

(Un)Disciplined Bodies: Ascetic Transformation in

Performance Art

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## **ABSTRACT**

### **(Un)Disciplined Bodies: Ascetic Transformation in Performance Art**

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This dissertation investigates different modalities of self-transformation enacted in ritualistic performance art by the examination of the work of three contemporary performance artists – Marina Abramović, Linda Montano and Ron Athey. Drawing on theoretical models of ritual, in particular the model of ascetic ritual developed in the works of Gavin Flood and Richard Valantasis, Georges Bataille’s theory of sacrifice, concepts of wounded healing by Laurence J. Kirmayer and Jess Groesbeck, and recent studies of ascetic self-injury in psychiatry and psychoanalysis, I argue that ritualistic performance provides a useful model of the therapy of the body that undermines rigid models of the individual self. Ritualistic performance employs a variety of methods of re-patterning of the dominant standard of individuality and formation of alternative model of the body associated with the ascetic self. In view of significance of the transcendence of the body in the work of these artists I employ a theory of “transformation” to reflect upon performative methodology developed in the artworks of Abramović, Montano, and Athey.

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**DEDICATION:**

For my parents, Nina and Anatolyi

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## Introduction

We may no longer be able to believe in the revolutionary power of extreme art, but we can recognize a need for contact and emotional intensity in a time of distress, frustration, and despair.<sup>1</sup>

Marla Carlson

In one of my performances, *Literacy* (2010), I wash the feet of my spectators while reciting from memory letters I had written to my family and friends since leaving Russia in 2006. I speak only in Russian. I teach my audience some Russian words while washing their feet; we laugh, I sing songs, and I pray. People file onto stage one by one and I can feel their tension and discomfort at exposing their feet to a stranger who also speaks a language they cannot understand. They all appear somehow awkward and squirm on the chair uncomfortably waiting for their part to be over.

The audience is always dead silent. This time suddenly I hear sobs and sounds of someone crying. I continue washing the feet of my spectator, making jokes as the sounds in the hall become louder and louder, until I can hear a woman crying at the top of her lungs. I finish with my “client” and invite the crying woman on stage. She is middle-aged with beautiful black hair and soft facial features. She sits on the chair for a moment, but then immediately gets up. She makes me stand up from the floor and insists on me sitting on the chair. I sit down. All this time, she never stops crying. I can see her tears falling down on the floor. She takes my bare foot and splashes some water on it. She starts speaking to me, but I cannot understand a word. I cannot recognise the language she speaks. Chinese? Korean? Tibetan? She washes my feet and I feel how my heart sinks in my chest. My mind goes completely blank and I feel suspended in-between two worlds: the controlled world of my performative scenario and the incredible,

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<sup>1</sup> Marla Carlson, *Performing Bodies in Pain, Medieval and Post-Modern Martyrs, Mystics and Artists* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2010), p. 86

disarming, powerful sincerity of the person at my feet. The truth? I feel I am not ready for this level of intimacy. I am not ready to open up, to cry, to reach towards the person at my feet. I sit on the chair, desperately trying to break through my performative identity; the idea of me being an artist, a scholar, an immigrant, of me being looked at, of me being expected to do something. I understand that the only way for me to meet my spectator at the same level of emotional sincerity is to surrender, though I am unsure what it means to surrender. I was never sure. But the moment she looks up at me, I feel completely shattered: disoriented and humbled by her reddened eyes full of tears. I feel. Her. Myself. People in the hall. The solitude. The togetherness. The pain of reaching out. The burning desire to be understood. The sweetness of self-loss.

This experience has been transformative to my understanding of performance art as a practice able to affect the artist and spectators on a profound emotional and intellectual level, which cannot always be fully understood or controlled. Reconstructing Christian narratives of humility, particularly the Biblical story of Christ washing the feet of his disciples, in *Literacy*, I couldn't predict the emotional resonance it would produce in myself and in my audience. For me, the symbolic meaning of this gesture was defined by an attempt to connect with spectators on a level more profound than the everyday encounter between two strangers, which usually results at most in a brief, semiconscious exchange of gazes. I was interested in introducing the personal, the intimate aspects of ritual to the audience, exploring the possibilities of sensual communication through touch, smell and sound. But this work revealed much wider implications: the devotional and religious aspects of contemporary performance art.

Exploring religious ritual in my artistic practice, I faced an interesting phenomenon. The audience's reaction to the ritualistic set up of my works often mirrored the devotional

understanding of ritual as a practice of connecting to realms higher than the individual self, while the space of the performance was understood as the realm of unconditional understanding, support, and emotional healing. The spectators recognised the ritualistic settings as an invitation for profound emotional experiences of personal sentiments related to trauma, intimacy, fear, desire, grief, longing and compassion and often went through the process of emotional self-transformation, and of the re-evaluation of the self in the performative context. These performative experiences made me wonder – why do the artworks produced in a secularised framework of contemporary art institutions inspire such dramatic emotional responses in the artists and the audience which often mirror devotional sentiments related to the experiences of the supernatural and the sacred?

In this dissertation, I examine the complexities of the process of the reconstruction of traditional religious ritual, in particular the paradigm of ascetic ritual, in the framework of contemporary performance art. Through analysing the ritualistic performances of Marina Abramović, Ron Athey and Linda Montano, the artists who directly engage with the tradition of ascetic ritual, I investigate the process of self-transformation enacted in their works. I argue that through artistic borrowing from the ascetic rituals of the Hindu, Buddhist, and Christian traditions these artists pursue transformative psychological and physical experiences on an individual as well as collective level that replicate religious ascetic paradigms of self-transcendence. The transformation that takes place in the performances of these artists is defined by the ability of ritualistic performance art to reconstruct the rhetoric of the sacred in the secularised context of contemporary art. Returning to the subjects of resurrection, humility, and self-transcendence, these artists engage in the process of redefining a model of the individual body and cultural and political discourses associated with it. These particular experiences

contribute to the formation of new bodily and cultural models, which reflect a collective longing for mystical and transcendental experiences in contemporary secularised cultures.

Beginning with European Enlightenment the values of individualism, independence and self-reliance of the individual self have been popularised and integrated in the national politics of the Western state comprising the central life philosophy and the cultural paradigm of capitalist and late-capitalist societies. Placing the individual interests above the interests of the community, the politics of individualism are based on the belief in the individual freedom to serve his/her own interests and pursue the goals of individual production and consumption, which were incompatible with earlier models of collective subjectivity in folk cultures. The politics of individualisation result in the model of the individual body characterised by its self-sufficiency, economic efficiency, independence, and separateness from the group.<sup>2</sup>

The model of individual body developed in parallel with the rejection of religious thinking and replacement of mystical perception of reality that reigned in Middle Ages with scientific thought. The values of reason, logic, scepticism and scientific research supplemented religious faith in non-rational, non-definable higher reality. Contemporary practices of ritualistic performance aim at re-evaluating this recent ideological shift and search for alternative models of subjectivity through the reconstruction and modification of traditional religious practices. Questioning the superiority of reason over feeling, and individual over collective, ritualistic performance art explores the possibilities of collective sentiment and affect in creating alternative to mainstream discourses of the self that correlate to, but are not identical to religious models of subjectivity.

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<sup>2</sup> For more information see Jonathan Israel, *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001).

The focus of this project is to investigate the mechanisms of artistic appropriation, modification, and enactment of religious ascetic rituals and the ways these enactments affect the cultural perception of the body, the self, and the other. I investigate why this has become a recurrent phenomenon in contemporary performance art and what draws contemporary performance artists to these types of practices. Through analysis of various performances by Abramović, Athey and Montano, I address the following questions: What are the goals of the artistic enactment of ascetic rituals? How are these rituals being manipulated and to what ends? What kinds of physical and psychological transformations take place in ritualistic performance art? And is this process only indicative of a trend in performance art, or rather might it have further-reaching social and cultural implications?

### **Ritualistic Performance Art**

I define ritualistic performance as a strain of performance art that evolved within the framework of avant-garde performance, in the early-1960s, and which continued its development during the latter twentieth century in the realm of radical body art, encompassing performances of endurance, sadomasochistic performances, and durational performances. Artists associated with the practice of radical body art include Carolee Schneemann, Annie Sprinkle, Marina Abramović, Gina Pane, Orlan, Vito Acconci, Herman Nitsch, Chris Burden, Linda Montano, Franko B, and Ron Athey amongst others. Radical body art embraces the variety of practices aimed at the physical transgression of the artist's body through self-injury (as in the performances of Franko B and Pane), physical penetration (as in the performances of Schneeman and Sprinkle), and bodily modification (as in the performances of Orlan and Stelarc). Ritualistic performance is a modality of radical body art based on modification of traditional religious

rituals and the enactment of physical endeavors associated with the religious paradigms of self-discipline and self-deprivation as methods of spiritual transformation. In the context of contemporary performance art, performative rituals derive from Western romanticised models of indigenous ritualistic practices, rather than from the authentic religious traditions and are based on modification and creative interpretation of traditional religious paradigms. Ritualistic performance art embodies artists' fantasies of indigenous spiritualities and introduces post-modern westernised modalities of religious rituals based on artists' eclectic approach to world religions and indigenous spiritual practices. Borrowing from and inhabiting traditional religious paradigms artists create modified versions of religious subjectivities and do not aim to embody sainthood per se. Instead, ritualistic performance art provides an example of a new type of the sacred inspired by contemporary search for alternative spiritualities, in particular its late 20<sup>th</sup> century modality represented by the New Age movement.<sup>3</sup>

The ritualistic performances of Abramović, Montano and Athey, while belonging to a larger strain of radical body art, provide a specific example of the appropriation and modification of ascetic rituals within a secular framework of performance art. The works of these artists embody different modalities of ascetic ritual as represented by Theravada Buddhist monasticism and its practices of discipline and endurance as in the works of Abramović; Christian martyrdom and the performance of self-injury as in the works of Athey; and of Kundalini yoga and holistic ritual as in the works of Montano. Through performative narratives of self-transformation, these artists reconstruct the rhetoric of the sacred within the realm of contemporary art and engage in a process of the individual and cultural redefinition of notions of the body and the self. While

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<sup>3</sup> New Age is a North American and Western European spiritual movement emerged in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century that encompassed mysticism, eastern spirituality, environmentalism, and holism. For more information see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, (Leiden, New York, Koln: E.J. Brill, 1996). I examine New Age spirituality in Chapter 3: Wounded Healing in the Performative Rituals of Linda Montano.



traditional religious rituals change significantly when transferred in the performative context, they nevertheless ignite the process of reconsideration of individual subjectivity of the artist and formation of alternative paradigms of the self. Although the appropriations of ritual in the works of Abramović, Athey and Montano is often flawed and incorrect, they provide excellent examples of the formation of the sacred body in alternative spaces not linked to traditional religious institutions. This dissertation is structured as a collection and analysis of case studies, each examining the work of one artist and the ascetic rituals integrated within his/her live art.

In Chapter 1, I explore the complexities of the ascetic rituals of self-discipline embodied in Abramović's performances of endurance. My analysis engages with the artist's early performances in Belgrade to her most recent ritualistic performances: *The House with the Ocean View* at Sean Kelly Gallery (2002) and *The Artist is Present* at MoMA (2010). I explore the fundamental connections between Abramović's performance art, Buddhist asceticism of the Theravada tradition, and its twentieth century interpretation in Vipassana meditation retreats. I analyse the variety of ways the artist appropriates the methods of insight meditation, fasting, abstinence, and seclusion in her live art and workshops as principal tools of self-transformation.

Drawing on seminal texts on Buddhist meditation techniques such as *Satipatthana Sutta*, "The Great Discourse on the Establishing of Awareness," as well as recent studies of Vipassana meditation in the works of Joana Cook and Robert Sharf, I argue, that Abramović's utilization of Buddhist monastic disciplines comprises ascetic "technology of the self"<sup>4</sup> aimed at production of a new understanding of the self as devoid of fixed subjectivity.

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<sup>4</sup> The notion of the "technology of the self" is introduced in Michel Foucault's theory of power and signifies a collection of practices by which subjectivity constitutes itself. For more information see Michel Foucault, *Technologies of the Self: a Seminar with Michel Foucault*, edited by H. Martin (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1988). I examine this subject in detail in Chapter 1: Deathless Body and Ascetic Mind in Marina Abramović's Performances of Endurance.

In her later performances, *The House with the Ocean View* and *The Artist is Present*, Abramović develops mindfulness meditation into a performative principle. Staged as durational performances, these works demonstrate the effects of prolonged meditation, fasting, and silence on individual and collective levels. These works also create spaces for conceptualizing the complexities of relationships between the artist and her audience. Throughout her career, Abramović attempts to transform the traditional framework of spectatorship, engaging her audience in non-conventional relationships with herself and with each other. Engaging her spectators in performative actions by constructing the situations that require immediate participation Abramović aims to influence her audience on a profound psychological level. I look into this topic through a conversation with the works of Erika Fischer-Lichte, Mary Richards, and Amelia Jones.

Chapter 2 examines the influence of Medieval Christian rituals of martyrdom on the sadomasochistic performances of Ron Athey. I argue that Athey's work embodies narratives of queer martyrdom and the experience of trauma: notably, the personal trauma of the HIV-positive artist and the cultural trauma of the HIV epidemic in North America in the 1980s and '90s. I conceptualize Athey's work as a form of transformative therapeutic ritual for the marginalised bodies of HIV-positive, queer subjects. Working with topics of social marginalisation, exclusion, and alienation in contemporary society, Athey reconstructs Christian rituals of martyrdom and resurrection through physical suffering. Centered on self-injury and self-mutilation, his works propose the performance of pain as an alleviation of the difficult psychological and mental states of marginalised subjectivity.

Through the performance of self-injury, Athey enacts the transition of the bodies of HIV-positive actors to the status of sacred bodies equated with the figures of Christian martyrs and

saints, notably Jesus Christ and Saint Sebastian. Although devoid of traditional spiritual content, his performances possess the structural unity of the ascetic ritual: the elimination of the ordinary body and its transcendence through the practice of self-inflicted injury. Athey's sadomasochistic performance aspires to deconstruct contemporary stereotypes of HIV infection as shameful and obscene, and proposes the narratives of divine resurrection and deliverance as a response to the biased treatment of HIV-positive gay men as marginal and perverse.

Analysing Athey's seminal works -- his torture trilogy: *Martyrs and Saints* (1992), *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life* (1993), and *Deliverance* (1994) – I explore connections between Athey's performance of self-sacrifice and Christian ascetic ritual, in particular the martyrdom rituals of the early Medieval European ascetics. In order to demonstrate the proximities between the two, I draw parallels between Athey's performance of self-injury and the ascetic rituals of Medieval Christian mystics, including Herman Suso and Margaret of Ypres. Christian rituals of flagellation, self-crucifixion, and self-mutilation, such as the excising of breasts among female saints or genital mutilation among male ascetics, were popular practices of self-discipline and self-transcendence. At the core of early European asceticism was an attempt by its practitioners to identify with the suffering of Christ as a model of spiritual perfection. Appropriating the imagery and symbolism of Medieval asceticism, Athey creates a dialogue with Christian devotional tradition. The sacrifice of Christ as re-enacted in Athey's performances emphasizes the subjects of resurrection, salvation and eternal life as alternatives to the physical suffering of the material body. For the HIV-positive artist, the tropes of transcendence of the physical body enacted in his works define the therapeutic quality of his sadomasochistic practices. I explore narratives of Christian martyrdom in the works of such scholars as Ariel Glucklich, Jerome Kroll and Bernard Bachrach, Eleanor Hartney, and Karen Armstrong.

Lastly, I engage with studies of self-injury and self-mutilation in psychiatry and psychoanalysis. Establishing a dialogue with the works of Armando Favazza, Arnold Ludwig, Sigmund Freud, and Gilles Deleuze I examine performance of self-injury as a therapeutic process for alleviating the distress caused by traumatic situations and the experience of uncomfortable emotional and mental states. I believe that my exploration of the connections between Athey's sadomasochistic performance, of Christian ascetic rituals in Medieval Europe and of psychiatry – a connection that has yet to be fully addressed in the academic literature to date – contributes to a very productive approach to his work, opening up new ways of reading and understanding his performances.

This exploration of ascetic ritual as a therapeutic practice continues in Chapter 3 through the examination of New Age healing rituals in the performances of Linda Montano. Building on arguments explored in the preceding chapters, I analyse Montano's ritualistic performances as a type of ascetic self-therapy that explores the possibilities of both – individual therapy and collective healing. Looking at Montano's seminal works – *Fourteen Years of Living Art* (1984-1998) and *Sacramental Chakra Chaise* (2003) – I demonstrate the ways in which Montano's performances embody the New Age paradigms of spirituality, sainthood, and the models of holistic therapy associated with them. Combining multiple religious and holistic rituals, including Kundalini yoga, Zen Buddhist meditation, Catholic prayer, acupuncture, color and sound meditation, and the shamanistic practice of astral travelling, Montano develops a unique method of art-therapy rooted in the utilization of the religious ritual as a holistic and therapeutic practice.

To elaborate these claims, I introduce the concept of “wounded healing” and compare Montano's interactive performance to the practices of shamanistic medical specialists. Drawing

on anthropological studies of shamanism, particularly in the works of Mircea Eliade, Edith Turner, Joan Halifax, and Merete Jakobsen, I argue that shamanistic rituals provide a mutually beneficial process of healing for both – the healer and the patient. I further establish a dialogue with the works in archetypal psychology and psychoanalysis. Examining the notion of the wounded healer in the writings of Laurence Kirmayer and Jess Groesbeck, I propose to analyse Montano’s interactive performances as a process of unravelling of the repressed, traumatic experiences in her spectators. Employing a variety of techniques -- interviews, active listening, and collective prayer -- Montano guides her spectators through the depths of their own wounds. Her counselling consists of instructions that require an active participation from her audience members and that they recognise their agency as self-healers capable of dealing with their own illness and healing independently. I believe that the exploration of connections with anthropological studies of shamanism, the Jungian strain of psychoanalysis, and New Age holistic ritual that I undertake here provides a productive framework within which to think about Montano’s performance; one which I expect could form new associations and understandings of ritualistic performance art.

### **Methodology**

The research for this project is primarily theoretical: the studies of different modalities of ascetic ritual in the realms of cultural anthropology, religious studies and performance studies provide the grounds through which to explore ritualistic performance art in its connection to religious ritual. I have based my analysis in the critic of ascetic ritual and ritualistic sacrifice in the works of Georges Bataille, Emile Durkheim, Gavin Flood, and Richard Valantasis. Concurrently, I engage with the studies of radical body art in the works of Erika Fischer-Lichte,

Fintan Walsh and Jennifer Fischer, who address the problematic of transformation in the framework of ritualistic performance. The crossover between anthropology, academic studies of religion and postmodern critique of performance art provides the platform for grounding the method of ascetic transformation in both fields – performance studies and religious studies. I address my research questions employing methods of interdisciplinary analysis in order to reveal the connections as well as divergences between the realms of contemporary performance art and religious ritual.

In addition to these, I work with the primary sources on performative practices of Marina Abramović, Linda Montano and Ron Athey, including published interviews with the artists, scores for performances, and photo and video documentations, including a feature length film *Hallelujah! Ron Athey: A Story of Deliverance*, Linda Montano's video work *Seven Spiritual Lives of Linda M. Montano*, Jennifer Fischer's documentary *Linda M. Montano: 14 Years of Living Art*, and a wide range of documentation of Marina Abramović's performances.

I also draw on analyses and critical discussions of religious ritualistic practices, with a view toward bringing into dialogue contemporary performance art and academic studies of religion. In particular, I focus on the studies of Theravada Buddhist monasticism and its contemporary variations in Vipassana meditation retreats in the works of Joanna Cook; the studies of ascetic rituals of pain in Medieval Europe examined in the works of Ariel Glucklich; and a variety of studies on the New Age religion and holistic practices associated with countercultural spirituality of 1960s and '70s. In addition, I draw on my personal experiences gained during my field trips to Vipassana Meditation Retreat in Montabello, Quebec, and Shivanda Ashram Yoga Camp in Val Morin, Quebec, attended in the Fall, 2012 and Winter, 2014.

Before moving to an extended analysis of specific examples, I present a more generalised theoretical framework for understanding ritualistic performance art and the process of ascetic self-transformation, discussing theories of the ascetic self and concepts of ritualistic sacrifice. In particular, I draw parallels between anthropological theories of the sacred, concepts of ascetic transformation and ritualistic sacrifice, and contemporary performance art in order to demonstrate the proximities and connections as well as divergences between religious ascetic rituals and artistic practices. These theories contribute to the understanding of ritualistic performance art as a transformative experience on individual and cultural levels.

### **Sacred and Profane**

Although the notions of sacred and profane have been defined in a variety of ways in anthropological and religious studies,<sup>5</sup> my understanding of the sacred is grounded in the works of Emile Durkheim and Roger Caillois. The Oxford English Dictionary defines “sacred” as “the holy, those things set apart from the ordinary and worthy of veneration and respect... The sacred includes the concepts of God and divine.”<sup>6</sup> According to Durkheim, on the contrary, the sacred does not always belong to the realm of religion and can be represented by many aspects of life and various objects that possess transcendental character as a result of their association with the divine. As Durkheim explains: “by sacred things one must not understand simply those personal beings which are called gods or spirits; a rock, a tree, a pebble, a piece of wood, a house, in a word anything can be sacred.”<sup>7</sup> The circle of sacred objects cannot be circumscribed and may include people (ascetics and saints), events (birth and death), materials and matter (wine, bread,

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<sup>5</sup> Thomas A. Idinopulos and E.A. Yonan, ed., *The Sacred and Its Scholars: Comparative Methodologies for the Study of Primary Religious Data* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996).

<sup>6</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., vol. 14, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1980).

<sup>7</sup> Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, (Glencoe: The Free Press, 1947), p. 37.

crucifix), psychological and social attributes (compassion, self-transcendence, community), and art products (music, sculpture).

The profane, associated with ordinary everyday existence and the material world, is formed in radical opposition to the sacred; these two realms are mutually exclusive. As Durkheim explains “the sacred and the profane have always and everywhere been conceived by the human mind as two distinct classes, as two worlds between which there is nothing in common.”<sup>8</sup> The contagious character of the sacred automatically eliminates profane experiences and transforms them in a type of potential sacred.

Caillois drawing on Durkheim’s argument on the radical split between the realms of the sacred and the profane defines the sacred as a category of feeling, while the profane is depicted as a category of the intellect and reason. The sacred is the realm of the most extreme sentiments of fear, awe and hope; the profane, on the other hand, is the realm of reason, order and clarity. For Caillois, the sacred is defined by its inherent ambiguity and its ability to embrace the opposites of defilement and sanctity. While being linked to transcendental experiences, sainthood and holiness; the sacred at the same time functions as the domain of extreme danger and pollution. The etymology of the word sacred demonstrates the tendency of different cultures to incorporate characteristics of purity and impurity into the notion of the sacred (the Greek word “defilement” also means “the sacrifice, that which cleanses the defilement;” “holy” also means “defiled;” in Rome the word “sacer” designates “the one or that which cannot be touched without defilement;” and the ancient Japanese term kami designates both “heavenly and earthly divinities” and “all malevolent and terrible creatures, objects of universal dread”).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid, 38.

<sup>9</sup> Roger Caillois, *Man and the Sacred*, (Glencoe, Illinois: The Free Press, 1959), p. 36.



Caillois emphasises the importance of these ambivalent feelings towards the sacred, which he defines as the sacred dialectic: “the sacred stimulates in the believer exactly the same feelings as the fire does in the child – the same fear of being burnt, and the same desire to light it; the same anxiety in the face of the forbidden, the same faith that its conquest will afford him power and prestige, or injury and death in the event of failure. And just as the fire produces both evil and good, the sacred involves right or wrong action and is imbued with the opposing qualities of pure and impure, holy and sacrilegious that define within their own limits the very frontiers to which the religious order can be extended.”<sup>10</sup>

Caillois notes the ability of the sacred to embrace the opposites of pure and impure and to reverse the power dynamic within the binary: in the realm of the sacred, the impure functions as pure, while the pure can be reduced to the impure. The sacred eliminates the binaries and rigid hierarchies of profane reality and proposes a unity and continuity instead of fragmentation, division, and separation. Thus, the sacred exhibits an unlimited power to transform the profane, to reverse its laws, and to deconstruct its system of values.

In ritualistic performance art, the sacred functions as a category of transformation. The artists’ enactment of self-injury, self-deprivation and self-humiliation results in formation of a new sacred body. The ambiguous character of these ritualistic practices is defined by the artists’ ability to perform the abject body as a type of sacred body. I link the notion of the abject body to the model of sacred body using theoretical approaches of Mary Douglas<sup>11</sup> and Julia Kristeva.<sup>12</sup> Abject qualities of the body are defined by its ability to transgress the borders between internal and external contents of the body and are associated primarily with bodily fluids. Bodily wastes such as urine, faeces, blood, phlegm and tears represent the aspects of the abject. As Kristeva

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid, p. 37.

<sup>11</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969).

<sup>12</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).

explains: “It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite.”<sup>13</sup> In the following research I explain the potentiality of the abject body to construct the spaces of the sacred employing above-mentioned concepts.

### **Ascetic Ritual**

Traditional religious ascetic rituals are grounded in the practices of self-discipline and self-deprivation with the purpose of undoing profane subjectivity and constructing new sacred body that transcends the limits of the individual self. Deriving the concept of transformation from the theories of sacrifice and the ascetic self, I define the process of self-transformation as a process of the production of altered states of body and mind through ascetic self-injury, fasting, seclusion, prolonged periods of meditation, silence, and the renunciation of bodily desires. Self-transformation is linked to the process of reshaping the ascetic body through control of bodily impulses related to food, sex and pain. Asceticism performs the reversal of the binary of pain and pleasure in a way that makes the performance of pain desirable while performance of pleasure is rendered painful.

The concept of ascetic ritual employed throughout this dissertation derives both from Georges Bataille’s theory of sacrifice and models of the ascetic self as developed within the framework of Religious Studies, primarily in the works of Gavin Flood<sup>14</sup> and Richard Valantasis.<sup>15</sup> I define ascetic ritual as a modality of sacrificial ritual based on physical annihilation and transformation of the individual self. Ascetic ritual, I argue, is a sacrifice

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid, p.4.

<sup>14</sup> Gavin Flood, *The Ascetic Self: Subjectivity, Memory and Tradition* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

<sup>15</sup> Richard Valantasis, ‘A Theory of Social Function of Asceticism’, in Vincent L. Wimbush and Richard Valantasis, ed., *Asceticism*, (New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), pp. 544-553.

performed on the micro level with the goal of transformation of the ascetic subjectivity and of reformatting the cultural discourses inscribed on his/her body.

As a discourse theory of ascetic transformation proposes not only a method of performance analysis challenging the tradition of Western logo centrism rooted in binary thinking, but also functions as a critique of the late-capitalist model of the individual body represented by self-sufficient productive subjectivity. Analyzing a variety of sacrificial models and their underlying principles described in Bataille's works such as *Inner Experience*,<sup>16</sup> *The Accursed Share*, Vol. 1<sup>17</sup> and *Theory of Religion*<sup>18</sup> among other texts, I argue that the principal significance of ritualistic performance is defined by its ability to undermine the rigid social boundaries drawn between masculine and feminine, health and sickness, and freedom and discipline. Public performance of endurance and self-injury is rooted in the attempt to transform the socially acceptable and culturally-constructed body associated with hierarchies of gender, race and sexual orientation. The performance of sacrifice transcends the limits imposed on the physical body by the dominant social discourses, associated with late-capitalism, and transforms the "ordinary" self into a type of transcendental body existing beyond the constraints of rational thought.

### **Ascetic transformation**

In the realm of religious studies the notion of ascetic transformation has been discussed by two primary theorists: Richard Valantasis and Gavin Flood. These theories define asceticism as a pre-symbolic impulse towards the transformation and alteration of dominant culture.

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<sup>16</sup> Georges Bataille, *Inner Experience*, (Albany, New York: SUNY Press, 1988).

<sup>17</sup> Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay on General Economy*, Volume 1, (New York: Zone Books, 1988).

<sup>18</sup> Georges Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, (New York: Zone Books, 1989).

Asceticism provides a counter-cultural milieu through re-patterning basic behaviours and relations, undermining socially accepted stereotypes of the individual self. By transforming the body of the practitioner, ascetic ritual becomes a source of new cultural meanings and narratives. Valantasis and Flood emphasise the performative and public character of asceticism: asceticism is a performance of tradition through the interiorization and naturalization of ascetic behaviour. The theatricality of ascetic ritual is defined by its ability to deconstruct the ready-mades of individual behaviour as defined by the dominant culture, and to reconstruct them in a new paradigm of ascetic self.

The central premise of Valantasis' theory of asceticism is the understanding of ascetic ritual as a transformative practice on the individual subjective and collective cultural levels. Relying on sociological theories of asceticism,<sup>19</sup> Valantasis examines the role of asceticism and its practitioner within the dominant social context. He examines the ability of ascetic practise to transform the personality of the practitioner in a way that reshapes the very culture in which the ascetic ritual is performed. As he points out: "at the center of ascetic activity is the self who, through behavioral changes, seeks to become a different person, a new self; to become a different person in new relationships; and to become a different person in a new society that forms a new culture."<sup>20</sup> Examining asceticism as the process of ultimate transformation Valantasis emphasises social, political, and cultural dimensions of the ascetic ritual. As he states, the ascetic process is aimed at both – the individual personality of the ascetic and the cultural environment in which this personality functions: "asceticism... constructs both the old and the reformed self and the cultures in which these selves function: asceticism asserts the subject of

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<sup>19</sup> Primarily by Max Weber and Geoffrey Harpham, for more information see Max Weber, *The Sociology of Religion*, trans. Ephraim Fishcoff, (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963), and George Harpham, *The Ascetic Imperative in Culture and Criticism*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>20</sup> Valantasis, 'A Theory of Social Function of Asceticism,' p. 547.

behavioral change and transformation, while constructing and reconstructing the environment in which that subjectivity functions.”<sup>21</sup>

For Valantasis, asceticism, first and foremost, is a construction of an alternative culture that most often undermines the values of dominant political and social discourses. Asceticism reveals closed and invisible systems of communication that facilitate alternative social relations and create new identities often oppositional to the dominant cultural standard of subjectivity. The cultural influence of asceticism is principal to Valantasis’s model. The transformation that takes place in ascetic ritual is a transformation of the world with all the multiplicity of discourses inscribed in it. As he writes: “Negatively described, asceticism breaks down the dominant culture through performances that aim toward establishing a counter-cultural or alternative cultural milieu. Positively described, the ascetic, like an actor learning to be a character in a play, lives in a new culture created through the careful repatterning of basic behaviours and relations.”<sup>22</sup>

The transformative impulse of asceticism is defined by its performative character. Valantasis draws parallels between the theatricality of the actor’s performance and ascetic ritual in their ability to decode the practitioner’s behaviour and psychology. Referring to Richard Schechner’s theory of performance,<sup>23</sup> Valantasis compares ascetic ritual to the process of an actors’ training. As in theatrical rehearsals, asceticism requires the internalization and naturalization of learnt behaviour: “the rigorous and systematic repatterning [that] eventually enables the actor to enter and to be the character.”<sup>24</sup>

Ascetic performance consists of the daily repetition of ritual: “[the] ascetic learns the techniques of asceticism by repeated activity, repeated prayer, a consistently affirmed

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<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid, p. 549.

<sup>23</sup> See Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory*, (New York: Routledge, 2003).

<sup>24</sup> Valantasis, ‘A Theory of the Social Function of Asceticism’, p. 548.

withdrawal, continuous silence, repeated physical acts of fasting, sleep deprivation, and manual labour.”<sup>25</sup> These acts, when successfully internalised, produce a new type of ascetic body, physical and social, which drastically differs from the original, profane subjectivity. The new ascetic subjectivity is based on transcendence and transformation, of the profane self. It embodies mythological ascetic narratives and establishes space for a life based on the re-envisioned world: “by the systematic training and retraining, the ascetic becomes a different person molded to live in a different culture, trained to relate to people in a different manner, psychologically motivated to live a different life. Through these performances, the ascetic, like the performer who becomes able to “express as actual” anything imaginable, can experience the goal of ascetic life as transformed life.”<sup>26</sup>

Flood draws on Valantasis’s argument of the social role of asceticism as a process of transformation. He sees the central significance of asceticism in its ability to create new subjectivities via the appropriation and internalization of the ascetic tradition. Building on Valantasis argument of the performativity of ascetic self, Flood interprets asceticism as a process of internalising tradition and enactment of the memory of tradition. He defines asceticism as a process of decoding of the subjective self from a limited, ego-centred self to a narrative greater than the self.<sup>27</sup> As he puts it: “rather than being subjected to individual desire as the person’s predominant driving force, asceticism advocates the subjection of oneself to tradition, to a master, in order to undergo transformation. The ascetic submits her life to a form that transforms

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Ibid.

<sup>27</sup> These narratives include: the unification with God; liberation from cyclic existence, etc. For more information see Flood, *The Ascetic Self*, p. 1-37.

it, to a training that changes a person's orientation from the fulfillment of desire to a narrative greater than the self."<sup>28</sup>

The transition from profane subjectivity to a type of sacred subjectivity in ascetic ritual is a result of rigorous self-discipline. Asceticism is the practice of self-renunciation and self-violation with the purpose of reshaping of the profane body and formation of a transcendental body. Flood defines ascetic discipline as a reversal of the flow of the body with the purpose of internalising religious narratives. As he puts it: "Asceticism refers to a range of habits or bodily regimes designed to restrict or reverse the instinctual impulses of the body and to an ideology that maintains that in so doing the greater good or happiness can be achieved."<sup>29</sup>

By "the reversal of the flow of the body" Flood means renunciation of bodily activities that are contradictory to the central goal of asceticism: spiritual perfection. Renunciation of food, sexual abstinence, and the cultivation of humility and detachment are principal conditions for the formation of the ascetic body and the reversal of the body's orientation. The enactment of tradition requires the conformity and submission of the ascetic self to a religious narrative in which the individual desire is to be eradicated.

However, Flood sees asceticism as an ultimate act of freedom. This is the major paradox of the ascetic self who surrenders to the tradition in order to overcome it. As Flood puts it: "the bodily disciplines of asceticism not only produce conformity to the power of tradition, they can also express resistance; adapting the body to the form of tradition might be regarded as a means of transcending it."<sup>30</sup>

Ascetic freedom is a result of extreme self-discipline and the reversal of the flow of the body. Continuous control of physical impulses and discipline of the physical body leads to

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<sup>28</sup> Flood, *The Ascetic Self*, p. 2.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid*, p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid*, p. 6.

liberation from the material scale of existence. Ascetic freedom in the first place is the freedom from bodily desires. More than that asceticism frees the practitioner from dominant cultural and political discourses inscribed on his/her body. Asceticism restructures the body of the practitioner in a way that eliminates dominant standards of mainstream physicality and behaviour. Asceticism can involve extreme bodily violation, piercing and burning the skin, and long periods of fasting and staying awake that undermine the model of mainstream physicality.

Asceticism provides freedom from ascetic and religious tradition as such. It is a pursuit of freedom from bodily limitations through bodily limitations. In result of the continuous submission to tradition, the ascetic transcends this very tradition and achieves the ultimate goal of spiritual liberation. Up to a certain point, if ascetic practice were to be successful, the practitioner would transgress the limits imposed on him by ascetic ritual and reach the state of absolute and of spiritual perfection associated with sainthood. In Christian discourse, this state is defined by freedom from sin; in Buddhism and Hinduism, by freedom from karmic debt and liberation from cyclic existence. As Flood states: “the body is harnessed and controlled, sometimes put into situations of intentional suffering, in order not only to attain an inner transcendence but also to attain a bodily perfection. Through developing ascetic habit, ascetic ideology maintains that the limits of the body can be superseded and a ‘new’ body created or the body transcended.”<sup>31</sup>

Flood also emphasises the performative quality of asceticism. However, he is interested in the public rather than the disciplining aspect of ascetic performance. According to Flood, asceticism is always in the public domain and can be observed by an audience. Even when performed privately, asceticism is located within this tradition and assumes the participation of religious community. As he writes: “asceticism is ... a performance because the reversal of the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid.



flow of the body is enacted within a community and tradition. Ascetic acts performed within the privacy of a cell or forest are nevertheless still public in the sense that they participate in and are given sanction by the wider community and tradition. ... Through performing asceticism the ascetic is performing tradition and the performance of tradition is a public affair.”<sup>32</sup>

Theories of the ascetic self introduced in religious studies of asceticism define ascetic ritual as a practice of transformation of profane subjectivity and of the formation of a new transcendental body, which also manifests the production of new cultures. In the following research I analyse proximities between religious ascetic ritual and its interpretation in contemporary performance art. While traditional ascetic ritual provides the ground for the ultimate self-transformation, the enactments of ascetic rituals in performances of Abramović, Athey and Montano engage with the same subjects, but on a different level. Valatas describes the goal of religious asceticism as the shattering of the individual self of the ascetic and his merger with the absolute power represented by God, Nirvana, etc. Appropriation of ascetic ritual in ritualistic performance art follows similar logic of transformation and formation of a better, healthier self. Through continuous practice of ascetic disciplines Abramović, Athey and Montano re-shape their everyday identities in a type of transcendental selves, beyond the constraints of mainstream discourses of the body. Artists’ engagement in ritualistic activities is often as rigorous and committed as that of the religious ascetics. For example, Montano engaged in ascetic disciplines of self-restriction for the duration of 14 years, Abramović practiced extreme fasting, while Athey engaged in the practices of extreme self-mortification and self-abuse. These artists consistently perform extreme asceticism as a method of self-discipline and self-transformation.

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<sup>32</sup> Ibid, p.7.

What makes ritualistic performances of Abramović, Athey and Montano different from ascetic rituals they borrow from is the artists' free play with the ascetic tradition. Ascetic rituals never remain intact in ritualistic performance art and are consistently modified, transformed and re-arranged. Often devoid of their original intention ascetic rituals enacted in performances of Abramović, Athey and Montano provide a new dimension of performative asceticism that emphasises external over internal and collective over individual.

### **Ritualistic Sacrifice**

A similar model of inquiry of ascetic self-deprivation was developed in the works of Georges Bataille and his theory of ritualistic sacrifice, which emphasises the transformative character of ritualistic activities. Bataille's theory of sacrifice provides an important opening for the analysis of ritualistic performance as a transformative form of expression. The transformation that takes place in the process of sacrifice provides a model of what Bataille calls general economy:<sup>33</sup> the model of economy rooted in the unproductive expenditure and loss of resources. If the capitalist model of economy is associated with production, profit, and continuous consumption, the general economy promotes irrational waste of resources without any material gain. Bataille's argument begins with the claim that in capitalist society the individual is reduced to his economic functions which defines his transformation from a free individual into a "thing." He argues that today: "any general judgment of social activity implies the principal that all individual effort, in order to be valid, must be reducible to the fundamental necessities of production and conservation."<sup>34</sup> Non-productive expenditure is almost fully excluded from the life of capitalist societies. A contemporary individual is not capable of pure expenditure as

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<sup>33</sup> See Georges Bataille, 'The Notion of Expenditure' in Georges Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, ed. Fred Botting and Scott Wilson, (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishers, 1997).

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid*, p. 170.

members of archaic aristocracy were and all his activity is governed by the principle of rationality and profit. As Bataille puts it: “the hatred of expenditure is the *raison d’être* of and justification for the bourgeoisie; it is at the same time the principle of its horrifying hypocrisy.”<sup>35</sup>

Bataille finds it crucial to rethink individual production and consumption, which violated social and economic interactions in modern societies and proposes the economy of loss as a principal method of rejuvenation of economic and social life. He defines economy of waste in terms of consumption. Consumption can be represented by so-called unproductive expenditures: “luxury, mourning, war, cults, the construction of sumptuary monuments, games, spectacles, arts, perverse sexuality and other activities which have no end beyond themselves.”<sup>36</sup>

The formation of the body through the state of loss is crucial for ritualistic performance art. The bodies of Abramović, Montano and Athey perform a “purely irrational expenditure” of physical and mental resources in order to transcend the mode of capitalist individuality. Ritualistic performance is rooted in waste: the physical waste of bodily materials – blood, phlegm, hair, weight, etc; or the symbolic waste of the self through self-mutilation, self-abuse and self-denial. Interpreted through the lens of Bataille’s concepts of sacrifice and general economy ritualistic performance functions as a radical critique of production based economies.

Concurrently, Bataille’s theory of sacrifice provides an alternative method of critical thinking. Sacrifice is rooted in physicality and the immediacy of ritualistic practices and undermines the very tradition of Western rational thought. Based on the concepts of affect, excess and anguish, Bataille’s theory of sacrifice proposes an alternative method of thinking about individuality and collectivity which goes beyond the classical concept of theory operating by the notions of objectivity, logic and utility. The theory of sacrifice emphasises the primacy of

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<sup>35</sup> Ibid, p. 176.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

physical experiences over the intellectual, of affect over reason, and of expenditure and loss over gain. Sacrificial ritual, as defined by Bataille, is always beyond rationality and the constraints of linguistic expression.

Bataille's concept of sacrifice developed in the context of early twentieth century discoveries in cultural anthropology documenting the first attempts to explain sacrifice in scientific terms. The English school of anthropologists, primarily Edward B. Tylor, traced the evolution of sacrificial rituals through piacular rites.<sup>37</sup> James Frazer defined sacrifice as a defence mechanism against fatal disasters and as an aid in fertility rites.<sup>38</sup> Bernard Marillier analyzed the development of sacrifice through magic rites and communal sacrifice.

However, Bataille's positioning of sacrifice within the realm of anthropology was primarily influenced by the works of Marcel Mauss and Henri Hubert. In their seminal text, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Functions*,<sup>39</sup> Mauss and Hubert define sacrifice as a gift to a supernatural being with the purpose of receiving spiritual and material benefits. Their concept of sacrifice interprets sacrificial ritual as a form of consecration transferring the object of sacrifice from the domain of the profane to that of the sacred. Mauss and Hubert examine sacrifice as a religious act that "can only be accomplished in a religious atmosphere, and through the intermediary of agents essentially religious."<sup>40</sup> Emphasising the sacred character of the practice, Mauss and Hubert argue that the process of sacrifice transforms not only the object of sacrifice, but also those participating in the sacrificial ritual. In particular, they emphasise the transformation of the sacrificer and his acquisition of religious character through the act of sacrifice. As the authors put it: "he [the sacrificer] has risen to a state of grace or he has come out

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<sup>37</sup> Edward B. Tylor, *Primitive Culture: Researches into the Development of Mythology, Philosophy, Religion, Art, and Custom*, Volume 1, 2 (J. Murray, 1871).

<sup>38</sup> James G. Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, (London: Macmillan & CO LTD, 1957).

<sup>39</sup> Henri Hubert, Marcel Mauss, *Sacrifice: Its Nature and Functions*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1964).

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid*, p. 35.

of a state of sin.”<sup>41</sup> They define “sacrificer” in very general terms as a person who receives the benefits of sacrifice or submits to its effects. This can be an individual person or, more importantly to Bataille’s argument, a group: whether family, clan, tribe, nation, etc. When the whole group takes part in the sacrificial ceremony a transformation of the collectivity into a sacred community happens. The radiating action of sacrifice “produces a double effect: one on the object for which it is offered and on which it is intended to act, the other on the person who desires and provokes that effect.”<sup>42</sup>

On the other hand, the figure of sacrifice functions as an intermediary between the sacrificer, the community, and the divinity, or god, to whom a sacrifice is offered. Mauss and Hubert emphasise the impossibility of the immediate contact between the sacrificer and the divine and introduce the subject/object of sacrifice as a messenger to the realm of sacred. They summarize their definition of sacrifice as follows: “sacrifice is a religious act which through the consecration of a victim, modifies the condition of the person who accomplishes it or the condition of certain objects which said person is interested in.”<sup>43</sup>

Bataille’s interpretation of sacrificial ritual is deeply influenced by these two points: of sacrifice being a religious act of communication with the divine and sacrifice being a transformative act on the individual and collective level. For Bataille sacrifice is primarily a manifestation of general economy and its laws of non-productive expenditure, but, no less important, it is also an act of transformation and transition from the realm of profane to sacred.

