

Contemporary Aesthetics (Journal Archive)

Volume 10 *Volume 10 (2012)*

Article 12

2012

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Available at: https://digitalcommons.risd.edu/liberalarts_contempaesthetics/vol10/iss1/12

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Flesh as Communication -- Body Art and Body Theory

Falk Heinrich

Abstract

On the last pages of *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty investigates "the bond between flesh and idea, and the internal armature which [it] manifests and which it conceals."

Flesh and idea are intertwined in that the body reflects on itself in the act of perception and, one could add, action. A correlative bond lies in communication theory as the operational difference between ego and alter-ego. This article investigates the non-semiotic intertwining of 'flesh' in art perception and theory based on communication theory in performance art (body art). The thesis is that 'flesh' in performance art is presented as absolute presence, but flesh can only be perceived through a reflective bearing.

Key Words

body art, flesh, performativity, presence, *theoria*

1. Introduction

In 2004, Marina Abramovic enacted seven canonized 'body art' pieces at the Guggenheim Museum in New York. Each piece had its own night and was continuously re-enacted throughout a seven-hour time period. On the sixth evening (other pieces are described below), she re-enacted her own well-known performance *Lips of Thomas* (1975): she appeared nude on stage, sat down on a chair in front of a little table covered with a white cloth, and turned on a metronome. She then ate honey from a glass for ten minutes, drank a bottle of wine, and scratched a five-pointed star on her stomach with a razor.

After, she donned a military cap with a red star and listened to a sad Russian folk song. She removed her military boots and lay down on an ice cross under a heat lamp. After five minutes, she began whipping herself. She repeated this ritual throughout the seven hours.

Re-enacting an artistic event that had occurred over 30 years ago gave the performance a paradoxical status. On the one hand, we assume that the spectators knew the underlying art historical dimensions, which distanced them as audience and wrapped their experience in documentary papers. On the other hand, the performances elicited the same affective reactions as 30 years ago. Flogging herself and scratching open her own flesh provoke emotional reactions, including physical disgust and revulsion. Are those only two different modes of art (per)reception that incidentally coincide in this particular event, or does the apparent simultaneity of those modes reveal an intrinsic connection? What happens to our perception of staged bleeding flesh when we know that it forms part of a repeated and scripted action? What happens to the performer's perception of pain while recalling it?

2. Flesh in body art and art theory

Abramovic's body art pieces form part of a sub-genre of performance art. Despite Goldberg's very broad definition,^[1]

performance art contains some identifiable traits.

Performance art appeared in the 60's, reacting to the prevailing representation paradigm of visual and performative art (*i.e.*, theatre). Body art has evaded representation by focusing on the materiality of the performers' bodies and presenting concrete life actions. In the wake of body art, theorists began writing on the significance and meaning of the concrete body that was not a reference bearer but was 'itself.'

A large body of texts exists on the significance of the materiality of the body in performance art, many highlighting the body as the phenomenal basis and pure existence.

Fischer-Lichte uses the term "phenomenal being."^[2]

Contrary to the concept of embodiment, where the body is transformed into semiotic gestures, performance art (and its artistic predecessors within theatre, like directors as Meyerhold, Artaud, and Grotowsky) stages the body as materiality, which is semiotically *unverfügbar*.^[3] The staged body-ness is a continuous 'becoming'.

This is manifest in the self-mutilation performances of Abramovic, Burden, and Pane, among others. The body is here revealed as flesh in its material and affective vulnerability. The term 'flesh' discloses the inside, the material machine that generates various internal and external motions.

Abramovic's flesh appears in the five-pointed star carvings, and her whip seems to want to remove the skin from her flesh. The flesh appears here as ultimate presence and reality that cannot be transcended. In the presence of flesh, the audience's inclination to decipher and contextualize flesh as representation seems to cease. The presentation of flesh (and the audience's perception of it) is recursive in that it points to itself trying to counteract the audience's hermeneutical proclivity. Here, the semiotic distinction between subject and object and between performer and recipient seems to collapse into pure presence of existence. Fischer-Lichte reserves the German term "Leib," which etymologically derives from "life" connoting a tangible borderline between life and death, willfulness and passivity, awareness and unconsciousness. It is precisely in these experienced differences that body art also gains multiple meanings, which can then be conceptualized and communicated.

As Lakoff and Johnson write in their Preface to *Philosophy in the Flesh*, they are indebted to Merleau-Ponty's usage of the term 'flesh.' "He [Merleau-Ponty] used the word flesh for our primordial embodied experience and sought to focus the attention of philosophy on what he called "the flesh of the world, the world as we feel it by living in it."^[4] Any theoretical account of flesh is indebted to Merleau-Ponty, who put the situated body and living flesh in a primordial but decisive relationship to surrounding spatial objects in the center of philosophical attention. The situated flesh and "the flesh of the world" are seen as "the sensible," which is an integrated perception field, "an anonymity innate to myself."

