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ETHICS AND POLITICS IN PERFORMANCE ART: RECLAIMING THE FUNCTION OF ART IN SOCIETY

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A Dissertation Submitted to the University of Cyprus in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy

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KAROLINA LAMPROU

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Αυτή η διατριβή αποτελεί μια θεωρητική προσέγγιση στη “performance art”, προκειμένου να αξιολογήσει, από την προοπτική του 21ου αιώνα, τις ηθικές και πολιτικές ανησυχίες που έχουν συμβάλει στην εμφάνιση και τη εξέλιξη αυτής της μορφής τέχνης. Προσεγγίζοντας τη «performance art», μέσα από την προοπτική της ιστορίας της τέχνης, η διατριβή αυτή επικεντρώνεται στις βασικές ανησυχίες που έχουν παρακινήσει κάποιους από τους βετεράνους αυτής της μορφής τέχνης και υποστηρίζει ότι αυτές οι ανησυχίες έχουν διαμορφώσει ένα κοινό όραμα για πολλούς καλλιτέχνες το οποίο ξεπερνά την απλή αισθητική απόλαυση του έργου τέχνης. Πιο συγκεκριμένα, κατά την ανάλυση μιας σειράς «performances» υιοθετείται ένα θεωρητικό υπόβαθρο με σκοπό να διαφανεί η σημασία αυτής της μορφής τέχνης που συνίσταται στην προσφορά μιας ενσώματης εμπειρίας που μοιράζεται ο καλλιτέχνης και ο θεατής και η οποία συμβάλλει στην ανάπτυξη της ηθικής και πολιτικής συνείδησης των συμμετεχόντων. Η βασική θέση της διατριβής αυτής αποδέχεται ως βασικό και διαχρονικό αίτημα της «performance art», την ανάκτηση της λειτουργίας της τέχνης στην ανθρώπινη κοινωνία.

Κάθε κεφάλαιο επικεντρώνεται στο έργο δύο έως τεσσάρων καλλιτεχνών, το οποίο αναλύεται μέσα από το φακό μιας συγκεκριμένης θεωρητικής προσέγγισης, φιλοσοφικής, ανθρωπολογικής και / ή ψυχαναλυτικής. Αυτό επιτρέπει τον ορισμό και τη διασαφήνιση των διακριτών τάσεων που χαρακτηρίζουν τη «performance art». Ως εκ τούτου, σταχυολογούνται οι διαφορετικές τάσεις που επηρέασαν καθοριστικά τον τομέα αυτό από τη δεκαετία του 1960 έως σήμερα, συζητώντας κάθε μία ξεχωριστά αλλά και συλλογικά.

Στο πρώτο κεφάλαιο, αναλύονται οι συνθήκες που συνέβαλαν στην εμφάνιση αυτής της μορφής τέχνης, η οποία μπορεί να θεωρηθεί ως «επιστροφή στο σώμα». Συγκεκριμένα, γίνεται αναφορά στο έργο κριτικών που αποδίδουν την κρίση που διέρχεται η σύγχρονη τέχνη στα ελλείματα της ύστερης καπιταλιστικής κοινωνίας. Το δεύτερο κεφάλαιο επικεντρώνεται στα πρώτα στάδια της «performance art», όπου παρατηρείται μια στροφή στα «rituals». Λόγω του ότι τα «rituals» αποτελούν μέσα δόμησης της κοινωνίας και του πολιτισμού και συμβάλλουν στην αποκατάσταση της τάξης σε περιόδους κρίσης, η στροφή της «performance art» σε αυτά υποδεικνύει την προσπάθεια για την επανορθωτική λειτουργία της τέχνης στη κοινωνία, μέσω της ενσώματης εμπειρίας. Το τρίτο κεφάλαιο, πραγματεύεται το πώς ορισμένοι καλλιτέχνες επιδιώκουν να δημιουργήσουν ένα χώρο όπου οι «δυνάμεις του τρόμου (powers of horror)» που σχετίζονται με την αποκειμενοποίηση (abjection) μπορούν να μετουσιωθούν σε μια θετική εμπειρία. Στο τέταρτο κεφάλαιο δίνεται έμφαση στις ηθικές ανησυχίες που εγείρει η ανταπόκριση στη διαφορετικότητα του «άλλου». Το πέμπτο

KAROLINA LAMPROU

κεφάλαιο, αναλύει έργα τέχνης τα οποία αποτελούν μια πολεμική ενάντια στη βιοπολιτική συνθήκη: μια πολεμική που στοχεύει να προβάλει ως επιτακτική την ανάγκη για την υιοθέτηση ενός εναλλακτικού τρόπου ύπαρξης και τη συγκρότηση μιας κοινότητας που αντιστέκεται στις δυνάμεις αποκλεισμού της βιοπολιτικής θεώρησης. Στο τελευταίο κεφάλαιο παρατίθενται σκέψεις σχετικά με τους πιθανούς κινδύνους που μπορεί να προκύψουν από αυτό το είδος τέχνης, που σχετίζονται κυρίως με τη δυνατότητα του καλλιτέχνη να δημιουργήσει μια αίσθηση κοινότητας μεταξύ των συμμετεχόντων.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

ABSTRACT

This thesis adopts a cluster of theoretical approaches to performance art, in order to evaluate, from a 21st century perspective, the ethical and political factors that determined the emergence and sustainment of this art form. This thesis' overarching argument accepts that the diachronic purpose of performance art reclaims the function of art in human society. Approaching performance art from an art historical perspective, the thesis examines the main concerns that have motivated some key practitioners of this art form, to show how ethical and/or political deliberations have shaped a common vision among diverse artistic practices, a vision that goes beyond the mere enjoyment of the artwork. More specifically, by analysing a number of performances against theoretical frameworks borrowed from anthropologic, psychoanalytic and political theory, and ethics, it seeks to highlight the importance of this art form, first; in its capacity to redefine the embodied experience that is shared between the artist and the spectator, and, second; its contribution to the development of an ethical and political conscience of the participants involved.

Individual chapters are structured thematically. Each chapter focuses on two, three or four performance artists whose work is examined through the lens of a particular theoretical philosophical, anthropological, and/or psychoanalytic perspective. Each set of chosen theories allows for the developments informing the dynamic traits of the field of performance art to come to the fore and relate to a period spanning from the 1960s to the present.

Chapter One discusses the societal circumstances within which this art form emerged. Specifically, the work of post-modern and contemporary critics shedding light on the discontents of the late capitalist society and the resulting crisis in the modern art world is utilised with a view to explain the primacy of the to return to the body. In Chapter Two, attention is cast to the early stages of performance art, where a turn to ritual is noted in artistic practices. Bearing in mind that rituals are means of structuring the sociocultural world and restoring order in times of crisis, what is argued is that performance artists' turn to ritual points to a conviction in the restorative function of body-oriented experience. Chapter Three, discusses how certain performance artists seek to produce a site where the "powers of horror" associated with abjection assume a transformative outlook. Therefore, chapter three analyses performances that exemplify the Kristevan abject, ultimately to illustrate the sublimatory function of art. Chapter Four, deploys a Levinasian lens, to emphasise the ethical concerns raised by the response to the alterity of the Other. Furthermore, the analysis is enhanced with Judith Butler's political appropriation of Levinasian ethics, particularly his notion of vulnerability, with a view to providing a more insightful understanding of the current issues that many of these artists deal with. Chapter Five, draws on performances which launch a polemic against the biopolitical state as discussed by Giorgio Agamben: a polemic which aims to demonstrate the need to move

KAROLINA LAMPROU

towards an alternative mode of being and a community that actively resists the exertion of exclusionary biopolitical power. In the second part of this chapter, a positive reading of Agamben's concept of play is introduced as a counter-strategy to neutralise the friction between the sacred and the biopolitical. Finally, the concluding chapter of the thesis identifies potential risks and dangers that may arise from this kind of artistic practices, which are found to relate primarily to the capacity of the artist to instill an innovative sense of community among the participants involved.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

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KAROLINA LAMPROU

Table of Contents

Introduction

The emergence of the term "Performance Art"……………………..……………………..…….1

The Early Stages of Performance Art: from Futurism to Fluxus and Action Art……………...…4

Key Tendencies and Approaches in Performance Art……………………………………….……9

Aims and Methodology……………………………………..……………………..……. 16

Overview of Chapters ………………………………………………..……………..……23

Chapter 1: The Turn to the Body in Art Theory and post 1960s Art Practice…......................30

Chapter 2: The Nexus between Body, Violence, Ritual

The Turn to Ritual: The Viennese Actionists' Performative Art………...…………….………...52

The experience of the Sacred: Ron Athey's Transgressive Art…………….……….……...…81

Chapter 3: Approaching the Abject: Meaningful or Meaningless Suffering?

Exposing a Traumatic Experience of Abjection ……………………….………........….…..…105

Sublimating the Abject in the Context of Performance Art…………………………………..…119

Chapter 4: The Face of the Artist: Responsibility for the Other and the Fight for our Common Vulnerability

Responding to the Pain of the (vulnerable) Other…………………………...……..…...…132

The Importance of Recognising a Shared Embodied Vulnerability……………...……………......149

Chapter 5: From the Sacred to the Profane

The Performance Artist as the Figure of the *homo sacer*: The Artistic Endeavour of Regina José Galindo……………………………………………………………………….…..…..……...166

Reclaiming the Use of Art: ORLAN…………………………………………………..……..…183

Chapter 6: Dangers, Risks, Limitations

Under the Gaze of a Sadist………………………………………………..………….........203

What about the Fate of the Body?..216

Conclusion: Where is Performance Art Heading? ……………..……………………...…..226

Works Cited ……………………………………………………..…………………...…....240

KAROLINA LAMPROU

List of Figures

Fig. 1. Warhol, Andy. *Electric Chair*.

Fig. 3. Sherman, Cindy. *Sex Pictures: Untitled #250.*

Fig. 4. Sherman, Cindy. *Sex Pictures: Untitled #255.*

Fig. 5. Sherman, Cindy. *Sex Pictures: Untitled #263.*

Fig. 6. Viennese Actionists. *Kunst und Revolution.*

Fig. 7. Schwarzkogler, Rudolf. *1st Action Wedding*.

Fig. 8. W. Kindler, Rudolf Schwarzkogler, *1st Action Wedding*.

Fig. 9. Müehl, Otto; Nitsch, Hermann; Frohner; Adolf. *Blood Organ.*

Fig. 10. Athey, Ron, *Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains.*

Fig. 11,12. Athey, Ron. *Solar Anus.*

Fig. 13. Athey, Ron. *Ron Athey as St Sebastian.*

Fig. 14. Pane, Gina. *Autoportrait(s).*

Fig. 15. Pane, Gina. *Sentimental Action*.

Fig. 17,18. Abramović, Marina. *Lips of Thomas*.

Fig. 19. Franko B. *Oh Lover Boy*.

Fig. 20. Abramović, Marina. *Rhythm 0*.

Fig. 21. Ono, Yoko, *Cut Piece*.

Fig. 22. Burden, Chris. *White Light-White Heat*.

Fig. 23. Burden, Chris. *Doomed*.

Fig. 24, 25. Franko B. *Aktion 398*.

Fig. 26. Franko B. *Aktion 893: Why Are You Here*.

Fig. 27. Galindo,Regina José. *Piedra*.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Fig. 28, 29. Galindo, Regina José. *The Objective*.

Fig. 30. Galindo, Regina José. *Estoy Viva*.

Fig. 31. Galindo, Regina José. *No Perdemos Nada Con Nacer*.

Fig. 32,33,34,35. Galindo, Regina José. *Alud*.

Fig. 36. ORLAN. *Drapery-The Baroque.*

Fig. 37. ORLAN. *Black Virgin Wielding White Cross and Black Cross*.

Fig. 38. ORLAN. *Incidental Strip-tease Using Sheets*.

Fig. 39. ORLAN. *5th Surgery-Performance: Operation-Opera*.

Fig. 40, 41. ORLAN, *7th Surgery-Performance: Omnipresence*.

Fig. 42. ORLAN. *4th Surgery-Performance: Successful Operation*.

Fig. 43. Martin O' Brien. *Martin in Cage (with Sheree looking in)*.

Fig. 44. ORLAN. *Nude Descending a Staircase with Platform Shoes*.

Fig. 45. STELARC. *Third Hand*.

Fig. 46. STELARC and Sellars, Nina. *Blender*.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Introduction

The Emergence of the Term "Performance Art"

The term performance art has been widely used for some decades now; nonetheless, a rising popularity of this term has been noted in the last twenty years.[1] Performance art relates to a number of artistic practices, where the body usually holds a central role in offering an ephemeral live experience. It has been used interchangeably with various other terms, a point I will elaborate on below. It is important to note that performance art, a term that appeared in the 1960s but became more popular during the early 1970s, belongs to the wider category of live art, which also includes a number of art forms such as Fluxus, happenings, action art, land art, digital work, devised performance, site-specific practice, and experimental film and video (Heddon, *Histories and Practices of Live Art* 2). Deirdre Heddon and Jennie Klein, in *Histories and Practices of Live Art*, treat the terms performance art and live art as interchangeable. This is because, as they argue, "[b]y the early 1990s, performance art [in the UK], which was being referred to by a variety of names, was being referred to almost exclusively as 'live art' a shift that, as Adrian Heathfield suggested retrospectively, proposed the 'impetus in contemporary art and culture towards the immediate, the immersive, and the interactive: *a shift to the live*'" (*Histories and Practices of Live Art* 23). Amelia Jones, an American art historian who has written extensively on body and performance art, explains that "[b]ody art, performance art, and live art are all terms wielded in various discourses and in various sites to point to works that activate a body or bodies temporally—either for an audience present at the time ('live art') or for audiences who engage the work through representational modes such as video installation" (*Perform, Repeat, Record* 12).

For this reason, it is not easy to define and categorise performance art, as the various artistic practices it encompasses and/or is associated with each have their own trajectory. RoseLee Goldberg, who has also written extensively on live art and performance art, acknowledges the difficulty of delineating the history of performance art and the development of related artistic practices. As she notes: to do this, one had to search "through old journals, ephemera and photo archives, looking for material that had been all but

[1] For example, RoseLee Goldberg, in *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, points to "performance's upsurge in the first decade of the twenty-first century" (227), while Amelia Jones, in *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History,* notes that "there has been a wholesale resurgence of interest in body art, performance art, or live art", hence, she finds it necessary to provide "a timeline to testify the burgeoning interest (which since 2000 has verged on art world obsession) in the body, in the live act, in the histories and meanings of performance and the performative" (12-3).

KAROLINA LAMPROU

forgotten" (*Performance: Live Art since the 60s* 9). This is why, Goldberg notes, performance remained for so long "overlooked because it often fit no category and unexamined because this material could no longer be seen only described" (*Performance: Live Art since the 60s* 7). In line with Goldberg, Heddon has also noted that live/performance art's "defining feature" is precisely the fact that "it resists definition" (*Histories and Practices of Live Art* 9). To this end, a number of art historians have attempted to illuminate the tendencies and histories relating to live art.[2] Heathfield and Jones, for example, with *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History,* offer a meticulous study which aims at producing a historiography of live art. Their narrative approach however does not follow a linear trajectory, with the exception of a chapter by Jones, titled "Timeline of Ideas: Live Art in (Art) History, A Primarily European–US-based Trajectory of Debates and Exhibitions Relating to Performance Documentation and Re-Enactments". This chapter, as the title suggests, offers a brief yearly timeline, from the 1950s to 2012, which is when the book was published. Beyond this chapter, Heathfield and Jones' book offers a "kaleidoscopic" approach, in order to discuss the "array of problems inherent in the multiple modes of the historicisation of performance" (41). For this reason, Jones suggests, the history of live art is best to be "read in a non-linear fashion" (*Perform, Repeat, Record* 41). Heddon and Klein, in 2012, have also offered a meticulous publication entitled *Histories and Practices of Live Art*, in order to delineate the development of live art, mainly focusing on the UK, from the 1950s to 2010, which, as they argue, forms a "long overdue" study (4). Nonetheless, they acknowledge the importance of many other publications which offer a "critical engagement with live practices" (Heddon and Klein, *Histories and Practices of Live Art* 3).

In the next section, drawing, among others, on the aforementioned seminal works, I will try to delineate some of the most important tendencies encompassed in this art form. It is important to note that there is no agreement among scholars, critics, and artists about when this form of performance has exactly emerged, mainly due to the fact that some approach it from a theatre studies perspective[3] and others from an art historical perspective, perceiving

[2] For example, Michael Archer's book *Art since 1960,* published in 1997, offers a detailed overview of the art forms that appeared during and after the '60s. The historiography of live art is also explored in Mel Brimfield's and Matt Fenton's *This is Performance Art*, published in 2011, which focuses on the collaboration between performance art and other types of artists, dancers, theatre makers, activists, comedians, etc. In 2019, Catherine Wood published a very insightful book, with the title *Performance in Contemporary Art*. Wood connects her discussion of performance art with other forms of art, such as sculpture, dance, and painting. Also, she draws on earlier performances, from the emergence of this art form in the 1960s until the 1980s, with a view to discuss their reception by other, contemporary artists.

[3] An interesting work that approaches performance from a theatre studies perspective is Erika Fischer-Lichte's *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, which mostly focuses on the development of performance studies in Germany, comparing it with the genealogy of American performance studies. The author identifies the 1955s as a turning point for the performative arts in the European aesthetic tradition. She discusses this "turning point" in terms of performance art and experimental theatre, which she juxtaposes to discussions

KAROLINA LAMPROU

it as emerging out of the limits of the "canvas", hence associating it with fine art. In this thesis, I will mainly discuss performance art by drawing on an art historical perspective. The art historical perspective is the most common approach to the subject, taking into consideration the scholarship available. The affiliation of performance art to theatre performance, however, cannot be denied.[4] As I will explain in more detail below, during the 1950s a turn is noted in the art scene, with many artists experimenting with live practices. Around the same time, there is also a shift in theatre practices with the emergence of experimental theatre. In experimental theatre, the members of the audience were often asked to participate in the performance, forming, in this way, a different relationship to the actor and among themselves than in traditional theatre performances, where the members of the audience are mere observers. Despite some similarities, the difference between performances associated with theatre and performances associated with the visual and fine arts, according to Nick Kaye, is noted in terms of the art object. As Kaye explains in *Art Into Theatre*, the latter takes an interdisciplinary turn in art through which the artistic goal or object is realised with performance (2). The performance, therefore, is not the end of the artistic process but the means through which the art object becomes realised. In Kaye's words, "the implications of the turn towards performance through visual art practices are often at their clearest where the practice of performance is not read in terms of 'theatre', but as an address to the terms and assumptions surrounding the 'art object' itself" (2).

Guillermo *Gómez-Peña*, in his *"Performance vis-á-vis Theater",* notes that "in drama theater the actors are not usually the authors. On the other hand, in performance art the performers are almost always the author" (35). Annette Arlander, who seems to also share this view, in "Is Performance Art Self-Portraiture?", argues: "What does it mean to use oneself as a performer or rather not to use other people as performers? In visual art and film and in performing arts like theatre and dance it is often considered strange if the author and the performer is the same person. Here performance art, body art and action art are exceptions" (10). For this reason, many performance artists underline the fact that they do

on traditional theatre practices. At the same time, she explores how the post-1960s shift in the visual and fine arts has also modified the concept of art and the artistic process, "from producing works of art to creating performances" (36-7).

[4] In her work *British Avant-Garde Theatre,* Claire Warden notes that important developments were noted in the field of theatre performance within the period between 1914 to 1956, particularly in Western avant-garde theatre, which is where Warden's work focuses on. These changes were largely sparked by the social, cultural, and political changes, as a result of the two world wars, that were taking place within the Western world (Warden 2-3). In particular, British avant-garde theatre and its practitioners supported that "their art could assist in the transformation of society [...] whether by presenting a truthful representation on stage, by challenging assumptions about taste or the nature of art, by drawing attention to the dexterity of the human body or the beauty of language, or by advocating a particular political opinion" (Warden 5). It is such ideas, according to the author, that gave rise to experimental performances, site-specific theatre and, as a result, various different performative genres became intertwined.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

not come from a theatre background while their work should not be confused with theatre. This is a view that Marina Abramović also supports:

> To be a performance artist, you have to hate theatre. Theatre is fake: there is a black box, you pay for a ticket, and you sit in the dark and see somebody playing somebody else's life. The knife is not real, the blood is not real, and the emotions are not real. Performance is just the opposite: the knife is real, the blood is real, and the emotions are real. It's a very different concept. It's about true reality the artist asserts. ("Marina Abramović Pits Performance Art Against Theatre")

Similarly, Franko B has also underlined the fact that his work differs from theatre performances. Specifically, the artist talks about the importance of the "real" in his work, in which he has always used his own blood and not "fake blood". ("Franko B Interviewed by Gray Watson").[5] Based on the above, I have chosen to explore performance art from an art historical perspective and not in terms of theatre studies, given that most of the artists I focus on are motivated by the idea of *presenting* rather than representing reality. In what follows, however, I will briefly refer to scholarship that approaches performance art from a theatre studies perspective, precisely because, as I have mentioned, this art form defies an overarching unifying categorisation.[6] I wish to clarify though that I will not attempt to provide the history of performance art or a comprehensive survey of what has taken place in the field so far. This, I believe, in agreement with Heddon, "is something of an impossible task". (*Histories and Practices of Live Art* 1). I will, however, provide a historical context that will help me explain the concerns and focus of this thesis.

<u>The Early Stages of Performance Art: from Futurism to Fluxus and Action Art</u>

According to art historians and art critics, performance art has close affiliations with earlier 20th century artistic and social movements, such as Futurism, which was founded in 1909, Dadaism (1916-1923), and Situationism (1957-1972), due to its experimental and un-conventional nature.[7] The genealogy of performance art, Jennie Klein notes, is located "in

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[5] This publication has no page numbers. It mainly consists of various photographs from Franko B's works, an interview with the artist, conducted by Garry Watson, and an essay, written by Sarah Wilson.

[6] Also, see Peggy Phelan who in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* discusses performance art from both perspectives. According to Phelan, performance as a collaborative event has a pedagogical role and gives birth to a new type of performativity, where the "sociality of performance is manifest" (173). "It is the attempt to walk (and live) on the rackety bridge between self and other —and not attempt to arrive at one side or the other— that we discover real hope", Phelan argues (174).

[7] Apart from Goldberg's *Performance Art: From Futurism to Present*, also see, Heathfield's "Alive" in *LIVE: Art and Performance*, where he discusses the beginnings of performance art as related to "modernist movements such as Futurism, Dada and Situationism…" (8); Heddon argues that live art emerges from Futurism and Dada and "performed a public, radical and opposition anti-art" (175); Tracey Warr notes that "[t]hroughout

KAROLINA LAMPROU

the practices of the historical avant-garde", as a means of rupturing with more traditional art forms such as theatre, dance, painting, and sculpture (14). Only in the 1970s "performance became accepted as a medium of artistic expression in its own right", as RoseLee Goldberg explains (*Performance Art: From Futurism to Present* 7). Goldberg's 1979 publication, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, seems to be the first book to offer a concise history of the development and trajectory of live art and performance, including a meticulous account of the 20th century avant-garde movements that took place much earlier on, such as Cubism, Bauhaus, Russian Futurism, and Constructivism.[8] For this reason, I find it important to offer a brief description of the main topics and ideas this publication includes, which form an important source of information and inspiration for a number of other scholars. What I find particularly useful in Goldberg's mapping of this field is the attention she pays to manifestos about performance that were produced within the context of these earlier forms of art. These manifestos, according to Goldberg, "have been the expression of dissidents who have attempted to find other means to evaluate art experience in everyday life" (*Performance Art: From Futurism to Present* 8). Goldberg's study explains the role of performance "as a medium" in general, long before the emergence of performance art. To elaborate, the critic draws on various kinds of performances, such as those by the poet Tomasso Marinetti, who is considered as the ideological founder of Futurism. She then compares the performances of Futurists, Surrealists, and Dadaists to those associated with Bauhaus. Only after exploring in approximately 125 pages the art forms that preceded, hence allowed, the emergence of performance art, Goldberg eventually moves on to Happenings and Fluxus actions that took place during the 1950s and 1960s. Finally, she concludes the first edition of her book with the 1970s body art actions. The revised editions are complemented with more sections in order to include the "role of performance art in the development of twentieth-century art": for example, how performance allows artists to "respond to change" through different means, narrow the gap between "high art and popular culture", and explore their concerns with regard to different cultures and ethnicities (Goldberg 9). For this reason, this book is nowadays considered a key text, included in the reading lists of relevant university courses, and is used as a reference text/sourcebook and referred to by many art historians who acknowledge its importance.[9] Nonetheless, limitations have been noted by scholars,

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modernism, the historical avant-garde sought to destroy the existing order-that is, the existing art tradition", a motivating factor behind early performance art practices (13).

[8] The writer, in 2018, published another very interesting work, *Performance Now: Live Art for the 21st Century.* In this book, Goldberg offers an illustrated overview of the influence of performance art in contexts, such as the Visual Arts, World Citizenship, Politics, Choreography, Theatre, and Architecture.

[9] Kathy O' Dell, for example, notes that Goldberg's book "was the first comprehensive book to survey the topic" (xii) while Deidre Heddon claims that Goldberg's book "remains the most common touchstone for historicising

KAROLINA LAMPROU

who find Goldberg's linear historical narrative to be restrictive. Heathfield, for example, argues against "the old forms of stable objective narrative" and supports a performative approach in writing about live works (*Perform, Repeat, Record* 30).[10]

> Historically and culturally diverse, numerous forms of documentation are assembled here within the limited confines of the printed page, each with their own dilemmas, tactics, and perspectives on the question of how one might describe, depict, capture, and restore the event of a performance work for historical record. Consequently the reader is invited to move between quite different experiences of documentary and discursive address, between forms of writing such as the manifesto, the performance lecture, the autobiographical account, performative writing, the performance score and script, art theory, and art historical narration, Heathfield explains. (*Perform, Repeat, Record* 237)

Most art historians who write about live art, including performance art, start their narrative by drawing first on Action Painting, or action art, a term coined by Harold Rosenberg, in 1952.[11] Action Painting refers to a process of painting in which the artist uses gestural brush strokes to drip paint onto a canvas instead of applying it with a certain creative purpose. This form of painting gives emphasis to the process of creating instead of the finished product (*Tate* "Action Painters"). Rosenberg describes this type of painting as "inseparable from the biography of the artist […]. The act-painting is of the same metaphysical substance as the artist's existence" (*The Artist's Body* 194). Pollock is regarded as one of the most representative artists of gestural painting in North America, particularly during the 1940s, and Gustav Metzger in Europe, who was most active during the late 1950s and 1960s. Artistic practices which shift the attention away from the finished product to the actual process of creating the artwork are often seen as paving the way for performance art. Roddy Hunter and Judit Bodor, for example, in *Histories and Practices of Live Art*, describe the performative type of art "not as picture but an event" (66). The idea of art as an event is noted in various art forms that emerged during the 1950s and 1960s, such as Fluxus events,

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live art" (*Histories and Practices of Live Art* 5). Also, Adrian Heathfield discusses Goldberg's "substantive works" which have traced "the aesthetic genealogies of performance" (*LIVE: Art and Performance* 8).

[10] The book *Performing the Body/Performing the Text*, published in 1999, edited by Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson, also uses a performative approach in writing about art. Specifically, this work consists of a collection of essays that "re-read" a number of artworks, through the concept of performativity, in order to offer a different model of reading art and, effectively, a new understanding of art.

[11] For example, Rebecca Schneider in *The Explicit Body in Performance, Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History;* Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield, eds., *Histories and Practices of Live Art 66-68* and Jones' "*The* Pollockian Performative" *in Body Art/Performing the Subject.*

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Happenings, action art,[12] and auto-destruction art events. In what follows, I will briefly refer to early forms that signal the "risky" and "controversial" character that performance art gradually acquired (Klein, *Histories and Practices of Live Art* 15). As Klein notes, in the aftermath of several wars, "during a time of political and social upheaval", performance art was reflecting a "radically changing society" (*Histories and Practices of Live Art* 14).

While action painting is considered to have played a significant role in the emergence of performance art, it is the art events of the 1960s and 1970s, specifically, according to Herbert Molderings, Happenings and action art, that are mostly recognised as "the forerunners of the performance movement", (*The Art of Performance: A Critical Anthology* 97). Happenings, a term coined by the American painter Allan Kaprow, in 1959, therefore, are generally considered as an important early art form that belongs within the wider category of performance art. What is important to note is that various types of happenings took place all around the world: for example, in the US, Germany, Japan. In his analysis of Happenings, Michael Kirby juxtaposes this art form to "acting" and representational skills:

> Acting means to feign, to simulate, to represent, to impersonate. As Happenings demonstrated, not all performing is acting. Although acting was sometimes used, the performers in Happenings generally tended to 'be' nobody or nothing other than themselves; neither did they represent, or pretend to be in, a time or place different from that of the spectator. They walked, ran, said words, sang, washed dishes, swept, operated machines and stage devices, and so forth, but they did not feign or impersonate he argues. (*The Art of Performance: A Critical Anthology* 56)

John Cage is considered one of the pioneers of happenings due to the great influence he exerted on Kaprow, who was his student. However, while Cage only produced "musical happenings", Kaprow employed theatrical and visual elements in his practices.[13]

John Cage has also influenced another important art form, which is generally associated with performance art, namely, Fluxus, which emerged in 1961, in New York, and spread throughout Europe the following year. Fluxus events were simpler and shorter than those of "Happenings". Fluxus took various forms such as "music, dance, poetry,

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[12] Action art, as Roddy Hunter and Judit Bodor note, is a "clumsy and imprecise term" as it initially referred to gestural painting and the "varying practices of 'action painting', such as Abstract Expressionism from the US, *Tachisme* and/or *Art Informel* from France and *Aktionismus* from Austria" (*Histories and Practices of Live Art* 67). More information on Action Art can be found in: "The Art of Action in Great Britain" in *Histories and Practices of Live Art.*

[13] For more information on Happenings, particularly in the UK, see *Histories and Practices of Live Art.* For a personal account of Happenings in LA and the influence Kaprow exerted, see *Live Art in LA.* For more on John Cage and his role within Happenings, see RoseLee's *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present.*

KAROLINA LAMPROU

performance, film, publication, multiples and posters". It was motivated by a conviction in the need to overcome "the separation between life and art" (Harrison and Wood 727). As the name of the movement suggests, and as expressed in their manifesto, Fluxus is associated with "flow and fusion". George Maciunas, a leading figure of Fluxus, explains this art form as promoting "a revolutionary flood and tide in art". He refers to it as "living art", "anti-art" and "Non-Art" (Harrison and Wood 727).

These early stages of performance art, including Fluxus and Happenings are considered by critics to belong to the broader category of Do-it-Yourself (DIY) Art. The category of DIY art, according to Klein, also includes auto-destructive art, as well as the infamous Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS) event, which took place in 1966, in London. Auto-destructive art was initiated by Metzger, who published his "Machine, Auto-Creative and Auto-Destructive Art", in 1962. This kind of art is used to describe radical artworks with a political purpose, in which destruction forms a central part in the artistic process of creating a work. Many performance artists viewed "sited performances as acts of resistance", against nuclear warfare, capitalism, consumerism, with the DIAS event being discussed by many art historians as a very important event in the history of performance art[14] due to the great media attention the event attracted and the participation of various different artists[15] and scientists, from many parts of the world, who gathered together to discuss destruction in art and in society (Heddon, *Histories and Practices of Live Art* 9). As the name of the event suggests, it aimed towards the destruction of existing social norms, ideologies and beliefs (Hunter and Bodor, *Histories and Practices of Live Art* 67-8).

By the 1970s, both in Europe and in the rest of the world, political movements asking for social change influenced most aspects of human life, including the art world. As Claire MacDonald notes, in 1968, the Vietnam War was at its peak, the assassinations of Robert F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King had taken place, Czechoslovakia was invaded by the Soviet Union, and lots of students joined forces with workers in various street protests, in Paris and other parts of the world (*Histories and Practices of Live Art* 157). Due to this, the late 1960s and early 1970s brought "political agitation" which sparked, among other things, "artistic innovation", leading art to take a more violent direction (MacDonald, *Histories and Practices of Live Art* 157). During these decades, the artist's body is rightly described by Jones in *The Artist's Body* as "a gesturing, expressive body, sometimes an aggressively

[14] See, for example, Kristine Stile's *The Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS): The Radical Cultural Project of Event-structured Live Art*, *Volume* 1.
[15] Many well-known artists participated in DIAS: these include members of the Viennese Actionists (for more, see Chapter 2), Yoko Ono (for more see Chapter 4), and the Puerto Rican artist Rafael Montañez Ortiz, who participated in DIAS with his performance *Self-Destruction*, which Cynthia Carr discusses in "An Artist Retreats from Rage", in *On Edge: Performance at the end of the Twentieth Century*.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

activist body…" (21). Performance activity at the time was largely motivated by political concerns, including social, racial, and gender injustices and, especially in the US, it related to the role of the US in the Vietnam War. Due to this, it is hard to separate actions that were part of performance/live art and activism at the time. This is precisely why Peggy Phelan, in her important book *Live Art in LA: Performance in Southern California, 1970-1983,* calls this period in the history of performance art "crucial" and "fecund". At the same time, motivated by similar concerns to the ones of earlier art forms, many performance artists of the 1970s and early 1980s also wished to "resist the commodification of the art object", turning their interest into "creating actions rather than objects", an idea I will elaborate on in the first chapter of this thesis (Phelan, *Live Art in LA* 12).

In the next section, I will discuss the different tendencies and approaches that have been noted in performance art so far in order to offer a mapping of the field which will help me situate my own concerns and aims in this thesis.

Key Tendencies and Approaches in Performance Art

Rituals in performance art

The well-known anthropologist Victor Turner defines rituals as a "stereotyped sequence of activities involving gestures, words and objects, performed in a sequestered place and designed to influence preternatural activities or forces on behalf of the actors' goals and interests" (183). Rituals, then, can be performed with the aim of dealing with both individual and collective crisis. As an approach to collective crisis, rituals appear to help communities cope with political, cultural, and social changes. Since a number of theorists, such as Amelia Jones, RoseLee Goldberg, Deidre Heddon, Jennie Klein, and Kristine Stiles, argue that performance art emerged out of societal crisis, it is no wonder that, particularly at its early stages, ritual elements were very strong.

As Goldberg notes, in *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present*, "the choice of ritualistic prototypes led to very different kinds of performances" (166).[16] For example, Goldberg explains, in the work of Gina Pane and Stuart Brisley, ritualised pain functioned as a response to "society's anaesthetization and alienation" while in the case of the Viennese Actionists, rituals had to do with art as therapy or acted as a means to release repressed energy (164-5). This will be the focus of the second chapter of this thesis, entitled, "The Nexus between Body, Violence, Rituals", where I will focus on the central role held by

[16] Carr notes that during the 1960s and 1970s destruction rituals were also very common in artistic practices, due to the artists' commitment to "transform themselves—with a thought toward transforming society" (182).

KAROLINA LAMPROU

rituals as a means to claim the cathartic nature of art and challenge conventional notions of art with a view to restoring to it a social function beyond the realm of aesthetics. I will continue my discussion of the role of rituals in performance art in Chapter 3, where I aim to demonstrate how the ritualisation of individual and communal experiences of abjection provides a site where transformation can take place.

Feminist concerns

Within the context of second wave feminism, many women artists were drawn to performance art. This can be attributed to the fact that performance art was not "entrenched within the art world hierarchy and as a new medium could be used by women to analyse their position in society" (Marsh 130). The women's movement provided the urge to many performance artists to "re-examine" and "re-define" "the models on which" many women had based their own self-image, as Moira Roth argues in *The Amazing Decade: Women and Performance Art in America 1970-1980*. During the 1960s in particular, many female artists used performance as the means to respond to the appropriation of their bodies and became engaged in an attempt to challenge feminine ideals produced to satisfy the masculine gaze. According to Rebecca Schneider, in *The Explicit Body in Performance,* in feminist performance, the artist uses her naked body in order to claim her agency both as a woman and as an artist.[17] Other female performance artists experimented with personas for other reasons, such as to expose or challenge gender stereotypes. Karen Finley, for example, used to perform various personas through provocative monologues.[18] At the same time, as Roth argues specifically with regard to the 1960s women's movement, due to the fact that "the personal *is* the political", autobiographical performances often went hand in hand with feminist concerns (16). Furthermore, particularly during the 1970s, some artists, such as Cindy Sherman and Ana Mendieta, dealt with notions of "disembodiment" and "erasure" to bring forward a scathing critique of popular depictions of the young white female body as a commodity or the object of male desire (Schneider 119).

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[17] In this context, Carolee Schneemann, for example, in her work "Eye/Body", covers her naked body with various materials in order to render herself "not only image but image maker", with a "desired *and* desiring body" more than merely an "active object as the "live nude was widely used in Happenings" (Schneider 35-37). Another example of feminist art realised through the medium of performance is Valie Export's work, such as *Tap and Touch Cinema* and *Action Pants: Genital Panic*, in which the artist allows strangers to touch her breasts or see her genitalia in order to offer a critique on popular representations of the female body in the movie industry and male voyeurism.

[18] For more on Karen Finley's performances see Mary Richard's "Karen Finley, 'Obscenity' and the NEA", in her PhD thesis *Resisting the Limits of the Performing Body*, and Carr's *On Edge: Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century.*

KAROLINA LAMPROU

It is important to mention, however, that in such works there is an embedded risk, namely, the risk of empowering the male gaze instead of disabling it, or the risk of being taken as "narcissistic" and "intended only to stimulate men". For example, Schneemann's work was criticised precisely on these grounds (Schneider 34). These concerns are very legitimate, I believe, and this is why I will elaborate on these issues in the last chapter of this thesis.

Focus on the body

During the 1960s and 1970s, the term "body art" was more common in descriptions of live performances where the focus is on the artist's body. Gradually, however, performance art became the preferred term, able to accommodate a wider range of artistic practices. The importance of body art is explained in a number of publications dedicated to the early stages of this art form, such as *Body Art/Performing the Subject* and *Body Art and Performance: The Body as Language*, which I focus on below. Of course, such works were published many years later; during its early stages, live art/performance art was still a "marginal activity with "very few places to show this work" (Heddon, *Histories and Practices of Live Art* 3). However, it is the art historian and critic Amelia Jones, in her 1998 book *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, who was the first to make the distinction between body art and performance art. Jones, in this work, explains that she usually avoids using the "perhaps more obvious" term performance art as she finds it "patently inaccurate", hence she prefers to use the term "body art" (*Body Art/Performing the Subject* 12, 317). For this reason, she dedicates a four-page section of her introduction to explain how she perceives and uses these two terms. Notably, a shift is noted in her more recent works, where the term performance art appears much more often. In the following section, I will summarise her arguments in order to then explain why I ultimately chose to use "performance art" in this thesis.

The term body art, Jones argues, emphasises the "implication of the body", including "all of its apparent racial, sexual, gender, class, and other apparent or unconscious identifications" (*Body Art/Performing the Subject* 13). This is one of the reasons why she uses the term body art in this specific work (as noted, the term performance art appears much more often in her more recent works) where she focuses on performances of the 1960s to the mid-1970s, referred to by other writers and art critics as "body art" and "body works" to distinguish them from practices of "performance art" which were considered broader, referencing back to dada or theatre productions. Jones goes on to argue that body art "does not strive toward utopian redemption, but, rather, places the body/self within the realm of

KAROLINA LAMPROU

the aesthetic as a *political domain…*" *(Body Art/Performing the Subject* 13). This idea is reiterated by Lea Vergine in her important work *Body Art and Performance: The Body as Language* that deals with the birth and early years of this kind of art. Vergine admits that the artists she is referring to "cannot be reduced to the label of Body Art", which is why it has been so difficult to come up with a solid and straightforward definition for this art form (12). Vergine, likewise to Jones, uses the term body art to refer to works where the artist's body is a suffering body for "*[t]hose who are in pain will tell you that they have the right to be taken seriously*" (8).

Another important aspect of the 1970s body art is the audience's engagement in the action, reflecting the artists' "chief goal to establish a dynamic interaction" between themselves and the audience, as David Bourdon argues with reference to Vito Acconci's work (100). This idea is significant to my own argument with regard to the function of performance art in society, which largely depends on the response of the audience. I will return to this idea later in this introduction, in an attempt to explain how I utilise the terms "society, "community" [19] and "audience" in my analysis of the selected artists and performances.

According to Jones and Vergine, in the 1980s the artist's body seems to disappear from the artwork. In the 21st century, the term "performance art" prevails over that of "body art", which seems to be scarcely used nowadays. Most well-known artists of the art form prefer to call themselves "performance artists". In addition, some artists, for example ORLAN, disassociate their work from notions of pain and suffering, which hold a central role in body art, hence they cannot be called body artists, as Jones and Vergine have defined this term. In my thesis, I mostly use the term "performance art", which, as already mentioned has become a much more common term. Whenever I specifically refer to body art works, i.e. from the 1960s or 1970s, I use the term that was used by artists and critics to discuss the respective work.

Masochism in performance art

In the 1970s until the 1980s, Cynthia Carr notes, many performances in the art world were called "body" or "ordeal art" (xv). This is because of the pain and suffering caused by the artist's self-inflicted violence, an idea shared by Ralf Remshardt who, in *Staging the Savage God: The Grotesque in Performance,* notes that "[a]lmost always, body art had an aspect of 'ordeal art'" (58). Peggy Phelan who, in her work *Unmarked: The Politics of*

[19] As it will become evident throughout this thesis, it is important to note that my use of the term community takes on different meanings/connotations, according to the theoretical frameworks I am employing.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Performance, draws on the basic premises of "ordeal" or "hardship" art, explains: this type of art "attempts to invoke a distinction between presence and representation by using the singular body as a metonymy for the apparently nonreciprocal experience of pain" (152). The artist's body, therefore, does not merely *represent* pain and suffering but *becomes* the recipient of pain in order to highlight the audience's inability to actually experience the artist's pain. Although it may be painful to watch the artist in pain, only the artist experiences physical pain.

What has been observed in many works within the fields of performance art and body art are acts of masochism. With her 1998 work, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s,* Kathy O'Dell provides a very thorough analysis of the masochistic approach that performance art adopted in the 1970s, mostly relying on the work of Chris Burden, Vito Acconci, Gina Pane, and the artist duo Abramović/Ulay. In addition, she focuses on the importance of the masochistic element in the performances she uses, which she situates within a psychoanalytic framework in order to explore its symbolic function. O'Dell provides an original and perceptive analysis of the 1970s work of the artists mentioned above, drawing on a number of theorists such as George Bataille, Julia Kristeva, Gilles Deleuze, and psychoanalysts such as Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud. She seems to be the first critic to draw directly and extensively on the masochist trope in performance art and attempts to provide a more in-depth analysis of the reasons behind masochist performances. For this reason, the author's contribution is acknowledged by many other art historians and critics who write about performance art. As O' Dell argues, masochistic performances should not be merely seen as responses to socio-political situations such as the Vietnam War. Instead, she uses contract law theory to explain the metaphors that such works employ. Specifically, she suggests that there is an implicit contract between the artist and the audience which "has to do with the complex dynamic" established between them (O' Dell 2). This contract constitutes a metaphor for other problematic social contracts that we often sign, which are not always of our best interests. Still, because of our acceptance of the terms of the contract, we cannot but become partially responsible for what we have agreed to. O'Dell's work, Johnson argues, forms an "invitation to address one's own responsibility for pain endured by another in performance art [which] may inform our awareness of larger political problems, such as individual, negligent culpability in a time of war" (*Histories and Practices of Live Art*, 123). Again, what needs to be noted in these interpretations of performance art is the crucial role the audience plays in (implicitly or explicitly, passively or actively) accepting or *not* accepting the action(s) presented in the context of an artist's performance.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Masochism in performance practices may serve other purposes as well, i.e., it may function as a tool of resistance to patriarchal notions of desire and subjectivity. Mary Richards, in her PhD thesis *Resisting the Limits of the Performing Body*, approaches masochistic performance practices in order to show how they critically engage with patriarchal discourses. As Richards explains, the performances she discusses "work in opposition to the patriarchally constructed, sado-masochistic cultural economy of 'desire'", presenting in this way alternative formations of subjectivity (*Resisting the Limits of the Performing Body* 6). To prove her argument, the author refers to "different paradigms of subjectivity", as discussed by a number of theorists and psychoanalysts. Given the importance of masochistic tendencies in the performances I am analysing in this thesis, I intend to discuss any problems or limitations that derive from such tendencies, focusing in particular on how they affect the audience and the relationship established between artist and spectator.

A turn to the ordinary and the everyday

As the aforementioned comments by Jones and Vergine show, a decline in the use of the body in artistic practices is noted during the late 1970s and 1980s. Beth Hoffman discusses a "turn to the ordinary", which comes in contrast to earlier artistic practices (*Histories and Practices of Live Art* 53). Sparked by the "impulse to reconsider the everyday", a number of artists performed "private activities" in public art and non-art spaces (Warr 29). An indicative example is Linda Montano's and Tehching Hsieh's *Art/Life One Year Performance 1983-84,* in which the two artists remained tied together with an eight-foot rope on their waists while they continued their usual everyday routine. By 1979, Goldberg notes, within the art world, in general, and performance, in particular, the move "towards popular culture is reflected" (*Performance Art: From Futurism to Present* 190). This is because "the anti-establishment idealism of the sixties and early seventies had been categorically rejected […]. The artist-as-celebrity of the eighties came close to replacing the rock star of the seventies" (*Performance Art: From Futurism to Present* 190). Similarly, Rob La Frenais has called the 1980s performance art, particularly in New York, "simply theatre adapting to the economies of scale or the particular entertainment — the club scene, for example" (*The Artist's Body* 245).

The impact of the AIDS crisis/Culture Wars

During the 1990s, there were many works that centred around the AIDS epidemic and the subsequent culture wars, a result of the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) cuts

KAROLINA LAMPROU

and defunding of particular artworks or artistic performances. During that time, a number of artists suffered because of the Congress' decision that the NEA should "consider 'general standards of decency' when awarding grants" (Carr 292). Specifically, in 1989, a new legislation was introduced that required the NEA to refuse funds to obscene works, "including but not limited to depictions of sadomasochism, homoeroticism, the sexual exploitation of children, or individuals engaged in sex acts which do not have serious literary, artistic, political or scientific value" (Carr 238). This decision caused a number of problems to many artists, with some of the most renowned cases being the defunding of Karen Finley, Tim Fleck, John Hughes and Holly Miller ("The NEA Four"). Ron Athey is another famous example of an artist who suffered from the NEA cuts, specifically due to the scene "Human Printing Press", from his 1994 work *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life.* For the purposes of this scene, Athey cut some patterns on Darryl Carlton's (known as Divinity Fudge) back and placed absorbent paper towels on the cuts which he later hanged on clothes lines rigged on pulleys that were positioned above the audience. The artist was falsely accused of exposing audience members to infected blood, placing them at risk of HIV transmission. This did not only impact NEA grants and funds but, more importantly, performance venues were afraid to accommodate such performances, in fear of not being able to secure any future funds. Due to these issues, performance art during the 1990s was largely centred around the AIDS epidemic and the culture wars on art that were caused by these concerns.[20] I will refer to these issues, in the second section of the second chapter, within the context of my discussion on Athey's work.

The turn to technology and bioart

According to Jones, during the 1990s, there is a turn to artistic practices that promoted bodies that were "technologized, ironicized, fragmented and open to otherness" (*The Artist's Body* 40). This, Vergine notes, signals the body's return "as the seat and arbiter of multiple identities" (280). Technology, in many performances, features as the source of unlimited power, such as in those of Stelarc. Jones, in the *Artist's Body,* describes the turn to technology as an indication of "a shattered, technologically mediated and otherwise

[20] There are many critical works dealing with this: Mary Richards, in her PhD thesis *Resisting The Limits of the Performing Body,* draws extensively on the issues arising from the NEA decisions in a chapter devoted to Karen Finley and in a second chapter dedicated to Ron Athey. The section "War on Art", in Carr's *On Edge: Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century*, offers a meticulous account of the events surrounding "The NEA Four" and, generally, the problems that arose during the 1990s. Also, in "Washed in Blood", Carr discusses Athey's notorious "Human Printing Press" scene. Heddon and Klein refer to the legislation impacting live art and "anomalous body practices" in the UK throughout their work *Histories and Practices of Live Art*. Although this work is mostly based on live art in the UK, it also includes a detailed section on Athey and the impact his work had on the culture wars, since the artist has often performed both in the UK and other European countries.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

resolutely incomplete" body (22). At the same time, the turn to technology, and most recently biotechnology, has also led to the emergence of bioart. Because of this, a new type of art space has emerged: the art labs. These are laboratories which offer residencies to artists who wish to incorporate biotechnology in their artistic practices or engage in bioart. Such art laboratories are: SymbioticA, Genspace, BiofiliA (Miranda, "Weird Science: Biotechnology as Art Form"). I will provide an extensive discussion on how technology and biotechnology have influenced performance art in Chapter 5, within the context of my analysis of ORLAN's work and Chapter 6, in my discussion of Stelarc's work. I will also elaborate further on bioart in my conclusion, where I discuss the new directions that performance art seems to be taking.

<u>Aims and Methodology</u>

Having offered a condensed outline of the key concerns and tendencies that have dominated the field of performance art since its emergence, I will now proceed to explain the aims and focus of my thesis. As I have already mentioned, I focus on performance art from an art historical perspective in an attempt to understand the ethical and political concerns that have informed the work of some of its key practitioners. Tracing these concerns, my aim is to assess what I understand as the social function of performance art, namely, its contribution to the development of an ethical and political conscience in its direct address to and involvement of the spectator. Considering the controversial nature of a lot of the performances that I am going to focus on and the ambiguous responses they have elicited, I also intend to reflect on the risks, dangers, and limitations that are inherent in this hybrid art form, in order to offer a more balanced evaluation of its value and functions, since the success of a performance remains contingent on particular contexts and factors and cannot be taken for granted.

At every step along the way, I have adopted different philosophical, anthropological, and psychoanalytic perspectives that will allow me to investigate the aims and stakes of this artistic practice, with a view to doing justice to its complexity and development. In particular, I draw on the theories of Mary Douglas, George Bataille, Julia Kristeva, Emmanuel Levinas, Judith Butler, Giorgio Agamben, Jacques Lacan, and Giles Deleuze, which will enable me to discuss issues relating to the ethico-political concerns that the performance artists I am focusing on seem to address.

Approaching performance art from an art historical perspective, I will situate the works of certain performance artists within a theoretical framework which will allow me to claim the ethical and political significance of this art form, from its emergence until today. It is important to note that I use the term performance art to refer to artistic practices that

KAROLINA LAMPROU

were sometimes performed live in front of an audience or in front of a camera with the intention to be circulated later, in the form of video performances or as images. In the performances I discuss, the central focus lies on the artist's body used as an artistic medium of particular aesthetic effects and ethico-political interventions. Due to the fact that I was not able to witness live most of the performances to which I am referring, the descriptions of these works, unless stated otherwise, are based on the available videos, which are listed in my bibliography.

My choice of artists has been made based on their particular contribution to the field. For this reason, I do not follow a chronological structure, but I discuss artists whose work can be illuminated better within the theoretical framework adopted in each respective chapter. Although most of the artists with whom I am dealing are of European origins, my thesis is not limited to artists associated with a specific geographical location. For example, the Viennese Actionists are important for the purpose of this thesis because they are discussed by many art historians for their important involvement in performance art, not only in Austria but internationally (see Chapter 2). The works I am discussing took place in Austria, although, after the group's dissolvement, some members continued to work in other parts of Europe, such as in the UK and in Germany. Importantly, due to the shocking and violent actions of the Viennese Actionists, which were often performed in public spaces, many negative reactions were generated towards the artists. Ron Athey, who was significantly influenced by the Viennese Actionists, is equally important for this thesis because his work manifests the positive response that violence may generate, especially when located within a ritualised context. Athey, who is North American, is well known in European countries as he performs across the UK and Europe very often. Also, his work has influenced other artists, particularly Franko B, with whom he has also co-operated. Gina Pane, whose work is considered a major contribution to the 1970s body art in France, as well as performing in Italy, did not always perform live in front of an audience, but she sometimes relied on the photographic material documenting the actual work, which she refers to as *constats* (proofs). This is important for me as it shows that not all works need to be presented in front of an audience to be considered effective. Although the artist is well known for the political concerns of her work, mainly her critical stance against the Vietnam War, I chose to concentrate on the sublimatory effects of her work focusing on abject representations of female subjects who refuse to comply with Western, heterosexual norms and standards. Marina Abramović is nowadays known as the grandmother of performance art, hence, her work could not be missing from this thesis. Her work is valuable for my overall argument since she has shared, through her work, important ethical and political concerns. Although

KAROLINA LAMPROU

she has European origins, she is also very active in North America, which, again, is significant for the scope of this thesis as I do not want to restrict my choice of artists geographically. Franko B, an Italian artist who is based in London, is very active and his performances take place all over Europe. I consider Franko B's earlier work very important for increasing LGBTQ+ visibility. Although the artist does not want to his work to be solely associated to homosexuality, I believe it is necessary to focus on this aspect, in order to show the function of performance art in challenging entrenched hierarchies. My analysis of Franko B's work is also premised on the notion of vulnerability – the vulnerability of the artist as a representative example of marginalised subjects and the shared vulnerability the artist invokes to produce a sense of community with and among spectators. Chris Burden, a North American artist, is considered to be a seminal figure in American performance art and became famous particularly for his 1970s works. In my analysis of Burdern's work, I am drawing on the audience's lack of empathy or unwillingness to respond to his art (in the context of which he often endangers himself), thus demonstrating the significance of the audience's active complicity for the eventual success of performance art's ethical endeavour. Regina José Galindo is the only South American artist I am focusing on. Her work, however, is often presented in a number of European countries and biennales to which she often travels to perform live. Galindo's artistic practice is very useful for the development of my argument because it exposes the effects of capitalism not only on so-called First World countries but also on the Third World. The last artist I am dealing with is ORLAN, a French artist whose work will allow me to return to my analysis of Agamben in the first chapter of this thesis and his insistence on the need to restore the *use* of art outside museum-culture in and for the benefit of society. Due to her controversial artistic practices and her great exposure to media, particularly with her lawsuit against Lady Gaga for plagiarism, she has been called "a feminist icon" (Frank, "ORLAN Talks Plastic Surgery Beauty Standards and Giving her Fat to Madonna"). One of the main reasons I have chosen ORLAN for the purposes of this thesis is the fact that, unlike most of the artists I am referring to, she does not want her audience to focus on her suffering body; in contrast, she denies experiencing any pain or suffering during her performances and maintains a "playful" attitude towards these notions. Notably, ORLAN has been active in both Europe and the U.S., while one of her most recent projects, *The Harlequin Coat,* is a result of her co-operation with the Australian artistic laboratory SymbioticA.

Overall, what I will try to achieve in this thesis is to show that performance art, despite its changing character, controversial nature, and hybrid form has been and still is trying to reclaim the function of art in society. At this point, it is important to explain how I

KAROLINA LAMPROU

use the terms society and community in my analysis. I consider Frazer Ward's work *No Innocent Bystanders: Performance Art and Audience*, as a vital contribution to the literature available on the audience's importance in this art form. Ward's work is useful for the development of my own argument as the writer elaborates on the notions of "community", "public" and "audience" in relation to such controversial performances. Ward explains that the audience of performance art can be seen as a type of community which is usually categorised as "smaller-scale group formations", including the viewers who are gathered to watch the performance and the collaborators of the artist, if any (Ward 4). In order to explain his understanding of the terms "public" and "community" and put forward his definition of the term "audience", Ward draws on Jürgen Habermas' theory on the public sphere. Habermas, in *The Structural Transformation of the Public* Sphere, understands the public sphere as "made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state" (176). Such gatherings, which for Habermas form a community, can have political impact precisely through the medium of discussion. In this way, the immediate responsibility of such groups is "heavily emphasized" (Habermas 82). Just like the discourse between bourgeois private and public realms functions as a vehicle of change, performance art's ethical imperative, Ward notes, relies on the transition from "private salon to public space", where the distinction between the two has become blurred (8).[21] Ward discusses the emergence of performance art in relation to protest cultures "by civil rights activists, protesters against the Vietnam War, feminists and gay rights activists" (58). As a result of this development in the art scene, a re-examination of the importance of the artwork followed, enabling it to open up "to a realm of public, intersubjective experience" instead of being "bound to an individual being" (Ward 34). This is, according to Ward, because the audience of performance art, "a public sphere defined by disinterest", becomes "community as a group formation defined by affect and interest, by something shared…" (8). In other words, in the context of performance art, spectators, who in more traditional artistic settings, such as museums, formed a public defined by the Kantian disinterest, now come to form a community defined by affect and interest.

This becomes apparent in early performance artistic practices and the "participatory aspects of the protest culture of the sixties and seventies" (Ward 8). Ward claims that "performance art instantiates the subject as radically embodied" (9). The "presence of the artist's body emerged through interaction with and between audience members", and for this

[21] Although Ward offers an interesting perspective on the notion of community in performance art through Habermas' discussion of the public sphere, I will not explore further this idea in my thesis. For more, see Ward's "Introduction: Reimaging the Audience".

KAROLINA LAMPROU

reason there are, as the title of the book suggests, "no innocent bystanders", as each work always depends on what we "tolerate in the name of art" and what we allow to happen (Ward 10, 4). Ward seems to agree with the artist Chris Burden that the audience is formed by both "primary" audiences, that is the people who are actually present in the performance, and "secondary" audiences, i.e. the people who "would read about it later" or become witness of a work through photographic and video material (Ward 12). For this reason, Ward maintains, "performance, with its documentation, projects a virtual audience (or public, or community) across time" (12).

This is how I utilise the term community in my own thesis: the goal of the performances I am discussing is precisely to create a kind of community. This comes in contrast to theatre performances that, traditionally, affect the members of the audience individually. In other words, the term as I use it refers not only to the members of the audience who intentionally witness a live work, but to anyone who accidentally finds himself/herself witnessing a performance, anyone who becomes acquainted with a performance through its documentation, and even anyone who reads, hears, or writes about a performance. What I argue then is that the experience of performance art is not limited to the individual watching it live but it involves a virtual community of people bound together through affect and interest, through collective participation in the performance. Following Ward, I disagree with Phelan who argues that performance "honors the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have an experience of value which leaves no visible trace afterward" (*Unmarked* 149). I strongly believe in the aforementioned existence of "secondary audiences" that consist of the people who become acquainted with the performance after its end, through the documentation that is often available, in the form of videos, photos, and articles or reviews. These elements are precisely the "visible trace" that remains.

With regard to the term society, I will use Agamben's notion of the term, who criticises contemporary Western technocapitalist society and the alienating effect that contemporary conditions of existence has on people. This idea is discussed extensively in Agamben's *The Man Without Content,* where the philosopher offers a scathing critique of the status of modern art in Western society, comparing it with the function of art in the past. In contrast to contemporary art's role in society, Agamben envisions a kind of society where art holds a more interventionary and effective role. In this context, he draws on the Ancient Greek model, where art occupied a central role, providing a common space in which artists and the rest of the citizens conversed in equality.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

In particular, Agamben discusses two important splits that have become determining for the alienation of modern art from society, attributing to it a nihilistic status. The first split Agamben discusses is that of the artist from his material/artwork, i.e. the split from the entire experience of the artwork. Agamben chastises the modern artist due to the fact that, in his attempt to produce a great masterpiece, he produces an artwork with no meaning. This is because the artist, as Agamben explains, has become so obsessed with the idea of producing a self-reflective work that his work emerges out of "the nothingness of expression" (*The Man Without Content* 35). The second split, which for the philosopher is the most radical, is the split between the artist and the spectator, or else, between genius and taste (*The Man Without Content* 16). The passive stance of the modern spectators helps the rise of false geniuses, which is harmful for art. The spectator, by holding the position of a mere observer, cannot look beyond the spectacle in front of him/her. Therefore s/he cannot communicate with the artist and truly understand the importance of the artist's medium. This, in a way, encourages the artist to produce more false masterpieces, hence, art transforms into its shadow, namely, non-art. In Agamben's words: "Wherever the critic encounters art, he brings it back to its opposite, dissolving it in non-art; wherever he exercises his reflection, he brings with him nonbeing and shadow, as though he had no other means to worship art than the celebration of a kind of black mass in honor of the *deus inversus*, the inverted god, of non-art" (*The Man Without Content* 29).

Agamben suggests that the problem with art in Western society began when art was no longer seen as the manifestation of the divine. Instead, it has become a matter of critical taste which, for Agamben, reflects the "radical alienation" of experience (*The Man Without Content* 30). This is because the spectator, at the sight of art, chooses to make a critical judgement that derives from the fact that he "sees himself as other in the work of art", i.e., he sees "his own self in the form of absolute alienation and he can possess himself only inside this split" (*The Man Without Content* 24). For Agamben, the experience of the artwork should be a shared experience between the artist and the spectator. In Western societies, however, taste belongs to the spectator and genius to the artist. Taste in its fullness, as the philosopher explains, is "separate from the principle of creation; but without genius, taste becomes a pure reversal, that is, the very principle of perversion" (*The Man Without Content* 16).

Agamben refers to the function of pre-modern art as "the shared space in which all men, artists and non-artists, come together in living unity" (*The Man Without Content* 36). It is precisely this "shared concrete space of the work of art" that dissolves, the philosopher notes (*The Man Without Content* 37). For Agamben, the artist should live "in unity with his

KAROLINA LAMPROU

material" and not place his "creative subjectivity" above the material and the artwork (Agamben, *Without Content* 24). Only in this way will the spectator be able to see the highest truth in the artwork, a truth that is not mediated by "aesthetic representation" which he cannot really possess, and which he can take possession of "only through the reflection in the magic mirror of his taste" (Agamben, *Without Content* 24). For Agamben, the modern spectator reflects Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel's subject of "pure culture", a subject that Hegel discusses in the figure of Rameau's nephew. Rameau's nephew is described by the philosopher as being alienated from himself, without the ability to *grasp* real substance, i.e. "the highest truth of his being in the world" (*The Man Without Content* 24). Due to this, he is only concerned with social and cultural hypocrisy.

What is also very problematic for Agamben is the function of the art collector whom he sees as removing the art object from its context, hence the use of art in society. The act of including artwork in a collection of accumulated products attributes an exchange value to the artwork which, as the philosopher notes, is analogous to an "alienation value". As a result, the artworks lose their usefulness and the "ethico-political significance with which tradition had endowed them" (*The Man Without Content* 65). "Loss of tradition means that the past has lost its transmissibility, and so long as no new way has been found to enter into a relation with it, it can only be the object of accumulation from now on", Agamben explains (*The Man Without Content* 66). He then concludes his argument with a reference to Walter Benjamin's *Angelus Novus* (angel of history), whom he compares to the melancholy angel of aesthetics. Agamben's angel of aesthetics, just like Benjamin's angel of history, remains lost because of man's inability to settle the conflict between the old and the new. What Agamben proposes as a solution to this conflict is the refusal of culture as an autonomous sphere, a task that the artist needs to take on, by restoring art's function, hence its usefulness, within society. For this to happen, the splits he describes between the artist and the artwork and the artist and the spectator need to be healed.

In the 2012 conference, "Biopolitics, Society and Performance", which took place in Trinity College, Dublin, Agamben discussed, among others, the function of performance in artistic production and, in effect, society. In his speech, "The Archaeology of the Work of Art", the philosopher explains how "the performance and living praxis of the artist have tended to replace what we were accustomed to consider as a "work". For Agamben, this is a positive development insofar as the artwork is not reduced to an "activity without a work", for which, however, "artists and dealers continue to demand a price…" (Agamben, *Creation and Anarchy* 3). What is important with regard to performance art is that the artist is not really the possessor of his work. The artwork is, in fact, a common process in which both

KAROLINA LAMPROU

the artist and the spectator are participants. His 2019 book, *Creation and Anarchy: The Work of Art and the Religion of Capitalism*, includes the chapter, "Archaeology of the Work of Art", based on the 2012 paper. Agamben finds the concept "work" problematic in the sense that the notion of art should go beyond "the work and demands to be realized not in a work but in life (the Situationists accordingly intended to produce not works but situations" (*Creation and Anarchy* 3). Agamben relates this idea to the status of art in Ancient Greece that provided a shared space between artists and non-artists. At the same time, this is important for my own argument on the importance of performance art as reclaiming the role of art in the context of a spectacularised, capitalist society. On this, I will elaborate further in Chapter 1 and Chapter 5.