Bataille starts his argument by defining sacrifice as a form of expenditure, a necessary loss that saves the community from natural devastations and gods’ rage. In *Accursed Share* he distinguishes two types of civilizations: the civilizations of enterprise, equivalent to Western

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<sup>41</sup> Ibid, p. 40.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

capitalist society; and societies of consumption that embody principles of general economy, such as the archaic civilizations of Mexicans and Aztecs. Societies of consumptions are centered on sacrificial practices in the forms of regular ritualistic killing. These cultures are governed by the belief that certain people must be sacrificed in order that the rest of the community might survive. Their deaths were necessary gifts to gods. As Bataille puts it: “not only wars, but also men were created so that there would be people whose hearts and blood could be taken so that the sun might eat.”<sup>44</sup>

Bataille interprets sacrifice as a form of accursed share: that, which is “destined for consumption,” that which is an excess of society. As he explains, the Aztecs carefully chose their victims, who had to be worthy of sacrificing. The tradition of sacrificing kings transformed into the sacrifice of virgins, warriors, or particularly distinguished members of society (young and beautiful). In any case the victim must represent a particular value to the community in order to be sacrificed:

The victim is a surplus taken from the mass of useful wealth. And he is only withdrawn from it in order to be consumed profitlessly, and therefore utterly destroyed. Once chosen, he is the accursed share, destined for violent consumption. But the curse tears him away from the order of things; it gives him a recognizable figure, which now radiates intimacy, anguish, the profundity of living beings.<sup>45</sup>

The value of the sacrificial victim is defined by his/her ability to interrupt the world of profane experiences and construct the space of sacred experiences that Bataille defines as intimacy. Following Mauss and Hubert’s argument on sacrifice being a religious act, Bataille continues his theorization of ritual by juxtaposing two radically different worlds: the world of things, and of productive activities; and the world of intimacy or the sacred world, which is that of expenditure and non-productive waste.

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<sup>44</sup> Bataille, *Accursed Share*, p. 79.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 59.

Drawing on Durkheim's argument of the severe separation of sacred and profane Bataille defines the sacred in opposition to the profane. For Bataille, the world of things, or the world of the profane, is introduced in social life through labour. Bataille argues: "the introduction of labour into the world replaced intimacy, the depth of desire and its free outbreaks with rational progression, where what matters is no longer the truth of the present moment, but, rather, the subsequent results of operations."<sup>46</sup> With the development of production, man also becomes one of the things of the world and is reduced to his working functions. In societies of enterprise the man lives "in order to work without ever fully enjoying the fruits of its labour."<sup>47</sup> Lost intimacy is in complete opposition to the world of enterprise, the world of things. Societies which place more value on consumption or expenditure than on production are not concerned with thing-ness and are much closer to the original intimacy of life and unity with everyone and everything. Intimacy is beyond subjectivity and separation. It is a purely unproductive experience and is characterised by immediacy and immanence: "the world of intimacy is as antithetical to the real world as immoderation to moderation, madness to reason, drunkenness to lucidity. There is moderation only in the object, reason only in the identity of the object with itself, lucidity only in the distinct knowledge of objects. The world of the subject is the night: that changeable, infinitely suspect night, which, in the sleep of reason, produces monsters. I submit that madness itself gives a rarified idea of the free "subject," unsubordinated to the "real" order and occupied only with the present."<sup>48</sup>

Bataille explains his theory of sacrifice as a process of negating of the world of things and of transgression of the real order. If the world of things, or real world, is preoccupied with the future and with the necessity of preserving material goods and things; the intimate world is

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<sup>46</sup> Bataille, 'Laws of General Economy,' in Bataille, *Bataille Reader*, p. 190.

<sup>47</sup> Bataille, *Accursed Share*, p. 46.

<sup>48</sup> *Ibid*, p. 58.

the world that exists only in the present. It is characterised by the meaningless grandiose expenditure that is the expression of the ultimate luxury of life: death. The profane order operates through the exclusion of death from the scale of everyday experiences as death is contradictory to the obsessive production and consumerism of profane life. The intimate world, on the contrary, is rooted in the experience of death and in its transcendence. These two worlds operate by rejection of each other. As Bataille puts it: “the real order does not so much reject the negation of life that is death as it rejects the affirmation of intimate life, whose measureless violence is a danger to stability of things, an affirmation that is fully revealed only in death. The real order must annul – neutralize – that intimate life and replace it with the thing that the individual is in the society of labour.”<sup>49</sup>

Sacrifice belongs to the world of intimate life and is always threatening to the world of things, as it is an expression of the most valuable and most useless expenditure: the expenditure of human life. Sacrifice that is not defined by the necessity of useful production and consumption, subverts the very idea of material profit. It destroys, annihilates and scatters the material world and drains it of its value. In the ordinary world the individual exists as a thing in itself. The thing-ness of the profane individual is manifested in his dependence on work and the results of his labour; his continuous preoccupation with the future and future survival. The ordinary individual exists in a state of lifelong fear of death, which is the final fiasco and deconstruction of the world of things. This type of dependency on material things – money, objects of comfort, etc – makes the life of the individual limited by the world of things that dictates the rules of individual and collective existence. Bataille sees the sacrifice as a process of liberation of the individual from this deeply rooted anxiety of the present moment, which is linked to awareness of the finality of human existence and the impossibility of the future tense.

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<sup>49</sup> Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, p. 52.



Sacrifice is an elimination of thing-ness within the individual and restoration of the lost intimacy within the community.

In *Theory of Religion* Bataille defines sacrifice as “the greatest negation of the real order”<sup>50</sup> that brings nothing to an end. It is not an ultimate annihilation of life, but the liberation of intimate life. It manifests the limits of the world of things that shapes people’s identity as inherently incomplete and rooted in the fear of death. Sacrifice reveals the intimacy of existence, the very “immanence between man and the world, between the subject and the object,”<sup>51</sup> that is repressed in artificial order of things. As Bataille writes: “The destruction that sacrifice is intended to bring about is not annihilation. The thing – only the thing – is what sacrifice means to destroy in the victim. Sacrifice destroys an object’s real ties of subordination; it draws the victim out of the world of utility and restores it to that of unintelligible caprice.”<sup>52</sup>

The process of sacrifice is a process of transformation of sacrificial victim from the state of a thing to the state of intimate life manifested in the ultimate expenditure: death. It is a process of separating the victim from the world of things – productivity, production and consumption, and its transition to the realm of sacred – the realm where material utility loses its value and all the anxieties linked to the world of things are removed. Sacrifice deconstructs the individual fear of death and with it the sacrifice transcends the very thing-ness of separate individual.

Going through the process of transformation from a thing to a divinity, the victim turns into a sacred object similar in its characteristics to the object of collective worship. It accumulates the energy of the community and unites the group in the ultimate act of devotion. The central meaning of sacrifice is in the negation of the laws of the mundane world and in the

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<sup>50</sup> Ibid.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid, p. 70.

<sup>52</sup>Ibid, p. 43.

separation of two worlds: one profane and one sacred. These mechanisms of negation and separation are deeply interwoven and the entire process of the formation of a sacred mentality cannot happen without the primary denial of the profane order. As Bataille concludes: “the greatest negation of the real order is the one most favourable to the appearance of the mythical order.” The figure of the sacrificed victim thus becomes a marker of this double process. The victim exists on the border of two worlds and technically triggers the entrance of the entire community in the realm of the sacred.

Theories of ascetic self and ritualistic sacrifice provide a rich theoretical background for the analysis of the ritualistic performances of Marina Abramović, Ron Athey, and Linda Montano. Studies of asceticism and ritualistic sacrifice emphasise the importance of transformation in ascetic and ritualistic practices. Ascetic rituals pursue the goal of establishing a new, sacred body and are defined by the process of continuous transgression and transcendence of the profane physicality and subjectivity through rituals centered on the body. The physical transformation of the ascetic body in parallel with his/her mental transformation and the production of altered states of mind symbolises the annihilation of profane subjectivity and formation of a new sacred self.

In ritualistic performance art, the incorporation and modification of traditional ascetic ritual and ritualistic sacrifice contributes to artists’ redefinition of their cultural subjectivities and stimulates the process of re-evaluation and of reformation of the individual self. The artists going through voluntary suffering and self-deprivation embody contemporary modalities of the sacred as expressed in ritualistic sacrifice. Focusing on the intimacy of performative experiences, as defined by the transgression of individual’s body through self-injury, endurance and self-abuse, they recreate the rhetoric of a sacred almost fully excluded from contemporary secularised

cultures. The process of ascetic self-transformation, as enacted in the works of Abramović, Athey and Montano, triggers the process of formation of the areas of the sacred, which embody public nostalgia for mystical perceptions of the self and the other. The ritualistic performances re-introduce the sacred into a public domain and construct the spaces of unrestrained emotionality, powerful humility and spiritual sentimentality. Re-evaluation and reformation of profane subjectivity in the works of these artists possess the potentiality to influence cultural perception of the self as continuous with the other and initiates the narratives of collective unity and continuity as alternative to the capitalist culture of individualisation.

### **Literature review**

Performance as a method of interrogation of artists' individual selves and the notion of contemporary subjectivity was continuously addressed in the works of performance studies scholars.<sup>53</sup> Understanding of contemporary performance art as a critic of contemporary standard of subjectivity was introduced in the works of Peggy Phelan, Rebecca Schneider, and Amelia Jones, the authors who launched a new paradigm in the studies of performance art as a form of political and cultural criticism. Developing the vocabulary of transgression, resistance and subversion these authors introduce a particular way to look at performance work as anti-capitalist form of artistic expression. Transgression of cultural hierarchies of gender and race and search for "true" subjectivity as principal goals of performance artists were analysed in the works of these writers.

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<sup>53</sup> I particularly address the paradigm of 1990s art criticism that emphasises the political dimension of performance art.

In her infamous analysis of representation in contemporary performance art -- *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993),<sup>54</sup> Phelan examines the variety of relationships between power, identity and representation. Phelan uses extended definition of performance as the field of representation and exchange of gazes in photography, film, theater, political protests and performance art. Through extensive examination of cultural products Phelan emphasises inadequacy of visibility as a mean of representation that results in politics of surveillance, imperialism and fetishism.

Phelan sees the political potential of performance art in its critique of representation and the notion of the “real” in dominant cultural discourses. Excessive visibility of late-capitalist culture results in the distortion of reality and supplement of the truth by the representation of the truth. In particular, contemporary discourses of representation are concerned with production of fixed and stable identities of racial and sexual other; the process that facilitates the construction of cultural -- gender and racial -- hierarchies. Phelan argues the impossibility of such representation as real, and emphasises that gender and racial identities are constantly changing.

By locating the subject outside the ideology of the visible Phelan promotes the subjectivity that is not visibly representative and therefore escapes the hierarchies of gender and race. Performance art, according to her logic, provides the field for such resistance. Escaping representation within the realm of performance art is anti-capitalist gesture of transgression and criticism of contemporary hierarchies of representation. As Phelan points out: “in the plenitude of its apparent visibility and availability, the performer actually disappears and represents something else – dance, movement, sound, character, “art.”<sup>55</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Phelan Peggy, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, (London, New York: Routledge, 1992).

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid*, p.151.

Analysing performances of feminist body artists, primarily the works of Angelika Festa, Phelan argues for disappearance of marked gendered body in the process of performance. As she writes:

In employing the body metonymically, performance is capable of resisting the reproduction of metaphor, and the metaphor I'm most keenly interested in resisting is the metaphor of gender, a metaphor which upholds the vertical hierarchy of value through systematic marking of the positive and the negative. In order to enact this marking, the metaphor of gender presupposes unified bodies which are biologically different. More specifically, these unified bodies are different in "one" aspect of the body, that is to say, difference is located in the genitals.<sup>56</sup>

For Phelan performance art emerges as a space in-between presence and representation and provides the opportunity for feminist artists to escape stereotypical symbolic meanings assigned to women's body in patriarchal discourses of representation. Rather than "representing" the object of male desire, that, in fact, asserts the absence of female subject as such, female body in performance withdraws from representation. In feminist performance art the absence integral to the representation of women in patriarchy is made explicit through performance of disappearance. As Phelan points out: "... performance work underlines the suspension of the female body between the polarities of presence and absence, and insists that "the woman" can exist only between these categories of analysis."<sup>57</sup>

Thus, for Phelan, performance art appears as a method of resistance to dominant standards of gendered and raced subjectivity and various modes of its representation. Re-consideration of relationships between the performer and her body, self and other, subject and object that takes place in the framework of performance art provides the opportunity for individual-subjective and collective-cultural change. According to Phelan this type of

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid, p. 164.

performance criticism is capable to “interfere with the structure of hommo-sexual desire which informs most forms of representation and bring about new forms of representation.”<sup>58</sup>

Similar mode of interrogation was developed in the works of Rebecca Schneider. In her work *The Explicit Body in Performance* (1997)<sup>59</sup> Schneider revives the avant-garde vocabulary of transgressive in performance art, in particular in the strain of feminist performance art.

Analysing the works of female body artists – Carolee Schneeman, Annie Sprinkle, Karen Finley and Ann Mangunson, Schneider develops the concept of the explicit body to define the constructed character of the bodies within social relations. As Schneider explains: Explicit body is “a site of social markings, physical parts and gestural signatures gender, race, class, age, sexuality – all of which bear ghosts of historical meaning, markings delineating social hierarchies of privilege and disprivilege.”<sup>60</sup>

In feminist performance art the body becomes a sight, a mise-en-scène of transgression. Radical body artists are interested in exposing and subverting seemingly natural, but, in fact, constructed social characteristics of the bodies including gender, race, and sexual orientation. As Schneider points out: “any body bearing female markings is automatically shadowed by the history of that body’s signification, its delimitation as a signifier of sexuality – either explicitly (literally) in porn, or implicitly (symbolically) in art and popular representation.”<sup>61</sup> In patriarchal discourses of representation female body always appears as inferior to male and is coded as sexual and sexualised in complex network of symbolic representations. Transgressive impulse of feminist performance art is defined by its ability to unravel the multiplicity of meanings inscribed on physical bodies and expose the hierarchies of gender and race that has been

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Schneider Rebecca, *The Explicit Body in Performance*, (London and New York: Routledge, 1997).

<sup>60</sup> Ibid, 2.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid, p. 17.

naturalised in late-capitalist discourses. Commoditisation of female bodies as sights of (insatiable) desire in late-capitalism is made apparent in the works of Schneeman, Sprinkle, Finley and others performing the body as a stage for commodity fetishism. Exaggerated sexuality, excessive exhibitionism and shocking physicality in the work of these artists aim to subvert the dominant structures of representation that locate the female body as a consumerist product. Reading the works of feminist body artists Schneider provides the critique of capitalism grounded in Marxist analysis of political economy and avant-garde criticism of consumerist society in the works of Guy Debord.<sup>62</sup> In particular Schneider focuses on a critique of production of consumerist desire in late-capitalist societies that contributes to alienation and separation on individual and collective level. As Schneider puts it: “desire in late capitalism is instituted and circulated as insatiable, promoting infinite accumulation, has placed the emblematic female body in a particular relation to impossibility – always just beyond reach, symbolising that which can never quite be acquired, even for those possessing a body marked female.”<sup>63</sup>

In this context feminist artists appropriate a variety of tools to question patriarchal discourses of representation. Borrowing from porn industry as Annie Sprinkle or pagan rituals as Carolee Schneeman artists provide a critique of patriarchy based on subversion of its stereotypes of representation through grotesque, mockery and exaggerated sexuality. According to Schneider feminist performance art provides the ground for exposing colonial, racist male-dominant politics still persistent in contemporary Western societies.

Amelia Jones continues the explorations of political significance of radical body art in the works of Vitto Acconci, Hannah Wilke and Orlan. In her work *Body Art/ Performing the Subject*

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<sup>62</sup> Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle*, (London: Rebel Press, 2002).

<sup>63</sup> Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance*, p. 5.

(1998)<sup>64</sup> she argues for subversive potential of performance art to destabilize the structures and conventional models of subjectivity. Combining phenomenological and poststructuralist philosophies<sup>65</sup> and practices of body art Jones investigates the ways the Cartesian subject, and particularly its sexual and gendered dimensions, are dissolved through radical body art gesture. She argues for an explicit political component of the works of Acconci, Wilke, Orlan and others, and their ability to expose hidden hierarchies and inequalities in contemporary art criticism. As she points out: “when the body in performance is female, obviously queer, nonwhite, exaggeratedly (hyper)masculine, or otherwise enacted against the grain of the normative subject (the straight, white, upper-middle-class, male subject coincident with the category “artist” in Western culture), the hidden logic of exclusionism underlying modernist art history and criticism is exposed.”<sup>66</sup>

Understanding of the body art as an art of resistance to dominant discourses of subjectivity and as a consequence to a mode of art history and criticism associated with them, Jones argues for an ability of body art to achieve certain radically dislocating effects. In particular, she emphasises its ability to undermine the paradigm of western white male superiority masked as “disinterested” critical attitude. As Jones writes: “by exaggeratedly performing the sexual, gender, ethnic or other particularities of this body/ self, the feminist or otherwise non-normative body artist even more aggressively explodes the myths of disinterestedness and universality that authorize these conventional modes of evaluation.”<sup>67</sup>

From this perspective Jones sees radical body art as a central artistic method of bringing on the

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<sup>64</sup> Amelie Jones, *Body Art/ Performing the Subject*, (Minneapolis, London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

<sup>65</sup> Jones engages with the texts by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Simone de Beauvoir, Judith Butler and others.

<sup>66</sup> Jones, *Body Art/ Performing the Subject*, p. 9.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*, p. 5.



surface the hypocrisy of late-capitalist politics of gender, sex and race and examines the ways these attitudes can be destabilised.

Although I do not deny political significance of ritualistic performance art as political gesture subversive towards dominant cultural and social discourses, primarily to discourses of the individual body and the self, I see the primary importance of ritualistic performance in its ability to revive the rhetoric of the sacred in an explicitly secular context of contemporary art. The revolutionary potential of the works of Abramović, Montano and Athey is defined not only by their critique of stereotypes of representation of gendered, queer or raced individuality, but primarily in their attempt to transcend the notion of individuality as such and to go beyond discursive understanding of the body and the self.

Artists' borrowing from ascetic rituals of Buddhist, Hindu and Christian traditions aims to recreate the narratives of transformation of the ascetic body, the body beyond the constraints of intellect and reason. The notion of transformation as I employ throughout this dissertation symbolises the process of transcendence of language-based subjectivity and formation of ego-less subject reaching towards the state of unity and continuity with the other. Ritualistic performances of Abramović, Athey and Montano employ modified ascetic practices with the purpose of transcendence of culturally-constructed self.

I see principal difference between readings of performance art as politically transgressive (subversive) and my interpretation of ritualistic performances as acts of transformation. While theories of transgression introduced in the works of Jones, Schneider and Phelan emphasise negative relationships between dominant culture and subversive art that are in opposition to each other, transformation is grounded in therapeutic nature of ascetic ritual. I argue that ritualistic performance art is not so much based on undermining, devaluing or destroying cultural

discourses inscribed on the body, but in transforming them in a type of all-encompassing universal body.

In this respect, I find it crucial to engage with the studies of ritual in the realm of religion in order to shed the light on the blind spots in performance studies defined primarily by its exclusive focus on politics of performance art. The studies of ritual with which I engage in this dissertation introduce a new angle to look at performance art as the realm of sacralisation of individual bodies and an attempt at formation of a new type of self-less subjectivity.

### **Religious Ritual in Performance Studies**

Academic studies of religion, and in particular ascetic ritual and ritualistic sacrifice, have rarely been employed in contemporary performance studies. Besides the iconic 1970s and '80s studies of religious rituals by Victor Turner<sup>68</sup> and Richard Schechner,<sup>69</sup> and more recent studies of ritual in contemporary performance art by Erika Fischer-Lichte and Mary Richards,<sup>70</sup> the texts, which I discuss throughout this dissertation, religious asceticism and sacrifice have seldom been discussed in the context of radical body art.

Two recent works examine the influence of doctrinal religious ritual on radical body art: Eleanor Heartney's *Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art* (2004)<sup>71</sup> and Marla Carlson's *Performing Bodies in Pain: Medieval and Postmodern Martyrs*,

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<sup>68</sup> Victor Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play*, (Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982).

<sup>69</sup> Richard Schechner, *Between Theatre and Anthropology*, (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1985).

<sup>70</sup> Mary Richards, 'Ron Athey, A.I.D.S. and the Politics of Pain.' *Body, Space and Technology* e-journal (Internet Publication: Brunel University, Dept. of Performing Arts, 2003), <http://people.brunel.ac.uk/bst/3no2/Papers/mary%20richards.htm>. (accessed 19 April, 2014).

<sup>71</sup> Eleanor Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art*, (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2004).

*Mystics and Artists* (2010).<sup>72</sup> Heartney's seminal work examines the controversial link between radical body art and Catholic spirituality. Looking at the works of Tim Miller, Karen Finley, and Vito Acconci, Heartney argues the strong influence of Catholic narratives on the works of radical body artists and proposes to move beyond a limited understanding of avant-garde art as "antithetical to religious sensibility."<sup>73</sup> Introducing the Catholic concept of "Incarnational Thinking" based on the belief in a dual nature of Christ as both: a man and God (the physical body and divinity), Heartney examines contemporary body art as an art of sacralisation of the physical body and defines this process as inherent to doctrinal Catholicism. As Heartney argues: "Works by artists like these reveal that, far from being adversaries, art and religion are inextricably linked together, joined by Incarnational consciousness that enriches the both. Without taking the complexities... into account, we will fail to understand the deepest aspects of both Catholic spirituality and contemporary art."<sup>74</sup>

Instead of focusing on the "heretical" content of radical body art, based on the deconstruction of Christian morality, she traces parallels between Catholic devotional practices and transgressive performance art. According to Heartney, the performances of the sexual body, the queer body, and the abused body are not contradictory to Catholic narratives of sacralisation and divinization of the human and are often inspired by the Catholic background of performance artists and their Catholic imagination.

Marla Carlson furthers this discussion in her seminal work *Performing Bodies in Pain*. In the comparative analysis of Medieval Christian rituals of pain and contemporary performance art, Carlson examines the significance of ritualistic pain as public discourses. She argues for the

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<sup>72</sup> Marla Carlson, *Performing Bodies in Pain, Medieval and Post-Modern Martyrs, Mystics and Artists*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

<sup>73</sup> Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics*, p. 23.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, p. 178.

cultural meaningfulness of pain during transitional periods in history and traces parallels between the political implications of rituals of pain in the Middle Ages and in Post-modernity. As she notes: “[the] move toward modernity during fourteenth and fifteenth centuries entailed stresses similar to those that we encounter now, as we move through a post-modernity also fraught with uncertainty and that the body in pain provides an especially vital focus during these transitions.”<sup>75</sup>

Contemporary rituals of pain enacted in radical body art unravel the political connotations of religious ritualistic practices and their inherent ability to connect to large audiences. Analysing ritualistic performances as tools of feminist empowerment and of queer identification, Carlson defines performances of pain as public re-enactments “staged for the sake of community.”<sup>76</sup> Similar to Medieval religious rituals, contemporary rituals of pain function as sources of self-identification and self-assertion on the individual and group levels. From this perspective, religious rituals of pain and their secular re-enactment in contemporary performance art prove efficient tools of political change.

Taking into account limited representations of religious ritual in performance studies, I further explore the possibilities of the comparative analysis of traditional religious asceticism and contemporary performance art. However, instead of focusing on a Western-centered analysis of religious rituals from the Catholic and Protestant Christian traditions, provided in the works of Heartney and Carlson, I engage with the studies of ritualistic practices from Buddhist and Hindu religious traditions, which have not been fully addressed in recent performance art criticism.<sup>77</sup> I

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<sup>75</sup> Carlson, *Performing Bodies in Pain*, p. 2.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 15.

<sup>77</sup> Although Buddhist and Hindu religious rituals had been an object of research in Theatre Studies, in particular in the works of Antonin Artaud and Jerzy Grotowski, in recent studies of radical body art these subjects have rarely been addressed. For more information on appropriation of ritualistic practices in the works of Artaud and Grotowski see Antonin Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*, trans. Mary Caroline Richards, (New York: Grove Weidenfeld, 1958), and Jerzy Grotowski, *Towards a Poor Theatre*, ed. Eudenio Barba, (New York: Routledge, 2002).

find it important to expand the field of ritualistic studies in performance art to the areas of Eastern and Eastern-oriented spirituality, as well as indigenous ritual. The artist's borrowing from religious rituals often possesses a cross-cultural and eclectic character and embraces the worldwide variety of ritualistic practices. In this context, it is not sufficient to address ritualistic performance only through the lens of Catholicism and a more encompassing analysis is required. In my research, I examine a wide variety of religious rituals as reconstructed in the works of Abramović, Athey and Montano, including the practices of Theravada meditation retreats, Tantric practices of Kundalini yoga, chakra meditation, and cross-cultural rituals of self-healing and self-restoration.

I find it particularly important to examine the works of Montano through the lens of New Age spirituality. The contemporary syncretic and eclectic approach to religion contributed to her performative method based on self-sacralisation and creation of new personalised religious paradigms within the framework of ritualistic performance. The analysis of performance art in the context of New Age movements, a research problem I have yet to encounter elsewhere in Performance Studies, opens up the field of ritualistic performance to new understandings that I hope will help to form new and unexpected relationships and new readings of performance art.

The examination of performance art in its relation to theories of the ascetic self and the ritualistic sacrifice unravels implicit possibilities of ritualistic performance as a practice of individual and cultural transformation and reformation. The artists' public transgressions against and deconstruction<sup>78</sup> of the individual body and the social and cultural paradigms inscribed in it represent the potentiality of performance art to provide new models of subjectivity and

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<sup>78</sup> In present research I do not employ "deconstruction" as a method of literary analysis associated with the works of Jacques Derrida. By 'deconstruction' of individual body I rather define the process of alteration of ascetic subjectivity from profane to sacred. For more information on deconstruction as a method of post-structuralist analysis, see Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, (Baltimore and London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1967).

physicality. The ascetic body produced in the works of these artists is antagonistic to the individual self and embraces the variety of religious models of selfhood as self-loss.

Applying the concepts of the ascetic self and of sacrifice in the studies of performance art, a research approach that I have not previously encountered, helps to shed light on the process of individual and collective transformation as enacted in ritualistic performances and fill the gaps existing in the realm of performance studies. In particular, it helps to examine the mechanisms of the construction of a sacred subjectivity in the performative context and to understand the transformative impulse of ritualistic performance as an impulse towards individual and collective change. What follows in the ensuing case studies is an exploration of these various questions through the examination of ascetic rituals in contemporary performance art and through the analysis of ascetic transformation in its many modalities.

## Chapter 1

### Deathless Body and Ascetic Mind in Marina Abramović's Performances of Endurance

In the period from the early 1960s to 1970s, visual art practices went through profound transformation that put the body of the artist at the centre of the creative process. If in traditional artistic practices (painting, sculpture) body functions primarily as representation, in performance art of the mid-twentieth century, the body becomes a principal instrument and a medium of expression. Performance art placed the body of the artist inside the art-piece and made it an equivalent of the work of art. Living body, its texture, content and physical qualities emerged as the primary expressive materials of body artists.

The explosion of corporeal-based art projects was a logical result of the artistic search for more influential means of transgressing the established modernist movements of the era represented most explicitly by Abstract Expressionism. As Amelia Jones points out, “histories of contemporary performance art pose performance as part of the hidden strain of modernist avant-garde practice that went underground with the rise of abstract expressionism and its accompanying formalist object-oriented model of artistic practice and is thus purely oppositional to Pollock.”<sup>79</sup> Performance artists of 1960s, in an effort to resist the disappearance of the body in abstract painting, looked back to the practices of early avant-garde theatre, developed in artistic movements of the Futurists and Dadaists. From the very beginning of its existence, body art absorbed the transgressive impulse and energy of earlier performance artists, “who propagated a radical break with preceding formulae of artistic production and promoted creativity as a part of a wider cultural-political revolution.”<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Jones, *Body Art/ Performing the Subject*, p. 59.

<sup>80</sup> *Ibid.*

Return to physicality of the body, exploration of bodily processes, body possibilities and limits defined central goals of radical body art of the 1960s-1970s. The unrestrained physical body was understood by performance artists as an expression of the original freedom of the human species and as a principal tool of resistance to the overwhelming canon of late-capitalist culture associated with the model of the individual body. Instead the nude, sexual body, the body in pain, or the defecating or urinating body marked the beginning of the transgressive impulse of body art in its struggle to recreate the body beyond the limits of stereotypical physicality.

Artists developed a variety of methods to engage the body in the art process. Feminist performance art proposed a sexually assertive female body as a response to repressive patriarchal dominance in the arts. Yoko Ono performed *Cut Piece* (1964), engaging her audience in cutting off her dress. Shigeko Kubota in *Vaginal Painting* (1965) painted with a brush inserted in her vagina. Orlan performed *MeasureRage* (1965) using her body as an instrument to measure the architectural space of male dominant art institutions; Annie Sprinkle, interpreting feminist performance art of the 1960s in *Post Porn Modernism* (1989) invited the audience to examine her genital organs through a speculum inserted in her vagina.

A large number of artists explored the limits of individual body through performance of pain and self-injury. Gina Pane cut her body with a razor blade in *Le Lait* (1972) and burnt herself in *Conditioning* (1973) in which she lay on a metal bed-frame over an area of burning candles. Chris Burden was shot in the shoulder by his friend in *Shoot* (1971), while Vito Acconci in *Trademarks* (1970) bit into his arms, legs and shoulders.

The abject body was performed in the works of Carolee Schneeman and Hermann Nitsch. Schneeman displayed orgiastic body on the border of pain and erotic excitement. In *Meat Joy* (1964) Schneeman engaged partially naked participants in a type of erotic rite that consisted



of bodies being coloured with paint, rubbed with pieces of meat and fish and wetted with oil and water. Nitsch introduced ritualistic sacrifice as a part of his Orgies-Mysteries Theatre project. His monumental performances involved staged sacrifices of actors, with the inclusion of the bodies of dead animals, blood and quasi-religious symbols. The opening of animals' bodies, the displaying of their intestines to the public and the placing of these organs on human bodies were central to Nitsch's ritualistic works. The blood of dead animals was not only dripped over naked human bodies but also consumed by actors in performances.

Marina Abramović's performance of endurance emerged in the context of Western performance art of the 1960s. Abramović's early works were highly influenced by American and Western European body art, as well as a socialist context of post-war Yugoslavia, and her familiarity with shamanistic and religious ritualistic practices, in particular her interest in Buddhist mysticism and Tibetan indigenous practices of Bön.<sup>81</sup> Performance as a type of modified ascetic experience was explored in a variety of performances of endurance Abramović staged in the period from 1970 to the present. Employing practices of self-injury, such as cutting and burning the skin, self-flagellation and other forms of self-mutilation, and practices of self-discipline including abstinence from talking, sexual abstinence, sleep deprivation, fasting and prolonged periods of meditation inspired by religious ascetic rituals, Abramović launched a life-long project of self-redefinition within the framework of performance art. In the following chapter I analyze performances of Abramović as a type of ascetic ritual of discipline aimed at transformation of individual body associated with the model of docile body and formation of the sacred body beyond the constraints of dominant bodily discourses.

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<sup>81</sup> Abramović's interests were defined by her familiarity with the books of Alexandra David-Neel, Belgian-French explorer who extensively travelled to Tibet in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. For more information see Alexandra David-Neel, *Magic and Mystery in Tibet* (New York: Claude Kendall, 1932).

While some performance studies scholars have responded to Abramović's work with the language of feminism<sup>82</sup> and psychoanalysis,<sup>83</sup> many others have assumed a less political perspective and emphasized the ritualistic significance of the body in pain in Abramović's performances. The rhetoric of transformation in response to Abramović's performance of endurance was developed in the works of Erika Fischer-Lichte, Mary Richards, Marla Carlson, Peggy Phelan, Bojana Pejic, Thomas McEvelley amongst others.

Bojana Pejic finds it crucial to examine Abramović's performance as a process of subversion of rational subjectivity. In her text *Bodyscenes: an Affair of the Flesh*<sup>84</sup> Pejic claims the undoing of rational subjectivity in this artist's performances of endurance via rituals of pain and self-injury. As Pejic points out – Abramović's everyday body and the performative body are not identical: “only the physically, emotionally and mentally “ready” body can become a “performance body” and manage to keep its openness during the work. The spontaneity and the crossing of the mental and somatic boundaries, the support of pain, heat or cold, mutilations is something that occur in the work of art; it is something which the artists do or rather would try to avoid in life.”<sup>85</sup>

For Pejic, pain is crucial for this type of performer's transformation. Employing Elaine Scarry's argument of the cultural rejection of pain, Pejic argues the transformative value of pain in Abramović's work. Scarry states the cultural “aversiveness” of pain that is widely “recognized

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<sup>82</sup> For example Anna Novakov, ‘Point of Access: Marina Abramović's 1975 Performance Role Exchange,’ *Woman's Art Journal* 24.2(2004), pp. 31-35.

<sup>83</sup> Kathy O'Dell examines Abramović's performance of endurance through the lens of Lacanian psychoanalysis and his concept of the mirror stage, for full information see Kathy O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s*, (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), pp. 31-45.

<sup>84</sup> Bojana Pejic, “Bodyscenes: an Affair of the Flesh” in Marina Abramović et al., *Marina Abramović: Artist Body*, ed. Elena Carotti and Felicity Barbara Lutz, (Milano: Charta, 1998), pp. 26-41.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid*, p. 31.

as something which cannot be felt without being wished unfelt.”<sup>86</sup> Pejic further elaborates and defines pain as inherently transgressive towards rational cultural subjectivity. Thus, she sees Abramović’s performance as a process of de-individualisation and transformation of her culturally specific rational subjectivity. As Pejic puts it: “in exposing her own body to pain, Abramović is engaged in undoing two basic dimensions of the Western speaking/ seeing subject: physical pain has the ability to destroy language, the most shareable ‘thing’ in our logocentric culture. Physical pain has one further ‘action’: it annihilates the most elemental acts of perception. Pain “may end... by destroying one’s ability simply to see.”<sup>87</sup>

In *The Transformative Power of Performance*,<sup>88</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte celebrates the same aspects of Abramović’s performance that Pejic enjoys. Comparing Abramović’s performance of pain to culturally permitted practices of self-injury, in particular ascetic religious practices of Dominican nuns, Fischer-Lichte claims the ability of the performance of pain to be transformative on the individual and the collective levels, lifting the subject above the routines of everyday life. As she argues, publicly exhibited self-violence produces a wide array of sensation in spectators “ranging from awe, shock, horror, disgust, nausea, or vertigo, to fascination, curiosity, sympathy, or agony.”<sup>89</sup>

Fischer-Lichte examines Abramović’s performance as a type of crisis that suspends the artist and the audience between the norms and the rules of art and everyday life. The ability of Abramović’s work to transgress the cultural standard of conventional physicality through pain

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<sup>86</sup> For more information see Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985).

<sup>87</sup> Pejic, “Bodyscenes: an Affair of the Flesh,” p. 32.

<sup>88</sup> Erika Fischer-Lichte, *Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2010).

<sup>89</sup> *Ibid*, p. 12.

and self-injury is also deconstructive towards the conventional relationships between the artist and her spectators. As Fischer-Lichte puts it:

Throughout her performance, Abramović created a situation wherein the audience was suspended between the norms and rules of art and everyday life, between aesthetic and ethical imperatives. She plunged the audience into a crisis that could not be overcome by referring to conventional behaviour patterns... Whatever the transformations the spectators underwent in those two hours – transformations that, to some extent, were manifest in perceptible physical expressions – they flowed into and prompted concrete reactions.<sup>90</sup>

Redefining the subject-object, artist-audience, and artist-artwork relationships within a performative framework, Abramović proposes a new type of aesthetics based on deconstruction of binary oppositions.<sup>91</sup> Instead of rigid understating of boundaries separating the artist from her artwork, the audience from the artist and the subject from her body, Abramović's performances promote the process of transformation of cultural standard, cultural body and a type of relationships associated with them. From this perspective Abramović's work launches the process of not only individual transformation of the artist but collective alteration of mainstream standards of physicality and subjectivity.

This chapter furthers analysis upon transformation of the individual body in the performances of Marina Abramović. I claim that the artist's performance of endurance aims to produce the sacred body, associated with the model of an ascetic self, through the appropriation of religious rituals of discipline and endurance. I argue that by adapting disciplines of body and mind associated with Buddhist monasticism (in particular Vipassana meditation) and multicultural religious practices of seclusion, fasting and endurance, Abramović creates a body of transcendental experiences in keeping with the model of the sacred.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Fischer-Lichte refers to Derrida's concept of deconstruction, see Derrida, *Of Grammatology*.

The creation of the sacred body through intensive disciplines of the body and mind is at the core of ascetic ritual. Gavin Flood sees the ascetic ritual as a process of liberation through discipline, self-injury and limitation. In continuous submission to ritualistic tradition, the ascetic disciplines his/her body in order to reach the freedom from both -- biological constraint and mainstream paradigms of the body. The reversal of the flow of the body in intensive ascetic practices helps the practitioner to transcend not only the biological necessities of the body but, first and foremost, to overcome the limited model of ego-centred individuality. Flood argues:

To reverse the flow of the body is to place high levels of constraint upon the self – severe restrictions of biological life -- in order to achieve a future state of freedom from biological constraint (even if understood as a transformation of a bodily state). It is almost as though the restriction undergone in asceticism is a necessary condition for the intensification of subjectivity that transcends desire and individualism. This intensification of subjectivity is spoken of in terms of freedom from restriction: freedom from the restriction of sin in a Christian discourse, freedom from the karmic drive whose eventuality is further birth and suffering in a Hindu and Buddhist discourse. The purification of desire, spoken of by Nicholas Lash, as a common theme in asceticism is a synonym for freedom from biological necessity.<sup>92</sup>

Abramović's performance of endurance, as I maintain, pursues similar goals of de-individualisation via discipline and endurance. Her performative method is based on artist's submission to severe physical and psychological limitations with the purpose of self-transcendence. I discuss the development of Abramović's performance of endurance from her early works such as *Thomas Lips* (1975) and *Rhythm 0* (1974) to collaborative works with Ulay (Frank Uwe Laysiepen) to her most recent durational performances – *The House with the Ocean View* (2002) and *The Artist is Present* (2010). I outline her performative trajectory as a process of re-evaluation of the notion of ritualistic discipline from her understanding of ritual as explicitly violent experience to more internal and elusive forms of transformative disciplines such as meditation, silent retreat, and seclusion. Abramović's ritualistic performance is an attempt to re-

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<sup>92</sup> Flood, *Ascetic Self*, p. 14.

evaluate the notion of discipline from externally imposed and culturally constructed limit to personally chosen and transformative inner experience of ascetic discipline. The ascetic ideal of going beyond culturally constructed disciplines of the body by means of imposing even harsher disciplines is continuously explored in Abramović's performance of endurance.

Before proceeding with the examination of discrete performances, I find it important to distinguish between two models of the body addressed in Abramović's performances – an individual body of disciplined self and the sacred body of an ascetic self.<sup>93</sup> While both models emerge in result of subject's internalization of external disciplines and limitations, their nature and goals differ drastically.

The model of individual body is based on the canon of productive and consuming subjectivity developed within the last three hundred years of capitalist economic and cultural development. In the following section, I introduce Michel Foucault's model of the docile body to conceptualize the model of subjectivity developed in a modern nation state since the late seventeenth century. A docile body is a bodily standard that embraces the politics both of a capitalistic individualisation and the politics of discipline in socialist (and ex-socialist) societies. In the docile body externally imposed disciplines of the state are internalized and naturalized as the subject's own desires and the differences between private and public, personal and governmental, freedom and power are blurred. As Foucault notes: "The classical age discovered the body as object and target of power. It is easy enough to find signs of the attention then paid to the body – the body that is manipulated, shaped, trained, which obeys, responds, becomes skillful and increases its force."<sup>94</sup>

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<sup>93</sup> This classification facilitates my analysis of Abramović's performance and does not derive from artist's own approach to the body.

<sup>94</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish, The Birth of the Prison*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1995).

The model of the docile body demonstrates a new type of dictatorship characterized by its omnipresent hidden tactics of bodily control and discipline developed in the Western world. Together with Georges Bataille's theory of general economy, Michel Foucault's analysis of contemporary bodily standard provides an excellent critique of the twentieth century models of disciplinary power associated with late-capitalism.

The sacred body, on the contrary, is concerned with the goals of self-transcendence and de-individualisation through internalization of religious ascetic disciplines. Ascetics continuously internalize ritualistic practices with the purpose of transgression of mainstream conceptions of the individual self. While employing theories of the sacred body developed in the works of Emile Durkheim, Victor Turner, Talal Asad and others, I define ascetic process as a process of formation of non-productive and non-consuming subjectivity via renunciation of bodily desires and impulses. If the individual body functions as a biological machine for self-satisfaction, integrated into the capitalist paradigm of production and consumption, the ascetic body aims to exit the continuous cycles of production and consumption through the reversal of the physical limits and desires. Particularly in so far as the latter pertains to pain, food consumption and sexuality.<sup>95</sup>

These two models of physicality – the individual body and the sacred body – are continuously addressed and explored in Abramović's work. Transformation that takes place is based on the artist's engagement with alternative models of physicality associated with the sacred ascetic body. I define Abramović's performance of endurance as a process of transformation of the individual body via submission to, and intensification of, religious ascetic disciplines which result in the production of a sacred model of subjectivity. The formation of the

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<sup>95</sup> Flood, *The Ascetic Self*, p. 14.

sacred body in Abramović's work is performative and artist-centric, as it embodies a personal desire to reshape her own body and mind via ascetic ritual.

The transformation enacted in the artist's performances do, nonetheless, aim for collective change and the transcendence of the individual selves of spectators via what Abramović calls the process of "energy exchange." Engaging the audience in the interactive performance of endurance, Abramović hopes to influence her spectators on a deep psychological level via prolonged practice of meditation. The complexities of this process will be discussed throughout this chapter.

While Flood's theories constitute the principal conceptual frame through which I view Abramović's work, I also employ other theoretical models of ascetic self to augment my position. Primarily, I engage with the studies of ascetic subjectivity in the works of Joanna Cook and Robert Sharf. I analyze how the popularization of monastic ascetic practices throughout twentieth century, such as Vipassana meditation, led to the development of the popular ascetic 'technologies of the self' available for the laity around the world and performance artists in particular. What follows is an overview of Abramović's performance of endurance, thus establishing her work within the tradition of ritualistic performance. Once this ground has been solidified I will examine her performance in the light of traditional ascetic ritual, in particular ascetic practices of Vipassana meditation and disciplines of Buddhist meditation retreats.



## **(Un)disciplining the Body: Abramović's Solo Performance and the Politics of De-individualisation (1971-1976)**

In this central and centralised humanity, the effect and instrument of complex power relations, bodies and forces subjected by multiple mechanisms of 'incarceration', objects for discourses that are in themselves elements for this strategy, we must hear the distant roar of battle.<sup>96</sup>

Michel Foucault

In her solo works, performed in the period from 1971 to 1976, Abramović targeted her body as a site of cultural and social inscriptions that are transcendent in the radical body art, in particular through submitting the body to intensive disciplines and trials. The violation of the body, self-injury, construction of situations on the border of survival, endurance of difficult physical and psychological conditions, and inducement of altered states of mind were principal in the beginning of Abramović's artistic career.