In Merleau-Ponty's account, *noema* and *noesis* are based upon this field, which comprises embedded objects and perceiver sensibility. It is a field that "... is much more than the correlative of my vision, such that it imposes my vision upon me as a continuation of its own sovereign existence."

The perceiving body possesses "an art of interrogating the sensible according to its own wishes, an inspired exegesis."^[5]

Ostensibly, the term 'flesh' cannot escape a peculiar immediacy: it instantly provokes a sensory and corporeal reaction. Horror movies make abundant use of bleeding, cut, deformed, and otherwise opened flesh. When art analysis and theory refer to flesh (*e.g.*, when analyzing performance works dealing with living body and flesh as artistic materials), it then appears not only as a sensuous denotation of living material but also as a kind of language frontier. Most theoretical approaches employ a more indirect notion of body. The term flesh does not convey an art experience but rather the ineffability of art experience. Flesh becomes a token for a basic sensory incommunicability (*e.g.* in Amy Sprinkler's feminist porn shows), where male theory seems to meet female materiality and energy. Flesh connotes "the totally direct transmission of energy."^[6] The term flesh appears to exhibit that which cannot be conceptualized by art theory; it indicates a blind spot in theory – and art. It appears as the very kernel of performativity.

Dieter Mersch, in his article "*Das Ereignis als Setzung*" describes this aspect as *die Differenz in der Differenz* and *die 'Spur' ohne Spur*.^[7] Here, the difference of the difference is the grounding principle of semiotic difference, the mediality of sign proper in which the semiotic difference between referent and referred collapses. In "*Paradoxien der Verkörperung*," he describes this as paradoxes (defining paradox as something irresolvable).^[8] He distinguishes between the paradoxes of mediality and performance. The paradox of mediality describes the materiality of signs as an unreferenceable rest, an existence that evades the referential distinction of semiosis. The paradox of performance uncovers an "uncontrollable rest" (*'Unverfügbarkeit'*, Mersch) in semiotic process. An intentional (or 'staged') sign operations event always contains a certain elusiveness. Mersch seeks the resurrection of materiality and performance as semiotic 'existence.'

Nevertheless, the paradoxes of embodiment in art can also be understood as a point of origin for both art practice and theory. All artistic action originates in the living flesh. But the flesh is also a material on which societal structures and values are imprinted. In Cristina Demaria's account, the body in performance art is always a written body, "that is a ... passage and transformation of sense and sensation into and through the flesh of the body." The body appears as discourse operated by the flesh, and "they produce their own level of significance."^[9] Art theory formation begins and ends with and in the living flesh.

This approach differs from both the semiotic and phenomenological traditions. This paper questions whether the communication process between the performer and spectator, between ego and alter, and its internalization as ego and alter ego could be seen as a theoretical model that can explain the duplicity of flesh as a locus for action and sensation on the one hand and as a point of departure for art theory on the other. Merleau-Ponty underlines the importance of intersubjectivity as the foundational practice of communication, where word and idea depend on each other.^[10] On the last pages of *Visible and the Invisible*, he investigates "the bond between flesh and idea, and the internal armature which [it] manifests and which it

conceals.”^[11] Flesh and idea are intertwined when the body reflects on itself in the simultaneous act of perception and communication as seeing the seen and seeing seeing.

Finally, even though this paper uses Marina Abramovic's performance, the re-enactment of different canonical 'body art' pieces mentioned above, as empirical subject, the paper does not analyze the aesthetics and possible meanings of her performance. The article traces the significance of flesh seen as materiality, performance, and concept.

3. Communication as differentiating observer positions

The decision to base these investigations on communication theory (art communication) necessitates accounting for two different participants in an art communication: the sender (artist) and receiver (audience). In body art/performance art, the artist is often also the performer, who utters. In the above case, Abramovic is both the artist who created the performance's concept and script, and the one who enacts it on stage. In the other pieces she enacted during *7 Easy Pieces*, she is primarily the performer and secondarily the conceptual artist because she took and re-enacted canonical body art pieces. Her re-enactment events unfold in the middle of the Guggenheim Museum on a white, round, elevated stage (which was slightly modified for each re-enacted piece). The height and color differences between the stage and audience space separate the audience from the stage, whereas the historic events often tried to blur this distinction.

This article thus operates methodologically with two different observer positions. The first observer position designates the perspective of the performing part. The performer is not seen as a human subject but rather as the ideal location for the immediate sensory experience of the staged action. The performer is the first to experience the actions of and on her own flesh; she directly experiences the pain, joy, or other emotions caused by the treated flesh. However, the spectator can also occupy this position, as I argue below. The spectator, conversely, is conceived as the ideal recipient position. At the outset, the spectator, separated from the stage, receives and contemplates the performer's actions hermeneutically. The performer and his/her sensory experiences thus appear as signs for the audience. This position is the culturally determined methodological starting point of any analysis and theory formation. The theorist is the spectator behind the spectator, observing his/her own observations as audience. To disentangle the participating persons and their functions, this paper uses anthropologist Alfred Gell's terminology.