<u>Overview of Chapters</u>

In this thesis, I will use a theoretical approach to performance art in order to delineate its trajectory and foreground primarily the ethical and the political concerns that have a) motivated and sustained this art form, and b) determined its goals, function, and nature. What follows as the first chapter of this thesis is an attempt to understand the reasons that may have sparked the emergence of performance art, as a return to the body, or, in Hal Foster's words, the real. For this reason, I find it important to start with the French philosopher Guy Debord's criticism of the society of the spectacle, in his work *Society and the Spectacle*. Debord specifically argues that modern art and its discourse, the kind of discourse Dadaism and Surrealism adopted, has proved inadequate to counteract the society of the spectacle that is epitomised, as Giorgio Agamben argues in reference to Debord's work, by the "transformation of life into a spectacular phantasmagoria", in which isolation prevails over communication (*The Coming Community* 67).

With a view to elaborating on the contingencies that paved the way towards performance art, as a by-product of aesthetic/cultural postmodernism, I will also draw on Agamben's analysis in his early work *The Man Without Content* (1994), where he focuses on the crisis of the modern art world in relation to the institution of the museum. As mentioned above, Agamben has been significantly influenced by Debord's *Society and the Spectacle*, which the two of them discussed, after its publication, in their epistolary exchanges. Agamben not only chastises the modern artist on account of the ineffectiveness of his/her art, but he also accuses the spectator for taking up a passive stance towards the artwork. Agamben argues that contemporary art has lost its meaning, while he treats the figure of the artist as "the man without content". Agamben is very critical of the institution of the museum, which he considers as an ineffective apparatus that removes art from the use

KAROLINA LAMPROU

of "man" and reduces it to mere spectacle. Although the Situationists were not successful, in practice, in challenging the spectacle, I find Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* very useful in offering a framework within which we might understand the turn to the body in post-1960s art. In order, however, to offer a better understanding of this turn, I also draw on Fredric Jameson, who discusses the various conditions that contributed to the emergence of new art forms, such as the Happenings.

Foster's work, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde*, is of seminal importance for the development of my argument, regarding the issues and needs that enabled the emergence of performance art in the 1960s. Foster provides a fresh reading of pop-art and readymades, which he refuses to see as an embrace of the simulacral commodity-sign. He argues that such works are neither referential nor simulacral but rather expose capitalism as traumatic realism due to the fact that they uncover the real in "*un*canny things" (Foster, *The Return of the Real* 15). Drawing on Sigmund Freud's and Jacques Lacan's theory on trauma, Foster argues that repetition in Andy Warhol's work reduces and eventually eliminates the traumatic object's significance, enabling the defensive mechanisms of the individual which allow the restoration of the symbolic function. Therefore, these works stage "the return of a traumatic encounter with the real, a thing that resists the symbolic, that is not a signifier at all…" (Foster, *The Return of the Real* 138). The same applies to the illusionism in works such as Cindy Sherman's grotesque photographs, where the setting is so excessive in its attempt to cover up the traumatic real that it "cannot help but indicate the real" (Foster, *The Return of the Real* 138). In my view, the art forms Foster is discussing have opened up a space for performance art as an art movement which aims at restoring art's effectiveness in spectacularised society. Hence, the critique against the capitalist society of the spectacle, put forward by the traumatic realism entailed in the above-mentioned artistic practices, will help me point to the needs that stimulated the return to the real, which are the same needs addressed by performance art.

The first section of the second chapter of my thesis focuses on the Viennese Actionists, whose early performance artistic practices were premised on the cathartic function of rituals aimed at counteracting the extreme forms of violence, the monstrosities and injustices that people were subjected to during and after World War II. I will try to elaborate on the fact that such ritualised performances had a transgressive and, at the same time, restorative function, as they aimed at redefining the sense of community. Due to the fact that the Viennese Actionists were active in the art scene on an individual level, while they became known as a group after they stopped working together, their views on "community" are not identical. What they all seem to share, however, is a strong

KAROLINA LAMPROU

resentment towards the social order of the time in Austria, that suppressed any form of non-productive, non-profit-oriented activity. What they also share is the idea that human community could be cleansed through ritual violence on both an individual and a collective level. Yet, due to the extremely violent nature of their works, the artists did not succeed in communicating a convincing vision of a transformed community. Still, they have managed to pave the way for many contemporary artists who are engaging in less controversial manifestations of this art form.

I have chosen Ron Athey as the main focus of the second part of my second chapter because his artistic practices often reflect those of the Viennese Actionists, to whom he even dedicates some of his works. Athey's work exemplifies both the convergence with and the disjunction from the Viennese Actionists' tradition, the main departure arising from the fact that, in contrast to those of his predecessors, his performances take place within an institutional artistic framework, for example, within the setting of a gallery. My analysis of Athey's work is facilitated by the deployment of George Bataille's understanding of the sacred moment and the transgressive function this entails, which, for the philosopher, is constitutive of a non-homogeneous community. Bataille is strongly against the capitalist principles of modern bourgeois society that require its citizens to be solely engaged in productive social and economic activity. For Bataille, as his writings illustrate, the practices of destruction, expenditure, and decomposition are important processes for the rise of a "non-utilitarian" and "acephalic" community that opposes both capitalist and fascist ideological structures. As I will demonstrate, Athey considers rituals and, in effect, the sacred moment, as essential constituents for the structuring and success of his performances, which encompass elements from Dionysian festivals. Athey, reflecting on his performances, refers to them as "modern primitive rituals", which aim at reclaiming the HIV infected body (Johnson, "Does a Bloody Towel Represent the Ideals of the American People?" 68). As I will try to show, Athey's work is both personal and political: personal, with regard to his artistic endeavour to come to terms with his traumatic childhood, and political because, as an HIV positive, homosexual male, he attempts to change the audience's reactions towards the infected, abjected, queer body. As Athey repeatedly notes, the acephalous figure, which is a symbol of radical transformation, has provided a great source of inspiration for the artist, whose work is often presented as an interplay between eroticism and death. In exploring Bataille's concept of the sacred, Athey also works towards the vision of an alternative "social" body.

Both Bataille's philosophical discourse and Athey's extreme artistic practices often raise questions about the successful sublimation of violence and traumatic experiences.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

For this reason, the following chapter, Chapter 3, turns to Julia Kristeva's work on the abject, which will permit me to approach particular performance art practices as a form of symbolic sacrifice. I have specifically chosen to discuss Gina Pane's, Marina Abramović's, and Franko B's work. In this chapter, I will focus on the artists' endeavour to expose and sublimate personal and communal experiences of abjection. Their aim, I will argue, is to re-channel these experiences towards a reclamation of embodied existence in all its vulnerability and suffering. In my analysis of Pane's and Franko B's work, I will attempt to demonstrate how the experience of abjection continues to haunt both the construction of female subjectivity and representations of the feminised and/or homosexual body. In line with the current of thought underlying the artists' work under discussion, my analysis throws into relief their conviction that women and homosexual people remain privileged victims in a multitude of contexts. In their work, then, these artists attempt to sensitise spectators to this victimisation. My discussion of Abramović's work, on the other hand, does not have to do with the abjection of targeted populations but with how the artist activates the subversive potential of the abject experience in order to sublimate her own past traumas.

To adequately explore the ethical dimension of performance art, in Chapter 4, I turn to what appears to be a Levinasian trend in performance art, one centred on a notion of community based on human vulnerability and response-ability. The Levinasian framework allows me to demonstrate how Regina José Galindo's and Franko B's suffering and exposure of vulnerability in their work might be perceived as a gesture that invites the members of the audience to assume responsibility for the other's pain. In light of existing critiques of Levinas' theorisation of the self as hostage and given the sometimes masochistic nature of such performances, I have chosen to foreground the usefulness of Judith Butler's own appropriation of Levinasian discourse which, inspired by her concern with our common vulnerability, refrains from fetishising victimhood and gives a more balanced account of the ethical relation between self and other.

Due to the fact that the aim of this thesis is to weave together the different threads that make up the complex phenomenon of performance art, an art form encompassing an array of different artistic practices, it is of crucial importance for me to demonstrate its development away from its initial dependence on ritual and concepts of the sacred. In order to achieve a broader analytical scope, in Chapter 5, I will situate the work of Galindo and ORLAN within the theoretical framework of the contemporary philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who is critical of traditional discourses of the sacred and who, by contrast, defines the function of art in terms of profanation. As I will attempt to show, Galindo

KAROLINA LAMPROU

willingly assumes the role of Agamben's infamous protagonist, i.e. the *homo sacer,* concerned as she is with contemporary forms of what Agamben calls the "state of exception". My choice of Agamben's figure of the *homo sacer* in my analysis of Galindo, an artist situated in the Third World, is not coincidental because, for Agamben, the figure of the *homo sacer* reflects the situation of the majority of the Third World population. This is mainly due to the neoliberal policies of the First World, or the democratico-capitalist project as Agamben calls it, that takes advantage of Third World people in order to enhance the capitalist market forces. As the philosopher argues: "Today's democratico-capitalist project of eliminating the poor classes through development not only reproduces within itself the people that is excluded but also transforms the entire population of the Third World into bare life" (*Homo Sacer* 180). Galindo's work focuses precisely on the violence targeting Third World subjects, whose lives are neither respected nor protected.

Finally, in the second part of Chapter 5, I return to my argument in Chapter 1 with regard to performance art as reacting against the commodity culture sustained by our society of the spectacle. To this end, I draw on ORLAN's artistic practice from the 1990s until recently to show how the *use* of art can be reclaimed through artistic practices that invest in the profanatory potential of *play* and *parody*. During these performances ORLAN uses, or rather abuses, ritual in order to open it up to play. As I will argue, by using parody to challenge the religious frameworks within which Western concepts of femininity, identity, and humanity have been shaped, ORLAN's work deactivates the power that is inherent in the sacred by effacing the rite and emptying it out of its mythology.

While what these artists have succeeded in producing so far is admirable, the often violent and/or controversial character of performance art entails a number of risks and dangers, which have concerned scholars in the field on various occasions. For this reason, I find it important to address these concerns in a concluding chapter. The last chapter of my thesis will focus on the limitations of performance art, as well as, the dangers and the risks an artist might be faced with during his/her performance. Moreover, I will investigate the factors leading to the potential failure of the artist to achieve the desired effects in the course of the performance. Given the significance of the role of spectators in my understanding of the nature and effectiveness of performance art, in this chapter, I will turn to problems relating precisely to the concern with creating a sense of community that, as I have suggested, informs the practices of a lot of practitioners in the field. As I will argue, one of the greatest limitations of this kind of art is that it can spur diverse responses, ranging from passive indifference to sadistic enjoyment. This is what I intend to explore in the first section of this chapter, "Under the Gaze of a Sadist". In this section, I will draw

KAROLINA LAMPROU

on psychoanalytic theory, particularly on Lacan's development of Freud's theory on sadistic and masochistic perversion. What I aim to address is, first: the fact that the desires and aims of the artist do not always coincide with those of the audience. Secondly and given the masochistic nature of some performances, I focus on the anxiety caused to the members of the audience, which may prevent them from understanding or being affected by the artist's ethical or political agenda. Finally, I turn my attention to the possible sadistic reactions of members of the audience, which the performance may instigate or enhance. Due to all the above, I will argue, the artist's aim of establishing an affect-based community is, sometimes, a cause destined to failure.

Yet another limitation of performance art relates to the artist's use of the body as the primary material and medium of their art. As I have mentioned, some performance artists use their body in an attempt to expose, disrupt, and challenge social constructions of gender and sexuality. This, however, can prove to be a daunting task since the artist relies on the spectator's reaction and interpretation of their work, which cannot be predicted prior to the actual performance. One could indeed wonder whether artists like Franko B or Abramović succeed in launching a gender politics that challenges entrenched hierarchies by opening up spaces for the marginalised subject, or whether they inadvertently end up restaging its victimisation. In response to these concerns, the second part of this chapter will focus on the body and its fate in performance art by turning to the implications emanating from understandings of the body as 'obsolete' and as a 'mere vehicle' of art. In this part, I will refer to striking examples of misuse of the body in the work of performance artists, such as, Stelarc.

I will conclude my thesis with an overview of the developments that have taken place in the field of performance art during the past decade, paying particular attention to the key practitioners of this art form whose work I have been discussing throughout this thesis. I will also discuss how these developments might be related to the trends of previous decades, especially those pertaining to the performances of my primary focus. Finally, I will refer to the current tendencies in the field and briefly discuss how the future of performance art seems to be shaping.

As a synopsis of this introduction, I re-iterate the overall argument and aims of this thesis: My analysis of selected performance works staged throughout the history of performance art allows me to evaluate, from a 21st century perspective, the ethical and political concerns that have motivated some key practitioners of this art form. In this thesis, I will therefore discuss how these concerns have shaped a common vision among many different artistic practices; a vision in the context of which art's function in late twentieth

century Western society is reclaimed and its purpose redefined beyond the mere aesthetic enjoyment of the artwork. As I will demonstrate, the vision that seems to have shaped the emergence and development of performance art is grounded in the embodied experience shared between the artist and the spectator, an experience that aims at developing an ethical and political conscience in all participants involved.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Chapter 1
The Turn to the Body in Art Theory and post 1960s Art Practice

In the first chapter of this thesis, I will try to offer an overview of the socio-political changes which also affected the art world and contributed to the emergence of "live art" practices which I have discussed in the introduction of this thesis. To this end, I will first draw on Guy Debord and Giorgio Agamben, focusing on their critique of the capitalist society of the spectacle, and their theorisation of the need to restore art's effectiveness within society. I will connect these arguments to Hal Foster's analysis of what he calls "a return of the real", manifested, for example, with the repetitive images in Andy Warhol's work or Cindy Sherman's grotesque photographs. Finally, I will turn to Fredric Jameson's discussion of the "end of art", an end he connects with the emergence of "happenings", which, as explained in the introduction, are closely affiliated with the early stages of performance art.

It is important to locate the genesis of performance art within the context of the colossal dimensions of a crisis in socio-political and economic relations in the 1960s.[22] It is in this context, following Debord, that a new spirit of capitalism emerged along with its by-products, consumerist society and a social obsession with images. Debord, in his most celebrated philosophical work, *The Society of the Spectacle,* meditates on the catastrophic effects of such an image-oriented way of life, and its dependency on the representation of what once was experienced as real. Debord's book, which consists of 221 theses, constitutes a manifesto that criticises the development of capitalism as the taking over by commodities of autonomous human life. Therefore, as the philosopher argues, what consumer culture has produced is a society that has no interest in the essence of things but in their value-invested image.

[22] These include the emergence of movements claiming the rights of homosexuals, women's rights, or movements struggling against race discrimination, and the new left antiwar movements. Also, one needs to mention the Cold War, which started in 1947 and ended in 1991, and the Vietnam War (1955-1975), which gave rise to several anti-war movements. Other prominent political events which established a wider mode of contestation and experimentation in the arts include the assassination of John F. Kennedy as well as student and new-left protests in the United States and France. In the United States, new taxes were introduced to secure economic growth while unemployment levels were considered to be high. The civil rights movement that started in the mid-50s was still active until the late 1960s. At the same time, at the beginning of the 1960s second-wave feminists were engaged in various protests and other activities to demand their rights while the gay rights movement became more prominent by late 1960s. For more information on the events that shaped the 1960s, see Jo Freeman's *Social Movements of the Sixties and the Seventies* and Gerald DeGroot's *The Sixties Unplugged: A Kaleidoscopic History of a Disorderly Decade.*

KAROLINA LAMPROU

In his turn, Agamben, whose work was immensely influenced by Debord's, glosses the importance of Debord's intervention. Interestingly, the latter's *The Society of the Spectacle* constituted the object of a long epistolary exchange between the two philosophers. In Agamben's *Means Without End,* which he dedicates to Debord, the philosopher ponders on the question: "how can thought collect Debord's inheritance today, in the age of the complete triumph of the spectacle?" (82). Agamben employs Debord's maxims regarding the spectacle to introduce his own political theory on how modern spectacular society alienates and represses people, a theory I will draw on extensively in Chapter 5. Foster, in line with Debord and Agamben, also describes contemporary society as "an imaginary world of a fantasy captured by consumerism" (*The Return of the Real* 166). According to his reading, cultural and aesthetic postmodernism aggressively invades this imaginary world, in order to force the return of a (traumatic) real, redefining experience in terms of trauma. "[A] despair about the persistent AIDS crisis, invasive disease and death, systemic poverty and crime, a destroyed welfare state" are only few of the forces that provoked a "contemporary concern with trauma and abjection", Foster notes (*The Return of the Real* 166). The art critic traces the return of the traumatic real in abject art, as presented in the diseased, damaged, and violated body of the postmodern subject which functions as an important witness of truth, offering "necessary testimonials against power" (*The Return of the Real* 166). Foster, therefore, argues that the "return of the real" is caused by the re-activation of traumatic events of the past, experienced through art. More specifically, Foster dismisses critiques of neo-avant-garde art forms as merely repetitive or imitative. Instead, he maintains that they show the effects of past trauma in order to produce new encounters and connections between past memories and present events.

In all these accounts, neo-avant-garde art forms, such as pop art, move centre stage for their ability to reflect and comment on the new spirit of capitalism. In particular, Debord and Agamben hold these art forms partially accountable for blurring the line dividing artworks from commodities. Establishing a dialogue with Foster, at a later stage in this chapter, I will depart from both Debord and Agamben on account of their polemic against the neo-avant-garde art forms which they consider too superficial or as merely reproducing the consumerist spirit. Foster argues instead that art forms such as readymades and pop art do not merely reproduce the spirit of capitalism but actually take a critical stance towards capitalism and consumerism: as such, they offer an encounter with the traumatic reality that defines the late 1980s and early 1990s, bringing about a new interpretation of our contemporary situation. This is how,

KAROLINA LAMPROU

according to Foster, a new interpretation of the postmodern condition of art becomes possible.

The development of my argument requires some background information on the Situationist International Organisation (SI), which offered a scathing critique of capitalist society, and the concept of *détournement*. Specifically, *détournement* is a technique that involves "the reuse of preexisting artistic elements in a new ensemble" (*Internationale Situationniste #3* "Détournement as Negation and Prelude"). This technique was developed by the Lettrist International group, during the 1950s. The remaining members of this group eventually formed the Situationist International. Debord was a founding member of this organisation, which was active from 1957 until 1972. The SI mainly consisted of avant-garde artists and theorists. Even though they were often associated with anarchism, this is an association that Debord himself denies, preferring to define the organisation as an "anti-hierarchical body of anti-specialists" (*Internationale Situationniste #5* "The Situationist Frontier"). While sharing Karl Marx's negative sentiments towards capitalism, the Situationists did not believe in a revolution on behalf of the working class as a solution to the on-going consumerism that was gradually destroying society. As mentioned above, their polemic revolves around the concept of *détournement*. According to SI, *détournement* can be "minor" or "deceptive". Minor *détournement* involves insignificant and everyday objects from which accumulated meaning is removed through placing them in a new context. Deceptive *détournement* constitutes the assignment of new meanings to important cultural elements, for instance, to significant and famous political, philosophical, literary, and art works, such as "a slogan by Saint-Just or a film sequence from Eisenstein" (Debord, "A User's Guide to Détourment").

> Détournement is thus first of all a negation of the value of the previous organization of expression. It arises and grows increasingly stronger in the historical period of the decomposition of artistic expression. But at the same time, the attempts to reuse the "detournable bloc" as material for other ensembles express the search for a vaster construction, a new genre of creation at a higher level. (*Internationale Situationniste #3* "Détournement as Negation and Prelude")

The Situationists argued that modern capitalist society was a society of "alienation, totalitarian control and passive spectacular consumption". (Debord, "The Situationists and the New Forms of Action in Art and Politics"). What the Situationists essentially aspired to, "as partisans of a certain future of culture and of life", was a

KAROLINA LAMPROU

completely reformed society, based on the model of "unitary urbanism" or "unitary milieu", where meaning and reality would no longer be mediated by the images that sustain the society of the spectacle (*Internationale Situationniste #3* "Détournement as Negation and Prelude").[23] Debord's polemic is against the development of historical societies, i.e. societies defined by the modern conditions of production, which end up being "divided into classes", formed by the social division of labour (thesis 128). Due to this division, people within capitalist society, Debord argues, have become alienated, and have ended up competing with each other. This is because, according to the philosopher, capitalist modes of production, instead of promoting collective labour, isolate people. At the same time, commodities are attributed a certain value that does not reflect reality but the value of what reality "represents". Images, therefore, have become reality. In this context, art and culture have become instruments for turning "*being* into *having*", and "*having* into *appearing*" (thesis 17). To elaborate on the notion of the spectacle, as defined by Debord, it is of pivotal importance to bear in mind that the spectacle does not merely refer to a system of images, but to "a social relationship among people, mediated by images" (thesis 4). The spectacle, then, according to Debord, has become even more real than reality itself, with the latter being subsumed by or transformed into representation.

For Debord, the artworks exhibited in museums are mere "collections of souvenirs" (thesis 189). Due to this, as the philosopher argues, the current state of modern art is that of mere spectacle, a situation that reduces all works of art to commodities. Debord argues that the historical knowledge accumulated on art and the recognition of its value has become possible on account of the acceptance of the fact that the art world has come to its end. Debord goes so far as to trace the reason for art's end in the loss of communication characterising capitalist society. He writes:

> Once this 'collection of souvenirs' of art history becomes possible, it is also the *end of the world of art*. In this age of museums, when artistic communication can no longer exist, all the former moments of art can be admitted equally because they no longer suffer from the loss of their specific conditions of communication in the current *general* loss of the conditions of communication. (thesis 189)

[23] The Situationists envisioned a kind of society based on collectivity and determined by "the combined use of arts and techniques" that would provide alternative and experimental ways of living, against the society of the spectacle (*Internationale Situationniste #1* "Definitions").

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Debord further notes that historical art "always *arrived too late*, speaking *to others* of what was lived without real dialogue", due to "the loss of the language of communication" (thesis 187). That is, modern art cannot produce authentic communication since it no longer constitutes "a common language", but merely represents "the non-lived" (thesis 185). This is because, for Debord, life in modern capitalist conditions is a mere accumulation of spectacles and modern art is no exception to this. In order to resist modern art's representational character, modern artists, Debord argues, should treat art not as commodity but as an authentic means of communication. Thus, artworks should "be a critical reflection of the 'society of the spectacle'" (Kauffman 285). The philosopher goes on to suggest that "[a]rt in its period of dissolution —a movement of negation striving for its own transcendence within a historical society where history is not yet directly lived—is at once an art of change and the purest expression of the impossibility of change" (thesis 190). Art, therefore, should not fall in the trap of representation but strive to oppose the spectacle by precisely "speaking with the others". Art, in other words, needs "to become the work of everyone" (Kauffman 286).

Along these lines, Surrealism, which developed from the avant-garde movement Dadaism, as Debord notes, appears to produce nothing more than a series of attempts "to assert a new way of life and a reactionary flight from reality" ("Contribution to the Debate" 67), forming in this way "the last great assault of the revolutionary proletarian movement" (thesis 191). As the philosopher argues, Dadaism and Surrealism failed to revolt against the society of the spectacle, due to their "one-sidedness". In particular, "Dadaism wanted *to abolish art without realizing it;* surrealism sought *to realize art without suppressing it*", thus failing to recognise that "the suppression and the realization of art are inseparable aspects of a single supersession of art" (thesis 191). Importantly, Dadaism presented itself not as art but precisely as anti-art and hence as a practice that excludes art, as Marcel Duchamp put it in 1913, when he produced his first readymade. The reason for Dadaism's failure, according to Debord, was its fixation on socio-political aspirations and goals. Surrealism, on the other hand, focused on a psychoanalytic perspective of art, which would make possible the expression of the unconscious as the means for social revolution, as the philosopher goes on to argue. In Debord's critique, only the combination of these two movements can lead to revolt. Art can, or indeed, must be at the same time destructive and constructive while expressing both political and personal aspirations. As a result, the psychoanalytic journey that surrealist paintings explore should be seen within the context of our socio-political geography.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

After his elaborate analysis of the end of the art world, Debord reaches the conclusion that the spectacle cannot be transcended by any idea: What ideas can merely achieve is to transcend other ideas, a transcendence though that preserves the spectacle as it is. Developing a form of self-consciousness against the spectacle is an urgent need, according to Debord, and will help people produce "a practical force into motion" (thesis 203). What Debord emphasises is a real loss of communication, not only with regard to art but among individuals in general. This is mostly due to the fact that modern culture, which includes art, is not part of socio-political life but only serves in re-producing and re-appropriating false ideas that reduce people to a state of appearing and not having. Due to this, experience in the society of the spectacle has been reduced to a mere commodity which renders individuals passive observers of what is being presented to them. What individuals, then, really experience is merely the images that the spectacle offers, which, essentially, prevent any real form of experience. As Debord postulates, only if the self-negation of culture (as a separate sphere) is actualised, "the meaning of an insufficiently meaningful world" will be restored (thesis 183). For meaning to be restored though art and culture need to become again part of people's everyday life instead of being isolated in a separate sphere.

Debord's influence is all the more evident in Agamben's first work *The Man Without Content*, which was written in 1999. In this work, the philosopher puts forward a critique of the capitalist society of the spectacle, which has produced the need for the reclamation of art's potent function within society. The problematic condition of art, and at the same time the potential of its power, are most certainly an issue of concern for Agamben. As extensively explained in the introduction of this thesis, the philosopher, especially in *The Man Without Content*, deals extensively with the figure of the artist, the meaning of art, as well as the crisis that the art world is currently facing. As Agamben points out, a monetary value has been attributed to art, while the artist has become a commercialised product. This is due to the explosion of museums, large private collections, and art fairs. As a result, the historicisation and commercialisation of contemporary art has gradually compromised its social function. Art, therefore, along with the accompanied ideological illusionary framework that it is situated in, is currently heading towards its own self-abolition and dissolution.

Agamben's critical stance towards the orientation of contemporary art is clearly outlined at the outset of the first chapter, where he refers to Friedrich Nietzsche's critique of Immanuel Kant's definition of the beautiful as an experience "which gives us pleasure without interest" (*Man Without Content* 1). Kant, in his

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Critique of Judgement, supports that, in order for aesthetic judgement to be practiced appropriately, we need to be disinterested in the object's own existence, experiencing pleasure in its presence solely because it is beautiful. This is an aesthetic conception that Agamben, following Nietzsche, finds most problematic. As Agamben explains, Kant approaches art and the beautiful from the viewpoint of the spectator, failing in this way to consider the role and the perspective of the artist. Agamben's definition of the beautiful, by contrast, foregrounds personal experience. According to him, art involves "an abundance of vivid authentic experiences, desires, surprises, and delights" (*Man Without Content* 1). Yet, in his discussion of art, Agamben warns against privileging the figure of the artist. If this occurs, Agamben argues, it will be catastrophic for the power and influence that art can have on individuals, hence on society as a whole. Driven by these reflections, Agamben puts forward a staggering analogy, comparing the figure of the artist to that of a "Terrorist", an analogy developed with reference to Plato's banning of poets and artists from his ideal republic. Clearly, "Terror" for Agamben has a very different meaning to Plato's "divine terror" (*Man Without Content* 4). As Agamben explains, Plato considered poets and artists dangerous and powerful enough to destroy the city, due to art's impact on the soul. For Agamben, however, the artist becomes a "Terrorist" in his attempt to produce a great masterpiece. During this process, he loses any connection with the real world, since he becomes obsessed with the idea of producing a self-reflexive work that eventually ends up representing nothing familiar or meaningful. What he depicts can only be related to the artist's world, hence it has no connection with the wider world shared with others. For this reason, the spectator is reduced to the position of mere observer and, as Debord would put it, cannot look beyond the spectacle in front of him/her. Therefore, the spectator is not able to communicate with the artist, truly understand the importance of the artist's medium, or intervene in the production of meaning in any way.

The communicative conundrum or even the dead-end that art has reached, Agamben reminds us, may also be understood in light of the German philosopher G.W.F. Hegel, who has noted that art is losing its ability to satisfy our spiritual needs not only due to the artist's failure, but also due to our fixation on the critical framework informing our approach to art. Art has become inseparable from the philosophy that seeks to explicate and frame it, losing in this way any communicative function and the impact it once had on the spectators. Hegel explains that we no longer practise aesthetic judgement when we are faced with a work of art, but we become obsessed about whether it is art, non-art, or false art. As a result, there is no genuine critical reflection

KAROLINA LAMPROU

on the artwork, on the part of the spectator, because spectators are only concerned with the shadow of art, hence with non-art. Agamben argues that, according to Hegel, art remains for us a thing of the past, not in the sense that art is dead, but in so far as it "has ceased to be the supreme need of the spirit" (qtd. in Agamben, *Man Without Content* 53). Even though Agamben acknowledges that, when Hegel came to this realisation, a large number of acclaimed masterpieces were being produced and nascent forms of art and aesthetic movements were emerging in the forefront of the art scene, he sees much truth in Hegel's argument regarding the self-annulling character of the art produced when Hegel was writing. Hegel's claims remind us of Debord's argument, who, as I have noted, aptly points out that what marked the beginning of art's end is art's failure to produce a common language of social interaction.

Agamben, in his discussion of the self-negation of modern art, expresses a clear affinity with Hegel's analysis of "destructive irony". As he understands it, destructive irony is a negative freedom from pre-given values and determinations that posits the individual in such an absolute position that it isolates him/her, and, essentially, has a catastrophic effect on his life. By contrast, in the Socratic constructive irony, the individual does not take an absolute position, hence s/he is benefited, since constructive irony "limits, finitizes and circumscribes and thereby yields truth, actuality, content" (Kierkegaard 326). This is because the individual does not conform to any pre-given values and ideas hence, s/he is not limited or restricted by these. In a similar spirit, Agamben claims that destruction manifests itself as the destiny of contemporary art, "a negation that negates itself, a self-annihilating nothing" (Agamben, *Man Without Content* 56). This is why Agamben perceives the modern artist as distant from the content of his/her artwork, a fact that also alienates the spectator from the experience of art. In Agamben's words, the artist has become "the man without content, who has no other identity than a perpetual emerging out of the nothingness of expression and no other ground than this incomprehensible station on this side of himself" (*Man Without Content* 55).

One may also observe Agamben's indebtedness to Debord's account of the era of museums. According to Agamben, the present problem with art results from its inability to be linked with the real world, partly because of the *Museum Theatrum* that positions art within the context of aesthetics and art criticism. This, Agamben argues, "throws it back into the pure inessence of its principle" and transforms art into non-art (*Man Without Content* 57). Simultaneously, the artworks become their shadow. The current crisis, therefore, as the philosopher argues, is mainly due to the fact that art

KAROLINA LAMPROU

limits itself within the context of the museum, which gives a "temporal and aesthetic dimension" to the art world. Agamben claims that in museums spectators take a step backward and deal with the shadow of art in order to regain familiarity with art as "an object of rational inquiry" (Agamben, *Man Without Content* 48).

Agamben's discussion illuminates a facet of his analysis of the negation of art, which is inextricably bound with the role of the spectator. The philosopher's claim that the passivity of the spectator, who merely holds the position of observer, disables him from going beyond the spectacle is reiterated side by side with the idea of art's self-annulment. Crucially, this is what points to the necessity for "praxis", which will introduce an artistic language with a true communicative function, a language that does not merely represent the current society of the spectacle. In the absence of such language, what we witness nowadays —and in recent decades— is the end of culture which is expressed by art through the representation of what Debord calls "non-life".

What overwhelms the art world from the perspective of both philosophers is what Karl Marx has defined as "commodity fetishism", namely, the transformation of social relationships into a mere exchange of commodities. Therefore, just like the use value of commodities is emptied out, artworks have become commodities and are approached as industrial products in the context of the institution of the museum. Inspired by Walter Benjamin, Agamben maintains that our lives have been given a phantasmagoric quality, subjected to the domination of the commodity form (*Stanzas* 38). Agamben goes further to argue that this phantasmagoric quality is sustained and intensified with the emergence of "two hybrid [art]forms" of the 20th century: i.e. readymades, which appeared in around 1915, and pop art that came into the scene during the 1950s (*Man Without Content* 63). These two forms of art, as the philosopher argues, oscillate between art and non-art, since they can be considered neither art nor industrial products. Therefore, Agamben concludes that readymades and pop art head "toward nothingness, and in this way they are able to possess-themselves-in-their-end" (Agamben, *Man Without Content* 67). More explicitly, readymades are described by the philosopher as taking the product out of its context and placing it within an aesthetic dimension, while pop art does the reverse, hence it is transforming the artwork to an industrial product. Agamben argues that the emergence of these two forms of art addresses "the need for authenticity in technical production" and the need for the "reproducibility of artistic creation" (*Man Without Content* 39). However, these forms of art, or as Agamben calls them of "non-art", are unable to produce an authentic artwork, due to the fact that readymades require a very limited artistic intervention, while the objects

KAROLINA LAMPROU

of pop art are the result of a superficial and profit-oriented culture. Consequently, art cannot identify with any real content and all that remains is the "alienated essence of the work of art", which presents reality as nothingness (Agamben, *Man Without Content* 67). Agamben remarks that the availability of the works of art in mass numbers for our aesthetic enjoyment within the museum resembles raw or merchandised materials in warehouses, while the spectators function as passive aesthetic consumers. The philosopher, then, draws the conclusion that "in the 'ready-made' and in pop art, nothing comes into presence if not the 'privation' of a potentiality that cannot find its reality anywhere" (*Man Without Content* 64). What Agamben notes is that these forms of art are empty, without real content, just like the artist who produces them.

In line with Debord and Agamben, Jameson, in his famous work *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, which was published in 1991, explains postmodernism as the "consumption of sheer commodification as a process" (ix). Jameson, maintaining a Marxist perspective, notes that culture has dilated throughout the social realm, due to the expansion of the sphere of commodities, which is postmodernism's sphere. Due to this, the philosopher argues, culture "has become a product in its own right; the market has become a substitute for itself and fully as much a commodity as any of the items it includes within itself" (*Postmodernism* ix). Similarly to Debord, Jameson notes that "exchange value has been generalized to the point at which the very memory of use value is effaced" (*Postmodernism* 17). Warhol seems to interest Jameson, whom he considers a key postmodernist artist. While he acknowledges that Warhol's Coca-Cola and Campbell soup images, "which explicitly foreground the commodity fetishism of a transition to late capital, *ought* to be powerful and critical political statements", he implies that they fail to do this, doubting the effectiveness of "political or critical art in the postmodern period of late capital" (*Postmodernism* 8). This is particularly evident when he goes on to compare Warhol's shoes, for example, with Van Gogh's still-life paintings of shoes, describing the former as pinpointing the "emergence of a new kind of flatness or depthlessness" (*Postmodernism* 8). Instead, the role of the postmodernist artist, he argues, should be pedagogical: i.e. to create what he calls "cognitive maps" in order "to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralised by our spatial as well as our social confusion" (*Postmodernism* 91). To this end, Foster, in line with Jameson, argues that "the political artist today might be urged not to represent given representations and generic forms but to investigate the processes and apparatuses which control them" (*Recordings: Art Spectacle,*

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Cultural Politics 153). This is how the artist can create art which is, in fact, resisting and not merely representational, an idea that Foster firmly supports. The art historian and art critic shares Jameson's argument that there is a "breakdown in the old structural opposition of the cultural and economic in the simultaneous 'commodification' of the former and 'symbolisation' of the latter" (*The Return of the Real* 145). Foster, however, does not believe that artistic practice has been reduced to a commodity form, but he notes a homogenisation between economy and culture, i.e. the complete integration of art within political economy. As I will show in the next section, Foster argues against the superficiality of pop art and the subsequent loss of symbolic meaning. Instead, he discusses the artist as a figure of resistance: arguably, the political artist at the time when Foster was writing was not merely trying to represent a situation but, as mentioned above, used their art to offer their own exploration of the apparatuses that determine and control the economic and cultural spheres.

In order to develop his argument, Foster, in *The Return of the Real*, provides a fresh reading of pop art and readymades, refusing to see them as an embrace of the simulacral commodity-sign. On the contrary, he considers such art as having a therapeutic and restorative capacity. To this end, Foster first refers to Roland Barthes' standpoint on pop art, as he develops it in "That Old Thing, Art". According to Barthes' argument, pop art removes any sense or meaning from the image it reproduces. Like Agamben, in his discussion of the simulacral, Barthes considers the artist as a man with no actual depth, as "he is merely the surface of his pictures, no signified, no intention, anywhere" (Barthes 372). Barthes, however, does not consider pop art as merely superficial, but as a practice that oscillates between a revolutionary force that challenges art and an old force that reinforces the popular culture of the period. Hence, as Barthes notes, there are two voices: one saying "This is not Art" and the other claiming "I am Art". The importance of pop art lies in the fact that it does not simply seek to represent an image, but it foregrounds its status as a mere image. As Barthes puts it, "reviled by high art, the copy returns" (370). Copies, or pop objects, therefore, do not merely present something but "signify that they signify nothing", giving prominence to their status as empty signs (Barthes 372). The process of representation is disrupted and, in effect, the object becomes de-symbolised. Yet the "copy" does not just reject the past but "obeys a historical impulse; the appearance of new technical means modifies not only art's form but its very conception" (Barthes 370). What remains, according to Barthes, is the subject "who looks, in the absence of the one who makes" (Barthes 373).

KAROLINA LAMPROU

The phenomenon of pop art has also been the subject of discussion for other theorists and philosophers such as Michel Foucault, Gilles Deleuze, and Jean Baudrillard, who, despite the fact that they discuss pop art from a different perspective, are regarded by Foster as providing, even with variations, merely a simulacral reading of this art movement. For this reason, the art critic considers their readings reductive and/or constraining. Deleuze, for example, by drawing on Nietzsche's idea of reverse Platonism as the ground of modern philosophy, argues that the simulacrum cannot be seen as a mere copy but as holding a power that subverts dichotomies such as model/copy or original/reproduction. [24] Such argumentation resists a mimetic reading of Warholian art, which, instead of representing the real, negates it. The simulacrum effect of such images blurs the distinction between what is real and what representation. As Deleuze argues referring to the 'moment of pop art', "[t]he artificial is always a copy of a copy, which should be pushed *to the point where it changes its nature and is reversed into the simulacrum"* (*The Logic of Sense* 265). Baudrillard also offers an interesting insight, perceiving pop art as being completely fused with the political economy of the time and the consumerist spirit that defines it. Warhol's images, when seen through the lens of Baudrillard's theory, function as commodity signs, which means that they have become the absolute signifiers of the image they portray, completely annulling in this way any relevant context.

Yet there are critics who reject this understanding of pop art. Thomas Crow, for example, argues that images like Warhol's *Electric Chair, 129 Die in Jet, Silver Jumping Man*, or *Green Car Crash* manage to portray "the reality of suffering and death" (qtd. in Foster, *The Return of the Real* 130). Foster provides a particularly interesting comparative reading of Crow, Barthes and Baudrillard, calling the Crowian reading of Warhol empathetic rather than merely referential. He seems to be in favour of Crow's empathetic reading as far as Warhol's work is concerned. Due to this, he rejects the view of Warhol's art as an "attack on that old thing art" (as Barthes would have it). In a likewise manner, he does not view Warhol's work as an embrace of the simulacral commodity-sign (as Baudrillard would have it), but as an exposure of late

[24] Plato's dialectics discuss two separate realms: the world of appearances and the world of essences. In particular, what people experience in the world of appearances are mere copies or shadows of transcendent Ideas that exist in a different realm, potentially accessible solely through the intellect. While Plato believes that the way to enter the world of Ideas is through the elevation of logos, Nietzsche on the other hand approaches these issues from the opposite direction; i.e. he recommends a descending movement that does not imply a return to the metaphysical essences. As Deleuze explains: "To reverse Platonism is first and foremost to depose essences and to substitute events in their place, as jets of singularities" (*The Logic of Sense* 53).

KAROLINA LAMPROU

capitalist "complacent consumption" through "the brutal fact" of accident and mortality" (Foster, *The Return of the Real* 130). Crow, according to Foster, concludes that Warhol not only empathises with the tragedies his images portray but politically engages with such events. One could say that he acknowledges an activist element in Warhol's work, especially in light of his reading of the electric chair images, which he sees as an "agitprop against the death penalty and of the race-riot images as a testimonial for civil rights" (Foster, *The Return of the Real* 130). It is precisely this comparative reading that enables Foster to provide not only one of the most interesting approaches to pop art but, in my view, an innovative theory which treats such artworks as expressions of *traumatic realism*.

Fig. 1. Andy Warhol, *Electric Chair* 1964.

When looking at Warhol's art, it is not difficult to recognise a pattern, a pattern of compulsive repetition, whether this is of his famous Campbell soup images which, as Warhol argues, constituted his lunch for twenty years, or the face of Marilyn Monroe in different colours and shadings, the atomic bomb illustration, or the electric chair. This strong repetitive element in Warholian images effectively conveys the persistent spirit of industrial production and, in effect, of consumption that defines the 1960s. As Foster puts it in his commentary on consumerism, such excessive paradigms, "reveal its automatism, even its autism" (*The Return of the Real* 131). Ultimately, my concern relates to Foster's own query: "is anybody home, inside the automaton?" (*The Return of the Real* 131). Yet, a more accurate question would be *is the subject so superficial and consumerism so central that nothing is real anymore?*

KAPOLI... PROU

Even though the above analysis may suggest that this is the case, I will argue, following Foster, that what we are exposed to in the context of pop art is not a mere repetition or the automation of the consumerist spirit but a disclosure of the trauma. This trauma, Foster argues, through its persistent return, forces a confrontation with the real. Foster considers Warhol's *Death in America*, which consists of a repetition of the same image, as capable of reproducing a traumatic effect through *screening* the real which comes to be understood as traumatic. This is because of the relationship of the images he chooses to repeat to acts and/or memories that relate to death. In this light, Warhol's works might be considered as neither referential nor simulacral. Rather, they expose capitalism as traumatic realism due to the fact that they uncover the real in "uncanny things" (Foster, *The Return of the Real* 152). Specifically, Foster draws on Sigmund Freud to define the "uncanny things" as the return of the familiar that is "made strange by repression", manifested in Warhol's art through his compulsive repetition of the same image, "rendering the subject anxious and the phenomenon ambiguous" (*Compulsive Beauty* 7).

Warhol himself admitted that the reason he was inclined to repetition is the fact that this practice eventually drains any emotion from the image that is being reproduced to the point that no significance can be assigned to it any longer. This idea echoes Freud's theory of trauma, according to which the repetition of a traumatic event works as the means of restoring the conditions that might help the subject defend itself against it. As Freud explains, it is by repeating a traumatic event from the past that the individual who suffers from it becomes an active agent. Hence, instead of experiencing it as "a passive situation" s/he manages to take "an *active* part". Ultimately, through repetition, the individual only remembers the traumatic event "as something belonging to the past" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 11-2). Even if Foster does not wholeheartedly embrace Freud here, he argues that repetition in Warhol's work reduces and eventually eliminates the traumatic object's effects by enabling the defensive mechanisms of the individual, which allow the restoration of the subject's psychic balance through the mastery of trauma. Foster, therefore, utilises Freud's concept of deferred action to demonstrate how the repetitive nature of such artworks serve to heal the spectators' traumatic experience in the context of postmodern capitalism. According to Freud, traumatic events, which may occur at any point of our lives, need to be revisited for the trauma to be mastered and/or healed. He then insists on the need to revisit the past as the only means of having a future. This is, according to Foster, what Warhol aims to achieve through his art: that is, to force a return to the

KAROLINA LAMPROU

traumatic events of the past in order to defend against their traumatic effects and open up the way for the future, which always depends on our relation to the past.

Foster's analysis of the return of the real is further enhanced through close reference to Jacques Lacan's theory of trauma. Foster draws on Lacan in order to show how traumatic effects are not merely repeated, reproduced, represented, or simulated, but, rather, they are produced anew. It is important to note that Foster specifies that, even if Lacan did not have pop art in mind when he gave his seminar "The Unconscious and Repetition", the explanatory force of his theory is invaluable in attempting to approach this art form. Due to the prominent influence of Surrealism on Lacan, his theory, according to Foster, might prove useful for a surrealist reading of pop art. Lacan in this seminar bases his discussion on two concepts: *Wiederholung*, a term referring to the repetition of the repressed as signifier, which he calls *automaton* inspired by Aristotle's concept, and *Wiederkehr*, which is understood as a return that rejects any attempt at symbolisation and cannot be signified. Lacan uses the French word *tuché* to translate the German term *Wiederkehr*. *Tuché*, which is the concept most relevant to Foster's analysis, erupts beyond the sign. Repressed trauma resists signification, constituting a missed encounter. Due to the fact that there is no mediation between the object that uncannily returns and what it signifies, the object becomes anxiety *par excellence*. Therefore, such encounter or "missed encounter" with the Real, as Lacan puts it, is defined as traumatic and needs to be introduced into the symbolic order. Warhol's repetition, however, does not contribute towards the restoration of the object's signification but rather helps the spectator's connection with the Real as traumatic. Interestingly, Foster views Warhol's artworks as *tuché*, which Lacan explains as the experience of the encounter with the Real, projected as a kind of accident, since it cannot be assimilated in the Symbolic, thus escaping representation (Foster, *The Return of the Real* 132). The mechanism of repetition forces the return of the Real due to the object's (in this case the artwork's) resistance to the Symbolic. (Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 55). Effectively, these works dramatise "the return of a traumatic encounter with the real, a thing that resists the symbolic, that is not a signifier at all…" (Foster, *The Return of the Real* 138). The Real is encountered through the gaze, which is very different from the "look". As Foster explains, "illusion fails not only as a tricking of the eye but as a taming of the gaze, a protecting against the traumatic real. That is, it fails *not* to remind us of the real, and, in this way, it is traumatic too: a *traumatic illusionism*" (Foster, *The Return of the Real* 144).

KAROLINA LAMPROU

It is important at this point to explain the concept of the gaze in Lacanian theory, in order to throw light on the significance of traumatic illusionism for the development of my argument. The gaze, according to Lacan, preexists the subject. Lacan describes the gaze as what determines subjectivity in the sense that, due to being observed by the gaze, the subject becomes an object which is surveyed. The subjection of a person to the gaze activates what Freud describes as a scopophilic drive, which, according to Lacan, alienates the person who is being looked at from his/her own subjectivity. In becoming one's object of desire, the subject seeks satisfaction in precisely being this object of desire. "The spectacle of the world, in this sense, appears to us as all-seeing [...] this all-seeing aspect is to be found in the satisfaction of a woman who knows that she is being looked at, on condition that one does not show her that one knows that she knows" (Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 75). Therefore, the gaze causes a feeling of alienation while the subject is forced to be identified with the object *a*, which for Lacan signifies a lack caused by unfulfilled desire. This is because the object *a* is "the remnant left behind by the introduction of the Symbolic in the Real", hence, it always remains inaccessible and unattainable to the subject (Evans 129). Lacan notes that even when painters attempt to portray something objective, like, for example, a landscape where no human figure exists, there is "something so specific to each of the painters that you will feel the presence of the gaze" (Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 101). While it can be argued that the artist's intention for his/her artwork is to be looked at, according to Lacan the true intention is to convey the message: "You want to see? Well, take a look at this! He gives something for the eye to feed on, but he invites the person to whom this picture is presented to lay down his gaze there as one lays down one's weapons" (Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 101). Lacan considers painting as something that pacifies and tames the gaze: "Something is given not so much to the gaze as to the eye, something that involves abandonment, the laying down, of the gaze" (Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 101). This idea however, according to Foster, is subverted by avant-garde and neo-avant-garde art, which produce artworks that not only do they not tame the gaze but stimulate and provoke it.

Sherman's early work, *Untitled Film Still* series (1975-82), provides an accurate example of the above statement in the sense that, as Foster beautifully puts it, these works yearn for "*the gaze to shine, the object to stand, the real to exist*" (*The Return of the Real* 140). While there are many readings of Sherman's work, in my view, most of these readings focus on the artist's feminist engagement with society's

KAROLINA LAMPROU

patriarchal expectations. Foster, however, provides us with an insightful Lacanian analysis of her art. While the film stills portray women who definitely seem to be under the gaze of someone else, as Foster argues, "this gaze seems to come from within" (*The Return of the Real* 148).

Fig. 2. Sherman, Cindy. *Film Still#21.* 1978.

Hence, the women in the stills look as if they are "self surveyed, not in the phenomenological immanence (*I see myself seeing myself)* but in psychological estrangement (*I am not what I imagined myself to be)*" (Foster, *The Return of the Real* 148). The same applies to the illusionism in works such as Sherman's grotesque photographs (*Untitled* series), where the setting is so excessive in its attempt to cover up the traumatic real that it "cannot help but indicate this real" (Foster, *The Return of the Real* 138). Her middle work becomes much stronger in the sense that it deals with the ob-scene, i.e. what shocks, horrifies, and is, thus, pushed off-stage, behind/beyond the scene of representation. [25]

KAROLINA LAZAROU

[25] Her middle work mainly consists of her *Sex Pictures* series in which prosthetic limbs and mannequins, staged in grotesque and perverted positions, challenge the way society views and treats the female body.

Fig. 3. Sherman, Cindy. *Sex Pictures. 1992, Untitled#250.*

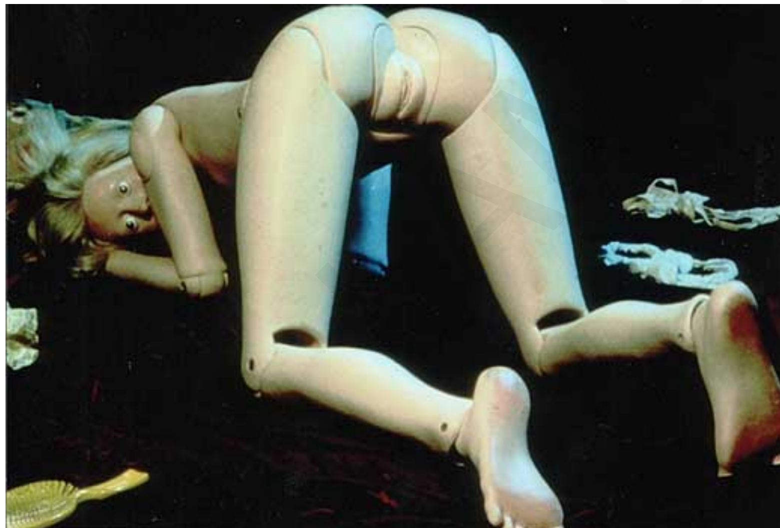

Fig. 4. Sherman, Cindy. *Sex Pictures. 1992. Untitled #255.*

In other words, Sherman's work, by portraying the ob-scene female body, escapes representationalism. The subject of the artwork is entirely invaded by the gaze to be eventually subverted by it in her latest work, where all that is visible is an array of limbs and other dead body parts. It is then the collapse of representationalism that brings the real to the surface, as that which cannot be represented or mediated. Lacan notes:

> There's an anxiety-provoking apparition of an image which summarizes what we can call the revelation of that which is least penetrable in the real, of the real lacking any possible mediation, of the ultimate real, of the essential object which isn't an object any longer, but this something faced with which all words cease and all categories

KAROLINUM PROU

fail, the object of anxiety *par excellence.* (*The Ego in Freud's Theory and in the Technique of Psychoanalysis* 164)

Fig. 5. Sherman, Sherman. *Sex Pictures.1992. Untitled #263.*

In Sherman's body/body part images, according to Foster, what becomes visible is the gap of "(mis)recognition that we attempt to fill with fashion models and entertainment images every day and every night of our lives" ("Obscene, Abject, Traumatic" 111). Foster considers such artworks as attacks "on the scene of representation", providing an opening to the real. This opening is felt "in the insistence on the factuality of the body as against the fantasy of transcendence in spectacle, virtual reality, cyberspace, and the like-an insistence that, again, is very different from the postmodernist delight in the image world where it was often assumed that the real had succumbed to the simulacral", Foster explains ("Obscene, Abject, Traumatic"114). Inspired by Foster's theorisation of a "traumatic illusionism", I will now proceed to argue that performance art emerged in response to the traumatic confrontation with the real and the need to develop effective strategies of social and personal resistance against "the simulacral".

Indeed, performance art can be said to offer an embodied experience that aims at authenticity and immediacy, beyond the commodification process based on a system of exchange, and beyond the spectacle. It is precisely for this reason that I will approach this kind of art as *not* representational but, rather, as seeking to produce a transformative experience. Following Agamben, I argue that the aim of performance art is to produce an experience that cannot but affect the Kantian disinterested spectator. Performance art involves the active presence of both the artist and the spectator, since it depends on the interaction between the two. In the context of performance art, the artwork is no other than the communal experience shared by both the spectator and the artist, an experience which is different every time the performance is staged. Foster

KAROLINA LAMPROU

traces the need to re-activate affect in what he calls "this bipolar postmodernism [that] is pushed toward a qualitative change: many artists seem driven by an ambition to inhabit a place of total affect *and* to be drained of affect altogether, to possess the obscene vitality of the wound *and* to occupy the radical nihilism of the corpse […]. Pure affect, no affect: *It hurts, I can't feel anything*" (*The Return of the Real* 166). My approach to performance art is motivated by the same concern expressed in Foster's query: "Why this fascination with trauma, this envy of abjection today?" (Foster, *The Return of the Real* 166). As I will argue, performance art, does not merely expose the trauma, as its predecessors did, but aims to move beyond it, in order to counter its destructive force and restore art's healing effectiveness in a way that avant-garde art has not succeeded in doing. Performance art, then, is the product or the after-effect of this trauma, at times, taking the form of a desire to reinvent commodified interpersonal relations.

As I have attempted to argue, Agamben and Debord's analyses of the capitalist society of the spectacle, and what Foster explains as traumatic realism, can help us understand both the return to the real which, as I explained, is associated with the obscene, abjected body, and the "turn to the live" of the 1950s artistic practice with the emergence of "happenings". While pop artists were obviously inspired by everyday items and consumer culture, neither did they wish to merely represent consumer culture nor did they reduce the status of the art object to that of a commodity. Instead, in Foster's reading, pop art "*screen[s]* the real understood as traumatic" (*The Return of the Real* 132). The need to address the traumatic real is what seems to have paved the way for the emergence of new kinds of art, which blur the distinction between art and life, associated with presence and participation instead of representation, and hence with immediacy instead of mediation. Due to this, the role of the spectator appears to have taken a new turn: instead of being mere observants of the work of art, spectators become an essential component of the artwork. They are expected to participate, or, on certain occasions, to even intervene. With regard to the new direction art appears to be taking post-1950s, I find Jameson's discussion of the "end of art" particularly insightful. While Jameson discusses two ends of art,[26] I will only refer to the second one, which, according to Jameson, takes on a political form "defined and constituted

[26] The first end of art, Jameson argues, is what Hegel predicted, i.e. the Beautiful, which, however, was not replaced with philosophy, as Hegel believed, but by "the aesthetic of the modern" (*The Cultural Turn* 84). Jameson explains this first end as the "persistence and reproduction of any number of secondary forms of the Beautiful in all traditional senses; the Beautiful now as decoration, without any claim to truth or to a special relationship with the Absolute" (*The Cultural Turn* 84).

KAROLINA LAMPROU

as an opposition to the American war in Vietnam, in other words, as a world-wide protest" (*The Cultural Turn* 75). Jameson locates this second end of art within the emergence of happenings, which, according to him, offer "a spectacle of the sheerest performance as such", paradoxically seeking "to abolish the boundary and the distinction between fiction and fact, or art and life" (*The Cultural Turn* 75).

While this turn to the "live" was perceived by many critics as a mere expansion of artistic techniques, or an attempt on the part of artists to use the new available materials and media, other critics, by contrast, have seen the turn to the body as a sign of crisis in the institution of art. The immediacy offered through artistic performances where the body is the medium transgresses the realm of representation, blurring, as Jameson argues in his discussion on happenings, the boundaries between art and life, presupposing at the same time the participatory role of the spectator. In line with Amelia Jones, therefore, what I will try to demonstrate in this thesis is the extent to which performance art has been mobilised "by a 'redemptive belief in the capacity of art to transform human life', as a vehicle for social change, and as a radical merging of life and art" (*Body Art/Performing the Subject* 13).

As I will explain in more detail in this thesis, the atrocities of the two world wars, the political turbulence of the sixties and the following years, along with the diverse reactions against the Cold War on the one hand, and the Vietnam War on the other hand, sparked the desire in the late 20th century to redefine community. Early practitioners of performance art, such as the Viennese Actionists, aimed at the enhancement of the potential of art, which they considered as the only means 1) to overcome the traumatic effects of World War II and 2) to express their strong resentment towards capitalist principles. As a result, these artists re-claimed the ritual and cathartic function of art and challenged the formalist or representational models of art, with a view to restoring to it a more meaningful role in human society. The Viennese Actionists "acted out in compulsive behavior and neurotic suffering" (Foster, "Viennese Actionism 1962b." 465), which included shocking rituals of self-castration, sexual acts and slaughter, the use of excrement, blood, naked bodies, and dead animals, in places like abandoned basements and ruined castles. They also used everyday objects and food in reaction against the commodification of these objects in the free market society and their specularisation in media culture. In this way, they sought to move beyond the representational character of art and to concentrate on the moment of art as a communal event. Essentially, they aspired to create art that aimed towards a radical

KAROLINA LAMPROU

transformation of the dominant cultural systems, including the transformation of the subject produced by these systems.

Significantly, a turn to ritual is noted in their artistic practices, and generally in the early stages of performance art. Ritual in these contexts is used as a means of self-expression as well as a means of creating a sense of communal belonging. Bearing in mind that rituals are means of structuring the sociocultural world and restoring order in times of crisis, performance artists' turn to ritual, as I will argue in the next chapter, points to a conviction in the restorative function of body-oriented communal experience. In what follows, I will explain that rituals have both a transgressive and a restorative function: on the one hand, they break taboos and react against the norms of society; on the other hand, as collective experiences, they establish a sense of social solidarity and communal transcendence that brings to the fore a new dimension of the self. Essentially, the importance of rituals lies in their function in redefining both the subject and the community. What I will, therefore, claim in what follows is the importance of the collective nature of these performances, which I read as an attempt at reinstating art's centrality in the process of introducing new modes of interpersonal relations.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Chapter 2

The Nexus between Body, Violence, Ritual

The Turn to Ritual: The Viennese Actionists' Performative Art

As briefly mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, a turn to ritual is observed in the early stages of performance art, a practice which is still adopted in a number of recent performances. In this chapter, I will elaborate on the transgressive and restorative function of ritualised performances. To this end, I will focus first on the work of early practitioners of performance art, specifically the Viennese Actionists. In the second part of this chapter, I will discuss the work of the contemporary artist Ron Athey, drawing on George Bataille's understanding of transgressive excess and the sacred.

The performances staged by the Viennese Actionists recall the political activism of several left-affiliated or anarchist movements and individuals, while even their name alludes to direct action. The key members of Viennese Actionism, Günter Brus, Otto Müehl, Hermann Nitsch, and Rudolf Schwarzkogler, were active up to 1971, when each artist continued his work individually. While they worked together, they conducted approximately 150 actions, some of which were particularly violent, sexually charged, blasphemous, and shocking, Even though many of their actions that included instances of mutilations, torture, coprophilia and urolagnia were staged, red paint was often used instead of blood, and the animals utilised in the performances had been slaughtered before the performance, the actions staged were still shocking while real violence, self-inflicted and intended against others, was often exerted. These actions mostly took place in Austria, with the exception of their participation in the Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS), which was held in London, in 1966, an event I will discuss more extensively below. Although the Viennese Actionists were not taken seriously by the art critics of their time, their work attracted lots of attention in the following decades. It constitutes an important reference point for a number of contemporary artists and art historians who examine their work and discuss their contribution to performance art.[27]

Nowadays, Viennese Actionism is "hailed as Austria's greatest contribution to post-war art, or even as the country's most important artistic group in that country

[27] See for example: *Viennese Actionism: From Action Painting to Actionism: Vienna 1960-1965* edited by Dieter Schwarz and Veit Loers, *Viennese Actionism, Vienna 1960-1971: The Shattered Mirror* edited by Hubert Klocker, *The Art of Destruction: The Films of the Vienna Action Group* edited by Stephen Barber, *Vienna Actionism: Art and Upheaval in 1960s' Vienna* edited by Eva Badura-Triska, Hubert Klocker, Kerstin Barnick-Braun, and Rosemarie Brucher.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

since 1918" (Green 9). The art historian Philip Ursprung, for example, in the book chapter "Catholic Tastes: Hurting and healing the body in Viennese Actionism in the 1960s", refers to the actions of the four artists as being "among the most spectacular events in recent art history" (129). Of course, not everybody shares this view, particularly with regard to the political objectives and significance of the Viennese Actionists' aesthetic practice. For example, the art theorist Gerald Raunig, in his book chapter "'Art and Revolution', 1968: Viennese Actionism and the Negative Concatenation", claims that the acts of the Viennese Actionists were the outcome of experimentation with new artistic practices and not of revolutionary intentions. According to Raunig, the attention that the Viennese Actionists have received, ex post facto, by art historians, galleries and museums, has created a myth "which often glorified both the artistic practice and the political significance of the Actionists —where they were not conversely politicised— and established via state and media repression measures (especially those *after* 1968) a legend of their radical politicization" (189). Even if this claim is true, nonetheless, the great attention paid to these artists is an undeniable fact. For this reason, to adequately evaluate the contribution of performance art from a 21st century perspective, I find it useful to start my analysis with this important artistic group. Specifically, I wish to start my first chapter with these artists for two reasons: 1) their work goes explicitly against the capitalist society of the spectacle I have discussed in the previous chapter; 2) their influence on a number of other contemporary performance artists and their contribution to performance art in general has widely been acknowledged. In what follows, I will attempt to explain the artistic endeavour of the Viennese Actionists, which, albeit short and violent, reflects the oppressive conditions of their time, particularly those observed in a post-fascist society. To this end, as I will show below, the artists used their work as a means of demanding free expression, in reaction to the perceived constraints of the exclusionary policies imposed by the ruling party, namely the Right-wing Social Democratic party that was in power at the time. Due to this, the Austrian people were subjected to a number of restrictions while Austria, during that time, could be characterised as an oppressive regime. At the same time, what I will argue in my analysis, is that the Viennese Actionists reacted against social alienation and fragmentation, regulated by capitalist principles and the false needs they create, needs which I have delineated in the previous chapter in reference to Guy Debord, Giorgio Agamben, and Fredric Jameson. In particular, this section will deal with the use of the body as an artistic tool, which can move beyond the representational function of other artistic mediums of the time, such as painting and sculpture, and

KAROLINA LAMPROU

produce art that counters the principles of consumerism, i.e. an art form that negates exchange value and the institutions marketing art. As such, the artist's performing body simultaneously attempts to challenge socio-cultural structures, resist capital accumulation, react against political conservatism and institutional oppression, and, most importantly, activate a communal experience that reclaims the function of art in society. Though my analysis of the work of the Viennese Actionists is overall appreciative, I cannot ignore existing critiques of their willing engagement in illegal actions, their acts of misogyny, and the association of their work with the promotion of fascism, which I will also address at a later stage in this chapter.

Before I focus on the Viennese Actionists' work, it is necessary to provide from the outset of this enquiry a historical overview of the events that sparked the emergence of their important artistic movement. Austria was a republic from 1918 until 1938, when Chancellor Engelbert Dollfuss forced a dictatorship on the country. In 1938, Nazi German troops seized the Austrian government and annexed Austria by force. It was not until 1955 when Austria became independent again, the Austrian State Treaty was signed, and the allied occupation was terminated. The Austrian people, however, had to overcome the guilt of being associated with the German anti-Semitic violence. They also had to work through the atrocities they had to endure themselves during the war and in the context of post war oppressive political situation. For these reasons, a number of reforms were implemented, including changes in cultural policies, part of Austria's effort to construct a new identity. Andreas Stadler, in "Disturbing Creativity: Phantom Pains, Arts, and Cultural Policies in Postwar Austria", provides some important insights with regard to post 1945 Austrian artists. As he notes, cultural policies that were adopted after the end of World War II aimed at reinventing Austrian national identity and ideology (Stadler 352). For this reason, "a rural and/or alpine aesthetic was embraced, which was fused with the country's baroque and monarchistic legacy" (Stadler 352). Clearly, such changes indicate an attempt to revive the country's earlier fin-de-siѐcle cultural glory and artistic brilliance.