One of Abramović's first performances, *Thomas Lips* (1975), a seminal work of endurance that was more recently restaged as a part of Abramović's project, *Seven Easy Pieces* (2005), demonstrates the artist's early preoccupation with endurance, pain and discipline of the body. In the performance Abramović appeared on stage naked, pinned up a photograph of a man with long hair to a back wall, sat at the table, ate a kilogram of honey, drank a litre of red wine, broke the crystal wine glass in her hand, making her palm bleed, and proceeded to stand up and cut a reversed star on her belly with a sharp razor blade. Still bleeding she knelt down and whipped herself with a leather whip for a lengthy period of time spreading the blood from her wound all over her body. When the self-flagellation was over, Abramović reclined on a block of ice in the form of the crucifix where she remained motionless and silent for 30 minutes. The

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<sup>96</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 308.

performance was over when the audience members could no longer tolerate the self-inflicted torture and removed the artist from the ice bed.<sup>97</sup>

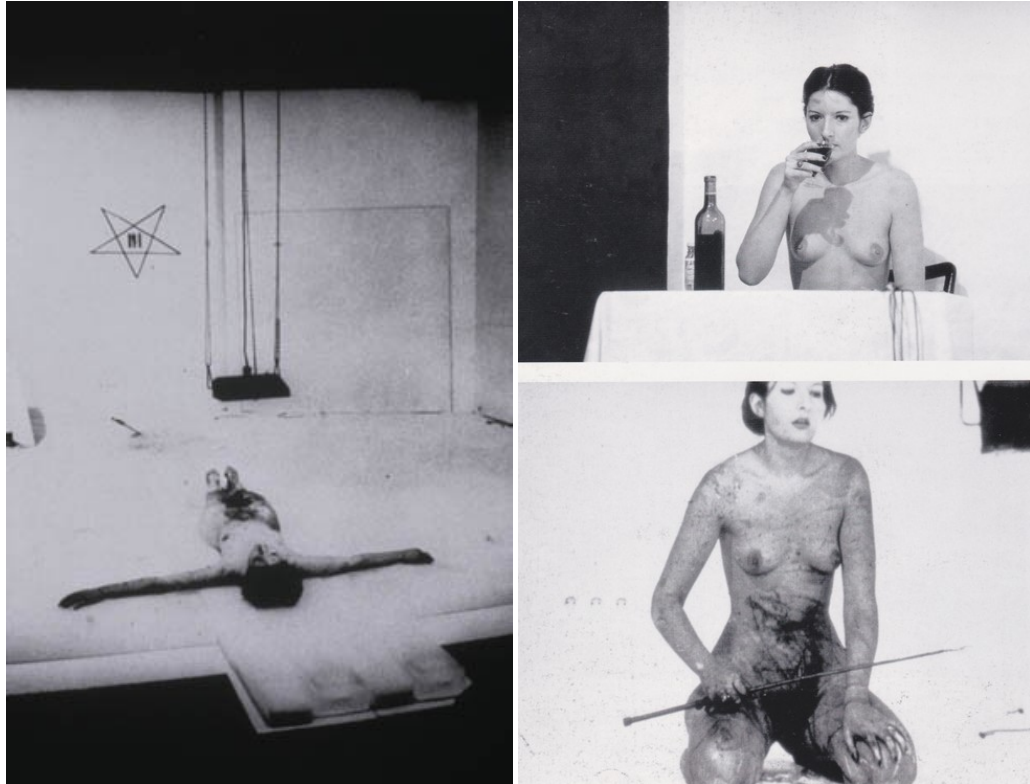


Figure 1.1-- Marina Abramović, *Thomas Lips*, 1975

This piece was a first manifestation of Abramović's non-conventional relationship with her body expressed via performance of radical self-discipline. Inspired by Abramović's brief affair with a Swiss man named Thomas Lips, whom she met while participating in Hermann Nitsch's performance of *Orgien Mysterien Theatre*,<sup>98</sup> though the performance had little to do

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<sup>97</sup>This and the following performances are reconstructed from Abramović's notes, artist's biography by James Westcott and the extensive video documentation of Abramović's performative work. See James Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies: A Biography*, (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2010), p. 23

<sup>98</sup> Abramović performed with *Orgien Mysterien Theatre* in Vienna in 1975, the performance repulsed the artist. See "Marina Abramović Untitled," interview with Chrissie Iles, Munich, February 8, 1996, *Grand Street*, 63 (1996), p. 193.

with the romance. For Abramović *Thomas Lips* commenced a life-long exploration surrounding the limits of the body and mind. As Abramović puts it: “This was when I realized that the subject of my work should be the limits of the body. I would use performance to push my mental and physical limits beyond consciousness.”<sup>99</sup>

The performance deals with the disciplined body and the modes of its transcendence. The body of Abramović in performance is turned into a site of disciplinary power, meanwhile the artist violates the body as an attempt to go beyond the limits of the culturally constructed self. On the one hand, the artist reconstructs and submits to the symbolism of the socialist state by inscribing the red star, the symbol of Socialist Yugoslavia, featuring on its flag, on her body. On the other hand, she attempts to break through the materiality of the body. The experience of external discipline and self-control was of primary importance for Abramović’s early performative works. Consequently, the narrative context for understanding Abramović’s early performances relates to authoritarian influences in her youth and the impact of these experiences on her identity and artworks.

Growing up in the Socialist Federal Republic of Yugoslavia through the 1950s and ’60s in the family of former war partisans made the life of Abramović a sequence of disciplinary activities on self-improvement and self-management. The artist’s parents, Danica and Vojin Abramović, were both war heroes and important members of the communist party. Vojo was a chief commander of Tito’s elite guard. Danica was a director of government agency responsible for monuments and artworks for public and government buildings and later a director of Belgrade’s Museum of Revolution.<sup>100</sup> They both devoted their lives to building the communist state while sacrificing their family to a set of work responsibilities and party commitments.

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<sup>99</sup> Abramović et al., *Marina Abramović: Artist Body*, p. 15.

<sup>100</sup> For more information see Westcott, ‘Partisan Stories’ in *When Marina Abramović Dies*, pp. 17-25.

Yugoslavian internal politics in the mid-twentieth century were defined by governmental control and intense disciplinary politics. In spite of the Titiosim<sup>101</sup> that provided a softer version of socialist dictatorship and made the performance of Abramović possible as such, state intervention on all levels of public and private life was more than common.

Abramović's family structure was based on strict, almost militaristic, discipline. Marina's failure to follow the daily routines imposed by her mother would usually result in a beating or other disciplinary punishments.<sup>102</sup> With the divorce of Abramović's parents and Vojo's re-marriage, Danica took complete control of Abramović and her brother Velimir. Until the age of twenty-nine Abramović, was not allowed to leave the house after 10 o'clock nor have any relationships. In spite of Danica's support of Marina's artistic pursuits,<sup>103</sup> most of Abramović's performances of endurance executed in the early 1970s were kept secret from her mother. In her interview with Thomas McEvilley the artist points out: "All the performances in Yugolsavia I did before 10 o'clock in the evening because I had to be home by then. It's completely insane, but all of my cutting myself, whipping myself, burning myself, almost losing myself in the fire star, everything was done before 10 in the evening. The complete structure in Yugoslavia was against what I was doing."<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Josip Broz Tito, a long-standing leader (later president) of Yugoslavia pursued the politics of Yugoslavia's quasi-independence from totalitarian politics of USSR and promoted the goals of fast industrialisation and modernisation of the state in order to compete with more advanced nations of the West.

<sup>102</sup> Westcott points out that during her teen-age and early twenties "Marina was in constant, cowering fear of breaking the multitude of rules in the house and risking to be beaten. Danika had unshakeable laws and rituals, imposed through mantras like "Bathroom is fee," a phrase that was repeated every night before bedtime to order Marina and Velemir [Marina's brother] to wash themselves immediately. If Marina refused to wash or did it half-heartedly, she would be beaten. See Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, p. 23.

<sup>103</sup> Abramović mother always supported Marina's artistic pursuits and encouraged her studies at the Belgrade Academy of Fine Arts.

<sup>104</sup> Marina Abramović et al., *Marina Abramović: Artist/ Body*, p. 16.

*Thomas Lips* elaborates on many of the issues of Abramović's childhood and can be examined as an artist's ode to her disciplinary past. Abramović's fear of bleeding,<sup>105</sup> intolerance of cold and her complex relationships with socialist politics and orthodox religion are all addressed in the performance. Restaging *Thomas Lips* as a part of *Seven Easy Pieces*, Abramović bleeds and cries to the accompaniment of Serbian Orthodox troparion, *Save O Lord Thy People*,<sup>106</sup> a reference that was also significant in Abramović's biography. The artist's great uncle Varnava was a patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox church and her grandmother Milica, with whom Abramović lived till the age of six, was an ardent believer. The patriotic sentiment of the performance is emphasized by Abramović wearing a communist military hat. The entire context of the work suggests the glory of Yugoslavian past and Abramović's struggle with its patriotic narratives which she embodies in her own body and being. Abramović's biographer James Westcott notes that *Thomas Lips* was an artist's attempt to recreate her culture and heritage. As he writes the performance "was an unconscious accumulation of religious, political and pathological symbols that held a primal power over Abramović: the red wine of the Eucharist practiced by her grandmother and her assassinated great uncle, the patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox Church; the star of communism that her parents fought for, but which she preferred to think of as the pentagram of the occult...; the childhood phobia of bleeding and struggle for attention that it expressed; and then the final martyrdom in the icy crucifixion."<sup>107</sup> From this

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<sup>105</sup> In early childhood Abramović suffered from hysterical hemophilia, for more information see Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, p. 20.

<sup>106</sup> "Look upon us suffering in the world Slavic Souls  
Nobody Understands Us, Our fate's not worth a penny  
Remember the times of glory in Thy name to wars we went  
The war's our eternal burden, our life is of true faith."  
The text is reconstructed from the video of the performance, *Seven Easy Pieces*, directed by Babette Mangolte, (2010).

<sup>107</sup> Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, p. 82.

perspective the performance suggests Abramović's submission to disciplinary narratives of her childhood and manifests the power they express.

*Thomas Lips* was also one of the first performances directly engaging with Christian narratives and religious practices. During the socialist era in Yugoslavia Orthodox Christian practices were repressed and Abramović's appropriation of Christian symbolism – the cross of ice in the form of Christ's crucifix, red wine as a symbol of Christ's blood in orthodox Christianity, and the practice of self-flagellation practiced by Christian ascetics – might be seen as Abramović's criticism of socialist oppression of religion. This argument is central in Richard's critical analysis of Abramović's performance. As she notes: "The presence of honey and wine as symbolic substances, the action of self-flagellation and then Abramović's submission to the cross of ice, can all be interpreted in the light of the story of Christ's crucifixion."<sup>108</sup> However, I see Abramović's recreation of religious rituals within the secular framework of *Thomas Lips* as an early indication of the artist's unique performative method, rooted in adaptation and a borrowing from religious asceticism. While cultural sentiment is significant in *Thomas Lips*, I find it more important to address the subversive and transformative impacts of Abramović's early performance as it pertains to the individual body and her desire to break through the cultural limit of individuality. Recreating the model of socialist physicality, Abramović engaged in the parallel process of its deconstruction through self-injury and self-abuse. In order to elaborate upon the notion of the individual body, and modes of its subversion, I find it crucial to introduce the model of the docile body developed in the writings of Michel Foucault. This will help to bring to light Abramović's transformative impulse and the underlying content of her performance of self-violation.

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<sup>108</sup> Mary Richards, *Marina Abramović*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2010), p. 12.

In his work, *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault introduces his concept of the docile body that encompasses the models of individual subjectivity and disciplinary politics developed in the modern nation state. Although Foucault's critique is primarily focused on the politics of the Western nation states, his notion of disciplinary power is relevant to Abramović's cultural background and the disciplinary politics of socialist Yugoslavia.<sup>109</sup>

### **Individual Body as Docile Body**

The concept of disciplinary power concerns bodies and is rooted in production of individual bodies as objects of political and cultural intervention. Foucault begins his argument by emphasizing the need of the state to interfere in the private life of its citizens by means of totalizing and immediate control of their bodies. In fact, the disciplinary power is defined by its very ability to produce individual bodies out of chaotic disorganized masses of people. As Foucault puts it: "Discipline makes individuals; it is the specific technique of a power that regards individuals as objects and instruments of its exercise."<sup>110</sup>

In targeting its citizens the state is concerned with the utility and productivity of these bodies. The link between economy and politics in the contemporary state unavoidably dictates the economy of the body together with its politics. What distinguishes disciplinary power is its preoccupation with meticulous control of the activities of bodies so as to constitute them as politically docile as well as economically efficient and productive. Foucault writes:

The body is... directly involved in a political field; power relations have an immediate hold upon it; they invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it to carry out tasks, to perform ceremonies, to emit signs. This political investment of the body is bound up, in accordance with complex reciprocal relations, with its economic use; it is largely as a

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<sup>109</sup> Although there is a significant difference between socialist state and western democratic state, which Foucault primarily examines, they both represent different modalities of the nation state and operate by politics of disciplinary power.

<sup>110</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 170.

force of production that the body is invested with relations of power and domination; but, on the other hand, its constitution as labour power is possible only if it is caught up in a system of subjection (in which need is also a political instrument meticulously prepared, calculated and used); the body becomes a useful force only if it is both a productive body and subjected body.<sup>111</sup>

The production of individuals that are both efficient and obedient embraces all activities of the state. For three hundred years the state developed an intricate network of disciplining rules and regulations that constituted the life of such individuals. Although the mechanisms of state control might not be obvious, they have nevertheless been all-encompassing and omnipresent, drastically influencing the type of individuality formed in contemporary societies.<sup>112</sup> Foucault outlines four principal directions in the disciplining politics of the state that also constitute the principal traits of individual body: cellular, organic, genetic and combinatory.

Firstly, disciplinary power is concerned not only with the production of individual bodies, but with an individuality that is framed as explicitly distinct from others – cellular individuality. One of the methods of production of cellular individuality is its separation (in time and space) from the mass and assignment of unique individual space to each body. Foucault demonstrates how, in the eighteenth century, factory partitioning becomes a principal form of organising individuals within the working space. Spaces separated by walls and gates and construction of individual cells were necessary to interrupt collective non-productive activities, and channel the individual energy in a way that is useful and efficient. The principle of ‘enclosure’ was rooted in the need for surveillance and monitoring of each and every activity of the worker. As Foucault

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<sup>111</sup> Ibid, p. 26.

<sup>112</sup> “These were always meticulous, often minute, techniques, but they had their importance: because they defined a certain mode of detailed political investment of the body, a ‘new micro-physics’ of power... Small acts of cunning endowed with a great power of diffusion, subtle arrangements, apparently innocent, but profoundly suspicious, mechanisms that obeyed economies too shameful to be acknowledged, or pursued petty forms of coercion – it was nevertheless they that brought about the mutation of the punitive system, at the threshold of the contemporary period.” For full text see Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 139.



puts it “its [disciplinary space] aim was to establish presence and absence, to know where and how to locate individuals, to set up useful communication, to interrupt others, to be able at each moment to supervise the conduct of each individual, to assess it, to judge it, to calculate its qualities or merits.”<sup>113</sup>

On the other hand, partitioning contributed to the formation of hierarchy and ranks by assigning a particular fixed role to each individual. In the factory each worker occupied a particular space depending on his/her individual functions in the process of production. In elementary education the principle of “enclosure” contributed to pupils’ distribution according to their progress, worth, character, application, cleanliness and parents’ fortune. In general, by assigning individual places in school and work the disciplinary power engaged each individual in the supervision, and the simultaneous work, of all. This made the educational space “function as a working machine, but also as machine for supervising, hierarchizing, rewarding.”<sup>114</sup>

Cellular individuality produced within a working space is also an organic individuality to the extent to which its submission to disciplinary power is naturalized and objectivised. In an organic individuality the demands of disciplinary power are internalized and perceived as the subject’s own desires and needs. One disciplinary control method, over an organic individuality, is the submission of individual activities to a timetable that prevents idleness by splitting activity in minutes and seconds. In schools, in the army, at work all activities are organised according to the productive division of time. The working timetable defines the activities that are perceived by individual as natural and organic – the time of waking up and going to sleep, the time of food consumption and rest, etc.

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<sup>113</sup> Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, p. 143.

<sup>114</sup> *Ibid*, p. 147.

Concurrently, disciplinary power breaks down the movements of the body and shapes the individual body in accordance with institutional needs of the work or educational space. In the docile body each movement is functional, productive and should contribute to the overall productivity of the system. As Foucault puts it: “In the correct use of the body, which makes possible a correct use of time, nothing must remain idle or useless: everything must be called upon to firm the support of the act required.”<sup>115</sup>

These types of bodily discipline arrange a positive economy of the body that results in “theoretically ever-growing use of time” and eliminate any possibility of waste (neither of time nor of movement). As Foucault explains: “one must seek to intensify the use of slightest moment, as if time in its very fragmentation, were inexhaustible and or as if, as least by an ever more detailed internal arrangement, one could tend towards an ideal point at which one maintained maximum speed and maximum efficiency.”<sup>116</sup>

Through this system of knowledge, the disciplinary demand for productive bodies is naturalised and inscribed as organic to all human beings. As Foucault puts it: “In becoming the target for new mechanisms of power, the body is offered up to new forms of knowledge. It is the body of exercise, rather than of speculative physics; a body manipulated by authority, rather than imbued with animal spirits; a body of useful training and not of rational mechanics, but one in which, by virtue of that very fact, a number of natural requirements and functional constraints are beginning to emerge.”<sup>117</sup> The docile body excludes all the possibility of the natural physical body in its original form (as physical body, animalistic body) and defines it as primitive, inefficient and unproductive.

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<sup>115</sup> Ibid, p. 152.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid, 154.

<sup>117</sup> Ibid, p. 155.

The disciplinary power also contributes to the formation of individuality as genetic. A genetic individuality is trapped in a continuous ever-growing progress towards an optimal end. The organisation of genesis in the army or at school includes division of time into efficient periods of practice and training; organisation of these periods or segments of time according to an analytical plan so that the simplest elements in education are followed by a more complex, final examination that shows the educational progress of the subject and production of series of tasks for each individual in accordance with his level of knowledge, rank and seniority. “Segmentation, seriation, synthesis and tantalization” of time in genesis contributes to the formation of more efficient individuality.

The assignment of exercises is another form of discipline of the body. As Foucault explains, “exercise is that technique by which one imposes on the body tasks that are both repetitive and different, but always graduated. By bending behaviour towards a terminal state, exercise makes possible a perpetual characterisation of the individual either in relation to this term, in relation to other individuals, or in relation to a type of itinerary.”<sup>118</sup> These two forms of discipline – segmentation of time and assignment of exercises – produce genetic individuality: “the small temporal continuum of individuality-genesis [that is] like the individuality-cell or the individuality-organism, an effect and object of discipline.”<sup>119</sup>

Lastly, the disciplinary power produces combinatory individuality – a type of individuality that is maximized in its relation with other bodies. It is a compositional body that manifests a higher efficiency when united with other bodies and thus creates a more productive subjectivity. The body constituted as a part of multi-segmentary machine can be placed, moved around and articulated on others in order to increase the productivity of each individual body. On

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<sup>118</sup> Ibid, p. 157.

<sup>119</sup> Ibid, p. 159.

the other hand, the coordination of time of each combinatory individual results in optimization of their forces and optimization of their work results. The combination of bodies at schools or in the working place was the principal method to increase the efficiency of each individual body in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Foucault introduces the notion of tactics to describe combinatory politics of the disciplining power. As he puts it: “Tactics, the art of constructing, with located bodies, coded activities and trained aptitudes, mechanisms in which the product of the various forces is increased by their calculated combination.”<sup>120</sup>

In Abramović’s early performances the docile body appears as a starting point of her radical criticism. The artist’s continuous attempt to subvert the cultural canon of individual self defines her desire to find the space of non-discipline (or at least the space of relative freedom from the external cultural limit) in the highly controlling culture of socialist Yugoslavia. In order to de-naturalize the learnt patterns of culturally defined physicality Abramović engaged in the performance of self-injury, self-humiliation and self-deprivation as methods of deconstructing her individual self. In her series of performances *Rhythm (Rhythm 10, Rhythm 5, Rhythm 2, Rhythm 4 and Rhythm 0)* Abramović continued the exploration of the variety of mental and physical states that dealt with the alternative conditions of the body and mind. Constructing a non-productive, non-consuming body often on the border of survival, Abramović proposed performance of ascetic endurance as a method of interrogating disciplinary power.

For example, *In Rhythm 5* (1974) Abramović constructed a large outdoor star made of wooden sawdust soaked in petrol in an attempt to recreate the symbolic red star of Communism. After the star was lit, Abramović lay down in the middle of the construction hoping to stay inside until the fire completely vanished. Her body spread in a star-like form, she soon lost

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<sup>120</sup> Ibid, p. 167.

consciousness as the fire consumed all the oxygen. Coincidentally, there was a doctor in the audience who, with another spectator, saved her life by removing her from the star.

As Abramović recalls, this experience of loss of the control over her mind infuriated her and she decided to produce a piece that would directly engage with the idea of conscious and unconscious presence in the performance. As a response to *Rhythm 5* Abramović produced *Rhythm 2* (1974), performed at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb. *Rhythm 2* was based on the idea of a planned loss of control in front of the audience. The performance lasted for about 6 hours. Abramović consumed two pills used in psychiatric care: one that forces catatonic patients to move and; another very strong sedative used to calm schizophrenic patients during violent fits. Abramović took the first pill and, since she wasn't sick, her body experienced some sort of epileptic attack. Her body shook uncontrollably, causing her to almost fall down from the chair, while her mind was fully aware of everything that happened to her. After one hour, when the effects of the first pill had wore off, Abramović took the second medication, which put her in a state of unconscious stupor. For the remaining 5 hours of the performance, Abramović was completely unaware of herself, her loose and relaxed body was sitting on the chair, meanwhile she continued to smile absent-mindedly. The artist recounted that she couldn't remember anything of what happened during the 5 hours that the pills had control over her mind.

In another significant work, *Piece 0* (1975), Abramović positioned her silent and passive self in front of the audience in the *Studio Mora* in Naples, Italy, and encouraged the audience to manipulate her body in the way they desired. The instructions for the performance read: "There are seventy-two objects on the table that one can use on me as desired. I'm taking the whole responsibility for six hours. There are objects for pain, objects for pleasure."<sup>121</sup> Among the objects she included a fork, sugar, chains, needles, a bottle of perfume, an axe, bell, a lamb bone,

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<sup>121</sup> Marina Abramović et al., *Marina Abramović*, ed. Anna Daneri, (Milan: Charta, 2002), p.30.

a feather, a pen, a book, a Polaroid camera, lipstick, a bowler hat and a pistol loaded with a single bullet. Within 6 hours of the performance Abramović's body was undressed, a cup of water was poured in her head, a word "end" was written across her forehead, her neck scratched and bleeding with rose thorns and, finally, a loaded pistol was placed in Abramović's hand and pointed at her neck. A violent discussion burst in the audience, whether the artist should press the trigger of the gun or not. After exactly 6 hours, Abramović stopped the performance and started walking towards the audience. As soon as her agency was re-appropriated these audience members escaped actual confrontation with Abramović.



Figure 1.2 -- Marina Abramović, *Piece 0*, 1974

The performance of the body on the border of survival was of extreme importance in the *Rhythm* series. Engaging with non-productive passive body, Abramović provided a critique of the individual canon of subjectivity. According to Foucault, disciplinary power operates by

individualisation and naturalization of productive behaviour that is beneficial from the perspective of the state, including self-development, self-perfection, and education and work. Breaking down the physical body, changing its organic trajectory of movements, submitting it to the never-ending tasks and disciplines of work and school, the state renders the individual incapable of spontaneous emotional and physical expression. On the contrary, Abramović's performance of endurance is rooted in extreme frenzy and ecstasy of purely physical experiences. Developing each sensation and each movement to its extreme, Abramović broke through the security of the disciplined body. Instead of the culturally promoted process of self-perfection and self-management, Abramović engaged in the process of self-degradation via performance of self-abuse and self-violation. While the dominant bodily canon in Yugoslavia was represented by the productive and athletic body of young socialists, Abramović performed as a naked obscene body on the border of life and death, sanity and insanity, health and sickness. In the *Rhythm 2* and the *Rhythm 5* she performed an unconscious, or drugged body, demonstrating her complete negation of the rational progressive subjectivity of the socialist state.

According to Foucault, the docile body internalizes the external cultural disciplines towards an optimal end. The contemporary standard of subjectivity is based on the positive economy of the body. Docile body excludes any possibility of waste (waste of time, space and physical resources) in its continuous striving for economic efficiency and productivity. Abramović's self-torture in her *Rhythm* series is visibly purposeless and inefficient. The spectators could rarely justify the artist's meaningless self-injury, self-flagellation, cutting and burning. Time and again Abramović was interested in performing the body in a state of loss; the body that wasted its resources, rather than attempted to amplify its productivity. There was no constructive purpose behind Abramović's public bleeding, performative loss of consciousness or

masochistic self-suffocation. The activities, in which the artist engaged, such as intake of psychotropic drugs, could not be explained from the perspective of state rationality or economic efficiency.

Often performing naked, Abramović aimed to emphasize the physical quality of the body and its ability to feel pain, cold, heat and pleasure. This body, “the body imbued with animal spirit,” was at the core of Abramović’s performative inquiry. Giorgio Agamben,<sup>122</sup> elaborating Foucault’s theory of disciplinary power, defines modernity as a crucial point of transformation of a simple living body into a subject of state intervention. Foucault states: “For millennia man remained what he was for Aristotle: a living animal with the additional capacity for political existence; modern man is an animal whose politics calls his existence as a living being into question.”<sup>123</sup> Politicization of bare life results in the impossibility of bare life outside the cultural, social and political significations of the body. For Agamben, the state operates by the exclusion of physical life from the realm of mundane affairs and its consequential re-inclusion in the state in a modified disciplined form. As he writes: “together with the process by which the exception everywhere becomes the rule, the realm of bare life – which is originally situated at the margins of the political order – gradually begins to coincide with the political realm, and exclusion and inclusion, outside and inside, bios and zoe, right and fact, enter into a zone of irreducible indistinction.”<sup>124</sup> The location of bare life at the centre of the state’s intervention, and the consequent impossibility of separating the physical life of the body from the politics of the state,

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<sup>122</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998).

<sup>123</sup> Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction* (New York: Random House, 1978), p. 188.

<sup>124</sup> Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 9.



presents a central tragedy of modernity that allows “both to protect life and to authorize a holocaust.”<sup>125</sup>

Abramović’s continuous attempt to de-politicize and de-individualize her body in radical performance of endurance demonstrates artist’s desire to break through political and cultural dimensions of her subjectivity. In order to reverse the cultural and the political self to the state prior to individualisation and disciplinization, Abramović devised a variety of methods of self-loss that, even in the beginning of her artistic career when Abramović’s engagement with religion was rather complementary, derived from ascetic ritual. Her search for freedom from external disciplines led her in the direction of religious asceticism and toward religious practices of radical discipline.

In her later works, Abramović engaged with the studies of mind-body transformation through appropriation and modification of traditional ascetic practices. Employing methods of self-injury, mindfulness meditation, abstinence, fasting, seclusion and mantra concentration, Abramović sought to develop an alternative performance practice based on search for the self beyond the constraints of rational subjectivity. The creation of a body of transcendental experiences in a performative context became the principal aim of the artist. As she points out: “I want to develop a new consciousness and approach an idea of unity between body and soul, between body and soul and cosmos... I want to demonstrate the unbelievable construction of our planet, point out its sources if energy and how, with a new consciousness, we can learn to rearrange our body and soul within this structure.” Her collaborative performances with Ulay, focused on the subjects of body-mind transformation, energy transformation and energy exchange as part of performative experiences. These, among many other subjects, were

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<sup>125</sup> Ibid, p. 10.

continuously addressed and explored in her later works. In the following section I discuss the complexities of ascetic process and its influence on Abramović's performative method.

### **Two-headed Body: Abramović and Ulay's Collaborative Works (1976-1988)**

At this point, invoke the grace of the Holy Spirit to make you progress in religion. Come, Holy Spirit, come, O God, love; fill my heart, which alas, is empty of that is good. Set me on fire to love you.<sup>126</sup>

Gertrude the Great of Helfta

The discipline, as a starting point of Abramović's transgressive impulse, is nevertheless the principal element of inspiration for her performative method. While transgression of the individual body demonstrates Abramović's discontent with externally imposed disciplines, it also manifests another dimension of discipline associated with the notion of ascetic endurance. In her attempt to transcend the disciplinary self Abramović submitted her body to a network of self-created rules aimed at reshaping and transforming her body in opposition to individualisation. The voluntary acceptance of physical and mental suffering was Abramović's means of regaining control over her body and mind and purifying her subjectivity from cultural and political paradigms of individualism. From this perspective, Abramović's performance of endurance functions as an ascetic practice of self-discipline and self-transformation pursuing an ultimate goal of liberation from the constraints of the dominant culture.

Modern anthropology links the emergence of the ascetic body to the process of individual transformation in the negative rite and in the initiation ritual. In cultural anthropology it was Emile Durkheim who helped to popularize the idea of asceticism as the modality of a negative cult. Durkheim links the production of the sacred body to a process of ritualistic separation of the

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<sup>126</sup> Gertrude the Great of Helfta, *Spiritual Exercises*, trans. Gertrude Jaron Lewis and Jack Lewis, (Kalamazoo, MI: Cistercian Publications, 1989), p. 37.

sacred and profane realms. He argues that sacred beings are formed as inherently “separated beings”; characterized by a radical break of continuity between themselves and the profane beings. Here the sacred is produced through constrictions surrounding rites – in rituals that “do not prescribe certain acts to the faithful, but confine themselves to forbidding certain ways of acting.”<sup>127</sup> Negative rites take the form of interdictions based on the necessity to limit the interaction between the worlds of profane and sacred.

In order to establish the break of continuity between these two realms the religious subject has to go through a negative rite that is often linked to the process of endurance, violation and transgression of the physical body. The physical body epitomizes profane subjectivity and requires a long process of transformation. Radical asceticism is a modality of a negative rite aimed at separating the practitioner from the realm of profane affairs and elevating themselves to a state of sacredness. The main purpose is to rise above the limited world of profane affairs and cultivate a sacred body that exists in drastic opposition to ego-centric subjectivity. As Durkheim puts it:

The pure ascetic is a man who raises himself above men and acquires a special sanctity by fasts and vigils, by retreat and silence, or in a word, by privations, rather than by acts of positive piety (offerings, sacrifices, piety, etc.). History shows to what a high religious prestige one may attain by this method: the Buddhist saint is essentially an ascetic, and he is equal or superior to the gods.<sup>128</sup>

Although the negative cult is based on a system of abstentions, Durkheim defines it as “a positive action of the highest importance.”<sup>129</sup> Only through the negative rite can a man establish the relationships with the sacred. The withdrawal from the world of the profane, through submitting to a set of religious interdictions, is seen as a necessary prerequisite for accessing the positive cult. As Durkheim puts it:

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<sup>127</sup> Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*, p. 299.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid, p. 311.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

The man who has submitted himself to its prescribed interdictions is not the same afterwards as he was before. Before, he was an ordinary being who, for this reason, had to keep at a distance from the religious forces. Afterwards, he is on a more equal footing with them; he has approached the sacred by the very act of leaving the profane; he has purified and sanctified himself by the very act of detaching himself from the base and trivial matters that debased his nature.<sup>130</sup>

Durkheim gives extreme importance to physical and mental suffering in the formation process of the sacred body. Through pain the condition of the subject's body is modified from profane to transcendental. Rising above his limited profane subjectivity in the ritual of pain the ascetic develops an exceptional strength and ability to subdue his own ego in service to a narrative higher than the self. As he points out: "suffering is the sign that certain of the bonds attaching him [ascetic] to his profane environment are broken; so it testifies that he is partially freed from this environment, and, consequently it is considered the instrument of deliverance."<sup>131</sup>

Victor Turner<sup>132</sup> elaborates upon Durkheim's notion of the sacred body and proposes the theory of liminality to define the unique state of the ascetic body in initiatory rituals. In early-twentieth century anthropology, in particular in the works of Arnold Van Gennep,<sup>133</sup> the term "liminality" defines a principal stage in rites of passages. Rituals that mark a person's transition from one stage of social life to another, as from a girl to a woman, or from a boy to a man. Van Gennep's classification of rites of passages is comprised of a pre-liminal phase (separation), a liminal phase (transition), and a post-liminal phase (reincorporation). Borrowing from Van Gennep, Turner focused on the liminal stage of rituals as a space for the transformation of the ascetic's identity. During the liminal stages of ritual the temporary ascetic goes through a number of ordeals and trials, usually of an extreme physiological quality, before he is able to enter a new social condition. The liminal space is situated between two social worlds and is

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid, p. 309.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid, p. 315.

<sup>132</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969).

<sup>133</sup> Arnold van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1960).

where the liminal subjectivity is produced. Liminal entities are characterized by passivity, humility, psychological and physical ambiguity. As Turner points out: “liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial. As such, their ambiguous and indeterminate attributes are expressed by a rich variety of symbols in the many societies that ritualize social and cultural transitions. Thus, liminality is frequently likened to death, to being in the womb, to invisibility, to darkness, to bisexuality, to the wilderness, and to an eclipse of sun or moon.”<sup>134</sup> The notion of liminality also signifies physical places and spaces of transition where the structures of profane life are suspended, and established norms of behaviour are subverted.

During the liminal stages of a rite of passage, the neophyte goes through physical and psychological trials in order to finalize the transformation from one social status to another. Turner argues that the neophyte’s ability to resist physical and mental trials and humiliations prepares him for new stages of maturity and status. In his analysis of Ndembu rites of passage, which are concerned with senior chief initiation, Turner demonstrates the multiplicity of ordeals the chief-elect has to undergo before he could enter the state of chieftainship. The figure of the chief-neophyte is constructed through his passivity and weakness based on the reversal of existing social hierarchies. As Turner points out “a chief is just like a slave on the night before he succeeds” and has to demonstrate the virtues of patience in humility, while going through the ritualistic prevention of sleep, verbal and physical insult, and fasting. The liminal state is associated with the mystical powers appropriated through the endurance of the ordeals and is transformative for both the person going through the initiation and the community that observes and participates in the rituals.

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<sup>134</sup> Victor Turner, ‘Liminality and Communitas’ in Ronald L. Grimes, ed., *Reading in Ritual Studies*, (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, 1996), p. 512.

Abramović's performances often reflect the journeying sensibility of ascetic liminality. The importance of physical and psychological trials associated with the negative rite has been further explored in Abramović's collaborative works with the German artist Ulay (Uwe Laysiepen). Their encounter in 1976 led to the transformation of ascetic endurance into a principal and central life philosophy for both artists. Being romantically and professionally involved for the duration of twelve years, the two artists focused on the production of collaborative performances of endurance that would represent a diversity of disciplines aimed at transforming artists' body and mind.

From the very beginning of their collaboration, Abramović and Ulay defined their combined goal as production of an alternative to the individual body subjectivity named "That Self." That Self was explained as a pure circulation of energy that emerges between two bodies engaged in performative ascetic action and required complete physical and mental presence. The gender, the age and the personal characteristics of That Self were less important in contrast to its ability to produce and channel the energy between two physical bodies. That Self was an experiment in understanding how bodies can be transformed through physical endurance and mental effort.

In the present section, I focus on a selected number of Abramović and Ulay's collaborative performances that illustrate the artists' preoccupation with ascetic transformation and with what they have defined as "energy exchange" between two individuals on physical and psychological level. I explain the process of the production of a shared subjectivity as an ascetic process of elimination of self-centred individuality and formation of the sacred body of transcendental experiences. Concurrently, I examine Abramović's collaborative works with Ulay, as a first stage of Abramović's preoccupation with Buddhist ascetic practices and

meditation techniques, that was later explored in her solo performances (such as *The House with the Ocean View* and *The Artist is Present*).

Abramović and Ulay's early collaborative works emphasized the importance of physical and mental trials in the formation of a new subjectivity. Often performing naked and engaging in physically challenging and abusive performative rituals Abramović and Ulay recreated the rhetoric of liminality in a secular context. The stripping from the social status and the stereotypes of gender, age and occupation were crucial for their performative method.

The transitional state of both artists who, for the duration of the first three years of their collaboration didn't have a permanent job or a place of living, often influenced the content of their performances. Soon after their encounter, Abramović and Ulay bought a Citroen van that became their mobile home, and travelled across Europe, committing full-time to the art-making. To clarify their existential and artistic goals Abramović and Ulay composed the *Vital Art* manifesto, outlining the rules of their daily existence: "No fixed living space. Permanent movement. Direct contact. Local relation. Self-selection. Passing limitations. Taking risks. Mobile energy. No rehearsal. No predicted end. No repetition. Extended vulnerability. Exposure to chance. Primary reactions."<sup>135</sup> The works executed during this period promoted simplicity, endurance of difficult psychological and physical conditions, and construction of the situations in-between life and death, pain and pleasure, freedom and authority.

Abramović and Ulay's first collaborative performance, *Relation in Space*, was staged at the Venice Biennale in 1976 and consisted of artists moving naked towards each other with a varying speed and allowing their bodies to collide. Performance lasted for 58 minutes and illustrated different levels of intensity of physical interaction between two people. During the

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<sup>135</sup> Abramović Marina and Ulay, Ulay/ Marina Abramović, *Relation Work and Detour* (Amsterdam: Ulay/ Marina Abramović, 1980).

performance the interaction between Abramović and Ulay shifted from gently touching to physically hitting and significantly hurting each other. The mechanical energy of one body was continuously changing the trajectory of movement of the other body, creating an interruption in the free flow of individual energy. At the same time, the collision between two bodies produced a new type of energy that transgressed and multiplied the individual force. Westcott explains the artists' intention in *Relation in Space* as follows: "They wanted to create a compound strength between their two bodies and their two wills."<sup>136</sup>

Pain and intensity were at the core of the Abramović and Ulay's performative exploration. The transgression of the notions of individual space, individual security and individual margins, defined Abramović and Ulay's attempt to engage with alternative models of physicality. In "Liminality and Communitas," Turner defines liminal entities as "neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremony."<sup>137</sup> Similarly Abramović and Ulay aimed to perform the space in-between two individual bodies, feminine and masculine, movement and stillness.

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<sup>136</sup> Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, p. 101.

<sup>137</sup> Turner, *The Ritual Process*, p. 10.



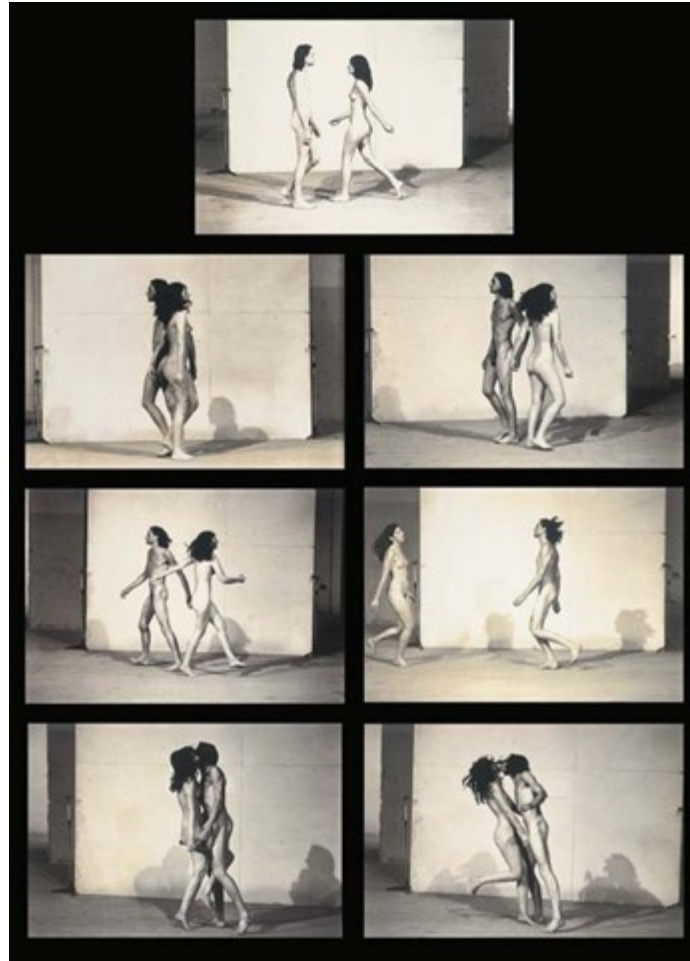


Figure 1.3 -- Marina Abramović and Ulay, *Relation in Space*, 1976

In the period from 1975 to 1980, the artists explored the variety of physical states that could be described as liminal in their ability to transcend the model of individual body and alter the type of cultural subjectivity of both artists. The idea of merging two bodies – “a two-headed body” was at the core of Abramović and Ulay’s experiment. In *Breathing In/ Breathing Out* performed in Belgrade in 1977, while their noses were blocked with cigarette filters, the artists exchanged a single breath. With their mouths locked together Abramović and Ulay exhaled and inhaled a lungful of air until it turned into carbon dioxide after the duration of nineteen minutes, causing both artists to faint. In *Dark/ Light* (1978), Abramović and Ulay exchanged slaps gradually enhancing aggression and speed until one of them decided to flinch. In performance

named *AAA-AAA* (1978), staged for Belgian television and performed only for a camera, the two artists screamed into one another's faces until one of them lost voice.

The physical exchange of movement, fluids, breaths, and sounds between two bodies was a significant step towards the formulation of a new concept of energy as non-subjective selfless matter transgressing the boundaries of individual bodies. Through touching, kissing, hitting, and physically abusing each other, the artists searched for the limits of the individual body in order to transgress and go beyond them. Focusing primarily on the exchange of raw physical energy, Abramović and Ulay reached towards self-transcendence and elimination of boundaries of individual self.

Performative exploration of energy and its possibilities led Abramović and Ulay in the direction of mysticism, paganism, and Buddhist spirituality with emphasis on the practices of contemplation and meditation. The shift of focus from external physical energy to the internal aspects of energy fluctuation and transmission signified a new phase in the Abramović and Ulay's collaboration. As artists stated in their catalogue *Relation Work and Detour*:

At the beginning of our relation work we considered vitality as an energy for physical motion, with the effort to direct movement towards physical limitations. Our approach to concrete physical matter changed gradually by the influence of our executed vital work. Now we consider vitality as energy of sensitivity for inner and outer dialogues. Such a dialogue depends on the speed of sensitivity. This movement gives to us a greater opportunity towards the opening.<sup>138</sup>

It is important to note Abramović and Ulay's turn to Eastern religious practices,<sup>139</sup> which significantly influenced Abramović's later performative method of energy exchange, based on modification of Buddhist monastic disciplines. The counter-cultures of the 1960s and 1970s, in Western Europe and North America, endeavoured to redefine concepts of religion and spirituality. De-traditionalisation of religion (the decline of Christian belief and proliferation of

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<sup>138</sup> Abramović and Ulay, *Relation Work and Detour*, p. 189.

<sup>139</sup> I examine the process of Easternization and the development of the New Age spirituality in Chapter 3.

alternative spiritualities), emerging in association with psychedelic experimentation and the hippie movement, provided context for the explosion of new religious traditions and popularization of Eastern religiosity, as well as indigenous spirituality originally alien to the West. In his research on spirituality in post-war America Robert Wuthnow points out:

1960 and 1970s provided new opportunities for people “to expand their spiritual horizons. The 1960s began with Christian theologians declaring that God was dead; it ended with millions of Americans finding that God could be approached and made relevant in their lives in more ways that they have imagined...New religious movements of Asian origin, such as Zen and Hare Krishna, spread in metropolitan areas, as did the humanistic spirituality of such groups as Esalen, EST, and Scientology.<sup>140</sup>

Western popularization of a wide range of Eastern spiritual traditions from Tibetan Buddhism, to Zen Buddhism, to Kundalini Yoga launched a process of intercultural socialization (discussed in detail in Chapter 3). In general terms, Easternisation was a twentieth century New-Age movement based on transformation of traditional Eastern religions and eclectic approaches to spirituality. These approaches represented reforms to the world’s religious traditions and alteration according to the individual needs of contemporary spiritual practitioners. Christopher Partridge notes:

The philosophies, techniques, and icons of [New Age] religious traditions contribute to a process of spiritual bricolage in which a range of beliefs and practices are reinterpreted in terms of the experience and well-being of the seeking self.<sup>141</sup>

This cultural context of New-Age spirituality and Easternization contributed to Abramović and Ulay’s romantic outlook on religious traditions and alternative religious practices. A combination of ascetic rituals, borrowed from multiple religious traditions, came to define their new performative method.

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<sup>140</sup> Robert Wuthnow, *After Heaven: Spirituality in America since 1950s*, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), p. 53.

<sup>141</sup> Christopher Partridge, *The Re-enchantment of the West: Alternative Spiritualities, Sacralization, Popular Culture and Occulture*, Vol. 1, (London and New York: A Continuum Imprint, 2004), p. 104.

The artists' consequent trips to Australian deserts, the Sahara, Gobi, India, Tibet and Thailand, for the purpose of accumulating alternative insights on the world's spiritual practices, changed the type of performance Abramović and Ulay were producing. Living for six months in Australia in the wilderness with aboriginal tribe Pitjantjatjara, Abramović and Ulay explored the space of stillness, a contemplative life-style, and its spiritual benefits. Abramović documented a number of episodes in the desert that she linked to the experience of invisible energy fields and mind transformation. For example, she retells the experience of complete identity blackouts while camping close to Ayers Rock.<sup>142</sup> While gathering firewood she felt complete dissociation from her ordinary self: "I didn't know who I am, where I am going, why I was there. For maybe five minutes I was completely paralyzed in that spot, absolutely displaced."<sup>143</sup> Abramović linked this experience to the proximity of the source of "great energy" in Ayers Rock.<sup>144</sup> The artist also remembers the experience of heightened intuition, prophetic dreams and telepathic communication.

Concurrently, Abramović and Ulay travelled to Bodhgaya, North India, where both artists participated in the extended meditation retreat. It was Abramović's first encounter with the practice of Vipassana meditation and it significantly influenced her later performative practice.<sup>145</sup> She was deeply impressed by the structure of the retreat with its strong focus on asceticism and self-control. As the artist noted, it was there that she realized the importance of physical endurance and commitment in meditation: "For me the most interesting lesson of this is that you

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<sup>142</sup> Ayers Rock is a large sandstone rock formation in the Northern Territory in central Australia

<sup>143</sup> Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, p.162.

<sup>144</sup> Two years later from the incident Abramović had identical experiences while meeting with Dalai Lama in Italy.

<sup>145</sup> Vipassana meditation is examined in the following section.

have to go 100 percent to the real end of what you can do, and then after that it's not up to you any more."<sup>146</sup>

The result of these newly received spiritual experiences was a grandiose durational project called *Nightsea Crossing* that Abramović and Ulay vowed to perform for ninety (non-consecutive) days in museums and art-galleries all over the world from 1981 to 1986. The idea of the project was genius in its simplicity – artists sitting in front of each other at the table silently and avoiding any movement for prolonged periods of time. In the following 5 years *Nightsea Crossing* was performed 22 times for 1 to 16 days at a time and involved daily sittings during the opening hours of the gallery (usually from 10 am to 5 pm). For the duration of the exhibition Abramović and Ulay followed a strict ascetic lifestyle including fasting,<sup>147</sup> almost complete silence and sexual abstinence. As Ulay remembers: “In order to endure these performances you have to totally withdraw into yourself. If you communicate, you may get a conflict. You have to stay very tight to yourself. It's a very egoistic exercise.”<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>146</sup> Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, p. 172.

