

Elisabeth Mixa

Postmodern body concepts and the current wellness discourse

... In the morning we pull on the "life shirt" which electronically monitors the pulse rate, and eat a "hormone bread" against premature ageing and spread it with a special fat that reduces the cholesterol level. On the way to work we look in for a brief massage in the adventure-health shop, which used to be called the chemist's. An internet fitness test is a bit of fun in the lunch break, and in the evening the sauna temple provides well-earned relaxation. This is not just for sweating, but also for meditation . . . This, among other things, is how the trend researcher Mathias Horx describes the future of the "wellness society".

The subject of my presentation is an analysis of a current phenomenon of western culture, i.e. the growing *wellness discourse*. The range of leisure and consumption on offer is broad and continually expanding: *functional* or *mood food* and other nutritional supplements for better concentration or purification, sense-enhancing perfumes or drinks, relaxing far-eastern oils and massages, wellness oases for *body&mind*, *slow-sport* techniques for fitness and against "problem zones", all this and much more is on offer on the new wellness market. This new *wellness* lifestyle can be trained with the aid of self-taught techniques formulated in *wellness* self-help manuals or with the assistance of personal *wellness* trainers or other *life coaches*.

The media discourse on health, happiness and wellness is growing and shifting. "Self" and "body" become the subject and are visualised – the search for tranquillity, sense and sensuality, "health" for which we take responsibility ourselves in a world that is imagined to be threateningly accelerated, from which the "harmony of body-mind and soul" – also with the environment – is supposed to represent a way (out) by which we make ourselves happy. States of tension are to be solved through "balance" and new horizons of meaning opened up with aid of far-eastern religious teachings. Differences appear to be dissolved; only the individual self, itself representing the boundaries to the external world, remains visible.

Is *wellness* just a modern trademark associated with pleasantness, a new consumption wave, an economic factor or a *trendy* subject? How are phenomena that have their cause in the deeper layers of everyday culture expressed? What conceptions of "body" and what self-evident conclusions are anticipated and established by this wellness discourse, and how and where do the (new) differences become evident?

Wellness is read in connection with the shifting of boundaries – not just between "human-nature-technology" – and thus itself becomes the subject of a process of dissolution and reformation.

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Lives and works in Vienna. She studied sociology at the faculty of human- and social sciences and for some ten years has been researching and lecturing as a freelance academic (Universities of Vienna and Klagenfurt). Focus of research and publications: cultural studies and gender studies. At present she holds a Hertha Firnberg research post at the Institute for Sociology in Vienna, working on her post-doctoral thesis (Habilitation) on the subject of "Wellness as an Example of Body and Self Concepts".