Despite these efforts though, the Austrian people seemed unable to come to terms with "the loss of a multi-ethnic empire and the monarchy" and to deal with the "painful legacy of National Socialism" (Stadler 353). Although approximately two decades had passed from the end of World War II, and while Austria was liberal capitalist by the time that the Viennese Actionists appeared, the Austrian people had not yet overcome the "trauma of 'Austro-fascism' during and after the Second World War" (Ursprung 129). For this reason, the Viennese Actionists' work is usually referred to

KAROLINA LAMPROU

as "a direct response to the post-war situation in Germany and Austria" (Warr, *The Artist's Body* 12). Stadler also interprets the radical stance of the Viennese Actionists as a delayed reaction to Austria's role in World War II; specifically, "an expression of the phenomenon of phantom pain which was exceedingly felt…after the annihilation and expulsion of the Jewish elements of Austrian society and culture. The severing of this Jewish and multiethnic, Slavic cultural heritage effectively led to self-criticism and castigation, which the sensitive artists of this generation—often subconsciously—undertook and articulated for the rest of society" (353). Anna Dezeuze, who seems to share this opinion in "The 1960s: A Decade of Out-of Bonds", notes that many European artists were still haunted by the ghosts of World War II, even during the late 1950s and early 1960s. Due to this, during the early 1960s, which is when the Viennese Actionists first appeared, there were many protests against Austria's conservative culture and the "remnants of Nazi ideology". At the same time, after the 1950s, as Hal Foster notes, Austria's political system was "restructured according to the laws of a liberal democracy" and the principles of "the so-called free market society," hence, "the conduct of everyday life in Austria was rapidly forced into the American mold of compulsive consumption" (Foster, "Viennese Actionism 1962b" 466). In light of the above, "consumerism, technology, shifts in the labor market, and the rapid expansion of the art market and cultural institutions were only some of the social phenomena with which artists were confronted in the 1960s", Dezeuze argues (*A Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945* 47).

Interestingly, there are some critics who trace the reasons that motivated the emergence of the Viennese Actionists much earlier. Ursprung, for example, argues that their work "corresponded exactly to the nostalgic revival of *fin de siècle* Vienna" (135). Also, Vanessa Parent, in her PhD thesis, *History, Myth and the Worker Body: Vienna Actionism within the Longue Durée of 1848* examines their work as related to "the failures of the revolutions of 1848 in Europe" (iv). As the author goes on to argue, the importance of these artists has to do with the paradox at the heart of the Viennese society that they reflect: namely, "a religious ideology which assigns a damning immortality to non-reproductive sexuality […] provid[ing] a rich context for the aesthetic exploration of the radical political potency of the fleshy, finite, material body" (6). While these works provide some interesting perspectives, in this thesis, I locate the emergence of Viennese Actionism in the aftermath of Austria's involvement in World War II. I will therefore proceed to read it as a response to the country's experiences

KAROLINA LAMPROU

during the war and to the new capitalist principles introduced in Austrian society after the war.

As mentioned in my introduction, Jackson Pollock and his innovating technique of gestural painting influenced a number of artists who started experimenting with art happenings. This influence is noted in the early practices of the Viennese Actionists, who, in the initial stages of their artistic career, were working with more traditional mediums, such as sculpture and painting. The artists soon departed from conventional artistic practices, pursuing a form of aesthetic expression that they theorised in terms of a process of destruction. For example, Müehl, in 1961, was daubing paint at a stretched canvas when he found this action inadequate, took a knife, and started slashing and tearing the canvas. Then, using an axe, he proceeded with chopping it. Afterwards, he threw the chopped canvas on the floor, poured paint all over it, and finally wrapped it with wire and hung it back on the wall (Green 79). This can be perceived as a transitional stage for Müehl, whose initial "violent" treatment of the artwork soon after became a violent treatment of the body. This is because the artist did not consider conventional artistic practices, along with the "art events" that were taking place all around the world, mentioned in my introduction, as truly effective. Specifically, Müehl openly criticises avant-garde practices in his *Manopsychotic Institute Manifesto*, which he read in 1970 at a "Happening and Fluxus" festival, arguing that "these people who make *Happenings and Fluxus* are the ones who collaborate with the State, and respond to its manipulations and are simply idiots creating entertainment. And view themselves vainly as revolutionary or as the so-called shitty avant-gardists" (Green 121). In my understanding, the Viennese Actionists considered that the anarchist, anti-bourgeois, and anti-capitalist approach of the aforementioned art forms was not revolutionary or subversive enough and did not offer people the opportunity to successfully cope with the events that occurred during World War II, as well as with the post-war events and alienation[28] experienced under the capitalist mode of production in the West in general and Austria in particular.

The Viennese Actionists not only considered traditional artistic mediums as ineffective, but also approached language as an inadequate medium of communication. This is why a number of artists turned to the body as the means of expressing themselves and communicating their artistic objectives. According to Nitsch:

[28] Karl Marx uses the term "alienation" to describe the effect of capitalist productive forces and conditions of labour centred around commodity production. According to Marx, this is a result of the social relations among people which took "the fantastic form of a relation between things", rendering the worker's body a mere commodity (Marx, *Capital Volume I* 165).

KAROLINA LAMPROU

> [a] recollection of sensual perception, activated through language, was not enough. The need for actual feeling thrust through language, language inhibited intensive, sensory feeling[...] I could no longer find any satisfaction with language, it was now a mere relic, a symbol (remembrance of what was once experienced). I wanted to penetrate to reality, to real experience, so as to elaborate an art that is only an aesthetic arrangement of what is directly experienced. To complement and enrich my language results, I introduced the directly immediate registration of certain sensory perceptions and feelings… (Nitsch, "The Development of Orgien Theater")

Likewise, Brus writes in his diaries: "Language has lost its way. You can still find it snarling, hissing, in screams and in swallowing —language was the touchstone of art— and then art and language died together and everything else, almost even including the action of a madman. From expression to the printed world and from there to death" (Schwarz 128). The ineffectiveness of language seems to have contributed to the use of the body as the most effective means of artistic expression. Elaine Scarry, in *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, claims that "[p]hysical pain does not resist language, but actively destroys it" (4). This idea reflects Nitsh and Brus' argument with regard to language's inability to capture experience. Scarry believes that, due to the pain and suffering artists may express, "they may themselves collectively come to be thought of as the most authentic class of sufferers, and thus may inadvertently appropriate concern away from others in radical need of assistance" (11). What I argue, however, is that the Viennese Actionists do not appropriate others' pain and suffering but use their body as a medium through which collective pain can be (re-)experienced and expressed. This idea is reinforced by the fact that members of the Viennese Actionists witnessed, suffered and/or were actively involved in World War II. For example, Müehl, at the age of 18, "had served in the German *Wehrmacht*,[29] Nitsch had lived through the firebombing of Vienna, and Schwarzkogler's father had been gravely injured at Stalingrad" (Weir "Abject Modernism"). After their involvement in the war, the artists used their art to express their strong resentment towards Austria's post war social order. As mentioned, central to their artistic practice was the use of the body: Specifically, they attributed several roles to their bodies in order to express their aesthetic, and, at the same time, political, concerns, which were obviously

[29] Foster refers to Müehl's account of Actionism as his "personal response to the experience of fascism" ("Viennese Actionism 1962b" 466).

KAROLINA LAMPROU

shaped by their own personal experiences. In what follows, I will show how the body in the context of the Viennese Actionists' artistic practice becomes a canvas, the site of abjection, a manifestation of the post war wounded and damaged body, and a form of commodity.

Parent explains Müehl's approach to the body as an "embrace of a bodily materiality from which subjects are alienated", due to oppressive "cultural and economic processes" that "have brutally suppressed and instrumentalized the body through its labour" (150-1, 197). Hence, she sees "the detached use of bodies" as a means to oppose the capitalist use of "servility to the forces of abstraction and accumulation" (151). In his *Material Action Manifesto* (1964), Müehl states that "a person is not treated in the material action as a person but as a body. The body, things, are not viewed as objects for our purposes, but have all purpose radically removed from them. Everything is understood as for the human being is not seen as a human being, a person. But as a body with certain properties. material action extends reality" (qtd. in Green 87).[30] Importantly, the Viennese Actionists, in the context of their artistic practice, do not focus on the individual as a person but as a body, posing the question: what can a body do? Since both language and artistic practices of the time have proven inadequate in helping people deal with their emotions, this becomes the body's task: i.e. the task of engaging in revolutionary artistic praxis. To demonstrate and further unpack my argument, I will focus on the concept of the body as it was construed by the Viennese Actionists, literally and metaphorically.

At the same time, Parent argues, Müehl expresses his disdain towards "learned identity and 'way of being' associated with national belonging and suffering the imprint of cultural history" (196). It is important to note that proponents of the modernist approach to nations and nationalism explore the genealogy of the nation-state by drawing extensively on the centrality of the homogenising forces at work in the structural linearity of national narratives. Ernest Gellner and Hans Kohn,[31] for example, identify the totalising effect of notions such as cohesion, unity, and purity on collective imaginaries and the construction of majoritarian identity, arguing that the state-sanctioned efforts to establish, consolidate, and expand national sovereignty appeal to essentialist cultural and socio-economic markers. Within this framework, it

[30] Due to the distinct writing style of the Viennese Actionists, their texts often include syntax and grammatical errors. Also, on many occasions, they do not use capitalisation, possibly another indicator of their view that language cannot capture experience.
[31] For more, see Gellner's *Nations and Nationalism* and Kohn's *The Idea of Nationalism: A Study in its Origins and Background*.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

could be argued that the artist's revolting body is a manifestation of national, cultural, and social estrangement which can be potentially counter-productive to the nation-state sponsored efforts towards homogeneity. The revolting body, in delineating the psychological and physical contours of the self in the relationship between the state and the individual, while upholding a strong individual identity, it may also reinforce strikingly divergent collective visions and can thus be seen as fundamentally alien and even hostile to majoritarian national identity and/or the notion of citizenship.

The identification of the artist's body with the revolutionary body is distinctly manifested in *Art and Revolution* (1968),[32] which is one of the most notorious performances the Viennese Actionists orchestrated. This work exemplifies the Viennese artists' revolt against Austria's political situation in the late 1960s. It simultaneously marks the end of their collaborative project since some of the members had to leave the country in order to avoid the consequences of the illegal actions they performed in the context of this performance. Specifically, Müehl, Brus, the writer Peter Weibel, and the philosopher Oswald Wiener were invited by the Austrian Socialist Student Association (SÖS) to support a student protest of approximately 500 people, held in a lecture hall of the University of Vienna that took place on the 7th of June 1968. The choice of time and place was of vital importance since the action took place during a period of political upheaval all around the world, like for example the German and the French students' revolt against their own political systems. In West Germany, in particular, the student protests started in 1966 and peaked in April and May 1968, with a large number of people demonstrating against the authoritarian structure of the right-wing government and Germany's neo-Nazis (Barker 63-4). A similar situation was noted in France, where a series of student and worker protests reacting against capitalism and consumerism ensued, leading to the largest strike in France up to now. The performance, therefore, took place during a period of student mobilisations around the world, in which young people were demanding greater freedom and the radical transformation of their society and its political systems (Wolin, "Events of May 1968"). In Austria, the protests were not as many as the ones in France. For this reason, the protest at the University of Vienna received great attention from the media and the police. Erika Fischer-Lichte, drawing on Herbert Marcuse, notes that the demonstrations that took place around Europe constituted a "cultural revolution" which "foregrounds the radical transformation of, even total break with, traditional culture" (*Theatre, Sacrifice,*

[32] The description of this work is based on the article of the art historian Hubert Klocker, in the book *Vienna Actionism*.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Ritual 209). This is evident in the actions performed in *Art and Revolution*, where the artists, among others, masturbated while vandalising the Austrian flag, covered themselves in their own excrements and vomited, singing the Austrian National Anthem. The event included a lecture on the "Psychology of Thought and Speech" by Oswald Wiener, who discussed the relationship between thought and language, specifically how language, in its inadequacy, affects what we perceive as reality. A speech against the American politician Robert Kennedy followed, entitled "Another Zero Less", attacking the American socio-political situation. Then, Brus, possibly as a reaction to these speeches, started undressing, cutting himself, drinking his own urine and eating his own feces, and, finally, masturbating. An exhibition of sado-masochistic behavior followed with Müehl whipping someone who was reading pornographic material and who later revealed his profession as a professor of philosophy at that university. Finally, Brus sang the national anthem. In the newspaper headlines, the artists were referred to, among others, as "Uni-Pigs" and "Leaders of Revulsion Orgy" (Green 59). This performance, therefore, while foregrounding language's inadequacy through the speech that was given, simultaneously, offered strong, visual images critical of Austrian nationalism.

Fig. 6. *Kunst und Revolution,* 1968, by Klein Siegfried.

This work is considered as one of the most important and intense works of the Viennese Actionists, due to the fact that it caused a number of reactions. For several

weeks afterward, the press condemned the Actionists, resulting in the State Prosecutor's Office decision to arrest many of their members. Their charges were: "defaming Austrian symbols, defaming the institution of marriage and the family, actual bodily harm and offence to public morals" (Green 59). Brus received the strictest sentence —imprisonment for six months— while, after this, he had to leave the country in order to avoid the legal consequences of his actions. Although what survives from the event is some photographs and a two-minute film, critics still discuss the importance of this performance. This is because of the emergence in this performance of a revolutionary body, engaged in drastic action, in an attempt to convey the spirit of uprising, revolt, and aesthetic rebellion.

As a result of the strong reactions against *Art and Revolution*, the student group dissolved. The Viennese Actionists were accused not only of opposing the leftist group that had invited them but even of promoting fascism. Theodor Adorno supports that fascist propaganda manipulates the masses by promoting a supposed search of "authenticity" through the medium of language, which, as the philosopher argues, provides fascism with a refuge disguised as salvation (*The Jargon of Authenticity* 5). Fascist discourse, or "jargon" as Adorno calls it, includes language that presents itself as "genuine dialogue" and "authentic experience" with the sole purpose of serving fascist political interests (6). The artistic practices of the Viennese Actionists, along with the frequent references in their manifestos to destruction rituals as a means of bringing forth societal change and achieving authenticity possibly added to the reasons behind the accusations against the group by the Austrian Left as being neo-fascists (Urpsrung 138). Werner Hofmann has also compared the actions that took place during that event to "fascist methods of terror" (Ursprang 138). Brus, however, emphatically rejects this: while he admits that it is their actions that divided the leftist group "to such an extent that their ideas did not catch or fell into the wrong hands", he notes that this was not their intention (Green 224).

Attentive to the Viennese Actionists' rejection of fascist ideology, Parent offers a different interpretation of the event. As the critic argues, such transgressive acts "reflect the violence and perversion inherent in a society which gave rise to a Holocaust, itself mimetic of a political economy which extracts profit from bodies while quelling those bodies' libidinal drives and indeed their very vitality, as well as to the psychosexual neuroses such conditions are susceptible to engender" (81). Parent relates this idea to Adorno's defense of Sigmund Freud's instinctivism. In light of this, Adorno, in his unpublished work "Social Sciences and Sociological Tendencies in

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Physchoanalysis", argues: "culture, by enforcing restrictions on libidinal and particularly destructive drives, is instrumental in bringing about repressions, guilt feelings, and need for self-punishment" (qtd. in Parent 81). It is precisely these feelings of guilt and the need for self-punishment that the Viennese Actionists seem to be expressing through violence and destruction. In line with Parent, I also believe that such readings that dismiss the work of the Viennese Actionists as fascistic are reductive and superficial, as they do not "reflect the work's position in relation to the complexities of its location within a particular historical moment and within a broader historical and discursive totality" (154).

What can be concluded from *Art and Revolution* in particular and their entire artistic trajectory in general is that the Viennese Actionists aimed towards a revolutionary artistic practice, one that would integrate art with life or, more accurately, restore art's function in society in the form of political resistance. In the context of the Viennese Actionist's work, the body and bodily functions are liberated from the dominant straightjackets of bourgeois morality. Through the use of their material bodies as tools of political activism and aesthetic exploration, the Viennese Actionists attack academic and state institutions, reacting at the same time against dominant political apparatuses such as the police forces and the judicial system. The figure of the revolutionary body, revolting against the societal norms and morals of the time, expresses a disobedient, obscene, offensive, and sexual body. This, for example, is obvious in Brus' mutilated representation of the body in the *Self-Mutilation* photographs, his naked, bleeding and tormented body in *Endurance Test* (1970), Schwarzkogler's use of dead animals and animal carcasses in many of his works such as *6th Action* (1966). Müehl, in particular, believed that for an artistic revolt to take place the body *had to* divest "itself of its corset of social conformity" (Schmatz and Daniel 65). This could be achieved by challenging the prevalent idea of the body which he considered, as Ferdinand Schmatz and Jamie Owen Daniel argue, "the manifest reflection of the society that controlled it with the mechanisms of social repression and subjected its psychic self-perception to its own economic concepts" (65-6).

In line with the above, the artists appear to use the body and its orifices as symbols for a phobic community, held together by the exclusion of anything and/or anyone perceived as a threat, for example, same-sex couples and other activities and behaviours that were condemned as immoral by right-wing social conservatism and Catholicism, two of the dominant ideological frameworks in Austria at the time. The artist's aim, as they often stated, was to desacralise and contest the institutions and

KAROLINA LAMPROU

practices of conservative bourgeois Austrian society.[33] Hence, the body, which in the context of the Viennese Actionists' work is presented as unclean, violated, and infected, mirrors the state that the post-war Austrian society was in, a state that dominant discourses sought to obscure. The anthropologist Mary Douglas notes that the body's boundaries, porous, exposed to penetration and all sorts of infection, symbolise the boundaries of a community founded on the threat of social pollution. Douglas, in particular, examines how the human body can be perceived as a symbol of society, an idea that seems to be internalised by the Viennese Actionists, who experiment with every part of the human body in their attempt to make an intervention that might affect the audience's perception of the social body. It is significant that the Viennese Actionists' performances were centred around elements which were considered taboos in Western cultures of their time, including in the 1960s Austrian culture.[34] Fischer-Lichte notes that such elements as those central in the Viennese Actionists' work normally belong to "the inaccessible inner zone of the body" and appear only in the case of illness, menstruation, violence, or wounding. (*Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual* 213). The artists' target, then, is purity, order, and social phobia of what is taboo. By bringing together erotic, taboo-breaking actions with everyday objects and materials, the artists show their disapproval of the existing reality; a reality formed by a fascist past, the capitalist conditions of the time, and consumer culture. To this end, the artists produced intense and extreme actions, focusing on trespassing the social borders and taboos, reacting, in this way, against the social body as represented and normalised by State institutions.

An attack on Austria's post-war socio-political body, therefore, is the central focus of the Viennese Actionists' work, an idea explicitly explored in Müehl's *Piss Action*. This work took place in the Hamburg Festival, in 1969, and resulted in problems with the German Police for disrespectful behaviour. For the purpose of this performance, Müehl, who was completely naked in front of an audience, urinated into Brus' mouth. Müehl's body and Brus' exposed orifice (open mouth) can be related to various issues that the Viennese Actionists were concerned with. Müehl, for example, wrote against social authority that suppressed its citizens on matters concerning gender relations, homosexuality, and racial purity, a fact illustrated further by the discourses

[33] Müehl, for example, in his *ZOCK Manifesto* highlights that "without exception all institutions that are one minute old" must be destroyed (Green 101).

[34] Due to the 1950s Austrian laws against "Scmutz und Schund" (Filth and Trash), literature, visual material, and artworks that exhibited violence and/or sexual content were prohibited for affecting public morality. In 1960, a Board of Governors Conference proposed to reinforce the 1950s laws, rendering the exhibition of such behaviours taboo (McVeigh 255).

KAROLINA LAMPROU

against homosexuality and celebrating racial purity circulated by the government. In this context, the exposed orifices and the exchange of fluids between the two artists can be seen as a reenactment of homosexual intercourse. Müehl envisioned a society that embraced free sexuality, since the institutions of marriage and private property did not match his vision. As he states in the *ZOCK Manifesto* (1966), an acronym for "destruction of order, Christianity and culture" (Green 99), which is a project Müehl developed with Oswald Winer, "there will be no property, no marriage and family, no religion" (Foster, "Viennese Actionism 1962b" 467). An example of the society these artists proposed is one in which people work according to the standard of living they wish to follow. For example, for 10 hours a week, one is entitled to a bus pass that allows that person to "lead a life on level I. accommodation, food, drink, and use of all public institutions to a sufficient degree…[with] 25 hours a week he will live at level II. Better food, living conditions + pocket money. life at level III begins with 40 hours a week…whereas one can occasionally drink beyond one's thirst at level II…" (Green 99). What is more, the artists in their performances and manifestos seem to mock doctrines favoring racial purity. Specifically, the *ZOCK Manifesto* writes: "ZOCK will remove the race problem by very simple means: 1. General prohibition of sexual intercourse between people of the same colour […] the colour of future ZOCK people will be grey" (Green 100). Such ideas as the ones expressed in the *ZOCK Manifesto* clearly indicate a reaction against "a massive amnesia about their own [Austrians'] recent fascist past, both in its self-generated variety of Austro-Fascism and in its externally imposed version of the 1938 German Nazi Anschluss (Annexation), and the catastrophic consequences of both" (Foster, "Viennese Actionism 1962b" 466). The artists, therefore, as Foster argues, used their art to express their strong

> opposition to the subject's scandalous reduction in the process of assimilation, to enforced heterosexuality, to the rules of the monogamous family, to the seeming supremacy of genitality and patriarchal order, and worst of all, to the subjection and extreme reduction of the libidinal complexity of the subject to socially 'acceptable' and 'desirable' roles and activities (for example, enforced consumption and the total passivity of experience under the regime of spectacle culture). ("Viennese Actionism 1962b" 469)

What is particularly interesting about the artworks produced by the Viennese Actionists is the use of unconventional materials, like for example dead animals and organic substances such as milk, urine, and blood. The artists are also drawing on

KAROLINA LAMPROU

contrasting pairs of concepts such as life/death, cleanliness/uncleanliness, purity/pollution, order/disorder, and many more. Douglas deals with the ambivalence of seemingly contrasting concepts such as "purity and pollution" or "cleanness and uncleanness". It is important to note that while it is widely accepted that "purity and pollution" are positioned on opposite poles, the distinction between the two is not as straightforward as it originally appears to be. In order to highlight the ambivalence of these concepts, Douglas refers to the assumption that people's avoidance of dirt derives from a hygiene threat, something that she considers a misconception. According to Douglas, dirt can be defined as disorder whereas, "in chasing dirt, in papering, decorating, tidying, we are not governed by anxiety to escape disease, but are positively re-ordering our environment, making it conform to an idea" (Douglas 2). Douglas explains that dirt is neither a unique nor an isolated event but is always related to a system. As the author argues, it is "the by-product of a systematic ordering and classification of matter, in so far as ordering involves rejecting inappropriate elements. This idea of dirt takes us straight in the field of symbolism and promises a link-up with more obvious systems of purity" (Douglas 36). In other words, images of cleanness and notions of purity function to establish a solid sense of coherence and control of the world. In this light, images of dirt and notions of pollution reflect the lack of order, and the breaking down of system, the failure of coherence. Interestingly, Douglas maintains that body margins represent the "threatened and precarious" social borders, hence corporeal products, such as breast milk, saliva, blood, urine, and excrements are linked to power (or the loss of it) and danger.

In this light, it is important that, in their work, the Viennese Actionists, use bodily fluids, which, as aforementioned, Douglas discusses as reflections of threats against social borders, material reminders of the ambivalence between inside/outside and signifiers of the dangers of impurity and infection. For example, in *Action 8: (Penis Risings)*, various materials and substances, including egg yolks, warm blood, excrement, animal intestines, and hydrogen peroxide, are being poured onto Schwarzogler's genitals while he passively submits to these violations. Just like the Austrian social body in the aftermath of the war, the artist's body becomes the site of abjection; it becomes the mirror of an abominable history marked by its Nazi past and "the notion of victimhood" (Weir "Abject Modernism"). This is why, in my view, the artists engaged in performances that took place in public spaces related to Austria's abominable history. Brus, for example, in *Vienna Walk*, dressed in a suit and covered in white pigment with a black line starting from the top of his head running down his

KAROLINA LAMPROU

entire body, orchestrated a walk through specific locations related to World War II: for example, in Heldenplatz, where Hitler, in 1938 after Austria's annexation, was cheered by a large crowd. He continued this embodied engagement with Austria's dark history with his *Endurance Test* (1970) and *Self-Mutilation* (1965) action and photographs, where he used materials such as wire, metal hooks, disembodied plastic feet, and a razor blade that he used to cut his head, with the purpose of creating images that alluded to the piles of fragmented and tormented human bodies that were found in Nazi death camps (Weir "Abject Modernism").

At the same time, the Viennese Actionists wanted to react against the way bodies were treated in postwar liberal capitalist society, i.e. as objectified, passive entities and/or mere products of consumer culture. To this end, consumerist products are used repeatedly, as in the work *Material Action 17: O Christmas Tree* (1964), which took place in Vienna, December 1964, and in the *Material Action Manifesto* that Müehl revised after this work. The time and title of this work are important due to the fact that Christmas takes place during a season when the consumerist spirit is at its highest. A male and a female participant performed in this work, using a number of objects and materials, such as a Christmas tree and various kinds of food, which they used to imitate sexual intercourse, engaging in erotic, taboo-breaking behaviour. Particularly, the male participant performed sexually violent actions, such as sticking "his penis and testicles through a length of fibreboard on which aluminium foil has [had] been glued" (Green 90). For the last part of the performance, the male and female participants are described as imitating gymnastic exercises, urinating on the Christmas tree, and simulating coital movements (Green 91). The artists, therefore, in the works I have been discussing, blur the boundaries between clean/unclean, morality/immorality, pleasure/pain. Müehl describes these actions as auto-therapeutic, even though, at first glance, they might look psychotic. He argues that paint for example is not used "as a means of colouring but as goo, liquid, dust. An egg is not an egg but as slimy substance […] real occurrences are reproduced and mixed with other materials, real occurrences can be mixed with other occurrences, as can real with unreal…" (Green 91). As Müehl argues in his *Material Action Manifesto*: "occurrences are remoulded, material penetrates reality, loses its normal validity, butter becomes pus, jam, blood, they become symbols of other occurrences" (Green 91). By mixing artificial substances, like butter and jam, with organic substances, like pus and blood, Müehl foregrounds the symbolic nature of these materials as signs of real and unreal occurrences "mixed" together, with a view to imagining new realities attached to different meanings, realities that were not

KAROLINA LAMPROU

formed according to the oppressive social rules of the time and the principles of materialism.[35] By utilising their bodies as a means of expression, therefore, the artists have orchestrated an abundance of *actions* where various social, national, and religious symbols, e.g. the national flag or the Christmas tree, are used in an unorthodox manner. In doing so, they aimed at communicating the vision of a society, which, as I have already showed, opposes the bourgeois economic system and social values.

Clearly, the mode of life that the Viennese Actionists advocate is based on sensual experience enabled through aesthetic processes. Their artistic actions often take the form of ritual events, particularly within the artistic practice of Nitsch and Schwarzkogler, who often used body-based rituals as a means of opposing contemporary power structures and perform an aesthetic exoneration and celebration of life. The rituals they performed had two functions: 1) to undermine and/or appropriate state and religious ceremonies, such as wedding rites; 2) to bring about an aesthetic sublimation of painful experiences and enhance a sense of community belonging among the participants. Perceived within an anthropological context, Douglas argues that rituals aim towards the purification of what is considered threatening to the established order; hence, their main function is to purify what produces pollution and results in disorder, in order to create a new system which will restore order and structure. Undeniably, religions nowadays do not approve of or practice the bloody rituals witnessed in the Viennese Actionists' work. These are mostly related to primitive practices. However, Douglas is right when she argues that the belief system of the primitives cannot be considered less important than the traditions of any advanced religion. According to Douglas and other anthropologists such as Vic Turner and Claude Lévi-Strauss, rituals reflect how social institutions and class structures are reproduced, especially when threatened. As she explains, "ritual is more to society than words are to thought. For it is very possible to know something and then find the words for it. But it is impossible to have social relations without symbolic acts" (63). This is due to the ritual's powerful symbolic effects that shape the people's worldview, cosmology, knowledge, structural values, and behaviour. Following Douglas, order is associated with patterns and relations. Disorder, on the other hand, threatens the patterns associated with the existing order. At the same time, disorder has the capacity to re-structure and recreate order. It

[35] Although Müehl's *Material Action Manifesto* does not include details on the "new realities" he envisions, he later founded a commune which he describes his *Commune Manifesto* (1973). Specifically, in Müehl's commune "material possession" and "consumer behavior" does not exist, institutions such as police courts, prisons, army are rejected, and free sexuality among all members is embraced (*Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art* 867).

KAROLINA LAMPROU

is rituals which are enacted in periods of transition, at the boundaries of social structure, that create the potential both of disruption and the transfiguration of order.

An indicative example is the performance work *Wedding* (1965), which simulates an inverted marriage ritual, arguably serving as a critique against existing social and religious institutions, such as the institution of marriage. While drawing on traditional elements from the actual wedding ritual, such as a woman wearing a white dress, Schwarzkogler, Brus, and Heinz Cibulka used animal organs, a dead chicken, a dead fish, coloured fluids, a knife, etc., and engaged in actions that evoked images of defilement, torture, and death. The blending of traditional Western wedding traditions with horrifying images of violence and disgust serves as a critique of such civil and religious rites, which are targeted in order to be undermined, especially since they are ritual ceremonies imposed by the State and the church. The restaging of these rites in a disruptive and mocking manner indicates that the Viennese Actionists target the austere Catholic discourses on the body and sexuality. For instance, in this performance, Brus' wife, Ani, who plays the role of the bride, exposes her breasts, an act that goes against Catholic discourses of female modesty. Schwarzogler, who plays the role of the groom, spills blue paint all over Ani's wedding dress, perhaps to show how a bride's supposed chastity, symbolised by the white dress, is nothing but fiction.

Fig. 7. Schwarzkogler, Rudolf. *1st Action Wedding*. 1965.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Fig. 8. W. Kindler, Rudolf Schwarzkogler, *1st Action Wedding*.

The fact that Schwarzogler chooses to spill blue paint is very important, as the use of the colour blue forms a recurring element in Schwarzogler's artistic practice. Specifically, it represents the Apollonian principles that guided the artist's work. Nitsch, in one of his essays on Schwarzogler that he wrote after Schwarzogler's death, explains the importance of the blue colour for Schwarzogler: "it was his favourite colour. He saw in it the refinement and transformation of basic urges, personified by the apollonian way. Red transformed itself into blue", Nitsch explains, highlighting in this way the sublimatory effect of Schwarzogler's actions (Green 181). This scene can be thus seen as revealing a desire on part of the artist to sublimate the act of violation that the wedding ritual precedes and anticipates, namely the violation of the purity of the bride. The sublimatory function of the ritual becomes stronger with Schwarzogler's use of the dead fish, which is a symbol of transformation and rebirth in both Christianity and Greco-Roman mythology. Notably, the Viennese Actionists' blending of Christian symbols with elements from Dionysian rites, a blending that is often noted in their work, relates to the idea of sacrifice and rebirth, actions that the artists often re-enact in their work. On the importance of the Dionysian and Christian rites in the context of the Viennese Actionists' work, I will return shortly.

Ritualistic elements are also encompassed in *Action 21, Fifth Abreaction Play: Destruction in Art Symposium* that took place at St. Bride Institute in London, in 1966. The artists, in this event, performed a ritual charged with various religious and sexual meanings. At first, I would like to give some background information on the

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Destruction in Art Symposium, where *Action 21* took place for the first time, in order to give emphasis to the context of such works. DIAS, which was a three-day art event, took place at the Africa Centre, in Covent Garden, London, from the 9th to the 11th of September 1966. The DIAS event was connected with the September Happenings, which were held in various places in London and included poetry readings, various performances, art exhibitions, etc. DIAS however, specifically targeted the theme of destruction in both the art world and society. As the organisers state in their press release with regard to the objective of this event, its aim was to pay particular "attention on the element of destruction in Happenings and other art forms, and to relate this destruction in society" ("Destruction in Art Symposium"). In a recent interview Müehl comments that what was practiced during that event was "destruction within art, but not outside it". He adds: "Hitler wanted to become an artist, but he destroyed in real life", distinguishing in this way the transgressions that were part of their artistic practice from the atrocities that Hitler had commanded (Grossman "An Actionist begins to Sing"). Kristine Stiles correctly notes, "while exploring destruction in art, they [the artists of the DIAS event] did not practice destruction of art, understanding destructivity as a causative principle consistent with, yet another dimension of, creativity and part of the cycle of making" ("The Story of the Destruction in Art Symposium and the 'DIAS affect'" 41).

The DIAS Event was essentially a collective experience, which did not share any features of other institutional or academic happenings and did not aim to create art history but to reconfigure art's role in society. Even though a number of important works were presented in DIAS, I will focus on *Action 21*. In this work, apart from Nitsch, Müehl, and Brus (Schwarzkogler was not in London at the time) more than 20 people participated while more people among the spectators joined in at a later stage of the performance. As in most of their performances, the setting of this action appeared absolutely chaotic, composed of a scream choir and an orchestra whose purpose was "to produce the greatest possible noise", projections of extremely violent and sexual nature, a dead lamb and its intestines (Green 150). The action lasted for several hours and included deeds like a man stuffing intestines inside his trousers while others were pouring blood all over him with different kinds of noises and screams in the background, and placing bloody cow brains, warm water and egg yolk on a man's genitals. The crucifixion of the lamb followed, along with the tearing of the lamb's flesh and removal of inner organs, and the joining in of spectators who participated in the violation of the lamb's remains by jumping and trampling on them while

KAROLINA LAMPROU

ecstatically screaming. At first glance, one could consider such acts as irrational or as a spontaneous burst of anger and a means of expressing violent impulses. Such assumptions, however, do not reflect the truth. First, Nitsch meticulously prepared everything for the performance and, even though it appears to be the result of several spontaneous acts, every action was in fact very carefully structured. Essentially, as I have mentioned, the importance of rituals lies in their function of redefining community and this is precisely what this art event aimed at. Specifically, this event brought together a number of people from various fields: artists, intellectuals, scholars, political personas, scientists, and activists, who all wanted to react against the destructive spirit inherited by post-war societies: "We [were] the first generation to live beyond that [Second World] War, and to *have* to create an ethos for ourselves, to recognise ourselves, and to create some kind of sense for another generation, to create some sense of bonding" (qtd. in Stiles, "The Story of the Destruction in Art Symposium and the 'DIAS Affect'" 15). What united the participants of the event was a sense of helplessness that followed the atrocities that had occurred during World War II. As a means of overcoming such feelings of vulnerability and despair, and, in effect, for a renewed subjectivity to become plausible, people had to free younger generations from the "ethos" that had defined their own generation. As it seems, for these people, only through destruction, social reform would become possible. By restaging the destructive events that had left a mark on their lives, by giving talks and inviting people into discussions on these events, and, effectively, by repetitively bringing to the surface the distressing memories of the war, the participants of DIAS undertook the social task of re-establishing a social bond, hence, a sense of community. Importantly, by performing their actions collectively, along with the spectators and, on some occasions, random passersby, their actions become more than an art event. I therefore agree with Fisher-Lichte's argument that "since such acts of violence were performed together by various individuals assembled here by chance, they were able to bring about a community: a community made up of individuals who dared to violate strong taboos publicly — i.e. before the gaze of other spectators, and in this way to revolt against the existing social and symbolic order" (Fisher-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual* 214). While such actions could not "protect" or "transform" society as a whole, they, Fisher-Lichte notes, "opened up the possibility, on the one hand, for participants to transgress the carefully watched and guarded boundaries of the taboo zone in public, to bond together with others to share forbidden sensual impressions and to endure bodily experiences which were usually locked up and prohibited, experiences that are able to

KAROLINA LAMPROU

cause 'ur-excess' that led to a cleansing of the individuals from [their own] violence" (Fisher-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual* 213-4). This is an idea I will explore further in relation to Rene Girard's work later on.

As I have suggested, the Viennese Actionists and other performance artists who use ritual in their work aim at the enhancement of the potential of art. The artists claimed the performative and the sublimatory element of art and challenged the conventional notions of art with a view to restoring to it a more potentially subversive function. This idea is illustrated further by the fact that the Viennese Actionists often blend Dionysian and Christian rites with a view to subverting the latter through a return to the former. As already noted, Schwarzogler's work is guided by Apollonian principles. On the other hand, Nitsch's work embraces the Dionysian principles (Green 181). Friedrich Nietzsche, in his *Birth of Tragedy,* elaborates on the importance of these two opposing concepts: i.e. the Apollonian principles, which respect boundaries and relate to discreteness, individuality, harmony, and restraint, represented in sculptures, and the Dionysian ones, which transgress limits and boundaries, are defined by excess, passion, and irrationality, and are represented by music. According to Nietzsche, art is based on this duality and the tension between the two principles. Specifically, Nietzsche argues: "Dionysos speaks the language of Apollo, but finally it is Apollo who speaks that of Dionysos. At which point the supreme goal of tragedy, and indeed of all art, is attained" (104). For Schwarzogler, Nitsch explains, "the concept of man is heightened towards the apollonian, the release from animal instincts is achieved" (Green 181). Schwarzogler, in many of his actions appears covered, from head to toe, in white bandage, assuming passive poses resembling, in this way, a sculpture. Nitsch, on the other hand, orchestrates works where the lamb, ecstatic dances, and images from Christian crucifixion are juxtaposed. The artist, through his artistic practice, wanted to re-introduce the pagan rituals that prevented the suppression of aggressive instincts in order to provide the means of realising repressed energy, as "an act of purification and redemption through suffering" (Goldberg, *Performance Art* 164). To this end, he orchestrates works where excess, passion, and irrationality form the central characteristics, elements which are necessary for Nietzsche's "best kind of society, modelled on the artistic culture of 'archaic Greece'" (*Birth of Tragedy* xiii). Apparently, the artworks produced by the Viennese Actionists combined the Nietzschean two principles, possibly in an attempt to revive the active socio-political role and function of art in society, as it once was in Ancient

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Greece.[36] Athenian drama held a very important role in politics: attending a theatrical performance was not only a source of entertainment but, more importantly, it was considered civic duty. Due to this, citizens were even paid to attend. The moral teachings that theatre provided the spectators were considered to preserve the democratic spirit. For this reason, theatre held a vital political function, essential to a functioning socio-political order. Nitsch seems to share this idea, explaining how he considers "tragedy and pain 'the points of departure' of his actions" (Green 17). This is evident throughout his work where he often refers to Dionysus, Oedipus, Orpheus, Adonis and other characters from Greek myths and tragedies.

Nitsch, in his project *Orgy Mystery Theatre* (1962), discusses a "regenerated humanity" and a "new form of existence" (Green 133). Nitsch argues that such actions as the ones he describes in his *O.M. Theatre*, which he calls "abreaction events", have "the aim of renewal" (Green 132, 139). Such events, Nitsch claims, bring to life his theory of abreaction, in an attempt "to depict the entire history of mankind […] not its outward history with its wars, struggles for power and regicide, but its true historical or dramatic process: the development of our (mankind's) psyche and consciousness" (Green 129). Alan Mulhern notes that

> [t]he feeling of alienation or separation from some primal unity, and a consequent longing for a unity with something inside ourselves, is at the root of spiritual endeavour. The awareness of fractures, splits, and divisions in ourselves and a desire to heal these states with a sense of unity is a perennial need. A state of separateness or alienation is therefore the result of the emergence and development of consciousness, which, by its egoist state, separates out from the immersion in the greater whole and individualises. The state of separation is the first darkness, the shadow of consciousness, and is the root of other negativity in the psyche. (116)

It is precisely this state of separateness and alienation, which became much stronger in the aftermath of World War II and with the rise of consumerism and materialism, that the Viennese Actionists were trying to heal with their art. To this end, the artists engaged in actions through which they experienced a "primal excess" that destabilises order, primarily in Christianity, an order in which "immanence and transcendence, 'esh

[36] This is a view shared by Giorgio Agamben who in *Man Without Content* supports that art's function should be restored to the one it held in Ancient Greece, i.e. a communal experience among all participants (actors and audience) with great socio-political importance (34). For more on how art in Ancient Greece held an important role in socio-political matters see Curtis Curter's "Artists and Social Change".

KAROLINA LAMPROU

and soul, instinct and intellect, eros and the sacred' are kept in strict opposition" (Bührmann and Remmert 63). This is through such actions that, according to Nitsch, man can "transcend and experience himself inside of an infinitely and eternally expanding whole" (qtd. in Bührmann and Remmert 63).

While the Viennese Actionists were often accused of blasphemy, Nitsch did not wish to undermine Christian belief but incorporate "ancient religious motifs into Christian dogma" (Bührmann and Remmert 59). This is the purpose of his *O.M. Theatre*: "to free the repressed dionysian vitality from its prison. I wanted to reach down into the deepest strata of the psyche and reverse the values again (…) I wanted christ to become dionysus again" (qtd. in Bührmann and Remmert 63).[37] To this end, Nitsch orchestrated performances where one could celebrate "extreme situations that are to be registered to the most sensually intense degree", for people to release tensions and be liberated from social constraints (Green 133). Nitsch orchestrated a number of actions with the purpose of showing how the ideas he explores in his *O.M. Theatre* project can be brought to life. For example, in *Action 1*, a twenty-year-old boy (Nitsch), dressed in a white shirt, is publicly portrayed as crucified, while an enormous amount of blood is being poured on him. *Action 2,* performed in 1963, in Dvorak gallery, Vienna, contained most elements that Nitsch mentions in his manifesto. What is important to note is that in this action, which lasted 15 hours, certain acts were repeated for the entire duration, attributing a ritualistic structure to the performance, a structure that he maintained in all of his actions, from 30-minute to six-day ones (Fisher-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual* 210). With *Action 3: Festival of Psycho-Physical Naturalism* (1963) Muehl and Nitsch claimed that they would offer "a life affirming orgiastic festival of the creative" (Green 81). This work took place in a cellar and attracted a large number of people, who witnessed the action from both inside the cellar and the windows of nearby buildings. Inside the cellar, there was a dead lamb, hanged from the ceiling by a meat hook. On the floor, there was a white cloth, onto which Nitsch threw a number of objects and fluids, such as tea rose petals dipped in a solution of vinegar and sugar, hair from two girls aged fourteen years and eleven years old, sandwich wrappers, animal organs, etc. The artist violently and ecstatically hit the dead lamb in order to reach a "gradual mounting of the sensory stimulation produced by the actions, occasional surges of blasphemous, destructive, sado-masochistic needs" (Green 138). Then, Nitsch lies on the bed with the lamb, which he positioned in a crucified pose and

[37] The author of this article has retained Nitsch's use of lower case.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

pretended to have sexual intercourse with it, in an attempt to present a "blasphemous association of two extremes, sexual intercourse and the cross (sacrificial death on the cross). (sexuality, unmastered urges as the origin of all needs to sacrifice and of all mythical and ritual excesses)" (Green 138). Apparently, Nitsch relies on Christian tableaux to orchestrate his actions, particularly the re-enactment of Christ's sacrifice, which he blends with motifs from Ancient Greek tragedies and Dionysian festivals. At the same time, he includes elements from ancient rites witch he uses along with bodily wastes and consumer products. The use of the lamb, which is a central element in many of their actions and has an array of symbolisms. [38] First, it is a symbol of weakness as it stands for the creaturely nature of human beings (Revelation 4-7); second, since ancient times, it symbolises life over death. The lamb, which represents the sacrificial victim, was initially used in the Dionysian rituals, where it was sacrificed as an offering to Dionysus for the fulfillment of a request to save someone. At the same time, it is also a symbol of Christianity. Specifically, in the Gospel of John it says: "Behold the Lamb of God who takes away the sins of the world" (John 1:29). The fact that the lamb is crucified on stage can be seen as a further illustration of the severity and abundance of sins which need to be forgiven. However, the fact that the lamb is hanged upside down and used in a sexual manner throws into relief the desire on the part of the artists to subvert the Christian narrative of the assumption of the Messiah. At the same time, the artists, who re-enact the sacrificial mechanism take on the role of the scapegoat, an idea I will move on to elaborate on in more detail.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

[38] For example, the lamb holds a central role in *Blood Organ* (1962), which was the Viennese Actionists' first performance as a group. The performance lasted three days and took place in Müehl's basement studio. For the purposes of the performance, the artists disemboweled a dead lamb, which they crucified on stage and, then, hanged upside down. Also, Nitsch in *The O.M. Theatre* explains the importance of the tearing of the lamb as providing a strong sensual experience, "identical with an extreme break-through of instincts" (*Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art* 864).

Fig. 9. Müehl, Otto; Nitsch, Hermann; Frohner; Adolf. *Blood Organ,* 1962.

An interesting connection to be drawn as regards the Viennese Actionists' concerns relates to Rene Girard's scapegoat mechanism. Girard's work is founded on the necessity of a surrogate victim in order for society to express its violent impulses. As Girard argues, the operation of the sacrificial rite in primitive societies helps men "to escape their own violence, removes them from violence, and bestows them all the institutions and beliefs that define their humanity" (Girard 321). The philosopher's theory focuses on the scapegoat mechanism and the rituals developed around it as the origin of sacrifice. For Girard, the importance of rituals lies in their relation to the sacred, which is inseparable from violence. The sacrifice of the surrogate victim needs to be carried out collectively, in order to prevent its reduction to a murderous act. The aim of this ritual sacrifice is the prevention of new conflicts and the resolution of pre-existing conflicts through the purification it offers, sparing the fear of punishment or revenge for the violence perpetrated in the context of the ritual. Müehl, in an interview where he is asked about the killing of a goose in the context of his work comments: "I became the priest who would not kill it in order to devour it, but rather to carry out a kind of magic ritual with it" (Grossman, "An Actionist begins to Sing"). Girard explains the double role of the surrogate victim as a figure of hatred and simultaneously a figure of religious importance due to his/her association with the sacred. Only by combining these two contrasting roles, will the victim's sacrifice initiate the transformation of baneful violence into beneficial violence.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

In his work *Violence and the Sacred*, Girard launches his theory on the mechanism of the substitute sacrifice, which he considers essential for what he calls re-directing mimetic desire and the violence that accompanies it, to a surrogate victim, in order to limit violence among human beings. For Girard, desire bears negative connotations since "desire itself is essentially mimetic, directed toward an object desired by the model" (Girard 155). That is, according to Girard, human beings are driven by an unknown, intense desire. When one feels that another person possesses what the former desires, his/her desire is directed to the object desired by the one who seems to possess what the other lacks, hence, the other becomes a model. The reason for the existence of such desire is, according to Girard, the mimetic capacity of human beings, a capacity which largely defines human nature. This results in the imitation of the other, i.e. the model, and what he desires, in an attempt to satisfy the lack that causes desire. The philosopher analyses the negative outcome of imitation which, unavoidably, results in rivalry and, essentially, becomes a violent conflict. "Two desires converging on the same object are bound to clash. Thus, mimesis coupled with desire leads automatically to conflict", as Girard explains (155). Eventually, the two subjects become doubles, while their desires can no longer be distinguished. When the rivalry between the "monstrous double" that the model and the subject have become for each other reaches a certain level of intensity, the object which has caused the rivalry is no longer important. The object of desire is finally replaced with violence, which becomes the object of desire. The inefficiency of contemporary law and current social order to establish structures that control mimetic desire is to be blamed, according to the philosopher, for the noted escalating violence in human history. This is precisely where the importance of the surrogate victim lies, who assumes the role of the monstrous double. In essence, the sacrifice of the scapegoat first ritualises and then redirects the violence and hatred among the people of the community towards itself. The surrogate victim, as founder of the rite, appears as the ideal educator of humanity, in the etymological sense of *e-ducatio*, a leading out. The rite gradually leads men to escaping their own violence, removes them from violence, and bestows them all the institutions and beliefs that define their humanity (Girard 321). It is precisely to this end, I argue, that Brus engaged in acts of self-mutilation,[39] Müehl transgressed sexual taboos,[40] Nitsch comes in contact with animal carcasses,[41] and Schwarzogler presents the body as

[39] See, for example, *Resistance Test.*
[40] See, for example, *Material Action 13: Leda and the Swan, Material Action 17: O Christmas Tree, Oh Sensibility!*
[41] See, for example, *Action 32, Action 43.*

KAROLINA LAMPROU

amputated and bandaged.[42] These actions can be seen as a symbolic sacrifice which occurs in front of the spectators who form a small community. The ritualised violence and symbolic sacrifice that takes place is what helps the redirection of violent impulses towards the artists who temporarily hold the role of the scapegoat figure. The fact that they retain the ritual framework is very important as it helps them produce a cathartic effect, precisely through the ritualisation of the violence they perform. At the same time, they attempt to produce counter rituals to societal ceremonies and customs.

Girard, drawing on the emergence of ancient Greek tragedy, also refers to the symbolical representation in theatre of the sacrificial mechanism, which may prevent the escalating violence in times of crisis (Fisher-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual* 209). Fisher-Lichte, utilising Girard's theory to provide her own reading of the Viennese Actionists' work, argues that modern societies cannot be compared to ancient communities who adopted the sacrificial mechanism to restrain violence. This is due to the institutional jurisdiction that has "declared violence to be a monopoly of the state" (Fisher-Lichte, *Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual* 210). However, Fisher-Lichte notes, the sacrificial mechanism could work "in times when the state's monopoly on violence is seriously challenged and a crisis emerges in a modern society" (*Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual* 210). Based on this assumption, Fischer considers Nitsch's *O.M. Theatre* "a particular fusion of theatre and ritual that was meant to bring about catharsis in participants, performers and spectators, alike" (*Theatre, Sacrifice, Ritual* 210). Similar to Girard's description of the double role of the surrogate victim, these artists often adopt a double role in the context of their performances: i.e. those of victim and victimiser, the hated and the venerated, bearer of death and bearer of life at the same time. The dynamic of the relationship the artists establish with the participants, who, as we have seen, also take on the roles of victim and victimiser (see, for example, the works: *Piss Action, Action 8, and Action 1* which I have discussed here), activate a communicative process that could spark a positive mimetic desire in order for people to *want* to overcome and, at the same time, help others overcome their traumas. Importantly, this process relies exclusively on the body and sensory experience for its success since, as aforementioned, in the aftermath of the wars and due to social alienation, language was felt to be inadequate. This is why the Viennese Actionists believed in the potential of a shared material, corporeal reality to fight social fragmentation and alienation. As

[42] *See*, for example, *Action 3, Action 6.*

KAROLINA LAMPROU

I will argue in the last part of this section, by precisely assuming the role of the victim, the artists attempt to activate what Girard calls positive mimetic desire.

Martha J. Reineke's "After the Scapegoat: Rene Girard's Apocalyptic Vision and the Legacy of Mimetic Theory" focuses on Girard's early work, where the philosopher examined how affective memory combined with sensory experience can result in positive mimetic desire. Girard abandoned his theory of positive mimesis, since, as he argues, there is no escape for humanity from "an escalating violent mimesis" (Reineke, "After the Scapegoat" 141). Due to this, as Reineke notes, Girard has withdrawn from his research on phenomenology and positive mimesis. Reineke however, following Julia Kristeva's line of thought, argues that there is great potential in Girard's early work on how Marcel Proust deals with experiences such as sensation, feelings and habits (Reineke, "After the Scapegoat" 141). Therefore, Reineke believes that affective memory, which generates positive mimetic desire, can still make a difference if combined with sensory experience. In order for this to become possible though, according to Girard's reading of Proust and his protagonist Marcel, a spiritual conversion needs to take place which can be realised through "the extraordinary blossoming of affective memory" (Reineke, "After the Scapegoat" 146). Only then will conversion be enabled in the form of, according to Proust, "a transformation that reaches so deep it changes us once and for all and gives us a new being" (qtd. in Reineke, "After the Scapegoat" 147). Reineke, reading Kristeva, explains how mimetic desire runs through the body and it is through sensory experience that the mechanism of spiritual conversion can work.

In light of Reineke's reflections above, I want to argue that the Viennese Actionists return to the scapegoat mechanism in order to re-activate Girard's theory of positive mimesis. Notably, the performance artists, drawing on certain symbols, rituals and narratives, use affective memory in order to negotiate with a traumatic past and an oppressive present. The Viennese Actionists utilise their body and orchestrate affect-based experiences that aim to mobilise the spectators, in an attempt to constrain mimetic violence and to redirect its escalating trajectory towards an end. This can be seen in the communication that takes place when the body of the artist and the other bodies on stage are involved in an exchange of "flesh", due to the active role of both the artists and the participants' impassioned bodies, achieved through the exchange of sensory experience. The collective nature of the Viennese Actionist's work, particularly with the central role given to the body, materiality and flesh, aims at the reclamation of embodied experience in both art and society. However, it all depends on the balance

KAROLINA LAMPROU

achieved between negative mimetic desire and positive mimetic desire, a balance that the Viennese Actionists were accused of not being able to always keep.

This is why I have attempted to read the work of the Viennese Actionists within the theoretical framework provided by Douglas and Girard. The artists, I have claimed, take on the role of the outcasts of society, they become liminal figures, or scapegoats, through the transgression of socio-political, religious, and sexual norms. Importantly, for the Viennese Actionists, rituals constitute a way of acting out the violent human impulses as well as the remnants of the cruelty, violence, and atrocities that were experienced during World War II. Even though the reactions against such *actions* were numerous and even sent some of the members of the Viennese Actionists to prison, Nitsch argues that the ritualistic violence that such works involve "should not glorify or induce killing (as its) purpose is to free and satisfy man's destructive urge, and to bring mythical unity", against alienation and social fragmentation (Green 156). As noted, Nitsch in particular, in *O.M. Theatre*, associates mythical cult with the Christian religion in order to imagine alternative conceptions of community. As he argues: "The almost perverse ecstasy of feelings places our psyche into that state where tensions are released, a state which unnoticed manifested itself to a great extent in mythical excess situations and sado-masochistic paradoxes (such as the cross, the tearing-up of Dionysus, his castration, the blinding of Oedipus, the meal of the dead etc)" (*Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art* 862). Through reacting against their current social and political reality, the Viennese Actionists along with the spectators were engaged in a public and collective ritual, in an attempt to experience the extreme states that orgies, sacrifice, and sexual pleasure offer as a means of releasing the destructive drives and repressed affect caused by the wars and the oppressive regime in Austria. Admittedly, collectivity constitutes a central element in such events which constitute a communal effort to work through the traumatic events, express violent impulses, and re-establish a sense of connection or belonging.

This, however, does not change the fact that the artists were involved in a number of illegal actions and were condemned for several of their practices. In addition, their work often depicts women as the passive other, the victim of violence, humiliation, and debasement. For example, In *Material Action 3: Bread-Crumbing a Woman's Backside*, "a girl kneels on a chair and bends the top of her body forwards so that her backside towers up like a monument in the room" while Müehl throws different kinds of everyday substances and food on her body, bites her buttocks and later, using a pair of rubber gloves, exposes her vagina and anal orifice (Green 83). Also, in *Material*

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Action 13: Leda and the Swan, Müehl, after grating cucumber, squashing tomatoes, cracking eggs, first places a bottle that contains a rose between the female participant's legs and then a large, uninflated plastic swan to simulate the rape scene from Greek mythology. In many performances, the artists simulated assaulting or raping female participants, and/or covered them in various food and other substances. Such behaviour has weakened the impact of their work, precisely because it was not merely "performative".[43] What is also particularly problematic is that they were trying to impose their particular ideal of society on others, reflecting in this way fascist traits, which is precisely the political system they oppose to. This, I believe, is their biggest limitation, especially in contrast to the other performance artists I am discussing who *only* engage in self-inflicted violence and reject violence directed at others. This shift is, I believe, very significant and will permit me to trace the gradual development of performance art away from the controversial legacy of Viennese Actionism. Which is why I now want to turn to the work of Ron Athey, an artist who was much influenced by the Viennese Actionists but who seems to be more successful in mobilising a positive mimetic desire.

<u>The experience of the Sacred: Ron Athey's Transgressive Art</u>

As I have already shown in the first part of this chapter, the Viennese Actionists emerged during harsh and eventful times, ergo the extreme nature of their performances. Undeniably, they are considered a very important group of artists, due to the issues they attempted to address with their violent and taboo breaking approach. However, the extremity of their transgressive actions, as I have already suggested, may have undermined the appeal of their work. Yet, despite the violence and their dubious sexual politics, they have exerted significant influence on the work of many contemporary artists, such as the American performance artist Ron Athey. Athey appears to be using certain elements from the Viennese Actionists' artistic practice, such as the experience of suffering, the infliction of violence, and the celebration of ritualistic practice. Whereas, as we have seen, Rene Girard's notion of the scapegoat mechanism serves to illuminate the Viennese Actionists' artistic practice, Athey seems to have been influenced by George Bataille, to whom he has even dedicated a number of his works.

[43] In 1991, Müehl was jailed for seven years for abuse of minors, rape and drug offences in a commune he had created in 1972, in Austria. Although this happened after the artists stopped working together, Müehl's conviction had a negative impact to the reception of the Viennese Actionism.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

In order to analyse Athey's work through the lens of Bataille's philosophy, it is important to introduce the basic premises of his perspective to the sacred as summarised in his essay "The Psychological Structure of Fascism". Drawing on Marxist theory, Bataille refers to the two psychological structures of society: the homogeneous and the heterogeneous. Social homogeneity is based on production and capital accumulation for economic development, where each man's worth is measured against what he produces. The homogenous members of a society are obliged to follow certain rules while any kind of violence is prohibited, in order for the society to be productive. On the contrary, he defines the heteregenous as "everything resulting from unproductive expenditure […]. This consists of everything rejected by *homogenous* society as waste or as superior transcendent value" (*Visions of Excess* 142). The heterogeneous structure of society refers to its leaders, who "are manifestly treated by their followers as sacred persons" (Bataille, *Visions of Excess* 144). Even though the leaders disrupt the order of things, this is done in a way that aids the continuation of a society and allows growth and change. Based on these grounds, the philosopher further argues that when man is involved in effective and valuable activity, he is reduced to a tool and a product, where value and death are the twin poles of the same axis. Bataille exhibits a strong fascination with fascism,[44] due to the fact that it is defined by power-seeking actions which demand "not only passion but ecstasy" (Bataille, *Visions of Excess* 154). While in democracy "the State derives most of its strength from spontaneous homogeneity, which it fixes and constitutes as the rule", in fascism, leaders stand out as something other (Bataille, *Visions of Excess* 139). "Whatever emotions their actual existence as political agents of evolution provokes, it is impossible to ignore the force that situates them above men, parties, and even laws: a force that disrupts the regular course of things, the peaceful but fastidious homogeneity powerless to maintain itself", Bataille explains (*Visions of Excess* 143). However, the philosopher also takes a critical stance towards fascist leaders since their ultimate goal is to satisfy their own economic needs, using military violence to control, dominate, and profit from society's homogenous sphere. Due to this, their heterogeneity is compromised for financial gain. What Bataille envisions is an "acephalic community", "a community based neither on the implicit servitude of the bourgeoisie nor on the incarnation of violence in the fascist leader, supported by military power. The community of Bataille's experiments is

[44] On Bataille's complex approach to fascism see for example: William Pawlett's "Politics and Community" in *George Bataille: The Sacred and Society* and "Fascism, Terrorism and Hatred" in *Violence, Society and Radical Theory: Bataille, Baudrillard and Contemporary Society.*

KAROLINA LAMPROU

precisely *acephalous*, without a head, its bond effected through a relation to the experience of sovereignty", which for the philosopher is directly linked with transgressive experience (French 58). This is precisely how, for Bataille, one enters the realm of the sacred: through acts of transgression. It is important to note that transgression for the philosopher is not treated as having negative connotations but is something that affirms limits, by precisely moving beyond them. As Michel Foucault explains in his essay "A Preface to Transgression", which is dedicated to Bataille, transgression "contains nothing negative, but affirms limited being—affirms the limitless into which it leaps as it opens the zone to existence for the first time". At the same time, "this affirmation contains nothing positive: no content can bind it, since, by definition, no limit can possibly restrict it" (Foucault, *Language, Counter-Memory, Practice* 35-6). For Bataille, it is through transgression that society will be transformed, as long as transgression lasts for a limited period of time and takes place within the heterogeneous part of society. As I will demonstrate, Athey's transgressive art performs the Bataillean sacred, since, as I will argue, his performances take place in a heterochrony, which serves as a sort of slice of time in the spacetime continuum, allowing, in this way, the transcendence of laws and norms. Athey's work, as an artistic practice, takes place at a temporary distance from the artist's ordinary life and identity, which is necessary, according to Bataille, for excess energy to be released.

Even though, according to popular belief, the sacred is associated with the holy, a more accurate definition, for the philosopher, is that it is located on the threshold between the holy and the cursed or the profane. It is precisely because it relates to terms normally understood as opposites (i.e. veneration and horror) that it constitutes such a difficult and complex notion. Bataille notes that in older times, when the death of a king occurred, "a boundless despair" was experienced, which was expressed in killings, rapings, pillagings, uncontrolled sexual activities etc. Therefore, when man was faced with death he returned to the "animality from which he started" (*Accursed Share, vol II* 90). However, this return is not explained as a complete abandonment,[45] but as a temporary disruption of the dominant order so that a festival would take place, offering the experience of the sacred. The notion of the festival is central in Bataillean discourse since it serves to create order anew. For this to happen, total chaos needs to precede the emergence of the new. Chaos is associated with violence, erotic excess,

[45] The concept of abandonment is most important in Bataillean discourse; therefore, I will refer to it extensively in this section in order to elaborate my argument. Notably, abandonment for Bataille is not perceived as something negative but as what signals re-birth.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

and sacrifice. During the festival, no productive action should take place: The importance of the festival lies in the expenditure and excess that it requires. In this way, man is able to enjoy the present moment in isolation of any speculations or prospects. For Bataille, those who disrupt gain-seeking experiences and engage in excessive behaviour open up themselves to what he calls the sovereign moment. According to Bataille, sovereignty cannot be possessed, but only experienced. The festival is therefore "the culmination of a movement toward autonomy, which is, forevermore, the same thing as man himself" (*Accursed Share*, *vol II* 91). It is precisely for this reason that for Bataille the festival does not relate to animality, but to the sacred. The philosopher refers to laughter as a central characteristic of the festival, which also sets apart humans from animals, as animals are incapable of laughter: "Nothing exists that doesn't have this *senseless sense*—common to flames, dreams, uncontrollable laughter", Bataille explains (*The Impossible* 20). Therefore, the senseless sense might be the source of the new possibilities that the sacred entails, adding a deeper meaning to this temporary interruption of order, in which destruction and sacrifice are celebrated.

The concept of sacrifice is of seminal importance for Bataille and, simultaneously, for the development of my argument. Bataille discusses sacrifice both in a literal sense, arguing that sacrificial rituals should reappear within the civilised world through the form of the festival, and in a metaphorical sense, connecting it with eroticism. By approximating death, Bataille argues, man feels that his life is worthy; hence, he becomes less inclined to release excess energy in crimes and wars. It is important to explain that sacrifice, as well as death, should not be seen as one-dimensional. There is a double meaning to it, and, as Dennis King Keenan explains, sacrifice is "articulated by that moment when death as possibility turns into death as impossibility" (45). In Bataille's words:

> In order for man to reveal himself ultimately to himself, he would have to die, but he would have to do it while living—watching himself ceasing to be. In other words, death itself would have to become (self) consciousness at the very moment that it annihilates the conscious being […] Thus man must live at the moment that he really dies, at all costs, or he must live with the impression of really dying. (Bataille, *The Bataille Reader* 287)

Bataille links erotic experience with "the impression of dying", hence with the notion of sacrifice. As the philosopher argues, erotic union is accompanied by sacrifice since the unity between two people requires a partial loss of the self: "I must emphasise

KAROLINA LAMPROU

that the female partner in eroticism was seen as the victim, the male as the sacrificer, both during the consummation losing themselves in the continuity established by the first destructive act", Bataille explains (*Erotism* 18). Eroticism for Bataille, which signifies the transgression of boundaries and excess, has the ability to destroy us. It is precisely this danger, along with the loss of meaning which occurs during the erotic union, that makes great passion feasible. According to the philosopher, "[c]ircumcisions and orgies show adequately that there is more than one link between sexual laceration and ritual laceration; the erotic world itself has been careful to designate the act in which it is fulfilled as a 'little death' […] the execution of a king and the sexual act only have in common the fact that they unify through the loss of substance" (*Visions of Excess* 251).