<sup>147</sup> Artists avoided any food except juice or yoghurt which they consumed after the performance.

<sup>148</sup> Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, p. 166



Figure 1.4 -- Marina Abramović and Ulay, *Nightsea Crossing*, 1981

Although *Nightsea Crossing* was not the first experiment in prolonged exercise of stillness (in the performance of *Relation in Time*, 1977, the artists sat back-to-back with their hair braided together for 17 hours), it was the first work that explored the possibilities of internal transformation and transmission of psychic energy within and between two bodies. Instead of focusing on physical expression of individual energy in movement, through a scream or slap as in previous works, *Nightsea Crossing* proposed a different dimension of individual force as potency and unlimited possibility. In comparison to their earlier performances, in which the energy was released into the external environment or exchanged between the artists through physical movements, this experience was based on pure accumulation and preservation of energy without its release. Westcott defines this difference as crucial for the understanding of the ascetic spiritual nature of the experiment: “while their physical performances had discharged them from energy, aggression, and even pain, *Nightsea Crossing* was a charging performance, through which they accumulated intolerable and unreleasable energy, agony, ecstasy, and even hatred

toward each other. *Nightsea Crossing* was the opposite of catharsis. It was in a sense a meditative practice that was – initially – too highly advanced for its practitioners.”<sup>149</sup>

Inspired by the nomadic lifestyle of Australian aboriginals and Buddhist meditation traditions, Abramović and Ulay aimed to embody the idea of ‘here and now’ as a continuous experience and a conscious choice. Dwelling in the present moment through motionlessness and mental focus only on each other, avoiding external distractions, the artists engaged in a type of spiritual practice. Abramović reported unpredictable transformation of her mental flow and appearance of altered states of mind similar to the states of mind of advanced meditation practitioners: “for hours and hours we didn’t do anything except sit at the table and look at each other. It opened the doors to perception to us and we were surfing different mental states.”<sup>150</sup> The new mental experiences as described by Abramović involved her heightened sense of smell and a gradual increase in her field of vision to the full 360 degrees panorama (as Abramović claims “I literally could see all public from my back”).<sup>151</sup>

Abramović also described transcendental experiences similar to the meditative visions of advanced Tibetan Buddhist practitioners she encountered later in life in Dharamsala, India. She describes one occasion, during the execution of *Nightsea Crossing* when she lost the sight of Ulay, but while still staring in the same direction, she had a vision of glowing light that appeared in the place of Ulay’s body:

I was looking at Ulay directly in front of my eyes and he completely disappeared – there was a shell of light and absolutely no body. I was so shocked by this image that I thought: ‘because we haven’t eaten and slept, I can’t see properly anymore.’ I tried to blink because I has also been preventing myself from blinking for a long time. I blinked to see if the image would change, but it didn’t change. For a long period of time, he absolutely didn’t exist except in the form of a light-sell...<sup>152</sup>

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<sup>149</sup> Ibid, pp. 165-190.

<sup>150</sup> Richards, *Marina Abramović*, p. 95.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid, p. 98.

<sup>152</sup> Abramović et al., *Marina Abramović: Artist/ Body*, p. 402.

The silent interaction between Abramović and Ulay during the performance influenced not only the artists' states of mind but also had a visible effect on their audience. Richards interprets *Nightsea Crossing* as an experiment in the reversal of time that would challenge the Western audience's obsession with the lack and 'waste' of time. The stillness of performers, lack of action and incredibly long duration of the piece was very unusual for regular gallery goers. As she writes: "This performance may be interpreted as effecting a reversal, thereby exposing the viewer to the practice of everyday submission undertaken by most of us who find ourselves running to keep the clock's ticking."<sup>153</sup> However, in spite of the Western discipline of time, a large number of audience members all over the world would spend hours and hours contemplating Abramović and Ulay's silent and motionless piece.

The *Nightsea Crossing* proposed the model of the sacred body based on artists' romanticized vision of Eastern spirituality as mystical, other-worldly and transformative. The performance of motionless silent body, similar to the body of the Buddhist monk engaged in the process of deep meditation, was at the core of the *Nightsea Crossing*. There was nothing profane or material about artists' bodies. For the duration of the performance Abramović and Ulay avoided physicality of food consumption and elimination, urination, talking, moving, touching, or falling asleep. Performing their bodies devoid of physical needs and desires, the artists aimed to convey detached spirituality and transcendental qualities of Eastern asceticism.

To emphasize their connection to alternative models of spirituality and religiosity Abramović and Ulay appropriated the symbolic mysticism of both Tibetan Buddhism and Australian aboriginal practices. In one of the *Nightsea Crossing* performances the artists painted swastika, the Buddhist symbol of auspiciousness and good fortune, on the wall of the museum hall. While staging a variation of *Nightsea Crossing* that was titled, *Conjunctions*, the artists

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<sup>153</sup>Richards, *Marina Abramović*, p. 98.



invited the Tibetan monk and aboriginal shaman Watuma Tarruru Tjungarrayi to their extended museum sitting. Performing *Nightsea Crossing* in Sydney in 1981, Abramović and Ulay engaged snakes that were placed on the table to see if the behaviour of snakes would change as the artists' meditation progressed.

The sacred body in the *Nightsea Crossing* embodied the artists' romantic vision of Eastern spirituality inspired by a New-Age attitude. Combining symbolism and methods of multiple religious traditions Abramović and Ulay searched for the universal space of transformation that would unite Tibetan Buddhism and Shamanism, Vipassana meditation and paganism. At the core of the *Nightsea Crossing* experiment was not only the internalization of religious traditions but also modification of doctrinal religious narratives and free-play with monastic asceticism.

The revelations of *Nightsea Crossing* were particularly important to Abramović's evolution as a performance artist after her separation from Ulay in 1987 and her subsequent return to the genre of solo performance. They directly informed her later experimentation with Buddhist meditation techniques and attempts to engage the audience in collective experiences of energy transformation and exchange. In the following section I analyze Abramović's latest performances – *The House with The Ocean View* and *The Artist is Present* – as principal works on self-transformation and self-transcendence inspired by the Buddhist practice of Vipassana meditation.

### **Meditative Introspection: Abramović's Interactive Performance (1988 – 2013)**

And how monks, does a monk practise contemplating the body in the body? Here, monks, a monk goes to a forest, or the roots of a tree or an empty place and sits, folding his legs in a cross-legged position, making his body straight and sets up mindfulness in front of him. Mindful, he breathes in; mindful, he breathes out... And again, monks, a monk, when walking, knows, "I am walking"; when standing he knows, "I am standing"; when sitting he knows, "I am sitting"; when lying down he knows, "I am laying down"; or, however his body is disposed, he knows it.<sup>154</sup>

Satipatthana-Sutta

In his theory of asceticism, Flood argues that the ascetic self is formed by religious tradition and internalizes both the tradition and its goals.<sup>155</sup> In this section I aim to demonstrate construction of the sacred body in Abramović's performances via internalization of the tradition of Vipassana meditation and the practices of awareness associated with it. In a mode similar to ascetic practitioners, Abramović replaces secular disciplines of the individual body with the harsh disciplines of Buddhist monastics. What follows is an overview of the Theravada tradition of Vipassana meditation and the examination of its influence on Abramović's recent performances – *The House with the Ocean View* and *The Artist is Present*.

As noted previously, Abramović's interest in Vipassana meditation developed in the context of the modernist popularization of the Buddhist monastic tradition. The widespread adaptation of meditation by laity throughout the world was due to religious reformations of monastic cultures in the early and mid-twentieth century. Sarah Le Vine and David Gellner<sup>156</sup> emphasize the role of Buddhism, and in particular Vipassana meditation, in the ethno-nationalist revival in Burma, Sri Lanka, Thailand and Nepal at the beginning of the twentieth century. Buddhist monastic practices have been popularized as an important part of a national identity and

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<sup>154</sup>“Satipatthana-Sutta” in Sarah Shaw, ed., *Buddhist Meditation: An Anthology of Texts from Pali Canon*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), p. 80.

<sup>155</sup> Flood, *Ascetic Self*, p. 3.

<sup>156</sup> Sarah Le Vine and David N. Gellner, *Rebuilding Buddhism: The Theravada Movement in Twentieth-Century Nepal*, (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2005).

as a central aspect of self-representation of Eastern cultures to the West. Public availability of Buddhist meditation to wider audiences signified a major change in the Theravada tradition, promoting Buddhism as the religion of a free people.<sup>157</sup> Le Vine and Gellner state: “Buddhist modernists mark a radical departure from traditional Buddhist revivalists, because they seek to monasticize the laity as well, that is, to bring the laity up to the level of Buddhist virtue that had previously been thought possible and appropriate only for monks.”<sup>158</sup>

Buddhist revivalism often accompanied social reform and promoted practices of Vipassana meditation as scientific or at least compatible with Western science. Robert Sharf sees the popularization of Buddhist meditation by the proponents of Vipassana as a response of Buddhist cultures encountering Western rationalism and trying to integrate into the world’s scientific community. He writes:

Vipassana and Zen have been largely responsible for perpetuating the image of Buddhism as a rational, humanistic, contemplative creed that eschews magic and empty ritual. And it was this image of an enlightened spirituality based on experience rather than faith that attracted many scholars to Buddhism in the first place.<sup>159</sup>

Instead of presenting the popular image of Vipassana as an authentic meditation practice originating in Buddha’s teaching, Sharf emphasizes the recent development of this tradition. Contemporary practice of Vipassana can be traced back to early-twentieth-century teachers and Buddhist revivalists such as Phra Acharn Mun (1870-1949) in Thailand, Dharmapāla (1864-1933) in Sri Lanka, and U Nārada (1868-1955) and Ledi Sayādaw (1846-1923) in Burma whom each contributed to the spread of Buddhist tradition around the world. Prior to popularization of

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<sup>157</sup> [Buddhism] will make every man, woman and child among you free of all the oppression of caste; free to work; free to look your fellowmen bravely in the face; free to rise to any position within the reach of your talents, your intelligence and your perseverance; free to meet men, whether Asiatics, Europeans or Americans on terms of friendly equality and competition...; free to follow out the religious path traced to the lord Buddha without any priest having the right to block your way; free to become teachers and models of character to mankind. For more information see Le Vine and Gellner, *Rebuilding Buddhism*, p. 9.

<sup>158</sup> *Ibid*, p. 11.

<sup>159</sup> Robert H. Sharf, “Buddhist Modernism and the Rhetoric of Meditative Experience.” *Numen* 42 no 3, (1995), p 228-283.

meditation, Theravada monastic practices were closed to the laity. Monastic disciplines primarily consisted of chanting and recitation of texts<sup>160</sup> pertaining to meditation rather than direct engagement in meditation practice. The concepts of devotion and cultivation of morality were more important in traditional Buddhist discourses. The realm of meditation and pursuit of enlightenment was a prerogative of highly developed practitioners, meanwhile the majority of monastics devoted their lives to the development of a wholesome attitude in prayer and devotion.

The preoccupation with altered states of mind and mind-transformation through meditation developed, together with the modernization of Buddhist monastic life, as a result of economic necessity. Today, Vipassana meditation is promoted to wide audiences not only as a fast way to achieve enlightenment, but also as a unique method of self-perfection and self-development. Vipassana centres emphasize the health benefits of their practices, positive psychological influences, and a general ability to improve the life and wellbeing of meditators. The traditional narratives of Vipassana meditation, including enlightenment and liberation from cyclic existence, are now accompanied by contemporary claims of psychological balance, creativity and healing. Vipassana meditation retreats, often taught by lay meditation masters,<sup>161</sup> emphasize the non-religious and universal character of Vipassana, furthering laity accessibility regardless of religious affiliation and cultural background. Vipassana is often introduced as a science of the body and an art of living rather than a religious or devotional tradition. For example, *The Code of Discipline for Vipassana Meditation* in the Dhramashringha meditation centre<sup>162</sup> reads: “It [Vipassana] is an art of living which frees the individual from all the

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<sup>160</sup> Satipatthāna-sutta and the Mettā-sutta in Burma

<sup>161</sup> One of the most recognised lay teachers of Vipassana meditation is Satya Narayan Goenka (30 January 1924 – 29 September 2013).

<sup>162</sup> A similar code of discipline for Vipassana meditation distributed at the Vipassana International Academy in Igatpur is reproduced in Kantowsky, D., *Buddhists in India Today: Descriptions, Pictures, and Documents*, (Delhi: Manohar, 2003), p. 207-211.

negativities of mind, such as anger, greed, ignorance, etc. It is a practice which develops positive, creative energy for the betterment of the individual and society.”<sup>163</sup>

Abramović’s engagement with Buddhist meditation practices thereby encompasses a variety of cultural and religious changes in Theravada Buddhism within the last hundred years. Her preoccupation with mind transformation, therapeutic healing and energy exchange through meditation reflects a historically specific New Age attitude that merges Buddhist religion and philosophy with Western psychology, psychoanalysis and science. That said, I do not deny the significance of traditional Buddhist monasticism for Abramović’s performance of endurance. However, this claim has to be addressed through the lens of new-age transformation of traditional monasticism.

### **Ascetic Body in Modern Buddhism**

In her text *Meditation in Modern Buddhism*<sup>164</sup> Joanna Cook demonstrates the formation of the ascetic subjectivity through the practice of Vipassana meditation. Cook examines meditation as a ‘technology of the self’ “through which people intend to effect a change upon themselves, which is consonant with religious tradition.”<sup>165</sup> Relying on Flood’s argument surrounding the construction of the ascetic self via internalization of religious ritual, Cook demonstrates various methods of shaping a monastic identity for both the monks and laity. Through continuous practice of Vipassana meditation, the practitioner learns to internalize the tradition and to interpret individual experiences in accordance with the dominant religious narratives. As Cook puts it: “the development of meditative discipline and monastic identity

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<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

<sup>164</sup> Joanna Cook, *Meditation in Modern Buddhism: Renunciation and Change in Thai Monastic Life*, (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.

involves a process of learning to reinterpret subjective experiences and learning to alter subjectivity.”<sup>166</sup>

The elimination of illusionary attachments and ego-centric subjectivity is at the core of the Buddhist paradigm. Therefore, Vipassana meditation practice is directed towards ego-transcendence and realization of the true nature of the self as the absence of the individual self. Buddhist monastics learn to “understand the process of religious formation as a shedding of a delusional perception of ‘self,’ the ultimate conclusion of which is the realisation of enlightenment: the cessation of suffering and the cycle of rebirth.”<sup>167</sup>

The new ‘enlightened’ identity of Buddhist renunciant is formed via internalization of disciplines of meditation, self-control and religious narratives associated with them. The central story-line of Vipassana meditation is a formation of subjectivity free from all the constraints of the material world; the subjectivity that transcends the limits of the individualism. From this perspective, Vipassana practices can be understood as a deconstruction of profane subjectivity and a formation process toward a new sacred self.

The discipline, as a central component of the ascetic path to freedom, has been examined in the works of Talal Asad. Analyzing the order of monastic life in Medieval Christian monasteries, Asad states that the willing obedience to the authority of ritual represents the central premise of the ascetic process of self-transformation: “The Christian monk who learns to will obedience is not merely someone who submits to another’s will by force of argument or by the threat of force – or simply by way of habitual, unthinking response... The obedient monk is a

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<sup>166</sup> Ibid, p.70.

<sup>167</sup> Ibid, p. 11.

person for whom obedience is *his* virtue – in the sense of being his ability, potentiality, power – a Christian virtue developed through discipline.”<sup>168</sup>

The voluntary submission to the disciplines of the monastic life constitutes the personal power of the ascetic, associated with freedom from material desires of the body rather than mere obedience to external authority of religious institutions. The monastic disciplines are associated with personal freedom, conscious choice and virtue, and differ from the disciplines of individual body defined by state control and state intervention in the private life of individuals.

The opening up of Buddhist monastic practices to the laity of the twentieth century allowed for the formation of Buddhist monastic subjectivity in the public domain for the duration of temporary ordination. In contemporary Buddhism, ‘monastic’ and ‘lay’ are not mutually exclusive categories and a large number of Buddhist practitioners engage with Buddhist disciplines on a temporary basis. Monastic retreats, meditation workshops and master classes promote monasticization for short periods of time and encourage students to transform their subjectivities in intensive Vipassana practices lasting from ten days to one month. Ideally meditation retreats should culminate with the students’ realization of the illusory nature of the individual self and a degree of release from the limitations of the ego<sup>169</sup>.

At the core, Vipassana retreats offer a practice of mindfulness meditation aimed at the development of the ultimate knowledge of reality. One of the oldest Buddhist’s texts on meditation, *Satipatthana Sutta*, argues the inherent impermanence (*annica*) of mind and matter, the changeable nature of life and our inability to perceive the true nature of reality without continuous practice of meditation.<sup>170</sup> Contemporary Vipassana meditation retreats teach of two

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<sup>168</sup> Talal Asad, *Genealogies of Religion: Discipline and Reason of Power in Christianity and Islam*, (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1993), p. 125.

<sup>169</sup> Cook, *Meditation in Modern Buddhism*, p. 73.

<sup>170</sup> “Satipatthana-Sutta,” p. 80.

stages – concentration meditation and insight meditation. During the concentration meditation the practitioner engages with a single object of attention – traditionally physical sensations at the tip of the nose – in order to develop single pointed focus. In contrast to this one-pointed concentration intended to remove mental clutter, insight meditation focus upon ever-changing sensations of body and mind, as a tool for understanding the nature of both. Jack Kornfield, a teacher of Vipassana meditation, points out that: “insight meditation is practiced by developing bare attention, a seeing-without-reacting to the whole process of our world of experience, to consciousness, and to all the objects of consciousness.”<sup>171</sup>

The awareness of bodily position, bodily temperature, pleasant and unpleasant feelings coming from the surface of the body comprises the Vipassana process. Insight meditation starts as a sitting meditation when meditators observe all the sensations that occur in their body. During more advanced stages of Vipassana the practitioner devotes all his/her life to a continuous meditation process. Ideally, the Vipassana practitioner maintains mindfulness of whatever he/she is doing during the day, eliminating rumination upon the past and future and maintaining focus upon experiences in the present moment. As a renown practitioner of Vipassana meditation, Walpola Rahula Thera, explains: “Whether you walk, stand, sit, lie down or sleep, whether you stretch or bend your limbs, whether you look around, whether you put on clothes, whether you talk or keep silence, whether you eat or drink, even whether you answer the calls of nature – in these and other activities, you should be fully aware and mindful of the act you perform at the moment. That is to say, that you should live in the present moment, in the present action.”<sup>172</sup> Each detailed movement of the practitioner must be contemplated in its respective order. The contemplation should start at the moment you wake up so that “each

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<sup>171</sup> Jack Kornfield, *Living Dharma*, (Boston and London: Shambhala, 2010), p. 11.

<sup>172</sup> Walpola Rahula Thera, *The Setting Up of Mindfulness in Vipassana: A Universal Buddhist Technique of Meditation*, edited by D.C. Ahir (Sri Satguru Publications, 1999) p. 44.



movement of the hands, legs, and body must be performed in complete awareness.” For example: “If you intend to lift the hand or leg, make a mental note, intending. In the act of lifting the hand or leg, lifting. Stretching either the hand or leg, stretching. When you bend, bending. When putting down, putting. Should either the hand or leg touch, touching. Perform all these actions in a slow, deliberate manner.” Being in the present moment means being fully aware of all bodily processes without being carried away by worries surrounding past and future, or by continuous judgements of physical experiences as painful or pleasant.

Extensive practice of Vipassana meditation is integrated in the rigid schedule of retreat centres that almost fully replicate the schedule of Buddhist monasteries. Although meditation disciplines can vary from centre to centre<sup>173</sup> a general focus on renunciation and control of physical desires, as well as the development of the present moment awareness, are promoted in every meditation retreat. Generally, Vipassana daily schedule consists of twelve to fourteen hours of sitting meditation; six hours of sleep and few breaks for breakfast, dinner and shower:<sup>174</sup>

4.00a.m.	Morning wake up bell
4.30 – 6.30	Meditation in Hall or residence
6.30 – 8.00	Breakfast break
8.00 – 9.00	Group meditation in hall
9.00 – 11.00	Meditation in hall or residence, as per instruction of the teacher
11.00 – 12.00	Lunch
12.00 – 1.00	Rest
1.00 – 2.30	Meditation in hall or residence
2.30 – 3.30	Group meditation in hall
3.30 – 5.00	Meditation in hall or residence, as per instruction of the teacher
5.00 – 6.00	Tea break
6.00 – 7.00	Group meditation in hall

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<sup>173</sup> Various centres focus on sitting meditation only while many others combine sitting and walking meditations.

<sup>174</sup> For more information on Vipassana Code of Discipline see Appendix I, p. 253.

7.00 – 8.30	Teacher's discourse in hall
8.30 – 9.00	Group meditation in hall
9.00 – 9.30	Question time in hall
9.30 pm	Retire to own room, lights out

During the days of retreat temporary ordinates must refrain from sexual activity, talking, smoking, intake of alcohol or drugs and use of any cosmetics. They are obliged to observe a full fast from noon until 6 a.m. the next day and to wake up to the morning bell without exception. Any kind of intellectual and sensual distractions are removed from the retreat centres. Cook notes that: "they [renunciants] may not mix the practice with other techniques; have physical contact with others; enter other people's room; read (this includes Buddhist books); write; listen to music; leave the monastery or have contact with outside world without the teacher's permission or sleep during the day."<sup>175</sup> The voluntary submission to the disciplines of retreat centres aims to facilitate the practitioner's transition from a state of ego-centered individuality to the state of the non-self.

Abramović's appropriation of Buddhist meditation and disciplines in *The House with the Ocean View* and *The Artist is Present* follows the principles of temporary ordination based on internalization of monastic disciplines. Her frequent participation in meditation retreats in India, Thailand and Burma significantly influenced her understanding of meditation as a practice of learning the nature of the mind and as a path to self-transformation resulting from this realization. Submitting herself to a set of harsh disciplines in her durational performances, Abramović performs the sacred body based on ascetic process of de-individualisation. Another significant component of Abramović's performative method is defined by her search for energy transformation and modification of the energy-field on an individual and collective level that,

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<sup>175</sup> Cook, *Meditation in Modern Buddhism*, p. 74.

according to her logic, results from an extensive meditation process. In her recent performances, Abramović seeks an energy exchange with her spectators by way of a gaze exchange and the practice of presence. These and other elements of Abramović's work are analyzed in the following section.

### ***The House with the Ocean View (2002)***

*The House with the Ocean View* was a twelve-day durational performance, in which Abramović lived in Sean Kelly Gallery in New York, on three small platforms attached to the walls of the room representing her living space – a washroom, a bedroom and a living room. During the performance Abramović fasted, abstained from speech, and tried to remain as present as possible by avoiding any objects of distraction (such as computer, TV, books, notebooks, etc.) and engaging in a continuous process of meditation. Not a single time did she leave the space of three platforms for twelve days of the performance. Her routine, for 10 hours of everyday, consisted of ritual sitting, standing, laying down, dressing and undressing, taking showers, drinking water and urinating. All her actions were performed publicly and the exhibitionistic character of the performance was intentionally emphasized by the telescope located in the public area for the audience's use. The central component of the piece consisted of Abramović's eye contact with her spectators as a form of silent communication and energy transmission between two people.



Figure 1.5 -- Marina Abramović, *The House with the Ocean View*, 2002

Abramović defines the goal of the performance as an attempt at self-transformation in the meditation process that can also influence her spectators. As she points out ‘the energy dialogue’ between the artist and the spectators was at the core of the performative set up. In the project statement for the *House with the Ocean View* Abramović explains the necessity to remain physically and mentally present in the attempt to purify her body-mind continuum and transform the space around herself:

The idea of work was an experiment: if I purify myself, without eating for twelve days any kind of food, just drinking pure water, and being in the present moment here and now in three units on the wall, which represent my house, like, the bathroom, the living room and the sleeping room, where the ladder coming down to the space are made from knives, so you never can leave. That kind of rigorous way of living and purification would do something to change the environment and to change the attitude of people coming to see me... But there is something, like, I almost think, that if you are in a present, and you are purified, you can create a kind of energy field, so you can change on atomic level of the space in a certain way that the public can feel and just be in the present moment.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>176</sup> The text is reconstructed from Marina Abramović, Artist’s Statement, *The House with The Ocean View*, audio recording, <http://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/190/1996>. (accessed 19 April, 2014).

Performance art scholars and friends of Abramović underline the significance of mindfulness meditation for Abramović's performative method. Thomas McEvelley<sup>177</sup> situates *The House with The Ocean View* along the lines of Zen Buddhism and Theravada Buddhism. He notices that Abramović was preoccupied with the performance of the mind rather than performance of the body. The framework of simplified everyday life was a necessary set up to focus on the transformed quality of the mind that emerges in limited and repetitive activities of the body. McEvelley defined *The House with the Ocean View* as a "meditation retreat made public."<sup>178</sup>

Peggy Phelan,<sup>179</sup> on the other hand, stressed the significance of consciousness in *The House with the Ocean View*. She sees the performance as an attempt to grasp consciousness in its continuous mutability and changeability. The volatile and elusive aspects of the *House with the Ocean View* as a performance of the mind locate the work beyond the logic of commodity and equate it with spiritual practice rather than with the world of art.

At the core of *The House with the Ocean View*, as I argue, is the idea of transformation – of artist's body and mind – via submission to and internalization of ascetic disciplines. The performance was structured as a sequence of disciplinary activities inspired by a structure of meditation retreats. For the duration of twelve days Abramović enacted the monastic disciplines with a principal focus on meditation, fasting, maintenance of silence and drastic limitation of physical movement.

Firstly, *The House with the Ocean View* adopted Vipassana practice of awareness meditation based on detailed acknowledgment of each physical and mental change. Abramović's

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<sup>177</sup> Thomas McEvelley, 'Performing the Present Tense' in *Art in America*, (April 2003), p. 114–117.

<sup>178</sup> Ibid, p. 117.

<sup>179</sup> Peggy Phelan, 'Marina Abramović: Witnessing Shadows,' *Theatre Journal*, Volume 56, Number 4, (December 2004), pp. 569-577.

daily activities in performance consisted of continuous repetition of basic movements – walking, sitting, standing – performed with full awareness and precise control of the body. Abramović attempted to approach each activity with full consciousness, contemplating the changes in her body and mind for the duration of the performance. After the piece was over, Abramović produced a detailed transcript of the video of *The House with the Ocean View* in which she thoroughly described every movement she had done during the performance. For example, describing sitting on the chair Abramović documented the following:

Friday, November 15<sup>th</sup>, Day 1

Sitting on the chair:

I sit in the chair, shake out my shoulders and push my hair back from my face and forehead with both hands. I shift first my left and then my right buttock back until they touch the back of the chair and I am sitting up perfectly straight. The back of my head is touching the quartz pillow headrest. I place one hand on each thigh, halfway between my knee and my hip. My fingers are splayed out. The fingers on my right hand are slightly further apart than those on my left hand. The fingers on my left hand curve inward more than the fingers of my right hand. I take a deep breath and my chest rises. Then it falls. I remain sitting still. The metronome is on the left-hand side of the table and its ticking. The glass is on the right-hand side of the table and its full. My feet are flat on the floor and spaced hip-width apart. My back is straight against the chair. I look at the audience. My head does not move, only my eyes. I blink. My mouth is closed. I blink again. When I take deeper breaths my chest rises and falls. The rest of my body is motionless. After I have been sitting for a long time I have to straighten my back up, etc.<sup>180</sup>

The attention Abramović placed on the mental recognition of each movement in *The House with the Ocean View* is not coincidental. The Vipassana retreat instructions consist of explaining the importance of body mindfulness in the process of meditation that help to develop the awareness in all spheres of life. To maintain conscious observation of the body in all activities helps to realize the principle of impermanence, or *annica*, that is at the core of Vipassana teaching. The aim is to transform the practitioner's understanding of body and mind

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<sup>180</sup> Marina Abramović et al., *The House with the Ocean View*, essays by Kelly Sean, McEvelley, Thomas, Sontag, Susan, Carr, Cynthia, Madoff, Stephen, Iles, Chrissie Goldberg RoseLee, Phelan, Peggy, (Milan: Charta, 2004), p. 150.

from that of stability and permanence to the realization of all phenomena as unstable and temporary. A short extract from a modern Vipassana meditation instruction book explains the significance of body awareness in the meditation practice:

You have to be aware of what state your body is in. is it upright, balanced, relaxed and tranquil? Or is it falling about, unbalanced, slack and loose?... Is it breathing smooth, quiet and gentle? Or is it noisy, ragged and harsh?... to be aware of these things is to be aware of body... As you observe, you become aware that all of the bodily things you attend to are transient: they do not last; they cannot last. You become aware of the 'rise and fall' of bodily phenomena. You come to experience the mark of transience (anicca) for yourself.<sup>181</sup>

From a rationalist perspective, this process of meditation is explained as the conscious effort of the ascetic to reduce mental clutter and negative thoughts associated with everyday conditions of mind. If normal states of consciousness are characterized by an “ongoing stream of shifting and fairly fragmented segments of thoughts and images,”<sup>182</sup> the ascetic mind has a developed skill to stop the flow of daily thinking and focus the mind on the goals of meditation. A variety of ascetic traditions<sup>183</sup> promote the necessity of mind-control and development of a single-pointed mind focus, as ordinary states of mind are incompatible with the ascetic goals of self-transformation. Mystical states of union with the absolute are linked to the process of continuous refraining from worldly thoughts and ability to empty one’s mind. The modernist Christian Saint, Simone Weil, points out: “the capacity to drive a thought away once and for all is the gateway to eternity.”<sup>184</sup> Mental clutter as an enemy of contemplation is continuously highlighted in manuals and instructions for medieval ascetics. Isaac, the desert ascetic, provides the recommendations for the successful prayer through the elimination of profane thinking process:

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<sup>181</sup> Sarah Shaw, ed., *Buddhist Meditation: An Anthology of texts from Pali Canon*, p. 78

<sup>182</sup> Jerome Kroll and Bernard Bachrach, *The Mystic Mind: The Psychology of Medieval Mystics and Ascetics*, (New York, London: Routledge, 2005), p. 47.

<sup>183</sup> Theravada Buddhism, Tibetan Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, etc.

<sup>184</sup> Flood, *The Ascetic Self*, p. 37-64.

First there must be a complete removal of all concern for bodily things. Then not just the worry but even the memory of any business or worldly affair must be banished from within ourselves. Calumny, empty talk, nattering, low-grade clowning – suchlike must be cut out. Anger and the disturbance caused by gloominess are especially to be eradicated. The poisonous tinder of carnal desire and avarice must be pulled out by the roots... Because of the workings of memory whatever has preoccupied our mind before the time of prayer must of necessity intrude upon our actual prayers.<sup>185</sup>

Abramović's rigorous meditation was meant to transform the flow of everyday mind to the point of complete eradication of profane thinking and full fixation on the moment-to-moment experiences. The reduction of worldly needs, the development of mind and body control and a complete awareness of physical and psychological experiences are at the core of mind transformation and the formation of the ascetic body. This process is accompanied by the development of practitioner's mind stability, serenity, tranquillity and luminosity as well as a developed ability to observe reality as it is. The reduction of a self-concerned thinking results in the meditator's ability to be more objective and attentive towards the world and needs of the others.

As noted, the process of mind purification in *The House with the Ocean View* was initiated by Abramović's extreme fast maintained for the duration of twelve days. Consuming only water, Abramović internalized the ascetic process of fasting as means of eradicating profane desires. In Vipassana practice, fasting is a significant component of the retreat process. Although temporary ordination does not require the full fast, the renunciants, nonetheless, follow a strict vegetarian diet and eat only twice a day, following the fast from 12 pm until the next morning. The importance of a limited diet in Vipassana retreats is explained by the need to maintain the clarity of mind during meditation. The control of food intake facilitates the process of meditation and helps to avoid apathy, sleepiness and mental laxity. For Abramović herself regular fasting is a customary practice that she undertakes "in order to release the body from the tyranny of

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<sup>185</sup> John Cassian, *Conferences*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1985), p. 101-102.



digestion that diverts the body's energies." The energy that is normally used for digestion can be saved in fasting and utilized in alternative ways for creative purposes.

Internalizing these ascetic narratives, Abramović maintained silence and drastically restricted the freedom of her movement, remaining suspended on the three narrow platforms for the duration of the performance. In meditation retreats, silence and temporary seclusion function as principal requirements of self-control. Maintaining silence, the temporary ascetics are able to direct all the attention to their internal processes without being distracted by external stimulus. Restriction of movement contributes to the same goals of self-realization and mind control.

Submission to ascetic disciplines in *The House with the Ocean View* resulted in Abramović's production of an alternative subjectivity through strict adherence to the Westernized Buddhist (Vipassana) ideals of the ascetic self. As Cook points out "with the development of ascetic practice the [Vipassana] practitioner gains increasing control over her body, mind and emotions and as attachment to the body is reduced both the body and the mind undergo change."<sup>186</sup> Abramović's performative rituals, likewise, led to the transformation of her body and mind in an explicitly secular context. Mental transformation via internalization of religious narratives of self-transcendence and self-loss was as important as the physical transformation of the artist's body.

Abramović's new body, which I identify with the model of the sacred, presented the body in a state of loss that undermined the principles of the individualised self. Her transformations had a very material physical quality: Abramović visibly lost weight and was utterly exhausted by the end of the performance. The artist almost lost consciousness, a few times, and could barely remain standing on the balcony. Her non-conventional physicality was openly exposed in the performance. Publicly dressing and undressing, taking shower and urinating, crying, and

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<sup>186</sup> Cook, *Meditation in Modern Buddhism*, p. 89.

suffering from hunger and lack of movement; Abramović exhibited her vulnerability, physical fragility and pain as aspects of the sacred. Abramović's new self manifested the ascetic body – the body reshaped and transformed in intensive disciplines. Her fragile physicality suggested her ability to conquer physical desires and emphasized the supremacy of spiritual over material in her ascetic practices.

Further, Abramović pursued mental and psychological transformation not only on an individual, but on a collective level. For Abramović, the main goal of the *The House with the Ocean View* was defined by her attempt towards the transformation of the energy-field of her spectators. Inspiration for the artist's transformative quest came from her personal experience of altered states of mind while interacting with advanced meditators and spiritual teachers from Buddhist and Sufi traditions. In Abramović's own words, simply sitting in front of professional mediators drastically changed her mental and physical state to the point of sudden sense of self-loss. In her interview with Richards, Abramović remembers one encounter with a Buddhist monk in Dharamsala, India, who was just released from the cave after the years of a solitary meditation. In the minutes following their meeting Abramović experienced "a feeling of great warmth in spite of the cold, and this was followed by an experience of great clarity where she just stopped thinking."<sup>187</sup> An altered perception of time and space, unpredictable emotional reactions and tears accompanied her experiences. As Abramović puts it:

You know, once, I was in Dharamsala seated next to a man who just came out after ten years in a cave meditating. They made a big celebration and because I was a foreigner they gave me the honour of sitting next to him. I didn't talk the language, I didn't understand one fucking word. But I developed a temperature of 45 degrees and was red like a strawberry. And that was it. I didn't do any thinking. I wasn't aware of space or time, everything disappeared, and I was just there and that was it. This is something close to what I want to achieve. I haven't been in a cave for ten years. But just by the

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<sup>187</sup> Marina Abramović et al., *Marina Abramović: Artist Body*, p. 22.

performance energy which I have in my work, I think I can make that kind of thing happen.<sup>188</sup>

In *The House with the Ocean View* Abramović was looking for a similar type of experiences in herself and her audience members.

It is important to point out that the proposition of mental transformation in the artist and her spectators remains problematic in the context of scientific enquiry as the measurements of such transformations were not undertaken during the performance. In present research, I can only claim the possibility of altered states of mind in the artist and her spectators that resulted from Abramović's engagement in meditative process. Critical responses from RoseLee Goldberg<sup>189</sup> and Peggy Phelan,<sup>190</sup> who both participated in the work, confirm a transformative quality of the performance and its ability to affect the spectators emotionally and intellectually.

The participants in the performance documented a very personal character of Abramović's gaze and its ability to trigger individual memories, repressed emotional experiences and anxieties. A number of participants reported a changed perception of time and space. Performance artist and a musician, Laury Anderson, remembers her experience, the interaction with Abramović lasted for about an hour, but in her own words it felt like it lasted only several minutes. As Anderson puts it: "when I went to see her [Abramović] there I had a very powerful wordless encounter. I also was able to experience the passage of time in a unique way—at a tempo somewhere between music and meditation."<sup>191</sup>

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<sup>188</sup> Cited in Richards, *Marina Abramović*, p. 111.

<sup>189</sup> Marina Abramović et al., *House with the Ocean View*, p. 157.

<sup>190</sup> See Phelan, "Marina Abramović: Witnessing Shadows," pp. 569-577.

<sup>191</sup> Laury Anderson, 'Marina Abramović', Interview, *Bomb* e-magazine, (Summer, 2003), <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2561/Marina%20Abramovi%C4%87>. (accessed 10 April, 2014).

Many spectators felt personally implicated in the work and returned daily to witness Abramović's ascetic performance over the twelve-day period. Goldberg describes the behaviour of the audience in the performative framework as devotional and religious:

One young woman mimicked Abramović's movements with the precision of an understudy. A man held up a small drawing he had made of her, tinted gold, as in an offering to a saint. Another man stood and stared, legs astride arms akimbo, at Abramović and she down at him, for a full quarter of an hour.<sup>192</sup>

Abramović herself reported a heightened ability to sense and attune to the energy of the audience. In her feedback published in the catalogue *The House with the Ocean View* Abramović describes the experience of "enfolding energy, energy fields surrounding her and the audience, a trance-like state of attention, and energy vibrations that, emitted from her during the performance, tangibly reshape the energy of the environment around her."<sup>193</sup>

The historical context of *The House with the Ocean View* also had a significant impact on how performance was received and interpreted. The performance was staged a year after the events that occurred in New York on September 11, 2001, and unintentionally provided "a place of contemplation for the aftermath of the disaster and the dramatic change it had brought in the psyche of a wounded New York City."<sup>194</sup> Abramović's public and voluntarily suffering mirrored the emotions of her audience going through post-traumatic shock. Deterioration of her physical condition through the days of fasting and silence accompanied by her unconditional presence and intimate interaction with her audience provided an example of the humility and surrender necessary to cope with emotional suffering. The artists' physical exhibitionism, her vulnerability and emotional availability, provided a type of spiritual support and encouraged her audience members to get in touch with their fears without repression or shame.

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<sup>192</sup> Marina Abramović et al, *The House with The Ocean View*, p.109.

<sup>193</sup> Ibid, p. 22.

<sup>194</sup> Ibid, p. 100.

Abramović's elevated position in the performance (her placement on the balcony) was crucial for the construction of her body as sacred, existing on a different mental and physical plane from her audience. The sacredness of Abramović in *The House with the Ocean View* defined her ability to emulate the emotional states of her audience. As her brother Velimir notices in one of his letters to the artist, in her recent works, Abramović started to lose a sense of interiority for the sake of connecting to the audience. As he writes: "she was becoming nothing but a mirror for people, reflecting back their desires." And continues: "probably that is the change that every priest has to go through. You cannot function as a priest if you are an involved person."<sup>195</sup> Enacting the sacred body Abramović was perceived by her audience as a sacred rather than an individual person with a unique set of psychological experiences, and provided traumatic embodiment for the sake of collective sentiments, and the search for existential meaning in times of sorrow.

Thus, the construction of Abramović's body as sacred in *The House with the Ocean View* resulted from a multiplicity of performative strategies. The ritualistic settings, the exhibitionism of the deprived body, the humility and vulnerability of the artist undergoing extreme trials, and the process of silent gaze exchange between the artist and her audience contributed to the audience's perception of Abramović as transcendental and equated with models of the ascetic self. Abramović's internalization of Vipassana meditation disciplines in the performance served a central premise for reconstruction of the rhetoric of the sacred within the secular context of her performance art.

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<sup>195</sup> For more information see Westcott, *When Marina Abramović Dies*, pp. 209-299.

### ***The Artist is Present (2010)***

A similar model of ascetic discipline and interaction between the artist and her audience was explored in Abramović's performance piece, *The Artist is Present*, staged from March to May, 2010, as a part of her major retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. In the work Abramović performed daily ten-hour sittings in the atrium of the gallery. The set up for the performance was minimal, consisting of two chairs – one for the artist, one for the performance participant, and a table separating the two.<sup>196</sup> Similar to *The House with the Ocean View*, Abramović followed a full daily fast and remained silent for the duration of the performance, engaging in prolonged eye-contact with her audience members, while avoiding any physical or verbal communication. As in *The House with the Ocean View*, she tried to achieve complete and continuous moment-to-moment awareness of time, space, her body and the person in front of her. According to Abramović, it was one of the most difficult performance pieces she had ever produced as “the hardest thing to do is something that is close to nothing.”<sup>197</sup>

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<sup>196</sup> Closer to the end of the performance the table was removed as Abramović found it insignificant for the execution of the work.

<sup>197</sup> Marina Abramović, *The Artist is Present*, (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010).



Figure 1.6 -- Marina Abramović, *The Artist is Present*, 2010

Staged in one of the biggest art institutions in the world – the Museum of Modern Art in New York – *The Artist is Present* received worldwide attention. The work inspired controversial responses in performance art criticism as it undermined traditional understanding of performance art as a marginal practice. The exhibition was curated by Klaus Biesenbach<sup>198</sup> who, in collaboration with Abramović, created the concept for the promotion of the performance based on using wide variety of media from printed press, to internet, to web documentation. A massive budget and scale of the exhibition made the performance a large publicity event attended by hundreds of thousands of spectators, many of whom grouped at the doors of the museum every morning long before the opening hours. Due to its promotion budget, its documentation and its mediatisation, the performance was accused of being a large commercial project that devalued performance art and its original transgressive potential.

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<sup>198</sup> Klaus Biesenbach is the current Director of MoMA PS1 in New York City, and Chief Curator at Large at The Museum of Modern Art, New York. He is the Founding Director of Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art, Berlin.

Amelia Jones, in her article “The Artist is Present: Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence,”<sup>199</sup> provided the most explicit attack on the performance. Denying its authenticity and transformative value, Jones focused on the media entourage and the performance’s representation in video and photo documentation. Recounting the “noisy emptiness of this ‘real’ live art experience” Jones claimed the impossibility of presence and immediacy in *The Artist is Present* had mutated from the genre of authentic performance art to re-enactment and post-production. She writes:

Paradoxically, Abramović’s recent practice, in its desire to manifest presence, points to the very fact that the live act itself destroys presence (or makes the impossibility of its being secured evident). The live act marks the body, understood as an expression of the self, as representational. Thus, as someone who sat across from Abramović; in the atrium of MoMA, surrounded by a barrier like a boxing ring, itself surrounded by dozens of staring visitors, cameras, and lit by klieg lights, I can say personally I found the exchange to be anything but energizing, personal, or transformative.<sup>200</sup>

I claim that Jones’ criticism of this performance is contextually framed by large art institutions like MoMA, which represent the consumerist aspect of contemporary art. It is important to distinguish between Abramović’s original intention for the performance, defined by her life-long involvement with Buddhist meditation techniques, and performance’s representation in the media. These two aspects of *The Artist is Present* are not identical. Engagement with consumerist dimension of the art world always corrupts the image of the artists that emerged as oppositional to dominant discourses of representation and Abramović is not an exception. However, Jones’ focus on the logistics of *the Artist is Present* provides a rather one-sided reading of the work. The transformative aspect of the performance, which Abramović claimed, requires thorough engagement with the work and a more sensitive attuning to the artist. The fact that the performance was institutionalized does not deny Abramović’s sincere and

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<sup>199</sup> Amelia Jones, ‘The Artist is Present: Artistic Re-enactments and the Impossibility of Presence,’ *TDR, The Drama Review*, Vol. 55, #1, (Spring, 2011), p. 17.

<sup>200</sup> *Ibid*, p. 18.



devoted engagement with Vipassana meditation techniques and her long-term pursuits of body-mind transformation through religious methods – that which inspired the production of her performance in the first place.

I find it more important to focus on the origins of Abramović's intention in the implementation of *The Artist is Present* and the embodiment of monastic disciplines in performative context, rather than to engage with the critique of authenticity of performance's representation in the media. A wide documentation of the performance demonstrates the strong transformative impulse of the performance, and its influence on the emotional states of spectators, despite the media surroundings and institutional context in which the performance was staged. The performance evoked a diversity of emotional responses in her spectators varying from joy and surprise to anger and grief. The most obvious and common emotional response of the audience to Abramović's performance was crying. Hundreds of portraits of the audience members taken by Marco Anelli<sup>201</sup> during the days of the performance, as well as live-documentation of the performance posted on multiple blogs that were organised by audience members in support of the work,<sup>202</sup> showing people's faces covered in tears. In spite of the public context of the performance and visible exposure of the participants to the large audience of viewers, photo and video cameras, it is clear that a variety of emotions were experienced and manifested. This exemplifies the power of such works to create the alternative space of the ritual even if in an explicitly commercial context. The participants in the performance, entering into a silent dialogue with Abramović, were encouraged to engage with their present moment experiences and unabashedly exhibit their own emotions. What interests me most in the

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<sup>201</sup> Marco Anelli, *Portraits in the Presence of Marina Abramović*, (Bologna: Damiani, 2012).