In his book *Art and Agency*, Gell designates the positions of performer and recipient as "agent" and "patient," respectively.^[12] The agent is the initiating part and the patient is the receiving, passive part. A Western understanding of art presupposes the correlation between agent and artist on the one side and between patient and spectator on the other. These need not be correlative determinants. Gell's theory is a communication theory, where art is a medium for energy transferences. He identifies four constituents in this process (found in almost every communication model): artist, recipient, index, and prototype. The concepts of artist and recipient do not need further

explanation. The index is the material artwork: "material entities which motivate abductive inferences, cognitive interpretation,"[\[13\]](#) showing the artwork as sign. The prototype is the represented object, the referenced. Gell's ingenious move is attributing patient and agent to every constituent of an art process. The prototype can also be an agent, when emperors demand that an artist paint their portraits or in realism in general, or in idolatry and magic, where the prototype controls the recipient through the index. When the recipient is the agent in relation to the artist, then the recipient has power over the prototype, which depicts and connects to another person (vult sorcery).

Gell's conceptualization transcends our common hermeneutical understanding of semiosis and adds a palpable and powerful power transference. This is not the place to refer to Gell's anthropological and psychological explanations of these 'magical' transfers. His model is interesting because it renders plausible the shifting attributes of participating persons and constituents in art communication. Art processes are not simple content transmissions from sender to receiver, but they are often cumulative processes with reciprocal interferences.

Fischer-Lichte extensively elaborates on this in her book *Ästhetik des Performativen*, claiming that the poetics of performance art disclose and operationalize this reciprocity.

Performance art ascribes a more decisive part to the audience in the unfolding of the performance.

In Abramovic's body art performances, the artist, index, and prototype are merged into one constituent of the communication process. She is the artist, as she devised the concept and dramaturgy of the event. Furthermore, she is the performer on stage, thus making her the index, which refers to herself as an individual person because she is not playing a dramatic role. Gell's three components distinguish between the artist, performing person and her experience of the actions (and the act), but also the audience's experience levels during Abramovic's actions and act. Some re-enactments posit the audience in an active performing position, changing the values of their original attributes (from patient to agent), whereas Abramovic becomes the 'patient' performer.

That she presented re-enactments (including those of her own piece, *Lips of Thomas*) emphasizes the pieces' constructed-ness and scripted-ness. Besides being fleshy performances inflicting inescapable impressions and affections on the audience, they are also documentaries exposing what is already done, the script behind the event and its repeatability.

Re-enactments of body art pieces accentuate the simultaneity and paradoxicality of immediacy and reference. This correlates with the double observer positions explained above.

Niklas Luhmann asserts that art operates with the difference between perception and communication, or art communicates perception.[\[14\]](#) One can discuss the almost normative absoluteness of Luhmann's abstract thesis, but it applies to the theoretical discussion surrounding body art performances (e.g., Fischer-Lichte's term "between and betwixt").[\[15\]](#)

Luhmann's concept shows that the difference between communication and perception is a simultaneity (identity) that cannot be captured. 'Difference' means that people can only catch sight of one or the other side of a whole.[\[16\]](#) Both sides

are nevertheless indissolubly linked.

In this paper, this identity is the flesh presented by the performer and perceived by the audience. The working hypothesis is that the performer's fleshness can only flourish as a staged presence in a theoretical movement that both audience and performer execute or, more accurately, in a 'theoretical' intake of each other's different observer positions.

Prior to elaborating and exemplifying this thesis, let me describe the four other re-enactments of *7 Easy Pieces* presented by Abramovic as concrete cases for these reflections.

4. The enactment of *7 Easy Pieces*

The first piece was Bruce Nauman's *Body Pressure* (1974). Abramovic pressed her body in 5-minute intervals against a glass plate, placed upon a small circular stage in the middle of the Guggenheim Museum, during which Nauman's original conceptual description^[17] was played as a voice-over. In this, the performer was asked to squeeze her entire body against a wall - even through the wall, while focusing on the pain in her muscles and bones, on breathing and sweat production.

The next day, she performed Vito Acconci's *Seed Bed* (1975), which consisted in its original version, of the artist, concealed under the gallery floor, masturbating while the audience visited the gallery. The artist's moaning could be heard through loudspeakers. Abramovic masturbated under the floor of a small stage on which the spectators stood and walked.

Her electronically enhanced voice, her panting, and even her sexual fantasies could be heard throughout the museum.

The following day she re-enacted Varie Export's *Action Pants, Genital Panic* (1969). For seven hours she sat in a chair with a machine gun in her hand, wearing a leather jacket and black jeans, which, however, lacked a crotch. The audience could see her genitals and pubic hair. During this time, Abramovic held direct eye contact with the spectators, trying to maintain and dominate their gaze and not let them look at her genitals.

For most spectators, it was a game of curious voyeurism, erotic reward, and symbolic punishment.