Keenan, drawing on Maurice Blanchot, argues that, like revolution, death as a possibility conveys a sense of absolute freedom since the one who is not afraid to die has complete control over his/her own life. It is exactly at this point that death does not have any importance, that is, when death as possibility turns into death as impossibility, due to the fact that life is empowered precisely through the possibility of death. Therefore, the impossibility of death makes it necessary for "death itself to become (self-)consciousness at the very moment that it annihilates the conscious being" (Keenan 52). For this to be plausible though, as Keenan argues with regard to Bataille's work, "the moment of death requires spectacle, representation or fiction" (Keenan 52). It is important at this point to draw on Bataille's concept "l'informe", which has been translated as "formlessness", introduced in the surrealist journal *Documents* 1929-30. Drawing on this concept, Bataille refers to the formlessness of the world, which he explains as something that cannot be defined, described, or have a form but "a term that serves to bring things down in the world" (*Visions of Excess* 31). This relates to the philosopher's notion of "base materialism", which, like "formelessness", transgresses ideal human values and recognises the "helplesseness of superior principles" (*Visions of Excess* 51). Bataille's notion of materialism reflects "a sinister love of darkness, a monstrous taste for [the] obscene and lawless..." (*Visions of Excess* 48). If we apply this concept to art, it can be explained as celebrating debasement in art, linking it to popular notions of the philosopher's oeuvre, such as failure, transgression, obscurity, and destruction. In my analysis below, I will show how Athey's work mobilises Bataille's concept of formlessness, due to the pivotal role that the notions of failure, destruction, and transgression hold in the artist's work. Athey's performances, in line with Bataille's theory, can be perceived as opposing the Kantian elevating and

KAROLINA LAMPROU

transcendent experience of art. Instead, the artist's transgressive art criticises homogeneous social structures through providing his audience with an experience of what Karmen MacKendrick defines as "counterpleasures".

MacKendrick, in *Counterpleasures*, launches her discussion on the experience of "odd-seeming" pleasures drawing on Bataille's understanding of transgression, and she shows how counterpleasures originate in the disruption of socially acceptable forms. According to MacKendrick, the intensity of counterpleasures, may lead to the renegotiation of our role as productive entities and sets in motion psychological mechanisms that allow the emergence of a new subjectivity. The author puts forward the argument that transgression can normalise "counterpleasures" precisely because a "marginal element" is assimilated "into the mainstream" (17). Hence, transgressive pleasure exposes the fact that the boundaries between pleasure and pain are, in fact, narrow, providing the subject who experiences pleasure through pain with the opportunity to subvert Western notions of sexuality and gender, which is what, as I argue, Athey attempts to achieve through his work. For a better understanding of Athey's artistic practice, it is important to briefly refer to the historical moment the performances I discuss are situated in.

Due to the fact that Athey was very active during the AIDS epidemic which started in the 1980s, many of his works make overt references to it. Athey's work, during the 1990s, became the target of the conservatives in the US who were against the funding of "provocative art" for violating "cultural boundaries and bodily properties" (Johnson, "Does a Bloody Towel Represent the Ideals of the American People?" 86). Specifically, Athey's *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life,* performed in 1994 at the Minneapolis Walker Art Center, suffered from a defunding of around $150. As already explained in the introduction, the NEA attributed this unfair decision to Athey's supposed exposure of his audience to HIV-infected blood, although this was not true. After this performance, the White House decided to reduce the NEA overall budget by 2%, rendering Athey, as Cynthia Carr correctly notes, "a scapegoat in the culture war" (336). According to the art critic Jennifer Doyle, "the battle against homophobia" had escalated with the AIDS crisis, intensifying homophobic behaviours within the art community too. At the same time, due to the fact that many lives had been lost because of AIDS, "[a]rtists, activists, and scholars found themselves asking questions such as: 'How do we mourn the loss of people whose lives have already been ignored, erased, or stigmatized as degenerate?' and 'How do we assert the importance of gay underground sexual culture in a society that associates same-sex and non-monogamous

KAROLINA LAMPROU

sexual practices with disease and death?'" (Doyle, "Queer Wallpaper" 346). Due to the moral panic and lack of understanding about how HIV is transmitted along with the implicit connections with gay men, Athey's work, especially during the late 1980s and 1990s, demonstrates a preoccupation with the spectre of infection, his own diagnosis as HIV-positive, and especially with the illness and deaths of Athey's friends who had suffered from AIDS. For this reason, Athey, through his artistic practice, refuses to be condoned in the oppressive and discriminating socio-political structures that reduce HIV positive bodies to stereotypes associated with infection, depravity, weakness, and femininity.

I will start my analysis of Athey's work with *Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains*, which took place in Stanford and Glasgow, in 2013 and 2014 respectively, and forms the fourth work of the *Incorruptible Flesh Series.* It is important to note that all four installations in the *Incorruptible Flesh Series* were inspired by and are dedicated to HIV-infected bodies. With his work, the artist exposes his eroticised homosexual, infected body, foregrounding the Bataillean relationship between eroticism and death. It is through such representations that he asks the audience to accept what is rejected and considered threatening to current socio-political structures and norms. This is what marks his work as political, despite being at the same time genuinely personal. The artist, who, as mentioned, is HIV positive himself, aims at showing the public that the media-circulated images of unhealthy and decayed HIV-positive individuals are promoting a false view of these bodies. In fact, HIV symptoms may not appear for years or, in fact, never, something that Athey's toned and muscular body strongly affirms. As Mary Richards argues in *Resisting the Limits of the Performing Body*, it is by blurring the boundaries between pleasure and pain, feminine and masculine, interior and exterior, sickness and health that Athey's work resists patterns of social and sexual "patriarchally determined hierarchies" (231). By blurring these boundaries, it can be therefore argued that he helps the audience to disassociate the homosexual and/or HIV positive body from the fear of infection and disease. Athey, in many of his performances, conceals his penis so that it looks severed or hides his genitalia in an inflated bulbous balloon,[46] so as to obscure his sexual identity and "desexualise" or portray a grotesque image of his genitalia. There are a number of recurring elements which aim at blurring binaries, like for instance the use of sex toys, anal beads and vibrators, and the long blonde wig. In the context of Athey's work, the sex

[46] See for example *Incorruptible Flesh (Dissociated Sparkle), Martyrs and Saints, Trojan Whore.*

KAROLINA LAMPROU

toys, which are normally used to provide pleasure, sometimes add to the suffering of the artist.

> In my performances, sex acts are used to make statements about politics, identity and physical boundaries. They can be intentionally repulsive. They can be ironically humorous. Or both. In the 'Post-AIDS Boy-Boy Show' [in *Deliverance*] Brian Murphy and I wear layers of opaque-orangey-colored suntan makeup, and I read a story about muscle queens and HIV re-infection while we ride a double-headed dildo in every imaginable position. It usually makes a mixed/art crowd slightly uncomfortable. 20 walked out in Amsterdam last July, the artist notes. ("Sex with Ron" 126)

Like in most of his performances, the title, *Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains*, has religious connotations, depicting HIV positive individuals as martyrs, whose flesh is incorruptible and whose wounds, therefore, can (through faith) be healed. At the same time, as the term "Messianic" alludes, Athey uses his work to perform a kind of spiritual rebirth: a rebirth from a very problematic childhood and from a culture war against AIDS which has affected his work. Nonetheless, as the artist admits, after he was tested HIV positive in 1986, he often felt like a "living corpse" and even planned his foreseeable death. Fortunately, as the artist repeatedly notes in his interviews, he currently is in his "post-AIDS era" since he feels healthy ("Perverse Martyrologies" 535). The idea of the "living corpse", however, is reiterated in his performances and is accompanied by the anticipation of re-birth. For the purpose of *Messianic Remains*, Athey inserts needles in his face which prevent his eyes from closing and, like a living corpse, positions himself on a steel structure with a phallic shaped bat inserted in his chin, reminiscent of the fake beard of Egyptian Pharaohs that evoked their status as living gods (Hoetger 60). The audience is then requested by his two assistants to wear surgical gloves and apply balm to Athey's body. The fact that the members of the audience are obliged to wear surgical gloves to be allowed to touch Athey's body evokes fears of contamination with regard to the HIV-infected body. This image also has religious connotations as it is reminiscent of Mary and Maria Magdalene's anointing Jesus' dead body with oil. At the same time, Athey's staging the spectacle of caring for a dead body reveals what Bataille describes as "the sacramental element of continuity through the death of a discontinuous being to those who watch it as a solemn rite. A violent death disrupts the creature's discontinuity; what

KAROLINA LAMPROU

remains, what the tense onlookers experience in the succeeding silence, is the continuity of all existence with which the victim is now one" (*Erotism* 82).

Fig. 10. Athey, Ron, *Spill Festival of Performance, Ron Athey Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains,* 2014, by Guido Mencari.

Violence is not only experienced by the victim, in this case Athey, but also those who witness it, in the form of psychic violence. This kind of violence, for Bataille, is what disrupts our normal sense of the world not because we empathise with the victim, as the philosopher maintains, but because of human fascination with death, violence, horror, and disgust. As mentioned in the introduction, through the spectacle of death, which, in Athey's case, is experienced at minimal distance, the members of the audience are confronted with Bataille's notion of "formlessness", which "break[s] up the subject and re-establish[es] it on a different basis" (Bataille, *Manet* 103). Most of the members of the audience, reluctantly or not, touch the artist's body in pain while some refuse to approach. A woman even faints, probably due to the intensity of the moment (Irvine, "Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains"). The audience, therefore, by touching the artist's body, can be seen as coming in contact with the idea of the corpse. This forms a very important aspect of Bataillean discourse since contact with corpses is a dominant taboo in the domain of prohibitions. For Bataille, the corpse, filth, decomposing flesh, decay, and death all evoke analogous ideas. It is through contact with death that one acquires self-consciousness. Bataille explains the feelings experienced when one comes in contact with death as the reflection of our desire to kill. This is because the dead person for primitives was a presumed murder victim, as, according to Bataille, primitives did not believe that death is natural. The response to such horror and decay offered by the sight of the corpse comes in the form of "proliferation, of

KAROLINA LAMPROU

renewal, of freshness", after which, ultimately, follows annihilation (Bataille, *The Bataille Reader* 256).

Echoing Bataille, Athey's transgressive art is located at the heart of eroticism. As Amelia Jones puts it: "[His] art activates an erotic and social connection, a matter of feeling and thought intertwined […] Through this activation, its meaning and value take place" ("How Ron Athey Makes me Feel" 161). Athey, therefore, uses "the frame of the aesthetic to pull us back into social/erotic relation with one another" (Jones, "How Ron Athey Makes me Feel" 157). This idea is thrown into relief in Athey's *Solar Anus*, which he dedicates to Bataille, and *Judas Cradle,* where the act of anal penetration seems to be celebrating Bataille's idea of sacrifice that the artist enacts in both of these works. What is particularly interesting in both works is that the artist uses objects that are commonly used to obtain sexual pleasure simultaneously with medieval torture tools, or, in other cases, he uses objects for sexual pleasure in an unorthodox, sadomasochistic manner, that is, to harm and cause himself tremendous pain. In this way, he transgresses the boundaries of pleasure, performing acts of sexual satisfaction which is attained through the use of objects that normally cause pain. Mackendrick, in her discussion of Marquis de Sade's transgression of sexual boundaries in sadomasochistic acts, argues that boundaries only exist as "objects for play", and she holds that the explanatory power of such transgression is of seminal importance in understanding the notion of "queer pleasure" in general (18). As she argues, queer pleasure is found in "the lack of fit, a delight in resistance itself […] a delight in the mobility of the structures of power, the rupturing of boundaries" (18). Crossing boundaries necessitates the subject's transgression of his/her own limits, and the overcoming of "subjectivity" as well as "the discipline of productive efficiency" (Mackendrick 106). It is through such acts of excess, Mackendrick argues, that "the powers that constitute the 'good' subject" are challenged while the right to our own agency and subjectivity is reclaimed (108). More precisely, the excessive nature of counterpleasures and the concomitant reclamation of agency counters rational, "consumer oriented" capitalist notions of "efficiency and productivity" that underscore "an aim or goal, an effect or product" (Mackendrick 110).

In a similar vein, for Bataille, a loss of awareness and subjectivity results from acts of transgression, which he sees in a positive light in so far as it enables the reconstitution of subjectivity. As I will argue in my discussion of Athey's *Solar Anus*, the artist, engaging in sadomasochistic (auto)erotic acts, transgresses the boundaries of what is perceived as socially acceptable, rejects the normative orderings of a "good

KAROLINA LAMPROU

subject" and, ultimately, celebrates "queer pleasure". In *Solar Anus*, Athey, drawing on the self-photographic portraits of Pierre Molinier and Bataille's homonymous essay, positions himself at the beginning of the performance in a way that fully exposes his illuminated anus which has a tattooed rayed sun around it. Shortly after, he unravels a long string of pearls (anal beads) out of it, and, finally, using a phallus-shaped heel, he repeatedly penetrates his anus. As in the previously discussed performance, Athey, proceeds with pinning a number of hooks in his face that prevent him from closing his eyes and, finally, wears a large crown on his head. In my view, Athey in this work, through the erotic act of anal penetration, enacts Bataille's moment of transgression. Eroticism, for the philosopher, is the most powerful means to achieve a continuity that would end "our discontinuous mode of existence as defined and separate individuals" (Bataille, *Erotism* 18). This is because, according to Bataille, during an erotic act that does not have the purpose of reproduction, which for Bataille belongs in the realm of violence, man is involved in unproductive, transgressive activity. Eroticism, then, which for Bataille is expressed in taboo-breaking and temporary transgression, can affirm life because of the desire aroused by transgressing prohibition (*Erotism* 71). It therefore belongs in the realm of violence, in opposition to the realm of production which includes work and reason, rendering man a discontinuous being. Due to this, eroticism is an inner experience that presupposes a sacrifice in its longing for continuity beyond death (Bataille, *Erotism* 23-4*)*. Only during erotic union for non-reproductive purposes, which dissolves the boundaries of human subjectivity, and in death one becomes a continuous being, according to the philosopher. "The unity of the domain of eroticism opens to us through a conscious refusal to limit ourselves within our individual personalities. Eroticism opens the way to death. Death opens the way to the denial of our individual lives", Bataille argues (*Erotism* 24). During sexual intercourse, one experiences a violent dissolution of the body's boundaries and a loss of identity which allow man to take a glimpse of continuity, while in death we recover the continuity we lost during birth. Both eroticism and death, therefore, interrupt the world order of things.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Fig. 11. Athey, Ron.*Solar Anus.* "Undercover Surrealism and the Vision of Georges Bataille show." 2006, Hayward Gallery, London.

Bataille argues that such an act of erotic transgression "does not happen under exactly similar conditions between individuals of the same sex" (*Erotism* 99). Athey, by contrast, insists on foregrounding the transgressive force of anal penetration. For Athey "coitus is emphatically queer, autoerotic, and enacted as art" (Jones, "How Ron Athey Makes me Feel" 157). Clearly, Bataille's theory is based upon his own life and experiences and, due to this, he could not appreciate the intensity involved in the sexual union between two individuals of the same sex. As Athey admits in an interview to Dominic Johnson, with this performance, he intended to queer Bataille in order to shift away from Bataille's fetishisation of a young girl's anus to a celebration of his own homosexual anus. This highlights the biographical nature of Athey's work, the effect his works have on his life and, at the same time, the meaning and effect that he wishes to convey to his audience. By exposing his "homosexual asshole", Athey responds to the "homophobic repulsion at the idea of the rectum as a receptacle for sex; or further, a more general body-phobia" ("Perverse Martyrologies" 533). In these acts where the body's unity is challenged, the artist not only challenges the limits of artistic practice but also the limits of the body. He challenges the body's unity by exposing its open orifices, its bleeding wounds, and its abject fluids along with its vulnerability, exhaustion, and, sometimes, its repulsiveness. At the same time, he challenges the limits of artistic practice by blurring the boundaries between the enacted and the real, art and

KAROLINA LAMPROU

sex.[47] As Athey comments, he turns the body inside out and exposes what is supposed to remain inside and considered threatening in order to "honour[ing] (as he likes to put it) the asshole as a kind of sacred site of potential eroticism: 'skin is the deepest organ, wide is the new deep'" (Jones, "How Ron Athey Makes me Feel" 155). For Julia Kristeva, when abject fluids, such as urine, vomit, mucus, which are supposed to remain "inside the body", leak from orifices, they cause the "breaking down of a world" and its meaning. The experience of abjection, as a social and psychological process, is what "disturbs identity, system and order" (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 4). At the same time, such experience, Kristeva argues, exposes the ambiguity that borders represent and leads to their redefinition (*Powers of Horror* 10). In the context of Athey's performance, the body, or in this case the homosexual body, exposes its abject inside which is then transformed into "an image of glorious sensuality, aural and emotionally charged opulence. For Jones, "*Solar Anus* […] marks the power of Athey's work to make us feel... to open our bodily contours to unpredictable fluids, and correlatively, sensory input" ("How Ron Athey Makes me Feel" 155).

On contemplating Athey's performance, one may therefore appreciate the violent experience of eroticism that the taboo breaking act of anal penetration offers. The anus is usually associated with excrement, repulsion, and transgressive sexual intercourse. Notably, the anus in Bataille is the parody of the sun, while the "solar anus" represents coitus, indecency, and criminal abundance. Bataille identifies himself with the sun, though not with its illuminating qualities but with its aggressive and destructive qualities. As Bataille says: "I am the *Jesuve*, the filthy parody of the torrid and blinding sun", a sun that loves the night and has coitus with it (*Visions of Excess* 9). This is because, although the sun brings life to earth, at the same time, it may bring death due to the excess energy and radiance it releases. This idea is also found in his passage "The Rotten Sun". Bataille's "rotten sun", which can destroy the one who gets too close, challenges the notion of the platonic sun which, due to its illuminating qualities, is a metaphor of goodness, "serenity and spiritual elevation" (*Visions of Excess* 57). Athey, in his turn, in a Bataillean fashion, foregrounds the self-destructive elements inherent in human nature. His performance is like Bataille's sun: aggressive, sexual, and excremental. The sun, which represents the highest form of elevation in Western philosophical tradition and a metaphor for absolute knowledge, is juxtaposed

[47] For illuminating accounts of this blurring see Mary Richards who has extensively dealt with this topic in her work "Ron Athey, A.I.D.S. and the Politics of Pain", in her PhD thesis, *Resisting the Limits of the Performing Body*, and, also, the book *Pleading in the Blood: The Art and Performances of Ron Athey.*

KAROLINA LAMPROU

to the anus, which represents the lowest elemental forms, due to its association to excrement and filth. Through the repetitive movement of penetrating the anus, Athey, in Bataille's words, produces "an erotic movement that burglarises the ideas contained in the mind, giving them the force of a scandalous eruption" (*Visions of Excess* 9). Bataille, then, undermines the notion of absolute knowledge by attacking and subverting the sun as the edifice of idealism in Western tradition. Similarly, Athey burglarises heteronormative structures. To this end, he stages this moment of the "scandalous eruption in the course of which the asexual noble heads of the bourgeois will be chopped off" (Bataille *Visions of Excess* 8). In other words, just like Bataille envisioned a revolution against bourgeois productive ideology from below, the proletarian masses, Athey too goes against the very same productive ideology promoted by an ideology of hegemonic masculinity, which renders certain minorities, such as homosexual and/or HIV-infected individuals, abject.

What is important for Bataille is not to confuse eroticism with animal sexuality; "eroticism is that within man which calls his being into question" (*Erotism* 29). Both Athey and Bataille use the idea of eroticism as a determining factor of human existence. It is through the intensity, the excess, and the reality of pain and violence entailed in the erotic moment that man's potential to move beyond the restrictive socio-political norms and embrace his existence can be activated. In *Solar Anus,* before wearing the crown, Athey experiences Bataille's sentiment of abandonment and humiliation, which can be witnessed from the sweat and the blood that leak from his body and the suffering and exhaustion he feels while inserting the hooks in his skin. After experiencing Bataille's "sentiment of defeat, of humiliation, always provoked by death" (*Accursed Share, vol II* 89), Athey is positioned on a leather throne wearing a gold crown, conveying in this way the sovereign moment of absolute freedom that the one who is not afraid to die experiences.

Fig. 12. Athey, Ron. *Solar Anus*, 2006, by Regis Hertrich, Hayward Gallery, London.

The fact that by the end of the performance the artist is seen to be wearing a crown can be taken as a reference to Bataille's sovereign subject, which refuses to engage in activities of utility and breaks away from any restraint, coming to embody the excess associated with the experience of eroticism. For Bataille, sacred horror can only be experienced in a weakened state, in the context of which the state of pleasure is not perceived as contrary to pain and sacrifice. Only in this state, according to Bataille, full sovereignty and heterogeneity can be manifested in human beings. The artist, in his turn, celebrates the notions of desire, sexuality, ecstasy, death, and destruction, which, in both Bataille's and Athey's view, define human nature. The audience, witnessing the force of erotic experience, is simultaneously urged to accept embodied and finite existence.

According to the artist, "[i]t's always been important to reveal the self-destructive elements in [my] work" (Johnson, "Introduction: Towards a Moral and Just Psychopathology" 29). Athey's body, in the course of his work, is often tormented.[48] It is such instances that mark his performances as authentic experiences, Athey claims. The fact that Athey, both as an artist and a human being, is not restrained by the fear of hurting himself allows him to transcend the limits which, in Bataille's words, define a

[48] For example, for the purpose of *Judas Cradle*, Athey climbs on a Judas cradle. To explain, a Judas cradle is a sharp pyramid-shaped seat-device which was allegedly used to eventually tear the orifice of the anus or the vagina by placing the victim on its edge. It is considered a very cruel device since it causes the victim's death either by the infection it may cause or due to the wounds from the deep penetration. The pyramid of course was waxed and polished, so the artist would not get infected, though the painfulness of the process was not nullified.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

being as discontinuous. Therefore, Bataillean excess is evident throughout the performance: the pain, the blood, the exhaustion, the suffering are not mere parts of a performance but authentic experiences that occur in front of an audience, rendering them participants. This idea is also explored in the previous work I have discussed, *Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains*, where, as noted, the members of the audience are asked to touch and apply balm to Athey's body. Hence, due to their active participation in the performance, they cease to be mere spectators and become active participants instead.

As in *Solar Anus*, in *Self Obliteration*, eroticism and transgression hold a central role. Athey appears on stage completely naked, wearing a long blonde hair wig and positioned between two large pieces of glass, placed on his hands and knees. Doyle explains that Athey's look is actually inspired from Marlene Dietrich, who, "used all sorts of old-school cosmetic and tricks to create her look, including (apparently), 'gruesome mini-facelifts (achieved by weaving her hair into tight braids, pinning them tightly to her scalp with surgical needles, and then topping it all with sexy wigs)" (Doyle, "I.E. You Belong to Me"). Athey, then, starts combing the wig in a very violent manner while the brush keeps hitting the floor, producing in this way a disturbing noise. At the same time, he assumes several sexual poses, occasionally inserting his fist into his anus. After some time, he takes the wig off and the needles that held the wig to his scalp appear. Shockingly, the needles were piercing the skin on his head. At this point, blood starts to drip from his head. Shortly after, there is an enormous amount of blood all over the space where Athey is performing. For the last part of the performance, Athey takes a piece of glass and rubs it against his bloody, naked body, producing once more a loud noise, while Athey is in an apparently struggling to move his body, due to the fact that his body sticks to the surface from the blood. Doyle informs us that the glass functions as "a substitute for another body", serving as a metaphor of a violent erotic joining of two bodies (Doyle, "I.E. You Belong to Me"). Commenting on the sex scenes in Athey's work, Doyle argues that sexual activity in this context is "more a means than an end. The point of sex as it happens in Ron's work is not to meet the spectator's desire. Not is the point to frustrate or shock…Sex is a part of his work in the same way that sexuality is, namely as something that shapes the space of transgression" ("Sex with Ron" 127).[49] The artist's work is often charged with erotic

[49] At this point, Doyle briefly connects Athey's work to Foucault's "Preface to Transgression", which he wrote for Bataille. In this chapter, however, my aim is to offer a more detailed analysis of the obvious connections between Athey's artistic practice and Bataille's thought.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

elements for the purpose of facilitating Athey's transgressive behaviour that he enacts in his performances. This work, therefore, has an intense, violent, and, at the same time, sensual character, which reflects Bataille's description of erotic experience as inseparable from pain and death. In an interview to Johnson, Athey explains that with this performance, he wanted to fulfill his "deepest desire", that is, "to rupture to obliteration in an ecstatic state, specifically through hard sex", echoing in this way Bataille's notion of desire as something that signifies transgression and excess, due to its ability to destroy us (Athey, "Perverse Martyrologies"). Like Bataille, who links the passion experienced in an erotic act as something that is only plausible with the loss of meaning, Athey, as he argues, in the course of this work, "abandon[s] conventions, emotional safeguarding and complacency, aimed to be experienced as Bataille's "little death" ("Perverse Martyrologies" 541).

The concern with sacrifice in Athey's work is not only shown through his enactment of erotic and transgressive experiences but, very often, through the religious context of his performances and the sacrificial elements he chooses to incorporate in his work since they held a crucial role in his upbringing. In the aforementioned works, the nails in the artist's head which hold the wig pinned to his head could allude to the thorns of Christ's crown while the artist, re-enacting the Eucharist, offers his body and blood as communion to the audience to build a bond with them and render his performance a sacred experience. It is important to note that Athey was raised as an "ecstatic" by his Pentacostal family. Athey's family, particularly his mother and grandmother, expected him to become a minister and often forced him into the ecstatic states of the baptism in the spirit.[50] This is something that he did not want and reacted against by running away from home when he was fifteen. The impact of homophobic and moralising religious dogmas along with the idea that he would become a second Jesus are easily traceable in his work. Although the artist uses Christian allusions and imagery, this is not with the purpose of glorifying the dogma he was raised to believe in, but, arguably, in order to subvert the connotations and the symbolism it possesses for him. Evidently, his upbringing haunted him for several years, causing him to suffer as he was not prepared to accept or understand his homosexual desire. It is when he started ritualising his past traumatic experience that he succeeded in reclaiming both his body and his sexuality. Due to this, although every performance has its own distinctive character and purpose, there are certain shared features in all of Athey's works, specifically,

[50] For example, as the artist notes in his discussion of his childhood: "By the age of 9, I spoke in tongues, danced in the spirit, and was prone to visions and ecstatic catatonic states" ("Gifts of the Spirit" 53).

KAROLINA LAMPROU

elements that allude first to religion and second to Athey's infected body. The way he structures his performances and incorporates these elements is what ultimately helps him to achieve the ritualisation of his past, which, as he often admits, haunts him. Lydia Lunch comments with regard to Athey's self-inflicted violence: "The cycle of abuse changes course only once you have decided to own your own self-flagellation, not simply as revenge or repetition of the crimes committed against you, but in celebration as ritual to all that has been willfully overcome" (194). After an eventful and difficult childhood, when Athey was oppressed and forced to lead a life he did not choose, and after several failed attempts to commit suicide, he managed to ritualise his suffering, as the artist often claims (Pagnes, "In Conversation with Ron Athey"). This is because, as I have explained in the previous part of this chapter, it is through rituals that individuals are able to confront traumatic past memories in order to re-negotiate their importance and, eventually, contain the violence they may entail.

The martydrom of St Sebastian is one that combines the concerns with religion and homosexuality, which are crucial for Athey and have determined both his life and his work's path. St. Sebastian is one of the most prominent and recurring figures in Athey's work, a figure appropriated for almost thirty years now, to address issues relating to his homosexuality, his disease, and his suffering. It is important to note that his body penetrated by arrows, along with his eroticised and feminised depiction in a number of artworks, have established St. Sebastian as the patron saint of homosexuals. I therefore agree with Richards who argues that Athey's fixation on Saint Sebastian can be attributed to two reasons: First, that he willingly suffers for his homosexuality just like the Saint suffers for his faith, and, second, because the saint's pock marks of the plague resemble the marks of the HIV-positive, infected body (Richards, *Resisting the Limits of the Performing Body* 202).

KAROLINA LAMPROU

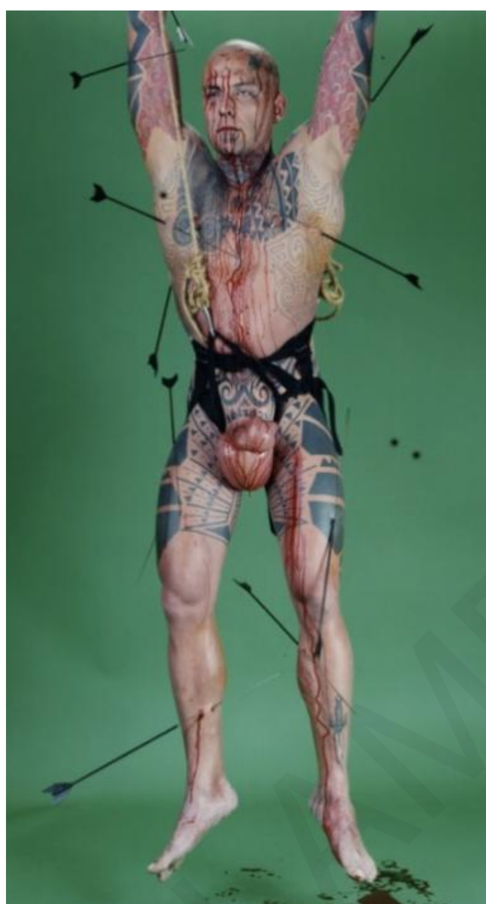

Fig. 13. Athey, Ron. *Ron Athey as St Sebastian.* 2011, by Catherine Opie.

Essentially, both Athey and St. Sebastian stand for a rehabilitation of the wounded body: St. Sebastian through his literal resurrection and Athey through his metaphorical one. Originally, *Sebastiane* constituted the second scene of his 1992 work *Martyrs and Saints.* However, he re-enacted other versions of this work on several other occasions. At the beginning of these performances Mary Rifkin appears, whose androgynous body is supported on a crutch and is pierced by arrow-like protuberances and spinal needles, adopting "a pose that is deliberately reminiscent of St. Sebastian" (Richards, *Resisting the Limits of the Performing Body* 202). The androgynous body does not react to the piercing arrows, possibly to enhance its portrayal as the body of a "martyr", who suffers because of his/her androgynous identity. Athey, on the other hand, wearing a white dress, assumes the role of the minister delivering a sermon. Athey, then, takes care of the androgynous person's wounds, leads him/her to a bath, removing the "arrows", wiping the blood from the pierced body and anointing oil on Rifkin's face, "in gestures of healing" (Richards, *Resisting the Limits of the Performing Body* 203). In the final scene, "The Crown of Thorns", alluding to Christ's Crown of Thorns, Athey meticulously inserts surgical needles in his gradually

KAROLINA LAMPROU

disfigured face and reveals other similar needles, which are implanted in his scalp. His metamorphosis continues with the appliance of white powder on his face. His infected body and the surgical needles in the place of the thorns can be seen as an act of re-using and re-appropriating in a new context the religious iconography of Christ.[51] Furthermore, just like in Christian martyrdom, the subject needs an audience to display its "suffering, discomfort, humiliation and disgrace" because "the suffering body on display, unlike the body suffering silently in the torture cell, wants to 'speak' not only its suffering, but the moral system that produced it" (Nuss 133).

According to testimonies, saints considered the spectacle of suffering and the tortures that they endured as a means of professing their faith. Witnessing (μαρτυρείν) has the double meaning of suffering and becoming a witness of one's faith. Athey often discusses the experience of his art as, simultaneously, an experience of martyrdom. Ever since he was nine years old, his grandparents and his Aunt Vena used to take him to Evangelical revival meetings to attend congregations and listen to sermons. Because of Athey's frequent attendance of such meetings, he was very often exposed to "graphic descriptions of martyrdom" and "high drama rituals" (Athey, "Gifts of the Spirit" 49). Due to this, Athey considers his performances as "modern-day martydroms" (Johnson, "Does a Bloody Towel Represent the Ideals of the American People?" 84), testifying to what he saw as his "death sentence" once he was diagnosed HIV-positive ("Perverse Martyrologies" 535). It is Athey's staging of his performances as martyrdoms that gives his audience the role of witnesses and not mere spectators or passive consumers of commercialised art. Just like Christ, Athey dies only to resurrect and as Richards argues, "his 'resurrection' occurs through our participation as witnesses to his actions and as bearers of the collective memory of all that has taken place" (*Resisting the Limits of the Performing Body* 213).

The idea of rebirth is most prominent in *4 Scenes in a Harsh Life*, in which Athey assumes a number of roles. Even though Athey's performances can be characterised as having a theatrical, or even "vaudevillian", form, as the artist admits, what takes place, the suffering, the pain, and the blood are certainly real, i.e. the "realness" is there (Johnson, "Introduction: Towards a Moral and Just Psychopathology" 13). The reason I find it fruitful to conclude my analysis of Athey by focusing on this performance is the biographical nature of the aforementioned four scenes, which reflect Athey's harsh life. Importantly, this work was presented in different versions a number

[51] On this very interesting aspect of Athey's work, see Richard's "Ron Athey, A.I.D.S. and the Politics of Pain", in *Resisting the Limits of the Performing Body*.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

of times, each time relating to a particular experience in the course of the artist's life. This work transforms from what may initially appear like a celebration of suffering and death to an affirmation of life and survival. This performance took place first in 1993, in Los Angeles, and a different version was performed in 1994 in other parts of the world, for example Minneapolis and London. It is important to note that this work is the last part of the *Torture Trilogy*. *Deliverance* and *Martyrs & Saints* preceded this work, in both the US and Europe. In order to explain the importance of this work, I should first provide an overview of the events that took place during the performance. *4 Scenes in a Harsh Life*[52] is divided into four scenes: In the first scene, "The Holy Woman", Athey is dressed as a nurse. With his fake breasts but bald head, he resembles an androgynous figure. At the same time, a naked woman with her body entirely covered and pierced by hypodermic needles with feathers attached to them dances in a sensual manner while two men in white enjoy her dancing. The woman looks like a female Saint Sebastian. Shortly after, Athey delivers a sermon in Pentecostal fashion. Then, he removes the needles from the woman's body, and, after covering her in a red robe, takes her in his arms and leaves the stage. In the second scene, "The Human Printing Press", Athey, who is in a workman's outfit, is wearing surgical gloves and cuts patterns into the bare back of an Afro-American performer, the artist Darryl Carlton who is also known as Divinity Fudge, using a scalpel. During the procedure, which is inspired by an African tribal scarring custom, Athey uses paper towels, which his assistants position on a clothesline adjusted above the audience to dry, to eventually create bloody prints. Eventually, these are passed over the heads of some members of the audience, an act that sparked a number of protests out of fear of getting infected. As already mentioned, though the audience did not risk getting infected, the media coverage and the negative publicity for this event has forced funding bodies to withdraw their funding and support. Due to this, Athey could not present his work in publicly funded venues in the United States.

"Suicide Bed" follows, where Athey, while naked, talks about how he conquered his drug addiction by covering his body in tattoos. The numerous tattoos that cover almost entirely the artist's body serve as a means of reclaiming the body. Because Athey was much oppressed by his family who raised him to be a fundamentalist minister, he did not feel that he actually determined his life and selfhood. When he came to terms with his homosexuality and, later on, when he became a heroin addict

[52] This description is based on the video clip of this work and on Ron Athey's and Lee Adams' documentary *Visions of Excess*.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

and, eventually, was diagnosed as HIV-positive, he experienced a strong resentment towards his body, probably a remnant from his religious education. It was when he started tattooing his body or do body piercings that he gradually accepted it and felt connected to it, precisely through pain. This act of tattooing, Athey notes, is what saved his life ("Deliverance: The 'Torture Trilogy' in Retrospect" 102). This is possibly because of the permanent physical change he *chose* to inflict on his body, which helped him to eventually reclaim and acknowledge his body as his own indeed. While narrating his experiences, he inserts 30 hypodermic needles in his entire body. In the last scene, "There are so many ways to say 'Hallelujah'", Athey, as a minister, firstly delivers a sermon and then officiates a wedding ritual ceremony between two androgynous figures. The marriage ritual, however, differs significantly from what we are used to, with Athey removing his clothes and the couple's clothes, revealing some bells stitched onto their skin and, then, forcing metal spears through their cheeks. By the end of the one-hour performance, Athey and the other participants are involved in what appears like a ritual sex orgy. The last part of the performance can be seen as a staging of Bataille's festival. More particularly, for the last ten minutes of the performance Athey, with the rest of group who are naked or covering their genitals with gold leaves, scream and laugh really loudly, engage in sexual behaviour, jump and dance ecstatically, and play different organs. This scene is reminiscent of Aztec or Dionysian rituals, where participants release the excessive energy and frustration they have accumulated. In the final scene of *4 Scenes in a Harsh Life*, he transitions from a minister to a shaman, as he writes in his preparatory sketches entitled "A Life of a Ritual". During this wedding ritual Athey preaches: "Where are Queers to draw their traditions from […] eastern body rituals? Wicca? Or should we continue aping straight people in America?" (qtd. in Johnson, "Does a Bloody Towel Represent the Ideals of the American People?" 68). It is important to stress that for Bataille, as already noted, the sacred can only be experienced in the realm of ritual, or within the excessive nature of the festival. The festival, therefore, is the locus *par excellence* for the sacred experience, where all limits are trespassed, taboos are eliminated, and erotic transgression is celebrated. As Bataille asserts,

> [t]he sacred is exactly comparable to the flame that destroys the world by consuming it. It is that opposite of a thing which an unlimited fire is; it spreads, it radiates heat and light, it suddenly inflames and blinds in turn. Sacrifice burns like the sun that slowly dies of the prodigious radiation whose brilliance our eyes cannot bear, but it is never isolated

KAROLINA LAMPROU

> and, in a world of individuals, it calls for a general negation of individuals as such. (*Theory of Religion* 53)

In the context of the performance as festival, Athey and the rest of the participants negate their individuality in order to be able to embrace what the festival can offer: the release of affect and the experience of the sacred. In other words, during the festival, the participants act freely, escaping their roles of social servitude which, as Bataille argues, renders individuals subjugated objects.

Through his work, Athey negates individual subjectivity, the way he was raised, and the expectations imposed on him. He empties out his subjectivity in order to open up to the destructive force of the sacred. The rituals which take place during this festive orgy offer the experience of erotic transgression, in which no socio-political norms and rules apply. The laughter, the frantic dance, the screaming, and the erotic behaviour are only few examples of the exploration of taboos, the disruption of order, and the experience of the sacred that occurs. Athey's work contains acts that are horrifying or repelling, causing strong reactions to members of the audience who even fainted at the view of Athey's tormented body and the sight of blood which, as Athey notes in an interview with Clara Malley, there is so much of it "spread out that you can taste it" ("Blood, Christ, and shock value: the gospel according to Ron Athey"). At the same time, however, the Bataillean "uncontrollable" laughter that follows what is normally repulsive is what transgresses the limits of the homogenous subject, enabling the artist's re-birth/transformation. Athey has assumed a number of identities during this performance: those of a painter, a minister, a tattoo artist etc. It can be argued that Athey enacts these roles to represent the homogenous part of society, which follows a utilitarian way of living. Athey however, assumes these roles only as stages in the process of re-birth/transformation during the festival. As Athey himself noted: "I became a nun, St Sebastian, Christ, a kinky Nazi, a house painter, a factory worker, a nurse, a eunuch, […] a Victorian woman, a fertility goddess (too complicated to go into), and sometimes even myself" (Athey, "Gifts of the Spirit" 53). His becoming a "minister" or a "shaman" reflects his influence by primitive cultures, which, as the artist states, reclaim violence as ritual ("Ron Athey: Biography"). The rebirth promised by ritual is achieved through the participation of the other performers and the witnessing of the audience. It is the collective nature of ritual that prevents the reduction of his self-inflicted violence to a mere act of self-destruction and provides the artist with power over himself and others who are affected by his performance. Based on my analysis in the second part of this chapter, it is clear that Athey pursues his rebirth; he reclaims

KAROLINA LAMPROU

identity and sexuality not only with regard to himself but also for every homosexual and/or HIV infected person. He reclaims and celebrates erotic excess as a source of life. Even the fact that he repeatedly calls his body "a living corpse" shows how he uses his infected and presumably dying body to remind the discontinuous beings we are of the need to accept death in life. With his work, he opens up a temporary space of transgression which makes re-birth possible. It is, then, the living body that prevails. What takes place on stage is a dialectic between the image of the corpse and the concept of life as re-birth, which however transforms the subject. Athey's transgressive desire is conveyed through the careful and deliberate use of humiliation, degradation, and pain. But it is also conveyed through the eventual celebration of the body and the erotic.

As I have attempted to show, both the Viennese Actionists and Athey perform the ritualisation of violence, in order to engage with dominant socio-political norms and mediate personal or collective experiences of trauma. What is most pertinent, particularly in Athey's work, is the experience of the sacred that is entailed in his ritualistic acts. What I have tried to show in this section, particularly by drawing on Athey's earlier works, is that the artist was actively involved in the cultural politics of homo/body-phobia and the AIDS crisis. By presenting his work in the US and Europe, challenging traditional notions of sexuality, pleasure, desire, and productivity, Athey with his subversive artistic practice can be seen as re-claiming the function of art in the interests of a much maligned and marginalised community, through offering his audience an experience of the sacred. Bataille's concept of the sacred has exerted great influence on Kristeva's work, though they engage with it from quite distinct perspectives, particularly as far as the nature and the intensity of the experience of the sacred is concerned. For Kristeva, the encounter with sacred is an essential component for artistic sublimation, due to the subversive potential of performing abjection. As we shall see, sublimation is the main concern of the philosopher Kristeva in her theory of abjection, which she explains as the violent rejection of what disturbs identity, system, and order, hence, what forces meaning to collapse. In the next chapter, "Approaching the Abject: Meaningful or Meaningless Suffering?", I will therefore turn my attention to how certain performance artists use their body to create a space "between the inside and the outside, between the clean and proper self and the abject other" (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 47). As I will argue, through their attention to the abject, the performance artists I am going to discuss in this chapter, seek to produce a site where the "powers of horror" associated with abjection can become transformative.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Chapter 3
Approaching the Abject: Meaningful or Meaningless Suffering?

Exposing a Traumatic Experience of Abjection

In the previous chapter, I have shown how the performance artist Ron Athey, through staging performances of erotic transgression, experiences, along with his audience, George Bataille's sacred moment. The concept of the sacred is central to the work of the psychoanalyst and philosopher Julia Kristeva. Kristeva posits the experience of the sacred at the heart of her theory of abjection. She defines this experience as a loss or a symbolic sacrifice that opens up a passage to a new life. Kristeva, in *The Feminine and the Sacred*, locates the sacred "at the intersection of the body and thought, biology and memory, life and meaning" (178). For Kristeva, the connection between the sacred and the abject needs to be traced at the origins of both community and the self. Specifically, she explains, abjection is the defensive reaction to a threatening breakdown in meaning, caused by the loss of the distinction between subject and object or between self and other. In the context of subjective development, in particular, the child comes to see the maternal as threatening, because of his/her dependence on it: Hence, the child's psychic need for the rejection of the maternal container as abject. As a psychic reaction, abjection allows the individual to form his/her subjectivity and identity, enter the symbolic world (which is the realm of signifiers and symbols produced by language and social codes), and become a speaking subject (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 52-5). For Kristeva, the rituals that take place to protect the Symbolic from falling to the side of the abject provide a sacred experience and are necessary for the formation of both subjective and collective identity.

According to both Kristeva and Bataille, the experience of the sacred that exists through transgression will transform society, as long as the transgression lasts for a limited period of time, in a space of transition. Both philosophers, then, can see the positive value of transgression as a process that affirms limits, precisely by transcending them. At the same time, despite their similarities, Bataille and Kristeva provide different accounts of the nature and the intensity of our encounters with the sacred. Kristeva engages with the sacred from a psychoanalytic rather than an anthropological and political perspective. Notably, Kristeva's most important divergence from Bataille is that she warns us against the politicisation of the sacred since she fears that once the

KAROLINA LAMPROU

sacred is integrated in political practice, it may become very dangerous. On that account, it should not be institutionalised. On the contrary, Bataille's concept of the sacred is clearly invested in a socio-political context and is most important in his revolutionary attempts to transform the Western socio-political system. Yet Kristeva considers Bataille the only anthropologist who has linked the "production of the abject to the weakness of that prohibition, which, in other respects necessarily constitutes each social order" (Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* 64). His work, then, constitutes a great inspiration for her and facilitates the development of her own theory on abjection.

Kristeva identifies two causes behind the narcissistic crisis that brings about the abject: "*Too much strictness on the part of Other*, confused with the One and the Law. *The lapse of the Other*, which shows through the breakdown of objects of desire", as Kristeva explains (*Powers of Horror* 15). In political terms, abjection is the reaction of a socio-political system confronted with its limits. Hence, socio-political reaction against the power vacuum within legislation can be paralleled to the child's reaction against the inability of the Law of the Father[53] to enforce itself as absolute, thus enabling the separation from the maternal container, either due to excessive strictness or because of its lack. A new dialectic between Symbolic Law and what threatens it needs to be produced, in order for abjection not to be misplaced and hence to abject women. As I will explain below, Kristeva suggests a "reverse reactivation of sacrifice", i.e. the mimesis of sacrifice as a means to include the maternal and the feminine that are excluded in the Symbolic realm, in this way redefining the nature of the Symbolic Law. Hence, a symbolic re-enanctment of the sacrifice endured by the female maternal body needs to occur in order to reverse the process of abjection to which it is subjected, thus reactivating its integration in the Symbolic order.

While Kristeva holds that Bataille's theories of transgression are "fascinating and rich in meaning", she states that this is not "something we can replay in the context of the end of this century", since "such forms seem relegated to an old space where people still believed in the solidity of prohibition" (Kristeva, *Sense and Non-sense of Revolt* 27-8). At present, Kristeva claims, prohibition has become obsolete, values are losing steam, power is elusive, the spectacle unfolds restlessly, and pornography is accepted and diffused everywhere. To this end, she wonders: Who can rebel and against whom or what? (*Sense and Non-sense of Revolt* 28). Nonetheless, Kristeva

[53] The child, before developing his/her own subjectivity has a passive relation with the Symbolic order, which imposes itself as a law since language is always there. As the subject develops, a more active relation with the Symbolic order is enabled as the Law of the Father, Lacan's term for the Symbolic, is not absolute.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

considers art and literature as experiences that integrate the "notion of revolt" in the process of bringing about a "rebirth of meaning for the other" (Kristeva, *Sense and Non-sense of Revolt* 8). As I will show in my analysis below, the work of the artists I am discussing use their body to create such a space of revolt, where transformation takes place. The transformation makes up for the temporary loss of meaning caused by the horror of the abject and renders possible the sublimation of this horror.

Before moving on to my analysis it is important to clarify first how I perceive and utilise the term sublimation. While Friedrich Nietzsche was the first to have used this term, Sigmund Freud drew extensively on it in his psychoanalytical theory. Specifically, Freud explained the term "sublimation" as a kind of transformation of elemental instincts, resulting in the ego's proper integration within the socio-cultural development. Hans W. Loewald, in his book *Sublimation*, re-visits this term from various perspectives. As Loewald explains, sublimation has been perceived as the conversion to a higher and purer state of existence. The opposite process, which takes the form of somatic symptoms, denotes repression, the opposite of sublimation (Loewald 38). Sublimation, therefore, counters repression, which, as anti-instinctual, impoverishes the ego, in order to allow the expression of instincts in compliance to the social order. In other words, in sublimation, the psychic reality comes to align with external reality. Referring to the mother-infant psychic matrix, Loewald argues that, in sublimation, the alienating differentiation of the infant's separation from the mother becomes a "fresh unity", one "that captures separateness in the act of uniting, and unity in the act of separating", allowing the formation of new connections to the world (Loewald 24). What I therefore consider important to re-iterate is that sublimation allows the re-formation of the Symbolic and the subject's re-integration in the social order, one enriched through the mediation of what is no longer abject. This is precisely what Kristeva suggests when she claims that "through sublimation, I keep it [the abject] under control" (*Powers of Horror* 11). Sublimation, therefore, "names" the abject to keep it under control and, in effect, re-arranges our psychic structures and symbolic existence.

In this chapter, I will draw on Kristeva's explanation of sublimation as the journey through which one takes on abjection in order to keep it under control and renew subjective as well as collective existence. My aim is to use Kristeva's theory in an attempt to illuminate a number of works which show a deep concern with the abject. I will start with the Italian-Austrian artist Gina Pane[54] with a view to showing the

[54] In her seminal work *Contract with the Skin*, Kathy O' Dell devotes a chapter, "Their Beds" to Pane's artistic practice foregrounding how her body, through her masochistic actions, acquires a symbolic

KAROLINA LAMPROU

artist's re-enactment of the gendered process of abjection. What I intend to argue is that the artist's actions aim to provide the spectators with an encounter with the "ignoble" female body, since, "it's because of the 'ignoble' that the female body is directly linked to the sacred" (Kristeva, *Feminine and the Sacred* 89). To this end, Pane's work, in my reading, attempts to subvert the revulsion associated with it. Then, drawing on Marina Abramović's *Lips of Thomas,*[55] I will elaborate on the experience of the sacred, which is viscerally bound with the experience of the abject. Finally, I will turn to Franko B's *Oh Lover Boy* to illustrate how these performances intend to work through the violence inflicted on marginalised abjected groups, such as women, homosexuals, or HIV positive subjects. In essence, I will argue that the work of these performance artists is transformative rather than representative. The aim of these artists is to sublimate the traumatic experience of violence inflicted on certain individuals or populations, transforming it into a meaningful, and hence shareable, experience.

During the 1960s and 1970s, Pane was considered "as one of the most radical artists in Europe" (Collier and Foster 7). Similarly to the rest of the works I am discussing, particular emphasis is given on the artist's body, which becomes an artistic tool functioning as a "material and expressive language", which is why her work is mostly associated with body art (Collier and Foster 7). While Pane has worked with a variety of media, such as painting, sculpture, drawing, and photography, for the purpose of this chapter, I will only draw on her actions, i.e. performances she carried out live in front of an audience or with the aim of producing photographic material to be circulated at a later stage. My aim in this chapter is to engage in a feminist reading of these performances, foregrounding her concern with reclaiming the abject female body, transforming the traumatic experience of abjection into the space of "fresh unity". Pane's concern with feminist issues has repeatedly been emphasised. She has, in particular, alluded to women's "wounds" from having to conform to Western norms that suppress women and, at the same time, privilege heterosexuality. Pane felt that wounding defined female experience, including sexuality and feminine discourse. It is this wounding that she seeks to expose, mediate, and invest with fresh meaning (Blessing, *Gina Pane* 30). As I have already mentioned, some of her performances did not take place in front of an audience but were documented and disseminated through other channels, while the duration of each action is estimated by its available documentation

status. O' Dell uses a psychoanalytic discourse to discuss Pane's work, mostly drawing on Gilles Deleuze in order to explain how such masochistic strategies require a contract between the artist and the members of the audience.

[55] Abramović's performance *Lips of Thomas* took place twice: The first in 1975 and the second in 2005.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

(Blessing, "Gina Pane's Witnesses" 14). Pane explains that the reason why she decides not to perform live relates to her view that the drawings that precede each performance, along with the photographic material documenting the actual work, which she calls *constats* (proofs), constitute a means of monitoring the audience's gaze and, consequently, of bringing about the desirable effect, which is to achieve "an aestheticizing or moralizing distance that the static single image permits" (Blessing, "Gina Pane's Witnesses" 16). According to the artist, the photographs have the effect of weakening the power exercised by the gaze of the audience, which, sometimes, may objectify the artist. Because her work is very violent indeed, the *constats* help to mediate this violence in order for her work to acquire a meaningful purpose. She, therefore, foregrounds art neither as representation nor as raw experience but, in Kristeva's words, as "the desire to make one feel —through abstraction, form, color, volume, sensation, —a real experience" (Kristeva, *Sense and Non-sense of Revolt* 11). Although other performance artists may not agree with Pane's choice of not performing in front of an audience, since they believe that the "here and the now" are very important for the success of a work, for Pane, the mediation of real experience is the most effective strategy to use in her own work. Arguably, one of the main reasons why Pane privileges art as mediation relates to her concern with transforming violence and abjection into life-affirming experiences.

Pane classifies what she calls her "actions" into three categories: The body in nature; 1969-1971, the active body in public; 1970, and, last, the body and the world; late 1970s onwards ("Gina Pane (1939-1990)"). For the purpose of my analysis, I will concentrate on the last category, in which Pane uses her body—and what the body produces—, often in a violent manner, with a view to exploring the relationship between the female body and the world. In order to contextualise Pane's work within the Kristevan framework I have delineated in my introduction to this chapter, I will firstly draw on three performances, *Autoportrait(s)*, which took place in 1973, at Stadler Gallery, Paris, *Sentimental Action,* performed in 1973, at Diagramma Gallery, Milan, and *Action Psyché (Essai),* performed the following year, at Stadler Gallery. The reason why I chose these three works is because they took place during the same period and share similar concerns. In my analysis of these performances, I will show how Pane's work directly relates to the abject, making a claim for its subversive function in the context of society. Notably, the link among these works emerges precisely in the bringing together of both the maternal and the abject.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Autoportrait(s), which was performed only for a female audience, is divided into three stages. In the first segment, "The Conditioning", Pane lies on a metal surface which is positioned above a layer of burning candles where she remains for thirty minutes. The suffering Pane experiences is obvious from her clenched fists. This segment has received a number of readings. Kathy O'Dell, for example, explains that the pain Pane endures may function as "a metaphor for the oppressive level of institutional and political domination in the early 1970s", brought about by political events such as the Vietnam War and the "post 1968-May political changes in Pane's home base of France" (50). Sam Johnson, on the other hand, associates her pain to female experience, arguing that "while the candles and bed suggested ideas of sexual love and pleasure, the manner in which Pane positioned her body around these objects caused her harm and surreptitiously threw up questions around the fixed notions of pleasure and pain" ("Five Radical Female Artists Who Used Their Body as a Canvas"). Based on this reading, her pain can be seen as analogous to the suffering and oppression women have endured for centuries. This idea was clearly reflected in the second segment, entitled "Contraction", where Pane leaves the metal structure and stands with her back to the audience facing a wall. Pane covers her hands with a handkerchief and uses a razor to cut the skin around her fingernails and lips while another woman is simultaneously shown through a projector to be doing a manicure using red nail polish, similar to the colour of blood. Similarly to her previous act, she juxtaposes images that denote a negative experience, i.e. cutting her skin with acts that are usually associated with positive experiences, i.e. having a manicure which is usually part of spa treatments and "pampering". During these acts, her voice is heard through a microphone saying: "They won't see anything" (O' Dell 48). Interestingly, the members of the audience not only get to see Pane's actions but also observe their own reactions to what they witness, from projections of the video monitors that are placed in the gallery space. Finally, for the last stage, "Rejection", Pane sits on the floor, where she gargles some milk from a bowl up to the point she chokes. By the end of the performance, the milk blends with blood from her cut lip.[56]

What is particularly interesting in this work is Pane's choice of the fluids she uses, which are directly linked to the feminine-maternal, namely, milk and blood. Blood, according to Kristeva, "becomes a lexical crossroads, an auspicious place for fascination and abjection, where death and femininity, murder and procreation, the end

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[56] The description of the performance is based on Kathy O' Dell's "Their Beds" (47-8).

KAROLINA LAMPROU

of life and vitality repel each other and join together" (*Feminine and the Sacred* 96). Kristeva's explanation is deeply rooted in the widely accepted multivalent connotations of blood, i.e. its connection with violent death and, at the same time, with fertility, which is what menstrual blood signifies. Similarly, the mother's milk has a double meaning, for, according to Leviticus Abominations, it relates to both the prohibition of an incestuous relationship and the nourishment of a child. Both substances carry connotations of the maternal and, of course, invoke the feelings of abhorrence and disgust though they are at the same time sources of attraction and fascination. They conjure up the feelings of fear and loss that the subject experiences in the course of identity formation. What I argue, therefore, is that Pane first invokes the primal abjection, which, as mentioned in the introduction of this chapter, is experienced during birth and during the infant's separation from the maternal container in the process of identity formation. Secondly, she shows the destructive effects of the association of the feminine with the maternal abject. That is: due to the feeling of disgust and repulsion that women are associated with throughout their lives, not only are they violently treated as abject, but they often see themselves as such. This is perhaps why Pane engages in self-inflicted violence through the use of abject fluids: the blood from her razor cuts and the milk that does not nourish but chokes her. In this way, as Anne Tronche suggests, not only Pane but also her viewer experience a sentiment of unease from seeing "mechanisms of nutrition reminiscent of childhood that are simultaneously suggestive of death" (67). Such images function as what "grips us strongly and draws us to the most dangerous confines of our psyche" (Tronche 67).

As noted, the significance of Pane's action also lies in the juxtaposition between her own self-inflicted suffering by burning, choking, mutilating herself and the other woman's relaxed appearance at a self-pampering moment. Indeed, one can read into this juxtaposition Pane's attempt to connect two different forms of violence targeting women: namely, a violence that targets the feminine as the abject *par excellence* and the violence of social expectations that seek to assuage the fear of the abject feminine through the objectification of female bodies and the imposition of beauty ideals and heterosexual desire. Naomi Wolf, in her work *The Beauty Myth: How Images of Beauty are Used Against Women*, insists on the impossibility of conforming to the beauty ideals imposed on women. For example, she refers to the post 1960s promotion of "little bikinis", presented as liberating for female sexuality. Instead, she argues, such images function as a means to "superimpose upon the young women chic pseudosexual scenarios that place new limits on what they can think, how they can move, and

KAROLINA LAMPROU

what they can eat" (Wolf 214). Dominant depictions of how the female body should look actually intensify the image of the anorexic/pornographic body, rendering any divergence from it abject. In my understanding, Pane exposes the violence behind such traditional representations of beauty, which, as Wolf notes, mostly rely on constructed and unrealistic images of women. Specifically, her work foregrounds an alternative perspective of female experience; one that throws into relief the pain, violence, suffering, and oppression that are inextricable from it. The juxtaposition of the two perspectives in her work exposes the psychological and physical violence that women have had to endure throughout the centuries.

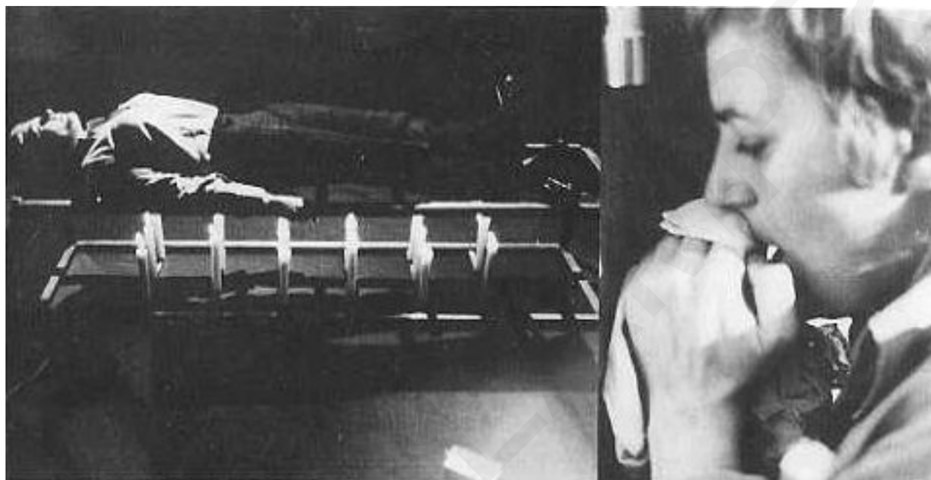

Fig. 14. Pane, Gina. *Autoportrait(s),* 1974.

In order to elaborate further on the importance of Pane's work, it is important to draw on the other two aforementioned works. In *Sentimental Action,* like *Autoportrait(s),* the audience was, once again, composed exclusively of female members. The setting consists of three rooms: in the first room, there is a rose sewn at the centre of a black velvet square and three photographs of a rose in a silver plate with the inscription "dedicated to a woman by a woman". The second room has an image of Pane, projecting her body from the waist down, revealing that she was wearing white trousers and holding some red roses close to her hip. Finally, in the third room, which is where Pane would perform, there are some aligned white circles and a word written with a chalk that says "DONNA", which means woman in Italian. At the beginning of the action, Pane appears, dressed in white, lying on the floor and holding a bouquet of white roses which she sometimes moves closer and other times further away from her body. When she stops this action, she remains in a foetal position. Then, she pierces herself with the thorns of the roses, which gradually become red because of the blood dripping on them, and repeats this action several times, using a razor blade instead. In the

background, the voices of two women reading an epistolary exchange are heard: the exchange is between Elise, who is French, and Luisa, who is Italian. The two women seem to profess their love to each other. The theme of the letters is the death of Luisa's mother, informing the audience that it was Elise who sent the roses. Pane repeats the exact same actions, however, using white roses. Finally, Frank Sinatra's "Strangers in the Night" is heard, a love song which marks the end of the performance.[57]

Regarding her choice of attire, one could argue that the white dress, which is a recurring element in Pane's work along with the white roses, symbolises the virtues of chastity and purity traditionally ascribed to and expected of women. In my view, her choice to wear white clothes, which allude to a divinised, purified female body, alludes to the centrality of purity in traditional representations of femininity. The choice of white roses is also an important element in Pane's work. The rose is the symbol of romantic love *par excellence.* Like Angela Carter in her fairy tales,[58] Pane shows that the red rose, symbol of romantic passion, is in the context of a patriarchal order inextricable from violence (i.e. desire for the violent penetration of a virginal body). Also, the title of the work, *Sentimental Action*, refers explicitly to sentimental representations of Romantic heterosexual passion. Interestingly, the rose in Pane's work is always accompanied by the infliction of pain and self-wounding. As the artist noted: "As a woman, wounding also expresses my sex, the bleeding slit of my sex" (Blessing, "Some Notes on Gina Pane's Wounds" 28). The wound, therefore, as Jennifer Blessing notes, functions as "a metaphor for the female body, the female experience, and female power" ("Some Notes on Gina Pane's Wounds" 28). Pane considers the wound as what reflects the body's fragility, pain, and "thus its 'real' existence". The artist, therefore, by wounding her body, exposes the truth behind idealised representations of femininity, an idea shared by O'Dell who argues that the wound in Pane's work goes against "socialized conceptions of the body" (27).

[57] The description of the performance is based on Jennifer Blessing's "Some Notes on Gina Pane's Wounds" (29-30).

[58] For example, Carter's "The Bloody Chamber" revolves around a marriage which is the site of violence and juxtaposes similar images to Pane's performance: the white flowers which conventionally symbolise the heroine's chastity and purity while, in fact, they stand for female objectification and sexual oppression. The white roses also form an important element in "The Tiger's Bride", a fairy tale included in the same collection. For instance, when the heroine's father asks her to forgive him for selling her to the Beast in order to repay his gambling debts, she gives him a white rose which is covered in her blood as her finger was accidentally pierced by its thorns.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Fig. 15. Pane, Gina. *Sentimental Action*. 1973, by Fabrice Seixas, Kamel Mennour Gallery.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

This idea is also prominent in her very challenging and taboo-breaking performance, *Action Psyché (Essai),* which lasted for almost half an hour, and was documented and later made available to the public though video-recordings, photos, and texts. As the *constats* reveal, Pane's "key movements and activities […] are ritualistic in their repetition and duration" (Blessing, "Gina Pane's Witnesses"14). For the purpose of this action, Pane is blindfolded and dressed in white. She first stands in front of a large mirror where she draws the image of a face, probably her own, and then she leans on a wooden frame and cuts her face, just below her eyebrows, an action which produces the simulation of bloody tears. For Pane, "vision may be bound up with blindness", in the sense that not everything is visible, not all that we see is actually true, arguably a reference to women's external appearance which often comes in contrast to the internal/invisible violence they may suffer. The notion of vision and visibility seems to be a recurrent topic in Pane's work, who, as noted, made sure that the audience not only witnessed closely the artist's actions but could also observe their own reactions in the monitor. This underlines her insistence on exposing violent representations of female experience which need to be seen. A hand-written note on this action reveals that, due to the way Pane cut her eyelids, the tears of blood that were produced become a kind of lens through which she could see "the light of a double

view of the other", illustrating the idea that, as the artist notes, "one" is the reflection of the "other". In this context, Pane seems to identify with all women who are often defined, mostly by men, as the "other". The artist, therefore, is possibly referring to a shared feminine condition that renders women as the abject other, a condition she identifies with (Tronche 68). Pane's performance seems to generate solidarity among women who can identify with each other, an idea highlighted by Pane's choice of an exclusively female audience. Pane has noted in an interview conducted by Irmeline Lebeer that: "...it was truly a mirroring space in which all the women who participated relived their own problems, whether these were with their children or their emotional problems as women" (qtd. in Tronche 68). In other words, the space of the performance can be said to have created a community of women, based on a shared experience of violence and abjection.

