

An Idea to Live In: On Lifelong Investigations, Fakir Musafar, and the History of Body Modification

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In 2004, I met the artist and body modification subcultural icon Fakir Musafar. Our paths would continue to cross until his death in 2018. In 2025, I released a feature film about him titled *A BODY TO LIVE IN*.¹ Most of my work is, in some way, internal, made with people I know, so this isn't entirely outside my norm. Yet this figure, who is more a stand-in for a series of ideas than a person, his modeling of the body as porous and distinct from the self, his tension between reverence and irreverence, embodiment and dissociation, has held my interest for 22 years. Is the goal of Fakir's extreme body modification to own the body, to deeply inhabit it? Or is it to leave the body behind? The tensions that remain in this work, the parts that evade filmic narrative, are perhaps the most interesting. I don't seek to resolve them, but I do enjoy speaking those tensions into the air, hanging with them. The following words are a blend of loose association and cogent reflection on the film I made and its adjacent tangents.

¹ <http://www.abodytolivein.com>

Like many young queer punks in the early 2000s, I had encountered the zines *Search and Destroy* and the RE/Search books *Modern Primitives* and *Angry Women*. They were standard coffee table reading material of the era, just as *On Our Backs* was standard bathroom reading. No longer isolated to the West Coast of the 1990s, these countercultural, freak-flagging publications were now available at home in the Midwest.

I can't pinpoint the initial draw to these materials. Likely, it was my budding interest in BDSM—an attraction to the overt display of the body's porousness and the erotic potential therein, the inclusion of ritual and magic, how hardcore it looked, its closeness to death, and/or its visual depictions of the plasticity of gender. In the RE/Search book *Modern Primitives* (a movement title that has not aged well), these elements were documented in words, but more importantly for me, in photographs, specifically, Fakir Musafar's photographs.

I want to think of photography as the beginning of our collective human death march. Maybe it was the written word; maybe it was the railroad; maybe it was Fordism; maybe it was the internet; maybe it was all or none of these things. But for the purposes of this meditation on the ethos of the film, I will take photography as the technological innovation that fully transformed our world at the turn of the twentieth century. As André Bazin suggests, it is the “embalmed” image.² Our entire contemporary relationship (pre-AI) to time and memory is or was built on this innovation: the idea that something was objectively real and could be marked in time.

First and foremost a photographer, Fakir Musafar was born in rural South Dakota in 1930. His earliest self-portraits, made at age fourteen, are utterly riveting. He gazes wistfully past

² André Bazin, “The Ontology of the Photographic Image,” trans. Hugh Gray, *Film Quarterly* 13, no. 4 (Summer 1960): 4–9.

the camera, arms floating in a pseudo–reverse pli  , fully nude, his waist cinched tightly with a piece of twine that demarcates grooves in the flesh of his prepubescent abdomen. In one image, he has wrapped tire chains around his entire body. As a prop, under their weight, he would dance himself to exhaustion, a kind of trance-inducing state not unknown to club kids, ravers, long-distance runners, artists, and holy people. He covered his entire body in clothespins and relished the pure sensation.

Later, Musafar would engage in extreme waist training, corsetry, extended sensory deprivation, suspensions, restrictions, constrictions, and other interventions, most notably, extreme body piercing practices, often driven by the question, “What if?” As his partner Cl  o suggests in the film: “What if you cannot? You cannot sit, you cannot lie down. You cannot move. What happens to you?” When she says this, she means, in essence: where do you go, inside?

These questions of ontology and phenomenology are foundational to any artistic practice. But the spiritual (read: cosmological) questions embedded in his particular weaving of practices—photography, performance art, eroticism, and spiritual quest (the “God Hole”³)—are what have kept me engaged with this figure for 22 years.

A BODY TO LIVE IN moves somewhat chronologically to introduce Fakir’s work, influences, motivations, and collaborators. But as the film unfolds, it becomes less about Fakir as a person and more about the histories and practices that entwine his life with larger movements and concerns. Through and across underground art practice, mainstream disgust, cultural

³ I am drawing on a conversation with Ron Athey in which he uses this phrase to suggest that humanity has an inherent hunger for spirituality—such that it is a hole that cannot be filled.

critiques of appropriation, the necropolitics of the AIDS crisis, and the subcultural elevation of an icon, Fakir becomes a stand-in for our collective need for communion.

How do we make new rituals? And if nothing is sacred, then what is the point? This is a question often posed by performance artist Ron Athey as well.

In my research, performance scholar Dominick Johnson told me that Fakir and the notable body-based performance artist Franco B. met in London in the early 1990s while sharing a performance bill. Full of argument, as Fakir often was, they entered into a discourse that ended with Franco B. simply stating that he was a punk and Fakir was a hippie. This sentiment gets at the flesh, the stretch and pull between reverence and irreverence.

Is modifying the body an act of worship, or of reverie? An act of dissidence? Are we checking in or checking out? Is it a “fuck you, dad” move? Do we have to choose?

For Fakir, there was something rooted in the body that allowed for both genuine reverence and profound irreverence at the same time. He often said, when speaking to young people, “Your parents don’t own your body, God doesn’t own your body, you own your body.” For me, what I get caught up on in this sentiment is the concept of ownership. What does it mean to own something, rather than simply living in it? It is hard for me not to read a colonial subtext there.