On the fourth day, Abramovic laid herself upon an iron bed (without a mattress) above several lit candles. The distance between her and the flames was approximately 10 centimeters. She wailed once in a while, probably due to the heat. She even replaced the candles when they burned down. This re-enacted Gina Panes' *The Conditioning, first action of Self-Portrait(s)* (1973).

5. Theoria

Art theory and theory formation belong not only to the academic world. Theories are conceptual hypostatizations and structural constructs (*e.g.*, categorizations as art forms, genres, or expressions), or sensory ideas about the object and event at hand. There is no 'immediate' meaning-producing sensation of artworks, even if Fischer-Lichte conjures up this immediacy (allegedly found only in performative art) by proposing redundant expressions like *sie* [Abramovic's action]

vollzogen genau das, was sie bedeuteten.[18] Fischer-Lichte repeatedly underlines that the perception of performance actions cannot be transferred to semiotic interpretation but instead elicits a *Verzauberung*[19] (enchantment) of the action *per se*. Every art perception begins with sense perceptions; yet especially in art, the presented appears only in a theoretical light.

According to the Western phenomenological tradition, the source of all theories is in the empirical, perceived world. In *Wahrheit und Methode*, Gadamer traces the emergence of theory by returning to the Greek concept of *theoria*. [20] *Theoria* described the ancient man's participation in a festival for honoring the gods, [21] *i.e.*, the ability to purely contemplate the universe. Gadamer re-interprets *theoria* as participating engagement in art events – an engagement that is the foundation of any cognitive activity. *Theoria* is a meeting or practice where the participant opens and gives him/herself to the presented event. [22] This is not unlike Fischer-Lichte's elaboration of 'presence' as an energetic transmission of energies between the stage and auditorium. The intention and desire for direct interaction on pre-conscious levels between performer and spectator is an inherent part and pre-requisite of all stage arts. This is promoted or blurred, depending on style and historical context.

From a communication perspective, the perception of the acting performer is not the same as the performer's own sensory experience. The spectator can experience similar sensations as the performer (empathy), but only via *theoria* (participation). Theory and therefore empathy are mediating processes, however 'natural' they may be. Mediation here means an act of conscious interference between the perceiver (subject) and another external entity, here another person.

Those feeling empathy normally know that the object of their feeling is not themselves, though it is primarily their own feeling and not the other's. The discovery of mirror neurons (and the importance of various chemicals as affect transmitters between people sharing the same physical context), do not change this fact. A mirror neuron is an important scientific cornerstone in 'theory of mind': "an understanding of others in terms of goals, intentions and perhaps desires." [23] The psychological account of higher mammals' capabilities to infer others' goals and intentions is based on neuro-physiological data. Nevertheless, human inference must be considered an aspect of communication, in that the ego attributes states, goals, and even beliefs to alter, thereby constructing alter-ego. This transference necessitates a level of meta-representation, which the theory of mind for children over five years old entails. [24]

Constructing a theory of mind and representation meta-levels is already a theory, as the term indicates. Especially in performance settings, which overtly deal with positioning performers (sender) and spectators (receivers), empathy is already a communication act and thus (at least) proto-theoretical reflection. Gadamer's rediscovery of the ancient *theoria*, underpinned by the theory of mind, enfolds a double movement: distances establishing and minimizing movement. This correlates with Luhmann's distinction between perception (as the physiological and

phenomenological aspects of the art-experiencing person) and communication (as interpretation of information and messages). In (performance) art, this constant observation shift between communication and perception is clearly based on the ability to form meta-representations of the perceived.

The performer can also participate in theory and concept formation, but only by adopting a reflexive observer position, either before, after, or even during the performative act. "Before" and "after" offer no explanatory problem because time supports the necessary theoretical distance. This "meanwhile" appears to be problematic because our culturally determined understanding of consciousness allows only one mode of consciousness at a time (*i.e.*, one cannot experience pain while reflecting on the same pain). Nonetheless, this paradoxical state unfolds on and in front of a performance stage.

Neuroscientist M. Turner speaks of "compression."^[25] Compression is a cognitive operation in which two divergent (re-)presentations of an object are compressed or "blended" into one. One of Turner's examples is Duchamp's *Nu descendant un escalier* (1912), depicting a woman in different temporal states going down a staircase. The figures are identifiable because they are commensurable with the picture of a woman as a conceptual frame. This "generic space" allows compressing divergent expressions into one space. Abramovic's body art performances find the audiences in the middle of other divergent expressions (or impressions): first, the re-living of the performer's pain and exposure demanding action and, secondly, the contemplative attitude towards stage occurrences demanding reflection and interpretation. The performer's bleeding body and exposed flesh and the audience's pacified gaze are compressed into one "object," according to the conceptual spaces of performance and theater stages, yielding a situation on the verge of collapse. The following describes this paradoxical state in communication terms seen from two participating perspectives: the spectator and performer.