Following the infliction of wounds resulting in bloody tears, she continues the act of self-mutilation by cutting the area around her navel, while holding some downy feathers. During brief intervals between the ritualised self-mutilation actions, she engages in other activities, such as playing with a tennis ball, licking her breasts, or caressing her body with the feathers. Pane's choice to use feathers while mutilating her body, brings to mind images of angels, representing in this way the denial of female embodiment and the violent imposition of body-free ideals of femininity. By choosing to juxtapose symbols of purity and divinity with symbols of impurity and abjection she, once again, throws into relief the contradictory discourses that define women's experience. Through utilising objects such as roses and feathers to hurt or caress her body, she shows the intimate connection between the idealisation of femininity and phobic representations of female bodily experience, between the violence of pornography and the equally objectifying violence of patriarchal narratives of Romantic love. What is noteworthy is that through this series of sexual actions, such as licking her breasts and caressing her body, Pane is also reclaiming the desiring/desired body, foregrounding the female body's capacity and right to simultaneously spark desire and desire itself. Her forceful depiction of the violated female body, traditionally represented as both pure and impure, innocent and polluted, aims to subvert these fictive representations imposed by a male-dominated society. Through self-inflicted violence, the artist aims to challenge societal expectations by turning feminine ideals on their head, exposing the violence inflicted on women by such ideals. Pane is very concerned about the unrealistic societal perceptions of femininity and constantly attempts to subvert them. Thus, she deliberately appropriates the role of women as victims in her

KAROLINA LAMPROU

performances with a view to exposing its structural function in patriarchal representations of women and in women's own understanding of themselves. At the same time, as Tronche suggests, the tears of blood "express the artist's desire to remain awake and see differently" (68). Specifically, as I have already shown in my analysis, she temporarily suspends her identity as an artist/subject/creator in order to internalise the passivity and expose the violence and the suffering that most women have to endure. I therefore agree with Bernard Blisténe who argues that Pane "did not want to suffer but to overcome suffering" (20). Her artistic endeavour was to "bring to light the violence and social traumas of our society", including, as I am arguing, the violence and traumas experienced by women in a patriarchal society (Blisténe 21).

Furthermore, the fact that while she is cutting herself, she is looking at her image on the surface of a mirror, may be seen as a direct engagement on her part with a society that objectifies and abjects the female body. Conscious of the social dynamics of subjective development, Pane reiterates a gesture Kristeva describes in *Powers of Horror*: "I expel myself, I spit myself out, I abject myself within the same motion through which 'I' claim to establish myself" (3). Pane shows how abjection and the abjected maternal feminine haunt the formation of the subject. By incorporating elements directly associated with the abject, Pane re-enacts the maternal abject which has been posited at the origins of both the subject and the patriarchal symbolic. In doing so, she is aiming at throwing into relief the gender politics of such processes. In my reading, Pane demonstrates that "abjection is not just a psychic process but a social experience" (Tyler, "Against Abjection" 87). In this way, she re-enacts the material and symbolic violence that hegemonic notions of embodied femininity entail. Interestingly, Pane, repeatedly and purposefully, attempts to counter dominant representations of the female body as unclean and abject. Such representations are aspects of a recurring myth that serves the purpose of masking off and controlling the monstrous feminine.[59] Pane becomes the abject woman that Deborah Caslav Covino discusses as

> [a] subversive trope of female liberation: she speaks an alternative, disruptive language, immersing herself in the significances of the flesh, becoming willfully monstrous as she defies the symbolic order. The abject woman abandons her oppressive confinement to the category of the

[59] On this idea, see Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood, and Cindy Sherman, who, among others, explicitly engage with representations of femininity in fairy tales and romantic fiction bringing together the idealisation of the feminine and the fear of the sexualised female body.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

beautiful, reforms her association with the grotesque, and contests her expulsion from the sublime. (“Abject Criticism”)

In similar terms, by projecting her female body as abject, Pane uses it to contest the violence of the patriarchal symbolic. At the same time, she demands the appropriation of the female body and bodily experience in a renewed understanding of the social, one no longer based on the exclusion of the maternal feminine and somatophobia.

Given Pane’s concern with gender politics, body performativity and social rituals, her *actions* can be further illuminated in light of Judith Butler’s theory of performativity, which enables us to appreciate the different function ritual acquires in the context of this female artist’s work. Butler claims that gender is the product of a process of ritualistic reiteration. This process starts as early as the moment when the doctor delivers a baby and says: “It's a girl”. This marks the beginning of a “long string of interpellations by which the girl is transitively girled: As a result, gender is ritualistically repeated, whereby the repetition occasions both the risk of failure and the congealed effect of sedimentation” (*Excitable Speech* 49). Whereas in the work of the Viennese Actionists, as we have seen, “ritual” is used to produce a renewed sense of community, in Pane’s *actions*, “ritual” functions as a denaturalising medium. As I argue, the ritualistic character of Pane’s work, along with her use of the photographs and other documentation, reveal the unnaturalness and, in effect, the performative aspect of femininity which, as Butler maintains, is the product of certain socio-cultural constructions. As the philosopher explains, there is a regularised reiteration of the norms that each gender should comply with, which takes the form of a performance enabling subjects to “assume” the appropriate “sexed position”. This position is not the product of a “singular act or event”, but it is “a ritualized production, a ritual reiterated under and through constraint, under and through the force of prohibition and taboo, with the threat of ostracism and even death controlling and compelling the shape of the production” (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 108). In juxtaposing ideals of femininity with images of self-inflicted violence, Pane re-enacts the deadly threat Butler refers to. She therefore exposes the violence entailed in this “reiterated ritualistic process” of the desired successful production of femininity. However, it is because gender is “ritualistically repeated” that the risk of failure appears. In the course of reiteration, sex is both produced and, at the same time, destabilised. This is because, Butler argues, although it is this ritualistic repetition that attributes to sex its naturalised effect, at the same time, the repetition exposes the lack of an origin or indeed a norm: “gaps and fissures are opened up as the constitutive instabilities in such constructions, as that which escapes or exceeds the

KAROLINA LAMPROU

norm, as that which cannot be wholly defined or fixed by the repetitive labor of that norm" (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 10). When individuals, then, do not comply with the expectations associated with each gender, they are marginalised. The process of gender formation, therefore, as the philosopher maintains, reinforces exclusionary practices. For Butler, then, the production of gender is inextricable from processes of exclusion. As a consequence, those who "do not appear properly gendered" become "abjected" (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 8).

Pane's abject blood tears in *Action Psyché (Essai),* for example, which result from an inverted make-up ritual (she uses a razor blade, not a make-up brush), show how the production of femininity is in fact oppressive and violent. This idea is intensified when the artist engages in the erotic acts of licking her breasts and caressing her body with feathers while performing more self-mutilating acts in her naval area. Her work then seems to expose "the gender's unreality, the impossible norms by which it is compelled, and in the face of which it perpetually fails" (Butler, *Excitable Speech* 68). Butler comments: "Indeed, precisely because certain kinds of 'gender identities' fail to conform to those norms of cultural intelligibility, they appear only as developmental failures or logical impossibilities" (*Gender Trouble* 24). Drawing on Catherine MacKinnon, Butler explains how pornography, for example, "not simply expresses or represents experience" but substitutes it, standing as reality, hence, "constructing the social reality of what a woman is" (*Excitable Speech* 66-8). It therefore allegorises female submission, and "repeatedly and anxiously rehearses its own *un*realizability" (*Excitable Speech* 68). By exposing the unnaturalness of sexualised representations of femininity, Pane "allegorise(s) the ultimate impossibility of maintaining these typically exclusive and heteronormative systems" that produce them (Harradine 69). At the same time, Pane shows how one's "failure" to fit into their assigned gender role pushes him/her into "the domain of the dehumanized and the abject against which the human itself is constituted" (Butler, *Gender Trouble* 151). Pane, therefore, can be said to reflect both Butler's and Kristeva's concern with abjection, a process which the theorists perceive as inextricable from the psychic and social production of identity.

It is my contention that such an encounter with the abjected female body, like the one Pane offers in her performances, is required in order to provoke an empathetic response from the spectator. In other words, the spectator witnesses the social production of abject femininity and the internalisation of abjection by the female subject. By drawing on representations of the female body as pure, through her appropriation of stereotyped imagery such as the white dress, the white roses and milk, in the context

KAROLINA LAMPROU

of multiple violations of the female body, Pane compels her audience to confront the sacrifice of the body inherent in idealised femininity. She therefore attempts what Kristeva would term a sacrifice of sacrifice, that is, she seeks to question sacrificial models of femininity, models based on the victimisation and abjection of women. This sacrifice of sacrifice "reproduces key elements in the economic process of the Symbolic's production: the foundation of that economy *and* what it represses" (Reineke, *Sacrificed Lives* 70). Pane, therefore, reacts against social mechanisms of victimization while, at the same time, she performs a symbolic sacrifice: the sacrifice of idealised femininity and the stereotypes it reproduces. In this way, the traditional understanding of the female body is questioned. By debunking society's ideals regarding the body, gender stereotypes, as well as the socially constructed notion of femininity, Pane's bloody body is rendered a signifier of the abject: i.e. that which such ideals and stereotypes exclude. The evocation of horror is achieved through Pane's presentation of the living tortured body, bleeding and suffering, while her bloody tears can be perceived as connoting the socially repressed female desire and the violent reinforcement of normative gender and sexual codes. Hence, her work can be seen as performing a double function: i.e. the function of defying the social constructions and myths in which the female body is embedded, at the same time showing its relegation to the realm of the abject.

Sublimating the Abject in the Context of Performance Art

For the second part of this chapter, I will analyse performances that, as I will argue, activate the subversive potential of personal and communal abject experience. First, I will draw on Marina Abramović, the grandmother of performance art, as she calls herself,[60] and, secondly, on Franko B, focusing on the artists' endeavour to sublimate experiences of abjection. Abramović, from a young age, considered "the process of art-making more important than the product", possibly, as Mary Richards notes, influenced by "Yves Klein's privileging of process over product" (*Marina Abramović* 3). Before moving on to my analysis, I should briefly mention some information on Abramović's upbringing, which determined, as I argue, the course of her initial work. As the artist notes, her upbringing in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia was under strict rules, resembling that of a "military routine". Both her parents were Communist partisans, fighting Croatian fascists, under the rule of the dictator Josib Broz Tito. At the same time, she enjoyed much freedom of movement, due to Yugoslavia's

[60] Abramović has stated that she now prefers to be called the pioneer of performance art. On this, see Marina Abramović's interview "The Legend of Marina Abramović" by Slava Mogutin.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

relationship to the US and (former) Soviet Union, hence, she could often travel to the West in order to perform or interact with other artists (Richards, *Marina Abramović* 2-3). The artist's remarkable upbringing has contributed significantly to her development as an artist with a number of different concerns, not only aesthetic but also social, cultural, political, and gender concerns, which I discuss throughout this thesis. In this section, I will focus on one of her early works, *Lips of Thomas,* which, according to Abramović, was primarily orchestrated as a means of overcoming her fear of "blood and bleeding", due to her misdiagnosed childhood condition of hemophilia (Richards, *Marina Abramović* 8). At the same time, Richards notes, it is obvious that she was also rebelling against the socialist oppressive regime that influenced her upbringing (*Marina Abramović* 8). This powerful work took place first in 1975 and lasted approximately two hours and, for a second time, in 2005 and lasted for seven hours. The choice of the title is very interesting since Thomas the Apostle, also referred to as the "Doubting Thomas" is the only one of the apostles who refused the believe Jesus' resurrection and demanded to see and feel Jesus' wounds. As Richards notes, "[i]n Abramović's performance, the audience witness the reality of her wounds", which, as I will later argue, serve in activating the subversive potential of the experience of the abject (*Marina Abramović* 12). At the beginning of the first version of this work, performed at the Krinzinger Gallery, in Austria, Abramović stands naked and engages herself in slowly eating a kilo of honey and drinking a litre of red wine. When she finishes drinking the wine, she breaks the glass with her hand. At this point, the violent character of this performance is intensified. The artist uses a piece of glass to draw a five-pointed star on her stomach. The performance becomes even more violent when Abramović kneels on the floor and whips herself several times and then, for the concluding part of the performance, lies down on a cross-shaped piece of ice. At some point, the bleeding of her wounds became really intense, due to the heat from the radiator above the artist, something that alarmed members of the audience, who intervened for the performance to end approximately thirty minutes after it had commenced.[61] In the 2005 version of this work, which Abramović repeated at the Guggenheim museum, in New York, the artist chooses to add more symbols of her communist upbringing. Specifically, after cutting the five-pointed star on her stomach, she wears a pair of boots and a military cap. She then stands up and cries while listening to a Russian folk song. Once the song finishes, she lies on the block of ice and, then, kneels

[61] The description of this performance is partially based on Mary Richard's book *Marina Abramović,* pp. 11-14.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

on the floor to whip herself. For the last part of the performance, she eats a spoon of honey and drinks a sip of wine —which, as I will explain shortly are Christian symbols that relate to Abramović's childhood— actions she ritualistically repeats until midnight.

Fig. 17. Abramović, Marina. *Lips of Thomas*. 1975.

The fact that Abramović's face remains impassive throughout the entire performance, serves one purpose: to attract attention to her wounds, and, in essence, the specific body parts which become signifiers in her re-enactment of her traumatic memories of a historical period that has been deeply formative for her, her family, and her people. Due to the fact that Abramović, until the age of six, lived with her Orthodox grandmother, a large part of her childhood memories includes her going to church and observing her grandmother's religious rituals. The artist has often stated in her interviews that her childhood became unhappy as soon as she was separated from her loving grandmother, with whom she had a close relationship. Her grandmother hated communism and Tito while she spent most of her time, with young Abramović, in church (Cué, "Interview with Marina Abramović"). In contrast to her grandmother, the artist's parents never showed any affection towards her, hugged or kissed her. Instead, "her mother beat her, pulled her hair, told her she was useless and called her a prostitute after she was kissed by a boy for the first time" (Hattenstone, "I Face so Much Jealousy: Marina Abramović Talks Friends, Enemies and Fears"). When her brother was born, Abramović went to live with her parents, who, as Yugoslav Partisans, followed the communist regime's repressive approach to religious ideology. To briefly explain, Yugoslav Partisans interpreted the church-state relations in line with party policy and regime laws. In effect, Abramović's parents embraced party policy, according to which

KAROLINA LAMPROU

religious life should be suspended for politically correct behaviour and party agency to occur. Due to the fact that religion held such a central role during her formative years, it seems that she emotionally and culturally invested in the religious rituals she attended with her grandmother. Also, due to her warm relationship with her religious grandmother, it can be argued that Abramović associates religion with the affect-based relationship she had with her. Moving from her grandmother to her parents, however, Abramović's exposure to religious practices was disrupted. It is precisely this anti-religious space that becomes the controversial background of Abramović's psychological development. For Abramović, I argue, the separation from the religious grandmother marks the critical moment when her negotiation with structures sustaining the Communist regime in Yugoslavia is established. Abramović's return to the abject associated with various communist symbols of her past when she was living with her parents and her experience under the communist regime, such as the five pointed star and the military cap and boots, has a beneficial outcome as it is through re-enactment that the memories associated with these symbols are processed and finally liberated from their connotations. As Abramović herself explains in a clip she recorded for MOMA's website, this performance forms an attempt on her part to come to terms with the suffering she experienced during the oppressive regime of socialist Yugoslavia (*MOMA Multimedia*, "Lips of Thomas"). In order to transform this suffering into a meaningful and livable experience, she draws on Christian imagery of martyrdom to re-enact the structures that sustained the communist regime in Yugoslavia. Significantly for my interpretation of this performance, the martyrdom Abramović re-enacts is witnessed by the members of the audience who watch (and believe in) the artist's suffering and self-inflicted wounds. The Orthodox Christian imagery Abramović employs in this performance is particularly important since it was repressed by the communist regime. For example, Abramović uses honey and wine to allude to a promised land "flowing with milk and honey" and to invoke Jesus' blood in the Last Supper scene. The flagellation and the cross relate to the Passions of Christ, bringing to mind not only the cathartic function of Jesus' suffering but also the promise of resurrection. It is through such allusions that Abramović seeks to make her traumatic experiences meaningful. This is because her suffering in the context of the performance is experienced as a transitory stage that opens up a path to future resurrection, free from the negative feelings associated with her parents and, in effect, with the communist symbols that played such an important role in her upbringing, particularly after the artist moved away from her grandmother to live with her parents. Drawing on the Kristevan

KAROLINA LAMPROU

framework I introduced earlier, I would like to argue that, through this performance, the artist acts out abjection and re-generates the borders that secure her identity. To achieve this, she pushes the boundaries of her physical limits to the extreme and enters a zone between being and non-being. Entering this limit-zone is important for the ritual process she seeks to mobilise, one aiming at the sublimation of the artist's suffering. In the context of this process, Abramović acts out the abject, identifies with it, and reintegrates it in a renewed framework that adds a spiritual dimension to its suffering, a kind of suffering that will enable her re-birth.

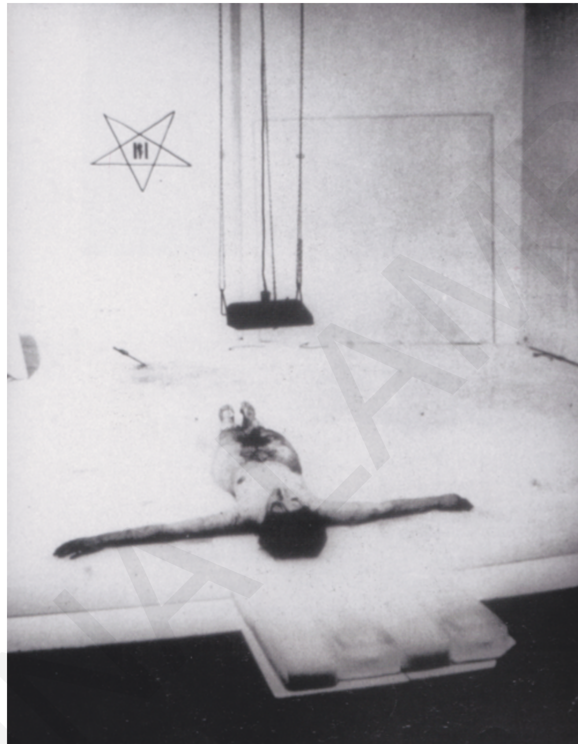

Fig. 18. Abramović, Marina. *Lips of Thomas*. 1975.

Notably, Abramović refuses to be depicted as a masochist. What she seeks to achieve through her performances is to sublimate her suffering, hence to make it meaningful and livable. The conscious and carefully planned repetition of a traumatic event, according to Sigmund Freud, enables one to revisit a traumatic experience in order to eventually work through and master it, assimilating the experience in the subject's psychic organisation and in the context of a project of life. As Freud explains, while the individual who suffers from a traumatic event initially experiences it as "a passive situation […] by repeating it, unpleasurable though it was […] he took on an *active* part". Essentially, the repetition helps the individual to remember "it as something belonging to the past" (*Beyond the Pleasure Principle* 11-2). Clearly, Abramović needs to overcome/master certain traumas for her sense of selfhood and agency to develop.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

For this to happen, she needs to revisit these traumatic events and temporarily experience abjection as well as a loss of the self that nourishes the promise of a re-birth.

It is important to note that this performance not only aims at a personal catharsis but also at a collective one. The positioning of the audience in such proximity that they could closely observe the artist's actions is very significant. Abramović's exposure of her naked body, her wounds that were caused by the cutting of her flesh and the flagellation, and her suffering from lying on the piece of ice while bleeding constitute a disturbingly forceful experience of the abject, for both the spectators and the artist. In Kristeva's words, the sacred experience offered by the encounter with the abject —the violated, wounded, and flagellated female body— reaffirms (body) boundaries, the sense of norms, and social order. Yet, abjection in this context is not a permanent experience. On the contrary, the performance stages an encounter with the abject, which leads to the sublimation of the abject symbols that shaped Abramović's traumatic past.

According to Kristeva, art and literature, as powerful experiences, have the capacity to sublimate the abject through the staging of what can be called a mimesis of the sacrifice (i.e. the speaking subject's lack of being), necessary for the establishment of human community. It is important to clarify, however, that for Kristeva mimesis is not synonymous to imitation. As Kristeva argues, in "A Digression Economy, Figure, Face", the detached head of Christ on the mandylion does not imitate or copy but rather inscribes. The economy of the inscription of the divine is associated with the experience of incarnation (i.e. the inscription on the flesh), which she also relates to Mary (the feminine and maternal body which makes possible Christ's entry into the human world), and to the Passion on the cross. As she puts it, "the economy of Christ and consequently of the icon are indissociable from the *original belly* as from *kenose*" (*The Severed Head* 53). Without the Virgin, the divine image would not have an impact on the human world, and, without the *kenose* (the passion of the flesh), it would not have any meaning. Therefore, the mimesis associated with the icon is formed by the double movement incarnation/annihilation. The icon is not a pagan symbol of adoration, but one of respect and prostration (time and proskynese). This is what gives the icon the value of an inscription in the world of immanence and the flesh. I find the concept *kenosis* very important for Abramović. Through her own torture on the cross-shaped block of ice and her own bleeding wounds, as a result of her self-flagellation and exposure to extreme temperatures, I argue that the artist displays her own "self-emptying". It is *kenosis* that undoes the margins of her identity in order to allow her

KAROLINA LAMPROU

body and flesh to be re-marked by the political and religious symbols of her childhood. In embracing her temporary self-sacrifice, Abramović, like Jesus, renews and re-activates the human capacity for meaning. Therefore, through *kenosis,* the artist, as a speaking subject, stops being fixated on her suffering and, through sharing it, re-inscribing it, makes a new beginning.

The dynamic between abjection and sublimation I have delineated above is also prominent in the work of Franko B. Franko B was known as "the bleeding artist" due to the central role that his open wounds or bleeding arms held in his performances. While nowadays he does not consider bleeding an effective artistic method, he notes that in the 1980s, when he started working with his own blood, "it was a totally different political context, and the work was a response to that situation – Thatcher,[62] AIDS epidemic" (Greenall). During that time, Franko B found it important to produce works that would challenge misconceptions around homosexuality and its association to infection: "The moment I came to make that kind of work was important, because there was such a fucking paranoia about blood and infection. I was an active openly gay man and suddenly people wouldn't even kiss you, because they were worried about catching something", he explains (Greenall). While Franko B has stopped "bleeding for his art" for more than ten years, I find it important to focus on one of his earlier works in order to show how the sublimation of the abject, at the time of the performance, served as a means of reclaiming the function of art in society, particularly with regard to the integration of homosexual subjects in existing socio-political structures.

In *Oh Lover Boy,* which took place in the UK, Denmark and Switzerland, in 2001 and 2005, the artist is concerned with the abject status of homosexuality in Western patriarchal heteronormative societies. Although the artist was never diagnosed as HIV positive, his blood is often associated with HIV, due to his homosexuality.[63] As I will argue in what follows, his blood, seen as potentially infectious, hence, as an abject substance, is transformed through its aesthecisation to

[62] During Margaret Thatcher's service as the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, clause 28 was added to the Local Government Act 1988. This clause prohibited local authorities and public schools from promoting homosexuality or portraying it as "a pretended family relationship" by teaching or by circulating published material ("Local Government Act 1988").

[63] Franko B has repeatedly stated that in the past, particularly during the 1990s, he did not want his work to be associated with HIV infection. In an interview with Richards, as she notes in *Resisting the Limits of the Performing Body*, Franco B explains that this is because "he wanted his work to be understood as larger than this, that is, as something beyond the particularities of that cultural and political climate...". As Richards argues, the artist has become less defensive now about this aspect of his performances although he prefers that his work is not "reduced to any one agenda or interpretation" (266).

KAROLINA LAMPROU

raw material, useful for the production of art and beauty. To this end, Franko B seeks to develop an artistic practice in the context of which the abject can be sublimated and re-integrated in a renewed community. This idea is illustrated in *Oh Lover Boy*, where the main focus lies on the body, which is bleeding from the open veins in both arms. In this piece, like in most of his performances, "the artist's tattoos are concealed beneath a surface of white pigment that covers him from head to toe, allowing the dark red of his blood to be the only colour present in the work", creating in this way a very beautiful image (Thorp, "Bodies of Distress"). Franko B's body is presented as being still on the table for around twelve minutes. Gradually, the white canvas upon which the artist is lying in a crucified pose becomes stained from the artist's blood, which flows from his wounds at a constant pace. At the same time, the members of the audience watch his blood flowing and "painting" the canvas, providing in this way a visceral, and at the same an emotional experience. After briefly staring directly at the audience, the artist "stands up and walks off, disappearing through a door that slams shut. All that is left behind is the image of his body and streaks of blood" (Gardner, "Bloody Peculiar"). Focusing on Franko B's *Oh Lover Boy,* in the last part of this chapter, I aim to demonstrate how the spectator's exposure to Franko B's suffering, which takes place within a highly aestheticised context, allows for abjection to be sublimated. What is important to note is that the artist's body, which is leaking abject material, i.e. blood, is used to evoke the threat of infection associated with the artist's homosexuality. In this light, as I will argue, it is precisely the aestheticisation of Franko B's body that works against the systematic abjection of homosexual, HIV-infected bodies.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

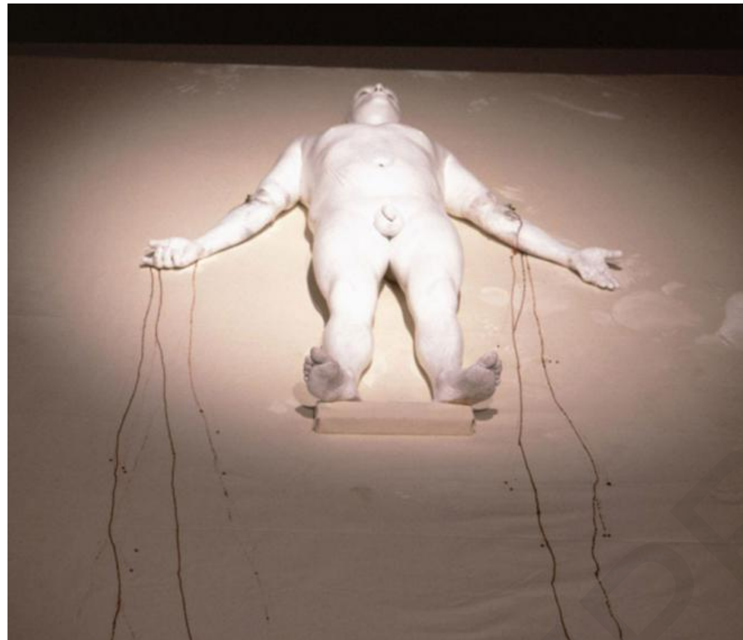

Fig. 19. Franko B. *Oh Lover Boy*. 2001-2005, by Manuel Vason.

Crucially, the artist uses his own blood with a view to foregrounding the element of the real in his performances. He states: "It is very important that I use my blood. It's not theatre you know. It's not fake blood" ("Franko B Interviewed by Gray Watson"). In a similar vein, the artist also states: "I don't enjoy pain, I don't like pain, but I believe that if I have to do something and it involves pain, I cannot fake it. I cannot pretend it's not real. If I am cutting myself, it's going to hurt, but I don't enjoy that feeling" (La Rosa, "In Conversation with Franko B"). This is precisely what Franko B is offering with his art: an honest experience so strong and so real that it compels you to respond. Even though the body is motionless, it is not a completely passive body, due to the fact that it is bleeding for the whole duration of the performance. "In a way the bleeding affirms life. And this 'body' is looking at you", the artist claims ("Franko B Interviewed by Gray Watson"*)*. The representation of the body as directly looking at the audience can be interpreted as Franko B's refusal to be ashamed of his body, hence, a reaction against any association of the homosexual body with illness or abjection. I therefore agree with Richards who, in reference to this work, argues: "This male has no embarrassment or fear of penetration, he embraces it, reversing an activity that amounts to a symbol of submission into a symbol of his resistance to patriarchal discourses of power" (*Resisting the Limits of the Performing Body* 263).

As we can understand from the artist's aforementioned statements, the aesthetic element is very important for Franko B. This is clearly due to fact that, first

KAROLINA LAMPROU

of all, he is an artist who produces works of art. The sight he offers in his performances is not repulsive, horrifying, or disturbing. Therefore, the spectators are not repelled but fascinated with what in other contexts may have been seen as abject. Franko B, in my view, succeeds in this by offering an encounter with the abject body on different terms: that is, through creating a beautiful painting. In an interview with Gray Watson, Franko B discusses *Oh Lover Boy* and the centrality of the body as an artistic medium and signifier in this performance: "Like most of my work *Oh Lover Boy* is a painting in itself and a performance where I use my body as a site of representation […] as a canvas, as a way to make pictures" ("Franko B Interviewed by Gray Watson"). The artist's body is used as a means of creating a space which will allow transformation to take place. The encounter with the abject body which brings about the temporary loss of the distinction between subject (the artist as an active agent) and object (the passive representation of his body) is followed by sublimation, through the reclamation of material nature and its re-inclusion in the Symbolic realm no longer as abject. By the end of the performance, as Richards notes based on her own experience as a member of the audience, the artist "sits up and gazes at us, the audience, with great intensity and emotion – returning our look and reclaiming his subject status" (*Resisting the Limits of the Performing Body* 256). Kristeva explains that during abject encounters, the sublime is experienced when the "abject collapses in a burst of beauty that overwhelms us" (*Powers of Horror* 210). Similarly, Franko B uses of his own blood as an artistic medium, a medium that helps him create a beautiful, aesthetically pleasing but at the same time powerful experience for the members of the audience. Due to the intensity of their emotions during their encounter with the artist's body, it can be argued that the members of the audience are offered the potential to empathise with the abject and to appreciate its other side, meaning its beauty as a nameable and shareable experience. Franko B's work is very sophisticated and through producing beautiful images he succeeds, I believe, in making a sublimatory gesture.

The title he chooses for this performance may be read as an allusion to his homosexuality, particularly to the victimisation and violence that many homosexual subjects have to endure. This idea is illustrated by Franko B's reference to the title which he explains as "'Oh lover boy look what has happened to you'" (Watson, "Franko B: Interviewed by Gray Watson"). The title, then, along with the hospital morgue setting, can be said to allude to the suffering of homosexual patients diagnosed with HIV. As Athey argues with respect to Franko B's work, "his bleeding arms function as tears streaming from wide-open eyeballs, the life-force bleeding out" (*Franko*

KAROLINA LAMPROU

B backcover). This idea is reiterated through the posture he assumes, reminiscent of Christ's posture on the cross (outstretched arms and bleeding). A member of the audience commented: "I imagine watching the crucifixion was a bit like that" (Gardner, "Bloody Peculiar"). Although Franko B adopts the pose of the victim, he refuses to be one. As mentioned above, by the end of the performance, he abandons this pose, sits on the white canvas, stares at the audience, and, ultimately, walks away from the stage, leaving behind him what he has described as a beautiful painting. On my reading, the way he ends his performance has a double function: first, to show his refusal to be depicted as a mere victim and, second, his wish to reclaim his abjected body and what it represents. Kristeva argues: "If I refuse to be victim, I begin by exposing the violence directed at me" (*The Severed Head* 87). In Franko B's work, artistic gesture works as a sign that goes against abject representations of certain groups and, as such, becomes a mechanism against abjection. In other words, Franko B's work resists the reduction of homosexual bodies to the abject other. Through the aestheticisation of his bleeding body, the artist wishes to liberate it from the negative connotations of sickness, wounding, and infection. In this way, phobic attitudes towards the homosexual body are countered. He therefore refuses pathologised representations of homosexuality and the clinical as well as social abjection of HIV-infected bodies. Kristeva rightly points out: "After all, if art is a transfiguration, it has [socio]political consequences" (*The Severed Head* 102). The artist's homosexual body, whose suffering is sublimated, demands, then, to be socially acknowledged in all its life and beauty.

The responses to Franko B's work prove that his art is very powerful indeed. Franko B, for example, notes that he receives many emails from people whose life has changed after watching his performance, though they do not necessarily understand what the work is about. The artist calls this "bridging". As he explains: "Bridging is to make contact. Bridging is when somebody else makes a connection to what I do. Not necessarily understands what I do. In the sense of 'Oh I understand what your work is about', but when they make contact […] it's not about getting what I mean or about the sort of contact you can make with verbal language" ("Franko B Interviewed by Gray Watson"). What the artist calls "bridging" is what, in my reading, can be explained as sublimation: a gesture that first mediates what is regarded as abject, allows new connections to be formed, and hence, enables the subject's re-integration in the social order on different terms.

All three artists I have dealt with in this chapter perform a symbolic sacrifice in order for a second birth to come forth. Pane uses her work as a means of reacting to

KAROLINA LAMPROU

social mechanisms of victimisation. To this end, she exposes the violence in gendered social structures and performs a symbolic sacrifice of the systematic sacrificial structures that victimise the female body. Abramović, by using symbols from her past, seeks to re-enact certain traumatic memories in order to ritualise her suffering and, through her temporary self-sacrifice, enable her re-birth. Finally, Franko B, by concentrating on the aesthetic dimension, seeks, like Pane, the sacrifice of the social mechanism of sacrifice. In this context, his works function as a sublimatory gesture that disassociates homosexual or HIV-infected bodies from the abject, in order to counter phobic attitudes towards them. "Art", as Kristeva argues, not only takes on murder (the murder of soma, the murder of the other as scapegoat) but moves through it because, after the artist interiorises death, s/he "sketches out a second birth" (*Revolution in Poetic Language* 70). Because these are representations of the victimisation of women or the abjection of those groups/elements within a system that threaten its purity, "a reverse reactivation of sacrifice", in Kristeva's words, needs to take place: that is, a sacrifice through poetic mimesis that does not produce scapegoats but exposes their suffering. Likewise, the performances I discuss do not merely reproduce sacrifice but, through mimesis, re-inscribe the suffering in ways that make possible an alternate dialectic between soma/sign, abject/system, upon which the vision of a new social order can be introduced. It is very important, however, that this symbolic sacrifice is part of a performance. This is what distinguishes the artists I have been discussing in this chapter from the sacrificial rituals enacted in the work of the Viennese Actionists, which includes atrocious actual acts.

Before concluding this chapter, I find it important to mention that not all artistic attempts at sublimating the abject are successful and not all performances manage to launch a politics that successfully challenges entrenched hierarchies and opens up spaces for the marginalised subject. In certain cases, artists may remain trapped within the abject or their work may reinforce abject images/representations of Others. At the same time, one cannot ignore the risks embedded in such radical artistic practices: for example, the margin of error with regard to voluntary blood loss or the danger of misinterpretation and the possible reinforcing of the very gender stereotypes that the artist attempts to challenge. I will elaborate on such dangers in Chapter 6, which, as already underlined, does not serve to undermine the importance of this art form but to acknowledge its complex, context-based and controversial nature.

Before moving to discuss a critical reception of some performance practices, I will discuss further the ethical and political contribution of performance art. In order

KAROLINA LAMPROU

to offer a thorough discussion of this art form's ethical dimension, I find it necessary to enhance my analysis by drawing on works that demand the acknowledgement of an ethical responsibility towards the other. To this end, I will return to Abramović and Franko B in the next chapter, as the development of their work shows an increasing interest in ethical rather than political issues. In the following chapter, I want to focus more closely on the ethical dimension of performance art, with a view to re-address this chapter's question: "Is suffering/violence in performance art meaningful or meaningless?". For the purpose of my analysis, I will turn to Emmanuel Levinas who bases his ethics on the relationship between the self and what he defines as the Other. This (intersubjective, ethical) relationship will constitute the frame of my discussion of the artworks I will be drawing on. Explored through a Levinasian lens, an emphasis will be placed on the artists' ethical concern, and their aim to cultivate response-ability towards the alterity of the Other. I will also draw on Butler's political appropriation of Levinasian ethics, particularly with regard to her elaboration on the notion of vulnerability. Employing Butler's concept of shared vulnerability as an agent of change, I aim to provide a thorough understanding of the ethical issues that many performance artists deal with.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Chapter 4

The Face of the Artist: Responsibility for the Other and the Fight for our Common Vulnerability

Responding to the Pain of the (vulnerable) Other

In the fourth chapter of my thesis, I will I demonstrate how the artists' suffering and exposure of their vulnerability in the works I am discussing might be perceived as a gesture that invites the members of the audience to assume responsibility for the pain experienced by distant others. My interest in this chapter is in looking closely at how we respond to self-inflicted violence in the context of performance art, and how the artist's body-in-pain can become an instigation of ethical change.

Before drawing on particular works, it is important to briefly delineate some very important premises of Levinasian ethics. As Jacques Derrida explains: "Levinas does not want to propose laws or moral rules […]. It is a matter of an ethics of ethics" (*Writing and Difference* 18). Principally, Levinasian ethics concentrates on one's encounter with the other and, as a result, on the ethical responsibility such a face-to-face encounter carries. The "face" therefore constitutes one of the most important concepts for Emmanuel Levinas, which marks a living presence erupting beyond any meaning or purpose. As the philosopher explains, the face denotes "the way in which the other presents himself, exceeding *the idea of the other in me*" (*Totality and Infinity* 50), and, for this reason, it is regarded as a determinant of ethical experience. This is because, as Levinas maintains, the exposure of the face reveals the other's alterity and causes so much pain and suffering that it forbids the other's reduction to sameness. Hence, this face-to-face encounter demands, for Levinas, an ethical relation that precedes ontology. Levinas' philosophy does not belong to the realm of traditional logic or metaphysics; it is based on the fact that the other can never be fully known but is revealed as a "primordial phenomenon" (Levinas, *Totality and Infinity* 150). This is precisely the reason why the philosopher claims that he has developed a "first philosophy", in which "ethics is understood as a relation of infinite responsibility to the other person" (Critchley, *The Cambridge Companion to Levinas* 6).

To elucidate the meaning of the encounter with the other, the self is described by Levinas as a horizon created from a totality of everything that it knows. When one encounters the other, a stranger, s/he instinctively wishes to encompass the other within his/her horizon in order to absorb his/her alterity. When the other however resists being absorbed entirely into the self's horizon, the self realises that some parts of

KAROLINA LAMPROU

the other will always remain unknown. The egoist self, realising that its solitude and its idea of totality is questioned, is then forced to respond either by respecting the other's alterity and accepting its ethical equality in difference, or by attempting to eliminate this difference in murdering the other. What is important to highlight is that the proximity of the other demands a responsibility to that other which brings about a new subjectivity, defined as the self's subjection to the other and as a mode of being for the other despite oneself. Hence, this new subjectivity is not merely a responsibility to the other but, in fact, a relationship with the other, in the context of which the self does not constitute a priority. Levinas, as Simon Critchley argues in *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity*, launches an anti-humanist critique of subjectivity where the humanity of the human is defined not through an invocation of autonomy but "in terms of subjection, substitution and hostage" (67). Critchley states: "Levinasian ethics is a humanism, but it is a humanism of the other human being" (*Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity* 67). This idea is clearly reflected throughout Levinas' works. Specifically, Levinas argues, "[s]trictly speaking, the other is the 'end'; I am a hostage, a responsibility and a substitution supporting the world in the passivity of assignation, even in an accusing persecution, which is indeclinable. Humanism has to be denounced only because it is not sufficiently human" (Levinas, *Otherwise than Being* 128). Therefore, the Levinasian subject is predicated upon this constant and overwhelming non-reciprocal responsibility. This relationship, for Levinas, treats "the eternal and temporal being as a totality of being" (Critchley, *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity* 68). The fact that the Levinasian subject is not free or autonomous is what allows it to make an ethical gesture towards the other, in the form of passivity and dependency. This state of passivity is defined by the philosopher as "a passing over to being's *other*" (*Otherwise than Being* 3), i.e. from ontology to ethics, which, for Levinas, appears to be "the condition of being hostage" so that the self comes to experience "pity, compassion, pardon and proximity" (*Otherwise than Being* 117). Levinas discusses the self's new subjectivity as characterised by a radical passivity in the form of the ultimate offering of oneself, which the philosopher terms "substitution" (*Otherwise than Being* 54). Substitution is the result of the self's absolute exposure to the other, through which the self becomes so obsessed with the other that it only exists "through the other" and "for the other" (*Otherwise than Being* 50).

We cannot ignore, however, that Levinas' insistence on the self's selfless, unequivocal responsibility, in fact, presupposes a "permanent state of trauma" (Critchley, *Ethics-Politics-Subjectivity* 295). Due to this, the permanent position that is assumed

KAROLINA LAMPROU

by the self as the other's hostage may result in the fetishisation of victimhood. In order to prevent this, a compassion for the other has to be cultivated through the recognition of the common vulnerability of all human beings. This, I contend, is perhaps one of the major concerns of performance art, a concern that encapsulates its ethics and politics. To demonstrate this claim, I will focus on Judith Butler's re-mobilisation of Levinasian ethics and her theorisation of the concept of vulnerability. Butler uses Adriana Cavarero's account on the relationship between selfhood and narration, as it is developed in her work *Relating Narratives: Storytelling and Selfhood*, with a view to underlining that humans need to be recognised by an other in order to sustain their existence. In line with Cavarero, Butler perceives the other as a "you" on which we depend as "without the 'you' my own story becomes impossible" (Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* 32). In this statement, Butler, echoing Cavarero, claims that the "I" confirms its existence by narrating itself in order to be recognised by the other. As Butler notes, the stories we tell about ourselves change every time we are engaged in a narration process. It is impossible to tell the exact same story, while our narration depends on "recognizable norms of life narration" (Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* 52). The norms within a social context constitute the "conditions of my own emergence", reducing our capacity for self-reflection and our ability to provide a stable narration (Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* 39). Butler, therefore, argues that our narratives "begin in *medias res*", as it is the various events that take place that make the self's story in language possible (*Giving an Account of Oneself* 39). As the philosopher maintains, once we realise that the way we form ourselves is in relation to existing norms and acknowledge that we don't really have complete and coherent knowledge of who we really are, we can start, first, to question and, ultimately, to resist such normative structures. Even if we cannot fully liberate ourselves from these dominant structures, we can change the way we recognise others and, in effect, how we want to be recognised by others.

Arguing for a reconsideration of the self-limitation that the other as addressee constitutes for me, Butler states: "my very formation implicates the other in me [...] my own foreignness to myself is, paradoxically, the source of my ethical connection with others" (*Precarious Life* 38). What Butler brings to the fore is the need to realise our dependency on the other, which is accompanied by a certain responsibility. This responsibility demands "a commitment to equality and non-violent cooperation", an "endeavor to re-create social and political conditions on more sustaining grounds" (*Precarious Life* 17-8). In order to establish equality, we need to broaden our horizons,

KAROLINA LAMPROU

and, as the philosopher argues, learn to hear voices beyond those we currently hear. More importantly, we need to "open to narration that decenters us from our supremacy and be able to ask the question: 'Who 'am' I, without you?'" (Butler, *Precarious Life* 22).

While Levinas focuses on the vulnerability of the other, Butler claims that our common vulnerability should be acknowledged, in order to prevent the reduction of some people, types, or classes of people to the role of the victim or hostage. Butler herself points out that her rendition of vulnerability is inspired by Levinas' ethics. Butler's work, which, among others, engages with identity politics,[64] or, more accurately its failure, turns our attention to the fact that, due to particular social conditions, states of conflict or war, the existence of certain populations, particularly ethnic, sexual, and gender minorities, is rendered ungrievable, hence, precarious. Specifically, as Butler argues, precariousness designates "a politically induced condition in which certain populations suffer from failing social and economic networks of support more than others, and become differentially exposed to injury, violence, and death" (*Frames of War* 25). Butler sees vulnerability as a key aspect of being human, and hence she strongly believes that we have enough ethical reasons to make a claim towards the recognition of an inherent "common vulnerability". For Butler, "common vulnerability" defines social existence and its acknowledgement will help the humanisation of those lives which are treated as precarious and ungrievable. Essentially, what Butler advocates is the restructuring of political communities so that they become more responsive to others, particularly those others who are currently depicted in certain contexts as "lesser humans".

Accepting Butler's view that human corporeality constitutes the site of suffering, and "of a common human vulnerability", I will demonstrate that performance art addresses the urgency to acknowledge an embodied "common vulnerability" and that the artists I discuss argue for such recognition (*Precarious Life* 44). In the performances I will be analysing, "common vulnerability" might be understood as a precondition for the humanisation of marginal individuals. As Butler puts it, our "interdependency" needs to become "acknowledged as the basis for global political community" (*Precarious Life* xii-xiii). The artists I will be looking at in this chapter often assume the role of both the self as being for the other and the other calling the self to respond, inviting the spectators to participate in a transformative, ethical

[64] See, for example, her works: *Frames of War*: *When is Life Grievable*, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence.*

KAROLINA LAMPROU

experience. Based on these premises, in this chapter, I will first focus on some early performances, which took place during the 70s. I will analyse these performances within a Levinasian framework in order to show how these artists attempt to encourage the audience to assume the position of the hostage, the self vulnerable to the other's pain, who is responsible to act upon this pain and suffering. As I will argue, these early performances, though they became very popular and were widely discussed in various contexts, may have not succeeded in eliciting the response the artists hoped for. For this reason, in the second part of this chapter, I will demonstrate that in more recent performances the dynamics of the relationship between the artist and the audience has developed in a different direction. Specifically, I will show how the members of the audience are expected to actively engage in these performances. My analysis of these performances will be heavily indebted to Butler's conceptualisation of a shared embodied vulnerability, which, as I aim to show, is successfully dramatised in these more recent works.

Marina Abramović, in *Rhythm 0*, deploys the above-mentioned double role of the response-able self and vulnerable other. Abramović performed this piece in 1974, at the Studio Morra Gallery in Naples, Italy. At the outset of the performance, the artist gave written instructions to the audience allowing them to manipulate her body in any way they desired. These instructions read: "On the table there are 72 objects that you can use on me at your will. I take total responsibility for 6 hours. Some of these objects give pleasure, some give pain" (Demaria 2004). Among these objects were a rose, a feather, some honey, a lipstick, chains of different sizes, a whip, matches, scissors, a scalpel, a gun, and a single bullet. At first, the audience started using the objects moderately while Abramović remained impassive with an emotionless face. Shortly after, some members of the audience responded more aggressively and more violently by marking her, scratching her, blindfolding her, dousing her with cold water, and pinning slogans to her skin (O'Hagan, "Interview: Marina Abramović"). "I still have the scars of the cuts," she admitted in her interview with Sean O' Hagan, in 2010: "It was a little crazy. I realized then that the public can kill you. If you give them total freedom, they will become frenzied enough to kill you […] A man pressed the gun hard against my temple. I could feel his intent. And I heard the women telling the men what to do" (O' Hagan, "Interview: Marina Abramović"). When Abramović eventually abandons her passive status, hence the role of the object, and regains her identity and agency, the audience, agitated, started running away. Arguably, only after noticing the artist's

KAROLINA LAMPROU

bloody and tearful body and face, they realised that their harmful actions were directed against a fellow human being and not an object.

Rhythm 0 is still considered one of the artist's most challenging pieces, where the conventional roles of the performer and the audience are transformed, since the artist invites the audience to take action while she remains impassive. Furthermore, the artist confronts the audience at the end of the performance, an act which, as I will explain further down, challenges the traditional role of women *qua* victims in male-dominated societies, by breaking the silence systematically imposed on them. The audience's participation appears to be essential for the progress of the piece. During the performance, both the artist and the audience suspend the established social norms that prohibit the infliction of violence on another human being. Abramović patiently and submissively accepts the violations of her body, even when members of the audience are involved in extremely violent actions like cutting her flesh.

Abramović considers the active involvement of her audience so important that she willingly objectifies herself and adopts a passive role. "I am the object", she states, in order to urge the audience to participate in the performance without any reservations (Stiles, *Marina Abramović* 60). For the whole duration of the performance, she appears to be taking on the role of a hostage, something that in Levinasian terms is defined as passivity. "Vulnerability, exposure to outrage, to wounding, passivity more passive than all patience, passivity of the accusative form, trauma of accusation suffered by a hostage to the point of persecution, implicating the identity of the hostage who substitutes himself for the others", Levinas explains (*Otherwise than Being* 15). The artist's passivity, during the six-hour performance, along with her submission to the audience, represent this idea effectively. In *Rhythm 0*, Abramović exposes her skin, her nudity and her wounds to the audience. In Levinas' words she represents "a self uncovered, exposed and suffering in its skin" (*Otherwise than Being* 51).

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Fig. 20. Abramović, Marina. *Rhythm 0*. 1975, Studio Morra Gallery, Naples.

The artist discards her identity by taking up a completely passive stance so that she can offer herself to the audience. Through this exposure, the audience's egoist self is forced to accept the responsibility for the sufferer's, the artist's, pain. The acceptance of this responsibility is what will eventually initiate an ethical relationship among human beings. Yet Abramović cannot be reduced to merely an object since she is only using her passive role to compel the audience to accept their responsibility for the suffering of the other and acknowledge their power to affect the other's life, whether this other is a man or a woman. Her passivity has an accusative form: it does not aim at satisfying sadistic instincts, but at making members of the audience feel culpable, responsible. Hence, one may argue that the artist assumes an objectified and submissive feminine role only to enable the spectators to, eventually, recognise her as a fellow human being. It is important to acknowledge, however, that in such radical works certain risks and limitations are unavoidable. Of course, the artist cannot always determine or predict each audience member's response, especially in cases when someone, for example, might be a sadist or completely misinterprets the work, a risk I will discuss in Chapter 6. However, the artist's failure to raise the intended ethical response on the part of every member of the audience does not compromise the overall success

KAROLINA LAMPROU

of the work. If this experience is powerful enough for at least some members of the audience, it still has the potential to inaugurate a transformative ethical encounter.[65]

Abramović's exposure and acceptance of the pain inflicted on her can then be construed as an attempt to urge the audience to acknowledge the existence of the other with whom an ethical relationship needs to be established for the welfare of humanity. The artist, as she often states in her interviews,[66] wishes to transform the audience by offering a unique and authentic experience, beyond the limits of representational frameworks, since the mere representation of pain cannot provoke a substantial change. The audience, by violating the materiality of the artist's body, as well as her subjectivity (by treating her as an object), has the possibility of reflecting on the consequences of his/her actions, thus, experiencing the emergence of a new ethical subjectivity. Even though the institutional framework of the gallery offers members of the audience temporary permission to inflict violence upon the artist, once the performance ends, they are faced with Abramović as a human being, not an objectified female. This is the point where the artist eventually regains her identity and agency, while simultaneously forcing those who inflicted violence on her to see her for who she is. It's worth mentioning some of the responses towards the artist's passive stance. Let us remember first, however, that the audience *did have* the choice to use objects that would *not* cause pain to the artist. Some of the audience's responses included: to thrust her arm into the air; to sexually assault her body; to paint on her body; to glue paper on her; to cut her clothes with the pair of scissors; to slash her throat with the razor blade in order to suck her blood from the wound; to carry her around, half-naked, and lay her down on the table; to stab a knife between her legs; to press the thorns of the rose onto her stomach. The performance was so stressful for the artist that, as she claims, a patch of her hair turned white, obviously from the agony she had to suffer during those six hours (*MAI* "Marina Abramović on Rhythm 0 (1974)").

What I therefore argue is that Abramović's choice to suspend her agency and subject position and the pointed significance of her temporary self-objectification constitute an exemplary instance of Levinas' concept of "substitution". Her performance seems to project the self as the other, not an object, but a Levinasian "face", calling for the response-ability of the audience. The artist herself comments on the public's

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[65] Also see *Rhythm 5* (1974), where Abramović lay on a flamed star putting her life into risk, and two members of the audience intervened and saved the artist.

[66] See, for example, Sean O' Hagan's "Interview: Marina Abramović" and Meredith Alloway's "The Artist, the Audience and The Space In Between: Marina Abramović Talks Pushing Boundaries in her Latest Film".

KAROLINA LAMPROU

inclination to continue treating her as an object after the end of the performance and their consequent discomfort upon their realisation that the artist has reclaimed her identity. She states: "they could not stand me as a person, after all that they had done to me" (Stiles, *Marina Abramović* 60).

There is also a strong Butlerian echo in this work. The members of the audience treat the artist as "less than human", an object, whose life is worthless and whose suffering is insignificant. Those who mistreated the artist's body failed to recognise her as an equal fellow human being. At the same time, they also failed to realise the implications that arise when someone inflicts violence upon any other, something that these people possibly realised only after the artist regained her agency and confronted them by walking in their direction. In addition, the reason behind the audience's fear/discomfort at the end of the performance could be the sight of the artist's injured, bleeding, suffering body, and the reluctant acknowledgement, perhaps, of their own vulnerability to wounding and pain. Butler argues that

> [t]he body implies mortality, vulnerability, agency: the skin and the flesh expose us to the gaze of others, but also to touch, and to violence, and bodies put us at risk of becoming the agency and instrument of all these as well. Although we struggle for rights over our own bodies, the very bodies for which we struggle are not quite ever only our own. The body has its invariably public dimension. (*Precarious Life* 26)

As I argue, Abramović, particularly in the context of this work, allows the violent treatment of her body precisely because she believes that we are not autonomous individuals but there is a co-dependency among human beings. Abramović uses her body as the site of a shared social vulnerability which assigns certain responsibility to spectators. Hers is an invitation to confront "our most vexed ethical decisions" (Butler, *Frames of War* 23). In her view, this invitation constitutes a first step towards ethical realisation and, consequently, towards change.[67]

Interestingly, Abramović posits the audience not only as response-able agent but also as "hostage". The shock of the violence/blood/pain is meant to keep the members of the audience a hostage; to lock the victimiser in a close embrace with the victim; and, in doing so, to teach the audience ways of being for the other. Both Abramović and spectators have a double role: passive-active; victim-victimiser. This is what

[67] What is important to note is that the traditional relationship between an artist (assuming the position of the artwork) and the spectator may have also affected the audience's reaction towards Abramović. As I have been arguing, it is this relationship that performance art aims at changing. I will return to this issue later in this chapter.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

renders this performance ethically sophisticated and effective. Abramović provokes ethical responsibility within the audience, in many cases against their will, which is a pivotal premise in Levinas' theorisation of the hostage self. At the end of the performance, walking towards her audience, the artist expects from them to recognise the violation, the suffering, and vulnerability of a fellow human being and demands that they take responsibility for their choices/decisions/actions. It is responsibility, for Levinas, that makes the self a hostage of the other. Once the audience acknowledges and accepts their responsibility, not only for the artist's but more importantly for every other's pain and suffering, ethics will finally prevail. According to Levinas, the assumption of responsibility entails an intersubjective experience of selfhood: "I understand responsibility as responsibility for the Other, thus as responsibility for what is not my deed, or for what does not even matter to me; or which precisely does matter to me, is met by me as face" (*Ethics and Infinity* 95).

The audience's response (or lack of response) raises questions regarding the capability of thinking and acting for the wellbeing of another human being and simultaneously stresses the need for the emergence of such ethical consciousness. Sadly, the pitfalls of humanism as they have been analysed in various contexts,[68] force us to bear witness to our repeated failures as an international community to recognise and respond to the violence inflicted on certain groups of people. As I have already mentioned, according to Levinas, "humanism has to be denounced only because it is not sufficiently human", and it is mainly our failure to take responsibility for the other that is to blame (*Otherwise than Being* 128). Along the same lines of thought, Butler argues that for recognition to occur, our common vulnerability needs to be acknowledged. Currently, one can observe the de-humanisation of those who do not comply with existing Western norms of humanity. This certainly interrogates basic premises of humanism and makes us wonder whether humanism is really humane. Butler suggests that for humanism to be restored, no life must be ungrievable. Abramović, with this performance, throws into relief just how selfish, violent, and inhumane human behaviour can sometimes be. This can act as a first step to the actualisation of "the possibility of putting oneself in the place of the other", which is "the condition for all solidarity" (Levinas, *Otherwise than Being* 117).

[68] Michel Foucault, for example, in his discussion of the Human Sciences in his work *The Order of Things*, argues that man, a product of "a "particular arrangement of knowledge", i.e. "modern episteme", has become "an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end" (386). Also, Friedrich Nietzsche has called humanism a mere metaphor and illusion or, as Tony Davies puts it in his discussion on Nietzsche "a bladder full of hot air" (37). For more on the failure of humanist ideology see "From Humanism to Antihumanism", in *Humanism.*

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Before analysing Abramović's powerful work further, I find it useful to turn to Yoko Ono's performance, *Cut Piece*, which raises similar ideas and concerns with *Rhythm 0*. This work was performed by the artist several times, in 1964, 1965, 1966, and finally in 2003, in Kyoto, Tokyo, New York, and London respectively.[69] What is intriguing in the case of this performance is that, as it was re-enacted almost four decades after the first time, it provides the ground for a comparative discussion of the audience's reaction since it marks radically different sociocultural moments.[70] The performances of the 60s served as a protest against the Vietnam War, while the last one against the September 11 attacks. In the artist's words, both performances constituted a step towards promoting "world peace" ("Yoko Ono to Recreate Naked Art Show"). Even though in the early performances people's behaviour turned more aggressive than the artist expected, she passively accepted the violence inflicted on her. In the first performance, Ono sat on a concert hall stage, wearing a black dress, while a pair of scissors was positioned in front of her. She then invited the members of the audience, one at a time, to get on the stage and use the scissors to cut pieces from her garments, which they could keep. In this performance, people reluctantly approached the artist and started cutting small pieces.

Fig. 21. Ono, Yoko, *Cut Piece*. 1965, Carnegie Hall.

However, as the performance progressed, the audience adopted a much more aggressive behaviour, sexually violating the artist, objectifying her and thus failing to treat her as a fellow, equal human being. Notably, the male members of the audience were

[69] For the earlier performances, my analysis will draw on the events that took place during the first performance, as the audience's reactions are very similar.
[70] Also see *Bag Piece* (1964) where Ono urges the audience to assume the same vulnerable position, in nakedness.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

much more aggressive than the female ones, something that was also noted in *Rhythm 0*. In both performances, many female members of the audience did not proceed to act upon the artist's body but asked their male companions to do this. The audience only stopped cutting Ono's clothes when her dress and bra were completely torn to shreds and her naked breasts were exposed. One man even shouted: "Come on, make a piece for Playboy, Richard" (Chladil, "Class 1"). Also, the art historian Jieun Rhee has noted that "Cut Piece was received as an exotic striptease" (110). In both Abramović's and Ono's performances, the audience fails to respond to the artist's exposed vulnerability. During the recording of Ono's 1965 performance, one can easily hear the members of the audience chatting and laughing, failing in this way to show any sign of empathy towards the obviously distressed artist who by the end of the performance keeps biding her lips. Both artists, despite their apparent agony and suffering, remain passive during the entire duration of their performance because, as Levinas argues, "the passivity of signification, of the one-for-another, is not an act, but patience" (*Otherwise than Being* 55).

As I have already mentioned in this thesis, female objectification has been normalised in patriarchal societies. Perhaps, therefore, it is the (female) artists' objectification that prevented the audience from experiencing a sense of responsibility for, and empathising with, the other's pain, hence, to violate with such ease the female passivised bodies in front of them. They seem to realise the artist's "humanity" only after the two artists abandon their immobile stance and walk away. What may also has contributed to such reactions is the spectacularisation and normalisation of human suffering as depicted on different media, particularly on television, which often has a desensitising effect. Alternatively, perhaps people, after the violence they had witnessed during World War II and the Vietnam War, were simply not ready to respond to the artists' pain; or, perhaps, Ono, due to her anger, as she herself admits, could not fully assume the position of the Levinasian other. Arguably, this is the reason why Ono's latest re-enactment of *Cut Piece* is regarded as the most successful one. In this performance, where Ono was dressed in a black skirt and shirt, the setting was more or less the same. The only difference was that Ono asked the audience to give their piece to a loved one. Notably, Ono admitted: "In the 1960s I did it out of anger. But now, I'm doing it for love, and that makes a big difference" (Ono, "Cut Piece in Paris 2003"). In the context of the most recent performance, the audience finally responded to the pain of the other and chose to treat her with care and tenderness. "In the end no-one could bring themselves to snip her knickers off" ("Cut Piece in Paris

KAROLINA LAMPROU

2003”). This response can be read as a sign that the members of the audience recognised in the face of the artist a responsibility to protect the other against any form of violation. At the same time though, we should not forget that Ono is a very famous artist and peace activist, and also the wife of the well-known singer of the Beatles, John Lennon. Arguably, this renders her what Butler calls a “recognizable subject”, that is, someone who shares the normative conditions we relate to and which “facilitate that recognition” (*Frames of War* 4). The real problem lies in cases of certain gender, ethnic, racial, and sexual minorities, whose lives are de-realised and de-humanised—hence they are treated as dispensable. To this very significant issue, I will return in the second part of this chapter, in the context of my discussion of Franko B’s and Regina José Galindo’s work.

For the development of my argument, it is instrumental at this point to engage with works in which the spectators were not specifically asked to take part or intervene. This will allow me to examine the impetuous response of the members of the audience who are not given any instructions. For this reason, I will now draw on Chris Burden’s work *White Light/White Heat* and *Doomed*, which took place in 1975, at Ronald Feldman Gallery, in New York, and lasted for twenty-two consecutive days. For the purpose of the first work, Burden positioned himself on a large triangular platform in the southeast corner of the gallery space, which was specifically constructed for the purpose of this work. The space wherein the artist was confined was asphyxiating and small—the platform was elevated at ten feet above the ground allowing only two feet between the surface of the platform and the ceiling. The artist, unable to see what was going on in the gallery, took on a hostage-like position. In addition, the artist did not eat anything for the twenty-two days that the performance lasted, receiving only celery juice to obtain basic nutritional elements. As Burden confirmed, “during the entire piece, I did not eat, talk, or come down, I did not see anyone, and no one saw me” (Cheng 57).

KAROLINA LAMPROU

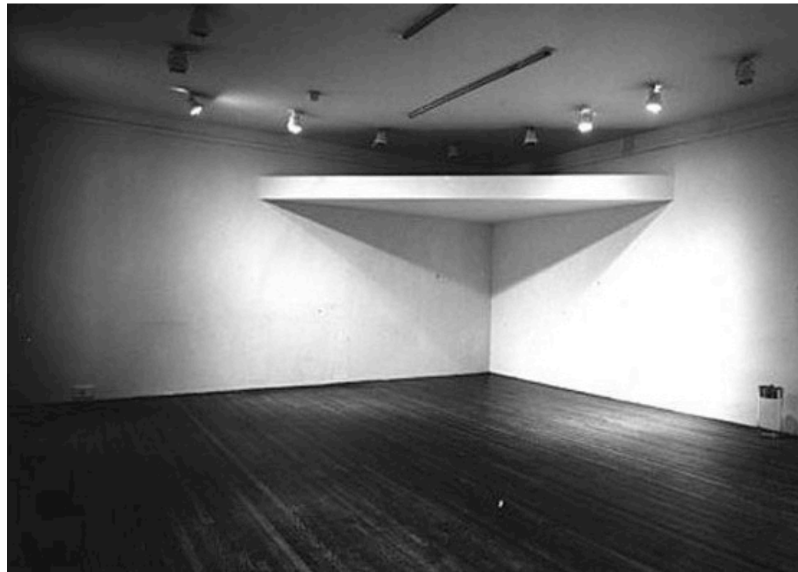

Fig. 22. Burden, Chris. *White Light-White Heat*.1975. Ronald Feldman Gallery, New York.

Robert Horvitz, in his article on the artist, in *Artforum* magazine, notes that while this performance was taking place, two leaders of the Irish Republican Army were "in the seventh week of their hunger strike in a Belfast prison. They say they will fast to death to protest the British occupation of their country. At the same time, thousands are starving in East Africa and India, not as a symbolic gesture, but because drought has killed their crops and livestock" (24). While one could argue that Burden's hunger strike and temporary imprisonment is preposterous or even offensive to those who unwillingly suffer or to those whose struggle serves a political cause, I have chosen to approach his artistic choices using a Levinasian discourse. What I contend is that not only does the artist address the aforementioned socio-political situations or events, but he moreover attempts to evoke a compassionate response to human suffering in general. I therefore argue that this performance can be perceived as an attempt to question the audience's egoist self, in order to awaken in them the feelings of "pity, compassion, pardon, and proximity" (Levinas, *Otherwise than Being* 117). What I find particularly important to underline is the fact that the artist's physical presence was not visible, yet it was felt by some members of the audience. Burden informs us that he heard one young man telling his friend that the feeling in the gallery was almost spiritual: "He can hear us, and he doesn't answer, but he can't help listening [...] it's like God" (Ebert, "Chris Burden"). This statement gains an explanatory force as, in my view, it exemplifies Levinas' idea of the face as a presence which is experienced as an epiphany which orders, calls, and summons one to recognise the other, eventually

KAROLINA LAMPROU

leading to the acknowledgement of the physical presence of the other and, more importantly, to the assumption of responsibility for his/her suffering. Burden therefore assumes such a passive role in an attempt to appeal to a spectator rendered indifferent due to the spectacularisation and normalisation of human suffering.

