We [the factory] want to smash the molds and open ourselves up to the beauty of diversity." The process of ideological interpellation could not be more obvious in the change of the exhibition's authoritative position.

The interpellation to the exhibition's ideology of natural beauty is complete when the attendees are instructed to "explore this gallery and you will find that you are indeed beautiful like no other." What this amounts to in reality is the visitor standing at the end of one of the laser beams to have a cliché slogan celebrating individual uniqueness projected on to their chest. To put this experience into an analogy, having a laser beam projecting the phrase "You're Thailand's Next Chailai (Star)" on us is the equivalent of undergoing an ideological surgery into the underlying message of natural beauty. Beautifully unique means having a beautiful body that has yet to undergo the cultural process of body mutilation. Therefore, a pre-cultural beauty is a timeless "natural beauty"; an ideological value we are inscribed to strive for by the exhibition's apparatuses. However, the very act of literally showing and inscribing us into the value of natural beauty, the exhibition itself becomes a victim of a Brechtian cruel joke. The exhibition spends the majority of its narrative exposing the attendees to the cultural construction of beauty. In so doing, it should at least be aware that it is repeating the act of "constructing"

natural beauty as another set of cultural values with the interactive design in that room. We can literally see how the device (the society, in this case the narrative of the exhibition) produce a culturally constructed value of beauty by means of body mutilation (we are, after all, looking into the mirror to see our ideologically tattooed chests).

There is certainly a production of beauty, but the very act of production is neither cultural nor natural. It is ideological. Beauty, is what Slavoj Zizek, a world-renowned Slovenian cultural critic, would term, a “zero-level ideology”⁷, in that it functions as a basis for constructing a certain value (“molds” or “stereotypes of beauty” as the exhibition called) at the level of discourse thereby serving the dominant authority in a particular context (Zizek, 1994, p. 10). To focus on the cultural or natural aspect of beauty, as in the case of “The Body Project”, is to neglect the apparatus of beauty, which is purely to construct a standard. Naomi Wolf (2006), a well-known feminist critic, affirms the ideological function of beauty as a means to construct a standard when she states how “‘Beauty’ is a currency system like the gold standard” to maintain the male dominance in the patriarchal system (Wolf, 2006, p. 12). Wolf’s simile in comparing beauty to a “gold standard” reinforces how beauty, as ideology, is what truly determines the contextual value of female exquisiteness. Thus, natural beauty, it seems, operates much like culturally produced beauty; neither inner nor timeless. In addition, it also requires an authoritative voice and cultural apparatuses to work. In this light, if the designer of “The Body Project” wanted to encourage the attendees to feel that they are beautiful the message should have been this: we are all beautiful, even if we have culturally mutilated our bodies through plastic surgery or bounded feet.

⁷ Zizek defines zero level of ideology in the introduction to *Mapping Ideology* as follows: The ‘zero-level’ ideology consists in (mis)perceiving a discursive formation as an extra-discursive fact. To (mis)perceive “connection” as having pragmatic functions of producing cultural or natural standard is to dismiss its ‘zero-level’ ideological performance of producing a function in the first place.

V. Conclusion: “Mirror mirror on the wall tell me who is the fairest of them all?”

Ultimately, “The Body Project” is an exhibition that betrays its own message. The interpellation process of the exhibition proves the ideology of natural beauty must also be complimented with rejection of cultural standards of beauty. What the exhibition fails to address from this structural deadlock is that the binary oppositions of both culturally constructed vs. natural beauty are both false opposites; they are both products of a selective power in one way or another. The apparatuses of the New Museum used in “The Body Project” may be designed to privilege the ideology of natural beauty over culturally constructed ones. Yet, in so doing it exposes its own Achilles’s heel of glorifying natural beauty, without addressing how it is also a product of *production*. In short, the binary oppositions of cultural vs. natural beauty are both false opposites in a sense that they are both a product of some form of *construction*, regardless of *context*.

Perhaps the best way to grasp the notion of beauty presented in “The Body Project” is to perceive it alongside “The Magic Mirror”; a common motif in Fairy Tales. An evil witch in *Snow White* or *Sleeping Beauty* may ask The Magic Mirror with the infamous chant “mirror, mirror who is the fairest of them all?” The Magic Mirror provides another beautiful maiden as the answer. Yet, the evil witch in both stories asked the mirror the same question. The point is that the Magic Mirror will give the same mode of answer (the name of some random maiden) regardless of who is asking. The Mirror will provide the evil witch, or whoever is asking, even us, with the current ideal value of beauty in order to drive the plot of the tale forward. Beauty is thus not in the eyes of the beholder, but rather in the *articulation* and subjectification of beauty by the agents possessing the authoritative power of the Magic Mirror.

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