<sup>202</sup> Katie Notopoulos, *Marina Abramović Made Me Cry* <http://marinaAbramovićmademecry.tumblr.com/> (accessed 21 April, 2014), and Pippinbarr, *The Artist is Present*, <http://www.pippinbarr.com/games/theartistispresent/TheArtistIsPresent.html> (accessed 21 April, 2014)

interaction between Abramović and her audience is the participants' ability to surrender to the momentum and expose emotional vulnerability in a public context.

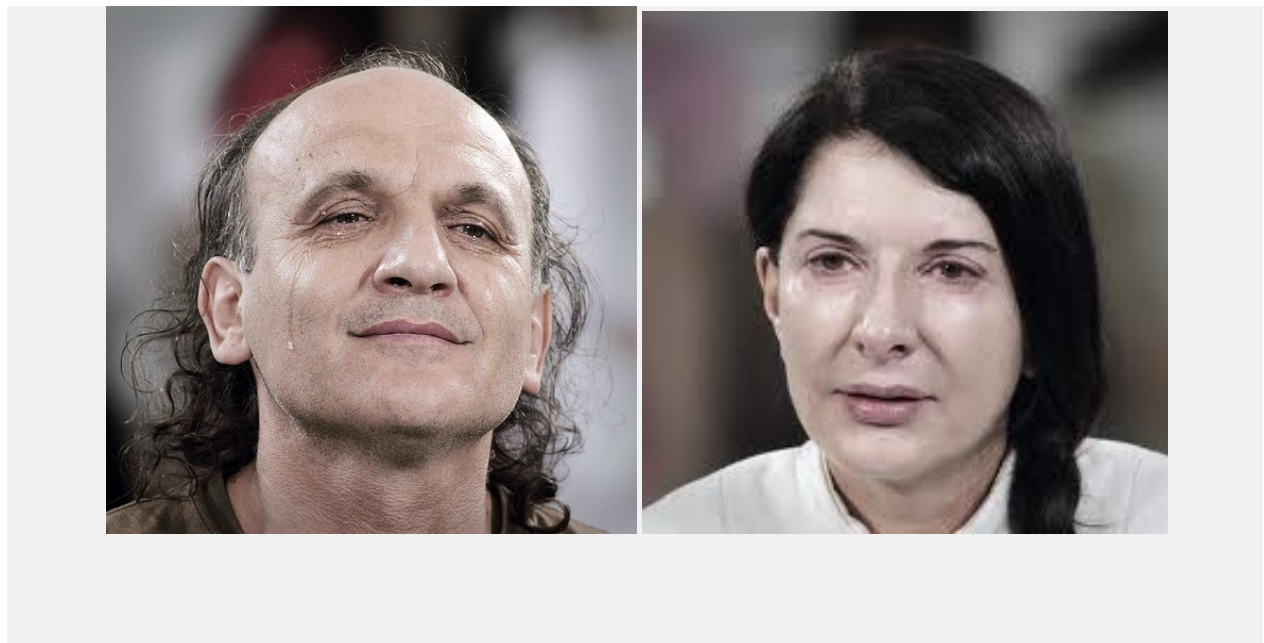
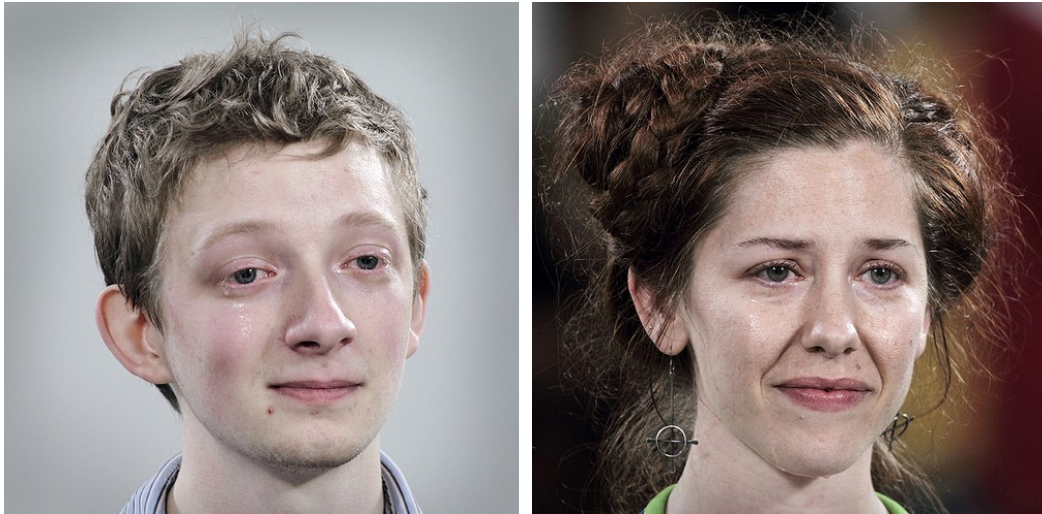


Figure 1.7 -- Marco Anelli, *The Artist is Present*, (Portraits), 2010

I explain participants' ability to expose their private feelings in an explicitly public environment by the ritualistic framework of the performance. As in *The House with the Ocean View*, Abramović's silent and passive figure embodied the audience's desire for the sacred transcendental experiences almost fully absent in secularized culture of contemporary megapolis.

Abramović's silence, endurance of physical discomfort, and abstinence from consumption of any food or liquid during the performance replicated the venerated practice of religious ascetics respected in all world religions. At the same time, the monumentality of her posture, the stillness of her gaze, devoid of any personal emotions, could easily be associated with qualities of transcendental wisdom and mystic powers, promoted not only in institutionalized religions, but in the contemporary mass culture of Hollywood cinema and computer games. From this perspective *The Artist is Present* reveals public nostalgia for the sacred embodied in the figure of Abramović.

On the other hand, Abramović claims that her continuous engagement in meditation, not only during her performances but on everyday basis, resulted in her developed ability to change the individual energy-field and influence the energy-field of others. After completion of *The Artist is Present*, Abramović was invited to Moscow, Russia, to participate in the retrospective of her work at The Garage Gallery, curated by Dasha Zhukova. As a part of the exhibition Abramović collaborated with Russian and American scientists who engaged in the studies of her brain activity. The results, though not fully released to the public, demonstrated some extraordinary quality of Abramović's brainwaves. As the artist explains in her interview with Daniel D'Addario for the *Scene*: "[The scientists] told me, I didn't know this, that my brain waves were very particular. They are different, they are more frequent, they are more illuminated. It's reflected in some kind of energy – the reaction of people. There's much more to it. I'm looking for the doctors to explain to me what really happened to the consciousness. They told me this kind of consciousness is not common. I feel it, but I don't know what it means."<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Daniel D'Addario, "Marina Abramović on How Her Brainwaves Are Illuminated," *Scene*, e-magazine, <http://sceneinny.com/2012/06/marina-Abramović-on-how-her-brain-works-differently/>. (accessed 1 May, 2013).

During the show in Moscow Abramović conducted an experimental performance titled *Measuring the Magic of Mutual Gaze*. The performance consisted of a real-time measuring of the brain activity of visitors who were sitting across from Abramović in a set up similar to *The Artist is Present*. According to The Garage review, “the data will be archived so that other scientists can study the “magic” that happens when two people share eye contact and the viewing public will be able to observe this activity, to see which areas of the brain are physically stimulated when participants are engaged with each other in thought.”<sup>204</sup>

In *The Artist is Present* as in *The House with the Ocean View* the participants declared strong emotional and psychological reactions to their participation in the performance, accompanied by the loss of sense of time and trance-like relaxation. One of the participants of the performance, the artist Daviel Shy, explained her experience of looking in Abramović’s eyes in the following way: “It was kind of like being out of time. Just really interesting and filled with different emotions that change the longer you sit there.”<sup>205</sup>

Thus, in Abramović’s recent interactive performances the internalization of ascetic disciplines takes a different turn – it is not only a practice of the artist’s personal self-transcendence, but a transformative ritual engaging all the spectators. Replacing secular disciplines of the individual body with intensive ascetic practices, Abramović reaches towards a collective project of energy transformation and energy exchange between the artist and her audience.

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<sup>204</sup> Adrian Covert, “Who Said Neurology And Fine Art Don’t Mix?” *Gizmodo*, 19 October, 2011, <http://www.gizmodo.com.au/2011/10/who-said-neurology-and-fine-art-don%E2%80%99t-mix/> (accessed 21 April, 2014)

<sup>205</sup> Julia Kaganskiy, “Visitor Viewpoint: Marina Abramović,” *MoMA: Inside/ Out*, 29 March, 2010, [https://www.moma.org/explore/inside\\_out/2010/03/29/visitor-viewpoint-marina-Abramović/](https://www.moma.org/explore/inside_out/2010/03/29/visitor-viewpoint-marina-Abramović/) (accessed 21 April, 2014).

### ***Cleaning the Body: Monastic Disciplines in Abramović's Workshops***

A big part of Abramović's recent public work consists of multiple workshops and courses based on her ascetic performative method. After the first workshop held in 1979 in Blue Mountains, New South Wales, Australia, Abramović executed more than twenty workshops held all over the world. At the core of Abramović's teaching method is an idea of rigorous discipline and renunciation similar to monastic lifestyle. Instead of providing "know-how" information sessions on performance art, Abramović teaches her students to look for inner knowledge through intensive ascetic practices. Her workshops are called *Cleaning the Body* and provide five to ten days experience in a variety of ascetic practices including fasting, silence, and endurance of difficult physical conditions. As Abramović explains: "to clean the body-house means you go into nature, you don't eat for five days, you don't talk for five days, you do very intense physical and mental action. It sharpens your perception, you experiment with your willpower, you prepare your body and mind to be able to do this kind of performance."<sup>206</sup>

In her workshops, as in her performances, Abramović appropriates the structure and principles of meditation retreats. Students entering the workshop must commit to a set of rules similar to those practiced in Buddhist monasteries and retreat centers promoting moral discipline, control of senses and respect to life. For the duration of the workshop they must refrain from talking, intoxicants, sexual activities, smoking, and using any electronic devices (telephones and computers). Personal belongings are reduced to minimum and include – "sleeping bag, one pair of heavy walking shoes, one pair of light sneakers, dark blue overalls (under the overalls students may wear their own clothes), one bar of non-perfumed soap, one bottle of pure almond oil. For

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<sup>206</sup> Hans Ulrich Obrist, *Marina Abramović, Interviews* (Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther König, 2010), p. 23.

men only: razor blades. No kind of perfumes or make up.”<sup>207</sup> Students follow rigorous daily schedule of exercises, waking up before sunrise, engaging in a variety of physical and mental activities created by Abramović, and having almost no free time. Their failure to commit to the rules and disciplines of the workshop results in their immediate expulsion. *Cleaning the House* codes of discipline almost fully replicates Buddhist monastic rules of discipline, that are generally based on respect of life, respect of other’s property, celibacy and mindfulness.<sup>208</sup>

The simplification of life and rigid discipline of Abramović’s workshops are principal methods for developing students’ self-control and self-awareness. In traditional meditation retreats that are organised as temporary monasteries for lay Buddhists, the integration of the monastic code of discipline and timetable aims to strengthen the meditation practice and contribute to purification of mental flow of the practitioners. Reduction of external distractions during the workshops facilitates students’ focus on *Cleaning the House* exercises and brings a higher level of self-understanding impossible in everyday life. For Abramović, discipline, abstinence, and silence are principal tools necessary for the production of long-durational works and performances of endurance which require full body-mind awareness and ability to survive difficult mental and environmental conditions.

The principal difference of Abramović’s workshops from Vipassana Code of Conduct is the inclusion of a full three to five days fast in the program of *Cleaning the House*. In the beginning of the workshop participants sign a contract in which they commit to abstaining from food with the exception of large amounts of water and herbal teas. As Abramović explains fast is

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<sup>207</sup> Marina Abramović et al., *Student Body*, essays by Miguel Fernandez-Cid, Marina Abramović and her students, (Milano, New York: Charta, 2003), p. 47.

<sup>208</sup> Tushita center code of discipline consists of the following rules: Respect all life: do not intentionally kill any living being, even small insects; Be celibate: no sexual activity. This also includes no holding hands, hugging, massages and other physical displays of affection; Be alert and mindful: avoid intoxicants such as alcohol, drugs and cigarettes (we encourage you to stop smoking while here, but if this is impossible, one can smoke at a designated place within the centre boundary), etc. For more information see “Tushita Meditation Centre” website, <http://tushita.info/> (accessed 21 April, 2014).

a necessary tool to detoxify the body and clean the mind in order to prepare the artists for the ordeals of performance art.

The program of Abramović's workshops consist of a large number of exercises that vary from meditation and relaxation exercises to intensive and rigorous endurance practices that challenge students' physical and mental boundaries. What unites them all is their ability to bring the participants into the experience of the present moment and a more acute perception of the self. In her workshop booklet Abramović writes, "Each exercise is designed to help further understanding of how our body and mind function."<sup>209</sup> For example, walking backwards holding a mirror before students' faces for orientation helps them to see reality as a reflection. Writing their name during one hour, with a pen poised continuously on the paper, helps students to expand levels of concentration. Taking a bath in the ice-cold water of the river or sea, helps them to reinforce their physical strength. Looking at the primary colours helps to sharpen the perception, etc. The majority of the exercises replicate or are a commentary on a particular ascetic religious discipline that is explored and modified through Abramović's personal experiences. I distinguish three principal groups of exercises depending on their relationships to the practitioner's body and the goal they pursue – Body Endurance, Body Awareness and Meditation exercises.

### **Body Endurance**

Abramović's endurance exercises are aimed at strengthening students' stamina and ability to survive physically and mentally challenging conditions. As in traditional ascetic practices, endurance tasks push the body and mind outside their zone of comfort and provide a completely new physical and mental experience beyond the limits of habitual physicality.

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<sup>209</sup> Abramović et al., *Student Body*, p. 48.

Endurance exercises provide the students with the knowledge of their physical and mental boundaries and ways in which to challenge and expand them. Endurance exercises vary from durational practices like sitting or walking for several hours to more immediate experiences like morning jumping exercise.

*Long Walk in Landscape Exercise* includes an 8-hour walk through a natural landscape in silence. The ascetic component of this exercise is reinforced by students' fast and general fatigue from workshop's rigorous schedule. Walking in line, students avoid any communication with each other and are focusing primarily on their individual experiences. The goal and the target of this journey remain hidden from the students.

Another group of exercises takes place outside and, no matter the weather, the students must be naked. For example, the instructions for *the Stepping on the Ground Exercise* and the *Jump Exercise* read "In the early morning between 6 and 7, naked, regardless of weather conditions, go outside onto the land, stepping on the ground and checking the body. With eyes closed, wait for the call, jump and use the entire energy of the body, lifting both legs at the same time, jump as high as possible and at the same time release the scream. Repeat three times."<sup>210</sup> The modification of this ordeal is *Water Exercise*, which takes place in freezing or close to freezing water (sea or river). The instructions read: "Take your clothes off. Get into the water, swim and return to shore."<sup>211</sup>

The physical impact of these exercises is aimed to push the students beyond their zone of comfort. Students' ordinary physical experiences and behaviours defined by the necessity to conform to the model of the individual body are deconstructed through the collective nudity and shock value of Abramović's exercises. The transgression of the individual body is at the core of

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<sup>210</sup> Abramović, *Student Body*, p. 54.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid*, p. 72.



*Body Endurance Exercises*. From this perspective they replicate the goals of religious ascetics pursuing alternative states of body and mind via endurance and self-inflicted pain: swimming in cold water or staying naked in extreme weather conditions is a traditional yogic practice popular in both Hindu and Buddhist rituals. In Tibet, the tumo meditation, the practice of the development of inner heat, had been popularized among Buddhist hermits. The word tumo means “heat or warmth” and signifies a type of yoga described in the Six Yogas of Naropa.<sup>212</sup> In the practice of tumo the meditator is able to channel his inner energy in a way that generates heat, enabling the practitioner to survive extreme cold weather. One of Abramović’s favourite writers, Alexandra David-Neel, describes the power of tumo: “To spend the winter in a cave amidst the snows, at an altitude that varies between 11,000 and 18,000 feet, clad in a thin garment or even naked, and escape freezing, is a somewhat difficult achievement. Yet numbers of Tibetan hermits go safely each year through this ordeal.”<sup>213</sup> For Abramović, the ascetic ordeals introduced in her workshops are a tribute to her life-long fascination with Tibetan yogic culture. However, the practical value of this type of exercises cannot be omitted. Development of endurance and health benefits of staying outside in freezing weather is a widely accepted fact and *Body Endurance* exercises is a way to prepare students’ body for the extreme methods of endurance performances.

### **Body Awareness**

Body awareness exercises are intended to increase students’ ability to be aware of their own physicality in space and time. The focus of this group of practices is on stimulating sensory experiences of participants with particular emphasis upon sight, hearing, taste, smell and touch.

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<sup>212</sup> Glenn C. Mullin, ed., *The Practice of the Six Yogas of Naropa*, (Ithaca: Snow Lion Publications, 2006).

<sup>213</sup> David-Neel, *Magic and Mystery in Tibet*, p. 216.

Through added emphasis on the abilities of the primary sensory organs, Abramović encourages students to explore the possibilities of their bodies in constructed situations, not fully explored in the contemporary consumerist context based on the reduction of physical effort.

The awareness exercises are structured as challenging tasks that have to be completed without engaging one of the sensory organs – primarily sight or hearing. One of the most representative examples is the *Blindfold Exercise* in which students are instructed to walk away from the house, blindfold themselves and find their way back to the house without using their eyes. As Richards points out: “without sight, you will be heavily reliant on your sense of smell, touch, sound and, possibly taste. In the process of dealing with the demands of the exercise you are likely to create an alternative perceptive field and an internalized “vision” of what you can no longer see.”<sup>214</sup> To complete this task the student has to engage his/her whole body to find a way back through the landscape.

The inversion of the *Blindfold Exercise* is the *Stop with the Mirror* and *Staring at the Mirror* exercises. In these tasks the focus shifts to the organs of sight – eyes. In *Stop with the Mirror* Abramović confronts the students with their own reflection in the mirror. While students are engaged in everyday activities during their limited free time (writing, resting, drinking water), Abramović walks around the space and unpredictably holds a mirror in front of the participants face. The idea is to catch the facial expression of the moment and keep it for 5 minutes. The modification of this task is *Staring at the Mirror Exercise* in which students sit in front of their individual mirrors and look at their own reflection for the duration of one hour. I see these exercises as a way to bring awareness to students’ sense of self. To catch the momentary expression of the face is a very revealing task. In everyday life a mirror is used to construct the ideal image of self through putting on makeup, combing the hair, etc. The mirror is

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<sup>214</sup> Richards, *Marina Abramović*, p. 123.

meant to conceal the truth about oneself rather than to reveal it. On the contrary, in these workshops, the mirror becomes a witness to one of the most challenging experiences in the students' life. Five days of the workshop – fasting, silence, lack of sleep – drastically change the facial expressions of participants. Not concerned with external beauty and social conventions of outlook, the participants are confronting their most natural images of the self; devoid of artificial constructs.

*First Food after the Workshop* is not considered to be an endurance task, but I see it as a form of awareness exercise in which the focus of the students' attention shifts to the organs of taste. The five days of fasting and an intensive exercise program makes breaking of the fast one of the most significant events of the workshop. The first meal consists of cooked plain white rice with no salt and a glass of water. The rice should be eaten with one hand in complete silence with eyes closed “feeling its texture and smelling its aroma.”<sup>215</sup> Abramović notes that the students are completely emerged in the experience of their first meal:

I usually open my eyes before they do, I look at the group in front of me, all participants have their eyes closed as they eat slowly and their faces show genuine concentration. They are absolutely rapt in this moment here and now. It is an image of complete harmony, unity and beauty.<sup>216</sup>

From this perspective the exercise embodies the principles of Vipassana meditation and its concern with the experiences of the present moment.

### **Meditation exercises**

Adapting her own experience in meditation retreats and durational performances to the needs and the abilities of the students, Abramović constructs the tasks that resemble Buddhist meditation exercises. Gaining one-pointed concentration and moment-to-moment awareness of

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<sup>215</sup> Abramović et al., *Student Body*, p. 106.

<sup>216</sup> Ibid.

the present moment is the primary task of this group of exercises. Similar to Vipassana practices, the students are asked to develop one-pointed concentration before they can proceed with tasks that require physical and mental stamina and full engagement of physical and mental abilities.

Many of these exercises fully replicate meditation practices at Buddhist retreat centres. For example, the instruction for the *Color Exercise* read: “Sitting on a chair facing one of the primary colours yellow, blue or red. Motionless. 1 hour each.” Abramović explains that this task was given her in Tushita monastery in Dharamsala, in 1987. The idea of this practice is to allow the mind to be fully aware of one single activity for the fixed period of time. Students are encouraged to meditate on each of the three primary colors for the duration of one hour in order to fully embrace the color and empty their mind of the thinking process. A modification of this task is the *Facing White Wall* exercise in which students meditate facing an empty white wall for the duration of one hour or seven hours (varied).

Closer to the end of the workshop Abramović introduces more sensual forms of meditation involving concentration on a sound, a piece of music or contemplation of picturesque scenery (river, landscape, etc). The *Listening to Sound* exercise engages students, while laying on their mattresses in meditation hall and listening to a piece of relaxation music. Abramović notes, that during the final days of retreat when students reach the point of exhaustion, “[their] mind becomes very sensitive and they become more open than usual to sound and music.”<sup>217</sup> The meditation aims to bring complete awareness to the music and facilitate general sense of relaxation.

*Cleaning the Body* workshops provide a new dimension of ascetic endurance in Abramović’s practice. Her workshops prepare the space for group asceticism and embody principles of Sangha, the Buddhist community of believers. Although Abramović and her

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<sup>217</sup> Ibid, p. 150.

students do not pursue spiritual goals of enlightenment, a sense of renunciation is at the core of workshops' structure. Abramović demands a full commitment from her students to follow the rigorous schedule and activities of her workshops. A large number of exercises question students' individual limits of shame, comfort, fear, physical and psychological endurance, and boredom. Through the network of physical exercises, meditation and durational experiences Abramović triggers the production of transcendental experiences and alternative physicality associated with the model of the sacred body.

### **Conclusion**

Abramović's artistic path is reminiscent of the path of a spiritual seeker, ascetic and renunciant. The artist has never been satisfied with purely aesthetic element of her performances, pursuing larger goals of spiritual transformation and transcendence of the ordinary self. Since her very first experiments in body art in early 1970s Abramović defined her artistic purpose as the transformation of body-mind continuum via expansion of physical and mental limits. Engaging in performance of self-injury and mindfulness meditation Abramović reconsiders the notion of discipline – from externally imposed rules and obligations to the inner discipline of ascetic self-transformation. While her earlier works addressed subjects of transgression opposed to the tactics of state control and familial and cultural restrictions, her later works engaged with topics of reshaping the individual body and mind via internalization of ascetic disciplines.

The construction of the sacred body in the works of Abramović has an explicitly performative character. Appropriating and re-staging the disciplines of the sacred body associated with Buddhist monastic asceticism, Abramović depicts the body which internalizes the symbolism and narratives of a religious self. It is the body transformed through ascetic ritual:

The body that loses weight via extreme fasting; the body that remains still and silent for hours engaging in insight meditation; the body that surrenders to pain and physical suffering in self-flagellation; the body that bleeds, cries and shakes from exhaustion in multiple rituals of pain and endurance. The aesthetics of the sacred associated with religious asceticism are continuously recreated and explored in Abramović's performative settings. Her appropriation of religious symbols and the visual language of religious traditions is eclectic and broad. Christian crucifixes, Zen Buddhist meditation settings, Yogic exercises and sacred chanting, and the settings of Vipassana meditation retreats reappear in Abramović's multiple performances and workshops.

The ascetic performance embodies Abramović's subjective experiences of the sacred which the artist links to a process of self-transformation and reversal of the flow of the body. Abramović's extensive practice of Vipassana meditation, Tibetan Buddhist practices, yoga, and other spiritual techniques led the artist to formulate a concept of individual energy as transformative, able to transcend the limits of the individual self, and merge with the energies of the surrounding environment and other people. The artist propagates the development of a new consciousness that unifies the body, mind and universe which she in turn pursues through her performances. In her interactive works Abramović explores the possibilities of energy accumulation, energy transformation and energy exchange within the secular framework. Spectators' extreme emotional reactions to Abramović's experiments demonstrate the potentiality of her method: The collective longing for the intimacy with the artist, spectators' sense of responsibility for Abramović's wellbeing, and their passionate engagement in silent dialogue and gaze exchange with the artist. The often resulting public crying, the lively engagement with and submission of the audience to the rhetoric of the sacred, is restaged in her performances.

From this perspective, Abramović's performative method addresses public nostalgia for the sacred in contemporary Western cultures. Constructing the spaces of the sacred in the explicitly secular context of art galleries and museums, Abramović sacralises the paradigm of Western rationality, and sentimentalizes the capitalist discourses of the body. Her work proposes ways to overcome the existing gap between rational analytical thinking and the ritualistic experiences of the sacred.

## Chapter 2

### Queer Martyrdom in the Sadoomasochistic Performances of Ron Athey

This chapter analyses the process of self-sacrifice enacted in Ron Athey's sadoomasochistic performance that embodies the trope of pain and redemption as forms of an archetypal search for healing and restoration on both the individual and the collective levels. Drawing from a variety of disciplines, including religious studies, cultural anthropology, and psychoanalysis I argue that Athey's performance of self-injury is inherently linked to the process of self-redefinition and self-transformation as a healing procedure. Examining the AIDS epidemic and its influence on queer performance art, I explain Athey's sadoomasochistic performance as a form of therapeutic practice aimed at annihilating the artist's negative image of the self and reconstructing a healthier body that had been abandoned as a result of past traumatic experiences. I draw parallels between religiously sanctified and socially meaningful forms of self-injury, notably in Christian ascetic ritual of Medieval Europe, and Athey's performances. I analyse religious rituals of ascetic identification with Christ's martyrdom in the practices of self-flagellation, self-crucifixion and other forms of self abuse as methods of self-transcendence and the construction of a sacred body beyond the constraints and limitations of profane physicality. Examining the hagiographies of Christian saints and martyrs, and the life of Herman Suso in particular, I demonstrate that the Christian ascetic ritual provides a religious dimension to the concept of healing as an abandonment of ego-centred subjectivity and unification with a reality higher than the individual self.

I argue for a direct parallel between Athey's sadoomasochistic performance and religious self-mutilating practices. The comparative analysis of religious self-injury and Athey's



sadomasochistic performance facilitates understanding of the significance of ritualistic self-injury as an attempted transcendence of the ordinary body and the formation of a sacred body associated with the body of Christ. I maintain that the main goal of Athey's performances is to demonstrate the performative transition of the marginal body of the HIV-positive patient to the status of a divine or sacred body. Although devoid of religious doctrinal content, Athey's work provides a structural unity of ascetic ritual: the scourging of the ordinary body results in the formation of a body of transcendental experience, associated with the model of sacrifice. Athey's sadomasochistic performance exposes violated, bleeding body as a type of a superior transcendental body overcoming constraints of physical pain and sickness.

I ground my analysis of self-injury enacted in Athey's sadomasochistic performance in the notion of sacrifice as defined by Bataille.<sup>218</sup> Analyzing a variety of religious sacrificial models and their underlying principles as described in Bataille's works such as *Inner Experience*, *Taboo and Transgression*, *Theory of Religion* and other texts discussed in the introductory chapter, I argue that the basic significance of sadomasochistic performance is defined by its ability to transcend the subject's subordination to a dominant culture of individualisation and temporarily liberate him/her from the constraints of profane subjectivity. In *Theory of Religion* Bataille notes: "sacrifice destroys an object's real ties of subordination; it draws the victim out of the world of utility and restores it to that of unintelligible caprice." According to Bataille sacrificial ritual defines the subject's "return to intimacy, of immanence between man and the world, between the subject and the object."<sup>219</sup> In the present chapter I demonstrate the healing potential of this sacrificial process. If in the real order of daily life the subject functions as a separate entity, as characterised by one's relations with the dominant culture of production and

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<sup>218</sup> A detailed analysis of Georges Bataille's model of sacrifice is provided in the Introduction, for more information see Bataille, *Accursed Share*, Vol.1, and Bataille, *Theory of Religion*.

<sup>219</sup> Bataille, *Theory of Religion*, p. 55.

consumption, then in sacrificial rituals the victim transcends the world of production and utility and forms a new type of ego-less subjectivity that is beyond the social dualities of utility and expenditure,<sup>220</sup> health and sickness, sin and virtue. Sacrifice transcends the limits imposed on the physical body by dominant social discourses, transforming the individual body into a type of sacred body beyond the constraints of binary thinking.

Concurrently, I analyze Athey's performance of self-injury through the prism of psychiatry and psychoanalysis including the works of Armando Favazza, Ariel Glucklich, Sigmund Freud, and Gilles Deleuze. I argue that self-injurious behaviour is marked by an individual's struggle for a better self through the process of deconstruction and obliteration of the sick body associated with physical and psychological trauma. According to Favazza, self-injury is understood by clinical patients as an immediate liberation of body and mind from the constraints of the habitual self and a purification of one's psyche of negative mental states such as anxiety and depression.<sup>221</sup> Self-injurious behavior provides a sense of empowerment and of regaining control over one's body while increasing the patient's sense of self-esteem and of independence from familial and social constraints.<sup>222</sup>

Analyzing three principal performances by Ron Athey enacted in the period from 1990 to 1997, his 'torture' trilogy – *Martyrs and Saints* (1992), *Fours Scenes in a Harsh Life* (1993), and *Deliverance* (1994) – I argue that Athey's sadomasochistic performances provide a secular

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<sup>220</sup> As Bataille notes: "to sacrifice is not to kill but to relinquish and to give. Killing is only the exhibition of a deep meaning. What is important is to pass from a lasting order, in which all consumption of resources is subordinated to the need for duration, to the violence of an unconditional consumption; what is important is to leave a world of real things, whose reality derives from a long-term operation and never resides in the moment – a world that creates and preserves... Sacrifice is the antithesis of production, which is accomplished with a view to the future, it is consumption that is concerned only with a moment." In Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, p. 213.

<sup>221</sup> Although the application of psychiatry and clinical studies of self-injury to the studies of Athey's radical body art may lead to interpretation of the artist's work as a pathological practice, it is not my intention to pathologize the work of the artist. On the contrary, I follow the logic of the discourse analysis and aim to demonstrate a variety of interpretations of self-injurious behaviour that help to unfold multiple meanings coded in Athey's sadomasochistic performance.

<sup>222</sup> Armando Favazza, *Bodies Under Siege: Self-mutilation, Nonsuicidal Self-injury, and Body Modification in Culture and Psychiatry*, (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011).

embodiment of religious sacrificial ritual, rooted in both the individual and the collective struggle for recovery. For Athey, who has suffered from the impacts of HIV-positive status for more than a decade, the performance of pain is linked to the search for healing and liberation from physical suffering. Sadomasochistic practices as enacted in Athey's performances such as skin cutting and skin piercing, branding, body sculpting and body suspension are aimed at the transcendence of his sick body and the construction of the sacred body associated with the processes of sacrifice and ascetic self-injury. Athey's imitation of Christian sacred figures, in particular Jesus Christ and Saint Sebastian in his performances *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life* and *Saint Sebastian* provides the historical and religious background for his individual martyrdom. Appropriating the imagery and symbolism of European religious painting and sculpture, Athey creates the dialogue with Christian devotional tradition. The sacrifice of Christ re-enacted in Athey's performances establishes the subjects of resurrection, salvation and eternal life as alternatives to the physical suffering of HIV-positive queer subject. For Ron Athey, the tropes of transcendence of the physical body, as enacted in his works, define the therapeutic quality of his sadomasochistic practices. Although the level of physical or psychological recovery that Athey achieves in his performances is beyond the scope of this research and it remains a rather intellectual construct; the cathartic quality of Athey's performative ritual is obvious and is defined by his ability to reconstruct archetypal scenarios of liberation and physical and mental restoration through extreme forms of suffering and pain.

The majority of performance studies scholars emphasise Athey's queer background and his strive to deconstruct gender binaries as the central subject matter of his works. For example,

Mary Richards<sup>223</sup> proposes an analysis of Athey's work as an attempt at deconstruction of the binary distinctions not only between pain and pleasure, but "binary notions of masculinity and femininity." She characterises his appropriation of masochism as transgressing against dominant social hierarchies and stereotypes. As she writes: "By calling the very basis of identity: the self, into question, masochism may be used to enact the mutability of individual identity in a society increasingly faced with doubts and uncertainties."<sup>224</sup> According to Richards, Athey's work is a critique of patriarchal power with its pathos of masculine superiority. Through a continuous performance of demasculinization, as expressed in Athey's figurative castration, the enactment of feminine characters by male actors, and the gratuitous usage of blood and other bodily fluids, Athey enters a liminal zone which may be better aligned with feminine rather than masculine power.

Fintan Walsh in his book *Male Trouble: Masculinity and the Performance of Crisis*<sup>225</sup> interprets the inversion of gender binaries in Athey's oeuvre as a form of misogynistic expression. As he states: "Misogyny is evidenced by negatively imagining women as threatening spectres without the presence of the women in question."<sup>226</sup> Walsh links Athey's traumatic childhood with his negative depiction of female patriarchal characters as abusers and sadists. He emphasises Athey's repulsion with femininity through his execution of violence on the bodies of primarily female performers and his desire to mock femininity through monstrous cross-dressing. Walsh defines Athey's drag as a highly misogynistic expression and links it to his desire to resist and deconstruct the body of a woman.

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<sup>223</sup> Mary Richards, "Ron Athey, A.I.D.S. and the Politics of Pain," *Body, Space and Technology* e-journal (Internet Publication: Brunel University, Dept. of Performing Arts, 2003), <http://people.brunel.ac.uk/bst/3no2/Papers/mary%20richards.htm>. (accessed 19 April, 2014).

<sup>224</sup> Ibid.

<sup>225</sup> Fintan Walsh, *Male Trouble: Masculinity and the Performance of Crisis*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), pp. 109-146.

<sup>226</sup> Ibid, p. 112.

Amelia Jones, on the contrary, highlights the androgynous erotic aspects of Athey's performance. Jones underscores the very elimination of the notion of gender binaries in Athey's work.<sup>227</sup> As she argues, in Athey's performance, the body is reduced to the mere set of holes. Through the performative shift of the focus from the aesthetics of performance to the physicality of the body the gender differences are eliminated in his work. In his performance female and male bodies both perform "multisensual texture" of the body through the performance of bodily orifice – mouth, nostrils, anus, ears. The phallus is physically absent in the work and the possibility of heterosexual relationships is completely removed from the scope of Athey's interrogation. As Jones writes: "Athey's performance mocks the very structure of the hetero – "the tormented duet is between a "man" and a "woman" who completely queer the idea of heterosexual matrix both by their holiness and by their bizarre refusal to mesh in a conventional way as two sides of a "proper" couple."<sup>228</sup>

While acknowledging the above-outlined critiques of Athey's sadomasochistic performance, in particular Athey's preoccupation with assertion of queer identity and the deconstruction of gender binaries, I perceive the value of Athey's work primarily in his attempt to perform therapeutic aspects of sadomasochistic practices. I find the reversal of gender binaries secondary to the central subjects of healing and the formation of a new healthier body through self-sacrifice. Athey's performative interrogation is larger than the problem of gender and non-conventional sexuality, approaching the subjects of self-transcendence and annihilation of the notion of individual self. The performance of the sacrificial body introduced in Athey's work is beyond the politics of gender as he performs a genderless body that transgresses social and cultural conventions of gendered physicality.

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<sup>227</sup> Amelia Jones, "Holy Body: Erotic Ethics in Ron Athey and Juliana Snapper's Judas Cradle," *TDR The Drama Review*, Vol. 50, # 1, (Spring 2006), pp. 159-169.

<sup>228</sup> *Ibid.*, p.167.

Athey's work is centered on erasure of boundaries between the material experience of the body and immaterial nature of the mind through extreme practices of self-violation and self-abuse. From this perspective his artistic goal is similar to the spiritual goal of religious ascetics rooted in the desire to overcome the limitations of the physical body. In both cases, the body is perceived as a central tool for self-transcendence and self-elimination. Violation of the body in Christian self-mutilating practices is rooted in the desire to replicate Christ's martyrdom and identify with a form of spiritual heroism. In a similar way, Athey is preoccupied with the subjects of queer martyrdom and the suffering of HIV-positive individuals. The construction of a sacrificial body is a predominant narrative in Athey's performative practice and is rooted in his desire to elevate the sickened queer body to the status of sainthood. Athey aims to deconstruct contemporary stereotypes on HIV infection as shameful and obscene and proposes the narratives of divine resurrection and deliverance as a response to the biased treatment of HIV-positive gay men as marginal and perverse.

The elevation of the sickened body to the status of divinity is at the core of Athey's performance and he is interested in the duality of this process. The pure physicality of his work, and its shock value, is aimed to bring the awareness of the subject back to the materiality of the body, while the transgression and violation of the body is performed with the purpose of self-transcendence and search for a better healthier self beyond the constraints of the sickness.

### **Sacred pain: Re-construction of Christ's body in *Martyrs and Saints*.**

The ideal follower of Christ adopts Christ's submissive model of behaviour, deferring to and accepting the greater wisdom of God regardless of the consequences. The Christian, in this way, could arguably be seen as religiously destined for masochism.<sup>229</sup>

Mary Richards

Athey's artistic practice is a highly-dramatic response to his own life experience: a childhood spent in the community of Pentecostals, several years of heroin addiction, and the stigma of being HIV-positive and gay. His sadomasochistic performance is rooted in the structure of ritual with the central focus on self-injury and self-sacrifice juxtaposed with aesthetics of hard-core sex shows and go-go dance. Athey and his collaborators have engaged in sadomasochistic performance since 1991 with the launching of their first project *Martyrs and Saints* featuring piercing, bloodletting, homosexual sex-game, suspension, crucifixion, and flagellation.

*Martyrs and Saints* was staged in 1992, following ten years of Athey's heroin addiction, and embraced several tableau vivant performed by Athey in club Fuck<sup>230</sup> in the period from 1981 to 1991. A seminal performance on the subject of HIV infection, *Martyrs and Saints* introduced the sickened body as a type of ascetic body and linked it to the trope of religious self-transcendence and resurrection.

The piece begins with a scene in a hospital for HIV-positive patients, where medical procedures are performed on the bodies of actors. Male nurses in drag with their lips sewn shut unravel naked bodies packed in garbage bags, wash them, spread them on the examination tables

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<sup>229</sup> Richards, "Ron Athey, A.I.D.S. and the politics of Pain."

<sup>230</sup> Club Fuck was an integral part of the early 1980s queer scene in Los Angeles, USA. Athey staged performances fused with practices taken from the Bondage-Domination-Sado-Masochism (BDSM) that also involved the staging of piercings, hypodermic injections, and lacerations. For more information see Ron Athey, *The Organ Feature*, *Organ* e-magazine (April, 2007), <http://www.organart.demon.co.uk/intronathey.htm>. (accessed 15 April, 2014).

and perform embarrassing medical procedures, including gynecological and rectal exams.

Athey's opening monologue draws immediate attention to the subjects of body and its mortality: "Of course body signifies death. To watch death approaching is frightening for what we know is what body is."<sup>231</sup> Reminiscent of Bataille's concept of sacrifice his monologue focuses on abject qualities of the body and its inherent vulnerability. The centrality of the body and its "abjection" is emphasised in the performance by brutal physicality and exhibitionism, bright hospital lights and the proximity of the stage to the audience. The spectators are bombarded with images of blood, urine, shit, and suffering bodies. The "patients" are treated harshly and are almost abused by the grotesque-looking nurses. The mode of embarrassment and public humiliation pervades the performance and constructs an atmosphere of discomfort and shame. As one of Athey's performers, Julie Tolentino, points out "it's about what it is to be literally a body, to have procedure done on you, to go through horribly embarrassing things in front of the audience."<sup>232</sup>

The second scene of the performance unfolds as an S&M show and progresses into sacrificial ritual. Athey appears on stage dressed in leather flagellating naked "temple whores" who crawl on the floor. The homosexual component of the scene is explicit: the male whores caress and kiss each other, lick Athey's boots and expose their naked bodies. The story unfolds rather unpredictably and transforms into a re-enactment of Saint Sebastian's penance<sup>233</sup> with Athey in the role of the Christian martyr. Suddenly Athey is seized by a group of butch women, representing Roman soldiers who violently attack Athey. Metal needles are inserted into the skin of his forehead in the form of a crown of thorns; ropes are attached to his legs and arms and he is

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<sup>231</sup> *Hallelujah: Ron Athey: a Story of Deliverance*, dir. by Catherine Saalfield Gund, (1998, DVD).

<sup>232</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>233</sup> Saint Sebastian (died c. 288 BC) - an early Christian Saint and martyr who was tortured and killed during Roman oppression of Christians for rescuing persecuted believers.



made to dance and jump while being beaten up by the daggers.<sup>234</sup> When the daggers leave Athey is alone with a butch woman who carries him in her arms and ties him to the post. In a way similar to the original story of Roman officer Sebastian, who was executed by arrows as a punishment for his betrayal, Athey is pierced with sharp long needles through his legs, arms and abdomen. As a final touch, the needles on his forehead are removed and Athey starts bleeding all over his face and chest.

I interpret the two parts of the performance – the scene in the hospital for HIV patients and the temple scene of ritualistic sacrifice – as a representation of two aspects of the sacrificial process: deconstruction of the world of things and the formation of the world of sacred experiences. Exposing the marginal, sick and humiliated body in the first scene of *Martyrs and Saints*, Athey demonstrates the limits of the physical body – its temporality and subjection to sickness and death. The explicit physicality and exhibitionism of the performance is defined by the necessity to expose the pains of “the world of things” that exists through ignorance and the repression of the unwanted qualities of the physical body: its fragility, temporality and mortality. The bodies of HIV-positive patients serve as a metaphor for any physical body trapped in the material world where the idea of self-transcendence is only a fantasy. In “the world of things” as defined by Bataille, there is no escape from sickness and death and no hope for elimination of fear and suffering; death signifies only death, the irreversible finality of human existence. Therefore, death and fatal sickness must be removed from the scale of profane affairs. As Bataille puts it: “future time constitutes this real world to such a degree that death no longer has a place in it. But it is for this very reason that death means everything to it. The weakness and the biggest contradiction of the world of things is that it imparts an unreal character to death even

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<sup>234</sup> A masculine identifying lesbian.

though man's membership in this world is tied to the positing of the body as a thing insofar as it is mortal."<sup>235</sup>

Athey's brutal exhibitionism of the sick and dying body in the institutional context of a hospital demonstrates the lamentable state of the subject within the individual order. The limit constitutes its nature. The fear of dying underlines all the activities of the profane individuality. Sick bodies are inherently marginalised and excluded from the dominant discourses of representation and Athey's exposure of unwanted subjects undermines the very order of everydayness rooted in the illusion of immortality and the continuity of human existence. Bringing the reality of the HIV-positive body in the public context, Athey addresses the artificiality of profane optimism and its ignorant exclusion of death from the realm of profane affairs.

*Martyrs and Saints* is Athey's most explicit commentary on the AIDS crisis of the 1980s. As he points out: "*Martyrs and Saints* is a meditation that was fuelled by rage and grief I felt in the early '90s, tackling the ambience created by the AIDS catastrophe, and trying it into my inheritance, a grandiose martyr complex (this was all my Jesus freak family could afford to leave me with)."<sup>236</sup> After losing dozens of acquaintances and friends to AIDS, including his lover and collaborator Cliff Diller,<sup>237</sup> Athey aimed to expose and humanise death from AIDS often exhibited as shameful and obscene within mainstream discourses of representation.

The underrepresentation and stigma of the HIV-positive queer body was a response of Western medicine of the early 1990s to the explosion of the AIDS epidemic. The historical

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<sup>235</sup> Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, p. 211.

<sup>236</sup> Ron Athey, "Deliverance: Introduction, foreword, description and selected text," in Joshua Oppenheimer and Helena Reckitt, ed., *Acting on AIDS: Sex, Drugs and Politics*, (London and New York: Serpent's Tail, 1997), p. 433.