As already mentioned, Levinas insists on the responsibility every One has towards the other. In *Otherwise than Being,* the philosopher elaborates on this relationship of responsibility as a sensibility which cannot be reduced to an experience. Experience for Levinas is not the mere "experience of objects" (*Otherwise than Being* xxiii). Experience, as a possibility, depends on the relationship with the other as "an a priori fact preceding the a priori forms or conditions" (*Otherwise than Being* xxiii). Based on his understanding of experience as inextricable from the relationship with the other, Levinas discusses a kind of sensibility that originates before thought, before the ordering of the human world. This is because the exposure to the other constitutes a signification in itself, which occurs before what he calls the "said". I consider Levinas' theorisation of the "saying" and the "said" seminal for my argument, as it is precisely this direction that I find Burden's art to be taking. Levinas defines the "saying" as the exposure to the other which can be seen as an act of generosity. Notably, the "saying" for Levinas does not "give signs, it becomes a sign" (Levinas, *Otherwise than Being* 49). It is therefore a gesture of communication "as a condition for all communication, as exposure" (Levinas, *Otherwise than Being* 48); it is an exposure beyond nudity which commands the self "thou shalt not kill". The "said", on the other hand, refers to what is communicated, "a conventional code which regulates the usage of a system of signs" (Levinas, *Otherwise than Being* 37). The "said" cannot signify in itself but simply represents what the "saying" signifies. Therefore, when something moves from the "saying "to the "said", it betrays itself, as it loses its signification as exposure through the mediation of language. In this light, the position that Burden assumes in the performance discussed above is intriguingly complicated. He is both absent from the sight of the audience and, at the same time, present, in immobility and silence, in the same space with them. He assumes a kind of passivity that strips the self of any "identical quiddity", and "it is a denuding beyond the skin" (Levinas, *Otherwise than Being* 49). As I argue, it is in his hidden and silent physical presence that he becomes a sign in the Levinasian sense, beyond language and conventional forms of human communication. Levinas clarifies that when he discusses "saying", he does not refer to saying "dissimulating itself and protecting itself in the said, just giving words in the face of the other, but saying uncovering itself, denuding itself of its skin [...] offering

KAROLINA LAMPROU

itself even in suffering-and thus wholly sign, signifying itself" (*Otherwise than Being* 15).

Burden's work here resonates with the idea of the vulnerable and suffering other who does not communicate his pain through language or his physical appearance, but through his/her presence which can be sensed on a different level. This is why I consider Burden's work to be functioning as an expression in the Levinasian sense. Levinas' accounting for the signifying potential of what we are frequently inclined to conceive as absent or devoid of meaning directs our attention to the function of ineffability as expression: "an artist —even a painter, even a musician— tells. He writes of the ineffable" (Levinas, *The Levinas Reader* 130). It is precisely such expression that Burden lays claim to in his work. By attempting to communicate the ineffable, he provides his audience with the opportunity to reflect on the people, whom we may not see, but who are suffering and dying while we remain indifferent. Ultimately, the message of Burden's work, in its capacity to communicate the ineffable, may be appreciated for its ethical force.

In this context, however, we can only speculate on the ethical outcome of Burden's performance. For this reason, I find it important to turn to another work of his, which took place in the same year, so as to shed light on a crucial aspect of this work, the impact the audience's reaction may have on the nature and development of the performance. Entitled *Doomed*, this performance took place at Chicago's Museum of Contemporary Art. For the purpose of this work, Burden remained lying on the floor of the gallery, entirely still, under a sheet of a five by eight inches tilted glass which was leaned against the wall. People kept going into the gallery space to witness Burden's endurance in this discomforting position.

Fig. 23. Burden, Chris. *Doomed*.1975. Museum of Contemporary Arts Chicago, Chicago.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Interestingly enough, no one tried to approach the artist, ask if he needed something, or intervene in any way in the performance. At some point, 45 hours later, a museum employee placed a pitcher of water next to the artist. This gesture of kindness was all Burden needed to end the performance smashing the ticking clock, using a hammer, and walking out of the performance space. None of the four hundred people who visited the gallery to witness Burden's performance responded to the discomfort of another human being, failing thus to enter into a relationship with him and refraining from acknowledging their ethical responsibility towards the suffering other.[71] On the contrary, they simply let him potentially starve or dehydrate to death or come down with uremic poisoning from not urinating for so long. The artist himself wondered: "my God, don't they care anything at all about me? Are they going to leave me here to die?" (qtd. in Ebert "Chris Burden").

The problem with such works that require the spectator's intervention is that the members of the audience assume that it is the artist's choice, and thus that they should not interfere out of respect for the work of the performance artist. This idea is evoked in the comments made by the museum employee, Alene Valkanas, who, eventually, interfered and stopped the performance:

> We felt a moral obligation not to interfere with Burden's intentions, but we felt we couldn't stand by and allow him to do serious physical harm to himself. There was a possibility he was in such a deep trance that he didn't have control over his will. We decided to place a pitcher of water next to his head and see if he would drink from it. The moment we put the water down, Chris got up, walked into the next room, returned with a hammer and an envelope, and smashed the clock, stopping it (qtd. in Ebert "Chris Burden").

"My God," Valkanas said, "all we had to do was end it ourselves, and we thought the rules of the piece required us to do nothing" (qtd. in Ebert "Chris Burden"). As mentioned in the introduction, one of the problems associated with modernist aesthetics and the institutionalised context of art is that the members of the audience are mere observers and do not feel they can develop a relationship with the artwork and, in the context of performance art, the artists. Therefore, they fail to acknowledge the artist as a fellow human being or treat the artwork as something that can offer more than

[71] Burden performed several other pieces with this idea as a common thread: *Shoot* (1971), *Five Day Locker* (1971), *Bed Piece* (1972), and *Trans-Fixed* (1974) are only few examples.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

disinterested pleasure. The piece would continue, Burden said, until the museum staff acted on one of the three elements: The clock, the glass, and himself. By providing the pitcher of water, they had done so. "I was prepared to lie in this position indefinitely", he continued. "The responsibility for ending the piece rested with the museum staff but they were always unaware of this crucial aspect" (qtd. in Ebert, "Chris Burden"). Although the performance demanded the audience's participation, Burden was willing to risk his life with his performance. The same applies to Abramović's performance discussed earlier on, in which the artist *knew* that somebody could easily pick up the gun and shoot her—which almost happened.

The Importance of Recognising a Shared Embodied Vulnerability

As I have tried to show in the first part of this chapter, one of the greatest limitations to early performances is the habitual conventional relationship developed between the artist and the spectator, due to the fact that the latter has learnt to treat artworks as objects of aesthetic delight or as mere spectacle. Since the early stages of performance art, contemporary audiences have become more familiar with artistic practices where they are expected to participate or intervene, and are, in effect, more likely to respond as expected by the artist. For this reason, it is important to draw on more recent performances, in which the dynamics between the artist and the members of the audience have changed, since the latter are expected to participate in the performance. What we need, following Butler, is recognition of the vulnerability we share as human creatures. It is because such recognition is lacking that the lives (and deaths) of certain gender and racial minorities, as Butler argues, are unthinkable, unmarkable, ungrievable, and unnamable. As I have tried to show, this concern with a shared vulnerability is central to the work of the performance artists I have been discussing above. In this way, the works I discuss in the second part of this chapter help the participants recognise a corporeal vulnerability shared by all, including those who are rendered abject because they belong to sexual, ethnic, or gender minority groups. Franko B's earlier work, in particular, as explained in the previous chapter, is concerned with the abject status of homosexuality in patriarchal heteronormative societies and seeks to develop an artistic practice in the context of which the abject other can be approached as a "face". As I will move on to argue, with his work, Franko B exposes his "embodied vulnerability" which, according to Butler, should motivate a response and a sense of responsibility towards others.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

As we have seen in the previous chapter, in *Oh Lover Boy* Franko B assumes a passive position for the duration of approximately 10 minutes. The artist states with regard to his body in this performance: "it's there, it's on the table. It is there for you to take, in a way, either to draw or to look at" ("Franko B interviewed by Gray Watson"). The artist appears as a victim, detached from his status as a subject, still and motionless.[72] The artist's passivity, during this performance, evokes Levinas's concept of "radical passivity", which for Levinas is an ethical solution due to the fact that it is only through "radical passivity" that we become able to recognise our inherent responsibility towards others. Levinas claims that suffering takes the form of giving even if the one who suffers takes the risk to suffer without any reason. The artist in his turn cannot be certain whether his performance will succeed in affecting any member of his audience, but he still feels the need to expose his nudity and his bleeding body to the audience, no matter what the outcome will be. As the artist explains, "but I think the most important thing is that you are honest in what you are doing. That's why I am totally naked and, as you said, we aren't talking about literally. It means to be really kind of…It is to give. It is really to give" ("Franko B Interviewed by Gray Watson").

At the same time, his passivity involves a conscious decision on his part to create a transformative experience for the audience. Therefore, as in the performances I have already analysed, he is using his passivity as a means of confronting the audience with their responsibility. As I have already mentioned, Franko B suffers to expose dominant misconceptions and the violence these inflict on certain minority groups. Like Butler, Franko B seeks to demonstrate that no life is dispensable and should be ungrievable. The other's alterity (in this case his sexual preference) should not scare us or make us feel threatened. We need to accept and embrace it. Therefore, the spectators are expected to recognise the suffering of a fellow human being. Only then, he believes, will we stop discriminating against people on the basis of their gender, race, and sexual preference. Only then can we treat everybody as the vulnerable human beings we all are. Essentially, what is required is to question any normative structures that separate people into categories, rendering them recognisable (and hence grievable) on the basis of the category they belong to.

One may naturally wonder whether the aestheticisation of the artist's suffering body actually prevents the audience from recognising and being affected by it. However, as I will argue, and as Amelia Jones drawing on Luc Boltanski brilliantly

[72] I will discuss the dangers inherent in the presentation of the artist as victim in the last chapter of this thesis.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

puts it in "Performing the Wounded Body: Pain, Affect and the Radical Relationality of Meaning", the aesthetically beautiful images that some performance artists produce in their work may have stronger political effects than actual images from wars, terrorist attacks, etc. Boltanski, in *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media, and Politics,* explains how responses to suffering may vary in the following way: "unjust, touching, and sublime". The first is when one responds to suffering with anger, rendering the spectator of suffering "*indignant*". Emotions of "*anger"* and "*resentment"*, Boltasnki argues, often result in violent actions, usually "at a distance […] condemned to remain verbal", in the form of mere "accusation" (57). This response, however, does not allow room for empathy or identification with the other (the Levinasian self who suffers) in order to assume one's own share of responsibility. Another may be moved by the suffering, which often leads the spectator to experience sadness, usually expressed through tears. This response that is based on sentiments, according to Boltanski, is problematic in the sense that it may prevent the one who experiences sadness from actually understanding and empathising with those who suffer in silence (Boltanski 92). The experience of suffering as "touching", Jones further explains, can be lead "towards a problematic catharsis, letting the spectator off the hook as it were by allowing her to feel touched rather than morally obligated to mitigate the suffering" (Jones, "Performing the Wounded Body" 48). The third, which Boltanski calls "aesthetic topic" and he considers as the most moral and socio-politically positive response, is the aesthetic response, which provokes the other's empathy instead of a mere over-identification. The aesthetic topic, according to Boltanski, reveals true suffering, urging the spectator to confront the truth (116). Boltanski explains that he uses the word "topic" as analogous to "ancient rhetoric", having an "both an argumentative and an affective dimension"(xv).The author argues that an "aesthetic view of the world" provides "a space for radical difference outside political constructions", which, by reject[ing] both denunciation and sentiment and, appealing to the control of any emotion other than aesthetic, refuses to be either indignant or tender-hearted" (Boltanski 131-2). Hence, the importance of the aesthetic response is precisely that it prevents the aforementioned problematic or "ambiguous catharsis" (Boltanski 26). While Jones uses these arguments to elucidate Ron Athey's work, I argue that the same applies to Franko B. As Jones argues, the body, through its public exposure, succeeds in politicising the spectacle of suffering in order to provoke the guilt of the audience ("Performing the Wounded Body" 47-8). The guilt the audience feel for the artists' suffering enables them to empathise with the artists and can bring

KAROLINA LAMPROU

about the political effect that body/performance art aims to have. Jones supports that body artists perform a very generous act of opening their pain to the public, calling them to recognise and embrace rather than disavow the other's wound and suffering, so that a potential opening for a change in politics becomes possible (Jones, "Performing the Wounded Body" 57). This is only so far as we take responsibility for the other's pain.

Butler focuses on the human body as a site of suffering. She explains that vulnerability needs to be exposed in representations of violence and pain, as opposed to the ones that the Media choose to present for their own interests. Butler argues that the Media sometimes "produce images of the less than human, in the guise of the human, to show how the less than human disguises itself, and threatens to deceive those of us who might think we recognize another human there, in that face" (*Precarious Life* 146). The Media, in some instances, present depictions of human suffering as "less than human" in order to prevent others from identifying and empathising with certain populations. On other occasions, the death of certain people is not even presented in or mentioned by the Media. By denying any form of representation to certain lives, it is as if "there never was a life, and there never was a death" (*Precarious Life* 146). Franko B both depicts and conveys human suffering in an entirely different way to the one Butler is so critical of. Specifically, he presents suffering as something that is simultaneously beautiful and revolting, attractive and repulsive. Regarding the aesthetic and the ethical dimension of his work, he argues:

> I guess I am a romantic – I believe that if I can change the course of one person's life, make them think on their own terms, then I have had some success with my work […] And that's why art is beautiful, not in a decorative sense, in the sense that it attracts you and has an impact on your ways of viewing the world. It can be an amazing opportunity. (Franko B, "Franko B: In Conversation with Dominic Johnson")

Mary Richards argues that body art performances "function as corporeal reality—at a time when the medico-scientific management of bodies and tele-filmic distancing of real bodies works to contain or mask the bloody reality of our interiors" ("Specular Suffering" 108-9). The critic claims that what body artists succeed in, through the use of their own real and bleeding body, is to convey a genuine image of the body "beyond the quotidian visual diet constructed by mediatized bodies in pain visible on television, the Internet, and in newspapers" ("Specular Suffering" 109). This is what Butler asks for; real and genuine images of suffering in order to humanise

people's responses to other suffering bodies, which are often dehumanised by media representation (*Precarious Life* 141). In order to escape the brainwashing caused by the images served to us by the Media, we need to be exposed to real experiences of suffering that can promote more ethical approaches to it. In this light, Franko B wants to show that his body is a *real* body that bleeds, aiming to take us out of our absorption into the false images of bodies circulated by the Media. Through his art, Franko B urges his audience to face the intolerable and move beyond the spectacularisation of pain by the Media.

The idea that an art event can be so much more than a spectacle can also be traced in Franko B's *Aktion 398.* This work was first performed in South London Gallery, in 1999, in a room at the centre of the gallery, which was specially constructed for this performance. For the purpose of this performance, the audience had to book seats in advance. When they arrived at the gallery, they had to take off their shoes, pick a number from a dispensing machine and sit in a waiting area until their turn was displayed on the digital screen on top of a wall. They were then placed in the company of Franko B's assistants, who were dressed in white coats and wore white gloves, and led to a white room where they had an intimate one-to-one encounter with Franko B for around three minutes. Franko B was naked and covered in white pigment. His white body was slowly becoming red as the artist was bleeding from a cut on the right side of his stomach. He wore a large collar around his neck, similar to what animals wear to prevent them from licking their wounds. According to the artist, we acquire wounds through time as creaturely beings ("Franko B Interviewed by Gray Watson"). In exposing his creaturely wounds, he invites his audience to confront their own wounds, something that in his view is very difficult for humans since "usually we try to avoid such situations in life" ("Franko B, interviewed by Gray Watson"). On this aspect, a member of the audience, the journalist Emma Safe, comments: "alone with Franko inside a small room, I wasn't sure which of us was more vulnerable" ("Come into My Parlour"). Each member's experience, however, seems to be different: "some were too scared to approach him at all, some wanted to touch the wound, shake his hand or talk about their day. Most courageously, one visitor stripped naked and urinated on the floor" (Safe, "Come into My Parlour"). However, as the journalist notes after studying the responses of various members of the audience, there was something common among them—they all felt that it was them "under scrutiny" rather than the artist (Safe, "Come into My Parlour"). Interestingly, this is Franko B's intention. As he explains: "in a way I am the one that has more power because I am the one who set it up. In

KAROLINA LAMPROU

terms of being vulnerable, I think we are both vulnerable in more than one way: it is not just me because I am naked. They are vulnerable, too" ("Franko B interviewed by Gray Watson").

Fig. 24. Franko B. *Aktion 398*. 1999-2002, by Manuel Vason.

With this statement, the artist highlights the fact that he is not simply the vulnerable other but adopts this role for the success of his performance. The calmness of the artist, despite the fact that he was bleeding, left no room for interpreting this piece as "a pitiable self-injurious cry for help" (Safe, "Come into My Parlour"). So, during these encounters, both the audience and the artist were positioned outside their habitual social context, hence outside their comfort zone, which may provide a false sense of security, in order to become able to reach a whole new level of communication. This is evidenced by the fact that the members of the audience felt vulnerable due to the artist's proximity and were moved by the artist's wound. Jones describes a similar experience in one of Athey's performances. As she embarrassingly admits, when she felt drops of liquid from Athey's anus on her face, she felt disgusted and afraid of his HIV-infected blood. However, at the same time, she became concerned for the artist's well-being, given his engagement in such difficult, dangerous, and painful actions. By feeling just how real the artist's pain was, Jones realised that such "violation of bodily coherence" could happen to anyone (Jones, "Performing the Wounded Body" 50). In fact, it happens to many, on a daily basis. It is such experiences that, potentially, have the ability to affect and even transform us on an individual, collective, social and

KAROLINA LAMBROU

political level. Franko B notes: "My work presents the body in its most carnal, existential and essential state, confronting the human condition in an objectified, vulnerable and seductively powerful form" ("The Centre of Attention"). His work therefore forms an attempt to show how *all* bodies matter. This is why he appears naked with a bleeding wound—an image that all human beings can identify with. Therefore, the artist is striving for the recognition of the vulnerability all human beings share in order to help spectators accept their ethical responsibility towards all others. This will enable us to reimagine the possibility of a community in which the bodies that do not comply with "the normative notion of what the body of a human must be" (i.e. white, middle class, healthy, heterosexual, etc.), are not excluded (Butler, *Precarious Life* 33).

Fig. 25. Franko B.*Aktion 398*. 1999-2002.

In her discussion of the performance above, Safe wrote in *The Guardian* that the anticipation of their encounter with Franko B made the audience feel as if they were patients waiting for test results. The white-dressed assistants, who looked like male nurses, made the setting resemble a hospital. However, what this performance offers is a unique experience, very different from any hospital visit. As a homosexual, Franko B can be said to be more sensitive to issues related to sexually transmitted diseases like AIDS. At the same time, as the artist has repeatedly stated, he does not want to be *solely* associated with AIDS and homosexuality (see Chapter 3). According to him, what needs to be foregrounded is not our differences but the fact that all human lives count the same and *can* bleed the same. The fact that Franko B is completely silent during his encounters with people, along with the white setting and the white pigment that his body is covered with, brings his bleeding wound into focus. Moreover,

KAROLINA TAPROU

the fact that during his encounters the artist opens and closes his eyes repeatedly emphasises further his discomfort and the pain he feels from his bleeding wound. Finally, the large collar that Franko B is wearing foregrounds the creaturely nature of his suffering, while his inability "to lick" his wounds serves as an invitation to the members of the audience to acknowledge his pain and take care of his wounds.

This idea becomes stronger when we see this performance in juxtaposition to Franko B's *Aktion 893: Why Are you Here*, which took place in 2005, where the members of the audience, who have a one to one encounter with the artist, need to be naked while, this time, Franko B is fully clothed. A 10-minute conversation takes place which pivots around the audience's reasons and motives for participating in these performances. The dynamics between the artist and the audience change with this work, as the members of the audience, placed in a more vulnerable position, are invited to expose their naked body and self to the artist. In this way, as I believe, those who participate in this work get the opportunity to experience art differently—no longer from the safe distance of the spectator. In addition, members of the audience realise that our situations can easily change: the victim becomes the victimiser, the observer turns into an object observed. As previously mentioned, human beings can never fully know themselves or others. Franko B, especially in the context of this work, invites the audience to escape their comfort zone, expose their body, have an honest conversation, and, ultimately, assume the position of the vulnerable other. It is precisely this vulnerability within ourselves that Butler considers as the foundation for an ethical bond with the other.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Fig. 26. Franko B. *Aktion 893: Why Are You Here*. 2005.

Another compelling performance that mobilises the idea of human vulnerability in the context of identity politics is Galindo's *Rock*, which took place in Brazil, in 2013. The performance took place outside of the Hemispheric Institute in São Paulo, for the purpose of the 8th Annual Encuentro. At the beginning of the performance, the artist positioned herself onto the cement ground curling up her body and hiding her face behind her hands, remaining in this position until the end of the performance. The audience placed themselves around the artist while the high trees and natural environment behind added to the naturalness of the space where the performance took place. After around ten minutes, a member from the audience moved towards the artist, stood right on above her, unzipped his pants and finally urinated on the artist's body. As soon as he finished, he zipped his pants and returned to his original position. Galindo remained motionless while not showing the slightest reaction to this diminishing, disrespectful, and cruel action. The urine spread all over her body, covering every inch of the black surface that was visible to the audience.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Fig. 27. Galindo,Regina José. *Piedra*. 2013, by Julia Pantoja, and Marlene Ramirez-Cancio Hemispheric Institute of Sao Paolo, Sao Paolo.

Ten minutes had passed before another male member of the audience repeated the same action, without showing any hesitation or remorse for violating this female body. The man was staring at the black back of the artist for as long as he was urinating, seemingly ignoring or not caring about the fact that he was abusing a fellow human being with this action. Sadly, the same action was repeated by a female member this time, something that demonstrates the complicit role of women in the objectification of "other" women.[73] For the duration of two whole hours, all members of the audience could see was the artist's motionless body, covered in black coal, curled up against the ground, covered in urine. Even though they did not imitate this disrespectful act, at the same time, they did nothing to prevent or stop it. They were passively watching what was going on, evoking the indifference of state officials and the public alike towards the violation of female bodies, a common occurrence in Guatemala. The documentation of this work uploaded on the artist's official website, is accompanied by a short poem, written by Galindo herself. In this poem, the artist writes: "Stone/Stone/I am rock/I do not feel the blows/the humiliation/the lascivious looks/the bodies on mine/hatred. I am rock/on myself; the history of the world/my body remains immobile/covered with coal/like stone" ("Piedra").[74]

[73] According to the artist's official website, the first two people who urinated on the artists were volunteers who were asked by the artist to perform this action while the third one was a member of the audience.
[74] My translation.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

In my view, Galindo's performance accurately reflects Butler's claim regarding each body's "public dimension". Butler explains: "Constituted as a social phenomenon in the public sphere, my body is and is not mine. Given over from the start to the world of others, it bears their imprint, is formed within the crucible of social life; only later, and with some uncertainty, do I lay claim to my body as my own, if, in fact, I ever do" (*Undoing Gender* 21). The artist's body mirrors the exploitation, objectification, violence inflicted on so many female bodies. The natural surroundings of the space blended perfectly with Galindo's stone-like figure. The artist's body, as the title also suggests, looks more like a rock than a human body, an allusion both to the women who were forced to work in the coal mines under inhumane conditions and a metaphor for the survival skills of women since coal has a protective quality against the absorption of urine that is toxic for the body (Mengesha, "*Piedra* by Regina José Galindo"). As repeatedly stated by the artist, her work explores "the ethical implication of social violence and injustices related to gender and racial discrimination, as well as human rights abuses arising from the endemic inequalities in power relations of contemporary societies" (*Regina José Galindo*, "Biography"). For this reason, she uses her art to expose the violation of the female body, both in Guatemala and in other South American countries. The physical appearance of the artist (she is naked, helpless, and abused) comes in contrast with that of the audience who appear as an integrated unity keeping control of themselves and the objectified body of the artist. Substituting herself for the abject other, Galindo underscores the fact that certain lives, in this case the lives of working class, indigenous women of Maya descent, are the targets of state and domestic violence. She also demonstrates that certain deaths are of no concern to the government or the general public. Hence, these bodies are rendered dispensable and ungrievable. Butler urges us to ponder upon these questions: "Is a Muslim life as valuable as legibly First World lives? Are the Palestinians yet accorded the status of the 'human' in US policy and press coverage?" "Why is it that Israeli and Palestinian deaths are not viewed as equally horrible?" (*Precarious Life* 12, 14). Along these lines, Galindo challenges our perception of Maya, murdered and mutilated female bodies, which are largely treated as non-important and dispensable. It is my contention that Galindo, who often presents her work in international art organisations, such as the Biennale, is precisely grieving for these "nameless and faceless deaths", seeking to develop the spectators' awareness of the existence and value of bodies treated as dispensable (Butler, *Precarious Life* 46). In this way, she helps us not only to acknowledge our own power

KAROLINA LAMPROU

to respond but also our obligation to challenge the socio-political conditions, institutions, and discourses that denude certain lives of any value.

What we must not ignore is our own complicity in perpetuating this violence and our role as "global actors". Butler insists: "Our acts are not self-generated, but conditioned" (*Precarious Life* 16). As she goes on to explain, on some occasions we are the ones who act upon someone and on other occasions we are acted upon by someone. The philosopher asks some very important questions that we should all be asking ourselves when we have to take action or make a decision: "What can I do with the conditions that form me? What do they constrain me to do? What can I do to transform them?" (*Precarious Life* 16). The most difficult decision we have to make is to abstain from acting violently when we are subjected to violence ourselves. As Butler claims, our responsibility is heightened on this occasion, despite our belief that we are justified to use violence when we are treated with violence. How can we achieve social transformation when we participate in and sustain the circuits of violence? According to the philosopher, a "different sort of responsibility" needs to emerge: a responsibility suitable "for the global conditions of justice" (*Precarious Life* 16). This is precisely Galindo's concern in *The Objective*. This work was part of the 2017 *Documenta 14*, in Kassel, Germany, in the form of a video-installation, on the second floor of the Stadtmuseum. The setting consisted of a white chamber with an internal room and an external corridor. The members of the audience could choose one of the four spots that the G36 assault rifles were positioned and pick the position of the target. The artist, in some instances, entered the chamber in order to assume the role of the target for the audience members. Posted in a public exhibition was the following question: "When you look at her through a gunsight, will you feel the impulse to look away, intervene, or pull the trigger?" (*Documenta 14,* "Regina-José-Galindo"). The author and artist Jota Mombaça argues that this work also posits these questions: "How do you position yourself in relation to the social politics of death that destroy the right to live in peace across the world?" ("Documenta 14").

KAROLINA LAMPROU

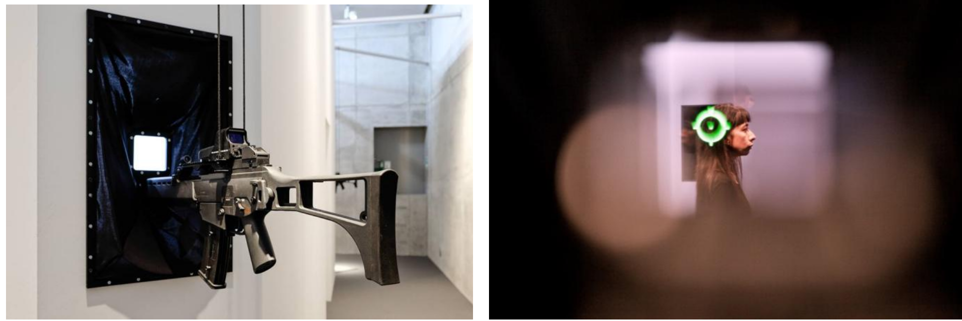

Fig. 28&29. Galindo, Regina José. *The Objective*. 2007, by Michael Nast, Stadtmuseum, Kassel.

The place where this installation was set is very important as Germany belongs in the top five international weapons manufacturers. Indeed, the country has significant financial gain from the sales of G36 Heckler & Koch assault rifles, which are exported to war zones. Galindo notes that such rifles were used for the killing of forty-three students in Ayotzinapa, Mexico, in the Iguala mass kidnapping.[75] The artist often takes up the role of the vulnerable subject. On this occasion, her ostensibly vulnerable position only brings to light our own vulnerabilities, unconscious murderous desires, and possible reactions when we find ourselves in a position of vulnerability and/or power. Galindo, therefore, compels the members of the audience to view the object of a murderous action as a face, a fellow human being. She enables them to simulate the experience of looking a human being through a gun hole, having the power to determine whether this individual will continue the course of his/her life. She also invites the members of the audience to wrestle with their instincts and impulses when faced with a vulnerable other (*Documenta 14* "Regina-José-Galindo").

Therefore, "if the first impulse to the other's vulnerability is the desire to kill, the ethical injunction is precisely to militate against that first impulse", Butler argues (*Precarious Life* 138). In the context of Galindo's performance, the artist offers spectators the opportunity to see where they would instinctively position themselves and which role they would assume: that of the sniper or that of the target? Even if they knew that no one would actually shoot them, many chose the position of the sniper. The bad conscience that causes this murderous impulse is described by Butler as a negative form of narcissism, which results from low self-esteem and is linked to

[75] On September 26, 2014, 43 male students were forced to leave the bus from Ayotzinapa where they were training to become teachers and allegedly taken into custody by Cocula and Iguala police officers. A few months after, their body remains were found in several plastic bags. It was confirmed that the students were tortured and violently murdered while the reason has not been given yet (Semple, "Missing Mexican Students Suffered a Night of 'Terror', Investigators Say").

KAROLINA LAMPROU

melancholia. Specifically, in one of her earlier works, *The Psychic Life of Power*, Butler explains negative narcissism as a self-renunciation, a state in which the subject is preoccupied "with what is most debased and defiled about it" (50). However,

> [i]f the ethical moves us beyond bad conscience, it is because bad conscience, is, after all, only a negative version of narcissism, and so still a form of narcissism. The face of the Other comes to me from outside, and interrupts that narcissistic circuit. The face of the Other calls me out of narcissism towards something finally more important. (Butler, *Precarious Life* 138)

This is precisely what, for Levinas, leads to the triumph of ethics that pivots around the defeat of the power and the wish to kill. What Galindo seems to be doing is to make one anxious about pulling the trigger and hurting another human being, forcing them, essentially, to fight against the impulse to inflict violence on the other. In the instances when she enters the room of the installation and becomes the target, she puts a face to that unknown other which the Media persistently tries to de-realise. At the same time, as I argue, Galindo, by asking the members of the audience to pick one of the two positions, the perpetrator or the victim, brings to the surface the possibility shared by human beings to suffer injury and/or cause death.

As Butler notes, it is the derealisation of the other, which marks him/her as "neither alive not dead, but interminably spectral", that allows humans to treat others with so much violence and cruelty (*Precarious Life* 33-4). It is when these derealised and objectified others finally regain their subjectivity as fellow human beings that this inexhaustible circle of violence will be interrupted. Ostensibly, this is what Galindo aims at: by exposing her humanness and by allowing the audience to see her as such, through the barrel of a gun, she prevents them from treating her and others as precarious and ungrievable lives. At the same time, she asks the members of the audience to come face to face with their own capacity to kill the other, hence, to acknowledge their own responsibility and the urgency for the formation of ethical subjectivity. This is how she hopes to help people recognise the common vulnerability of human beings, including their own. As Butler argues,

> [m]indfulness of this vulnerability can become the basis of claims for non-military political solutions, just as denial of this vulnerability through a fantasy of mastery (an institutionalized fantasy of mastery) can fuel the instruments of war […] We must attend to it, even abide by it, as we begin to think about what politics might be implied by staying

KAROLINA LAMPROU

> with the thought of corporeal vulnerability itself, a situation in which we can be vanquished or lose others. Is there something to be learned about the geopolitical distribution of corporeal vulnerability from our own brief and devastating exposure to this condition? (*Precarious Life* 29)

The fear we experience when, for example in the context of this performance, we take the role of the target or the sniper, must neither be repressed nor disavowed. It has to be used appropriately for something meaningful to occur. The philosopher, therefore, argues that we have to stop acting as if we are not part of the international political domain. We have to be able to see each one of our wounds in order to expose our vulnerability, respond accordingly, and show our contempt "for international coalitions that are not built or led by us" (Butler, *Precarious Life* 7). Even if we haven't directly caused violence, we still need to accept our ethical responsibility with regard to violence inflicted on other people and stop justifying the use of violence as a means of fighting violence. Only then will we find the capacity to instigate political change: i.e. once we accept that the way we relate to others provokes analogous effects.

Both Franko B and Galindo engage in a painful and/or violent enactment of gendered processes of abjection with the purpose of sparking the audience's empathy and, ultimately, to incite their response in order to challenge the political representational frameworks that sustain such processes. Essentially, they try to show to the audience that a violated body could in fact be that of a loved one or their own body. Only when everyone realises that all lives are grievable that an ethics able to resist current global challenges can come about. It is my contention that these artists, through their work, reiterate Butler's assertion that we must not "miss the situation of being addressed, the demand that comes from elsewhere, sometimes a nameless elsewhere, by which our obligations are articulated and pressed upon us" (Butler, *Precarious Life* 130). It is crucial that we fight for the acknowledgement of our common vulnerability. However, this cannot be actualised without our exposure to suffering. What performance artists do is mediate this violence, injustice, and pain that fellow human beings around the world experience. By enacting these experiences within an aesthetic context, they help us face and respond to violence. They work towards a more inter-subjective understanding of the human and a new corporeal vocabulary beyond language, where physical and bodily experiences are better able to touch and respond to the real. Furthermore, what performance artists do is take responsibility for the injustices of the world and, through the exposure of their body, their vulnerability and their suffering,

KAROLINA LAMPROU

urge the audience to acknowledge their own responsibility and find the capacity to respond. The artists I have discussed in this chapter transform their wounded bodies into signs "which provide a potential opening for a politics of change" (Jones, "Performing the Wounded Body" 57). Franko B seems to be involved in a double gesture: on the one hand, he is dramatising his vulnerability as an othered person; on the other hand, he demands that spectators relate to him not as a self safely at a distance but as an equally vulnerable human being. In a similar way, Galindo, with her artistic practice, illuminates certain socio-political concerns, particularly with regard to the precariousness of the lives of the indigenous Maya women, whose murder, as I will show in the next chapter, remains unpunished.

With this chapter, I hope to have shown how artists, each through their distinct artistic practices, attempt to challenge current socio-political situations and propose a new basis for humanism. So far, I have focused on the importance of rituals in the context of performance art, both in earlier and more recent artistic practices. In the second part of Chapter 2, I focused on Ron Athey's work to show the artist's concern with George Bataille's sacred moment. In Chapter 3, I have extended my discussion of the sacred, foregrounding its role in the process of sublimation. To this end, I drew on Gina Pane's and Franko B's work to explore how female and homosexual individuals are treated as abject, due to heterosexual, normative structures. In this chapter, I found it crucial to elaborate on the ethical dimension of this art form, in order to insist on the meaningfulness of the suffering of performance artists. At the same time, as aforementioned with regard to *Rhythm O,* the success of a performance cannot be guaranteed due to the fact that it depends on how each member of the audience receives or responds to the work, or even on whether there is a response at all. Also, it should be noted that the artist sometimes risks his/her own life, which, again, can cause the work's failure. These issues will be discussed in the last chapter of this thesis. Nonetheless, despite the possible risks and dangers entailed in such controversial forms of art, many people have been positively affected by performance art, a fact which re-affirms its significance. For this reason, and before moving to the last chapter of this thesis, I find it important to bring together some tendencies that might be seen as markedly different to the ones I have already discussed, though they are mobilised by ethical and political concerns. Particularly, I will examine a tendency in performance art that can be illuminated if seen through the lens of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben, who provides a completely different understanding of the sacred. Agamben, I will explain, relates the sacred to the degradation of man and

KAROLINA LAMPROU

his reduction to the bare state of nature, in a permanent state of abandonment and marginalisation. For Agamben, nothing positive can come from being in a sacred state or by being reduced to a position of abandonment, an idea extensively explored in his work *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life.* In this work, he argues that, due to the biopolitical turn in structures of power, human life has entered a zone of indistinction where bare life is appropriated by the political sphere. Using the binary concepts of bare life/political existence, zoe/bios and exclusion/inclusion, Agamben prepares the ground for the introduction of the protagonist of his book, a figure of the archaic Roman law, the *homo sacer* (sacred man). In the following chapter, I will draw on performances which launch a polemic against the biopolitical state, a polemic which aims to demonstrate the need to move towards an alternative mode of being and a community that does not reinforce exclusionary biopolitical power. In my analysis, I will deploy Agamben's concept of play as a counter-strategy against the separating function which he posits at the heart of both the sacred and biopolitics.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Chapter 5
From the Sacred to the Profane

The Performance Artist as the Figure of the *homo sacer*: The Artistic Endeavour of Regina José Galindo

In contrast to early performance artists, contemporary practitioners seem to be more sceptical about adopting a discourse centered on notions of sacredness and sublimation. Therefore, it is crucial that I position their work within an analytical framework that does not depend on such concepts. Following Giorgio Agamben, I will treat consumerist society in relation to the biopolitical State. Agamben's theory of biopolitics—a term coined by Michel Foucault—,[76] will help me elucidate important aspects of the artistic practice of the Guatemalan performance artist Regina José Galindo, who, as I will argue, stages what Agamben defines as the "state of exception" through adopting the role of the *homo sacer*. Unlike George Bataille and Julia Kristeva, whose work I have extensively drawn on in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3, Agamben understands the sacred as a mechanism for separation and exclusion, which the philosopher analyses in the context of his work on the "state of exception".

Agamben argues that contemporary mass consumerism and capitalist modes of production, which reflect the principles on which liberal democratic states are based, render our sociopolitical structures highly problematic. The philosopher goes on to argue that the increasing power of the supranational institutions of neo-liberal, capitalist economy has produced the most "docile and cowardly social body that has ever existed in human history" (Agamben, *What is an Apparatus* 22). This is because when people are integrated in the capitalist system, they enter an ongoing circle of production and reproduction, sustaining a consumerist spirit that worships commodities whose exchange value does not reflect their actual use value. As a result, people enter a spectacular sphere, in which their value as human beings depends on their role as agents of consumerism who become complicit in sustaining capitalist principles. Human beings, therefore, are seen as mere tools of capitalist production. According to Agamben, the domain of consumption that sustains capitalism fashions a system where objects, bodies, activities, relations and so on are "divided from

[76] Foucault traces the emergence of biopolitics in an older political model based on sovereignty. Sovereign power, according to the philosopher, is "a right of seizure: of things, time, bodies, and ultimately life itself". Biopower is defined instead as the power to "incite, reinforce, control, monitor, optimize, and organize the forces under it". Due to this, while the sovereign exercised his "right to take life or let live", biopolitics prevails as "the power to make live and to let die". (Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, vol I.* 136).

KAROLINA LAMPROU

themselves and placed in a separate sphere […] where all use becomes and remains impossible" (*Profanations* 81). Agamben's view of capitalism is related to his understanding of the sacred. According to the philosopher, just as the things that belonged to the gods, hence that which belonged in the domain of the sacred, could not be used by humans, in the same way, in the commodity-based system of late capitalism, the consumption and exhibition value of things has taken over, a fact that has made their actual use impossible.

For Agamben, such politics, which rely on increased consumption and economic growth, are based on a prolonged "state of exception", in which not all human beings are protected against injustice. Although Agamben published a book entitled *State of Exception* in 2005, his exploration of this concept started before that, in one of his early works, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, which was published in 1998. In this work, Agamben discusses how human life has entered a zone of indistinction between *bios* (life recognised in the polis) and *zoe* (life included in the political only through its exclusion from/abandonment outside the legal protection of the polis). While Aristotle considers *zoe* as simple natural life, excluded from the political sphere, Agamben argues that *zoe* has been included in the political domain since ancient times, due to the fact that natural life has always been part of the *polis.* In his analysis, Agamben foregrounds a figure of the archaic Roman law, the *homo sacer*. The *homo sacer* is the bearer of the sacredness of life, the figure reduced to bare life as he can be killed without impunity but, at the same time, cannot be sacrificed, i.e. serve as the sacrificial victim in a religious ritual. This figure is explained more lucidly through the paradigm of the paradoxical status of the sovereign, who is "*at the same time* outside and inside the juridical order" (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 15). Drawing on Carl Schmitt's discussion on the sovereign's right to decide who can be in a state of exception, i.e. suspended from the rule of Law, Agamben argues that the *homo sacer* belongs to the sovereign sphere, "*in which it is permitted to kill without committing homicide and without celebrating a sacrifice, and sacred life—that is, life that may be killed but not sacrificed—is the life that has been captured in this sphere*" (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 83). The life of the *homo sacer* becomes for the philosopher the example *par excellence* of the condition of "bare life", which is the result of being within a zone of indistinction characterised by an exclusionary inclusion. Within this zone of indistinction, human beings are exposed to violence whether they are "included" in law, since they can be punished for disobeying the law, or excluded, hence not protected by the law. In other words, human life is in a state of abandonment from the

KAROLINA LAMPROU

rule of Law construed as conference of rights, while sovereignty is at once the sole guarantor of rights and, by definition, that which may and can suspend them. Just as the *homo sacer* belongs to a sphere of double exception (i.e. exception from the law and from religion) modern man, according to Agamben, is defined by "the particular character of the double exclusion into which he is taken and the violence to which he finds himself exposed" by the biopolitical State (*Homo Sacer* 82). Modern man, then, is abandoned in a constant state of exception in which he enjoys no rights or freedoms.

Agamben's interpretation of Aristotle's definition of the Greek *polis,* as conditioned by the distinction between "bare life" (*zoe*) and political existence (*bios*), paves the way for an understanding of modern politics in terms of the inclusion of life in the politico-juridical order by means of its exclusion. Therefore, "*the originary relation of law to life is not application but Abandonment*" (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 29). "Abandonment" is the common practice in a "state of exception", through which the bare life of political subjects, who have been stripped off their legal rights, is exposed to unconstrained violence. What I will therefore argue is that Galindo puts forward a scathing critique of such practices of systematic exclusion, marginalisation, and abandonment of distinct populations of undesired subjects: these include indigenous women, working-class people, ethnic or racial minorities etc. Galindo, in a number of performances, exposes the bare truth that more and more humans find themselves outside the *polis*, in a constant state of double exception, exposure, and abandonment. Agamben argues that the inclusive exclusion of life in the Greek *polis* exposes a biopolitical structure at work since antiquity. In modernity, "bare life" has delineated a trajectory from the margins of political existence to the centre of political order.[77] Agamben writes: "The exception becomes the rule, and the difference between inside and outside, fact and law enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction" (*Homo Sacer* 9).

Whereas Foucault concentrates on how various disciplinary forms of power rule every aspect of human life, Agamben argues that modern biopolitics is reducing humans to a state of utter abandonment, sustained by what he calls the State and its apparatuses. In *What Is an Apparatus,* Agamben refers to Foucault's use of the term "apparatus" or "*dispositif*". As Agamben notes, Foucault has never really provided an

[77] This is precisely where Agamben departs from Foucault. Foucault argues that biopolitics signals a particular moment in the development of modern governmentality which was marked by the interest in population, while Agamben believes that biopolitics was inherent in sovereign power, therefore, contemporary society differs from previous political forms only in the sense that it has fuelled the movement of 'bare life' from the margins towards the centre (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 12).

KAROLINA LAMPROU

accurate definition for it, except in an interview, where he describes the apparatus as "a thoroughly heterogeneous set consisting of discourses, institutions, architectural forms, regulatory decisions, laws […] moral and philanthropic propositions—in short the said as much as the unsaid" (*What is an Apparatus* 2). Agamben explains that the Foucauldian apparatus has a strategic function and acts as the intersection of power and knowledge relations. For Agamben, however, the term has a much broader definition, as it includes "anything that has in some way the capacity to capture, orient, determine, intercept, model, control, or secure the gestures, behaviours, opinions, or discourses of living beings" (Agamben, *What is an Apparatus* 14). Therefore, anything can constitute an apparatus: from pens to computers, philosophy, literature, telephones, an artwork, or indeed language. Pondering upon the operation of contemporary ideological machinery and its apparatuses, Agamben argues that they sustain the domain of consumption that characterises capitalism. Hence, as Agamben notes, experience is currently displaced "as far as possible outside the individual" (*Infancy and History* 17). Due to this, capitalist societies are defined by a spectacular quality, while humans live and enjoy the exhibition of things they cannot actually use. The world of spectacles not only forecloses the use of objects, but also generates a "process of what can be called desubjectification" (Agamben, *What is an Apparatus* 20). Following upon Walter Benjamin's assertion that capitalism is the religion of modern times, Agamben argues that what characterises capitalism is a structure of separation that has emptied out the use value of commodities, assigning to objects a phantasmagoric quality. This leads to our current society of the spectacle, which I have extensively discussed in Chapter 1, where, as I have argued, humans consume the images of things that they cannot actually use. Modern art is no exception, according to Agamben's critique. As I have pointed out earlier in this thesis, Agamben appears very sceptical about the institution of the museum, which he considers as a socially and politically ineffective apparatus that removes art from the use of human beings, reducing it to mere spectacle.

It is precisely because Galindo's work aims at being more than a spectacle that her performances need to be examined and elucidated within a politically-inflected framework. In order to bring forth the significance of Galindo's work, and of performance art as a counter apparatus, I will concentrate on four very powerful performances. In my reading, these performances stage the state of exception in an attempt to expose its exclusionary operation. In particular, I will discuss the following performances: *I am Alive*, which took place in 2014 in Milan, Italy, *We don't Lose*

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Anything by Being Born performed in Guatemala in 2000, the 2009 video-performance *Tomb*, and finally *Avalanche*, which was included in the Thessaloniki Biennale 2011. The reason for choosing these particular performances is because they are concerned with different images of the oppressed—Guatemalan women, exploited Caribbean bodies, and discarded human life in general. In my view, these performances resonate with what Agamben interestingly notes when he quotes Benjamin: "The tradition of the oppressed teaches us that the 'state of emergency' in which we live is not the exception but the rule" (qtd. in Agamben, *Means Without End* 6). What I intend to argue is that Galindo, by staging contemporary experiences of this state of exception, puts forward a scathing critique of the systematic exclusion, marginalisation, and abandonment of distinct gendered, racially or ethnically-marked populations. The artist's work can be perceived as a response to this perverse phenomenon. It is an attempt on her part to reflect on this situation in order to raise the spectators' consciousness and mobilise resistance against the conditions that facilitate oppression. As I will show below, Galindo often stages her works in places such as in popular streets or outside Guatemala's National Palace and Constitutional Court, where random passers-by become unaware spectators of artistic works or are requested to assume an active role in the course of a performance. In line with Frazer Ward who argues that certain performance works, "by obliterating the line between artist and audience […] ask what behaviour we tolerate in the name of art—and, by extension, what we will tolerate in what other names" (4), I will move on to demonstrate Galindo's own concern with the limits of our toleration. In my reading, Galindo's work constitutes an act of political resistance, a fact which reflects the political and emancipatory agenda of many practitioners in the field of performance art. Galindo works beyond representational models of art, thus reclaiming the function of art as intervention. Furthermore, for the duration of many of her performances, Galindo is experiencing pain and (self-inflicted) violence, which again makes her work more than merely representational. In other words, Galindo's performances become an experiential zone which is the product of a suspension: i.e. Galindo's own identity.

In the performances I discuss, Galindo enacts the stakes of survival in liminal situations, on the border between zoe/bios, exclusion/inclusion, apathy/empathy, self/other. Her work *I am Alive* exemplifies this idea of liminality, due to the fact that the artist positions herself between life and death, or, in other words, presence and absence. This performance took place in a mortuary-like white setting with the naked body of the artist situated on a stone, reminiscent of a gravestone. The members of the

KAROLINA LAMPROU

audience, prior to entering the space where the artist's motionless body was laid, were given a small mirror. Upon their entrance to the room, they could use the mirror in order to check if the artist was breathing, therefore if she was alive, as her heavily sedated body, the low room-temperature, and the morbid surroundings suggested the opposite. In this performance, Galindo is eager to make a political statement with regard to gendered violence in Guatemala. In doing so, she reclaims the social and political function of art, showing its potentiality when it is put to use for the sake of the human. Galindo dedicates this work to the silent bodies of the Ixil women who were tortured and killed by the Guatemalan dictatorship during the Guatemalan Civil War, which lasted from 1960 to 1996, a war aiming at the genocide of the Mayan population as a means of ending the protests against the repressive government at the time. "Operation Sophia", marshalled by the Guatemalan army in 1982, resulted in the killing or disappearance of approximately 200,000 people and the displacement of another 1,5 million ("Genocide in Guatemala"). Although this was several decades ago, many Guatemalan women still face similar risks, due to the government's lenient policies with regard to femicides. This is what Galindo exposes and protests against and, in effect, what marks her work as political.

Fig. 30. Galindo, Regina José. *Estoy Viva* by Sartori Andrea.

In this performance, the portrayal of the artist's body as bare life throws into relief Agamben's characterisation of modern man as someone whose life has become a political stake. This is why, according to the philosopher, the "absolute capacity of the subjects' bodies to be killed" is what "forms the new political body of the West"

KAROLINA LAMPROU

(Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 125). Agamben also refers to Hannah Arendt's argument regarding the aim of totalitarian States to establish a condition of life similar to that in the concentration camps, where life was reduced to bare life. The fact that more and more people are positioned in this situation is what has turned the world into a biopolitical place, where almost every individual has become a *homo sacer*. In Guatemala, the truth of Agamben's argument cannot be missed: According to the BTI 2018 report on Guatemala, there is a great number of corruption cases while the economy of the country relies on illegal and criminal activities, including "drug trade, money laundering, weapons and human trafficking" (5). In fact, Government officials are linked to several human rights violations and are involved in organised criminal networks. What modern biopolitics has ultimately accomplished, and what Galindo's work illustrates, is a constant state of exception where the liberties and rights of selected populations are suspended under the sovereign authority of State organisations and transnational corporations, operating in the name of liberal democracy. What Agamben finds problematic about liberal democracy is that it leads life into a state of exception that has become the rule. Likewise, Galindo seems to be equally concerned with Guatemala's corrupted allegedly democratic state, where the protection of human rights is enforced only nominally. In reality, there are various transgressions of human rights that are ignored and remain unpunished if these transgressions are against certain populations that are of no importance to the State. The Guatemalan women Galindo is concerned with, like Agamben's *homo sacer,* are unprotected as a consequence of the loss of their political and legal rights and can be killed with impunity on account of their lack of politico-juridical representation.[78]

The idea that Galindo's work can be seen as a critique of the Guatemalan government's totalitarian practices can be explored further through an analysis of her performance *We don't Lose Anything by Being Born*,[79] where the artist positions herself in a foetal position within a plastic clear bag. Naked and motionless, she intentionally resembles a sexually assaulted corpse. The disconcerting number of femicides and instances of violence against women constitute, as the artist states, the

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[78] Most femicide victims in Guatemala are indigenous women, women who live in extreme poverty, work in sweatshops, are in prison, or are involved in prostitution. The majority of the victims are raped, tortured, and/or mutilated before their murder while, due to the country's corrupt government, the murderers of these women enjoy impunity. The bodies of the women are often abandoned in public places. These women, therefore, are first abandoned by the State in being exposed and vulnerable to male violence and, secondly, abandoned by their predators in trash heaps or in the middle of streets as if their dead body means nothing. For more info see "Demanding Women's Rights in Guatemala".

[79] Regina José Galindo brings similar issues to the surface with many other works, such as *Landscape*, *(279) Hits*, and *Breaking the Ice.*

KAROLINA LAMPROU

focal point in this performance (Goldman, "Regina José Galindo"). Galindo aims at exposing the fact that certain lives are considered expendable—arguably because they are perceived as not having any political or social importance. According to the BTI 2018 report, "there have been more than 21,500 reported cases against women",[80] which include tortures, sexual abuse or forced, child marriages, while "between April 2015 and March 2016 there were 262 reported cases of femicides", for which impunity is high (12). The artist notes on this issue:

> There are many theories for why so many women are killed in Guatemala. Not all deaths originate from the same direct causes, but all murders are committed under the same premise: that it is done, it is cleaned up, and nothing happens, nothing occurs, nobody says a thing. A dead woman means nothing, a hundred dead women mean nothing, three hundred dead women mean nothing. (Goldman, "Regina José Galindo")

In the context of this performance, Galindo's body is disposed at a garbage dump, as the enormous trash heap around her suggests, while passers-by walk casually around the body. This can be seen as an exemplary moment pointing to the normalisation of violence against expendable human bodies, particularly within the context of today's biopolitical paradigm. According to the documentation of the performance, no-one, throughout the entire duration of the performance, paid attention to the artist's body, which highlights the fact that certain lives are indeed disposable, especially the lives of working-class, immigrant, native women. This is precisely what Ward refers to when he argues, in his work *Performance Art and Audience: No Innocent Bystanders*, that there are "no innocent bystanders". Galindo, by broadcasting this work in different art events and festivals, uses her art to expose 1) the unfair treatment of certain populations 2) people's passive acceptance of this treatment. Here, as I argue, Galindo's work can be seen as suggesting that Agamben's *homo sacer* is gendered in Guatemala since, for the purpose of this work, she focuses on the issue of the increasing number of femicides in that country. Therefore, she throws into relief a contemporary context where distinct populations of women are abandoned from the rule of Law and become exposed to violence. It is this state of utter abandonment foregrounded in the context of the performance that allows me to bring together

[80] According to statistics, around 500-700 women are murdered on an annual basis. See, "Femicide in Guatemala." *Women for Justice, Education, And Awareness*.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Galindo's figuration of the artist as a violated victim and Agamben's *homo sacer*, both subject to an exclusionary inclusion.[81]

Fig. 31. Galindo, Regina José. *No Perdemos Nada Con Nacer* by Bella De Vico.

Agamben elaborates on this idea by arguing that it is through separating from and opposing himself "to his own bare life" that man "maintains himself in relation to that bare life in an inclusive exclusion" (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 8). Therefore, bare life has always held a significant role in the formation of political communities, while the control of biological life has always been, according to Agamben, the primary function of sovereign power. Hence, as Agamben notes, on entering political life, human beings are inevitably subjected to the sovereign power on life and death. This, in my view, is reflected in Galindo's critique of the treatment of some women as non-subjects. Agamben, in *Means Without End,* argues that human rights actually reflect the logic of sovereignty, instead of marking its decline, as they allow the space of exception and exclusion to be formed. The paradox that Agamben refers to is embodied in the figure of the refugee who, in many cases, after forcibly leaving his/her home country, becomes stateless, hence stripped of any rights and/or protection, condemned to a space of exception and exclusion. In the same way, Galindo shows how targeted female populations occupy a space of exception and exclusion in Guatemala, thus gendering Agamben's contention that "modern man is an animal

[81] Although the artist is only enacting the violent treatment women receive, she still runs the risk of ending up in the long list of female victims.

KAROLINA LAMBROU

whose politics call his existence as a living being into question" (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 119).

Galindo's work then can be elucidated through Agamben's criticism of liberal democracy, a criticism, as we have seen, informed by Arendt's analysis of totalitarian States. In *Homo Sacer*, Agamben notes that modern democracy is going through a decadent phase, which has led to its "gradual convergence with totalitarian states" (10). Humanity is confronted with a constant state of exception, where any liberties and rights are suspended under a sovereign authority sustained by modern forms of biopolitics. In the case of Guatemala, we have a ruthless dictatorship which lasted until 1996 and an alleged Democracy, both of which refuse to recognise some of their (female) subjects. The Guatemalan government has supposedly made efforts to deal with the problem of the "femicides"; however, it is still an increasing phenomenon in the country, mainly due to the lack of any interest in or sympathy for the female victims of violence on the part of the authorities. As stated by the Council on Hemispheric Affairs, in "The International Violence Against Women Act: Could Ivawa Save Guatemala From Femicide?", rape is considered a "generalized and systematic practice carried out by State agents as a counterinsurgency strategy" and a "true weapon of terror" ("The International Violence Against Women Act"). This attitude has resulted from the country's civil war, where State agents were taught to consider rape as a weapon. Therefore, this behaviour is deeply rooted in the practices of the Guatemalan government, along with the other atrocities that were performed at the time, like dismemberment and torture. Biopolitical power not only regulates and surveils peoples' lives, as Foucault supports, but also renders these lives dispensable, depending on what State interests are to be served.

Tomb,[82] which took place in Santa Domingo, Dominican Republic, constitutes another important performance that Galindo orchestrated, although she did not actively participate in it. The aim of this performance is to show how certain bodies can simply disappear. To this end, Galindo hired three local Dominican men to drop from a small, wooden boat into the ocean seven white sheets filled with sand, resembling the shape and having the average weight of a human body.[83] What remains from the performance is some photos and a 93 seconds video, in which the artist does not appear. The work

[82] For the purpose of the analysis of this performance I relied on the artist's official website and Maja Horn's description of the performance in her article "Bodily (Re)Marks: The Performance Art of Regina José Galindo" since there is a limited amount of information available on it.
[83] See Galindo's *Common Ground* and *Cortege*, which touch on similar issues. Also, Ana Mendieta's *Rape Scene*.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

aims to serve as an index pointing to the hidden reality of the illegal disappearance of unclaimed bodies. Galindo uses the ocean as a symbol that throws into relief how these bodies quietly disappear without leaving any trace behind. There is a strong diachronic dimension in this performance due to the fact that the artist not only exposes the current situation in Guatemala that involves drugs, human trafficking, crime, and the exploitation of vulnerable populations but also the entire history of Caribbean reality. This is a history that revolves around the slave trade and, effectively, involves countless unidentified and faceless deaths, especially on the slave ships that transported slaves to the New World. Just like the precarious body of the slave qua *homo sacer*, whose life was neither protected nor valued, the Caribbean bodies currently disappearing are of no concern to the law. It is this issue that I aim to foreground in my analysis of this performance. As I have suggested, the situation of the people whose fates concern Galindo can be illuminated by Agamben's notion of "bare life", which enhances their utter abandonment. Their situation is aggravated by the phenomenon of statetropism,[84] which has become an integral part of the country's political system. Statetropism not only protects but also uses illicit and criminal behaviour within the social order, if such behaviour serves the State's interests. Essentially, as Lilian Bobea claims, it "institutionalizes complex criminality within a putatively democratic system", condemning subjects to a kind of life that oscillates between law and the suspension of law, and, in effect, between *zoe* and *bios* (Bobea 23). The people of the Dominican Republic may have escaped old forms of slavery; however, their lives are far from secure. The Dominican Republic, as like most Caribbean nations, suffers from a very high organised crime rate which includes drug trafficking, weapons, and money laundering while "this situation is exacerbated by the lack of law enforcement resources, poorly paid and trained police officers, and rampant corruption" ("Dominican Republic 2018 Crime & Safety Report"). In 2018, San Domingo showed one of the highest reported homicide rates, reaching 12,5 per 100,000 individuals ("Dominican Republic 2019 Crime & Safety Report"). These numbers reflect Agamben's claim that "human life is politicized only through an abandonment to an unconditional power of death" (*Homo Sacer* 90). Sadly, *Tomb* has greater resonances today, due to the problematic nature of the European Asylum System, which allows the drowning of thousands of immigrants who are refused entry to European countries. The situation of these immigrants, whose tragedies are depicted

[84] The term statetropism is coined by Lilian Bobea in her essay "Democratizing Violence: The Case of the Dominican Republic" to refer to the alliances between the State and certain criminal groups.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

as mere accidents due to their political status as "illegal", also exemplifies Agamben's discussion of abandonment. Large numbers of immigrants are in danger on a daily basis, having taken hazardous journeys and dangerous sea routes, in order to escape inhumane and degrading treatment by their own regimes. Europe's failure to treat these human lives as valuable often results in their unaccounted death, which is often presented by the Media simply in terms of numbers, obscuring the loss of individuals.

Galindo's depiction of disappearing bodies resonates not only with the fate of today's immigrants but also with Agamben's figure of the "countryless refugee" (*Means Without End* 15). The complexity of the experience of the refugee, as Agamben explains, goes back to the end of World War I, where many refugees preferred to become stateless rather than return to their country. This fact still applies today in regard to those who are politically persecuted or are in danger in their country. Agamben elaborates this point further by claiming that "these noncitizen residents often have nationalities of origin, but inasmuch as they prefer not to benefit from their own states' protection, they find themselves, as refugees, in a condition of de facto statelessness" (*Means Without End* 23). Due to this, according to Agamben, refugees and stateless people can be often seen as analogous categories, i.e. the people who are excluded from politics. Agamben, then, rightly notes that, when we discuss people, we don't only refer to people as a whole political body but also to "the class that is excluded—de facto, if not de jure— from politics" (*Means Without End* 29). On the one hand, we have "the *people* as a subset and as fragmentary multiplicity of needy and excluded bodies", whereas, on the other hand, "*People* refers to the whole and integral body politic" (Agamben, *Means Without End* 31). What I argue is that *Tomb* highlights the ambiguous definition of the term *people* within a political context. By paraphrasing the famous Freudian hypothesis on the relation between *Es* and *Ich*,[85] Agamben argues that not only "when there is naked life there has to be a *People*" but the inverse also applies: "where there is a People, there shall be naked life" (*Means Without End* 35). In *Tomb,* Galindo touches on this immensely significant issue, seeking to reclaim those excluded bodies in need.[86] Her work echoes Agamben's

[85] Sigmund Freud developed his concepts Ego (*Ich*) and Id (*Es*) to argue that conscious thoughts presuppose the existence of unconscious thoughts.
[86] See Santiago Sierra's *24 blocks of concrete constantly moved during a day's work by paid workers*. In general, Sierra creates installations or performance works for which he employs various people who agree to undertake difficult and/or degrading tasks with the purpose of exposing the true nature of capitalism. Also, in *Workers who cannot be paid, remunerated to remain inside cardboard boxes*, he underpaid some workers to remain within cardboard boxes in order to underline their social invisibility.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

critique of the paradoxical status of certain people who find themselves in the peculiar state of inclusionary exclusion.

Stateless people are therefore those without political rights, who are not treated as individual cases but as a mass phenomenon. As a result, their human rights are compromised while their identity as citizen and as human becomes too complicated or is lost, as Agamben argues drawing on Arendt. The empty white sheets filled with sand that Galindo chose to use for *Tomb* allude to the excluded status of the "de facto stateless" people and the disappearing bodies that both the philosopher and the artist are concerned with. Those Caribbean bodies, which disappear without a trace or consequence, resonate with Agamben's theorisation of the condition of the *refugee* who, according to the philosopher, "represents such a disquieting element in the order of the nation-state, […] primarily because, by breaking the identity between the human and the citizen and that between nativity and nationality, it brings the originary fiction of sovereignty to crisis" (*Means Without End* 21). The worryingly increasing numbers of lost lives that have turned the sea into a mass cemetery, along with the constant accusations of humanitarian organisations, expose the fact that political institutions do not protect certain subjects but rather selectively control and determine their life-value according to their interests. Galindo's portrayal of the sea as a large tomb adds further to the fiction of sovereignty as safeguarding human rights and people's lives. As I have shown, Galindo's work dramatises the interplay between presence/absence, naked-exposed/hidden-absent body. In doing so, it constitutes a testament to a growing number of unaccounted for deaths, inviting the audience to acknowledge that the division of life into *zoe* and *bios* has produced bare life.

