What is a body of knowledge? Knowledge is a collection of abstract ideas, logically or poetically linked together, but clearly with no physical or tangible existence. The notion of a "body of knowledge" suggests a unity that joins together into a coherent visual image rules of practice and modes of thinking about a particular subject.

This section of the exhibition presents maps and diagrams from a wide range of fields — including cartography, anatomy, mysticism, astrology, cosmography, medicine, and psychology — all using the image of the human body to depict various systems. In some cases, the body serves as an image of a political entity, such as a map that merges the human body of the monarch with the geographical domain under his rule. Every part in the body of the Astrological Man corresponds to one of the signs of the zodiac, and as such is ruled by a particular planet: although the human body is mortal, Man also has something of the cosmic eternity within him. The human body is viewed as the center of the universe: not merely a reflection of the cosmos, but its very foundation and reason for existence.

Diverse cultural expressions reflect the desire to strip away the external layers of the human anatomy to achieve self-understanding or self-revelation. In the latter half of the sixteenth century, primarily due to developments in the field of medicine, people ceased to view the body as an expression of cosmic forces, and instead began to see it and its organs as elaborate machines. In the early twentieth century, the dissection of the body extended to the world of the mind. The father of psychoanalysis, Sigmund Freud, divided the psyche into components — id, ego, and superego — that determine human behavior. Today, the body metaphor reveals the inherent contradictions of human knowledge: like the body, it is transient, subject to historical contexts and therefore continually changing.
The human body and its dimensions have long served as measuring units for the creation of harmonic relationships in art, architecture, and choreography. The first expression of a parallelism between the human form and the universe, or divinity, can be found in the Book of Genesis, in the verse, “So God created man in his own image” (Gen. 1:27). The ancient Greek philosophers viewed the cosmos as ordered by proportional principles and numerical and geometrical inferences. Proportion, according to Plato, in the fourth century BCE, serves as a retainer of order and balance in an otherwise chaotic realm. The most significant book on the subject of proportion, written in the first century CE by Roman architect Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, linked the proportions of the human body to those evident at all levels of the cosmos, from which he inferred key notions, such as symmetry and fundamental units.

Man as the center of God’s Creation appears also in the visions of German abbess, writer, composer, and mystic St. Hildegard of Bingen, described in her Book of Divine Works, ca. 1163–73. Centuries later, Leonardo da Vinci’s 1487 Vitruvian Man depicts a male figure in two superimposed positions, whose outstretched limbs fit perfectly within the two basic Euclidian forms, highlighting the correspondence between the geometric proportions and the order of the cosmos. In the realm of architecture, Le Corbusier, one of the most influential architects of the twentieth century, discovered geometrical and mathematical rules underpinning nature, and developed the Modulor—a system of measurement based on the height of the average European white man. Creators such as Oscar Schlemmer and Rudolf von Laban translated the movement of the body in space into “architecture in motion,” and hailed the similarity between human movement and that of the celestial bodies.

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Artists of all cultures and beliefs have drawn comparisons between the female body and nature — from ancient figurines to twenty-first-century multimedia works. Mother Earth, identified with trees, water, soil, and seasons, was worshipped as a fertility goddess as far back as 8,000 years ago. In Human Landscape, artists explore themes of growth, fecundity, and germination through amorphous, organic, and soft forms and materials. Throughout history and across cultures, the woman-nature analogy is expressed through a focus on one of the bodily organs — especially the sexual organs — as a part that represents the whole, enhancing it with further meanings.

Anthropomorphic landscapes are a curious genre that merges landscape and human features. This theme often features a face hidden in the landscape, a portrayal of the master who conquers and works the land. Such paintings reached their heyday in the seventeenth century, especially in northern Europe. These are in marked contrast to the curvaceous bodyscapes painted by Israeli artists such as Michael Gross, Ori Reisman, and others, which eroticize nature by fusing a woman’s body with the landscape. Emphasizing the fertility or life-giving powers of the land, such works also assert land ownership from a national perspective.

Contemporary art has undergone a paradigmatic shift, from reiterated visual metaphors for female sexuality and binary coupling of woman—nature and man—culture to an exploration of the diversity, flexibility, and mutability of identities and practices. For instance, the exploration of feminism and pornography by Swiss artist Pipilotti Rist, and Venezuelan artist Luchita Hurtado’s presentation of Earth as a live, breathing creature put in jeopardy by acute ecological crisis.
Artists leave traces of themselves on surfaces and in spaces, delineating physical and symbolic boundaries and creating landscapes through bodily gesture. Sometimes the whole body is at work, and often parts — such as hands, hair, or eyelashes — are isolated as tools. Body of Work explores the performativity of artist and artwork alike, where making and looking may both be seen as performative.

Jackson Pollock’s “action painting,” engaging his whole body, was documented in Hans Namuth’s film of 1950. This signaled a shift from the painted body (or body as described) to the painting body (or body as agent). Thus, painting became a performative “event.” Pioneering feminist artist Carolee Schneemann engaged in an intergenerational conversation with Pollock, aiming “to vitalize the whole body as stroke and gesture in this dimensional space.” Like her, Ana Mendieta asserted that the body must be exposed in its processes of making. Her private rituals in public spaces, such as Siluetas, 1973–78, or Body Tracks, 1982, invoke what she called a “dialogue between the landscape and the female body.”

The contemporary artwork becomes a site or landscape not only for the artist but also for the viewer. To create Loving Care, 1992–93, Janine Antoni dipped her hair in dye and mopped the floor with it, both dramatizing and despectacularizing her body. Tamar Shippony and Mili Ben Hayl’s In Between, 2009, heightens our awareness of the delicate chain of equilibria that sustains the fragile balance between humanity and creation. Concerned with contested spaces, Manar Zuabi skips with a rope in a viscous dark pool, splattering herself and the white-cube space around her. The anxious bodies in these works test not only their own limits, but also those of the space in which the body performs.