<sup>237</sup> Athey explains: "it [the performance] was a hodge-podge of short vignettes. My reaction over the death of David Wajnarowicz inspired Scene I: A Nurse Penance; the death of my beloved Okie drag-queen Cliff Diller, who was like a best girlfriend and a son to me, offered not only the meditative preset, 'A New Blood Cure', but supplied the set with his memorial pyramid. It was a structure he hallucinated on that last morphine drip." In Athey, "Deliverance: Introduction, foreword, description and selected text," p. 433-435.

context of AIDS and its powerful association with homosexuality defined the mainstream politics of the stigmatization of homosexual bodies. In his article “AIDS and Stigma” Sander Gilman<sup>238</sup> explains the representation of sickness in Western culture as a process of silent marginalisation. Being sick, especially being HIV-positive, carries the meaning of being perverted, odd and deeply unhealthy. The understanding of HIV-positive body in the opposition to a healthy body leads to the creation of rigid boundaries and hierarchies between polluted and pure bodies. As Gilman puts it: “the anxiety about [AIDS] illness as a danger is repressed in continuation of the older model of ‘health/ beauty ‘and ‘illness/ ugliness.’ The person at risk of but uninfected by HIV is ‘healthy’ and therefore beautiful, and poses no danger to the collective’s continuity. The person with an HIV infection, however, is the focus of anxiety about individual as well as collective death and decay. This person is a reminder of the necessary presence of death in a seemingly healthy world.”<sup>239</sup>

Athey’s performance of the suffering HIV-positive body aimed to bring the awareness to the existence of hidden hierarchies and inequalities in contemporary medical and cultural context. The repression and exclusion of dying bodies seems justified by dominant culture concerned with health of its population. However, in a larger context this exclusion is a result of the transgressive potential of sickness towards dominant discourses of production and consumption. Bringing the argument back to Bataille’s theory of sacrifice, the performance of sickness and death is one that unveils the limits of the individual body as mortal and provisional, in contradiction of the capitalist goals of never-ending cycles of production and consumption.

Bataille states:

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<sup>238</sup> Sander Gilman, “AIDS and Stigma,” in Oppenheimer and Reckitt, ed., *Acting on AIDS Acting on AIDS*, pp. 101-118.

<sup>239</sup> Ibid, p. 107.

The separate individual is of the same nature as the thing, or rather the anxiousness to remain personally alive that establishes the person's individuality is linked to the integration of existence into the world of things. To put it differently work and the fear of dying are interdependent; the former implies the thing and vice versa. In fact it is not even necessary to work in order to be the thing of fear: man is an individual to an extent that his apprehension ties him to the results of labour. But man is not, as one might think, a thing because he is afraid. He would have no anguish if he were not the individual (the thing), and it is essentially the fact of being an individual that fuels his anguish. ... he is afraid of death as soon as he enters the system of projects that is the order of things. Death disturbs the order of things and the order of things holds us.<sup>240</sup>

From this perspective, the opening scenes of *Martyrs and Saints* are symbolic in their representation of the mortality of the human body and the finality of human existence.

Transgressive towards capitalist discourses of representation of young, healthy and productive bodies as a standard of physicality, the visuals from *Martyrs and Saints* are desperately honest in their exhibitionism of non-productive non-consuming decaying bodies that represent the destiny of every living body on the surface of the Earth.

The second scene is staged as a reversal of the first: the hospital is replaced with a temple, and the sick, dying bodies of patients with the seductive bodies of temple whores, the passivity of HIV-positive patients is replaced by the aggressive sexuality of the dominatrix and her slaves. The light, the music, and the décor suggest the glory of religious institution, its link to eternal life and eternal victory in contrast to the plain fatalism of the hospital scene. The scene provides a juxtaposition of Western rationalism and mysticism, Western medicine and religion, and the hopelessness of HIV infection and the hopefulness of religious resurrection.

The central focus of the concluding scene is on Athey's sacrifice, which commences by the insertion of surgical needles in his scalp and proceeds with the piercing of his body with arrows. Athey's body is completely surrendered to the punishment, his face expresses quiet humility, the eyes are directed to the sky; he speaks in tongues replicating Pentecostal tradition.

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<sup>240</sup> Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, p. 214.

The scene is almost fully reminiscent of religious paintings of Saint Sebastian, in particular that of Andrea Mantegna (Isola di Carturo, circa 1431 - Mantua, 1506) St. Sebastian. Although the figure of Saint Sebastian embodied various meanings throughout history – from representing plague saint in Medieval Europe to being a symbol of decadence in late 19<sup>th</sup> century – the Saint has primarily been associated with male homoeroticism. The representation of Saint Sebastian as a homosexual saint was launched in early Renaissance paintings that laid the ground for future development of religious imagery of Saint Sebastian as a gay icon. The paintings of Guido Reni, Andrea Montegna, Tintoretto, and Sandro Botticelli demonstrated a perfectly-built near-naked body of a young man writhing in the ecstasy and pain of the arrows that pierced his body. Montegna’s painting shows Saint Sebastian tied to a post with his head tilted back expressing ecstatic humility that can easily be confused for sexual longing. The arrows penetrate his abdomen, hips and shoulders being explicitly symbolic of homosexual intercourse. His saintly suffering and sexualised body contributed to his homoerotic appeal and the image was easily translated into the object for gay male adoration.<sup>241</sup>

Renaissance images of Saint Sebastian also ignite sadomasochistic associations. Sebastian’s penetrated body in pain and his visible frenzy and ecstatic pleasure from it add a sadistic overtone to his depictions. It is not a coincidence that an infamous Japanese novelist, Yukio Mishima, marquise de Sade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the author most influential for Athey’s artistic development, chose Saint Sebastian as an object of his erotic devotion. In his memoir *Confessions of a Mask*, Mishima remembers having his first ejaculation as a child over a reproduction of Remi’s Saint Sebastian. As he writes the image provoked “pagan joy” and erotic

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<sup>241</sup> For more information see Charles Darwent, “Arrows of desire: How did St Sebastian become an enduring, homoerotic icon?” *The Independent*, (February 10, 2008).

rapture: “My blood soared up; my loins swelled as though in wrath [...] My hands, completely unconsciously, began motion that had never been taught.”<sup>242</sup>



Left: Figure 2.1 -- Ron Athey, *Martyrs and Saints* (Saint Sebastian), 1992

Right: Figure 2.2 -- Andrea Mantegna, *Saint Sebastian*, Isola di Carturo, circa 1431 - Mantua, 1506

Athey's identification with sacrificial figure of Saint Sebastian in *Martyrs and Saints* is explicit. He appropriates the symbolism of Christian martyrdom and Renaissance homoeroticism of the image of Saint Sebastian and adapts it to the context of sadomasochistic performance. Athey's suspended beautifully-shaped body is lit with dramatic light reminiscent of Renaissance paintings. His flowing blood leaves red dripping marks on his muscular hips, legs, shoulders. His body passively surrenders to self-inflicted punishment yet it is full of emotion. Desire, humility, acceptance of intense pain and longing for liberation from it intertwine in his staged

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<sup>242</sup> Yukio Mishima, *Confessions of a Mask*, (London: Peter Owen, 1998), p. 40.

torture. Almost boyish look on his face: lips lax open, eyes closed, a prayer coming out off his mouth. His pain awakens innocence: an image of a punished boy searching for forgiveness; an abused teenager giving up to his torture with youthful maximalism. Although covered in HIV positive blood Athey's body is irresistibly attractive, replicating the fantasy world of homoerotic desire and sadomasochistic fetishism.

At the same time, following the ascetic form of replication of the suffering of Christ, Athey unfolds the narratives of glory through martyrdom programmed in ascetic self-injurious behaviour. Although being explicitly atheistic Athey, in this scene, aims to connect to the narrative higher than the individual self through the performance of physical endurance and self-injury. His preoccupation with heroism and transcendence of the profane self is pronounced in his interview with Catherine Saalfield Gund. As he says: "I am going to die in a few years and I have to leave my mark. What's my mark? How did Ron Athey change the world? This frenzy to make it bigger, to make it more, to make it mean something... How can you do that without God? How can you do that without spirituality? How can you do that without a belief system and support group?"<sup>243</sup>

The performance of Christ's Passion, via identification with Christ in self-injury and self-sacrifice, was a common practice in Christian ascetic ritual. I see a direct parallel between Athey's sadomasochistic performance and religious practices of self-mutilation. The comparative analysis of religious self-injury and Athey's sadomasochistic performance helps in understanding the significance of ritualistic self-injury as an attempt towards self-transcendence of the sick body and the formation of the sacred body associated with the body of Christ.

The ritual mortification of the flesh, which had been central to Medieval Christian asceticism, is still preserved in a number of contemporary Christian cults including Good

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<sup>243</sup>*Hallelujah: Ron Athey: a Story of Deliverance*, dir. by Catherine Saalfield Gund.

Friday's processions. Heroic Christian ascetics<sup>244</sup> often engaged in extreme forms of self-violation including lacerating, puncturing, burning the flesh, self-flagellation and self-starvation. Medieval Christianity focused primarily on narratives of Christ's Passion as a model for spiritual transformation and spiritual growth through replication of Christ's suffering. Christ's martyrdom became a central subject in Medieval religious practices and provided the manual for ascetic practices centered on flesh mortification and self-injury.

Medieval art and literature served as a principal inspiration for extreme forms of asceticism. Fourteenth century religious art depicted Christ being flagellated, crucified and tortured. In religious paintings of this era Christ was traditionally depicted tied to a column, whipped and abused by his persecutors; his body wounded and bleeding. The Middle Ages introduced a new genre of religious art *Arma Christi*,<sup>245</sup> which embraced the variety of objects of torture associated with Christ's Passion and with which Christ was believed to conquer death. Among these objects are whips, crown of thorns, scourges, knives and pincers. Being exposed independently objects of *Arma Christi* were worshipped in the manner of images of Saints.

On the other hand, Medieval Christianity associated objects of torture and mutilated body parts with narratives of sainthood and martyrdom. Christian saints were depicted "being flayed alive, dismembered, having their teeth and tongue cut off, being gored by bulls, cooked alive, and eaten by wild animals."<sup>246</sup> The images of martyrs' severed heads, severed breasts, and enucleated eyes often served as objects of collective devotion. The biographies of Christian Saints served as manuals for achievement of sainthood through intense physical suffering and encouraged believers to endure mortification of flesh for higher spiritual goals. For example,

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<sup>244</sup> Ascetic practitioners who engaged majorly in self-injurious rituals with the purpose of spiritual self-transcendence.

<sup>245</sup> *Arma Christi* or "the Instruments of the Passion." are the objects associated with Jesus' Passion in Medieval Christian art.

<sup>246</sup> Favazzo, *Bodies Under Siege*, p. 14.



Saint Agatha, a third-century martyr, was depicted with her breasts severed. The saint displays a dish holding her mutilated breasts as proof of her martyrdom and sainthood. Saint Catherine of Alexandria was depicted torn to death; her special attribute was the spiked wheel. Saint Lucy was portrayed holding her self-enucleated eyes in her hands.



Figure 2.3 -- Sano di Pietro (1405–1481), *Martyrdom of Saint Agatha in an Initial D: Cutting from an Antiphonary*, ca. 1470–73

The ascetic practices of identification with Christ's martyrdom consisted of diverse methods of self-punishment that were primarily focused on restaging Christ's execution. The ascetic's realisation of God's calling was often accompanied by the perceived necessity to go through self-inflicted torture similar to the torments of Christ in order to liberate the soul from the constraints of the physical body. Self-flagellation, piercing of the skin, carrying the cross and nailing oneself to it were among the most popular methods of ascetic self-injury.

German mystic Henry Suso (1300 -1366) is a perfect example of an ascetic engaging in sadomasochistic practices for spiritual purposes. From a very young age, Suso subjected himself continuously to extreme forms of mortification and physical abuse for the purpose of identification with Christ's martyrdom. The ascetic often restaged Christ's penances in an exaggerated manner that would prolong his physical suffering. One of Suso's penances involved the construction of a wooden cross with thirty iron nails hammered through the wood in special remembrance of Christ's wounds: "He fastened the cross to his bare back on the skin between his shoulders and carried it day and night for eight years to praise his crucified Lord."<sup>247</sup> Nails continuously scratched and pierced his skin causing deep wounds and infection. Suso continued this penance for 8 consecutive years. In the final year, "he hammered seven needles into it in such a way that the points extended out quite a bit but the needles themselves remained fixed in the wood. The back parts of the needles he broke off. The wounds caused by these sharp needles he bore in praise of the deep sorrow of the pure Mother of God that so utterly pierced through her heart and soul at the time of his wretched death."<sup>248</sup>

Another European mystic Margaret of Ypres (1216-1237) worshiped Christ by deeply piercing her skin with stings and nettles. Her biographer Thomas de Cantimpre describes her extreme austerities: "she very frequently applied the discipline even to the shedding of blood... A child of three could barely have lived on the food she ate while she dwelled in the flesh... she scarcely ever slept one entire night."<sup>249</sup> She died as a young woman at the age of 21 after suffering intense bodily pains and hemorrhaging, extreme bodily conditions that were accompanied by ecstatic visions and mental states of bliss.

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<sup>247</sup> Frank Tobin, ed., *Henry Suso: the Exemplar, with Two German Sermons*, (New York, Mahwah: Paulist Press, 1989), p. 89.

<sup>248</sup> Ibid.

<sup>249</sup> Thomas de Cantimpre, *The Life of Margaret of Ypres*, trans. Margot King, (Toronto: Peregrina Press, 1990), pp. 48-50.

Identification with the suffering of Christ was often interpreted as a tool of self-transcendence and unification with God. Self-inflicted pain was understood by the ascetics as a way to merge with the spirit of Christ and lose oneself in the passion for the divine. Sacred pain promoted dissolution of one's individual identity, its ultimate shattering in a gesture of negation of a limited egocentric self.

The formation of the sacred body in pre-modern religious practices is predicated on eradication of the mundane physical body saturated with intensities of sexual desire, desire for comfort and for inflicting violence on others, and transformation of these negative physical impulses in a form of unconditional love towards God and other human beings. Ascetic self-injury is a form of overcoming of the physical self and elimination of self-identification with a material body. It provides a tool for the understanding of the body as a temporary envelope for the eternal soul.

On the other hand, ascetic self-injury was perceived as a tool for individual salvation and purification of bodily sins committed in the course of life. As Ariel Glucklich in his research on psychology of heroic asceticism points out: "when the body is either imagined or experienced as the filthy and putrefying encasement of the pure soul, pain is felt as cleansing."<sup>250</sup> Sexual desire, gluttony, hatred and violence – imagined in the mind of ascetics or committed by their bodies – are purified through extreme forms of self-mortification.

Punishment of the body for sinful desires was a typical practice of Medieval monks and clergy. It was understood that it is preferable to endure physical suffering in this world rather than to receive eternal suffering in the afterlife. In the Christian worldview pain and self-injury were understood as a "pre-emptive measure" protecting against the fires of Purgatory and hell.

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<sup>250</sup> Ariel Glucklich, *Sacred Pain: Hurting the Body for the Sake of the Soul*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 27.

By logical analogy, if physical treatment requires painful medicine, so does the healing of the mind and soul. The fear of suffering after death was often at the core of ascetic self-injurious behaviour. Even the smallest sin committed by the ascetic could lead to excessive self-punishment. Contact with the female body, an erotic dream or a random thought linked to a selfish physical desire could result in extreme ascetic penance.

Christian ascetics viewed pain as God's mechanism to regulate one's path in life and death. A belief that God punishes the faithful in order to purify their souls before dying was very common. Excessive suffering, whether experienced intentionally or non-intentionally by the ascetic manifested his chosen status and his need to go through pain in order to reach the goal of salvation. For example, an ascetic named Stephanus suffering from cancer perceived his illness as a favour sent to him by God. When his members were cut off due to the growth of cancerous tissue, Stephanus showed no sign of pain and explained to his visitors that "it may well be that my members deserve punishment and it would be better to pay the penalty here than after I have left the arena."<sup>251</sup>

The collective dimension of this belief is manifested in the event of Christ's sacrifice that stands at the center of the Christian belief system and demonstrates the ability of individual suffering to purify not only the individual soul, but the entire community from its sins. The highest manifestation of one's transcendence of the self and overcoming of the bounds of individual self is expressed in the ability of the ascetic to take the on himself/ herself the sufferings of the whole society. The sacrifice of Christ replicates more ancient beliefs in the ability of individual sacrifice to heal, purify and liberate the community. In Greek culture, the concept of sacrifice developed in parallel with the concept of miasma, which signifies "a

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<sup>251</sup> Ibid, p. 18.

contagious power ... that has an independent life of its own.”<sup>252</sup> Miasma afflicts the whole society until the sacrificial death of the scapegoat, who by his own death removes the suffering of entire community.

Ron Athey’s performance of *Martyrs and Saints* embraces the variety of Christian ascetic practices rooted in the tradition of replication of suffering of Christ. Although Athey is explicit about his atheism, he never underestimates the influence of Christian and Pentecostal ritual on his artistic philosophy and aesthetics. Athey’s performance of *Martyrs and Saints* is rooted in the tradition of Christian ascetic sacrifice and utilizes the variety of methods of ascetic self-injury such as piercing and cutting the skin, flagellation and crucifixion.

Although the process of soul healing pursued by religious ascetics is irrelevant for Athey’s secular performance, the concept of guilt and the necessity to purify the mind of the sins committed in the past constantly re-emerges in his work. *Martyrs and Saints* is confessional performance that reveals the hidden reality of HIV-positive individuals. Self-punishment, self-hate and the desire to eliminate the sickened body through physical torture is at the core of the work. The sadomasochistic performance of *Martyrs and Saints* does not lead to actual healing of the body, but, it nevertheless becomes cathartic and purifying in the way that it approaches the subjects of deaths and dying as transformative and liberating. As art historian Eleanor Hertney points out, Athey’s works “ultimately serve as an exorcism of the self-hatred which he acquired in his early Pentecostal years. He finds masochistic play transformative and cathartic, and his performances are designed to re-enact the positive aspects of his early experiences.”<sup>253</sup>

The elevation of the queer body to the status of sainthood is paradigmatic for the performance scene of the late 1980s – early 1990s. Athey’s attempt to depict himself and his

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<sup>252</sup> Karen Armstrong, *The Great Transformation*, (Random House Digital Inc., 2009), p. 67.

<sup>253</sup> Hertney, *Postmodern Heretics*, p. 66.

friends as ‘living saints on earth [who were] being struck down’<sup>254</sup> parallels the attempts of many queer artists and performers of early ‘90s. The bond between Christianity and homosexuality has been explored in the works of Franko B, Robert Mapplethorpe, Tim Miller, David Wojnarowicz and many others.

For instance, Tim Miller staged autobiographic performances that often utilised Christian symbolism and rhetoric as forms of assertion and elevation of the queer body. In one of his works, *Stretch Marks*, Miller performed as if crucified on a blackboard shaped in the form of the bomber plane. Being a gay believer Miller continuously addresses the complexities of his relationships with the Christian Church and Christ. While Miller’s homosexuality is a stigma it is also the main reason of his engagement with Christianity that began from his falling in love with the Christ. As he points out he could never separate his sexual identity from his religious identity as both resulted from each other: “The first man I was ever in love with was Jesus. He was sweet. He was strong. He didn’t play football or scream at me and he wore great clothes. This feeling I had for him from a very early age is part of my love for other men. I imagine him as a generous and sensitive lover, ready to give and receive pleasure. I see him there for the other person. Rubbing tired muscles with all those sweet smelling balms and ointments that they keep talking about in the New Testament. My relationship to Jesus is in a direct heartbeat to my gay identity.”<sup>255</sup>

This approach mirrors the work of another queer artist and playwright – Terrence McNally. Being Catholic and gay McNally staged a re-enactment of the *Passion of Christ* with explicitly homosexual content. The play *Corpus Christi* depicts a boy, Joshua from Texas, who is persecuted for engaging in homosexual relationships with Judas. Joshua is a prophet who

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<sup>254</sup> Ron Athey et al., *Pleading in the Blood: The Art and Performances of Ron Athey*, ed. Dominic Johnson, (London: Live Art Development Agency, 2013), p. 28.

<sup>255</sup> Heartney, *Postmodern Heretics*, p. 73.

teaches unconditional love and acceptance and who following the biblical scenario, is betrayed by Judas. Earlier in the play Joshua manifests the nature of his teaching by blessing the gay union of two apostles, James and Bartholomew. In his dialogue he emphasises the acceptance that is at the root of his teaching. Quoting the Bible he asserts: “and God saw everything that he had made, and behold it was very good. I can quote the scripture as well as the next man. God loves us most when we love each other. We accept you and bless you.”<sup>256</sup>

The identification of the queer body with the body of Christ is prominent in the work of queer photographer Robert Mapplethorpe. His work is even more significant in the context of discussion on Athey as he directly engaged with the subjects of BDSM. Mapplethorpe’s traveling retrospective *The Perfect Moments* (1988), during which the artist died from AIDS related complications, depicted the sexualised queer body as an archetype of the sacred body. Containing explicit images of homosexual sadomasochistic acts, the exhibition unveiled Mapplethorpe’s obsession with both – Catholic aesthetics and unconventional sexuality. Heartney engages in detailed analysis of his work as profoundly influenced by theological structures of Catholicism. For example, analysing his image *Dennis Speight with Calla Lilies*, she compares the body of a queer youth to the theme of the Risen Christ. As she writes in traditional representations, Christ is depicted carrying a lily “as a symbol of his triumph over death and his body is so purified and perfected that he must warn Mary Magdalene at the tomb – “Noli me tangere” – “Do not touch me.” In the picture a naked black man with a perfect body holds a lily while confronting a viewer with his large open eyes. The picture is cropped so the viewer can see a part of the man’s penis.

In contrast to these art works, Athey’s sexualisation of religious narratives or sacralisation of homosexuality goes beyond the aesthetics of representation. Athey is interested

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<sup>256</sup> Ibid, p. 79.

not only in the representation but in the reconstruction of ascetic experiences and embodies the principles of the sacred in his own body. Christian rituals of martyrdom and ascetic practices of self-injury are recreated and experienced by Athey in real time and space. From this perspective, Athey's performance of Christian martyrdom reveals the spiritual potentiality of HIV-positive body and proposes a new way to think about one's sickness as transformative and cathartic. Athey's exhibitionism of his HIV infection, his engagement with subjects of marginalisation, death and dying, brings proscribed subjects to public interrogation. As in the Christian ascetic self-sacrifice, Athey's performance is a form of liberation of repressed collective fears and anxieties related to death and an attempt at cathartic transformation of sickness into blessing.

### **Erotism and Sacrifice: Divine Feminine in the *Four Scenes in Harsh Life***

The trinity of the masochistic dream is summed up in the words: cold – maternal – severe, icy – sentimental – cruel. These qualities point to the difference between the woman torturer and her “counterparts,” the hetaera and the sadist, their sensuality is replaced by her supersensuous sentimentality, their warmth and their fire by her icy coldness, their confusion by her rigorous order.<sup>257</sup>

Gilles Deleuze

Those Females Who Can Wreck the Infinite...<sup>258</sup>

Julia Kristeva

George Bataille, in his concept of sacrifice, described in the Introduction, draws a direct parallel between the experience of sacrificial killing and of erotic desire. He sees a direct connection between the feelings of horror the process of sacrifice produces in its audience and the feelings of orgasmic excitement experienced during sexual liaison. On the one side, at the core of sacrifice Bataille sees a collective fear of dying and physical repulsion. The physicality of

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<sup>257</sup> Gilles Deleuze, ‘Coldness and Cruelty’ in *Masochism*, texts by Gilles Deleuze and Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, (New York: Zone Books, 1991), p. 52.

<sup>258</sup> Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1982).



death is repelling. The figure of sacrifice is not only the object of transcendental sentiments, but also the object of group disgust and terror, for the death of the sacrificial victim is still the death of a material body with all the consequences of dying and disintegrating flesh. The outcome of sacrifice is a deteriorating corpse, “a fetid, sticky object without boundaries”<sup>259</sup> that horrifies the individual of the world of things. The sacrifice - sacrificial killing or a type of ascetic ritual associated with self-injury - reveals the very materiality of the body that remains hidden under the protective envelope of skin. Sacrifice is the exposure of the content of the body, its fluids – blood, urine, phlegm, its holes - screaming mouth, flayed skin, open anus, etc., its ultimate vulnerability. The world of things that operates by the exclusion of vulnerability of the physical body and the materiality of death from the scale of everyday life is threatened by the physical exposure of sacrifice. The sight of blood, urine and feces is repelling for its ability to bring the hidden content of the body into the external world and expose the fragility of skin, that unreliable envelope that separates life from death.

On the other hand, Bataille draws a parallel between the disgust felt towards the dying body and the desire the sight of it produces in the spectators. As he states in the *Phaedra Complex*: “Every horror conceals a possibility of enticement.”<sup>260</sup> Death, especially violent death, based on the deconstruction of morality and the whole order of the world of things, hides the possibility of temptation and pleasure. In *Erotism*, Bataille explains the intrinsic link that exists between sexual pleasure and violence of death rooted in the “promise of life implicit in sensuous aspect of death.” Life is possible only through death and the elimination of exhausted life from the burden of living. The death of any living creature is a promise of new life and is at the root of cycles of existence. The desire latently present in the act of dying is defined by this potentiality

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<sup>259</sup> Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, p. 253.

<sup>260</sup> *Ibid*, p. 254.

of death to produce a new life. From this prospective the act of dying and sexual act are not that different from each other, but both are manifestations of intimate life. As Bataille writes:

“sexuality and death are simply the culminating points of the holiday, nature celebrates, with the inexhaustible multitude of living beings, both of them signifying the boundless wastage of nature’s resources as opposed to the urge to live on characteristic of every living creature.”<sup>261</sup>

The external violence of sacrifice reveals the violence of existence programmed in continuous cycles of birth and dying. The central goal of sacrifice according to Bataille is to bring life and death into harmony, reconciling the imaginary opposition in the binary life-death constructed of the “world of things.” He compares the process of sacrifice as the ultimate manifestation of death with the act of love-making as the ultimate representation of life. What unites the two is their inherent animality, which strips the human beings of their humanity and returns them to the state of bare life beyond the artificial social and cultural constructs of the world of things. Both – sacrifice and sex -- are centered on shameless revelation of flesh. Both are driven by subconscious forces that overthrow the mundane subjectivity ruled by the power of reason. Both are rooted in violence and the intensity of intimate life incompatible with the order of the world of things:

Sacrifice replaces the ordered life of the animal with a blind convulsion of its organs. So also with the erotic convulsion; it gives free rein to extravagant organs whose blind activity goes on beyond the considered will of the lovers. Their considered will is followed by the animal activity of these swollen organs. They are animated by violence outside the control of reason, swollen to bursting point and suddenly the heart rejoices to yield to the breaking of the storm. The urges of the flesh pass all bounds in the absence of controlling will. Flesh is the extravagance within us set up against the law of decency. Flesh is the born enemy of people haunted by Christian taboos, but if as I believe an indefinite and general taboo does exist, opposed to sexual liberty in ways depending on the time and the place, the flesh signifies a return to this threatening freedom.<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>261</sup> Ibid.

<sup>262</sup> Bataille, *Erotism*, p. 92.

What is more important, sacrifice and erotism liberate the person from the bonds of his/her discontinuous subjectivity, as characterised by unsolvable loneliness, separateness from other beings and the fear of death.<sup>263</sup> Sacrifice and eroticism communicate the divine message of continuity of existence rooted in unity of everyone with everyone and everything achievable only through violent deconstruction of limited self-sufficient individuality. As Bataille writes “The whole business of erotism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives.”<sup>264</sup> The act of love-making, stripping naked, surrendering to your own desire and the desire of the other person is oppositional to self-possession of discontinuous existence. The person is transgressing the self thus entering the realm of unity and continuity of experiences with the other being. In a similar manner sacrifice corresponds with dissolution of life as it exists in the realm of discontinuity. The violent death of the sacrificial victim “disrupts the creature’s discontinuity”<sup>265</sup> and reveals the continuity of existence for all the spectators of a rite. In both cases violence and desire are reversible and often coincide. Erotic desire is the desire driven by violent, subconscious forces at the core of which is destruction of the separate individuality, which in turn is similar to the criminal desire to kill. On the other hand, the sacrificial victim often embodies the object of erotic desire and is perceived as an embodiment of ultimate frenzy and of the ecstasy of existence. As Bataille concludes: “Only violence can bring everything to a state of flux..., only violence and then nameless disquiet bound up with it. We

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<sup>263</sup> Bataille defines discontinuity as a principal tragedy of humanity: “We are discontinuous beings, individuals who perish in isolation in the midst of an incomprehensible adventure, but we yearn for our lost continuity. We find the state of affairs that binds us to our random and ephemeral individuality hard to bear. Along with our tormenting desire that this evanescent thing should last, there stands our obsession with a primal continuity linking us with everything that is.” In Bataille, *Erotism*, p. 15.

<sup>264</sup> Bataille, *Erotism*, p. 17.

<sup>265</sup> *Ibid*, p. 22.

cannot imagine the transition from one state to another one basically unlike it without picturing the violence done to the being called into existence through discontinuity.”<sup>266</sup>

From this perspective, the sacrificial victim and the object of desire coincide and are often represented by a feminine figure. Defining the notion of religious eroticism Bataille compares the relationships between the victim and the sacrificer in the sacrificial rite with the relationships between female and male partners in the act of lovemaking. As he writes: “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.”<sup>267</sup>

The figure of sacrificial victim embodies the Feminine principle through its passivity, receptivity, and surrendering to the figure of the sacrificer. The masculine archetype, on the contrary, is activated in aggression towards the victim, and in the ability to kill. However Bataille does not minimize the role of the sacrificial victim due to its passivity and visible vulnerability. On the contrary, he emphasises its omnipotence and equates the figure of sacrifice, the feminine archetype, to the divine Feminine. In his seminal text *Madame Edwarda* Bataille depicts Edwarda as a figure of ultimate sacrifice, a mad prostitute who drifts on the border of delirious suffering and excessive self-liberating pleasure. Edwarda identifies herself as God and asserts an omnipotent power over her client, in spite of her dubious social and professional status:

She was seated, she held one long leg stuck up in the air, to open her crack yet wider, she used her fingers to draw the folds of skin apart... ‘Why’, I stammered in a subdued tone, ‘why are you doing that?’ ‘ You can see for yourself’, she said, ‘I’m GOD.’<sup>268</sup>

Being an object of the narrator’s uncontrollable desire Edwarda leads him from one frenzied experience to the next, exposing her madness and her excessive sexuality in the most uncontrollable way. Through witnessing her violent epileptic fits and her extreme physical

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<sup>266</sup> Ibid, p. 17.

<sup>267</sup> Ibid, p. 18.

<sup>268</sup> Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, p. 11.

suffering, the narrator approaches the transcendence of his own self and is able to merge with Edwarda in the intensity of her self-loss.

However the ultimate expression of Edwarda's power is defined by her ability for sexual satisfaction, the *jouissance* that manifests her proximity to the divine. Her ability for self-transcendence is sexual and orgasmic and it causes the narrator to completely surrender to her:

Edwarda's pleasure – fountain of boiling water, heartbursting furious tideflow – went on and on, weirdly, unendingly; that stream of luxury, its strident inflexion, glorified her being unceasingly, made her nakedness unceasingly more naked, her lewdness ever more intimate. Her body, her face swept in ecstasy were abandoned to the unspeakable coursing and ebbing, in her sweetness there hovered a crooked smile: she saw me to the bottom of my dryness, from the bottom of my desolation I sensed her joy's torrent run free. My anguish resisted the pleasure I ought to have sought. Edwarda's pain-wrung pleasure filled me with an exhausting impression of bearing witness to a miracle. My own distress and fever seemed small things to me. But that was what I felt, those are the only great things in me which gave answer to the rupture of her whom in the deeps of an icy silence I called 'my heart.'<sup>269</sup>

Bataille's figure of Edwarda is a metaphor for sacrifice, the divine victim that exists on the border of excessive pain and unbearable pleasure. Her God-like nature is defined by her ability to channel the intensity at a cosmic level through her own body. Edwarda's principal quality is the ability to merge the opposites of suffering and joy, violence and sexuality, sickness and beauty, that Bataille calls a miracle. She is beyond binary thinking and classifications of "the world of things." Her indefinable, fluid nature is threatening for the ordinary world preoccupied with borders, limits and clear cut definitions. She embodies the sacrificial feminine – the principle that is at the core of all transgressions and subversions of reason-based culture. The social order is built on binary thinking. As Mary Douglas points out "it is only by exaggerating the difference between within and without, above and below, male and female, with and against, that a semblance of order is created."<sup>270</sup>

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<sup>269</sup> Ibid, 235.

<sup>270</sup> Mary Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, (London and Henley: Routledge and Kegan Pual, 1969), p. 4.

The abject qualities of sacrifice are inherently linked to the concept of the feminine. Madness and delirium of sacrifice are often associated with female sexuality and excessive jouissance incompatible with everyday reality. Womanhood is sacred to an extent that it can threaten and transgress the order of reason. The otherness of the feminine is simultaneously the object of desire and the object of disgust.

Athey's sadomasochistic performance proposes the variety of models of sacrificial feminine that embraces the extremes of pain and pleasure. The feminine in Athey's work appears as a sacrificial principle, transgressive character dwelling on the margins of reason and order. It takes the variety of roles from transvestite priestesses to butch nurses, from overweight strippers to androgynous martyrs. In all cases the feminine appears in a state of ecstatic frenzy, whether from pain, repulsion or sexual excitement, and it is always linked to the realm of divine transcendental experiences.

*Four Scenes in a Harsh Life* proposes the violent feminine as a form of embodiment of sacrificial subject. Athey's most biographic performance and the second part of his trilogy *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life* embraces the variety of female characters from Athey's traumatic childhood: his schizophrenic mother, hyper-sexualised aunt and totalitarian grandmother and his complex relationships with them. Walsh sees the principle meaning of Athey's performance of feminine in Athey's desire to mock and devalue authoritarian female figures from his childhood. As he writes, Athey's "misogyny is evidenced by negatively imagining women as threatening spectres."<sup>271</sup>

I, on the contrary, argue that the performance of feminine in *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life* surpasses gender binaries and is not primarily linked to the politics of gender. I believe Athey utilizes the performance of feminine as a trope of sacrifice. In his performances feminine appears

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<sup>271</sup> Walsh, *Male Trouble*, p. 112.

as a ritualistic principle, rather as gender. Instead of focusing on power struggles within the male-female binary Athey engages with the subject of the transcendental feminine as an embodied energy of sacrifice. The principal meaning of feminine in Athey's performance is linked to his quest for transcendental experiences and the transcendence of the mundane body.

The performance opens with the scene of sacrifice of female androgynous looking Saint Sebastian (Myra Rifkin). Athey, cross dressed as an evangelist holy woman with exaggerated hips and breasts, inserts arrows in the slim, fragile body of the performer – the legs, the hips, the abdomen. The arrows stay in the body of Rifkin who trembles and shakes from pain close to losing consciousness, while Athey sermonizes the story from his childhood. He talks about his visit to a holy woman who was believed to have “the miraculous gift of stigmata.” However on his two visits Athey didn't see any “holy marks,” but encountered a “fat disgusting scam artist.”<sup>272</sup> Disappointed he returned home, invited his little sister Tina in the backyard and sliced the tips of her fingers with the razor blade. Clean slices produced blood, Tina started to cry and Athey took the blade to his own hand “to show how insignificant the wounds were.”<sup>273</sup> After his confession is over Athey leads a trembling figure of Rifkin to a bath. Arrows and needles are removed from her body and head and Rifkin starts bleeding while Athey anoints her face with her own blood. Her facial expression is almost ecstatic, her mouth is open, her eyes are closed. She is lost in delirious frenzied state on the border of violent pain and relief.

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<sup>272</sup> Ron Athey, *Gifts of the Spirit in Pleading in The Blood: The Art and Performance of Ron Athey*, ed. Dominic Johnson, (Live Art Development Agency: London, UK, 2013), p. 43.

<sup>273</sup> Ibid.



Figure 2.4 -- Ron Athey, *Fours Scenes in a Harsh Life*, 1993

This opening scene defines the direction for the whole performance. The real-time sacrifice of female Saint Sebastian and the story of the sacrifice of Athey's sister, mirror each other and demonstrate the link Athey draws between femininity and the gift of transcendental experiences. Instead of slicing his own fingers and acquiring the magic gift of stigmata he craved so much, Athey chose his sister as a bearer of God's sign. Remembering his feelings Athey proclaims: "I wanted her to bleed... I wanted to be anointed with her blood, sipping directly from her palms."<sup>274</sup> In the scene Athey identifies womanhood with divinity and Christendom and places particular significance on the role of blood in transcendental experiences. Stigmata, wound, bleeding cuts are inherently feminine signs and are linked to the image of flowing blood in menstruation. Athey fetishizes blood in the *Fours scenes in a Harsh Life* and proposes flowing blood as a symbol of sainthood.

In cultural anthropology blood is often linked to the concepts of abject and abjection. Mary Douglas defines the defilement through its relationships to the physical borders. Abject is not a "quality in itself," and does not exist independently from constructed binary oppositions. It

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<sup>274</sup> *Hallelujah: Ron Athey: a Story of Deliverance*, dir. by Catherine Saalfield Gund.



represents the boundary between two realms, primarily external and internal and begins from the understanding of physical separateness of the body from its external environment. As Douglas writes: “any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins. We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolise its especially vulnerable points. Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed bodily parings, skin, nail, hair clippings and sweat. The mistake is to treat bodily margins in isolation from all other margins.”<sup>275</sup>

The abject quality of bodily fluids is primarily defined by their relationship to the borders. The internal content of the body is hidden from the everyday experiences and its appearance in the external environment is always linked to negative and threatening mental states. In indigenous cultures bodily waste was traditionally thought to be dangerous due to its incomprehensible and sometimes dark power. Bodily magic and using blood in a ritual process as an instrument of healing or harm was very common in traditional religious practices. As Douglas points out:

Blood, in Hebrew religion, was regarded as the source of life, and not to be touched except in the sacred conditions of sacrifice. Sometimes the spittle of persons in key positions is thought effective to bless. Sometimes the cadaver of the last incumbent yields up material for anointing his royal successor.<sup>276</sup>

The female body is most capable of transgressing the borders between the external and internal as a result of monthly menstruation, and the ability to conceive children and give birth. It is literally built for transgression and deconstruction of limits between the two worlds as it is biologically prepared to produce a new life that develops inside the body and exits from it into the external world. Julia Kristeva sees menstruation and childbirth as major reasons for abjection of the female body and its simultaneous identification with transcendental powers. As she writes:

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<sup>275</sup> Douglas, *Purity and Danger*, p. 121.

<sup>276</sup> *Ibid*, p. 120.

“menstrual blood... stands for the danger issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference.”<sup>277</sup>

The feminine thus is perceived as irrational, wily and uncontrollable power that threatens the order of phallogentric society with its clearly defined borders and hierarchies. The female blood flow is a symbol of fragility of socially-constructed binaries between the internal and the external, the self and the other. As Kristeva puts it, feminine threatens “one’s own and clean self, which is the underpinning of any organisation constituted by exclusions and hierarchies.”<sup>278</sup>

The juxtaposition of feminine and masculine and association of masculine phallogentric power with reason, control and intelligence leads to the understanding of feminine as inherently bodily state of being. Womanhood is linked to the body and flowing bodily fluids that symbolise the ability for procreation and transgression of physical and social borders. The rejection and repression of the body in phallogentric cultures is based on the understanding of the dangerous and marginal power of feminine. The nature of the body, its vulnerability, its inherent ambiguity and potential for the disintegration and transgression of borders is manifested primarily in feminine. Kristeva points out that the whole notion of abject developed in correlation to the fear of the feminine body. As she writes: “defilement reveals... an attempt at separating the speaking being from his body in order that the latter accede to the status of clean and proper body, that is to say, non-assimilable, uneatable, abject... Fear of the uncontrollable generative mother repels me from the body.”<sup>279</sup>

The performance continues with more associations between the female body and sacrifice. The next scene takes place in a sleazy strip bar where butch women contemplate a

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<sup>277</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, p. 71.

<sup>278</sup> *Ibid*, p. 65.

<sup>279</sup> *Ibid*, p. 78-79.

performance by overweight naked dancers. Suddenly the music stops and an exotic guest, Divinity Fudge from “Africa-America,” performed by male actor Darryl Carlton, appears on stage. His large body is covered with multicolored balloons with only a pair of uncomfortable high-heeled shoes appearing from underneath. Ecstatic he moves his hips in front of the faces of the daggers, crawls on stage, explicitly enjoying his erotic show. However, his suspicious spectators are not convinced by the performance, they drag him down, burst the balloons and suddenly his frenzy is interrupted. Divinity Fudge revealed as a man is severely beaten up by aggressive daggers. His large body is placed on a gynecological chair with his back facing spectators and his skin is sliced with a sharp razor blade. The fresh bleeding cuts on his back are covered with pieces of paper towels that are subsequently placed on a wire above spectator’s head producing a metaphor for human printing press.



Figure 2.5 -- Ron Athey, Divinity Fudge, *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life*, 1993

The feminization of male actor Divinity Fudge through his erotic performance reveals the necessity to master the performance of feminine in order to obtain its abject and transcendental qualities. The sacrifice cannot be performed otherwise. Only through the appropriation of the symbolism of the feminine body rooted in its sexuality and ability to transgress the limits between internal and external can the sacrifice be restaged. From this perspective, the drag performance of Divinity Fudge is accompanied by the sacrificial bloodletting. The bleeding wounds on his back are reminiscent of menstrual bleeding and are the embodiment of the abject and transcendental qualities of feminine. The bleeding wound provides a metaphor for the ability of the female body to transgress the boundaries between the internal and external, the ability that is incompatible with masculine physicality. Through wounding and bleeding, Divinity Fudge enters the realm of sacrificial feminine that is inherently the realm of ambiguity, danger and irrational power. The abject qualities of flowing blood in this scene were exaggerated by a media scandal that accompanied the performance of *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life* at a Minneapolis Walker Art Center in 1994. A local critic reported that the blood on the paper towels was HIV infected and posed a significant risk to public health.

The performance of sacrificial feminine is fully unfolded in the concluding scene of the *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life*: the scene of the dagger's marriage. It opens up with three women covered in a white transparent lace fabric facing the audience. Athey preaches on the nature of union and marriage between same sex partners. When the covers are removed women appear to be naked adorned with multiple piercings and small bells. Male performers appear on stage and start playing the drums while Athey pierces the cheeks of women with long needles. The women immediately fall in a trance-like state and start dancing to the beat of a drum. Their dance causes them significant pain as the piercings with bells rub through their skin. The music plays faster

and faster and the dance turns into a pure frenzy. Ecstatic women are groaning, jumping, howling and gyrating about the stage while male musicians and other performers lock them in a circle leaving them no space to escape their delirious dance.

The scene represents the intrinsic bond between pleasure and pain as inherent characteristic of sacrifice. Staged as a wedding ritual the performance in fact is a demonstration of sacrificial qualities of the feminine rooted in its ability for transcendental experiences – the transcendence of pain and suffering. Men in performance assume a secondary role of tending towards the delirious feminine in a similar mode as Bataille takes care of his mad madame Edwarda.



Figure 2.6 -- *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life*, 1994

The sacrificial feminine in Athey's performance is comparable to the tradition of religious martyrdom. The depiction of women saints in Christianity often utilizes the tropes of erotic love and violent passion. The link between erotic ecstasy, pain and transcendental experience is inherent to female mysticism. Christian female mystics often described their encounter with the divine as ecstatic, shattering their sense of identity, and putting their bodies

through extreme physical trials. Saint Teresa is one of the most famous examples of spiritual ecstasy documented in the history of art. Her most representative depiction is Bernini's sculpture, *The Ecstasy of St. Teresa* that pictures the young Christian mystic in a swooning position with her head tilted back, which suggests the intense physical nature of her experience. Her face is unconsciously relaxed, the mouth lax open. Being one of the most known devotional sculptures in the Western world, the "Ecstasy of St. Teresa" is also "a remarkably accurate portrayal of a woman in the throes of sexual climax."<sup>280</sup>



Figure 2.7-8 -- Gian Lorenzo Bernini, *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa*, 1647-52

Teresa's own description of her mystical union with Christ is no less erotic. She writes about her encounter with a young angel: "In his hands I saw a golden spear, at its tip, a point of fire. This he plunged into my heart several times so that it penetrated into my entrails. When he pulled it out I felt he took them with it and left me utterly consumed by the great love of God. The pain was so severe that it made me utter several moans... This not a physical but a spiritual pain, though the body has some share in it – even a considerable share."<sup>281</sup>

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<sup>280</sup> Heartney. *Postmodern Heretics*. p. 1.