6. Spectator suspension

The five summarized works described above are all canonical performance art pieces, a concept that those original performances helped lift to a genre name. Performance art arose particularly from the visual art environment and simultaneously tried to brush off any theatrical, representational conventions. Performance art is often seen as an attempt to present an authentic, non-referential event because actions have their own intrinsic meanings within the given context. Allan Kaprow used the term "Happening." Presence is created by drawing spectators into a concrete palpable world, a world not made up of metaphors and metonyms. The exhibition of human beings as operating organisms comprised of actions involving skin, flesh, and blood was a strategy found in body art, as seen in Abramovic's re-enactments: (Nauman) Abramovic's body, pushing against a glass plate, cuts off all sign-based significances but the mere pushing; (Pine) the candles' heat underneath the iron bed produces meat-smelling pain; (Acconci) Abramovic's orgasmic sound contractions which, by definition, can only be actual,

(Export) an openly displayed living vagina; and Abramovic's cutting the flesh through her protective skin and the hurting whip that ruptures all significance. There is no intelligible explanation for these acts; they are not metaphors, but they create situations that simultaneously shroud and repel the audience by her bodily actions' exposed "weirdness" (referential rupture). How can this paradoxical simultaneity be explained?

These performances can hardly be "observed" in a distanced manner; they challenge the audience to respond physically by the arousal of some comparable pain, disgust, or embarrassment. Nevertheless, these sentiments can only be called imaginary, though they are real. It is not the spectator flesh that is being sliced, but it might feel that way. Through the performer's repeated rituals, her seven-hour recurring orgasms, her seven-hour bodily pressure against the glass, and her seven-hour open crotch, an insistence unfolds towards the spectators. The spectators should be drawn entirely into the performer body's intimate sphere, into blood's red smell, into sweat and anxiety's touch, to the pure physiological actuality in a Nietzschean-Dionysian primal experience[26] as a struggle against the accursed separation between stage and floor against which so many theatrical and performance initiatives have rightly fought.

However, this conceptual separation is the *sine qua non* of the spectators' privileged sensation and perception of the performing flesh. If the distinction were not there, the audience would not have been slow in stopping the deranged person (performer). The intimate meeting (and perhaps even unification) with the performer paradoxically happens because of the conceptual stage-audience separation. The stage convention keeps the audience in a suspended state, where flesh and action become untouchable *noemata* right before their eyes. The perceived object becomes an index. The connection between index and prototype occurs via abductive inferences.[27] Abramovic's body and flesh, experienced as indexes, refer to a prototype. The scenic framing of the performer's body's actions automatically leads to an index formation, which is nothing more than a vector pointing to a generalized prototype: a vulnerable, suffering, and self-exposing body. The prototype is the performer herself. The spectator's suspension creates space for a recursive feedback of the index via the prototype to Abramovic's body's singular actions. The prototype and performer's singular body thus overlap in an intended infinite regress, a kind of indeterminacy where communication points to sensation and vice versa.

This is obvious in *Seed Beds*: Abramovic's voice, her panting and uttered fantasies that accompanied her seven-hour masturbation performance must be seen as both sensual, spontaneous eruption and communicative messages. The spectator is thrown from one river bank to the other: at one moment, trying to understand the conceptual dimensions of this re-enacted historical performance; at another, forced into a voyeuristic witnessing of very personal and intimate actions. Her performance of Naumann's piece, *Body Pressure*, openly places itself between two chairs. The performance script displayed as a voice-over both supports and contrasts the actual performance, as it creates a theoretical space of

comprehension and interpretation. Communication through words contrasts with the described action; one referring to the other.

The index, prototype, and the spectator's own body also coincide in another infinite regress. The index, Abramovic's specific body, refers to a prototype, which contains a generic body and pains. In most of Abramovic's re-enactments, her specific body is also a human body stripped of its individual characteristics. Her body actions as index produce general body and pain. Through the index, the audience can relate to the prototype, which now collapses with them. Only through a series of abductions can the spectator have a sensory intimacy with the presented performer's flesh. In the arts, empathy and identification only occur through creating a generic prototype. Expressed differently, the distinction between stage and floor inhibits the spectators' 'natural' (which is also a social-culturally determined) reaction, forcing an act of reflective and participatory sublimation. These reflections come in many forms (as personal imaginations, thoughts, remembering, and associations), but they are always short-circuited by the concreteness of the exhibited flesh.

Abramovic's orgasms in *Seed Beds* become floating prototypes, which give the spectator room for his/her participation in and reaction to her fleshy contractions. Abramovic's individuality is simultaneously accentuated and abolished. Displayed sexuality, dissolute subjectivity, create a prototypical platform for involvement. In what manner each audience member physically reacts to the unambiguous sounds depends on each individual, on specific genders and dispositions. Supposedly, a heterosexual man reacts differently from a woman. Nevertheless, it is always a physical reaction thrown into a shared reflective space. In *Action Pants*, *Genital Panic*, the spectators are given the time and freedom to observe the exhibited singular crotch, which immediately becomes a prototypical crotch, which could be the spectator's own (men also included). Creating prototypes and objectifications of Abramovic's crotch are coupled with the performer's urgent and personal look that cannot be objectified, as it is directed towards each spectator. Most spectators turn their eyes away from the crotch and performer. The suspension is broken, yet performance art (like all art) demands participating observation, which *Action Pants* unfolds in a play of invitation and rejection, voyeurism (looking at) and reflection (being looked at).