Yet this entwining of reverence and irreverence, or perhaps a larger field of irreverence within which sits a smaller pocket of reverence, keeps me thinking about it still, 22 years later. For Musafar, body modification was not solely about release, accomplishment, spectacle, or testing the limits of physicality, but also about the deepest human desire to connect with something larger than the self. Body modification was the methodology, but the goal in achieving this state was to leave the body altogether, a lifelong preparation for death.

In his earliest out-of-body experiences, he describes encounters with “the white light.” He recounts flying out of his body (what other schools of thought might call astral projection or a near-death experience) over his small town as people rise at dawn. He describes his ability to speak to dead animals, as well as his prepubescent telekinetic talents, which mysteriously vanished after adolescence, a possible nod to a gendered gift lost with the onset of testosterone. Artist Gordon Hall does not make work “about” the body, because that framing implies that bodies are singular rather than plural, or that one body could stand in for all bodies. Within their analysis is a sense of refusal, they resist the notion that the body is distinct from personhood. Yet I can’t help but think that buried within this refusal is a utopian promise: that we might somehow leave the body behind altogether.

In Musafar’s thinking, much prioritizes the plurality of the body, yet it is also about leaving the body—his body. At the same time, it is not that the body is a vessel (a notion that Hall resists), but that it is a passageway. Or, as he would say plainly, “Body is the door to spirit.” In this logic, if the body is merely the entrance to the portal, then why such emphasis on the pleasures of the body? On its animality? On its erotic potential? On the gendered and genderless shaping of the body? Is the draw that it is perverse, or simply that the sensations produced by these practices feel good? Again, why choose?

This friction between staying in the body (aligned with somatic therapies and the concept of being “present”) and leaving the body (as a way to explore beyond this world) remains one of the many ongoing tensions I have with this work.

Fakir’s resistance to staking a claim, to self-identifying, to clearly positioning himself anywhere, appears as an act of defiance within our skittish and sensitive culture of deep codification, where everything must have a place, a marker, a mode, a descriptor. You are

expected to know everything about someone before even meeting them. But of course, because you haven't met them yet, everything you think you know about them is filtered through whatever hyper-stylized sociocultural framework you inhabit—one that dictates your narrow perception of a person not yet known. How sad. And how liberating it must feel to refuse taxonomy.

“But was he trans?” I was asked this question many times while pitching the film. Funders and investors needed to know whether it was a “trans narrative.” Note that these pitches were largely happening before the second Trump administration and the recent NEA cuts, when “trans” was still something that people in small, select cultural spheres were supporting, sometimes because they wanted to report diversity stats to their board, but often due to genuine care and interest. I would respond: why does it matter?

Fakir's lovers attest that, had he been born in the past forty years, he would almost certainly be trans. But I resist subscribing to this claim, because all the conditions and frameworks that shaped his interests would also have been different, in a million possible permutations. And yet, it is clear that gender was at the forefront of his consciousness throughout his life, and that skin was a barrier to be overcome, and eventually, shed. Some of us are hyper-aware of our skin: how it sits, how it folds, how it looks and feels when opened.

Let me turn to the skin of the film. The film is one rupture after another, interspersed with lengthy images that suggest a kind of wholeness within that unending fracturing. It often moves in three-frame still images (approximately one-eighth of a second) of unrecognizable grain. The gutters of Fakir's photographs create a backdrop against which these frame-within-frame images emerge, still images of his photographs, lingering on screen long enough to sit with them, but briefly enough to leave us wanting more. Technologies of image-making spanning 1930 to 2025

collage the screen; historical live-feed video art overlays the image, creating visual forms untethered from talking heads, while oral histories proliferate like haunting voices guiding a tour. The film, like the photographs, makes it all real. But unlike the photographs, the film makes it all a story. It places these elements into narrative form for the ease of audience consumption, a tactic that will always remain a point of internal tension for me.

Yet these tensions are what sustain my long-standing curiosity. In the film, I sacrifice many unanswerable questions in favor of narrative, as a way of inviting the viewer in—welcoming them on this journey. It is, after all, a movie, rich with pathos. Moving chronologically carries an inherent sadness: we witness ontogeny on fast-forward, a body transitioning from robust to frail. We encounter this passage up close through documentation of one of his final suspensions before death.

I'm not sure what Fakir would think of the film, but I know he loved story and understood, instinctively, its role in ritual and collective experience.

I cannot offer a neat “this is what I learned from this project” conclusion. I have no answers, only lingering questions, loose tissues longing for connection. Inasmuch as *A BODY TO LIVE IN* documents something real, it also constructs a history, one woven not only from Fakir's life, but from the monumental shifts in American identity across the mid-twentieth century, the dissemination of queer knowledge, the commodification of our lives, and our collective edging closer and closer to the other side(s).

“Edging” is likely not a word Fakir would have used. But here, it makes sense to me: to get as close as possible to the thing without being consumed by it, until it is your time. And then, to move seamlessly into nothingness.

Bibliography

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