<sup>281</sup> *Ibid.*

Another Christian mystic, Mechtild Magdeburg, of Bavarian descent, provides multiple examples of her religious experiences as erotic liaison with God, who “burns with desire for her.” In her narrative she is led to the forest where on “the bed of love” she experiences the love of God: “the more his desire grows, the more tightly he holds her and the greater is the happiness of the bride. The more fervent they embrace, the sweeter the taste of the kisses... The more he gives her, the more she consumes... The hotter she remains,... the more she burns,...”<sup>282</sup>

These descriptions are reminiscent of Bataille’s description of the sacred embodied in the figure of Edwarda. Describing her violent fits Bataille writes: “She began to shake, to convulse. She was suffering... she wrenched away from me, gripped by a shapeless disgust; suddenly lunatic... A gale of dark savagery blew up inside her, raging, she tore and hammered at my face, hit with clenched fists, swept away by a demented impulse to violence. I tottered and fell. She fled.”<sup>283</sup>

Athey’s performance of sacrificial feminine embraces the multiplicity of characteristics of the sacred associated with the process of sacrifice. The sacrificial feminine in Athey’s performances dwells on the border between ecstatic pleasure and extreme pain, *jouissance* and torment. On the one hand, in his performance the feminine is continuously victimized through physical abuse, self-injury and humiliation. On the other hand, it is worshipped and venerated for its capability for transgression of physical boundaries and deconstruction of artificial binaries between internal and external, divine and profane. The transcendental superiority of the feminine is manifested in the drag performance of male actors. The performance of sacrifice requires the assumption of female physicality with its focus on the bloodletting and bleeding. The desire

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<sup>282</sup> James Aho, *The Orifice as Sacrificial Site*, (New York: Aldine de Gruyter, 2002), p. 105.

<sup>283</sup> Bataille, *The Bataille Reader*, p.232.

towards sacrificial feminine is explicitly demonstrated in the inversion of gender roles and dramatization of female physicality as performed by male actors.

Female sexuality is interpreted as a doorway towards transcendental experiences. Its wildness, irrationality and uncontrollable power borders with delirium that is a central characteristic of sacrificial process. The transcendental experiences that Athey strives to reconstruct in his performance are rooted in the excessively erotic and violent nature of sacrifice. Although not explicitly expressed in *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life* female desire guides the show and provides the ground for its abjection and veneration.

### **The Psychology of Death: *Deliverance* and Healing**

Healing at its most human is not an escape into irreality and mystification, but an intensification of the encounter between suffering and hope at the moment in which it finds a voice, where the anguished clash of bare life and raw existence emerges from muteness into articulation.<sup>284</sup>

Thomas J. Csordas

*Deliverance* is the last piece of Athey's trilogy, which unfolds the notion of recovery and healing through sadomasochistic practices. In *Deliverance*, one of the most existential of his performances, Athey shares his beliefs on resurrection in "the world without God." The performance processes Athey's lifelong trauma of recognising the absence of the miraculous power of God, the belief that was principal for his childhood formation and upbringing as a child-minister. As Athey points out: "it took a decade for me to find that life could be worth living without a God. Maybe that's at the bottom of it, I didn't have God, and after my glorious spiritual upbringing, it left a huge hole in me. I was furious. I hated my family for lying to me. I

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<sup>284</sup> Thomas J. Csordas, *Body/ Meaning/ Healing*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 11.



hated them even more because in their truth they didn't lie to me, they took their belief system with them to the grave."<sup>285</sup>

In *Deliverance* Athey confronts the utility of a Pentecostal belief system rooted in the idea of miraculous healing and transformation through spiritual practices. Instead of looking for "deliverance" in the non-material spirituality of religion, Athey turns to his own body for an ultimate understanding of life and death. Appropriating the symbolism of shamanistic healing rituals, Athey is looking for the miracle in the very materiality of the body through self-injury, excessive sexuality and physical abuse. The principal question the *Deliverance* posed is how resurrection and healing is possible in the world without the belief system that supports the idea of salvation and liberation in afterlife?

The main protagonists in the performance are three sick men, Athey and his two collaborators looking for the treatment from their deadly disease. The performance unfolds as a sequence of sadomasochist acts aimed at healing Athey and his partners from HIV infection. The beginning of the performance is reminiscent of Christ's walk to Golgotha. Performers enter the scene carrying wooden crutches on their backs while a butch priestess sermonises on the futility of human life:

You exist in a dream world where there are no absolutes. You talk of healing, psychic surgery and new help, but still you come to me not believing; still with guilt and shame. I cannot offer help if all you seek is atonement. Should I be the flagellator in this deliverance that you seek? Will you pay something. Haven't you ever heard that nothing in this life comes free?<sup>286</sup>

The price of healing in the performance is extreme physical humiliation and abuse that unfolds in the second scene of the piece. Athey's collaborators with hooks attached to their chests, are suspended from polls on each side of the stage, replicating the Sun dance rituals of

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<sup>285</sup> Jurij V Krpan, Interview with Ron Athey, *Virus Magazine*, (January 1997), pp. 44-47.

<sup>286</sup> Cited in Walsh, *Male Trouble*, p. 120.

Native Americans. Pulling in opposite directions so the skin of their chests becomes stretched, the performers go through extreme physical suffering. Their faces deformed into a mask of pain, the fresh cuts on their bodies bleeding.

Meanwhile Athey, standing on his knees is manipulated by “psychic surgeon” who extracts a rope of handkerchiefs from his anus before inserting an enema. Athey’s anus is purified with glittering water producing a “precious” glowing substance in the transparent vase in the hands of the surgeon. As Walsh points out this gesture signifies not only the purification of anus from faecal contaminants, but also “purification of other ‘contaminants,’ in particular these relating to his HIV-positive status.”<sup>287</sup> Following the anus cleansing hooks and ropes are attached to Athey’s arms in response to which he screams and shakes. The scene is finalised with Athey’s scrotum stapled over his penis in a mock castration. The images of pierced skin are multiplied on three monitors above Athey’s head.

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<sup>287</sup> Walsh, *Male Trouble*, p. 121.



Figure 2.9 – Catherine Opie, *Ron Athey/ The Sick Man* (from *Deliverance*), 2000

*Deliverance* is the performance that comes closest to the notion of therapy through sadomasochistic practices. It proposes self-injury and self-negation as central forms of restoration of one's mental and physical wellbeing. Although I do not consider Athey's sadomasochistic performance pathology, I find it relevant to analyse his work through the lens of psychiatry and psychoanalysis, the most incisive tools that can be used in the discussion of self-hurt. The clinical concepts of impulsive self-injury, sadism and masochism help to unfold the

healing potential of Athey's performance and supplement the anthropological analysis of Athey's performance with clinical studies of sadomasochism.

In contemporary psychiatry, self-injury is explained as a "direct, deliberate destruction or alteration of one's own body tissue without conscious suicidal intent"<sup>288</sup> with the purpose of alleviation of distress related to situations and uncomfortable emotional and mental states.

Armando Favazza in his works on cultural psychiatry outlines the most common reasons for engaging in impulsive self-injurious behaviour in sadomasochistic patients: relief from anxiety, establishing self-control from racing thoughts and swirling emotions, relief from depression, dealing with traumatic events and flashbacks, relief from alienation, self-stimulation and euphoria.<sup>289</sup>

Clinical self-injurious behaviour is usually practiced when the levels of tension and anxiety reach the pathological level and regular methods of relaxation – massage, meditation, orgasm – cease to be effective. The theory of "psychic energy" states that the mind-brain system is the most effective within a particular range of tension levels. As soon as level of tension exceeds the barrier of perception the brain will operate to release unprocessed "quantities of excitation." As Favazza writes: "when tense patients cut themselves, they in fact often describe the results in words such as "it's like lancing a boil" or "it's like popping a balloon." The implied metaphor is clear: in cutting their skin they provide an opening through which the tension and badness in their bodies can rapidly escape. What does leave the body is blood, a precious substance that throughout human history has been associated with the cure of illness, preservation of health, salvation, and resolution of social conflict."<sup>290</sup>

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<sup>288</sup> Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, p. 79.

<sup>289</sup> Favazza, *Bodies Under Siege*, p. 213.

<sup>290</sup> *Ibid*, p. 228.

This approach to self-injury parallels Athey's own statement about the reason of his sadomasochistic performance. As he says: "If the inside of your head gets pummeled with enough emotional blunt force trauma to splinter the psyche, you develop ways to punish the body, that fleshy prison which houses the pain."<sup>291</sup> For Athey, bloodletting in the performative context is linked to the understanding of his HIV-positive blood as "bad" and to his desire to literally purify his body from the disease. The role of flowing blood in his performances is central in a way that it manifests his desire to eliminate the negative content of his body. As Favazza points out "cutters may feel relief because they have eliminated some "bad blood," thus symbolically decreasing the tension arising from impaired relationships."<sup>292</sup>

At the same time, bloodletting in Athey's performances might also be interpreted as an attempt to validate the public status of HIV-positive blood, to bring the awareness to the problem of AIDS that remains excluded from mainstream social discourses. The exhibition of infected blood in Athey's performances, which resulted in the media scandal surrounding *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life*,<sup>293</sup> is meant to question the problem of marginalisation of HIV-positive people. The blood in Athey's performances, red flowing substance, does not differ visually from the blood of any other healthy or infected person. Athey is reducing the problem of HIV-infected blood to a purely aesthetic level, making his infected blood the central protagonist in his performances. By demonstrating what HIV-positive blood looks like, Athey is deconstructing a network of taboos surrounding the problem of AIDS. Visually, there is no difference between healthy and infected blood. Making the explicitly private and "shameful" illness public, Athey is drawing attention to the materiality of the illness rather than to the paranoia that surrounds it.

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<sup>291</sup> *Hallelujah: Ron Athey: a Story of Deliverance*, dir. by Catherine Saalfield Gund.

<sup>292</sup> Favazza, *Bodies Under Siege*, p. 228.

<sup>293</sup> During the recreation of the performance in the Walker Arts Center in Minneapolis in 1994, it was falsely reported that the audience was sprayed with HIV-positive blood.

Another therapeutic effect of self-injury is linked to its ability for the cathartic release of anger. Wounding the body provides the outlet for anger against the self. As Favazza states: “many cutters are angry with themselves for not living up to their expectations, for causing misery for others, or for being “no good.” They may be angry with their parents and other important people in their lives or with institutions such as mental hospitals, schools, or prisons that have failed them. Often they are angry with their fate and with the unjust universe.”<sup>294</sup>

Cutting, burning and piercing the skin are forms of self-punishment often practiced when the anger cannot be directed outwards. In Athey’s *Deliverance* the trope of self-punishment is one of the central subjects. In performance Athey publicly confesses the sins of his body before going through self-staged torture. In the state of frenzy, he talks about his excessive sexuality, his heroin addiction, the lies and crimes he committed. The explicit anger with his own past leads him to self-violation, piercing his skin with needles, stapling his penis and hanging himself on hooks.

However, seeing his work only as an expression of self-hate would be too simplistic. The binaries between the self and the other in Athey’s work are constantly broken down. In the performance, Athey is continuously changing roles from masculine to feminine, from abuser to victim, from sinner to saint. For example, the scene that follows Athey’s teary confession is a complete reversal of religious remorse and purification. In a bright light, Athey, on all fours is penetrated by a double-headed dildo manipulated by his partner. Athey’s appropriation of the passive feminine role in this scene may suggest his identification with feminine figures from his past who left a strong negative imprint on his psychological development. In his performances, he often relates to his childhood trauma and his upbringing in the family ruled by a schizophrenic mother and fanatical grandmother. Self-identification with abusers from his childhood leads

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<sup>294</sup> Favazza, *Bodies Under Siege*, p. 228.

Athey to restage sadomasochistic ritual as a form of punishment not only of the self, but of significant others as well.

In psychiatry, the process of internalization of the negative other in the process of self-injury is a very common explanation for NSSI.<sup>295</sup> Otto Kernberg in his studies of personality disorders points out that “the feelings of resentment, rage and impotence in an effort to control an important person . . . , and that the experience of NSSI [self-injury] is the relieving enactment of revenge.”<sup>296</sup> Favazza, on the other hand, conveys examples of abused children who mutilate themselves to punish the original abuser, “using their own skins as a symbol for the offending persons.” As he states: “in a regressive slide from object to self, an object of hate may be incorporated or introjected so that the internalized representation becomes the target of aggression.”<sup>297</sup> There is a strong link between self-injurious behaviour and chronic anger. Self-injury becomes a form of compensation for the lack of control over one’s own body, as defined by the totalitarian power of the other over one’s being. To incorporate the image of the other in one’s own body is a task that requires the transgression of boundaries and the inversion of both – the original self and the other. This explains the necessity of drag and parody in Athey’s performance. Rather than being an expression of misogyny, Athey’s drag performance, depicting female characters in humiliating context, provides the ground for the construction of a unified image of the other-self. As Jon Erickson explains:

To make something that belongs to others your own, you must transgress, that is trespass, across those boundaries separating what is yours from what is theirs. I make it mine, so the effectiveness that your meaning gives to it is devalued. This doubleness is at the core of both parody and travesty: the ridicule of authority.<sup>298</sup>

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<sup>295</sup> Non-suicidal self-injury.

<sup>296</sup> Otto Kernberg, “A Psychodynamic Approach” in *Personality Disorders* (1987) 1, pp. 344-46.

<sup>297</sup> Favazza, *Bodies Under Siege*, p. 229.

<sup>298</sup> Jon Erickson, “Appropriation and Transgression in Contemporary AmEriican Performance: The Wooster Group, Holly Hughes, and Karen Finley”, *Theatre Journal*, Vol. 42, No. 2, (May 1990), p. 226.

In Athey's case, his HIV infection can function as the "other" that inhabited his body. The desire to control his deadly illness is manifested as an attempt to overpower his own body through self-injury and abuse. Having no control over the progress of his illness, Athey projects the sense of control on the amount of pain he inflicts on his body. Clinical self-injurers often report re-appropriation of control over their body in the process of self-injury. Having little or no agency over the experiences of their past or present abuse, self-injurers perceive the practice of self-mutilation as empowering and liberating. As one of the clinical injurers interviewed by psychiatrist Jennifer Egan reports, the feeling of the razor blade cutting her skin is the most pleasant feeling she has ever experienced. As she says: "it [the razor blade] was so sharp and smooth and so well hidden, and yet there was some sense of empowerment....It says "you can't hurt me anymore, I'm in charge of that."<sup>299</sup>

Self-injury and infliction of pain on oneself becomes a powerful tool to restore order in one's life and re-appropriate the sense of independent self that was lost through traumatic life experiences. As Richards point out: the self-injurer "actively seeks to control and experience the painful situation so that he/she may be alleviated from anxiety created by suspense so that what is actually experienced as pleasurable is not the pain itself, but the anticipation of pain and their own control over the circumstances of that pain. In this way the masochist uses suspense to extend their personal power over their own body."<sup>300</sup> The studies of self-injury can be further understood through examination of psychoanalytical concepts of pain which emphasise the healing potential of self-injurious practices.

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<sup>299</sup> Glucklich, *Sacred Pain*, p. 81.

<sup>300</sup> Richards, "Ron Athey, A.I.D.S. and the Politics of Pain."



## **The Psychology of Pain**

Psychoanalytical discourse explains self-injury through the concept of negative and negation that helps to understand the sadomasochistic drive for self-annihilation. Through self-abuse and humiliation sadomasochistic character aims to deconstruct an unsatisfying self-image and produce a new healthier body that emerges in the process of the shattering of the old self. In Freudian discourse, sadism and masochism are defined as the most frequent sexual perversions associated with active and passive receiving of the pleasure “from all kinds of humiliation and subjection.” According to Freud, sadistic and masochistic sexual drives are often interwoven and “encountered in one and the same person”: “A person who feels pleasure in producing pain in someone else in a sexual relationship is also capable of enjoying as pleasure any pain which he may himself derive from sexual relations. A sadist is always at the same time a masochist, although the active or the passive aspect of the perversion may be the more strongly developed in him and may represent his predominant sexual activity.”<sup>301</sup>

In both cases, the pleasure itself is defined by a striving of the sadistic or masochistic character towards the negation and deconstruction of the self. Violence and humiliation, as independent activities, result in pleasure for neither the sadistic nor the masochistic character; the pleasure is a result of the association of the pain, caused through sadomasochistic practices, with the overcoming of the suffering of human existence. By multiplying and amplifying the intensity of pain in sadomasochistic practices, the person strives to achieve the transcendence of his being, the state of non-being associated with the death drive and the destruction of the individual self.

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<sup>301</sup> Sigmund Freud, “Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality,” *The Complete Psychological Works*, Vol. VII, (Hogarth, 1955-64), p. 159.

Gilles Deleuze in his psychoanalytical analysis of sadomasochism elaborates Freud's discoveries regarding the sexuality of the death drive. Analyzing the seminal works on sadism by the Marquise de Sade and on masochism by Sacher-Masoch, Deleuze sees the root of self-injury and abuse in striving towards pure negation and deconstruction of being that links him to Bataille's concept of sacrifice. Deleuze introduces the idea of negation as a totalizing idea that exceeds negation as a partial process expressed in the death drive. As he writes "the negative is all-pervasive, but the process of death and destruction that it represents is only a partial process." Pure negation is beyond the idea of the finality of life, the idea of death, it is a primordial chaos: "Pure negation needs no foundations and is beyond all foundations, a primal delirium, an original and timeless chaos solely composed of wild and lacerating molecules."<sup>302</sup>

Deleuze sees the principal difference between the Death Instinct, or pure negation, and the death instinct expressed in partial negation. Death Instinct as such cannot be given in psychic life and cannot be expressed in linguistic order as it exceeds structures of language and the conscious component of the human psyche. Death instinct or pure negation belongs to the world of transcendental experiences that sadistic and masochistic characters are trying to reach in their continuous attempt at self-annihilation.

In sadism Death Instinct is expressed through repetitive and impersonal crime towards the other, while in masochism disavowal and suspense function as forms of the Death Instinct. The sadistic character is driven by the idea of pure evil, the crime, as Sade puts it, "which is perpetually effective, even when I myself cease to be effective, so that there will not be a single moment of my life, even when I am asleep, when I shall not be the cause of some disturbance."<sup>303</sup>

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<sup>302</sup> Gilles Deleuze, "Coldness and Cruelty," p. 27.

<sup>303</sup> Ibid, p. 28.

The masochist, on the other hand, is driven by suspense and postponement of sexual pleasure through different forms of physical abuse and humiliation. Disavowal of pleasure and passivity in the face of violence are central characteristics of masochism. As Deleuze points out: “the masochistic process of disavowal is so extensive that it affects sexual pleasure itself; pleasure is postponed for as long as possible and is thus disavowed. The masochist is therefore able to deny the reality of pleasure at the very point of experiencing it, in order to identify with the “new sexless men.”<sup>304</sup>

Although Deleuze defines the principal difference between sadism and masochism rooted in their relation to active and passive recipient of pleasure, he, nevertheless, emphasises their interchangeability as they are similar in their drive towards ultimate negation. The sadistic character enjoys hurting others as much as he enjoys being hurt. The pleasure in doing and the pleasure in suffering evil are often complementary and demonstrate the desire for self-annihilation and destruction of the ego-based identity. For Sade’s libertines being whipped and assaulted is a method of going further, far enough in shattering of their socially constructed and acceptable identity. La Borghese, one of Sade’s characters says: “I would wish that my aberrations lead me like the lowest of creatures to the fate which befits their wantonness: for me the scaffold would be a throne of exquisite bliss.”<sup>305</sup>

At the same time, the sadistic character has experienced the pleasure through being abused prior to his development of a sadistic personality. As Deleuze puts it, “it would never occur to the sadist to find pleasure in other people’s pain if he had not himself first undergone the masochistic experience of a link between pain and pleasure.”<sup>306</sup> Only through primary

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<sup>304</sup> Ibid.

<sup>305</sup> Ibid, p. 39.

<sup>306</sup> Ibid, p. 43.

experience of abuse and turning of sadism upon the self as a result of this experience sadist discovers the pleasure of being hurt that he projects on others in his sadistic performance.

Similarly, the masochist engages in sadistic practice as a form of modification of his primary passivity and disavowal of pleasure. Severin, the main protagonist of Masoch's *Venus in Furs*, denies his masochism at the end of the novel and turns to torturing and abusing women. As Deleuze explains "it is as though expiation and the satisfaction of the need to expiate were at last to permit the hero what his punishments were previously intended to deny him."<sup>307</sup>

The reversibility of sadism and masochism demonstrates the importance of deconstruction of fixed self shaped through sexual aberrations. Sadism and masochism develop as forms of a protest against the self limited by social and cultural expectations. It is explicitly expressed in aggressive sadistic predisposition towards the "ordinary body" of bourgeois and implicitly performed in masochism through self-injury and self-humiliation targeted at deconstruction of the "mediocre self." However, it is not enough for the sadistic or masochistic character to link his identity to sadistic performance or masochistic practices. "Going far enough" in sadism and masochism means embracing sexual aberrations. Negating one's own self means negating sadism or masochism through the appropriation of its opposite extreme. Thus, for the sadist embracing masochism and for the masochist embracing sadism, this act becomes an ultimate expression of pure negation and chaos prior to classification and hierarchies of social order.

As Deleuze concludes: "the fundamental distinction between sadism and masochism can be summarized in the contrasting process of negative and negation on the one hand, and of disavowal and suspense on the other. The first represents a speculative and analytical manner of

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<sup>307</sup> Ibid.

apprehending the Death Instinct... while the second pursues the same object in a totally different way, mythically, dialectically and in the imaginary.”<sup>308</sup>

The healing potential of sadomasochistic practices is defined by their ability to deconstruct the notion of the fixed self associated with psychological or physical trauma the individual went through and a stigma of being sexually deviant as defined by dominant discourses on sexuality. The necessity to annihilate an unsatisfying image of oneself through sadomasochistic practices becomes a form of therapy that unfolds the possibilities of the creation of a new healthier body. As Richards puts it: “for a new subjectivity to become possible, the old must be fragmented – abandoned. By the same token ... in order for Athey to deal with his potentially sick body he masochistically fractures and destroys the boundaries of his own subjectivity through pain and restraint.”<sup>309</sup>

While discussing clinical studies of self-injury and sadomasochism in psychiatry and psychoanalysis it is important to point out the link between queer sexuality and pleasure. The notion of pleasure is drastically different from the notion of sexuality in its ability to escape classifications and hierarchies of clinical studies of sex. In his interview with Jean LeBitoux<sup>310</sup> Foucault points out recent invention of homosexuality as sexually deviant practice in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. As he explains: “the notion of homosexuality is a notion that dates back from the nineteenth century, and thus it’s very recent. And I think it’s not simply the notion that’s recent. I’d say that the separating out from all sexual practices, from all forms of pleasure, from all the

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<sup>308</sup> Ibid, p. 35.

<sup>309</sup> Richards, “Ron Athey, A.I.D.S. and the Politics of Pain.”

<sup>310</sup> Michel Foucault, “The Gay Science,” translated by Nicolae Morar and Daniel W. Smith, *Critical Inquiry* # 37, (Spring 2011), pp. 385-403

kinds of relationships people can have with each other – the separating out of the homosexual dates, in part, from this period.”<sup>311</sup>

The process of separating queer sex from “normal” sex, the process linked to categorization of sexual behaviour and invention of the whole system of knowledge on sexuality in post-Enlightenment period, resulted in creation of rigid hierarchies and separation of “healthy” sexual practices from “unhealthy” sexual practices. This new system of knowledge on sexuality developed in biology, psychology, psychiatry, etc. worked to exclude the possibility of free circulation of sex and transformed sex from being an intimately private concern into a public discourse. As Foucault points out: “There is a whole psychologism about sexuality, a whole biologism about sexuality and consequently a possible takeover [prise] of sexuality by doctors, by psychologists, by all the authorities of normalization.”

As an alternative to scientific definitions of queer sex as sexual pathology Foucault introduces the notion of pleasure that is not assigned to a particular type of sexuality, but, on the contrary, is a universal category.<sup>312</sup> “Pleasure” escapes medical and naturalist connotations surrounding the notion of sexuality and is absolutely unclassifiable. There is no “pathology” of pleasure, no “abnormal” pleasure. While the notion of sexuality is always attached to the subject and his/ her choices and priorities regarding sexual desire (“tell me what your desire is, and I’ll tell you what you are as a subject”<sup>313</sup>), pleasure is a priory non-subjective. It is a category that is linked to transgression of subjectivity as such. As Foucault writes: “the intensities of pleasure are indeed linked to the fact that you desubjugate yourself, that you can cease being a subject, an identity. It’s like an affirmation of non-identity.” From this perspective pleasure intensified

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<sup>311</sup> Ibid, p. 386

<sup>312</sup> Foucault is explicitly anti-Freudian in his understanding of pleasure/ desire, but points out the connections of his theory of pleasure with Deleuzian psychoanalysis.

<sup>313</sup> Foucault, “The Gay Science,” p. 389.

through a variety of sexual practices functions as a way to re-evaluate the individual self and to enter the physical, psychological and mental space of non-self, where classifications and hierarchies of subjectivity cease to be important. Foucault argues for the necessity of spaces of pleasure where the individual can lose himself, “places where you desubjectivize yourself” through pleasure.<sup>314</sup>

Athey’s sadomasochistic performance provides one of the varieties of these spaces of pleasure and self-loss. His performance of pain is rooted in the idea of self-transgression and self-transcendence through the experience of frenzy. Losing himself in intensities of pain and pleasure Athey strives for the space where his subjectivity loses its ground. The extreme levels of suffering and excessive pleasure experienced by Athey and his collaborators in *Deliverance* provide a new dimension of sadomasochism as a practice for the elimination of the individual self. The bond between pleasure and pain staged in Athey’s performance demonstrates the potentiality of sadomasochism in being a healing practice as far as it provides the opportunity for the re-evaluation of stigmatised understanding of the queer body. The therapeutic quality of pain is defined by its ability to liberate the individual from his/ her habitual tension and stereotypical understanding of one’s individuality as anxious, depressed and sick. As an American-born sadomasochistic artist and father of neo-primitive movement Fakir Musafar points out:

In contemporary Western culture I’ve found maladies not usually found in tribal and non-Western cultures. These disorders deal with inhumanity, excess and abuse of others. They are traumas inflicted through the body: gross sexual, physical, emotional, and substance abuse resulting in alienation of the body. a large majority of the students who come to my school, to our Spirit+Flesh rituals and S/M workshops are survivors of abuse. They are seeking to reclaim their bodies. Physical body rituals and body modifications often help and are therapies worthy of exploration.<sup>315</sup>

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<sup>314</sup> In his interview with LeBitoux Foucault brings the example of baths and the practices of queer sex.

<sup>315</sup> Musafar Fakir, “Body Play: My Journey,” *Body Play Online*, <http://www.bodyplay.com/bodyplay/online/>. (accessed 1 May, 2013).

Studies of self-injurious behaviour in psychiatry and psychoanalysis demonstrate the healing potential of self-inflicted pain. The violation of the surface of the body in sadomasochistic practices is associated with the process of negation and subversion of the unsatisfying image of the self resulting from mainstream discourses on queer sexuality. In *Athey's Deliverance* sadomasochistic ritual functions as a therapy of the body and mind. Athey's performance of self-injury embodies the artist's desire of self-restoration and regaining of control over his body and life. It is a distorted image of the self resulting from Athey's association with HIV infection that is negated in the performance, while a new transcendental body of sacrifice is asserted.

### **Conclusion**

For Athey, pure negation expressed in his sadomasochistic performance exceeds the binary of life and death or partial negation and links him to transcendental experiences of sacrifice. Sadomasochistic practices are rooted in the attempt to go beyond physical death of the self through the process of annihilation of this self. The elimination of fixed subjectivity solves the problem of fear of dying. If ego-centered subjectivity is shattered in the process of self-injury then there is nobody to lose and nobody to kill. The healing potential of sadomasochistic practices is defined exactly by their ability to push the subject beyond the constraints of ordinary perception of the self as limited in time and space. The transgression of the limits of the body produces a new bodily image that exists in-between external and internal and does not belong to any particular realm – neither life, nor death. As in Bataille's concept of sacrifice the sadomasochistic character is transcendental in his ability to embrace the opposites of external and internal, feminine and masculine, passive and active. Dwelling on the margins of clearly



defined binaries sadomasochistic character is sacred. The healing that takes place in sadomasochistic performance is not linked to a traditional Western understanding of cure as a return to the healthy body that was lost through the progress of the illness. On the contrary, healing in Athey's performances is perceived as embracing the opposites of health and illness, life and death, mortality and eternal life. A new body constructed in Athey's performance is multidimensional and cannot be analyzed through the prism of binary juxtaposition. The HIV-positive body does not disappear, the infection is not cured, but it is unraveled to the point of insignificance.

### Chapter 3

#### Wounded Healing in the Performative Rituals of Linda Montano

It is a test you have to pass. Then you can learn how to heal with the finger. I went through every test on the way, that's how come I am a shaman.<sup>316</sup>

Shaman Essie Parrish

IT WOULD TAKE pages to remember and unravel my past traumas: near death from anorexia, PTSD, the Catholic Church's failings . . . but needless to say, my art cured and continues to heal my life.<sup>317</sup>

Linda Montano

The following chapter analyses the works of Linda Montano as performative rituals rooted in the practices of self-healing and self-transformation. Examining Montano's seminal works, *Fourteen Years of Living Art* and *Sacramental Chakra Chaise*, I propose to analyse her performance as a form of therapeutic project aimed at transforming the artist's everyday life through the holistic ritual. In her performative work and practice, Montano addresses the totality of her existence as a body-mind-spirit continuum and propagates not only the avant-garde merging of art and life,<sup>318</sup> but an ultimate merging of art, life and holistic therapy on individual and collective levels. Montano's performance advocates an interpretation of ascetic religious ritual as a form of self-therapy that leads to the formation of a healthier and more balanced perception of self. Besides focusing on the doctrinal religious goals of salvation, enlightenment, and liberation from cyclic existence, Montano's ritualistic performance pursues the more secular goals of self-examination, self-restoration, and self-perfection achieved through religious ritual.

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<sup>316</sup> Cited in Joan Halifax, *Shaman: The Wounded Healer*, (London, UK: Themes and Hudson, 1982), p. 8.

<sup>317</sup> Linda Montano, *Artforum 500 words*, <http://artforum.com/words/id=40742>. (accessed 21 April, 2014).

<sup>318</sup> Blending of art and life is at the core of avant-garde art project started from Marcel Duchamps' method of ready-made introduced in his installation *Fountain* (1917). For more information see Calvin Tomkins, *Duchamp: A Biography*. New York, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1996).

Developed within the historical framework of the New Age and counterrevolutionary movements of the late-1960s and '70s, Montano's performance embodies new Western spirituality rooted in an eclectic and syncretic approach to religion. The New Age movement encompassed the variety of processes of liberalisation, simplification and globalisation of Western spiritual life during the latter twentieth century.<sup>319</sup> These changes resulted in the proliferation of alternative spiritual practices based on borrowing from and modifying religious traditions including world religions such as Christianity, Buddhism and Hinduism, and religions of indigenous cultures.

In his analysis of the New Age, Wouter Hanegraaf defines New Age religiosity as a radical form of healing. As he notes: "The link between religion and healing is undoubtedly a natural one. Both domains... share a concern with providing alternatives to human weakness and suffering."<sup>320</sup> The notion of the New Age religion as a form of salvation and liberation from life's suffering is included in the context of both physical (bodily) and spiritual healing.

New Age movement developed in parallel with the Western system of holistic health which proposed methods of integration of spiritual and physical healing. Holistic health is based on the belief in the interrelationship of the body, mind, spirit, and surrounding environment and develops an integral approach to treatment of the illness that takes into account all the multiplicity of its causes. Lynn Keegan defines holistic health as "a Western system of care directed toward integrating and balancing mind, body, and spirit."<sup>321</sup> In holistic approach to health, the mind and spirit, including feelings and thoughts, are as responsible for maintaining physical health as the conditions of the body. Holism embraces the variety of healing paradigms

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<sup>319</sup> James R. Lewis, "Approaches to the Study of the New Age Movement" in *Perspectives on the New Age*, ed. James R. Lewis and J. Gordon Melton, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), pp. 1-13.

<sup>320</sup> Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought*, (Leiden, New York, Koln: E.J. Brill, 1996), p.44.

<sup>321</sup> Lynn Keegan, *Healing with Complementary and Alternative Therapies*, (Delmar: Thomson Learning, 2001), p. 5.

that stress the importance of individual responsibility in one's own healthcare and promote the practices of self-therapy and self-healing. Montano's performative rituals are based on the New Age philosophy of the convergence of spirituality and healing in one performative method and introduce a variety of techniques of self-restoration and self-treatment explored in her performance work.

In this chapter I examine the complexities of New Age spirituality in relation to performative rituals of Linda Montano. I demonstrate the ways in which Montano's performances embody the New Age paradigms of spirituality, sainthood, and the models of holistic therapy associated with them. Drawing on multiple religious rituals and healing practices, including Kundalini yoga, Zen Buddhist meditation, Catholic prayer, acupuncture, color and sound meditation, the shamanistic practice of astral travelling, tarot card reading, and various practices of focusing through visualisation in her performances, Montano develops a unique method of art-therapy rooted in the utilization of the religious rituals as New Age therapeutic practices.

In particular, I analyse Montano's durational project *14 Years of Living Art* as a New Age experiment of adaptation of traditional Tantric systems of Kundalini yoga and chakra meditation. Developed as an experiment in endurance, *14 Years of Living Art* featured Montano as a New Age ascetic and renunciant. By appropriating, mixing, and modifying a wide range of traditions, Montano develops a highly-personalised version of the sacred as a personal methodology and a performative strategy.

Montano's artistic practice is severely underrepresented in performance studies and art criticism. While there is large number of published interviews with Montano, including the texts by Alex and Allyson Grey, Jennie Klein and Moira Roth – texts I engage with throughout this

chapter – there are very few critical analyses of Montano’s oeuvre. The most significant critique of Montano’s ritualistic art by Jennifer Fischer<sup>322</sup> emphasises the rhetoric of intuition in Montano’s method. Fisher sees Montano’s works as self-created exercises in feeling aimed at producing extraordinary states of experience. As Fisher puts it: “she [Montano] establishes situations that forge connections between feelings, instincts, insights and energy states, and uses the cognitive disciplines of spiritual traditions to train perception.”<sup>323</sup> Analysing Montano’s approach as “distinctly intuitive” Fisher proposes to look at her work as “continuous with the experience of mystics who direct their devotion to the point where self merges with the divine.”<sup>324</sup> Equating Montano’s ritualistic performance with authentic religious practices of ascetics and yogis, Fisher defines Montano’s work as ‘transformative vehicle’ aiding the artist to access mystical identifications.

The rhetoric of ecstasy, mysticism and self-transcendence is often utilised in relation to Montano’s work. Victoria Stanton in her text *Linda Montano is Living Art*<sup>325</sup> examines Montano’s performance as a form of yogic practice on developing total awareness. Montano’s performance is characterised in terms of its ability to transform the totality of artistic life in the spiritual practice of self-transcendence. Stanton emphasises Montano’s desire to bridge the gap between spirituality and art practice and explains her work as a life-long exercise in spiritual self-perfection. As she notes “The ensemble of her [Montano’s] work is about living more spontaneously and fully, about locating internal balance and serenity, about centring attention, about finding the voice.”

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<sup>322</sup> Jennifer Fisher, ‘The Chakra Cycles of Linda M. Montano’ in Jennifer Fisher, ed., *Technologies of Intuition*, (Toronto: YYZBOOKS, 2006), pp. 157-181.

<sup>323</sup> Ibid, p. 157.

<sup>324</sup> Ibid.

<sup>325</sup> Victoria Stanton, ‘Linda Montano is Living Art,’ *Ascent* 24, Winter 2004, p. 30-37.

While these interpretations significantly contribute to a better understanding of Montano's performance as an all-encompassing exercise in spirituality, they do not explain the complexities of Montano's performative rituals in the context of New Age religion. Although Montano's performance is based on adaptations of religious ritual, it borrows not from religious systems "traditional" to her cultural background, but from hybrid models of spirituality developed in the West within the last fifty years. Montano's performance is rooted in the New Age paradigm of the sacred associated with the process of individual exploration and religious eclecticism, on the one hand; and self-healing and self-restoration through ritual and other disciplines, on the other. In this context, Montano is not concerned with mystical self-transformation as such, but with the process of reconstruction of the sacred in a secular context of performance art. The new sacred produced in Montano's ritualistic performance embodies New Age beliefs in the accessibility and immediacy of mystical experiences, ability of art to heal, and general commoditisation of religious rituals as efficient tools for self-improvement and wellbeing.

Analysing healing aspects of Montano's performances, I introduce the concept of the "wounded healer" who embraces the variety of healing roles developed in the New Age paradigm of holistic health, with its roots in the indigenous models of medicine and folk healing. By "wounded healer" I mean the archetypal image of a medical specialist which is rooted in the idea of the healer's initial wounding and his continuous engagement in the process of self-healing. Approaching the concept of the wounded healer from the perspective of cultural anthropology and archetypal psychology and broaching the works of Jess Groesbeck, Mircea Eliade, Joan Halifax, Merete Jakobsen among others, I argue that the performative persona of Linda Montano embodies the archetype of a wounded healer. Performing as a Catholic Saint, an

Indian guru, a nun, a psychoanalyst, and a nurse, Montano incessantly strives to reveal the possibilities of healing imagery and symbolism.

Applying the structure of ascetic and holistic rituals to her works, Montano develops a performative method that deals with negative psychological experiences, destructive emotions and general physical and emotional unbalance on individual and collective levels. Through the continuous practice of meditation, self-introspection, and psychoanalysis, Montano performs a specialist in the spirit able to heal not only herself, but also others. Claiming an elaborate insight into the psycho-mental complex of her audience, Montano aims not only to entertain her public but also to engage her spectators in the process of ritualistic healing. In the following chapter, I discuss a variety of the methods of self-healing and self-transformation developed in Montano's ritualistic performances and their application to healing and counselling staged in a public environment. In the context of what she perceives to be a spiritual vacuum and the deterioration of traditional religious systems in contemporary Western society, Montano's new-age ritualism uncovers a collective longing for spirituality and the supernatural.

## **Performing the Sacred: Early Works of Linda Montano (1969 – 1984)**

When I performed I got attention from others that helped me attend to me. When I attended to me, I discovered that the 3 billion cells in the body, when properly treated, can produce a half-watt of electricity in all 3 billion cells. WOW!!! Also I could oscillate my brain waves at a frequency that produced addictively pleasing endorphin states of consciousness.<sup>326</sup>

Linda Montano

Throughout Montano's practice one constant persists: her desire for healing through engagement in performative ritual. Beginning with her very first works executed in the late-1960s and early '70s, Montano focused on ritual as a form of therapeutic practice helping her to address traumatic life experiences and her struggles with everyday existence. Montano's performative work intertwined eclectic religious rituals and self-healing techniques and proposed a new dimension of performance art as a therapeutic process. Highly influenced by Catholicism, shamanism and the Eastern religious traditions of Hinduism and Zen Buddhism, Montano engaged in performative practice as a reconstruction of the models of salvation associated with religious systems. These early performances featured Montano as an angel, self-canonised saint, a nun, a shaman, and a humanitarian servant, and embodied her first attempts to heal through internalising religious narratives and personalities.

Raised in Upstate New York in a family of devout Roman Catholics, Montano absorbed Christian narratives of sainthood and asceticism from an early age. One of Montano's important memories from early childhood is linked to her desire of becoming a 'Holy Girl.' The artist remembers dressing like the Virgin Mary and giving out Necco wafers to her playmates.<sup>327</sup> In 1960 Montano entered the Maryknoll Sisters, a convent of missionary nuns, with the intention of

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<sup>326</sup> Linda Mary Montano et al., *Letters from Linda Montano*, ed. Jennie Klein, (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), p. 90.

<sup>327</sup> For more information see Montano et al., *Letters from Linda Montano*, p. 18.



devoting her life to humanitarian services. Staying at the convent for two years, Montano received extensive experience in Christian monastic discipline. Living a highly ordered life, Montano internalised the rules and limitations of the monastery that in many ways influenced her later performative method and her life-long inspiration with discipline and renunciation. The nuns lived in dormitories of 30, rising up at 4 am. The disciplines involved singing in the chapel with over 300 nuns, wearing four layers of medieval, pre-Vatican-II clothes and avoiding talking. Spoken communication was allowed for only one hour a day in the room with all nuns present. While at the convent, Montano suffered a severe case of anorexia nervosa that caused her to lose 50 pounds and led to her expulsion from the monastery and her consequent decision to become an artist.

Engagement with ritualistic performance art became Montano's response to her failure to pursue a religious career. Montano's desire to enter the priesthood was inhibited in the context of Catholic Church based on strict gender hierarchies, and Montano felt that she had no choice but to retreat into art-making. As Montano explains: "I realised early on that I had missed out because I wasn't a man and wasn't able to be a priest in a catholic tradition. I didn't have that ability to create the transformation that the priest was able to create, or to create public ecstasy for the group of people...so as a performance artist I've realised the child's dream of becoming priestess."<sup>328</sup> Self-therapy through performative ritual aimed to address her complex relationships with religion as well as her life-long struggle with anxiety and anorexia that significantly influenced her everyday existence. As Montano noted of her expulsion from the monastery, "Mother art became my trauma catcher, my therapy, my confidante, my best friend, my guide, my confessor and my salvation. Art became religion. And in separating from

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<sup>328</sup> Cited in Stanton, "Linda Montano is Living Art," p. 32.

Catholicism, I married art.”<sup>329</sup> These early performances and tableau vivant derived directly from Montano’s experiences within the Catholic Church and with religious models of therapy through endurance, silence and self-deprivation.

One of Montano’s first performative works dealing with the subjects of self-healing and ritual was a series of performances that developed her persona as a “chicken woman.” On May 20, 1969, Montano held her MFA graduation show on the roof of the art department of the University of Wisconsin. For the show, she exhibited nine live chickens, and photos and videos from the chicken farm, while driving around the city playing chicken sounds from a loudspeaker. For Montano the performance had a significant therapeutic value as during her MFA process she experienced difficulty integrating in the demanding environment of the Art Department. As Montano explains: “All of the other graduate students in the Madison were constructing gigantic, minimal objects and I couldn’t keep up with them or understand their practice. I was scared and felt out of place in sculpture and in graduate school. I often visited the agriculture school and saw chickens there. They became my friends.”<sup>330</sup>

But Montano’s first transformative experience in performance happened two years later when Montano and her husband-to-be, Mitchell Payne, performed as a dead chicken and a live angel (*Lying: Dead Chicken, Live Angel*, 1971). In the performance, the couple dressed in gauze robes with long polyethylene wings filled with chicken feathers, was laying motionless and silent on a table for the entire three hour duration. The performance revealed the possibilities of tableau vivant as a contemporary form of devotional art: the audience attended to the artists as to the objects of collective worship, silently contemplating their motionless bodies. Reminiscent of canonical depictions of Christian saints and angels Montano and Payne’s bodies dressed in white

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<sup>329</sup>Montano et al., *Letters from Linda Montano*, p. 90.

<sup>330</sup> Linda Montano, *You Too are a Performance Artist*, (Santa Fe, New Mexico: SITE, 2013) p. 12.

and covered in feathers, were treated with respect and veneration. It was the first opportunity for Montano to experience the healing potential of performance art. Montano explains: “I experienced a state that I had not known in my work before... a personal transformation. I was attending to my own stillness, and the audience participated in both the visual and interior imagery of the piece. I was elated. I could go into deep states, relax, do nothing, and call it art! Also I was getting the kind of attention that I used to give to nuns, priests, saints, statues, and crucifixes.”<sup>331</sup> The work was transformative for Montano’s understanding of performance as public therapy. Using her audience as co-healers, Montano internalised the attention and care she received from her spectators and integrated the principles of co-healing in her performative method.

Later interpretations of this work – the performance *Screaming Nun* (1975) – featured Montano dressed as a Catholic nun, dancing, screaming and hearing confessions in Embarcadero Plaza in San Francisco. Using the nun persona in an ironic way was Montano’s expression of her discontent with institutionalized religion and her early disillusionment with the Catholic Church.<sup>332</sup> On the other hand, the performance was aimed at addressing her unfulfilled desire for the priesthood and sainthood. Montano’s enactment of the ecstatic nun provided an experience with sainthood that the artist was unable to attain in real life. Singing and screaming uncontrollably was Montano’s therapeutic solution for exploring her repressed desires related to religion, as well as to sexuality. Shortly after the performance Montano left her marriage to pursue a romantic relationship with her friend, the musician Pauline Oliveiro.

Montano’s appropriation of ritual as a form of self-therapy led to her engagement with the alternative religious traditions of shamanism, as well as a consequent exploration of altered

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<sup>331</sup> Ibid, p. 14.

<sup>332</sup> Montano returned the Catholic Church in 1998 and stopped using nun persona in an ironic way.

states of consciousness through trance and hypnosis. Interested in the subconscious, dream states, and visions, Montano executed a number of works on the borders of psychoanalysis and shamanistic ritual. In her performance *The Story of my Life* (1973), Montano publicly confessed her life-story, talking into an amplification system while walking uphill on a treadmill. By way of her performance, Montano attempted to purify her mind of her trauma through exhibitionism. The performance produced a type of trance state and physical euphoria that caused the artist to keep walking for hours after the performance was over.