In the final section of my analysis of Galindo, I would like to turn to her performance titled *Avalanche* which I aim to approach as an Agambenean "gesture" that reclaims both the human body and artistic practice from their current biopolitical context in order to render them open to what the philosopher calls "use". Agamben explains the concept of "gesture" as any kind of action that does not aim at achieving a certain goal, but at restoring to human use what has been separated by religion, capitalism, or the spectacle. For the purpose of this performance, the artist, once again naked and motionless, lies on a metallic table within a white room. She is entirely covered in dirt and mud from head to toes. Beside her, there is an installed shower-head and a small table with several small white towels. The members of the audience in this performance have two choices: treat the artist as an excluded, abandoned body destined to death and hence leave the artist's dirty body as it is, or take up an active

KAROLINA LAMPROU

role and assume the task of cleaning and nurturing the body. Eventually, instead of neglecting the artist's vulnerable body, members of the audience collectively clean the mud that was covering it using the shower installed in the space and the white towels to dry it up, while the artist's entire body was trembling from the cold water and the hardship it had been through.

Fig. 32-35. Galindo, Regina José. *Alud/Avalanche* by Elefheria Kalpenidou.

I find this response striking due to the fact that the audience refuses the passive role of the spectator that requires that the artwork be treated as "spectacle", approaching in this way the work of art as life itself. Along these lines, the reaction of the audience can be perceived as an act of resistance against the spectacle. Not only does Galindo refuse to produce artwork that could acquire the status of an industrial product which Agamben criticises in *Man Without Content*, but she also denies the exhibitionist value of art by urging the audience to actively participate, hence, partially determine it. This can be perceived as an attempt on the part of Galindo to re-establish art as an integral part of everyday life, close to the way art used to function in ancient Greece, a point I will elaborate further shortly. Galindo's approach to art, I argue, not only resists the spectacular value that the institution of the museum assigns to art, but it also urges the spectator to abandon his/her passive role and approach art as a communal experience. It is precisely the opportunity offered to the members of the audience to become active participants instead of passive spectators that, according to

KAROLINA ANTONIOU

Ward, has the potential to transform the audience "into a functioning, miniature community" (101).

The caring gestures the performance solicits in the audience reclaim the humanity of the spectacularised/abandoned body. Eventually, such performances may have the force to restore to art its integral, communal function within society beyond and against its institutionalisation and spectacularisation. In Agamben's terms, Galindo's body in *Avalanche* becomes "only communicability" and pure mediality, which he understands as a gesture that is not an image of something but an inexhaustible act of communication. Perceived from this perspective, Galindo introduces an embodied signifying system that resists conventional representational frameworks. Her aim is not to represent aspects of culture but to produce art that can actually influence culture, as was the case with art in earlier times. What the artist seems to be doing, then, is to re-conceptualise art in ways that bring it closer to understandings of art dominant in Ancient Greece. In reference to Plato's *The Republic,* as mentioned in Chapter 1, Agamben refers to the power exerted by poets and artists, who could destroy the city through their art's effect on the citizens' soul. For this reason, Agamben calls the artist a "Terrorist", an analogy that emphasises the importance of art within society. In effect, Agamben underlines the importance of art's capacity to bring about something new and points towards its power to develop a shared sense of community, precisely because artistic practices were shaped as events and not mere spectacles. Importantly, the philosopher supports that the artwork, due to its status as an experience equally shared by the artist and the spectator, provides a shared space among the members of a community. This is what Agamben means when he suggests that art should become what it "had been in its Greek beginnings", i.e. when art as an event was a communal experience, bringing together artists and spectators (*Man Without Content* 34). With her work, Galindo responds to the challenges faced by post-war art, when, as I have extensively analysed in the introduction of this thesis, many artists reacted against social, racial, and gender injustices. To this end, she invites the audience to take part in the artwork, assume responsibility for art as an event, and, ultimately, consider how they can instigate change themselves. This, as I argue, might help the dynamics between the performer and the viewer to change, by giving agency to the viewers.

What is also notable is that Galindo's face is not the focus in any of the discussed performances. What gets foregrounded, instead, are the "invisible" bodies: the submerging "suitcased" bodies in the limitless ocean and the dispensable, abused

KAROLINA LAMPROU

and disappearing female bodies. Her body therefore becomes what Agamben analyses as pure mediality. In a world dominated by the spectacle, politics is founded on the control of appearance, wherein "human communication is being separated from itself" (Agamben, *Means Without End* 92). "The task of politics", Agamben argues, is "to return appearance itself to appearance, to cause appearance itself to appear" (*Means Without End* 94). Agamben here refers to Arendt's argument that politics is the space of appearance, which is based on the recurring metaphor of the *polis* in Arendt's work. This is because, as Arendt notes, this space is created when "men are together in the manner of speech and action" (*The Human Condition* 199). At the same time, it "disappears not only with the dispersal of men —as in the case of great catastrophes when the body politic of a people is destroyed— but with the disappearance or arrest of the activities themselves. Wherever people gather together, it is potentially there, but only potentially, not necessarily and not forever" (*The Human Condition* 199). Hence, what Agamben argues, in line with Arendt, is that the space of appearance needs to be recreated through the power held by actions. Writing about the relationship between political intervention and theatrical image-making, Adrian Kear argues that the appearance of politics occurs in the gap between presence and representation. While the author specifically discusses theatre, I believe that the same applies to the artworks of my focus, which open up "a place where appearances are constructed, spectatorship is activated and politics negotiated" (Kear 2). The performance artists I am discussing do not merely represent a situation; they purposefully re-enact the effects of certain, often violent, socio-political structures, in an attempt to provide a medium, a tool, through which intervention can take place. In this way, the spectators themselves are not merely observing an artwork but become participants; active participants who are expected to respond and not passively accept the injustices they are presented with. As I move on to argue, there is a profanatory potential in such works which re-appropriate the body as pure mediality and make it function as "face", that is, as the site where, according to Agamben, the truth of intimate objects can be found (*Profanations* 90).

Agamben considers profanation as an effective act of resistance against the commodity culture sustained by the society of the spectacle. As the philosopher explains: "In the strict sense, profane is the term for something that was once sacred or religious and is returned to the use and property of man" (Agamben, *Profanations* 73). Discussing the apparatuses of pornography, he singles out the impassive face of the porn stars which does not express something but simply presents itself as "pure

KAROLINA LAMPROU

means". As he explains, "the awareness of being exposed to the gaze creates a vacuum in consciousness and powerfully disrupts the expressive processes that usually animate the face" (Agamben *Means Without End* 90). The "face", which for Agamben is a not a synonym for "visage" (i.e. what exposes itself to the eye) is then another form of gesture and cannot be perceived as "a signifying proposition", but as "language itself" and as "*only* communicability" (Agamben, *Means Without End* 91). This is because the face does not expose or reveal something that can be signified; it is language itself as an appeal. This is a central idea in *Means Without End,* where the philosopher explains that "people caught in the act of performing a gesture that is simply a means addressed to the end of giving pleasure to others (or to themselves) are kept suspended in and by their own mediality" (58). Through the face of the people who participate in pornographic films, eroticism is being desacralised and denaturalised, as erotic behaviour is detached from its immediate ends. This is because porn stars stare directly at the camera instead of their partner, which is not a natural expression of sexual pleasure. As a result, sexual action in this context, Agamben argues, becomes pure means. Eroticism is, therefore, positioned in a sphere where means do not have an end, thus it belongs in "the sphere of a pure and endless mediality" (Agamben, *Means Without End* 59). In similar ways, Galindo's body is not a medium that represents — or can have— an exchange value. Her naked body is not meant to be a spectacle, an object of desire or pleasure, a fetish offered to the gaze of the audience. Her body does not bear reference to concrete particularity but presents itself as pure mediality. Galindo's portrayal of life in a space of exception then, renders her work a gesture, a gesture that interrupts the exhibition function of art, becoming, instead, a medium of communicability. Galindo's body therefore *becomes* face in the sense that it becomes the place where appearance is not that of something but of itself: a gestural body that goes beyond the artist's physicality.

In this light, Galindo's project seems not to represent an object or a situation. Rather, by staging bare life and exposing its precariousness, it resists the normalisation of the state of exception and the violence this entails. Her artistic practice, therefore, works against the commodification of art that is carried out in and feeds our world of the spectacle. In her analysis of Agamben, Ewa Płonowska Ziarek draws on Orlando Patterson's work on the relationship between social death and slavery to illustrate how the *homo sacer* is inevitably racialised and/or gendered. Specifically, Ziarek refers to Patterson's argument that "the enigma of slavery exceeds both the juridical and the economic categories of law, production, exchange, or property" (Ziarek 95). She goes

KAROLINA LAMPROU

on to argue that "what these categories fail to explicate is both 'total' domination of the enslaved life and the liminality of the slave's position", which creates "the anomaly of the socially dead but biologically alive and economically exploited being" (Ziarek 95). Biological death is, therefore, replaced with social death, a transformation that turns the "sovereign ban into ownership and exchange" (Ziarek 96). The socially dead slave figure or exploited person *has* to be included within the community as the community profits by the slave.

In my reading, the constant state of exception staged by the body of the performance artist can pave the way towards a re-conceptualisation of community where the performance artist and the audience interact. Performance artists like Galindo offer their art, as an emancipatory gesture, to the *use* of the community, thus, they establish an aesthetic praxis beyond exhibition and exchange, beyond the realm of the spectacle. It is Galindo's attempt to temporarily suspend her own identity in order to occupy the limit space of the *homo sacer* that, in my view, contributes to the emergence of a community in which "bare life is no longer separated and excepted, either in the state order or in the figure of human rights" (Agamben, *Homo Sacer* 134). As Agamben suggests, this will only be possible when the gap opened between *People* and *people*, a gap sustaining contemporary biopolitics, is erased.

As I have argued, performance art, in its determination to restore the use of art, responds to Agamben's belief that contemporary art has lost its effectiveness and has become mere spectacle. Galindo does not wish to simply create a product of aesthetic value for the mere enjoyment of the spectator but aims at opening up art to politics so as to reclaim the use of modern art. Galindo's artistic practice, therefore, purports to re-examine the relation between art, politics and life, particularly within the context of today's biopolitical paradigm. Essentially, Galindo's task is political; it is the task of confronting spectators with the abandonment of *zoe* outside the polis, exposing those who suffer from all kinds of injustices: social, political, economic, and/or sexual injustices. To carry out this task, the artist has to suspend her identity, temporarily occupying the position of a *homo sacer.* It is through this suspension, I argue, that the birth of a new aesthetic politics becomes possible.

Reclaiming the Use of Art: ORLAN

The performances I have discussed in the first section launch a polemic against the biopolitical state, a polemic which aims to demonstrate the need to move towards a community which is not grounded in exclusionary biopolitical power. In this section,

KAROLINA LAMPROU

I want to continue thinking about the possibilities of resistance offered by certain forms of performance art. To this end, I will employ Agamben's concept of play which he theorises as a counter-strategy against the separating function of biopolitical apparatuses, such as the Media, consumerism, the spectacle, the art market etc. The author, as I have shown in the first part of this chapter, appears critical of the way capitalist Western society is controlled by apparatuses that reduce the human body, sexuality, language, art, and other human activities to the status of a fetish. As I have mentioned, the gesture of profanation is for the philosopher an act of resistance against this growing process of fetishisation, which, as we have seen, Agamben connects with the structure of separation that defines religion. Drawing on the Roman jurist Trebatius, the philosopher explains that the things of the celestial or the underworld gods belonged to the domain of the sacred and the religious, respectively. Hence, they were separated from the human domain and could not be used by or form the property of human beings. If a human being used a sacred thing, then, he was performing a sacrilegious act. This separation, "[i]n its extreme form", according to Agamben, defines "the capitalist religion", which "realizes the pure form of separation, to the point that there is nothing left to separate" (*Profanations* 81). "In the commodity", Agamben notes, "separation inheres in the very form of the object, which splits into use-value and exchange-value and is transformed into an ungraspable fetish" (*Profanations* 81). People are not even concerned with the real value of an object. The commodity, in reality, has no actual use value, while its exchange value is determined by a spectacular quality, which, however, cannot be justified. For Agamben, such "spectacular commodities" are, in fact, intangible. The philosopher argues: "Only by means of profanation", something "that was once sacred or religious" can be returned to "the common use of men" (*Profanations* 73). Agamben considers the act of playing as an activity that can return what has been separated by (capitalist) religion to the "common use of man". Although he does not restrict the activity of playing to children, he specifically refers to them, due to the fact that the activity of play is central in children's lives. This is why, according to Agamben, children have the ability to change the meaning assigned to objects, concepts, and narratives. Hence, play, for the philosopher, is the organ of profanation *par excellence*. Based on Agamben's view that profanation is a strategy of overcoming the separating tendency characterising Western capitalism, I will argue that ORLAN's artistic practice[87] can be seen as an

[87] ORLAN has been active within the art world for many decades and has produced a very large body of works. For a detailed description of her artistic practice until 2000 see *ORLAN: Millennial Female*

KAROLINA LAMPROU

attempt to change the function of art as a capitalist apparatus. By re-claiming the use of fetishized and commodified objects, concepts, iconographies, hence by changing their context and function, ORLAN opens them up to a series of possibilities. In doing so, her aim is to challenge what it means to be a woman but also a human.

I will begin my analysis with her performance series *Drapery - The Baroque*, which first took place in 1983, at the Biennale of Paris. The artist has chosen the Baroque[88] because it was rejected in France for its bad taste, an idea that ORLAN challenges by questioning the standards according to which something is actually defined as tasteful or tasteless, beautiful or ugly (ORLAN, "This is my Body…This is my Software" 37). Interestingly, in a flyer distributed to the audience of the aforementioned performance, the artist stated that "art is no longer a problem of mediality, but of relationality" (Bex 24). ORLAN's work does not centre around the material and media she uses but the myth of identity she wishes to deconstruct. On this, Flor Bex notes: "ORLAN measures herself against myths: the mother, the whore, the Saint, the artist: she measures herself against herself in such a way that her work always stays anchored in identity" (24). As I will explain in my analysis, ORLAN does not use art as a medium to an end or a tool of representation. Instead, she aims at appropriating and recontextualising dominant aesthetic or ideological frameworks, especially with regard to feminine ideals and patriarchal expectations and fantasies. At the same time, she asks from the spectators not to passively watch the performance but to question habitual assumptions and adapt their reading of the performance to "the transformation and modifications of identity, the attitudes, the references, the connotations the attitudes, the references, [and] the connotations" mobilised in her work (Bex 24). In *Drapery - The Baroque*, ORLAN is dressed in a long white trousseau sheet, a recurring element in her work, which covers her entire body and hair.[89] The way she "wears" the sheet, which falls loosely, is reminiscent—intentionally— of various depictions of Madonna. Her right breast, which is later revealed, and her face

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by Kate Ince; until 2005, see *Carnal Art: Orlan's Refacing* by C. Jill O'Bryan. The writer, of course, does not only provide an overview of ORLAN's work but looks at her artistic practice through the lens of feminist and psychoanalytic discourse. Also, the bilingual work (French and English) *Orlan: Le Recit,* by Hevgi, Lorand, Kuspit Donald B, *ORLAN: A Hybrid Body of Artworks* by Simon Donger, Simon Shepherd, ORLAN, and Phelan Peggy, offers some very interesting essays on ORLAN's artistic practice, until 2007.

[88] When the word Baroque was first used in art criticism, it denoted a bizarre work, usually of bad taste. Popular art critics, such as Johann Winckelmann and John Ruskin critically used the term to describe works of art which were "odd, grotesque, exaggerated, and overdecorated", like for example the works of the architects Francesco Borromini and Guarino Guarini, the sculptor Gian Lorenzo Bernini and the painter Pietro da Cortona ("Baroque Art and Architecture").

[89] See for example, *The Trousseau Sheets, Occasional Strip-Tease Using the Fabric of the Trousseau, MesuRAGEs, A Thousand and One Reasons Not to Sleep.*

KAROLINA LAMPROU

are painted in white, so she resembles a sculpture, highlighting in this way the fictiveness of the character she is impersonating. The artist is situated in a transparent plexiglass cube, where she performs various abstract movements which are projected on a small screen, behind the artist.

Fig. 36. ORLAN, XI Paris Biennale of Contemporary Art, City of Paris Museum of Modern Art.

Shortly after, her assistants pull out the threads of the garment she is wearing and place her on a surface. In this posture, ORLAN resembles a corpse that is being carried around the performance space by her assistants. After some time, the artist stands up and starts unwinding the white sheet that covers her body and face. In her hands, she has an object wrapped in a white cloth, which looks like a baby, alluding once again to a number of popular visual representations of Madonna holding baby Jesus. At some point, she unfolds the white sheet she is holding and voraciously eats the red and blue bread that was inside, an act that causes her first to choke and finally even to vomit. Then, the white trousseau sheet that covered her hair and body covers the stairs of the space, revealing her right breast. The artist assumes a very theatrical and ecstatic pose, as if she is in a holy delirium or a kind of trance. For the final part of the performance, she kneels on all fours and, while moving, wraps herself in the red carpet that is on the floor and leaves.

KAROLINA LEMPROU

It is important to begin the discussion of this performance by focusing on the function of the trousseau in ORLAN's work.[90] Originally, the trousseau sheet was offered to her by her mother as part of her dowry, in order to embroider the initials of her future husband. Hence, she considers it as part of "the vocabulary of her aesthetic language", symbolising both "a suffocating autobiography […] and the provocative artistic canvas", where she can reinvent this autobiography (Petitgas 49). It accordingly serves as a means of emptying out the meaning of what it represents — i.e. her suffocating mother— whom, as she has said, she hated. At the same time, she also aims to undermine the conventions that many mothers —including her own mother— respect and wish to impose on their daughters, such as the patriarchal tradition of the dowry, the institutions of marriage, and the cult and exhibition of virginity.[91] Due to the fact that the trousseau sheet can change forms and adjust according to the movements of the artist, it can be argued that it functions as a second skin, which the artist folds and re-folds in her art of self-transformation. For the duration of the aforementioned work, ORLAN assumes the identity of Madonna (covered in the trousseau sheets resembling popular depictions of the Madonna), a corpse (being carried around in a box in the same way that coffins are being carried during the funeral ceremony), and a goddess charged with eroticism (with her exposed breast like goddess Diane or Amazon warriors). In some instances, she appears as a sensual woman while suddenly, especially when she vomits, she creates repulsive images which may cause one's disgust. The setting of the performance sometimes resembles a holy place (at the beginning of the performance when she assumes both a posture and the appearance of a Saint) and at other moments a brothel (when she strips naked and wraps herself with the red carpet that was on the floor).

The use of the trousseau sheet, especially in the context of depicting the aforementioned Western constructions of female identity, is clearly parodic, something that introduces the notion of play in ORLAN's work. What I argue is that ORLAN changes the *use* of the trousseau sheet (which, as I have mentioned, is linked to the tradition of dowry) and of religious images central in Christian theology, for example, the image of blessed Artos. The transformation of baby Jesus into a loaf of

[90] ORLAN has repeatedly used the motif of the white trousseau sheet, especially in her early works, as part of her endeavour to redefine her femininity and individuality. For more information on the importance of the trousseau sheets for ORLAN and the performances where these were used see Catherine Petitgas' "Peering through les draps de Trousseau" in *ORLAN: A Hybrid Body of Artworks* (2010).

[91] This idea is also explored in her work *Chiaroscuro Sewing*, which she performed at the FNAC, in 1968. In this work, she uses her wedding trousseau to embroider the sperm of her lovers, in front of an audience (*ORLAN: A Hybrid Body of Artworks,* 180).

KAROLINA LAMPROU

bread to be consumed can be seen as a parody of the holy communion: feeding on Jesus' flesh and blood. The artist's attitude is profanatory since she vomits Jesus' flesh and blood, thus rendering what is sacred abject. At the same time, ORLAN challenges the Catholic veneration of the Madonna, an image of female purity and chastity. The New Testament emphasises Madonna's "humility and obedience" and her role as a mother that is, obviously, privileged over her sense of womanhood (Jaroslav, "Mary: Mother of Jesus"). By revealing her naked breast, ORLAN adds an erotic element to an image which is traditionally treated as an icon (a depiction of divinised femininity). She, thus, eroticises the figure of the Madonna. Simultaneously, her exposed breast alludes to the Amazon warriors from Greek mythology, who, unlike Madonna, were considered to be promiscuous and embraced their aggressive instincts. Essentially, ORLAN intentionally draws on religious representations of the Madonna in order to demonstrate the hold such representations still have on the Western imaginary. ORLAN's performance, therefore, is a parody which targets Christian and patriarchal ideals of femininity. ORLAN explains: "Carnal Art loves parody and the baroque, the grotesque and the extreme" with a view to, ultimately, challenge traditional notions of patriarchy ("Manifesto of Carnal Art" 29). Her use of parody in this work, then, aims at blurring the boundaries between the oppositional poles of dominant hierarchical structures: i.e. ugly/beautiful, holy/profane, purity/impurity, high/low.

This idea is even more prominent in her work *Black Virgin Wielding White Cross and Black Cross,* in which ORLAN, as she states, plays with the images of the virgin dressed in black (prostitute) and the virgin dressed in white (holy), again in an attempt to subvert binary distinctions. The oscillation between these two identities has to do with ORLAN's private mythology, i.e. "the private pressures of family and personal history" and how "she was brought up to become as a woman" (Petitgas 55). In other words, this performance exposes, as Catherine Petitgas puts it, the "private pressures of family and personal history [which] led ORLAN to tackle her identity within larger, public, schemes of feminine identity" (55). In this work, ORLAN is dressed in a leatherette gown and is holding two crosses: a white one and a black one which is held upside down. She is directly looking at the audience while her right breast is completely exposed. Below the artist, there is a screen with wings on each side that shows the artist's eyes, as if she wants to underline the fact that she is gazing at the audience instead of facing away as in familiar Madonna representations in Christian iconography. The purpose of her work during the 1980s, as she often states, is to go against the expectations of her mother, in particular, and patriarchal society,

KAROLINA LAMPROU

in general, that women should be prude, modest, and exhibit submissiveness. As the artist argues: "Religion is always against women, and Christian art wants us to not touch bodies, to choose between good and evil. But all my work is about good and evil" (Jeffries, "Orlan's Art of Sex and Surgery"). She, therefore, questions traditional representations which render women the obedient, prude other. Generally, ORLAN performs the ambiguous threshold between different stereotypes of femininity: the saint, the whore, the mother, the woman. What the artist wants to highlight is the fictive and fluid nature of these identities, which are nothing more than constructions, serving male ideals and fantasies. At the same time, the exposed breast is not reduced to the fetishistic object of the audience's gaze as ORLAN removes it from any familiar erotic context,[92] while she persistently gazes back at the audience; given that she is positioned higher than the audience, she literally gazes down on them indeed.

Fig. 37. ORLAN, *Black Virgin Wielding White Cross and Black Cross*. 1983.

While this performance could be perceived as an instance of mere blasphemy, I treat it as essentially ironic. Donna Haraway, in her *Cyborg Manifesto,* argues in favour of the political uses of blasphemy as a species of irony. In her view, blasphemy is essential for "taking things very seriously […] Blasphemy is not apostasy. Irony is about contradictions that do not resolve into larger wholes, even dialectically, about the tension of holding incompatible things together because both or all are necessary

[92] The breast, separated from the immediate context of the body, can also be seen as the fetishistic object *par excellence.* I will return to this point in Chapter 6, where I discuss the limitations and dangers of performance art.

KAROLINA MPROU

and true. Irony is about humour and serious play. It is also a rhetorical strategy and a political method" (149). ORLAN, too, blurs the boundaries between concepts or images that appear to be contradictory with a view to challenging socially constructed categories and associations. Similarly to Haraway's figuration of post-gendered cyborgs, ORLAN's work opens up a space where incompatible things are brought together and contradictory female depictions transform into each other. ORLAN's stance against patriarchy and religion, as I argue, is conveyed precisely through irony. The fact that she exposes holy representations of women as complicit with sexist ideological frameworks is obvious in her choice of garment, the antithesis between the white and black cross, including the way she holds them, and the winged screen situated below her. Like popular Baroque paintings of Madonna, such as Caravaggio's "Santa Maria di Feletto" or Guercino's "Madonna and Child", ORLAN is wearing a similar gown to the ones a saint is usually portrayed in. However, the artist's choice of a black leatherette gown that is associated with leather fetishism, hence sexuality, foregrounds, like in the works discussed above, the juxtaposition between the two representations of women that she challenges: the saint and the whore. This is precisely the reason why I argue that the white cross, which can be taken as a symbol of humility, and the inverted (Petrine) black cross as a symbol of anti-Christianity,[93] exhibit the tension Haraway discusses, a tension holding together things that are incompatible. Blasphemy, in ORLAN's work, is inextricable (as in Haraway) from serious play. Her reappropriation of familiar iconography, then, is a rhetorical strategy which in her hands becomes a political tool, inviting her audience to contest patriarchal frameworks within which distinct forms of femininity have been naturalised— indeed, sacralised.

Taking these instances into consideration, I therefore contend that ORLAN, in recontextualising the sacred images and symbols she draws on for her performance, allows for a special form of negligence towards such images and symbols, a negligence brought about by "an entirely inappropriate use (or, rather, reuse) of the sacred: namely, play" (Agamben, *Profanations* 75). Here, I use the word "negligence" in accordance to Agamben's definition, that is, as an act that does not completely annul what is being neglected but, rather, renders it inoperative, hence open to a "new

[93] The upside-down cross is often associated with Saint Peter, who did not feel worthy to be crucified in the same manner as Christ was, so he asked for his own cross to be inverted. For this reason, the upside down cross is also known as the Cross of St. Peter or the Petrine cross. Most recently though, the inverted cross is taken to be an atheistic or occult symbol or seen as representing the dominion of humans. ORLAN commented on the use of these two symbols: "I manipulated two crosses, one white and one black, like objects that had no religious importance to me. It is not transgression because to me they were only two bits of wood…" ("This is my Body…This is my Software" 39).

KAROLINA LAMPROU

dimension of use" (*Profanations* 76). The act of negligence is described by the philosopher as analogous to the act of play. It is through the acts of play and parody that profanation can take place, as Agamben argues, due to the re-appropriation of objects, bodies, texts, etc. ORLAN, in similar terms, uses a series of binary opposites in her work with a view to ultimately suspend them. Through the restaging of the Madonna mythology and its juxtaposition to the equally oppressive mythologies developed around the image of the whore, ORLAN succeeds in achieving what Agamben defines as play, which, as the philosopher argues, can be used as a counter-apparatus. As shown, Orlan "plays" with constructed ideals of femininity and utilises her art in an attempt to render these ideals inoperative, opening them up to the sphere of common use, hence, to resignification.

ORLAN adopts a ritualistic structure in many of her works: The artist repeats particular, well-orchestrated actions until a kind of metamorphosis occurs. This is clearly seen in ORLAN's work *Occasional Strip-Tease Using the Fabric of the Trousseau*, which consists of a series of 18 black-and-white photographs, in which the artist covered from head to toe appears to be stripping to ultimately attain the image of an aesthetically pleasing and sensual woman (specifically, she adopts an Aphrodite pose at the end, that of Venus Anadyomene). At first, ORLAN's image resembles that of the Virgin Mary. As we move from the early to the later photographs, the artist gradually strips off the trousseau sheets that cover her naked body to finally occupy the posture of Botticelli's Birth of Venus. Through stripping, the artist, once again, changes her identity from Madonna to whore,[94] in such a way that the spectator does not realise when her identity actually shifts from one feminine ideal to the other, thus exposing the inadequacy of binary representations of femininity, i.e. the pure virgin, dressed in white, and the sexualised female divinity, associated with physical beauty, sex, and desire, who seductively reveals her body. "I do not want to choose between religious and pagan: alleged purity and alleged impurity", ORLAN states ("The Kiss of the Artist (1977)" 21). The either/or view of human affairs and identity is what ORLAN aims to challenge in her work through her systematic practice of playing with (i.e. appropriating, re-contextualising, misplacing, parodying) oppositional concepts or structures.

[94] Venus is known as a whore-goddess due to her association with beauty, love, sex, and fertility.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

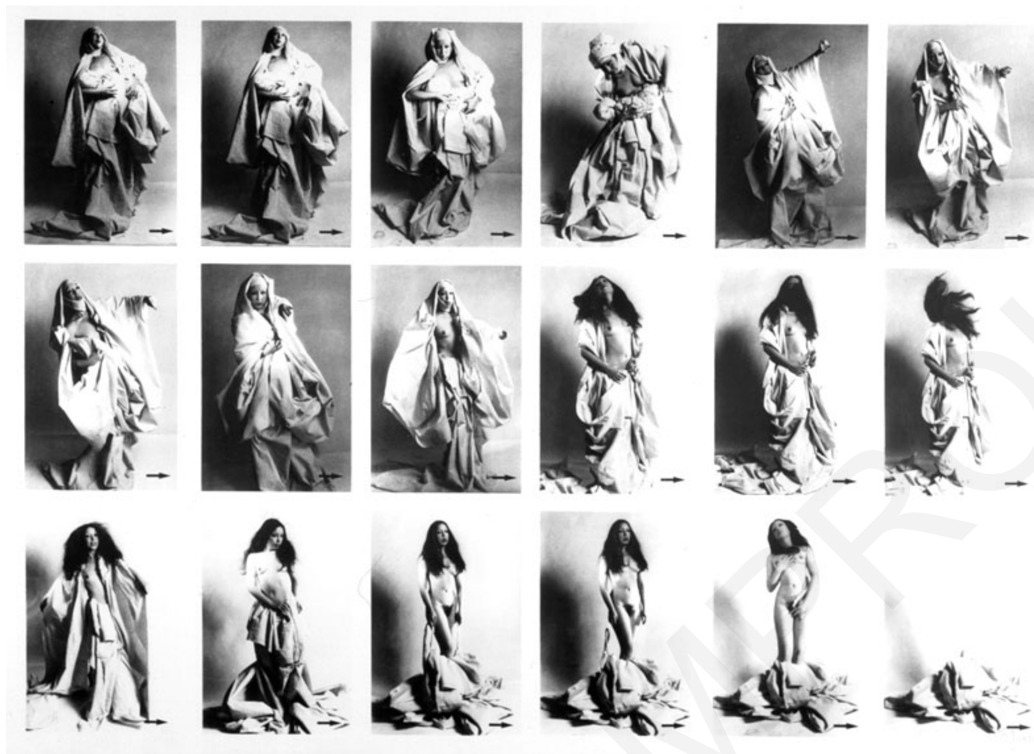

Fig. 38. ORLAN, *Incidental Strip-tease Using Sheets*. 1974-1975.

In order to elaborate on the connection between play and profanation, Agamben refers to the linguist Emile Benveniste, whose work shows that even if play derives from the sphere of the sacred, it radically transforms it and overturns it (Agamben, *Infancy and History* 69). This is because the sacred depends on the combination of the "myth that tells the story [in this case the chastity and holiness of the Madonna in contrast to the oversexualised figure of the whore] and the rite that reproduces and stages it" (Agamben, *Profanations* 75). As I contend, in the course of the performances analysed, ORLAN's artwork does not attempt to tell a story. The artist uses the combination of the myth and the rite in her work only to open it up to play and break its unity, deactivating in this way the power of the sacred. ORLAN, therefore, does not aim at retrieving or reinventing ritual functions (as artists in previous chapters do) in an attempt to create/restore a sense of community. Her aim instead is to empty out traditional, community-forming rituals in order to interrogate the assumptions that hold these communities together. As noted, ORLAN uses a ritualistic structure to transform herself from the Madonna to a sensual woman while, eventually, she completely disappears from the image, leaving only the white sheet behind. The fact that ORLAN's body is completely absent in the last image highlights further the artist's attempt to expose the fictiveness of the roles she was previously enacting. She abuses the sacred space and the structures of the ritual in order to

KAROLINA LAMBROU

eventually overturn the roles and identities she assumes during her transformation. Rhonda K. Garelick associates ORLAN's work to the attitude of "laïcité", which, as she argues,

> explicitly raises the question of religion only to countermand it, a move that ORLAN frequently makes in her own work. In recasting herself as Saint ORLAN, for example, in her reinterpretations of sacred objects such as crucifixes or the shrouds of saints […] she has repeatedly borrowed and subverted the rituals and lexicon of the Catholic church for her own feminist, critical, and highly secular ends. (14)

ORLAN rejects the association of her work with any cathartic process. For this reason, I find it important to return to Judith Butler's use of the concept of ritual, which, like ORLAN's rituals, does not go hand in hand with a concept of purification. As already mentioned in the third chapter of this thesis, Butler argues that the production of gender resembles "other ritual social dramas". According to the philosopher, "the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated" (*Gender Trouble* 191). Specifically, as she explains, "words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body, through the play of signifying absences that suggest, but never reveal, the organising principle of identity as a cause" (*Gender Trouble* 185). The gendered body, therefore, is a performative one, while its substance is constructed and affirmed by these repetitive enactments. Following this reading, the rituals enacted both produce the illusion of identity *and* undermine it. This is due to the fact that they introduce discontinuity in identity as the organising principle of the subject, rendering the subject "never coherent and never self-identical precisely because it is founded and, indeed, continually refounded, through a set of defining foreclosures and repressions" (Butler, *Bodies That Matter* 190). Following Butler's logic that gender is performative and fabricated through certain acts, gestures, and performed desires, I argue that ORLAN's rituals actually serve to *deconstruct* gender identity by exposing its performative nature. This is precisely why ORLAN chooses to simultaneously enact opposing roles and/or use contrasting elements: virgin/whore, fully covered body/naked body, Virgin Mary/Venus Anadiomene, etc. In *Occasional Strip-Tease Using the Fabric of the Trousseau*, in particular, she shows how easily a woman can switch from one identity to the other, simply by changing her posture and the way she covers and/or reveals her body, in this case, with the same piece of cloth.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

What can also be noticed is her preference for staging religious tableaux. Commonly, religious icons serve as expressions of human's devotion, sites of worship and affection. For this reason, they are sacred symbols for humans to respect, venerate, and, essentially, to relate to. ORLAN, however, takes an ironic stance towards such religious tableaux. Drawing on the rich resources of religious iconography, she seeks to deactivate the hold such iconography has on men and women alike, mobilising, at the same time, new meanings: i.e. the possibility of self-transformation. As ORLAN says,

> thanks to Christianity, we can make portraits and images, which is not the case in all religions. And I have benefited from that, we could almost say outrageously, beginning with the idea that I am unrepresentable, unfigurable […] But I have always had the impression of feeling my way, of turning around all the possible images of myself, with what I have made up to now in my work… ("Transgression/Transfiguration" 58)

Ostensibly, ORLAN uses the apparatus of the religious tableaux to construct her own "fictive hagiography" and enact her self-baptism into "Saint ORLAN" (Rose, "Orlan, Is It Art"). Her own tableaux though mimic religious images only to subvert them. When she appropriates the image of Saint Teresa to create her own image of "Saint ORLAN", the artist makes a statement about (female) identity: i.e. that it is constructed and inexhaustible.

The stereotypes of the mother and the prostitute, deriving from religious mythologies developed around the Virgin Mary and Mary Magdalene, constitute the focus of ORLAN's earlier works. In these works, as I have showed, ORLAN aimed at exposing the social construction of gender by simultaneously projecting the "two possible roles that women could traditionally adopt: the positive— virgin and mother—and the negative—prostitute" (Tejeda 72). In her later works, as I will show in this section, she takes this task one step further by undermining first the patriarchal notions of femininity and second the idea of the body as a whole, completed entity. With her series of surgeries for the purpose of her project *The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan*, which started in 1990,[95] ORLAN subjected her body and face to a number of "performance surgeries", as she calls them, in an attempt to transform her physical appearance according to ideals of beauty from Western Art. Specifically, she wanted

[95] The artist intended to finish this project within a period of ten years, however, after nine surgical performances, it is yet to be completed.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

to attain the chin of Botticelli's *Venus,* the nose of Jean-Léon Gérôme's *Psyche*, the lips of François Boucher's *Europe*, the eyes of Diana as painted by the Fontainebleau School, and the forehead of Leonardo Da Vinci's *Mona Lisa*. By surgically attaining specific characteristics of iconic female figures from Western Art, ORLAN puts forward a scathing critique of the violence that Western ideals of beauty inflict on women's bodies. What she aims at is to expose femininity as a form of masquerade.

As her project develops, ORLAN's critique of the cosmetic industry becomes more and more scathing. Although many women argue that cosmetic surgeries transform them into active agents who take control of their own bodies, what ORLAN underscores in her Surgery-performances is that women resort to plastic surgery in order to rise up to the beauty standards that patriarchal capitalism produces. In the context of these surgery performances, ORLAN asks everyone to wear clothes designed by famous designers, such Issey Miyake and Paco Rabanne. In doing so, she transforms the surgery into a fashion show, a spectacle. Through bringing together contemporary art, the fashion industry, and cosmetic technology, ORLAN throws into relief what they all seem to share: i.e. a reliance on spectacle and their serving of capitalist interests. Appropriating the different apparatuses responsible for the production of beauty ideals (i.e. fashion-art-plastic surgery- the Media), she reveals the violence they inflict, the ends they serve, and the fictive nature of the images they promote.

More importantly, she puts these apparatuses to a new use, taking over the surgical process and producing parodic versions of beauty standards. She does not use plastic surgery to attain "ideal beauty". By contrast, she subverts the notion and standards of "ideal beauty". Clearly, her appearance, after the surgeries, does not reflect Western popular depictions of the "ideal female beauty", shaped by art and the popular media. Of course, she does not expect that her work has the power to subvert such Western structures, but still she finds it necessary to produce alternative depictions of female appearance. ORLAN explains,

> I am not sure I can change such a thing [idea of beauty], but I can produce images that are different from those we find in comics, video games, magazines and TV shows. There are other ways to think about one's body and one's beauty. If you were to describe me without anyone being able to see me, they would think I am a monster, that I am not fuckable. But if they see me, that could perhaps change. (qtd. in Jeffries, "Orlan's Art of Sex and Surgery")

KAROLINA LAMPROU

To this end, as aforementioned, ORLAN not only pushes the boundaries of identity, the body and representation, but also exposes the complicity among the apparatuses of art, science, medical technology, performance, the Media, and fashion. In this way, as the artist claims, the surgery room becomes her artistic studio. ORLAN argues in her manifesto:

> Carnal Art is not against cosmetic surgery, but against the standards it carries and which are inscribed particularly over women's skin, but also men's. Carnal Art is feminist, necessarily. Carnal Art is interested in cosmetic surgery, but also in high tech medical and biological techniques that challenge the body's status and pose ethical concerns. ("Manifesto of Carnal Art" 29)

ORLAN, then, puts forward her ethical concerns in the most extreme manner: she uses the medical procedures that so many women undergo in order to "stay" young and beautiful in order to challenge the premises according to which these procedures operate. By producing different images of femininity to those presented by the Media or the health and beauty industries, she explores ontological possibilities that are entirely new. At the same time, by keeping and exhibiting her discarded flesh and other relics from her performances, she ironically mimics and thus debunks the different "social, political, cultural and religious practices", which, according to the artist, determine the female body's status and value in society (Frank, "ORLAN Talks Plastic Surgery, Beauty Standards and Giving Her Fat to Madonna").

Essentially, ORLAN provocatively dares us to "rethink our most basic assumptions about beauty, religion, art history, sexuality, and ultimately, about the stability of the self" (Garelick 9). Her performances, as Jorge Daniel Veneciano argues, "critically test the limits of our beliefs in the representational power of images and deny our tendency to naturalize representation" (23). ORLAN, therefore, is engaged in a process of denaturalisation, exposing the workings of representational frameworks, socially constructed norms and ideals. It is for this reason that she forces us to *see* her open, naked body which, obviously, has nothing to do with the images of the body circulated by the Media, the beauty and health industries. In this way, the audience gets to *see* nudity as it truly is, "as opposed to social pressures exerted as much on the human bodies as upon the bodies of artworks" (ORLAN, "Carnal Art Manifesto" 29). In ORLAN's work the organic body prevails since it is transformed to "the first material one possesses": that is, flesh. (ORLAN, qtd. in Hallensleben and Hauser 140). In Christian theology, as Agamben notes, there is a fixation with the

KAROLINA LAMPROU

resurrection of the flesh, in the sense that Christian theologians wonder whether the resurrected body will "be resuscitated in the condition it happened to be in at the moment of death (perhaps old, bald, missing a leg) or in the integrity of its youth" (*Profanations* 26). This can be seen as an example of how people are more concerned with the image of the body as a whole, free of traces of old age or disease, instead of with the body *per se*. In ways similar to the religious tableaux I have already discussed, ORLAN's open body undermines our assumptions of selfhood, exposing them as fake. "Cutting open the human body for the purpose of looking inside shatters any perception of completeness—the body is no longer a contained individual body. The skin, as container, is violated as such, with the result that the body appears to overflow its bounds, to transgress its *self*" (O' Bryan 39).

Fig. 39. ORLAN, *5th Surgery-Performance: Operation-Opera*. Paris, 1991.

What the artist appears to be doing is celebrating the "grotesque" body which Mikhail Bakhtin defines as a body of change that is "not separated from the rest of the world. It is not a closed, completed unit; it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits" (*Rabelais and his World* 16). ORLAN's post-surgery body, therefore, alludes to Bakhtin's argument that the body is "in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body" (*Rabelais and his World* 317). This is why ORLAN broadcasts the operations on her body, including every gruesome detail: the exposed organs, the blood, the cut flesh etc. With these operations and the subsequent encounter with an unknown aspect of the naked body, one might be allowed "a privileged access to the trembling space of an open, unmade body, in all its surplus materiality, the living body

as it *might* be thought" (Boxall 97). Agamben argues that even the body has been "transformed into an ungraspable fetish […] where all use becomes and remains impossible" (*Profanations* 81). It is my contention that ORLAN enacts the profane use of the body by persistently, repeatedly and, provocatively cutting it open in order to explore, disfigure, and refigure it. Ultimately, these surgeries expose the materiality of the body and work as transformations of the flesh, precisely in order to underscore the unknowability of the body. ORLAN's project, therefore, as I argue, helps spectators see the body as a body in becoming, a body which is not fixed and can never be finished, foregrounding its ability to transform. In this work and the photomontages that followed, ORLAN's body even "appears as an ongoing rhizomatic metamorphosis…[and] her facial image as work-in-progress" (Hallensleben and Hauser 140). If ORLAN becomes unrecognisable and in a constant state of becoming,[96] it can be argued that she engages in a process of resisting identity-fixing apparatuses, such as cosmetic surgery and fashion, which she renders (at least temporarily) inoperative. Jill C. O' Bryan argues that ORLAN, through her cosmetic operations,

> is performing a reincarnation with no apparent finale. And within the time gap between these two moments [illusion and representation] lie both ORLAN's always-yet-to-be-determined face […] and ORLAN's facelessness, which exists in the present as a consequence of the future. In other words, there exists a temporal delay between the present and a future fixed face and fixed identity. (126)

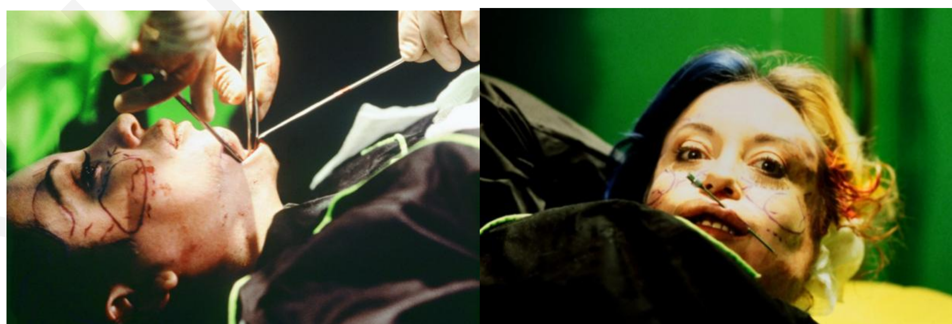

Fig. 40&41. ORLAN, *7th Surgery-Performance: Omnipresence*, New York, 1993.

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[96] See for example ORLAN's work: *Self-Hybridizations, Portrait of ORLAN and Agatha Ruiz de la Prada, American-Indian Self-hybridizations, Self-hybridations Amérindiennes, African Self-hybridizations, Self-hybridations Africaines, Disfiguration-Refiguration, Pre-Columbian Self-hybridizations, Défiguration-Refiguration, Self-hybridations précolombiennes.*

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Fig. 42. ORLAN. *4th Surgery-Performance: Successful Operation*, 1991, Paris.

Essentially, what I contend is that her art project challenges dominant conceptions of the human body and female identity, a fact that reflects Agamben's own critique of the principle of identity. Agamben argues: "The transformation of the *species* into a principle of identity and classification is the original sin of our culture, its most implacable apparatus *[disposi*uvo]. Something is personalized —is referred to as an identity — at the cost of sacrificing its specialness" (*Profanations* 59).

ORLAN's endeavour to challenge what renders us classifiable and to transgress the limits posited by definitions of humanity or femininity often frightens or alienates her spectators who find it too difficult to watch her being operated. ORLAN insists that she experiences no pain during the operation. This is mainly because, as she has said, she does not want her work to be associated to that of other body or performance artists who foreground the violence and not the process of metamorphosis. Instead, she focuses on the careful orchestration of the process and the playfulness of her attitude. Unlike the artists I have been looking at so far who wish to approach and/or communicate with their audience, ORLAN seems not concerned with the fact that many people experience distaste or fail to understand her work. She insists that this is a risk you need to take when you are trying to be a pioneer, in order to open "the path for others to follow" (ORLAN, "Transgression/Transfiguration" 56).

So far, I have attempted to show: first, how ORLAN uses the strategies of play and parody to appropriate and re-contextualise particular iconographies, myths of femininity, or concepts of the body with a view to challenging religious, gender, humanist, and capitalist paradigms. In her earlier work and through her operations, not

KAROLINA LAMPROU

only does she put forward a scathing critique of capitalist apparatuses, like plastic surgery, fashion, the dowry system etc, but she also opens up her body in order to reclaim and celebrate its materiality. She thus challenges the idea of a whole, completed body by showing a (hybrid) body in a constant state of change and becoming. The return to the organic body is foregrounded in ORLAN's critique of the fixity of identity and monolithic notions of the self. In the final section of this chapter, I will argue that ORLAN's experimentation points to the exhaustion of our current dominant paradigms of the body, the human, and life. To this end, what I have been discussing in the previous sections of this chapter will help me argue that Agamben's understanding of human "potentiality" is reflected in ORLAN's artistic endeavour. To demonstrate my argument, I will also draw on ORLAN's latest work, the *Harlequin Coat*, which is an ongoing project that started in 2007.

The *Harlequin Coat* is part of the artist's residency with SymbioticA, a collaborative art and science research lab at the University of Western Australia. Originally, the harlequin was a 16th century comic character which, eventually, became a stock character, that is, one with certain characteristics mostly used in parodies. Notably, the harlequin is associated with devilish characteristics, due to his dexterous nature and ability to perform various tricks using magic. ORLAN's *Harlequin Coat,* inspired by the French philosopher Michel Serres and his book *The Troubadour of Knowledge,* is an assemblage of the co-culturing of various cells from animals and people of different backgrounds, colour, ethnic origin, and age and has the form of a coat made of coloured diamond-shaped pieces. ORLAN takes as her point of departure Serres' Arlequin, the king of the earth and the moon, who undresses until all that is left is his flesh and blood. ORLAN, who has previously "undressed" up to the point where her flesh and blood were exposed, takes this idea one step further by composing a coat that consists of various different cells, calling into question, like in her "performance surgeries", the idea of a whole body. While Serres refers to the figure of the harlequin as a symbol of multiculturalism, ORLAN expands on this by drawing on the possibility of cultural crossbreeding and the hybridisation of various species from different origins (Garelick 10). By using various skin cells and biotechnology as her medium, she engages in an attempt to develop a different understanding of what it means to be human and what defines each person's identity, while, at the same time, exploring the idea of the plurality of identity, a point I will return shortly.

ORLAN's artistic exploration of the notion of identity in both her earlier work and the *Harlequin Coat* can be seen in light of Agamben's theory of "potentiality". In

KAROLINA LAMPROU

his analysis of potentiality, Agamben draws on Aristotle who explains how action assigns to man "a proper nature and essence" (Agamben, *Sovereignty and Life* 2). For example, the sculptor is defined as the maker of *agalmata*. According to this, actuality is a kind of potentiality, due to the fact that potentiality exists for the act to be fulfilled. Agamben, however, provides a different interpretation of Aristotle's discussion of the ambiguous relationship between actuality and potentiality. This is because what is also foregrounded in Aristotle's argument is the idea of a possible *argia*, inactivity or inoperativeness, in relation to man's "functions and occupations", since man in his nature "appears as the living being that has no work" (Agamben, *Sovereignty and Life* 2). Agamben explains this as the potentiality-not-to, which disrupts actuality. Man for Agamben is a being of pure potentiality, precisely because "he has no other nature than being in impotentiality" (Agamben, *Sovereignty and Life* 3). Ultimately, he visualises a world that is determined by the "working that in every act realizes its own *shabbat* and in every work is capable of exposing its own inactivity and its own potentiality" (Agamben, *Sovereignty and Life* 10). For such a world to come about, however, we have to see beyond contemporary understandings of identity politics, that is, beyond the tendency to fix a person to a recognisable identity, based on gender, class, social status, religious beliefs etc.

As I argue, ORLAN's constant attempt to invent herself challenges this tendency and contributes to a re-discovery of what it means to be human. ORLAN criticises the notion of a fixed identity and refuses to be constrained by either/or paradigms. She enacts and inhabits differences, perpetuates change, and exposes the fluidity of identity. By appropriating the same apparatuses that many women use to attain an ideal beauty, according to Western standards, she disfigures and refigures herself, becoming, essentially, unrepresentable. ORLAN constantly shifts between various identities, sometimes mythical, sometimes monstrous, ultimately deconstructing the assumptions on which the search for a "proper identity" is based. As she specifically noted, even the pronoun "I" is illusory for her, referring to a subject which does not exist beyond/outside discourse. Instead, what she has tried to establish through her works is "the notion that I am not 'I am' but 'I are'" which, once more, denotes the view of identity as plurality (ORLAN, "Transgression/Transfiguration" 61). ORLAN has even said that she wants to legally request that she be allowed to claim two identities: one with her family name and the second with her artist's name, in order to challenge the idea that we only have one identity each.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

As I have tried to show with my analysis, ORLAN's art projects seem to have a subversive potentiality with regard to the integral role of art in society. Her artistic practice does not centre around aesthetic enjoyment but goes against religious, gender, humanist, and capitalist ends. Simultaneously, by offering a new understanding of the body, she produces new means of perceiving the notion of human identity. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that these projects are often controversial and might elicit a number of (contrasting) responses and diverse readings. For example, her insistence on theorising what she does, hence positing herself as a theorist at a distance from her suffering body, demonstrates that she remains dependent on what she wishes to denounce: i.e. the Cartesian subject. Also, the fact that she is obsessed with preserving her distance (from both her body and the spectators) and her insistence on remaining in control as the author-ity of the processes she orchestrates, is, indeed, problematic. As Kathy Davis argues, ORLAN "designs her body, orchestrates the operations and makes the final decision about when to stop and when to go on. Throughout the surgery, she talks, gesticulates and laughs. This is her party and the only constraint is that she remain in charge" (175). At the same time, while she advocates for the biological body's obsoleteness, her artistic medium is precisely her body while her work depends upon its materiality. The possibility of death that such practices as ORLAN's art entails is in fact inevitable, rendering her claim of being a disembodied subject not feasible. The same can be argued for the erotic poses she is depicted in, as one could claim that these cannot escape the male gaze which can still see ORLAN's eroticised body as an object of desire. Due to the fact that similar arguments may be relevant to other works in the field of performance art, I will conclude my thesis with a chapter on the possible risks and dangers that may arise from such approaches towards the body. The concluding chapter, therefore, focuses on the limitations that sometimes render performances based on the body ineffective.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Chapter 6
Dangers, Risks, Limitations

Under the Gaze of a Sadist

The purpose of this thesis, so far, has been to re-examine a number of performance works in order to offer an evaluation of this distinct art form and its contribution to the reclamation of art's function in society. I have tried to underline throughout my thesis that performance art includes some very controversial practices which, unavoidably, bear possible risks for the performer and may limit the impact of the performance on spectators. Although I believe that performance art practices often help to raise political awareness, express ethical concerns, and offer a communal experience, in order to provide a more balanced evaluation of this art form, it is also important to reflect on the questions and criticism addressed to this art form in the course of its development. For this reason, the concluding chapter of my thesis, "Dangers, Risks, Limitations", draws precisely upon these issues. In the first section of this chapter, "Under the Gaze of a Sadist" I am primarily concerned with the role of the audience in the context of these performances, given that the artists rely on the audience in their attempt to produce the sense of an alternative, more ethical or politically engaged community. In addition, I will point to the risk entailed in some performances motivated by gender concerns to empower the male gaze instead of taming or escaping it.

As I have tried to underline throughout my thesis, a lot of the practitioners in this field, especially the early practitioners, have sought to mobilize a new vision of community which would be reflected in the sharing of affect-based experiences between artists and spectators. In this light, the relation they establish with their audience and the precariousness of this relationship in the course of the performance is of great importance.

Indeed, from the earliest stages of performance art, which I discuss in the context of the Viennese Actionists' artistic practice, it is the vision of a transformed community that was largely informing this art form. As I have already explained in the second chapter of this thesis, the Viennese Actionists advocated for a vision of community which is "understood as a therapeutic group with the assignment of making its family-damaged members healthy again and enabling social communication with others" (Stiles, *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art* 866). This vision

KAROLINA LAMPROU

continued to inform the artistic practice of the veterans of performance art, such as Marina Abramović, who has often stressed the significance of "building trust with the audience and the power of being together in community", as she wanted to "connect with her audience spiritually" and "enable people to feel and heel in community" ("Marina Abramović: The Body But Not As You Know It"). Likewise, Franko B has stated: "What I do is my contribution to the society I live in. I use art as a language to communicate the things I care about. For me, this is the most eloquent way I can communicate. I am not interested in my legacy as an artist once I am dead. What I am interested in is in the ideal of a community that is about sharing, engaging and contributing..." ("I Feel Empty"). In what follows, I will try to expose some of the pitfalls of this vision which become all the more visible if the complexity of the relationship between the spectator and the artist is acknowledged and appreciated. Specifically, I will explain that, despite their expressed intentions, performance artists cannot always have full control of the performance and its impact on the audience, and cannot prevent the relation of mutual sharing and acceptance they are aiming to establish from turning into a power relation.

What I aim to address first is the possible sadistic reactions of members of the audience.[97] On such occasions, the greatest risk artists run is that their performance may actually feed a spectator's sadistic desires, particularly when the spectators are put in a position of power over the artist. Before I move on to analyse examples from specific works, it is important to introduce the psychoanalytic framework I will be drawing on this section, i.e. Jacques Lacan's theorisation of the pervert, which, as I will explain, diverges from Sigmund Freud's.

Lacan's theory on perversion is premised on his theory of the "mirror stage", which constitutes a seminal experience for the formation of the subject. Lacan brilliantly illustrates the importance of the "mirror stage" as a formative experience in the process of subjectivisation by stating that it "will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure" (*Écrits* 78).[98] As this stage marks the point where

[97] Kathy O' Dell, with her book *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s,* offers a very meticulous and illuminating analysis of the 1970s' masochistic performances. In this book, she approaches performance art within a psychoanalytical and legal framework and explains how the artists re-enact certain key moments that occur during psychic development.

[98] This pivotal psychic and mental process takes place when the child, at around the age of six to eighteen months, is introduced to the Symbolic order, forming in this way a proto ego. At this age, the child, who cannot walk or stand properly yet, glimpses his/her reflection on the mirror, which provides the child with an image s/he identifies with. Lacan calls the image that the child identifies with, in other words the specular image/specular ego, the "ideal I" or "ideal ego". Since the child cannot yet control his/her movements, the experience of his/her body is fragmented, and is accompanied by feelings of

KAROLINA LAMPROU

the "specular I" is initiated into the "social I", the cultural intervention that will follow will determine how the "I" will function in "socially elaborated situations" (*Écrits* 75-81). Upon the child's entrance into the Symbolic, a separation from the mother needs to take place, in order to impose the Oedipal prohibition. For the child to successfully enter the Symbolic stage, the mother's role needs to resonate with the fact that the child is not the object of her desire. If this process does not successfully take place the child will remain trapped in a state where it is the mother's source of jouissance. In this case, the subject's unconscious is not formed since, for Lacan, "castration means that jouissance has to be refused in order to be reached on the inverted scale of the Law of desire" (Lacan, *Écrits* 700). For this reason, parents, as the law-giving Other, need to be very careful with how they guide the child during her/his entrance into the Symbolic. If the parent imposes rules and restrictions on the child only in the form of prohibition, the child will fail to internalise the law. Instead, s/he will receive these rules as "manifestations of the parent's desire", causing a feeling of anguish and anxiety in the child. As a result, the child will internalise the symbolic law as desire, in the form of "blame, punishment, humiliation, and the unequal distribution of power", a symptom that will accompany the child in his adult life and, effectively, determine his/her future relations (Swales 160). The child who grows into a pervert engages in a constant attempt to "prop up the paternal function" through the "enunciation of a temporary law", "which sets limits to the pervert's excess in jouissance, binding his anxiety and resulting in a subjective experience of satisfaction" (Swales 159).

Before elaborating further on Lacan's contribution though, I find it helpful to offer a brief analysis of Freud's conceptualisation of perversions, specifically sadism and masochism. Freud argues that the perversions of masochism and sadism occur as a pair of instinctual drive components of the libido, entailing the assumption of a passive or an active position since they are both directed at an object. Freud bases his theory of these two perversions on Richard von Krafft-Ebing's views, which he discussed in the form of a triad: erotogenic pain, sexual bondage, and sexual activity. Based on this triad, Freud developed his own formulation of masochism, which he also explained in the form of a triad: i.e. "as a condition imposed on sexual excitation [erotogenic masochism, which he also calls primary masochism since it derives from the libidinally bound destructive instinct], as an expression of the feminine nature

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aggression, (primordial) jealousy, and rivalry towards the specular image, feelings that can result in a kind of obsessional neurosis.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

[feminine masochism which is a perversion], and as a norm of behaviour [moral masochism, such as sexual pleasure in bondage]" ("The Economic Problem of Masochism" 276). Freud, however, considers erotogenic masochism as underlying the other two, since it is developmentally the oldest. In line with Krafft-Ebing, Freud argues that masochism and sadism usually occur simultaneously. He maintains that these perversions are characterised by an experience of pleasure in pain and cruelty, "in any form of humiliation or subjection" (*Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* 23). Sadism, as he explains, pivots around aggressiveness in the form of the desire to dominate the sexual object. This is because, according to Freud, the sexual instinct has been displaced and, now independent and exaggerated, assumes a leading position.[99] Freud considers that an individual who suffers from sadistic perversion, i.e. who is sexually aroused by inflicting pain on others, experiences pain as something pleasurable himself. Due to this, as Freud argues, the distinction between the two perversions is not always clear. The sadist therefore desires not only to inflict violence and pain on the sexual object but also to humiliate it. This is why for Freud sadism is an active form of perversion. On the other hand, masochism is connected with a passive position, in which the masochist receives sexual gratification in being humiliated and hurt by the sexual object. For Freud, masochism is, in fact, the reverse side of sadism, or, as he claims, someone who suffers from the perversion of sadism could, at some point, turn his sadistic impulses upon himself/herself and transform into a masochist. Finally, Freud maintains that masochism results from the passive sexual attitude of the subject as the result of other factors, such as the castration complex or an exaggerated sense of guilt and shame. Freud argues that an individual who suffers from such perversions may otherwise lead a normal life. If the sexual instinct overrides someone's life, then it becomes a pathological symptom that determines the individual's behaviour in every other aspect (Freud, *Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality* 23-8).

While Freud considers sadism and masochism as sexual drives and behaviours, Lacan maintains that they belong in the category of clinical structures, hence, he strongly disagrees with Freud that these perversions only affect one's sexual behaviour. Furthermore, he also disagrees with Freud's explanation of the terms as

[99] Freud considers the feelings of shame, disgust, and morality as dams against sexual excesses. These are developed at some point during childhood and determine the subject's sexual behaviour, against perversion. These feelings relate to the castration complex and the superego. Basically, they resist the sexual instinct of aggressiveness, which, for Freud, exists in the desire to subjugate and the fear that relates to castration anxiety. In sadism, these feelings are exaggerated and displaced while in masochism the individual does not experience shame but only experiences jouissance.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

analogous, i.e. as the active and passive aspects of the same perversion, where the active/primary—sadism—may transform into the passive—masochism—. For Lacan, "sadism is merely the disavowal of masochism", i.e. the disavowal of the position of the masochist as the object (Lacan, *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psychoanalysis* 186). What sadism and masochism have in common, according to Lacan, is the "invocatory drive",[100] in the form of the law-giving Other's voice that forcefully, albeit temporarily, gives the commands. While for the masochist, the voice of the Other serves a substitute for the father's voice, the sadist removes speech from the Other in order to impose "his own voice". Hence, the sadist employs the active voice, the voice of the one who commands, while the masochist employs the passive reflexive voice, the one who is commanded (Swales 158-9). Both perverts aim towards the temporary establishment of the paternal function as the law-giving figure. What is important to note is that neither the sadist nor the masochist seeks enjoyment in physical pain: "It is not much the other party's suffering that is being sought in the sadistic intention as his anxiety" (Lacan, *Anxiety* 104). However, "what lies concealed behind the search for the Other's anxiety in sadism is the search for the object *a*",[101] Lacan explains (*Anxiety* 177). While the masochist experiences jouissance by provoking the (law-giving) Other's anxiety, the sadist assumes the role of an instrument that serves the Other's jouissance, however, without knowing, "what jouissance he is serving in exercising his activity. It is not, in any case, in the service of his own jouissance" (Lacan, *Anxiety* 150). In this respect, the sadist actually identifies with his victim in the sense that he too is serving the jouissance of an Other, whom s/he obeys. "The sadistic quest aims at the object and, within the object, the little piece that's missing", Lacan explains (Lacan, *Anxiety* 195). According to Lacan, the sadist,

> [i]n carrying through his act, his rite – because it has specifically to do with this kind of human action in which we find all the structures of rite – what the agent of sadistic desire doesn't know is what he is seeking, and what he is seeking is to make himself appear – to whom? Because in any case this revelation can only ever be obtuse to himself – as a pure object, as a black fetish. (*Anxiety* 104)

[100] Lacan identifies four drives: the oral, the anal, the scopic, and the invocatory.

[101] When the paternal law sets limits and rules to the child, the threat of the child's loss of the object that provides satisfaction transforms it into the object *a*, i.e. the cause of the subject's desire that remains as a feeling of lack, inaccessible and unattainable to the subject.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Adopting Lacanian terms in the context of performance art, one can argue that the artist runs the risk to become the spectator's "black fetish", an object in his hands. Lacan's "black fetish", then, does not merely refer to the pervert's own will and jouissance. According to Lacan, due to the identification of the sadist with the instrument that s/he uses to satisfy the Other's jouissance, the sadist actually identifies with the fetish object, loyally offering himself/herself to the Other's enjoyment, precisely as a "black fetish" (Robertson 48). The sadist sees himself/herself as the object of a "radically transcendent and pervert Other", whose thirst for enjoyment is what the sadist is actually striving to quench (Robertson 48). Therefore, it can be argued that the sadist spectator actually identifies with the artist, the black fetish, since they construe themselves as an object, that is, a mere submissive instrument, devoted to the Other's jouissance. Their aim, then, is to provoke their agony and further please the Other they are serving. Perhaps, this is why some individuals feel good and sexually aroused by the violent treatment of the artist's body: because they do not feel a free subject but perceive themselves as a mere tool. Likewise, this is why the context of such performances is the ideal place for a pervert subject to operate: because s/he seeks an audience, which will also suffer through watching gruesome acts.