7. Performer suspension

How can the performer Abramovic press her body against a glass plate for seven hours, interrupted only by small breaks?

How can she repeat her own ritual *Lips of Thomas* for seven hours? How can she cut in the same wound again and again?

How can she sustain seven hours of martyrdom of hot flesh above many candles?

Performativity researcher and performance director Richard Schechner sees the notions of performance and performativity as both a connecting concept and a more fundamental trait of many cultural expressions and events. Performance art is only one specific instantiation. He finds the generic characteristics in indigenous rituals. One characteristic of rituals is the

transformation of the everydayness into the 'extraordinary.' A room and time are demarcated and separated from life's daily pace. Van Gennep and Victor Turner describe this as liminality.[28] A space-time is reserved for a meticulously planned and prepared event. The rituals' contents are unimportant here (they are described elsewhere), but the physical actions and experienced intimacy (and maybe even the presence of gods and deities) of a ritual that are brought about by 'always already' described actions is significant.

Though (in the West) the ritual is often associated with orgasmic trance states[29] that transcend rationality, the ritual's dramaturgy is always clearly defined. All participants, both audience and performers (who often swap roles during the ritual) follow a given script that describes the essential elements of the performed act. In the scripts, one finds the ritual's conceptual dimension (*e.g.*, its social purposes and intentions). The script has at least three functions. It is first a structural dimension that gives the ritual's participants a platform for understanding that allows the learning and remembering of the ritual's progression and execution. A structure arranges and links the performer and audience's experiences to manageable meaningful units. Second, the script also has a documentary feature: it ensures the communicability of the experience made. Third, the script is a rigid recipe that authorizes an existing societal power structure, but it also opens spaces for improvisation and cultural innovation.[30]

Abramovic straightforwardly exhibits the script of her re-enactments. When using other artists' works, she must follow the script, which consists of the documentation of long-since vanished staged events. There is room for changes and modification. A new exhibition space and more than 40 years of art development demand new staging aesthetics.

Nevertheless, the scripts (concept) have been laid down decades ago in the first (and usually the only) enactment of these performance pieces. It is the scripts that re-emerge as and operate in the moment of Abramovic's re-enactments.

Henry Flynt said in 1961 that concept art must be seen as language and thus communication. [31] Since Duchamp, he asserts, art must be understood as concept art.

In her book *Homo Aestheticus*, Ellen Dissanayake describes the ritual as 'dromena,' borrowed from Greek (and the anthropologist Jane Ellen Harrison), meaning 'things done.' [32] This concept first indicates a temporal distance that allows a distanced observation in an interpretive review.

The term also indicates that this observational distance is in the ritual's execution. The ritual's boundary, its extraordinary space-time, becomes part of the ritual itself and is not just a frame condition. There are potentially two simultaneous observation levels. The first observational level is the performer's being-in-action, where she experiences her body and its actions, her pain and orgasms, her carving in her own flesh. At the second level, the performer observes these sensations from the internalized spectator position. The script now performs the actions. This is, however, not a stepping out from the stage presence and staged body, but it instead belongs to the intimacy of the performed actions.[33] The body still feels pain, but it is now observed as the pain of the

performer because she (Abramovic) is exempt from having to act. The script acts; the body has become an exhibited but sentient machine that can enact the script without interference by Abramovic, the private person. The subtle difference between the artist (Abramovic), the acting performer (index) and the prototype (the actions performed) can explain the simultaneity of (painful) sensation and reflection as multiple observations belonging to different systems. The script elevates the pain by suspending an otherwise reasonable reaction to it: candlelit heat on the back, the clitoris's painful sensitivity, the whip and razor's permeation of protective skin are now forced to linger in a suspended space.

But where is this written and what is written? And who reads?

The trivial answer is that the performer writes on her own body, scratching her own flesh. The "scriptuality" of the performance writes on sense perception. The artist and audience "read" the actions that the performer (the script) performs. The spectator's suspension from reaction-effectuating mechanisms allows for a spirit of affection and participation in Abramovic's body rituals, as described above. The performer carries out a similar recursive movement but in the reverse direction.

The performative suspension of "natural" pain opens a space for internal associations and interpretations. This scriptuality does not prompt a topical reading of the performative act's metaphoric content (if any). Associations are generated as doublings between different hierarchically structured levels of consciousness. Per Aage Brandt uses a bottom-up cognition model, where discrete sensory data (primary inputs) are synthesized and compressed into object formations on higher neurological levels. Brandt describes this as 'bonding.'[\[34\]](#) A higher level expresses lower-level sensory data through abstracting categorial attributions or a synthesizing of different data types, *i.e.*, construing an object's perception by synthesizing descriptions of various sensory inputs (color, texture, or lines). These "objects" are merged with the subject's proprioceptions (how it feels at a given moment) and become situational experiences. Definitive object, concepts, and thoughts are finally construed on higher neurological levels. This neurological process of abstraction is usually purpose-led (intentional), and it triggers specific actions or reactions in specific situations.

In most art and artistic performances, however, the performed actions are predetermined and their purpose is to be the object of aesthetic contemplation and/or involvement. Kant describes the aesthetic judgments as a free play of our cognitive abilities.[\[35\]](#) Brandt (and before him others, *e.g.*, Masumi[\[36\]](#) and Deleuze[\[37\]](#)) speaks of excess, "an amount of surplus material"[\[38\]](#) on different levels that are normally uninterpreted and thus do not lead to cognitive descriptions. In aesthetic contexts, a data surplus leads to fluctuating conscious content (associations, feelings, memories). In Abramovic's performances, these ephemeral, flickering associations, memories, and emotions blend with physiological pain during a seven-hour cycle. The candlelight is weak but in the long run unbearable: heat can only be tolerated because manifold association chains encapsulate the pain. Everybody tries to make pain go away by thinking of something else.

Scarry explains that pain is an intentional state without an object.^[39] Pain is thus difficult to express through verbal language. The production of associations and imaginations fills this void. "Pain becomes an intentional state of imagination and imagination the intentional object of pain."^[40] While performing on stage, the associations paradoxically point to the sensed pain because the pain and flesh are exhibited.

Masturbation becomes a bodily enrollment in fantasies and imaginary situations. In these associational processes, the masturbator can become an external observer. But the thesis presented here contradicts neurological findings, which prove that, in the moment of real orgasm, many neuronal activities are deactivated.^[41] In a performance context, this could be interpreted as the annihilation of the performer's subjectivity in a divine moment of absolute presence, a kind of collapsing of Gell's distinction. The question is, though, how long can this state be sustained? In the course of a seven-hour performance, the answer is not for long. Paradoxically, these moments of absolute presence (like people in trance) are only experienceable for the observing audience, not for the performer, herself.

Anyone who has followed Naumann's instructions in *Body Pressure* knows that muscle rigidity does not prevent but rather encourages adopting an external observer position. The performer becomes an interpretive observer of his own actions. When Abramovic, re-enacting Valery Export's piece, looks into the spectator's eyes while displaying her own exposed genitals, she sees her own genitals in their faces and eyes. For her to tolerate this internalized image, she can do two things: she can get dominion over the audience's eyes and force the audience away, making the upper body with the machine gun a moral judge of the spectators' gaze, or she can take the spectators' observational position and create a "theoretical" distance by considering her own crotch an index and prototype. However, both strategies lead her back to her own crotch's immediate vulnerability and exhibition, just as the spectators are always led back to the singularity of the exhibited flesh. From there, a new cycle of differentiation between immediate perception and communication of intents and purposes starts. The performer's artistic participation in the staged actions is only possible through a scripted distancing from her flesh's immediacy. Gadamer's use of the term *theoria* contains both a distance creating sense and a forced sensory participation. In an art context, both aspects depend on each other.

8. Conclusion

The word 'flesh' has a peculiar concreteness after every typed instance. This concreteness is not tied to a specific body, Abramovic's body, but is instead an embodiment of the prototypical flesh. The exhibited flesh, the enacted and the enacting body's generic characteristic is its staged specificity. Even here on the computer screen, the word 'flesh' becomes a specific sensuous entity. Sakellaridou calls this the "somatics of the written word."^[42] A dinner steak, conversely, is comfortably general and yet tasty. The concept of flesh is one of the black holes in art theory. Flesh is part of many aesthetic theories (especially since Merleau-Ponty's usage of it). It can be written about, as this article suggests as the significance of

flesh in performance art, but despite or rather because of *theoria*, flesh remains synonymous with longing of performer, spectator, and writer after an absoluteness and inextricable presence, a presence that paradoxically is already there.

Therefore, the notion and experience of flesh is a post along the frontier, leading the distanced, contemplative observation (theory) back to the unfathomable object of observation in a recursive motion. This object is now both the performer and viewer's own fleshness.

For the performer, exposing her own flesh gives rise to an inverted theoretical movement. Through the performative script, she can loosen herself from her own flesh and be directed back to it. She writes the performative events simultaneously with and on her own body, but this writing leads her to an overflowing associational chain that never separates itself from the performer's body, as it is the foundation and theme of the performed excess. In this *theoria*-motion, she meets the spectator's prototype of her own flesh.

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Published on January 12, 2012.

Endnotes

[1] "Then as now, the definition of performance art is open ended. In my earlier book, I wrote that performance art actually defies precise or easy definition beyond the simple declaration that is it live art by artists, and this still holds, although each emerging performance artist, and each new writer on performance, inevitably expands the scope of that definition." (Roselee Goldberg 1998)

[2] Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen* (Frankfurt: Rowolt, 2004); Erika Fischer-Lichte, *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics* (London: Routledge, 2008).