Gilles Deleuze, in his essay "Coldness and Cruelty", also questions the unity of "sadomasochism", which he explains as two separate perversions. In this work, he explains how the masochist, unlike the sadist, lacks a superego, which is only externalised to "serve the ends of the triumphant ego" (Deleuze 124). For the masochist, as he argues further, the superego is not negated but disavowed: "The beating woman represents the superego superficially and in the external world, and she also transforms the superego into the recipient of the beating, the essential victim" (Deleuze 125). Deleuze, following Freud in his discussion of masochism, draws on his theory of the death instinct. For Freud, it is the death instinct, or the death drive, that ignites the feelings of self-destruction, and it appears in the form of repetitive compulsions. Therefore, it comes in opposition to the pleasure principle, which relates to sexual and self-preservative instincts. Drawing on Daniel Lagache, Deleuze further explains how the true nature of both sadism and masochism is to be found in the ego-superego split. In other words, due to their completely different structure, the ego and the superego cannot transform into each other: In the case of masochism, the ego, reflected in the mother image, becomes idealised and is produced as "a narcissistic ideal of omnipotence" (Deleuze 129). In sadism, the father-image produces a superego, which appoints the "ego-ideal" as an ideal of authority that exists outside the

KAROLINA LAMPROU

individual's narcissistic ego (Deleuze 130).[102] It is the disavowal of the superego that results in the sexualisation of violence, manifesting itself in enjoyment of the pleasures the superego forbids, namely masochism (Deleuze 131). What is important to stress is that perversion is the result of the child's permanent entrapment in the mother's desire for the phallus and the child's position as the mother's jouissance. The pervert cannot find signifiers to symbolise the mother's lack, hence, desire does not become the metonymy of a lack directed to another object. As a result, the mother remains phallic and the pervert strives to construct a different law to retain the Other's all-powerfulness. In contrast to the case of masochism, where the ego "is beaten and expelled", Deleuze maintains that in sadism "the unrestrained superego assumes an exclusive role, modelled on an inflated conception of the father's role —the mother and the ego becoming its choice victims—" (131).

In my view, the aforementioned theories on sadism bear an explanatory force in the investigation of the work of many of the artists I have been discussing, precisely because the relationship between the artist and the spectator does involve a power dynamic. The artist, who depends upon the spectator's reaction for the outcome of the performance, often allows the spectator to occupy a position of power. In what follows, I will refer to some examples of performances in which the artist either relinquishes control willingly or finds that in the course of the performance his/her position of power has been usurped and that his/her body has become the vehicle of a sadist's desire.

A reference to those members of the audience who violated Marina Abramović's body in *Rhythm 0* and actually enjoyed having her naked body in their power is quite pertinent here. One may also mention those spectators who tore Yoko Ono's garments in *Cut Piece*, and the individuals who urinated on Regina José Galindo's body, in *Stone*. Such performances demonstrate the possibility that the pervert/subject to whom the performance is addressed may actually resist the sublimatory aims and the ethical concerns that drive these performances. As Lacan puts it, the sadist "denies the Other's [the victim's] existence" (*Écrits* 778). In other

[102] At this point, I wish to draw a distinction between the "ideal ego" and the "Ego-ideal". In his discussion of the ideal ego, Lacan refers to what the child sees when s/he catches his/her reflection on the mirror for the first time (literary or metaphorically) and develops a first identification with the "ideal I", the image he will strive to attain for the rest of his/her life. For Freud, this relates to infantile narcissism while Daniel Laplanche argues that "the Ideal Ego, understood as a narcissistic ideal of omnipotence, does not amount merely to the union of the Ego with the Id, but also involves a primary identification with another being invested with omnipotence- namely, the mother" (*The Language of Psychoanalysis* 202). On the other hand, the "Ego-ideal" refers to the convergence of the idealisation of the Ego and the identification with the parents or collective ideals imposed by the superego.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

words, he does not ask the question "what am I to the other" but fails to recognise, and even disavows, the alterity of the other or his/her lack. In addition, the other who is in pain is reduced to a doll or a puppet in the pervert's pursuit of jouissance. The sadist may even pretend that s/he cares about the other only to eventually humiliate and refuse to show compassion for the other's suffering.

More specifically, as we have seen, in Abramović's *Rhythm 0*, some members of the audience acted violently, even sadistically, towards the artist (see Chapter 4). Abramović's purpose with this performance, as explained in Chapter 4, was to help spectators abandon their passive role in the face of violence. The artist, however, did not expect that by positioning the audience in such a powerful position, they might engage in such violent acts as dousing her with cold water, using a razor to cut her skin, slashing her throat to suck her blood, and even making an attempt to shoot her. Due to the shock and distress caused to her from the intensity and violent treatment of her body, the artist has confessed that a streak of her hair turned white right after the performance. Perhaps the artist was relying on the spectator's sense of morality to treat her with care and respect. Nonetheless, as Deleuze argues, the sadist lacks the ego which "normally confers a moral character on the superego" (124). The sadist's "superego rungs wild, expelling the ego" and "then its fundamental immorality exhibits itself as sadism" (124). The libertine, and in this case the sadist spectator, is "monstrously reduced to a pure superego which exercises its cruelty to the fullest extent and instantaneously recovers its full sexuality as soon as it diverts its power outward" (Deleuze 124). What the artist did not consider, therefore, in her attempt to raise communal responsibility for the suffering of an other, is the risk of sadistic reactions such as the ones that were noted in this performance.

The same can be argued in relation to Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*, particularly during the first three times it was performed, in 1964, 1965, and 1966. In these performances, members of the audience reacted in an aggressive manner, cutting the artist's clothes, leaving her naked skin exposed, while shouting degrading and offensive comments (see Chapter 4). According to Deleuze, "sadism operates by means of quantitative reiteration" (134). The sadistic individual, therefore, does not feel satisfied by acting out his/her sadistic drives, but s/he "is always faced with the task of destroying something outside itself again and again" (126). Hence, the sadist spectator will continue to see the artist as his/her "black fetish". This idea can be explored further with reference to Chris Burden's *Doomed* (see Chapter 4), where the spectators could actually *see* the artist's discomfort from being still under a small sheet

KAROLINA LAMPROU

of glass, for approximately 45 hours. One could, of course, argue that during the 1970s the spectators were not accustomed to intervene in the artwork, hence, they could not acknowledge their own ethical responsibility towards the suffering artist. On the other hand, however, such indifferent response could actually point towards what Deleuze calls "sadistic *apathy*", which results in the sadist's all-powerful superego that represses any moral connotations (134). The sadist, according to Deleuze, feels indifferent to scenes of cruelty. Hence, the sight of the suffering and/or distressed artist does not ignite feelings of empathy within such spectators but leaves them completely indifferent, frustrating in this way the artist's desire for the creation of a renewed, more ethical community.

The work of Martin O' Brien, a British performance artist who suffers from cystic fibrosis, may raise similar concerns. O' Brien's artistic practice includes sadomasochistic elements, mechanisms which, as the artist explains, help him cope with the suffering that his illness causes, due to the fact that they enable him to explore "physical endurance, hardship, and pain" ("Martin O' Brien: Performance Artist"). At the same time, as the artist states, through his art, he becomes able to resist his illness, claim agency and celebrate his body ("Martin O' Brien: Performance Artist"). In 2013, O'Brien collaborated with Sheree Rose for the purpose of the performance *Do With Me as You Will/Make Martin Suffer for Art.* This work took place at a professional BDSM dungeon, in Los Angeles. The artist was inside a cage, which is the same cage Bob Flanagan was kept in by Sheree, positioned in the centre of the room. Rose was responsible of doing to the artist whatever the members of the audience requested for the duration of one hour.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Fig. 43. Martin O’ Brien. *Martin in Cage(with Sheree looking in)* 2013.

According to the artist, these included BDSM acts such as being beaten, having a piece of ginger inserted in his anus, spanked with a paddle, and having his scrotum stretched and pierced with needles to more intimate moments such as engaging in conversation with O’Brien or sharing food with him. The artist stated that all actions would be considered consensual. The only restrictions were the exchange of bodily fluids or the performance of dangerous acts that could cause serious harm to the artist. The instructions given to the audience were to “make Martin suffer for his art” (“Martin O’ Brien: Performance Artist”). The artist commented on this work: “I had never in a performance allowed audiences to come and do things with me” while Rose admitted that she “was very nervous about the whole thing”, since this was the first time that the audience could exert so much control over the artist (Howard, “Obliquely Chronophilic”).

On the one hand, I believe that such performances offer an opportunity to the members of the audience to explore their own limits and take responsibility for both their actions and their passive stance. On the other hand, one cannot ignore the power dynamic that develops between artist and audience, a dynamic that may undermine the artist’s expressed aims and even endanger his/her life. One of the main reasons why the pervert does not feel awkward or shameful in such situations is that his/her violent

KAROLINA LAMPROU

actions do not disturb the boundaries of his/her comfort zone. On the contrary, such spectators feel at home, or to use Lacan's words, "where they belong" (Swales 62). To become a subject, one needs to lose something: the object petit *a*, that is, the mother. This is one of the experiences of castration, which are a pre-requisite for entering the Symbolic order. The pervert, however, does not experience loss or lack but identifies with the non-lacking Other. The sadist is simply the agent of the jouissance of the Other. In identifying with the non-lacking Other, the sadist disregards social norms, morals, and rules. His/her aim is to direct his/her actions towards what s/he considers as the Other's desire, not in order to revolt against it but with a view to obtaining a position which will allow him/her to follow his/her own desire. What characterises sadistic behaviour, therefore, is an interplay between prohibition and transgression. The gratification that might be derived from transgression actually intensifies the desire to transgress imposed prohibitions. The result of this interplay is jouissance. It can therefore be argued that the licensed transgression offered spectators in the context of some performances may activate what Lacan describes as the pervert's desire to enact his/her fantasy not so much through victimizing a chosen object, but through taking actions or adopting a stance that produces anguish. Based on this, the setting of *Do With Me as You Will/Make Martin Suffer for Art*, for example, can be seen as providing the ideal situation for the sadist to fulfil his desires. This, then, cannot but remain an important concern in the context of performance art, precisely because this kind of art relies on the spectators' active participation and the precarious relation established between artist and audience. With regard to O'Brien's performance, for example, though the audience was not supposed to cause serious harm to the artist, his anxiety over the course of the performance shows that the danger of being harmed was not inexistent, since the audience is put in a position of power over the artist.

Arguably, the aforementioned performances may not only instigate the pervert's desire but, in not permitting satisfaction, they may greatly intensify it. Indeed, what is important for a sadist is not the result but the process: his/her desire will never be fulfilled because this desire is only the reproduction of a fantasy, the Other's desire, so it can never be satisfied by the attainment of the "real thing". This is why s/he keeps provoking the other's anxiety, in an attempt to maintain his/her position as the object of the Other's pleasure. The fact that such performances, as some of the ones I have been discussing throughout this thesis, have large audiences make the situation more appealing to the sadist, precisely because the members of the audience serve as the witnesses to the pervert's demands.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

At the same time, I believe, even such reactions can prove beneficial since they can be, as I have suggested in Chapter 3, part of a process of sublimation, providing the grounds for coming to terms with the sadist within each of us in the context of a shared experience. What all the above seems to demonstrate is the naivete of the vision of a violence-free, anguish-free community that characterized earlier practices of Performance art, a naivete significantly acknowledged in more contemporary performances. On this, I will elaborate further in the conclusion of this thesis, where I discuss the new directions this art form appears to be taking.

Before turning to contemporary developments in performance art, I find it important to raise some questions which relate to what, in my view, is a double bind at the heart of the emancipatory gender politics, which, as we have seen, is central in the work of a number of artists. As the artist's body usually constitutes the medium in performance art, some performances have been involved in an attempt to expose and challenge the social constructions of gender by exploring new possibilities for the male and female body. This, however, can prove to be a daunting task not only because, as aforementioned, the artist relies on the spectator's reaction and participation but also due to the artists' positioning of themselves as an object (the object of male voyeuristic gaze, the passive recipient of spectators' conscious or unconscious homophobia and misogynism). One could indeed wonder whether artists like Franko B, Galindo, ORLAN, and Abramović succeed in launching a gender politics that successfully challenges entrenched gender and heteronormative hierarchies. One may well argue that the line between challenging and reproducing stereotypes of the other as quintessential victim or abject is very thin. For example, Abramović, in *Rhythm 0,* could be perceived as reproducing the image of women as vulnerable and fragile victims of society, since she willingly submits her body to the audience's gaze, desire, and will. As already mentioned, in this performance, the audience was allowed to undress the artist or to physically hurt her, using one of the many instruments available to them, including a gun with a bullet.

Admittedly, one of the dangers that performance art involves, especially for women performance artists, is that sometimes, in their attempt to challenge stereotypes of femininity, they run the risk of empowering the male gaze. This is the case, I believe, of *Role Exchange* which was performed in the Netherlands, in 1975, when Abramović, who was already enjoying a ten-year career as a performance artist, changed places for four hours with a professional prostitute, Suze. Their experiences were recorded and projected in De Appel Gallery, in Amsterdam, for two weeks. Abramović relates this

KAROLINA LAMPROU

performance to the social context women live in. By exchanging roles with a prostitute, the artist aims to illustrate the fact that identity is the product of particular contexts and the social structures dominant in society. Yet, it is legitimate to ask: How does this performance contribute to feminist politics and to improving the lives of prostitutes? Certainly, Abramović's gesture of rendering visible a life rarely accounted for and easily disposable is very important. Yet, hers remains a gesture not likely to have much impact beyond the sphere of art. Nevenka Stankovic, in her paper "An Institutional Travesty: Risk as a Strategy in Marina Abramović's Performance *Role Exchange*", argues that Abramović's choice of switching places with a prostitute functions as a metaphor for art as another type of trading and implies the subsequent objectification of the artist. Based on this argument, she claims that Abramović, by "depriving the artworld of the art object as the crucial commodifying factor", actually poses a scathing critique towards art institutions (570). Yet, if the artist's intention is to put forward a critique of the commodification of the artwork, how can switching roles with a prostitute for just a few hours constitute a solid political and/or ethical gesture in the service of a progressive social politics? More importantly, in her attempt to expose the prostitution of art, isn't Abramović legitimising the objectification and exploitation of the female body?

The same concerns arise with regard to several of ORLAN's works. In my view, ORLAN's ambiguous positioning between a critique and a perpetuation of gender stereotypes may be observed in her work *Nude Descending Staircase in Wedge Heels.*[103] For the purpose of this work and as the title indicates, the artist is photographed naked in high heels, the fetish *par excellence* in representations of Western feminine sexuality.

[103] ORLAN's choice of this title, which is the title of Marcel Duchamp's homonymous painting, is not coincidental. The artist was inspired by Marcel Duchamp and his idea of the "readymade" as an object that is able to change the viewer's idea and understanding of that specific object, by positioning it in a separate context (Rose, "ORLAN: Is It Art").

KAROLINA LAMPROU

Fig. 44. ORLAN. *Nude Descending a Staircase with Platform Shoes*. 1967.

The position from which the photograph is taken, i.e. from below, serves to offer a "monstrously anamorphic reading of her body" (Tejeda 67). It may certainly be argued that the artist chooses to deform her body so that it does not offer pleasure to the male gaze. It is my contention though that, unlike Cindy Sherman's sex pictures (see Chapter 1) which subvert the male gaze by exposing the masquerade of femininity in the most perverse manner, ORLAN's body does not necessarily escape the male gaze which can still reduce it to an object of desire. This is because the vagina and the breast, which, due to the angle that the photo is taken, are magnified, can be seen as the objects of desire *par excellence*.

Using the body as the medium of their art, these and other artists, create performances in the context of which they attempt to expose, disrupt, and challenge the social constructions of gender and sexuality through re-signifying femininity or, in other instances, homosexuality. As mentioned above, these artists take on a very difficult task, which is sometimes compromised precisely due to the complex functioning of the body in these performances, or, indeed, due to the ambiguous attitude that performance artists themselves have towards the body.

<u>What about the Fate of the Body?</u>

The second part of this chapter will focus on the potential risks and problems that may rise with the treatment the body in the context of performance art as

KAROLINA LAMPROU

"obsolete" and "mere vehicle". To this end, I will critically analyse some of the theoretical premises regarding the body underlying the work of Franko B, Abramović, and Stelarc.

As I have already shown in previous chapters, one of Franko B's main techniques until 2006 was the use of his bleeding body. Franko B's *I Miss You*, which is one of his most widely reviewed works, provides an illustrative example of this technique. This work was first performed in 1999 while more performances of the same piece followed in different parts of Europe. During this performance, the spectators could see Franko B walking down a long canvas aisle, which was lit by fluorescent tubes. The artist was bleeding from self-inflicted cuts on his wrists and from calendulas in his arms that held his veins open as he slowly and ceremoniously walked imitating the style of a catwalk, normally assumed by models in *haute couture* fashion shows. Even though one might easily detect a connection between Franko B's use of his naked bleeding body and the challenging of the stereotypes of beauty and sexuality top models represent, the artist denies such connection in the following statement:

> It is not a comment on the fashion industry at all. It uses the aesthetics of a fashion show in that you have a catwalk and you have a distinctive white canvas marking where the catwalk is, and you have a set-up with people sitting and standing either side like they do at a fashion show. Here, the difference is that what is being paraded up and down the catwalk is not clothes, it is the body, my bleeding body. So what is happening is that I walk I am not 'catwalking' but 'painting' the canvas as the blood drips on it. But this is a plus. It's not that I'm painting and I'm trying to do something with that. ("Franko B Interviewed by Gray Watson")

According to this statement, Franko B's insistence on the need to witness his bleeding body seems to consider the body as a "what" moved by a "who", an "I" engaged in aesthetic creation. The body is, then, treated as an object to be exhibited, like the clothes in a fashion show. In *Oh Lover Boy*, the body is used as a painting brush that creates "a beautiful painting". At the same time, his insistence on creating something beautiful and his use of the body as a medium of art is at the expense of his health. Indeed, one may ponder on the necessity to injure one's own body and self-willingly undermine his/her well-being for art's sake (for more on Franko B's insistence on using his own blood, see Chapter 3). Franko B clarifies that he is concerned with his

KAROLINA LAMPROU

physical condition. Therefore, as the artist claims, he tries not to lose more blood than a regular blood donor does, who gives blood up to four times per year. In order to be able to carry out such performance pieces, Franko B highlights that he is careful enough not to risk his health and respects his body and its rhythms. "I'm not putting my life at risk. That would be foolish", he specifically says ("Franko B Interviewed by Gray Watson"). Despite his claim that he takes care of his health, nonetheless, he does not refrain from emphasising the risks for his health that any performance entails. He explains: "You never know whether the performance is going to last two minutes or 14 minutes. I know it has to finish and I know that the maximum I can do is 13 to 14 minutes, which is pushing my luck, but the idea is that every time I come out to walk down, you see different details" ("Franko B interviewed by Garry Watson"). In similar terms, Abramović, in *Rhythm 5*, which I have drawn on in the first section of this chapter, also risked her life in her attempt to a symbolic sacrifice. She later commented on this: "In *Rhythm 5* I had gotten so angry that I'd lost control. In my next pieces, I asked myself how to use my body in and out of consciousness without interrupting the performance" (*Walk Through Walls: A Memoir* 51). Clearly, she was not alarmed by the possibility of losing her life during this performance.[104] Likewise to Franko B, she seems to be more concerned about her body as a vehicle for art than about any risks involved in the process.

Considering such risks and their implications, I believe that the work of the Cypriot-Australian artist Stelarc exemplifies the dangers that may arise when artists assume body-phobic attitudes. Stelarc completely disregards the material body's significance. Indeed, the objectification of the body in Stelarc's art has led many art critics and witnesses or followers of his work to criticise his art on the grounds that it promulgates the wholesale disavowal of the body's physical, political, and social function.[105] It is widely accepted that Stelarc's work entails a number of dangers and raises various legal questions, due to the extreme methods he employs in order to incorporate technology within the body. In the case of *Re-wired/Re-mixed*, for example, which was part of STR BIENNALE 2017, complete strangers from all over the world had the freedom to intervene in the artist's bodily function, which was

[104] Notably, *Rhythm 5* is only one of the many examples in which Abramović takes enormous risks for her art. For more examples see: *Rhythm 0* (see Chapter 3) and *Rhythm 2*. In *Rhythm 2*, Abramović sat in front of an audience and took medication which is normally for people with mental illnesses (a pill which has calming effects and another which is used to treat catatonic episodes). As she said, she wanted to experiment with the idea of having and losing control (Richards, *Marina Abramović* 86).

[105] See "Flying into the Future with Stelarc" by John Appleby, in *The Cyborg Experiments: The Extensions of the Body in the Media Age*.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

"augmented by a 7 degree-of freedom exoskeleton" ("Re-Wired/Re-Mixed"). For five days, six hours per day, the public, by using an online interface, was able to force any involuntary movement onto the artist's right arm.

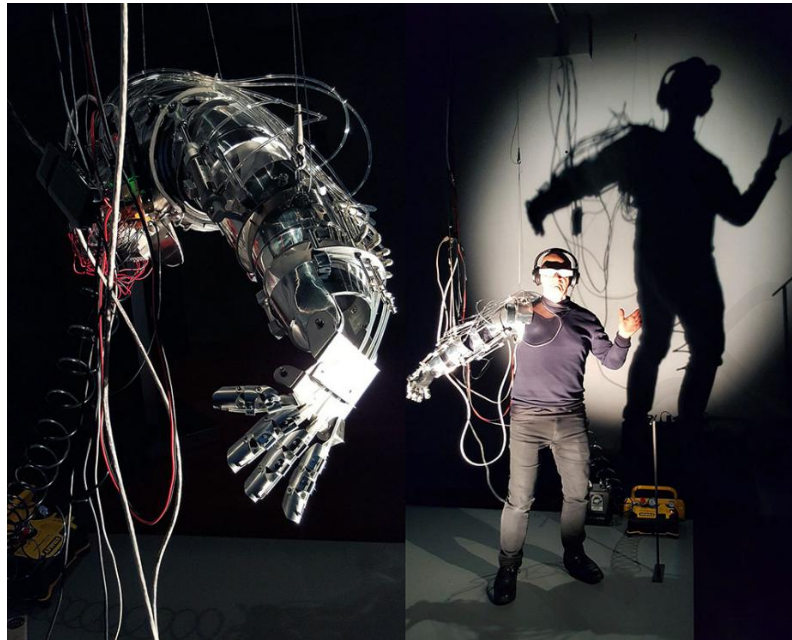

Fig. 45. STELARC, *Third Hand*.

The artist who was wearing a video headset and noise cancelling earphones could only experience the senses of vision and hearing of someone in London and New York, respectively, while what the artist was seeing and hearing was broadcasted live in the gallery space. Stelarc explains that this work "explored the physiological and aesthetic experience of a fragmented, de-synchronized, distracted, and involuntary body wired—and under surveillance online" ("Re-Wired/Re-Mixed"). As the artist has repeatedly stated, his work functions as a metaphor for the extreme surrender of individual freedom as the body becomes an involuntary body, not controlled by the person who "owns" the body but someone else. In view of the displacement of individual agency, the dynamics generated enhances the power that may be exerted onto the self by an entity foreign to the self to overwhelming limits, a fact that can easily intrigue power-freaks who may wish to manipulate and harass the artist and, at the same time, harm or molest his body.

It is clear that Stelarc cannot separate his life from his art. The artist undergoes great risks for the sake of his artistic performance, in the process of which he treats his body, hence his material self, as obsolete. It seems that his art is prioritised over his own biological well-being. In 1993, Stelarc had a very serious and dangerous operation for the Australian Sculpture Trienalle in the process of producing his work *Stomach*

KAROLINA LAMBROU

Sculpture. For the purposes of this performance, he inserted a small, umbrella-like device of approximately 40 centimetres inside the stomach cavity which released sounds and which was self-illuminating. For the success of the operation, the stomach, which had to be empty, was inflated with air. For this reason, the artist was not allowed to eat for a whole day before inserting the sculpture. The result was a choreography of motion inside the artist's body. The sculpture is described by the artist as a very simple reliable mechanism driven by a control cable to a servo motor and a logic circuit outside the body to help it open and close, extend and retract (Stelarc, "Stomach Sculpture"). The artist admits in an interview to C Theory that the stomach sculpture was his most dangerous performance, for which he had to be at a 5-minute distance from a hospital in case this procedure damaged his internal organs. The artist comments on the purpose of this performance:

> I've moved beyond the skin as a barrier. Skin no longer signifies closure. I wanted to rupture the surface of the body, penetrate the skin. With the stomach sculpture, I position an artwork inside the body. The body becomes hollow with no meaningful distinction between public, private and physiological spaces. The hollow body becomes a host, not for a self or a soul, but simply for a sculpture. ("Extended Body: Interview with Stelarc")

The artist, then, underwent a dangerous operation and risked his health in his attempt to produce an artwork and to re-affirm his concept of the material body as obsolete and hollow. As the quote above shows, the body can only function as a tool for exploration and human evolvement. As he argues:

> The obsolete body is not about a loathing of the body; it's not about discarding the body altogether. It's rather about speculating on how the body has evolved […]. And then technology often outperforms the human body and accelerates the body so that it escapes from the gravitational pull of the Earth and finds itself in alien environments. So in these ways the body becomes obsolete. The question is not so much whether we discard bodies but how to rethink the design of the body. (*Cyborg Experiments* 122)

Stelarc claims to be presenting the multiple possibilities that our transformation into post-humans can offer and his work aims to help people become more open-minded with regard to the utilisation of technology. The cyber theorist Donna Haraway, in *A Cyborg Manifesto*, discusses the cyborg body as the amalgam of

KAROLINA LAMPROU

biological and artificial/technological parts that change the function of the human body due to the added mechanical elements. Haraway argues that "the dichotomies between mind and body, animal and human, organism and machine, public and private, nature and culture, men and women, primitive and civilised are all in question ideologically" (163). Adopting Haraway's lens with a view to understanding Stelarc's work, one notes the artist's preoccupation with the eradication of binary thinking and a concentration on the enhanced potentiality of the redesigned, technologically empowered human body. The artist, in an interview with Joanna Zylinska, explains: "Technology is what constructs our humanity; the trajectory of technology is what propelled human developments" (114). In light of overwhelming technological advancement and the unprecedented pace at which the dissemination of information takes place, Stelarc points to the limitations of human biological powers. In his comments, he does not hesitate to underline the shortcomings of the human body against the new temporospatial configurations dictated by the inexhaustible potentiality of technological development. Specifically, he argues: "The body is neither a very efficient nor very durable structure. It malfunctions often and fatigues quickly; its performance is determined by its age. It is susceptible to disease and is doomed to a certain and early death. Its survival parameters are very slim—it can survive only weeks without food, days without water and minutes without oxygen" (qtd. in Filas 291). Given his attitude to the physical body, it is no wonder he is prepared to risk his body's well-being to such a degree. As I will show in the next section, Stelarc's artistic practice raises a number of questions, in relation to both his well-being and with regard to the ethical dimension of his work.

As shown above, for Stelarc the body is amenable to manipulation and reduction to a mere vehicle. In my view, the discourse adopted by Stelarc is dominated by the metaphor of the body as a hollow, hospitable womb. Admittedly, this hypothesis implies the assumption that the artist envisions technology as a phallic organ hosted within the body. In this way, one could argue that his works actually reproduce existing gender hierarchies, reinforcing the contemporary nexus among technology, masculinity, and power. At the same time, they also underscore the hierarchy established between biology/nature and science/technology. While, according to Haraway, the cyborg becomes a means of challenging Western ideals, binary structures, and normalising practices that define the human body and, generally, human existence, in my view, the dangers inherent in the uncritical adoption of the cyborg paradigm are not to be ignored. First, cyber visions of the body such as the

KAROLINA LAMPROU

ones Stelarc provides us with may be perceived as contributing to its depersonalisation and objectification, its reduction to "spare parts" which can easily be commodified and which are divorced from wider processes of life that are not always within human (and hence technological) control. Hence, the artist's repeated assertion that technologically enhanced bodies function much more effectively and efficiently than the biological body. As I have been arguing, such views entail serious implications about the biological body, especially since it is yet uncertain the extent to which the biological body can be technologically augmented and at what cost. The idea of human enhancement through technology is still experimental. As a result, the risks and dangers that arise with such views that render the biological body "obsolete" need to be considered. In the context of these performances, the artist engages in a phantasy of omnipotence which enables him to ignore the limits of the biological body for the sake of a powerful, immortal, technological body. Such fantasies of omnipotence can be very worrying, especially in light of increasing calls from both within the scientific community and outside to adopt a more critical attitude towards contemporary uses of technology.[106]

What is most disconcerting about the uncontrolled advancement of bio-technology is its dependence on a discourse of eugenics. The popular vision of a posthuman society that encourages the breeding and engineering of superior children (positive eugenics) while eliminating "inferior" gene lines (negative eugenics) is often noted in discourses and practices that have to do with bio-technology and forms of bio-art.[107] As Ai-Ling Lai argues, "Western history is steeped in the anxiety of negative eugenics, which strikes a neuralgic chord in a contemporary sociopolitical context, as a constituent element of Nazi ideology and its obsessive privileging of the Aryan race. Consequently, race and class prejudices become intensified through high technologies" (388). As he moves on to add, the possibility of cloned children as a commodity to be used for transplantation may lead us to question Haraway's utopianism in her conceptualisation of the cyborg figure as a medium of hybridisation and undermining of oppressive binaries (Lai 391). Indeed, rather than eliminate class, race and gender binarisms, the cyborg paradigm may end up producing ever more

[106] See, for example, "Law, Cyborgs, and Technologically Enhanced Brains" by Woodrow Barfield and Alexander Williams and *Prometheus Reimagined: Technology, Environment, and Law in the Twenty-First Century* by Albert C. Lin.

[107] Kira O' Reilly for example, in the course of her residency with SymbioticA, was engaged in several dangerous and life-threatening experiments with a view to expanding our understanding of the body and exploring how scientists and artists can collaborate not only to produce art but also to help humanity ("Kira O' Reilly").

KAROLINA LAMPROU

distinctions, for example a distinction between a "normal" child and a "clone" child, a human and a superhuman, etc. Finally, the fixation with the vulnerability and fragility of flesh that can be traced in many posthuman or transhuman discourses[108] may actually produce a being, a cyborg that is "a *meat-hater*, a technological—organic structure that relates with fear and hatred to its organic core" (Shabot 227). Even if the prospect of a healthy, immortal, indestructible, and omnipotent body is certainly intriguing in many ways, are we ready to give up what defines our carnal existence, the corporeal pleasures, such as "the enjoyment of food, moving our bodies, sex or dancing; and also the painful, such as sickness, aging, and, finally, dying" (Shabot 228)? As Sara Cohen Shabot argues: "We are fleshed subjects, who relate to the world, to objects and other subjects, by way of our embodied subjectivities, through our carnal eroticism and sexuality, through our ineludible fleshed existence" (230). This view, which as we have seen was very important in the early stages of performance art, opposes Stelarc's vision, which disregards the importance of human flesh. In contrast, he proposes bodies of "Fractal Flesh", which he defines as "bodies and bits of bodies, spatially separated but electronically connected, generating similar patterns of recurring activity at different scales", and "Phantom Flesh", which he explains as "Phantom not as in phantasm, but as in phantom limb. Haptic technologies generating tactile and force-feedback that results in a more potent presence of remote bodies" ("Ear on Arm"). Can Stelarc's "Fractal Flesh", however, create embodied connections to others, feel intimacy, or experience eroticism?

What I find particularly problematic with regard to Stelarc's vision of an alternative post-human subjectivity, the product of a technologically enhanced body, is the fact that he often uses Levinasian language in his attempt to convince his audience to embrace the alterity of technology. For example, he speaks of offering his body to his various projects which, as he claims, intend to improve humanity.[109] Prosthesis, Stelarc supports, which is a central concept in most of the artist's projects, actually works as a means of connecting the self with others and becomes a medium in the attempt to re-define identity. Crucially, as Stelarc puts it, prosthesis entails both the acceptance and the incorporation of the radical other (i.e. technology), which signals the welcoming of the unknown. Based on this premise, Stelarc advocates that

[108]While posthumanists and transhumanists share similar ideas, "posthumanist sociology emphasizes the 'superorganic' biological and evolutionary roots of social behavior, while transhumanists emphasize humanity's extension into technology and our accelerating cultural evolution" (Fuller 151).

[109] Stelarc refers to his body as the "the body", due to the fact that he does not consider people owning their body and, for this reason, he refuses to relate to it.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

his artistic practice constitutes an act of hospitality, offering the body as a host to a foreign object that alters the body in order to "adjust[ing] and extend[ing] its awareness of the world" (Zylinska 229). The discussion between Stelarc and Zylinska is exemplary of Stelarc's ethical claim that technology should not be seen as mere technics but as the means to face alterity and "open the self to the exterior" (Zylinska 216). However, while the other in Emmanuel Levinas' work is presented as the needy other, which is often associated with the figure of "an orphan" or "a widow", Stelarc's other, technology, is very different in essence to that invoked in Levinas, as it has historically functioned as an instrument of power in a number of military, corporate, or totalitarian contexts, such us the Nazi death camps.[110]

Stelarc's experimentation with technology, has also led him to become involved in bio-art, a development I discuss further in the thesis' conclusion. In particular, he has collaborated with Nina Sellars, a bio-artist who participates in a residency programme of SymbioticA. The two artists produced an installation called *Blender*, which is a project that involves the blending of a number of bio-materials, including the artists' and animals' fat. The artists, after having a liposuction operation, put inside "a hermetically sealed vessel [...] fat, nerves, connective tissue and blood, extracted from Stelarc's torso and Sellars's limbs" (Clarke 411). Julie Clarke, in her paper "Corporeal Mélange: Aesthetics and Ethics of Biomaterials in Stelarc and Nina Sellars's *Blender*", informs us that they also inserted various chemicals which were necessary for the surgical procedure as well as oxygen and methylated spirits to aerate and prevent the biomaterials from degrading (411). As the title of the project reveals, these materials were blended together within the blender, producing a rhythmic sound similar to a heartbeat. The artists have explained that the purpose of this project was to reduce the body to its essential material elements, such as blood, fat, tissues, and nerves, as well as to portray the human body as a kind of landscape (Clarke 413). At the same time, however, this project invokes disturbing references to the technological experiments performed onto Auschwitz victims (e.g. fat extraction from prisoners for the production of soap). Due to this, I find that the performance constitutes a striking example of the body's misuse.[111] In a similar vein, Clarke mentions that the pair was also criticised for promoting the use of human or animal fat for aesthetic or other

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[110] It is precisely experience in the Nazi death camps that led Levinas to develop his distinct ethics.

[111] Also see the work of Kira O' Reilly, another bioartist. During her residency at the "artistic labatory" SymbioticA, the artist lived in smelly and dirty cages in order to fully experience the manipulation of life by biotechnology. She was involved in tissue cultured procedures like co-culturing newly dead pigs' cells with her own in order to produce a hybrid skin.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

commercial purposes (413). In response to these comments, Stelarc declared that he is more interested in the aesthetic rather than the ethical issues that might be raised by his art (Clarke 414).

Fig. 46. Stelarc and Sellars, Nina. *Blender*.

While I strongly believe that performance art, as I have tried to show throughout this thesis, is a very important art form which aims at re-establishing the function of art in society, this chapter is intended to serve as an acknowledgement of the risks entailed in the practices of some performance artists, risks which pertain to the kind of relation established between the artist and his/her audience as well as to the use of the body. In the conclusion of this thesis, I will discuss the most recent artistic practices of the main artists I have discussed so far, with a view to showing the direction that this art form is currently taking.

KAROLINA D. PROU

Conclusion
Where is Performance Art Heading?

In this thesis, I have taken a theoretical approach to performance art in order to re-evaluate and foreground, from a 21st century perspective, the ethical and political concerns that have contributed to the emergence of this art form, sustained it, and determined its development. To this end, I have discussed the different motivations behind the development of different tendencies within it and their socio-political function. In my introduction, I have tried to offer a review of the most important scholarship available so far on this art form, in order to discuss the different key directions in performance art from the 1960s until recently. This has allowed me to conduct a mapping of the field and, also, to introduce the aims of my own thesis.

Before moving on to my analysis of specific artists and artworks, I found it important to discuss the post-World War II socio-political situation that sparked the need for new art forms. Guy Debord's *Society of the Spectacle* proved most useful in discussing how capitalist society, which is characterised and defined by modern conditions of production, has rendered life an "accumulation of spectacles", where all human experiences, interaction, and relationships have become mere images. Giorgio Agamben seems to agree with Debord and considers his work a great source of inspiration. In his work *Man Without Content*, Agamben criticises the function of art in modern society, particularly in comparison to the function of art in the past. As I have shown, Agamben, in this work, discusses two splits in the art world; 1) the split between the artist from his material and his artwork, as well as 2) the split between the artist and the spectator, which resulted in the production of false masterpieces, divorcing art from its *use.* This, I have argued, is the main reason behind the emergence of new art forms where the focus is not the spectator's distanced aesthetic enjoyment but his/her active involvement in the artistic process. The first chapter, then, centres around Agamben's critique of modern art, Hal Foster's interesting discussion of neo avant-garde art forms as forcing "a return of the real" and Fredric Jameson's analysis of "happenings" as emerging from the second "end of art", which resulted from the

KAROLINA LAMPROU

political situation of the 1960s and took the form of a reaction against cultural institutions and high art. This discussion has ultimately allowed to me to demonstrate how performance art appeared as a response to the various socio-political turbulences that were taking place from the 1950s onwards. The first chapter, therefore, has helped me to focus on the emerging need of an art form that reclaims the function of art in society, helping the spectator to relinquish his/her passive status and become part of the artistic process.

In the second chapter, I focus on the Viennese Actionists who are considered by many critics as the forerunners of this art form. These artists exhibited a (late) strong reaction to atrocities and extreme forms of violence that they witnessed during World War II. Combined with their opposition to Austria's social order at the time they were performing and the capitalist principles that consumerist culture was governed by, their artistic practice included an exhibition of taboo-breaking and violent behaviour, where the cathartic function of rituals held a central role. Although, as I have mentioned, the Viennese Actionists' violent and law-breaking behaviour has compromised the success of their work, the artists remain the focus of discussion of art critics and they have provided inspiration for a number of contemporary artists.

One such artist is Ron Athey who has dedicated some of his works to the Viennese Actionists. Like their work, Athey's artistic practice often centres around rituals, which he considers an important element of his performances. However, unlike the Viennese Actionists, Athey's work takes place within institutional artistic frameworks and the participants are not violated against their will. For the purposes of the second part of my second chapter, I have utilised George Bataille's notion of the sacred, experienced through violent transgression, which is necessary for the fulfilment of his vision of an alternative social body. Similarly, Athey uses transgressive behaviour and rituals in his work in order to challenge homophobic behaviours and the abject treatment of HIV positive individuals. As I have shown, Athey's work has both personal and political ends. On the one hand, the artist is trying to overcome a traumatic childhood and come to terms with the loss of many of his friends because of AIDS and, on the other hand, he seeks to present a more accurate image of the HIV infected, queer body and fight misconceptions and phobias towards it.

In the next chapter, I continued my discussion on the importance of the sacred moment in performance art with close reference to Julia Kristeva's theory of the abject. I have specifically chosen to discuss Gina Pane's, Marina Abramović's, and Franko

KAROLINA LAMPROU

B's work. In my analysis of Pane's work, I have attempted to demonstrate how the experience of abjection continues to haunt both the construction of female subjectivity and representations of femininity. At the same time, I have used Franko B's work to show how, similarly to women, homosexual people are often abjectified. To this end, I have tried to show how Franko B uses his own "homosexual" blood to create what he calls "beautiful paintings", with the aim of breaking the association of his blood with infection and sickness. Finally, I have chosen Abramović's work to show how certain socio-political symbols from the artist's past were sublimated in her early performances, in order for the artist to be able to overcome her traumatic childhood.

As I have highlighted in my introduction, the main focus of this thesis concerns the ethical and political dimensions of this art form. For this reason, in Chapter 4, I found it important to approach particular tendencies in performance art that aim at the creation of a community based on human vulnerability and response-ability, as Emmanuel Levinas has theorised these notions. Levinas' ethical theory has allowed me to discuss Abramović's, Yoko Ono's, Chris Burden's and Regina José Galindo's work as important artistic interventions that not only expose suffering and vulnerability but also invite the members of the audience to recognise their own responsibility for the other's pain. I have also used Judith Butler's analysis of vulnerability that was inspired by Levinas' ethics. Importantly, Butler develops the notion of a common vulnerability that needs to be acknowledged as the first step of establishing an ethical relation between self and other, one based on equality and no longer on the Levinasian demand to subject oneself as a hostage to the needy other. It is the recognition of this basic premise, i.e. our common vulnerability, that a number of more recent performance works seem to be aiming at.

In order to adequately support my argument on the ethical and political significance of performance art, I have found it necessary to conclude my discussion with an analysis of artworks that do not mobilise ritualistic practices or a concept of the sacred. For this reason, in Chapter 5, I have used Giorgio Agamben's work, who attributes negative connotations to the sacred. The philosopher adopts a discourse that centres around profanation instead. More particularly, I have used Agamben's theory on the "state of exception" which he explains with the paradigm of *homo sacer* to interpret Regina José Galindo's artistic practice. Specifically, I have discussed the role that Galindo seems to assume in many of her performances as analogous to the position held by Agamben's *homo sacer*, i.e. a figure whose condition is reduced to "bare life" and is exposed to unconditional violence without being protected by the law. As I have

KAROLINA LAMPROU

shown, Galindo effectively shows how this position is often held by individuals who are the victims of social injustice because of their gender and/or race. Finally, I turned to ORLAN to show how her performances can be analysed through Agamben's notion of "play", a form of counter-strategy against biopolitical apparatuses which, according to the philosopher, have a separating function. As I have argued, ORLAN's use of "play" within her artistic practice creates a space that can restore the critical function of art in society, cancel out oppressive religious or consumerist representations and is able to re-activate the human as a potentiality.

In every chapter, I have showed how each artist brings forth, through his/her work, a new vision of community and how this vision can only be fulfilled if a relation with the audience is successfully established. This is why, as I have tried to highlight, the purpose of this art form is not concerned with the mere aesthetic enjoyment that the artwork may offer but becomes a shared experience between the artist and the audience, an experience that requires the audience's response. The growing interest in performance art adds to the importance of this art form and its social function.

While what these artists have succeeded in producing so far is admirable, the violent character of many tendencies within performance art entails a number of risks and dangers, which I have addressed in my penultimate chapter. As I have shown, the controversial nature of some of the performances, sometimes results in ambiguous responses on the part of the audience, a fact which is important given the vision informing the work of a lot of the artists I have discussed in this thesis, namely, the vision of a more responsive and responsible community. Though they cannot cancel out the overall contribution of performance art as an art form that seeks to restore the use of art in society, these risks and limitations cannot be ignored and can perhaps help us appreciate the new directions performance art is currently taking.

As I have shown, in the early stages of its development, performance art was characterized by the use of violence and, on some occasions, by the performance of dangerous, shocking and/or illegal actions. For example, the Viennese Actionists did not always abide by the law while Burden and Abramović repeatedly risked their lives for the success of their performance. This, Amelia Jones argues, was part of the artists' endeavour to produce something "uniquely truthful" or something "which can deliver some kind of final truth" (Jones, "Performative Afterlife" 13-4). As a result, many artists were treating their bodies as a mere tool in their attempt to succeed in offering the audience a glimpse of the real. As Jones explains, however, we need to escape the "fetishization" of embodiment that can be traced in particular manifestations of

KAROLINA LAMPROU

performance art, the "romantic attachment to notions of authenticity", and the idea that the "body somehow delivers the truth" ("Performative Afterlife" 13). In her view, this realisation will facilitate new discussions and ideas because, "if we don't question, we just repeat the same narratives and reinscribe the same beliefs and reinforce the same histories, with the same artists at their center" (Jones, "Performative Afterlife" 11-12). Perhaps, this explains the different trends that have been noted with regard to this art form, trends that I too have tried to re-map from a twenty-first century theoretical perspective.

I will now embark on a brief discussion of how recent developments in performance art may be related to the tendencies that have characterized previous decades. What needs to be noted is the declining use of self-inflicted violence. In this section, I will focus on three artists whose work is central with regard to my scope of interest in this thesis: Abramović, Franko B, and Athey. In my view, their work best registers and most eloquently demonstrates the changes in the development of performance art.

First, I will draw on Abramović's latest works *The Artist is Present* (2010) and *512 Hours* (2014), which aim at establishing a relationship between the artist and the audience as a means of inducing empathetic feelings among individuals. Notably, there was no admission fee for both of these performances. *The Artist is Present* took place in the MoMA, New York, and lasted for almost three months, eight hours per day, requiring in total 750 hours of physical endurance on the part of the artist. In the course of three months, a retrospective exhibition of her works was held. The exhibition consisted of fifty works, installations, photographs, video works, audio pieces, solo and collaborative performances, which took place during the last four decades that Abramović has been active in the art world. For the purpose of this performance, Abramović, wearing a long plain red, white, or black dress, sat on a wooden chair while anyone could sit opposite her in silence, simply gazing at the artist for as long as s/he wanted. The artist, and many of the people who participated in this work, have talked extensively and enthusiastically about the energy exchange that they so intensely experienced. Some people called the experience seductive, illuminating, and even life-changing. Abramović commented on her experience: "I only wanted to create this state of being that I am there with my mind and my body and give all of my energy and be vulnerable to anyone who sat in front of me. I wanted to create experiences that were one-to-one" (Anderson, "Marina Abramović Challenges the Norm of Performance"). Some stayed for hours while others for a few minutes. What was truly

KAROLINA LAMPROU

remarkable is the fact that hundreds of people patiently and calmly waited in the long queues that were formed on a daily basis to see the artist, despite the great chance of failing to enter the gallery because of the huge number of visitors. By the end of this work, approximately 1500 people had the opportunity to be touched by "the grandmother of performance art". Abramović comments:

> It looks simple. I am sitting peacefully there, but it is incredibly painful for the body and the muscles and for the eyes. You are sitting there, and you are reflecting on your own life, all the things that are important, not important but what's really happening? Seeing the other people you come to that state where you start to feel unconditional love for the total stranger. (Dodes, "Artist Marina Abramović Sits for an Interview")

A few years later, another work that was based on similar premises took place at the Serpentine Gallery, in London: *512 Hours*. As in *The Artist is Present*, *512 Hours* was set in the form of a silent encounter and energy exchange between strangers who, sometimes, develop a kind of connection to each other and to their own selves. Again, this work centred on the artist and the visitors, with an addition of a few, limited props such as a bowl of rice, some chairs for the visitors to sit in and gaze at each other, and noise-cancelling headphones. This durational performance lasted for 10 weeks, 6 days a week, from 10am to 6pm, and by the time it finished it had attracted a total of 129,916 visitors. Upon arrival, Abramović's helpers requested from the visitors to leave their belongings outside the space of the performance, including their watches and mobile phones, in order to lose contact with the outside world and not to have a sense of time. People were also asked to record their impression of the performance, or any other thoughts on their experience, on a piece of paper while these were later uploaded on a daily basis on a dedicated *Tumblr*. Some reflections included the following comments: "it was like rehab, but better", "Thank you for the gift of time. Time to listen to my body", "I've never experienced this state of mind before. I don't want to leave the present—everything is wonderful here", "a deep exploration of oneself", and many more touching, intense, and grateful messages. Of course, not everyone enjoyed their experience or were affected by it.[112] This shows that the audience-reaction cannot be always predicted since not all people are touched by the same experiences.[113] This, once again, points towards the difficulty of materialising

[112] For example, some people only wrote "good", "interesting" or "Just OK". For more messages visit: http://512hours.tumblr.com/.

[113] This, I believe, is an eventuality faced by every work, speech, act, or any other experience. From her long-time experiences, the artist has developed what she calls the "Abramović Method", which is a

KAROLINA LAMPROU

the vision of a more ethical community which I have been discussing throughout this thesis.

Abramović is currently preparing a new performance, which will differ significantly from her past works. This work is a musical theatre production about the opera singer Maria Callas, entitled *7 Deaths of Maria Callas*. The operatic performance will present seven different deaths from roles that Callas performed, accompanied by short films, concluding with the singer's real death, staged by Abramović. *7 Deaths of Maria Callas* would have taken place in April 2020, at the Bavarian State Opera, in Munich, however, it was postponed due to the coronavirus pandemic (Anderson, "The Coronavirus Derails Marina Abramović's Maria Callas Opera"). Abramović has stated that, with this work, she aims at investigating female suffering in terms different to those she had adopted in her previous performances.

I also want to share some concluding reflections on the latest works by Franko B, who, as I have already demonstrated, became famous for his controversial bleeding artistic practices. Franko B, reflecting on the exclusive association of bleeding acts with his career path, notes: "Looking introspectively, I can truly say that I have successfully wrecked my career as a 'bleeding' artist" ("Milk & Blood Press Release"). Although his previous performances, in which his blood-leaking body formed a central element, have affected a number of people who follow his work, I strongly believe that the turn he has taken over the past fifteen years still provides a powerful and poignant experience, which addresses the needs of a contemporary audience. The body, of course, still constitutes the focus of his work, however, in an entirely different manner: First, his body is no longer hidden behind a white pigment, nor his tattoos are concealed. Second, the artist no longer bleeds before the eyes of his audience, at least not in the literal sense. In *I'm Thinking of You*, which was performed for the first time in 2012 while various versions of this performance still take place in many parts of Europe, Franko B, completely naked, serenely swings back and forth on a golden swing. The artist's movements suggested a carefree and leisurely swinging, accompanied by a soothing piano melody, by Helen Ottaway. A member of the audience has commented that this work provides the audience with "the opportunity to temporarily embody […] an ideal

series of exercises with regard to walking, breathing, and experiencing time and space to ultimately help the individual to explore their inner selves and connect to other people and circumstances differently ("Terra Communal"). In 2018, a similar performance took place, *The Cleaner,* which, according to the artist, establishes a shared experience among the participants. In this work, however, the artist has added for the first time the element of music, accompanying this work with choral singing ("Performance: The Cleaner").

KAROLINA LAMPROU

childhood/romance" (Skuret 15). Another member of the audience writes: "while a pianola tinkled little tunes, a naked Franko B sat, beaming beatifically, on a golden swing. The room glowed with the sunlight of a carefree childhood" ("Performers Open Eyes and Minds"). Such comments suggest that the acoustic investment, which blends perfectly with Franko B's serene back and forth movement, takes the audience on a journey, awakening their memories of childhood experience. As the artist states in his press release, this performance "presents a surreal, dreamlike image" and conveys "a romantic vision of childhood fantasy and abandon", a carefree childhood he never had ("I'm Thinking of You Press Release"). Notably, this performance was preceded by the exhibition of a sculpture Franko B had made, which was inspired by a childhood object that was later recreated as an adult object: a (teddy) bear. As the artist holds, he wanted to create this sculpture so that adults could play, like children, temporarily forgetting their concerns and problems, and simply enjoying themselves.[114]

During the same period, Franko B produced an inter-disciplinary work, *Because of Love*, which also marks his departure from his previous artistic practice. For the purposes of this work, Franko B collaborated with Tim Etchells and Giles Jobin, a team of animators, singers, and prop makers, the cooperation with whom underscores the versatility of this performance. At the outset of the performance, the artist appears on stage casually dressed, first walking at a slow pace and then at a marching pace. At the same time, various images are projected behind him showing important historical events, such documentary scenes from the Vietnam War, soldiers marching in communist China, or the Pope's speech.[115] The artist interacts with the images by waving back to the Pope, for example, or by responding to the gestures of the soldiers. For the next scene, Franko B writes the pronoun "I" on a blackboard that is placed on stage, an act he repeats several times until he adds the word "DIDN'T", and, eventually, draws a house. He then starts sobbing, erases everything from the blackboard and assumes a vulnerable position at the left corner of the stage where he pulls a black ribbon across his knees. Simultaneously, a recorded voice is heard narrating certain events from the artist's life, some of which are sad while others are funny or serious. For the last part of this scene, the artist lies on a bed which the audience sees being dragged on the stage. The last

[114] In the past two decades, Franko B has been exhibiting his sculpture work. Prior to this work, he had created his *Play Series: Adults only* (2015), which consists of objects and equipment usually found in children's playgrounds such as swings, slides and merry-go-rounds. In this way, as the artist says, adults can return to a more carefree and relaxing time.

[115] The artist does not specify which Pope's speech is being projected and it is not clear from the documentation of the performance.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

scene of this performance is a pastiche of surreal, dreamlike images. The main protagonist is an enormous animatronic white, polar bear with which the artist seems very intimate with: He dances with it, hugs it, and caresses it. The bear symbolises the love that one may receive during his/her lifetime: from a lover, a friend, or a parent. I find this performance very important for Franko B's most recent trajectory as it illustrates his concern with important socio-political events and his commitment to the values of community and life. This is the reason why the events mentioned in this performance are not only public events but, as stated in this work's press release, they are also events "about life, childhood, humanity, inhumanity, love and grief […] both personal and political" ("Because of Love: Press Release").

Franko B's latest performance, *Milk & Blood* (2015), is a work that brings to the fore his overtly political agenda, which reveals the artist's deep-seated interest in gender issues and the struggle for the equal rights of LGBTQ+ individuals.[116] In this work, the artist deviates from the nostalgic and surrealistic setting of the works described above, while he initiates an exploration of "pain, eroticism, revulsion, ecstasy and masculinity" ("Milk & Blood: Press Release"). The artist, who is wearing gold garments and boxing gear, repeatedly punches a gold boxing bag for thirteen rounds which last two minutes each, while reciting parts of his earlier text *Insignificant* (2015). With this work, the artist explores both his mental and physical endurance, as he explains, in order to create an image which functions as "a metaphor for social struggle" ("Milk & Blood: Press Release"). In this text, Franko B compiles a list of words, phrases, and ideas, such as "democracy, abandoned, homosexual, marginalised, victim, abusing, terror, refugee, politicians", or like "love, forgiven, awake, selfless, dignity" while almost after every alternate word he utters the word "insignificant". These fractured words are punctuated by a punch the artist gives to the boxing bag. Every punch is his reaction against the refugee crisis, political corruption, human rights violations, wars, terrorism, and so many other daily occurrences. Every punch, therefore, is a reference to certain situations we seem not able to escape since they define our current socio-cultural existence. In his press release for this work, the artist states that he "returns to the seminal aesthetics of the wound" ("Milk & Blood: Press Release"). That is, he uses the image of the wound, of the "bleeding milk", to remind the audience that "although we cannot change the fact of our bleeding, we can choose what we bleed for"

[116] These concerns are also foregrounded in his other, non-performantive, works, like for example his stitch works *Fuck Series* (2015).

KAROLINA LAMPROU

(Ramayya, "Review: Milk and Blood at Rich Mix"). He underscores the fact that as long as society continues to remain indifferent to pain, loss, and injustice, milk will continue to bleed.

Along the same lines with Franko B's latest project, Athey's most recent work is also characterised by an autobiographical element (see Chapter 2) since the artist provides a blending of his own personal memories from his childhood with a spiritual journey. A striking turn in Ron Athey's artistic methods can be discerned in his *Gifts of the Spirit* series, which was first performed in 2011 and is based on his Pentecostal upbringing. Unlike his previous work, it does not include images of his physically tormented body. In contrast, the most prominent element in these works is the artist's spiritual journey and his narration of the memories of his past experiences. *Gifts of the Spirit* takes the form of an "automatic writing machine" that consists of a team of 16 writers and six typists who write and type what the artist is reading. When the documenting procedure ends, Athey uses black paint to draw some shapes on top of the written words. Then, all the participants stand up and walk around the space in a "trance-like state of ecstatic communion". This work deviates from the artist's earlier artistic practices, which include self-mutilation, physical exhaustion, and torture. Also, the fact that, prior to the performance, the entire procedure was rehearsed, gives this work a more theatrical character. As the artist admitted in his interview to Amelia Abraham, "further ahead projects work more with ecstatic voice, glossolalia, and operatic theatre. I'm kind of leaning back in a theatrical direction" ("Ron Athey Literally Bleeds for His Art"). Athey seems to be exploring this new step in his career further with *Gifts of the Spirit: Prophecy, Automatism, and Discernment*. This work involves collaboration with the experimental composer Sean Griffin, a team of singers, musicians, and a hypnotist. This collaborative and interdisciplinary work, according to the artist, serves in "expanding the 'I' of my [Athey's] memoir into the randomness of collectively authored text, set with the bloat of an opera" (Campbell, "Glory Be").

In 2014, Athey, for the first time after almost twenty years, presented a section of his older work *Martyrs and Saints,* "Sebastiane", at the Hammer Museum, in Los Angeles. As already mentioned in Chapter 1, this work, caught in the middle of the 1990s Culture Wars, caused the reaction and criticism of the National Endowment of the Arts, which denied funds to works that included homosexual references, were associated with HIV, or included S&M practices. For this reason, it is very important that Athey, for the first time in his extensive career as a performance artist, chose to

KAROLINA LAMPROU

engage in “bodily pain and bloodletting” in the space of an American museum. As a member of the audience comments, at the end of the performance, “the performers then stood up on stage and bowed to an appreciative audience”, something that he probably would not have done in earlier performances (Ahn, “The Redemption of Ron Athey”). The performance was followed by a talk between Athey and the director of the Flynn Centre for the Performing Arts, John Killacky, about their past experiences with regard to the problems and the injustices that the Culture Wars caused. The fact that the artist was able to present his work in an American museum and, more importantly, chose to conclude his performance with a discussion on his past experiences when he was targeted by the N.E.A. shows that performance art is becoming more widely accepted, while people are readier to be exposed to artistic experiences considered scandalous in earlier decades.

His most recent performance work, *Acephalous Monster*, which was first performed in 2018, has the form of a political satire, which he describes as a critique of “the contemporary resurgence of fascism and the decline of organized religion”, while the figure of the “acephalous monster”, according to the artist, can be seen as a metaphor for “Trump’s America” (Malley, “Blood, Christ, and Shock Value: The Gospel According to Ron Athey”). This work, like many of his previous performances, is inspired by Bataille and engages with various works of literature, such as Brion Gysin’s “Pistol Poem” and Bataille’s *The Madness of Nietzsche*. The performance begins with Athey’s chorography of “Pistol Poem”, which combines dance and hopscotch movements with marching. Athey, for the second part, reads excerpts from Bataille’s aforementioned work. Then, more activities follow with Athey wearing a long white wig and applying white powder onto his face in order to transform into Louis XVI just before he was executed by beheading. Assuming the role of Louis XVI, he recites the King’s last words. In the next scene, the artist covers his head with a full head Minotaur mask and sits on a frame, covered in neon paint. Finally, Athey has his chest ritualistically cut by the performer Hermes Pittakos, who then presses the artist’s wounds with pieces of gauze in order to stop the bleeding. For the last part of the performance, Athey, who covers his head with a solar ray shaped cage and wears a black armour, resembles a prophet while, simultaneously, BDSM scenes are projected behind the artist. Commenting on this work, Athey notes that his work has always been more “related to theatre than it is to actionist Performance Art” (Zeiba, “Notorious Performance Artist Ron Athey”). Indeed, his performances have always incorporated theatrical and operatic elements, however, they often included activities where Athey

KAROLINA LAMPROU

bled and submitted himself to tremendous physical pain. The artist provides insight in this new direction of his art by describing it as "a departure in a way that is less physical and it can be repeated" ("Blood, Christ, and Shock Value: The Gospel According to Ron Athey"). He playfully comments on this: "Yeah, Grandpa isn't bleeding or sticking things inside his ass for once!" ("Ron Athey Still Bleeds for You").

I will conclude my thesis with a very brief overview of current developments, with a view to pinpointing the paths that performance art is taking. As we have seen, the declining popularity of the deployment of violence and the attempt to cultivate a feeling of empathy and the recognition of our common vulnerability have become central in current artistic practices. What I therefore argue is that contemporary performance art is becoming more mainstream, a tendency which may partly account for the fact that a great number of performance artists nowadays often present their work in recognised art institutions. Additionally, the proliferation of performance paraphernalia, such as photos, videos, blueprints, or other objects available for purchase attests to the fact that the work of performance artists is becoming more embedded in the consumerist economy.[117] This idea is further illustrated by the fact that "Abramović's method", a method developed by the artist as a means of communicating with her audience in silence, features in Lady Gaga's music videos. At the same time, the famous singer Lady Gaga and the rapper Jay-Z publicly supported Abramović on many occasions (Gibsone, "Lady Gaga and Jay-Z Help Marina Abramović reach Kickstarter Goal"). Abramović has noted that such collaborations, as the one she has developed with Lady Gaga, have a positive effect on performance art and draws attention to the new status of performance art as "alternative performance [which] has transitioned to the mass culture" ("Marina Abramović about Lady Gaga effect on her Career" 00:00:30). Crucially, performance art is becoming more interdisciplinary, incorporating elements from theatre, dance, music (even rap), and fashion.[118] Athey's latest performance, *Acephalous Monster*, which I mentioned above, brilliantly illustrates performance art's claim to

[117] For instance, Tino Seghal, who, until recently refused to document his work, sold the blueprint of his work *The Kiss* to MOMA, for $70,000. He forced them to agree however that it will be destroyed upon his death or disappearance from the art world (Baumgardner, "How Performance Art Entered the Mainstream"). Abramović also sells prints from her past works while videos of works by Rebecca Horn and Ana Mendieta, for example, were sold at really high prices.

[118] A few examples include: Alex Baczynski-Jenkins, whose work amalgamates interpretive dance, poetry and performance art, while he uses elements from video games and cartoons. Also, SUKA OFF, whose work can be described as live "dance painting". Furthermore, the famous rapper Jay Z has collaborated with Abramović for the production of his 2013 video "Picasso Baby" in exchange for a large donation to her institute.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

interdisciplinarity in adopting the form of a more conventional theatre performance. Another example constitutes Franko B's collaboration with the jewellery designer and metalsmith Mayu Iwakami.

A central role in many recent works seems to be held by technology and the post-human body.[119] In Abramović's *Five Stages of Maya Dance* (2018), for example, the artist's physical presence is completely absent, and the artist's body is replaced by technological means. Hence, the viewers, instead of directly interacting with Abramović, walk among the artist's "five alabaster self-portraits that mix light, sculpture, and performance. As the viewer moves around them, the artist's figure decomposes, morphing into carved landscapes" (Lucchinetti, "Marina Abramović Today"). Likewise, in her recent work, *The Life*, which took place for the first time in 2019, Mixed Reality (a form of virtual reality) completely takes over. For the purposes of this work, the viewer is required to wear VR goggles in order to interact with the artist's figure, who, once again, is not physically present at the place of the performance.

Another prevailing trend in the field of performance art is more and more artists' involvement with biotechnology.[120] Due to this growing interest, a new type of art space has emerged: the art laboratories, which, as mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, have residency programmes for artists who wish to explore the practice of bio art or use biotechnology in their work. However, as I have mentioned in the previous chapter, several debates are currently taking place, within and outside the scientific community, with regard to the role of the physical/natural body and the possible implications that its modification may cause. I will not elaborate further on the developments mentioned above though since they are beyond the scope of enquiry of this thesis. At this moment, I believe, performance art is still in a transitional phase, so it is difficult to offer a single theoretical lens through which its future might be predicted or evaluated.

Whatever this future may be and as the live elements of performance art are gradually diminishing, it is clear, as Jones has argued, that more attention needs to be

[119] See Ann Hirsch's *Scandalishious* or *Playground*, which features in her "YouTube" account or in internet chatrooms, respectively. Also, STELARC, whose work, as seen in Chapter 6, depends on technology.

[120] Apart from ORLAN and Stelarc, whose work I have already discussed in this thesis, Kira O Reilly, for example, has extensively worked with biotechnology, such as tissue culturing and engineering, as part of her residency with SymbioticA for the project *Marsysus – Running out of Skin*, during which the artist was involved in many experiments "in order to challenge the idea of "a coherent or fixed 'self'" (O' Reilly "Marsyas – Besides Myself").

KAROLINA LAMPROU

paid to the relationship between the "live and the archival" aspects of performance art, aspects which, she insists, are "not opposites" (Jones, "Performative Afterlife" 11). The documentation of a performance and its "relics", along with some explanation on the documentation itself, provide "a historical version of what had been a live event" (Jones, "Performative Afterlife" 16). At the same time, focusing on the archival means will permit us to "explore the relationship between the live, performing body and these different registers of photographic representation" (Jones, "Performative Afterlife" 16). While the viewer of a live performance is addressed differently than the viewer of non-live art, yet, the documentation of a performance may have a strong impact on the individual. Drawing on Sophia Hao's project "Of Other Spaces: Where Does the Gesture Become Event?", Jones notes that currently archives are put "in active proximity with performing bodies as well as scholars addressing both levels of the performative" ("Performative Afterlife" 15). This is an interesting development in performance art, which many artists, curators, and scholars seem to be exploring further. This is also what has allowed me to write this thesis. On some occasions, I was able to witness the performances I have discussed live, while for most works, I have used the available documentation of the performances in relation to the responses and reactions they ignited. It is my hope that this thesis, and its theoretical analysis of the dynamics of performance art, is a testimony to the undeniable importance of this art form, in terms of both its aesthetic and ethico-political goals. For this reason, I strongly believe that this art form will continue to develop, and I intend to closely observe and follow its new shifts.

KAROLINA LAMPROU

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