[3] Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen* (Frankfurt: Rowolt, 2004).

[4] George Lakoff and Mark Johnson, *Philosophy in the Flesh* (New York: Basic Books, 1999).

Lakoff and Johnson's invaluable enterprise traces the origin of our cognitive capabilities from within our very concrete being-in-the-world. Their research is fuelled by neuro-scientific research paradigms taking the physiological and operational circuits of our brain as the inner kernel of cognition. In their account, the majority of our cognitive occurrences are

unconscious. They trace the relationship between language and the materiality and situatedness of the body by means of bodily-informed metaphors, which ultimately serve as transformation points from one ontological substratum to another.

[5] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York, London: Routledge, 1962).

[6] Duila Denegri, "Intervista con Marina Abramovic," Denegri, Duila et al. *Marina Abramovic: Performing Body* (Milan: Charta, 1998).

[7] Dieter Mersch, "Das Ereignis der Setzung," Fischer-Lichte, E. *Verkörperungen* (Tübingen, Basel: Francke Verlag, 2001).

[8] Dieter Mersch, "Paradoxien der Verkörperung" (www.momo-berlin.de).

[9] Cristina Demaria, "The Performative Body of Marina Abramovic: Rerelating (in) Time and Space," *European Journal of Women's Studies*, 11 (2004), 295.

[10] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*.

[11] Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible* (Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1969).

[12] Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989).

[13] Alfred Gell, *op. cit.*

[14] Niklas Luhmann, *Art as a social system* (Stanford, Calif.: Stanford University Press, 2000).

[15] Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen*.

[16] Niklas Luhmann, *Soziale Systeme* (Suhrkamp, Frankfurt a. M., 1984).

[17] "Press as much of the front surface of your body (palms in or out, left or right cheek) against the wall as possible. Press very hard and concentrate. Form an image of yourself (suppose you had just stepped forward) on the opposite side of the wall pressing back against the wall very hard. Press very hard and concentrate on the image pressing very hard (the image of pressing very hard). Press your front surface and back surface toward each other and begin to ignore or block the thickness of the wall (remove the wall). Think how various parts of your body press against the wall; which parts touch and which do not. Consider the parts of your back which press against the wall; press hard and feel how the front and back of your body press together. Concentrate on the tension in the muscles, pain where bones meet, fleshy deformations that occur under pressure; consider body hair, perspiration, odors (smells). This may become a very erotic exercise." (Naumann 1974)

[18] Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Ästhetik des Performativen*.

[19] Erika Fischer-Lichte, *op. cit.*

[20] Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Wahrheit und Methode* –

Grundzüge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik (Tübingen: Mohr, 1975).

[21] Nicolas Davey, "Art and theoria" in Macleod, Kathy; Holdridge, Lin, *Thinking through Art* (London: Routledge, 2006).

[22] Academic theorizations are further abstractions that discuss or consolidate perspectives and methodological filters of experience and interpretation, and thus power structures.

[23] Brian Boyd, *On the Origin of Stories* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2009).

[24] Brian Boyd, *op.cit.*

[25] Mark Turner, "The Art of Compression," Mark Turner, ed. *The Artful Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[26] Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (USA: Oxford University Press, 2000).

[27] Alfred Gell, *Art and Agency*.

[28] *limen* (Lat.): threshold

Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1982).

Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969).

[29] Some rituals work with trances, which contain an improvisational element as a surrender to and possession by an external power. These moments, however, are well prepared and initiated. In most rituals, the participants' individual consciousness is still intact. This is especially true of art performance shows. In none of Abramovic's re-enactments does she slip into an unconscious trance state.

[30] Victor Turner, *The Anthropology of Performance* (New York: PAJ Publications, 1987).

[31] Henry Flynt, "Concept Art," in Kristine Stiles; Peter Selz *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art – A Sourcebook of Artists' Writing* (Berkeley, London: University of California Press, 1994).

[32] Ellen Dissanayake, *Homo Aestheticus* (Seattle, London: University of Washington Press, 1995).

[33] It is the exact opposite of the naturalistic theatrical tradition, which requires the actor's identification with the played character in the fictional, yet specific, action-reaction-based situations.

[34] Per Aage Brandt, "Form and Meaning in Art," Mark Turner, *The Artful Mind* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006).

[35] Immanuel Kant, *Kritik der Urteilskraft* (Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1979).

[36] Brian Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual: Movement Affect Sensation* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2005).

[37] Gille Deleuze, *Pure Immanence: Essays on a life* (New

York: Zone Books, 2001).

[38] Per Aage Brandt, "Form and Meaning in Art."

[39] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985).

[40] Elaine Scarry, *op. cit.*

[41] Gert Holstege, cited in *New Science* Vol. 186, Issue 2505 (2005).

[42] Elizabeth Sakellaridou, "Millennial Artaud: Rethinking Cruelty and Representation," Effie Yiannopoulou; Katerina Kitsi-Mitakou, Zoe Detsi-Diamanti, *The Flesh Made Text Made Flesh* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2007).