In *Hypnosis, Dream, Sleep* (1975), Montano slept and dreamt for three hours in the Berkeley Art Museum. Whenever she had a dream, she would sing it into the microphone, attempting to unravel her subconscious desires and anxieties. A similar model of self-inquiry was constructed in *Talking about Sex while under Hypnosis* (1975). In the performance Montano appeared to her spectators as a model applying makeup while a video played simultaneously in another room of her talking about sex while under hypnosis. The performance was an intensely traumatic experience for Montano and instead of the expected healing, it resulted in the artist becoming ill after the completion of the work. As she notes: “I presented myself as attractive, easy, relaxed, and yet under hypnosis revealed deep and frightening suppressions and fears concerning sex.”<sup>333</sup> *Trance Dance* (1975) featured the artist dancing blindfolded for three hours in the form of the cross while singing to a tape of Linda Ronstadt and searching for mental focus through the repetition of movement and sound, replicating the shamanic methods of inducing altered states of mind.

In parallel to these works, the artist commenced performative explorations of meditation, yoga, Buddhist chanting, and eastern medicine. In an attempt to recover from the loss of Mitchell, who tragically died in a shooting accident one year after his divorce from Montano, the

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<sup>333</sup> Montano, *You Too are a Performance Artist*, p. 46.

artist performed *Mitchell's Death* (1978). With acupuncture needles inserted in her face, the artist chanted to the accompaniment of a Japanese bowl gong. As the performance progressed, Montano sang the story of Mitchell's death in monotone, a text that she composed after seeing his body in the mortuary. Although the performance was primarily structured as a public confession, the influence of Buddhist tradition was implicitly present in the work. Montano was interested in a detached retelling of tragic events and staged the work as a public meditative process, focusing on the present moment experiences of sound, light and music.

In 1983, after living in a Zen monastery in Upstate New York for three years, Montano began a *One Year Performance* (4 July 1983 – 3 July 1984) with Tehching Hsieh, a Taiwanese-born performance artist practicing durational art. In the performance, conceived by Hsieh, the artists were tied together with two meters of rope for one year, never separating from each other. Montano and Hsieh agreed to never touch or have any physical contact during the performance. For Hsieh the performance was intended to represent human dependence on multitude and our inability to escape each other's presence. As he explained the work was based on the Buddhist idea of the interconnectedness of all beings in the universe.

Montano, on the other hand, perceived the work as a form of mind training similar to the Buddhist practices of meditation, which she studied at the Zen monastery. For her, the performance embodied the Buddhist ideals of the focused and alert mind. As she explains: “supposedly there are seven stimuli that simultaneously grab our attention every second. This piece demands that the mind pay attention to one idea, not seven, and because being tied is potentially dangerous, the mind gets focused or else our lives are threatened.”<sup>334</sup>

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<sup>334</sup> Allyson Grey and Alex Grey, “The Year of the Rope,” interview with Linda Montano and Tehching Hsieh, in Montano et al., *Letters from Linda Montano*, p. 41.



Figure 3.1 -- Tehching Hsieh, Linda Montano, *Art / Life: One Year Performance*, 1984

These early works manifested Montano's eclectic approach to religious ritual and her attempts to personalise and individualise doctrinal religious principles. Inspired by the religious systems of Catholicism, Buddhism and shamanism, these performances were based on the merging of multiple ritualistic techniques borrowed from religious traditions that do not usually co-exist. Appropriating religious ritual as methods of self-healing, Montano manipulated and transformed various traditions, adapting them to her artistic needs. The structure of ritual was more important than its content and Montano's ritualistic performance often embodied the artist's individual agenda rather than traditional religious beliefs.

Creating an eclectic, personalised version of religion in her multiple works, Montano was searching for an individual and unique method of healing that would fulfill the artist's personal needs. It was not a doctrinal ritual embodying universal beliefs of a particular religious system; instead it was an intimate act of creation based on the artist's search for more direct relationships with the divine, herself, and her audience.

From this perspective, Montano's performances recreated the 1960s and '70s counterrevolutionary rhetoric of modification and of the simplification of doctrinal religious systems as an attempt at liberation from dogmatic religiosity. Montano's desire to de-centralise, simplify, and popularise religious ritual in her early works reflected general changes in Western spirituality associated with the New Age movement of the latter twentieth century. The combination of spiritual, religious and holistic principles in the New Age movement manifested counterrevolutionary nostalgia for magical and mystical experiences in secularised Western cultures, as well as a general desire for personal availability of the sacred, which had long remained the prerogative of the Catholic Church.

In the following section, I discuss the complexities of the New Age spiritual transformation in late-capitalist societies and its influence on Montano's performative method. The eclectic and syncretic character of the New Age movement defined Montano's performative approach based on the highly personalised interpretation of religion as a body-mind-spirit therapy, as well as her general desire for the return of the rhetoric of the supernatural in a secular context.

### **The Times of the New Age**

The term New Age entered into academic discourse in the early-1980s and defined the attempt of multiple scholars to explain the proliferation of spiritual movements during the counterrevolution of the late-1960s and early-1970s. In spite of the popularity of the term, there is no consensus on the definition of the New Age movement. This is primarily due to the fact that the New Age is not an organised religious movement, which could be defined on the basis of religious doctrines, spiritual leaders or standard rules and rituals. As Hanegraaff points out: "the

initial fact about the “New Age” is that it concerns a label attached indiscriminately to whatever seems to fit it, on the basis of what are essentially pre-reflective intuitions.”<sup>335</sup> Resultantly, the term New Age comprises different things to different people.

In the present research, I appropriate Steven Sutcliffe’s definition which explains the New Age as an umbrella term that includes a considerable variety of groups and identities. As he notes: “The New Age is not a distinctive empirical formation but a ... codeword for the heterogeneity of alternative spirituality, best classified as a sub-type of ‘popular religion’.”<sup>336</sup> While official religion is founded on authoritative documents and a hierarchy of religious specialists and professionals, popular religion applies to any person who appropriates beliefs that may not coincide with the doctrinal religiosity. Popular religions provide simpler, more direct and more rewarding relationships with the divine. The New Age represents a form of popular religion based on the counterrevolutionary quest for more personal and personalised relationships with the divine. The inclusive and eclectic nature of the New Age allowed it to embrace the often contradictory spiritual practices and movements of Neo-paganism, the ecology movement, the Goddess movement, the human potential movement, Asian meditation traditions, neo-shamanism, the Aquarian Conspiracy, and many others. What united them all was an approach to spirituality based on the sacralisation of the human and a general belief in the ability of everyone to engage in immediate relationships with the divine. In his analysis of New Spirituality, Woodhead defines central characteristics of the New Age movement:

In all its forms it [The New Age] is detraditionalised in the sense that it rejects any form of religion which locates authority in a source which transcends the individual – whether that be God, scriptures, a particular community, its rituals, sacraments or priesthood. Instead, authority is characteristically located in the heart, feelings, intuition or experience of each individual. In more metaphysical terms, the New Spirituality is

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<sup>335</sup> Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, p. 2.

<sup>336</sup> Steven J. Sutcliffe, *Children of the New Age: A History of Spiritual Practices*, (London and New York: Routledge, 2002), p.11.



therefore radically immanent. It views everyday or phenomenal reality as a manifestation of a deep and unifying spirit or life-force, a stance which may also be described as this-worldly monism, for it maintains both that ‘All is One’, and that it is through the phenomenal world (natural and human) that we gain access to ‘the One’. It is therefore characteristic of the New Spirituality to divinize the human and the natural. Furthermore, the New Spirituality’s continual stress on unity gives rise to a universalist stance in relation to other religions and cultures, all of which are viewed as potentially one by virtue of their common ability to bear witness to ‘the One’. Finally the New Spirituality tends to be strongly optimistic, evolutionary and progressive, maintaining that a new age of unity, peace and spiritual enlightenment is currently dawning.<sup>337</sup>

The New Age movement is based on a belief in the ultimate ability of the individual self to receive higher knowledge through intuition, personal revelations, and feelings. Doctrinal religious systems in the New Age movement are modified and tailored to fit the principles of immediate knowledge through personal contact with the divine. On the other hand, the sacralisation of the self in the New Age represents the ability of the subjective self to transcend its limits and merge with a higher reality beyond the individual. Although the significance of subjective experiences is not inconsequential, it nevertheless is only a pathway to the revelation of an authority greater than the individual self. As the New Age author, Shirley MacLaine explains: “self-realization is God-realization. Knowing more of your Higher Self really means knowing more of God. That inner knowledge is radiant with life, light and love... When I go within I look for communication and guidance... When I first made contact with my Higher Self I was aware that I could, from then on, better touch my purpose on Earth and have it fit in with everyone else’s.”<sup>338</sup>

Historically the roots of the New Age movement can be traced back to the Theosophical Society, founded in 1875, in England. The members of the society, including Helena P. Blavatsky, Rudolf Steiner, Alice Bailey, and Jiddu Krishnamurti, were to introduce Buddhist and

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<sup>337</sup> Linda Woodhead, “The World’s Parliament of Religions and the Rise of Alternative Spirituality,” in *Reinventing Christianity: Nineteenth Century Context*, ed. Linda Woodhead (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), p. 96.

<sup>338</sup> Shirley MacLaine, *Going Within* (London: Bantam Books, 1990), p. 82.

Hindu spirituality to the West, in addition to promoting the notion of a unified world religion based on the fusion of Christianity and Buddhism. While Hindu and Buddhist beliefs were prominent in the Theosophical Society, it also promoted the alternative spiritual practices of channelling, fortune-telling, and astral travelling.

More recently, the New Age was associated with the countercultural revolution of the 1960s and its consequent transformation of alternative spiritualities into a public discourse. The 1960s precipitated a highly individualised approach to spirituality that favoured the intuitive over the dogmatic, the personal over the institutional, and immanent over objective. As Christopher Partridge notes: “the 1960s saw the stream of alternative religious thought, which had for many years flowed underground, begin to surface and seep into popular culture, and permeate Western popular consciousness.”<sup>339</sup>

The New Age spirituality of the 1960s and '70s developed in combination with the decline of Christianity, the sexual revolution, the proliferation of liberation movements, including feminism and the gay and lesbian rights movements, and the psychedelic revolution promoting drug induced altered states of consciousness as a part of a spiritual quest. As Partridge explains: “this was a postwar period of utopian idealism, of free love, or religious and political optimism, of recreational, intellectualized, experimental drug use, of talk about bright countercultural futures, of a New Age in which ‘tomorrow’s people (as Jeremy Sandford and Ron Reid called them) – attractive, healthy, free, uninhibited, peaceful individuals of the Aquarian age – would live as one.”<sup>340</sup>

Despite the diverse nature of the New Age movement one tendency was explicitly present in the principal majority of the movements identifying with countercultural spirituality.

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<sup>339</sup> Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, p. 102.

<sup>340</sup> Ibid.

This tendency was Easternization. The turning towards the East that commenced with the British Theosophical Society in the late nineteenth century reached its apogee in the latter half of the twentieth century. Eastern-oriented spirituality of the New Age movement embraced a variety of practices associated with Eastern religions and produced modified versions of Tibetan Buddhism, Zen Buddhism, Hinduism, Sufism, and other Eastern traditions. Partridge claims that by the late 1960s it was difficult to find a Westerner who was unaware of Eastern concepts of reincarnation, karma, meditation, yin and yang, and chakras. Western borrowing from the East often had an eclectic character and resulted in the hybrid philosophies of New Age spiritual movements, which combined cross-religious methods and techniques of both -- the East and the West. In their analysis of a new American spirituality Richard Cimino and Don Lattin point out:

Rising interest in eastern faiths like Buddhism, Taoism, Hinduism, and Sufism is part of a broader move toward experiential spirituality. Eastern spirituality is grounded in what could be called 'heart knowledge', rather than 'head knowledge', of the sacred. The practice of eastern forms of mysticism, such as meditation, does not require the same kind of loyalty to an exclusive belief system as Christianity and Islam often does. In the new millennium, many practitioners of Eastern meditation techniques will continue to see themselves as Christian, Jews, or none of the above.<sup>341</sup>

The New Age movement produced a bricolage from Eastern religious traditions. The syncretic nature of the New Age movement afforded easy transitions and shifts from one spiritual practice to another and encouraged spiritual seekers to practice as many spiritual techniques as possible. The East as an embodiment of 'heart knowledge' was highly romanticised in the West and was identified with harmony, balance, warmth, ecological awareness, and intuition. The Western interpretation of Eastern religions often differed from their origins and had an idealised aura of spiritual superiority. In his book, *The Tao of Physics*,

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<sup>341</sup> Richard Cimino and Don Lattin, *Shopping for a Faith: American Religion in the New Millennium*, (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998), p. 21.

physicist Fritjof Capra, exposes this modified and idealised understanding of Eastern spirituality that in many ways reflects New Age stereotypes of the East:

The organic, “ecological” world view of the Eastern philosophies is no doubt one of the main reasons for the immense popularity they have recently gained in the West, especially among young people. In our Western culture, which is still dominated by the mechanistic, fragmented view of the world, an increasing number of people have seen this as the underlying reason for the widespread dissatisfaction in our society, and many have turned to Eastern ways of liberation.<sup>342</sup>

The romanticisation of the East resulted in the development of the New Age cultural dichotomies associating the East with the unity of body and mind; man and nature; the spiritual and the physical. The West, by contrast, was presented as a culture of division and separation: between man and nature; body and spirit; spirit and mind. The East was associated with the subjective, intuitive, irrational and imaginative aspects of the psyche, and the West with reason, power, order, rationality, and criticality.

The profound identification of the new-agers with Eastern philosophies was defined not only by a heavy-handed idealisation of the East, but sometimes by explicit misinterpretations of Eastern traditions. In the same book Capra, referring to the secret teachings of tantric yoga, transmitted only on a student-teacher basis in the narrow circles of advanced yogis, explains the entirety of Hinduism as the religion of desire and sensuality. As he writes:

Contrary to most Western religions, sensuous pleasure has never been suppressed in Hinduism, because the body has always been considered to be an integral part of the human being and not separated from the spirit. The Hindu, therefore, does not try to control the desires of the body by the conscious will, but aims at realising himself with his whole being, body and soul.<sup>343</sup>

This statement, which is far from the accurate description of the principal majority of Hindu religious movements, nevertheless reflects the general tendency of the New Age movement to co-opt Eastern traditions to their own spiritual and cultural agenda. The sexual

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<sup>342</sup> Fritjof Capra, *The Tao of Physics*, (Boulder: Shambhala, 1965), p. 25.

<sup>343</sup> *Ibid*, p. 90.

revolution and liberation movements of the 1960s and '70s defined individual freedom as a central premise for the spiritual search for the true self.

The 1960s liberation from the dogmatic power of the Christian Church, which had operated by the repression of sexuality, required an alternative spiritual system that would support the liberating impulse of the counterrevolution. Buddhism and Hinduism with their visible accent on tolerance and compassion fulfilled this role. Despite the fact that celibacy and control of sexuality figures as principal components of spiritual growth in both, the Buddhist and Hindu traditions, the New Age movement generalised the principles of tantric yoga and projected them on the entire scope of Eastern religions.

In their research on the influence of Hinduism in the New Age, Andrea Diem and James Lewis explain the social-psychological tendencies that figured in the New Age's adaptation of an idealized East. As they write, the 1960s picture of the East by Westerners was defined by a dual projection: "[first] Asian culture was imagined (for iconoclastic) purposes to be the reverse image of everything the counterculture disliked in America, and [second] Asian philosophies and religions were made to reflect... countercultural ideas."<sup>344</sup> From this perspective, the image of the East produced during the New Age revolution was primarily defined by the need to protest and subvert traditional Western systems of spirituality and Western culture as such. On the other hand, Eastern spirituality was used to reflect the New Age ideals of freedom, exploration of altered states of consciousness (often drug-induced), and the superiority of the personal over the institutional.

Thus, the New Age revolution resulted in highly modified, romanticised, and subjectivised versions of classical spiritual traditions. This idealisation of Eastern religions was

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<sup>344</sup> Andrea Grace Diem and James R. Lewis, 'Imagining India: The Influence of Hinduism on the New Age Movement' in James R. Lewis and J. Gordon Melton, ed., *Perspective on the New Age*, (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1992), p. 56.

defined by the need of counterrevolutionary movements to resist Western cultural paradigms and find support in alternative cultural and religious discourses. Buddhism and Hinduism provided a fruitful ground for the proliferation of alternative spiritual movements, which, in fact, had little to do with doctrinal religious traditions. The New Age borrowing from the East resulted in the reformation and transformation of Eastern spirituality and in the production of Western models of Eastern religious traditions. As Harvey Cox points out:

There are actually two “Orients.” One is made up of real people and real earth. The other is a myth that resides in the head of Westerners. One is an actual cultural area, stretching from India to Japan and from Mongolia to Singapore. The other is a convenient screen on which the West projects reverse images of its own deficiencies.<sup>345</sup>

Montano’s ritualistic performances internalised the New Age impulse for the development of alternative religiosity through liberal borrowing from Eastern religious traditions and merging of multiple spiritual practices. This appropriation of Buddhist meditation, practices of retreat and seclusion and their modification in Montano’s early works were often characterised by her own need to redefine herself against her earlier religious experiences, associated with Roman Catholicism.

On the other hand, this romanticized understanding of Hindu and Buddhist practices reflected Montano’s projection of her own spiritual agenda and expectations. The artist employed traditional religious techniques of self-transformation as efficient methods of healing and therapy. Combining techniques of psychotherapy with Eastern religious and esoteric practices, Montano searched for a unique personal model of wellness.

In the following section, I analyse Montano’s performance of *14 Years of Living Art* as a New Age project of redefinition and modification of traditional Eastern religiosity, in particular the Tantric system of Kundalini yoga. I do not define the process of New Age Easternisation and

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<sup>345</sup> Harvey Cox, *Turning East* (New York: Simon and Shuster, 1977), p. 149.

romantization of the East as negative. In the context of the contemporary secularisation and deterioration of Western traditional religiosity, the New Age movement provides a fruitful ground for the redefinition of spirituality as an individual process. The eclectic nature of the New Age opens up a space for the production of personalised versions of religion based on more intimate models of the sacred. While the simplification of traditional religious traditions might have negative connotations it also provides more available paradigms of spirituality which encourage spiritual practices in everyday life. Public availability of the sacred promoted in the New Age fills the spiritual lacunae in a highly secularised life of contemporary societies. Montano's performance of the *14 Years of Living Art*, as I see it, is based on the rhetoric of a new sacred, which embodies public search for new mystical experiences in contemporary rationalised models of culture. The redefinition of traditional Kundalini yoga in Montano's performance produces simpler and more accessible model of the sacred and serves as an example of a new type of spirituality.

### **The Experiment in Self-Therapy: *14 Years of Living Art* (1984-1998)**

I'll send you home with a new body...<sup>346</sup>

Swami Vishnudevananda

Montano's most ambitious work incorporating the principles of New Age spirituality was *14 Years of Living Art*, the project that unfolded in the period from 1984 to 1998. The performance consisted of two parts: primarily, Montano conceived the *7 Years of Living Art* project, which she executed in the period from 1984 to 1991. Immediately after finishing *7 Years*

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<sup>346</sup> Swami Vishnudevananda, *Swamiji Said: A Collection of Teachings by Swami Vishnudevananda in His Own Words*, (International Sivananda Yoga Vedanta Centre, 2013), p. 35.

*of Living Art* she began the performance again, transforming it into *14 Years of Living Art*. The performance was structured as an endurance ritual based on the exploration of the yogic concept of the seven chakras and seven primary colors associated with them. Montano's principal goal in the performance was defined by an attempt at reconstruction and modification of the yogic tradition of Kundalini and its adaptation to the individual needs of the artist.

In Hindu esoteric tradition, primarily in Tantric Saivism, Kundalini belongs to the teaching of tantric yoga and is based on the belief in the ascetic's ability to awaken dormant spiritual potency -- the divine creative energy Shakti -- that lies dormant at the base of the spine.<sup>347</sup> Through engaging in yogic practices the practitioner arouses the dormant energy and moves it up the spine through invisible energy centers, chakras, till the Shakti reaches the top of the head, thus engendering the enlightenment and final liberation from the cycles of birth and death.

The esoteric physiology of Tantric yoga explains chakras as focal points within the body's vertical axis -- the subtle medial channel sushumna, which is believed to animate the physical body. The vital energy prana flows through sushumna's channels called nadis that distribute the life force within the organism. The yogi attempts to open the central channel of sushumna drawing the vital energy, prana, within it. This defines the rise of Shakti from the base of the spine to the top of the head accompanied by release of the nectar of immortality (amrita) and the state of ultimate bliss. Diverse schools of yoga somewhat agree that each chakra corresponds to a particular color, an organ or a set of organs, an emotional quality and a psychic energy. The direction of attention to each chakra through meditation engenders the movement of

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<sup>347</sup> Shaman Hatley, "Kundalini," the article will appear in the *Encyclopedia of Indian Religions*, ed. Arvind Sharma, (Springer, 2015).



Shakti to the top of the head and is practiced with the ultimate goal of self-transcendence and yogic merging with the absolute.

Borrowing from a doctrinal understanding of Kundalini yoga, Montano created a set of individualised rules centered on chakra exploration. Although yogic meditation was incorporated in the performance, Montano was primarily interested in self-learning and creative transformation of traditional religious practices. Kundalini yoga became a starting point of Montano's experiment that progressed in a new type of discipline which in the end had little to do with its original model. Although in her project statement Montano mentions that the performance was "an experience borrowed from Hindu theology which states that there are seven nerve plexuses, or nerve centers, on the spinal column which correspond to body parts, body areas, inner psychological qualities and subtle energies," *14 Years of Living Art* proposed a unique method of self-exploration and self-therapy based on creative modification of traditional religious methods.

The performance developed as an alternative lifestyle that encompassed almost all of Montano's everyday activities. For seven years, Montano committed to follow strict discipline that involved innovative chakra experiments through color, sound, clothing and speech.<sup>348</sup> In her preliminary notes Montano defined the conditions of her work. For the duration of the performance she vowed to fulfill five rules on a daily basis:

1. Staying in a colored space for extended periods of time so that the color can activate the center that I am working on (minimum three hours).
2. Listening with and without headphones to the pitch associated with the center (minimum seven hours).
3. Wearing clothes that are the same color as the color of the center.

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<sup>348</sup> See Linda Montano, *Chakra Drawing*, Appendix II, p. 259.

4. Speaking in the accents to illustrate the center (except with family).<sup>349</sup>
5. Focusing my mind on the location of that centre during everyday life actions.<sup>350</sup>

Montano devoted each of the seven years of her project to the exploration of one of the chakras, wearing the clothes of the respective color and trying to activate the chakra centre using a variety of self-created practices. Once a month, for seven years, Montano saw people for private counselling with the artist at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. In parallel, Montano supposedly met visitors astrally, appearing in spirit at the Chagall Chapel in the United Nations in New York.

<b>Year</b>	<b>Number</b>	<b>Quality</b>	<b>Color</b>	<b>Pitch</b>	<b>Location</b>	<b>Accent</b>
1984-85	1	Sex	Red	B	Tip of coccyx	French
1985-86	2	Security	Orange	C	Pubic area	Nun
1986-87	3	Courage	Yellow	G	Navel	Jazz singer
1987-88	4	Compassion	Green	D	Heart	Country and Western
1988-89	5	Communication	Blue	A	Throat	British
1989-90	6	Intuition	Purple	E	Third eye	Russian
1990-91	7	Bliss	White	F	Top of head	Normal

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<sup>349</sup> Montano identified each Chakra centre with a particular accent, which, according to the artist, would illustrate the nature and qualities of the center. For example, speaking in French accent, Montano attempted to convey sexuality associated with Muladhara Chakra. Montana practiced speaking in different accents in her video *Learning to Talk* (1978). In the project she developed and performed multiple characters: French woman, nun, jazz singer, country and western songwriter, neurosurgeon, Russian choreographer, and karate black belt. These characters, speaking in different accents, inspired the disciplines of *14 Years of Living Art*. For more information see Linda Montano, *Learning to Talk*, Video Data Bank (1978).

<sup>350</sup> Montano et al., *Letters from Linda Montano*, p. 156.

Chakra meditation was incorporated in the performance, but it was not a principal part of it. Besides daily periods of intense concentration on the chakras characteristic of Kundalini yoga, Montano developed a personalised system of chakra activation that was integrated in her everyday activities. For seven years, daily, she wore monochromatic clothes, spoke in a particular accent, listened to a prescribed pitch assigned to each chakra, spent periods of time in a colored space representing the tone of the chakra and meditated. Her entire life became a manifestation of her performative discipline on understanding the chakra system. The majority of her methods however were never present in the tradition of Kundalini yoga and are not proven to be efficient in the pursuits of yogic goals of enlightenment and liberation.

As Montano explains, the process of developing the idea for the performance took place in parallel with her eclectic engagement in studies of multiple religions and, in particular, her involvement in the study of yoga psychology and chakra meditation under the guidance of Ramamurti Mishra. As she notes of the process of developing the idea for the performance, it emerged in result of her eclectic spiritual trainings:

That October day was not the first time that I had decided to systematically, consecutively and slowly focus on every chakra of the body, starting at the base of the spine. It had seemed essential to do that because different spiritual traditions had their own favourite spots on the body and as a result, there were many locations and styles to choose from. For example, in Zen meditation, practitioners concentrate on the breath around the navel; in Tibetan, the head, throat and heart are emphasised; in some schools the tip of the nose or third eye are stressed. Where was my spot? Even though these were tested, ancient, 2,400-year-old guaranteed formulae, I still felt that I should explore all of the centers in my own body so I could find out for myself how they worked... For the next six months, the idea grew, developed, changed, scared me and finally became clear and simple enough so I could do it.<sup>351</sup>

Ramamurti Mishra (Shri Brahmananda Sarasvati) – an Indian guru and a founder of Ananda ashram in Upstate New York – was Montano’s teacher since 1973. Growing up in India,

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<sup>351</sup> Linda Mary Montano, ‘Year-End Reports for 7 Years of Living Art,’ unpublished manuscript (1984-1991), cited in Fischer, “The Chakra Cycles of Linda M. Montano,” p. 158.

in a traditional Brahmin family, Mishra started to practice yoga and to study Vedic philosophy early in life. His interest in medicine led him to pursue an academic career in the United States and England. After following advanced medical studies at New York University Post-Graduate Medical College, NY and at McGill University in Montreal, he was on staff in Metropolitan Hospital and at Queen Mary Veterans Hospital in the department of neurology and psychiatry. Later in his life Mishra returned to teaching Vedic philosophy, yoga and meditation in Ananda ashram. Combining scientific methods of psychology, psychoanalysis, and neurology with yoga system and Vedanta, Mishra developed a method of yoga psychology based on interpretation of Patanjali's Yoga Sutras through the lens of Western science. Yoga psychology embraced the variety of Western medical discourses from psychiatry to neuroscience in order to explain the complexities of authentic yogic teachings.

Ramamurti Mishra contributed significantly to the popularisation of traditional yogic practices in the USA and provided one of the examples of the modern guru engaging in the globalisation of traditional Eastern religiosity. Popularisation of the tantric practices of Kundalini yoga in the West generally led to the adaptation of original tantric philosophy to the needs of the Western students and an emphasis on the more secular goals of yoga such as healing and psychological balancing. Chakra meditation provided one of the dimensions of the popularised understanding of yoga as a psychological journey to a better understanding of the self.

For Montano, studying under the guidance of Dr. Mishra had both spiritual and psychological connotations. Learning about chakras, Montano explored meditation as a practice of psychological cleansing by going deep inside herself and discovering new aspects of her personality. As the artist explains:

Throughout the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s her Guru, Dr. Mishra taught, mentored and directed her toward meditation. Little Linda loved to shut her eyes and go deep down

inside to a big silent and mysterious place. Sometimes lights were there, sometimes beautiful sounds. Wow, what a beautiful fairyland place that is. Little Linda spent hours and hours and hours there. She didn't care what it was called, Zen or Yoga or Centering Prayer, she just knew that she was in ecstasy and hungry for more and more and more.<sup>352</sup>

A merging of Eastern spirituality and its Western interpretations colored by psychology and psychoanalysis, reflected Montano's attempt to therapy-ize her performative practice and heal without the institutional help. Her understanding of Eastern spirituality as a healing practice in many ways reflected the contemporary paradigm of religion as individual therapy and a practical method of physical and psychological recovery.

From this perspective, Montano's holism embodied New Age principles of self-help reflected in its holistic healthcare. Holistic or alternative healthcare thrived through counterrevolutionary culture of 1960s and 1970s and provided a form of medical resistance to the official Western medicine and its biomedical and pharmacological hegemonies. This resistance to dominant medical discourses in Western medicine dates back to eighteenth century Germany and Samuel Hahnemann's introduction of the principles of homeopathy as alternative to official medicine methods of healing.<sup>353</sup> Hahnemann resisting popular allopathic therapies of administering dangerous chemicals (mercury-containing drug, calomel) to induce vomiting and bowels cleaning, developed the laws of similars: like heals the like, and promoted the beliefs in the ability of the body to heal itself. Hahneman theorised that "if a large amount of a substance caused certain symptoms in a healthy person, smaller amounts of the same substance could treat those symptoms in someone who is ill."<sup>354</sup>

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<sup>352</sup> Linda Montano, *Chakra Story*, <http://www.lindamontano.com/14-years-of-living-art/story/chapter4.html>. (accessed 21 April, 2014).

<sup>353</sup> For more information on contemporary use of Homeopathy see Edzard Ernst and Eckhart G. Hahn, eds., *Homeopathy: A Critical Appraisal*, (Oxford: Butterworth Heinemann, 1998), pp. 101-145.

<sup>354</sup> Keegan, *Healing with Complementary and Alternative Therapies*, p. 130.

The twentieth century holism, resisting allopathic medicine and its misuse of biomedical technology, provided a variety of methods that were focused on the natural abilities of the organism to heal. If allopathic medicine operates by the rhetoric of curing and sees the body as a physical machine whose isolated parts can be repaired through drugs and surgical intervention, the holistic approach to health appropriates the logic of healing and sees the person as a totality of body-mind-spirit experiences. Healing the ‘whole’ person requires re-integration and balancing of the mind and body that takes into account the physical, spiritual and psychological conditions of the patient. As Maria Tighe and Jenny Butler, exploring the alternative medicine in Great Britain, explain “[in holistic model of health] the health of the individual is viewed as an integral part of wider socio-cultural whole, rather than as deriving from a mechanistic breaking down of organic body parts.”<sup>355</sup> In holism human being is viewed as a unique, interdependent relationship of body, mind, and spirit.

Holistic medicine stresses the importance of self-help in the healing process. Finding the individual unique meaning of the illness characteristic for a patient is a principal method of healing. The illness in holistic approach is understood as a starting point of self-development and inner-growth and carries a personal message for the patient. Therefore only the patient himself can understand the underlying meaning of his malfunctioning. The mind plays the central role in physical healing and it is the patient’s responsibility to look for the psychological and spiritual reasons of his illness and their consequent eradication. As Hanegraaff points out:

The individual is challenged to find the deeper meaning of his/her illness and thus to use it as an instrument for learning and inner growth instead of taking the passive role of the victim. The concept of ‘taking responsibility’ for one’s illness is central to the holistic health movement, and accordingly there is a heavy emphasis on the individual character of therapy. This individualisation of health care, in which not an abstract ‘disease’ but the

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<sup>355</sup> Maria Tighe and Jenny Butler, “Holistic Health and New Age in Britain and the Republic of Ireland,” in Daren Kemp and James R. Lewis, eds., *Handbook of New Age*, (Leiden, Boston: BRILL, 2007), p. 417.

unique individual in his/ her undivided wholeness is at the center of attention, is arguably the most central characteristic of the movement.<sup>356</sup>

The crucial aspect of the holistic approach to wellbeing is the unification of healing and spirituality in one approach. In the holistic model there is no separation between physical healing and the healing of the mind and spirit. Healing is perceived as an a-priory spiritual phenomenon that requires total transformation of the 'entire' person, not only the remedying of his/her physical conditions. New Age healers emphasise the importance of spiritual health and healing of the soul as principal pre-conditions for physical health. In holistic medicine traditional religious practices of meditation, prayer, and yoga are appropriated as tools of healing, not only as spiritual tools of self-transcendence and unification with the absolute. The more secular goals of self-balancing, harmonisation and purification of the body and mind through religious ritual are emphasised in the holistic discourse. As Tighe and Butler explain: "Concepts such as the Indian chakra system are employed in the discourses of both holistic health and New Age to refer to connections between the physical body and the spiritual and emotional centers of the self. Within such worldviews, physical ailments are cured by changing the psychological and spiritual conditions of the person."<sup>357</sup>

Montano's appropriation of Kundalini yoga and chakra meditation in the *14 Years of Living Art* had New Age connotations of holistic healing. Montano personalised and modified yogic principals with the purpose of developing unique methods of self-examination and self-help that differed from traditional yogic philosophy. Following the logic of the holistic model of health as defined by the necessity of self-exploration, self-therapy, combination of spiritual and holistic, Montano embodied the New Age therapeutic paradigm.

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<sup>356</sup> Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture*, p. 46.

<sup>357</sup> Tighe and Butler, "Holistic Health and New Age in Britain and the Republic of Ireland," p. 418.

In the New Age holistic discourse Chakra meditation addresses the totality of being, realigning physical, psychological and spiritual energy of the practitioner. Chakra concentration is understood as a very powerful tool for healing that removes psychological blocks, releases repressed emotions, and results in overall healing of the practitioner on physical, psychological and spiritual level. The concentration on a particular chakra contributes to physical healing of the person and general improvement of the area of life associated with each chakra. Continuous concentration on the chakras produces vibrations in physical centers and creates specific healing influence on that area of the body as well as balancing affect on the area of life ruled by each particular chakra.<sup>358</sup>

Contemporary teachings of Kundalini yoga often simplify the meaning of chakra meditation as a holistic activity for the general improvement of wellbeing. For example, renowned Indian yogi and guru Swami Vishnudevananda, in the interests of making tantric practice accessible for a wider Western audience, explains its healing benefits and its ability to positively influence the life of the practitioners. Introducing each chakra, Vishnudevananda explains how meditation can improve the physical and psychological health of meditators.<sup>359</sup>

1. The first chakra Muladhara, “the root chakra” is the source of Kundalini energy. It is located at the tip of coccyx and is associated with the color red. Muladhara relates to basic human survival needs and sex and is responsible for our sense of belonging to a group, family or any other community. The meditation on muladhara gives a sense of security, confidence and

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<sup>358</sup> For more information see Saraswati Satyananda, *Tantra of Kundalini Yoga* (Monghyr, Bihar: Bihar School of Yoga 1973).

<sup>359</sup> For more information see Swami Vishnudevananda, *Meditation and Mantras*, (New York: OM Lotus Publishing Company, 2000), pp. 89-103.



ability to easily fulfill one's duties. The disruption of the energy flow in this area results in the feelings of anxiety and fear.<sup>360</sup>

2. The second chakra, Svadhisthana, is located in the pubic area and is characterised by the orange color. It represents creativity and birth and defines the ability to produce new ideas. When the chakra is balanced it becomes a source of creative energy and stimulates the artistic abilities of the practitioner. When blocked, the Svadhisthana produces the feelings of stagnation, creative emptiness and dryness. Concentration on the muladhara balances unconscious experiences in man.

3. The third chakra, Manipura, is at the solar plexus. It is represented by yellow color and bestows will, courage, and a sense of personal power. Healthy flow of prana in the Manipura defines confidence and the ability to manifest one's desires freely. A blockage in this area results in frustration, depression, and a sense of powerlessness. Concentration on Manipura chakra gives the freedom from fear and disease. On a bodily level Manipura chakra controls the entire process of digestion, transportation and assimilation in the body. It also participates in temperature control in the body.

4. The Anahata chakra is located at heart center and corresponds to the color green. The Anahata is a source of feelings of compassion and love and when balanced gives a sense of connection to everyone in our lives. Anahata chakra bestows "pure qualities, cosmic love and various psychic powers."<sup>361</sup> When blocked the Anahata creates feelings of loneliness and alienation. The Anahata controls the heart, the diaphragm, the lungs and other organs in the same area of the body.

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<sup>360</sup> Ibid, p. 96.

<sup>361</sup> Ibid, p. 99.

5. The fifth chakra, Vishuddha, is associated with the throat and is represented by the color blue. It is responsible for the realm of communication and when balanced provides the practitioner with eloquence and the ability to express himself/herself freely. Blockage of the Vishudha results in an inability to freely communicate and increased self-censorship. On a bodily level Vishuddha controls the thyroid complex, systems of articulation, the upper palate, and the epiglottis.

6. The Ajna chakra is located at the pineal gland, which is known as the third eye, and is characterised by the color purple. It represents intuition and higher states of creativity. When balanced, the Ajna gives a gift of intuition and insight. When the energy of the Ajna is blocked it results in the sense of self-doubt and distrust. The Ajna controls the functioning of the muscular system and also participates in balancing sexual activity.

7. The seventh chakra, the Sahasrara, is located at the top of the head and is associated with the color white. It is a chakra of spiritual bliss and transcendental states of consciousness. In Kundalini yoga, the Sahasrara is a site of unification of the cosmic energies of Shakti and Siva and a symbol of ultimate self-transformation and enlightenment of the practitioner.

In *14 Years of Living Art* Montano examined holistic aspects of chakra balancing. Concentrating for the duration of one year on a respective chakra, she aimed at improving the physical conditions of her body as well as at harmonizing the area of life associated with each chakra. Intensifying the experience of chakra focusing, Montano engaged in self-created disciplines of speaking with a particular accent and listening to a prescribed musical pitch. When travelling, Montano carried a pocket synthesiser and a colored fabric that could be transformed into an enveloping tent. As Jennifer Fischer explains: “These commitments were formulated to inflect her consciousness and intensify the specific personal issues associated with each chakra,

whether that correlates to sex, security, courage, compassion, communication, intuition or bliss.”<sup>362</sup>

Montano herself reports transformative experiences resulting from her chakra experiments. The more she focused on each chakra the more improvement she would experience in the respective area of health and life. As she explains: “I realised that wherever my attention was placed, for example, fourth chakra, then fourth chakra things began to happen. It’s not that my attention caused things to happen, but my self-scrutiny and focus allowed me to notice the minutiae of my inner world. I became a detective of the interior.”<sup>363</sup>

At the end of each year, Montano documented the physical and psychological changes she experienced as a result of her chakra experiments. For example, examining the improvement of her intuition during the sixth year of the performance devoted to the Ajna chakra, Montano documented a heightened awareness of the pineal gland and her ability to see through the inner vision:

The Third Eye sees 360 degrees. Turning inside the head this Eye has no opinions, no judgments, is a laser and sends messages. This Eye speaks without words and sees a blank screen within. When it wants to see outside, this Eye looks through the lotus flower.<sup>364</sup>

In the seventh year of the performance focusing on the Sahasrara, the chakra of spiritual bliss, resulted in physical transformations and painful experiences prior to Montano’s improvement. In her year-end report Montano writes:

Top chakra, bliss. Bliss of worry, bliss of bliss. Year to blow my mind. I have a pain in my head; have to go for a CAT scan. Soon. Short-term memory gone. I stutter. What’s that about? Will have medical check-up but I think it’s a combination of my age, hormones and psychological stress. (In 1992 I go for an MRI and find out I have had a silent stroke).<sup>365</sup>

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<sup>362</sup> Fisher, “The Chakra Cycles of Linda Montano,” p. 160.

<sup>363</sup> Montano et al., *Letters from Linda Montano*, p. 11.

<sup>364</sup> Fischer, “The Chakra Cycles of Linda M. Montano, p. 160.

<sup>365</sup> Montano et al., *Letters from Linda Montano*, p. 10.

Montano's 14 years' chakra experiment internalised the holistic principles of physical and psychological healing through religious ritual. The artist was primarily interested in the improvement of her condition through meditation and chakra focusing. The experiment led to visible changes in Montano's physicality as well as the development of altered states of mind and psyche.

At the same time, embodying the yogic principles of self-restraint and renunciation, Montano pursued more traditional goals associated with practice of Kundalini yoga. Her disciplinary practices replicated the traditional ascetic beliefs on transformation of the mind with the ultimate purpose of enlightenment through extreme self-discipline. Engaging in daily practices of meditation, visualisation and ritualisation for fourteen years, Montano aimed to discipline her mind and transform her body-mind continuum into a type of a yogic body. In her interview with Judy Kussoy taken during the fourth year of the *14 Years of Living Art* project, Montano emphasises the importance of self-discipline and self-transformation in her project:

I see it as an experiment in self-imposed disciplines, which I've designed, collaged, and created in order to allow me to work on areas that hopefully lead to a kind of attention state – the same kind of attention that a Tibetan nun living in a cave would have, or a surgeon operating on a patient. What I've done is to discipline things into my life, things which I would like to do anyway but wouldn't do without a structure.<sup>366</sup>

According to Montano, addressing the core illness of the mind -- its undisciplined attachment to and craving of sensual pleasures – she aimed at transforming the mind through a rigid system of disciplines similar to monastic rules. The structure of the performance, with its intrinsic system of physical and psychological limitations, drastically changed Montano's life and made it impossible for the artist to have a full time job and travel freely. The repetition of the daily rituals necessary to direct the attention was a principal tool of disciplining and clarifying the mind and reaching towards the spiritual goals of self-transcendence. Rooted in her life-long

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<sup>366</sup> Ibid, p. 161.

commitment to meditation, *14 Years of Living Art* proposed the method of utilising art as a vehicle for meditation.

Montano's healing process in *14 Years of Living Art* was also central in her development as an interactive performer and a public counsellor. Montano's performative method always involved interaction with her audience and the construction of situations that required immediate participation from her spectators. In particular, Montano was interested in the therapeutic aspect of life communication and used her interactive works as an opportunity to listen to her audience and provide her assistance and service when needed whether it'd be the cleaning of houses, cooking or advising. In 1973 Montano performed *Home Nursing*, in which, dressed as a nurse, the artist visited her sick friends and assisted them in their recovery process. In 1974 Montano worked on *Garage Talk*, a three-day performance during which she made herself available to her neighbours to talk about their life issues in her garage. The same year, Montano performed as a Salvation Army bell ringer during the Christmas season, using the Salvation Army set up to communicate with the public.<sup>367</sup>

*14 Years of Living Art* created regularity in Montano's interaction with her audience. For seven years, once a month, Montano gave free art counselling sessions at the New York Museum of Contemporary Art in New York. Montano met her 'clients' in the room painted in the color of one of the seven chakras located at the back of the museum.<sup>368</sup> As Fisher points out: "Montano initiated a situation of attentive listening and response to people's questions." Her counselling methods included palm reading, tarot card reading, and group meditation. "With the information

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<sup>367</sup> For more information see Linda M. Montano, *Art in Everyday Life*, (Los Angeles: Astro Artz, 1981).

<sup>368</sup> The room was allocated by the director of the New Museum of Contemporary Art, Marcia Tucker.

that arose Montano would formulate a visualisation, communicate it to the person, and tell them how they could practice it on their own.”<sup>369</sup>

In the next section, I discuss Montano’s interactive performance as a form of public healing project inspired by Montano’s engagement with holistic medicine and New Age spirituality. Developing the individual healing method during *14 Years of Living Art* Montano aimed to apply this methodology in her later works. Montano’s interactive methodology comprised group healing using chakra meditation, visualisation, chanting and praying. I introduce the concept of the wounded healer in order to explore the territories of physical, psychological and spiritual transformation in Montano’s interactive performance.

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<sup>369</sup> Fischer, “The Chakra Cycles of Linda M. Montano,” p. 168.



Figure 3.2 -- Linda Montano, "Jumpsuits and Skeletons" from *Fourteen Years of Living Art*, 2011.



Figure 3.3 -- Linda Montano, *Seven Years of Living Art*, 1984.

### ***Sacramental Chakra Chaise: The Ritual of Healing in Interactive Performance***

To be wounded means also to have the healing power activated in us; or might we possibly say that without being wounded one would never meet just this healing power? Might we even go as far as to say that the very purpose of the wound is to make us aware of the healing power in us?<sup>370</sup>

Gerhard Adler

In her interactive performance, *Sacramental Chakra Chaise*, staged in Montreal in April, 2003, as part of a larger exposition of the *14 Years of Living Art* project, Linda Montano performs as a life-counsellor. Reclining on a wooden couch, reminiscent of psychoanalytic session set up, Linda gives readings to her visitors on their particular life situations. One by one her audience members are invited to sit on a chair in front of the artist and share their life-concerns. Linda is in a professional looking business suit, glasses, but with a pink feathers' clip in her hair, orange silk blouse and a long rose flower in her hands.

After attentively listening to the visitor's story, Linda gives readings of their life problems, provides a brief advice session, and blesses them with a rose flower, touching them on the forehead. Her immediate instructions are based on her studies of the yogic chakra system -- she suggests her 'clients' focus on particular chakra center, perform a brief meditation or visualisation, repeat a prayer, or have a chanting session. Sometimes she prays, sings and recites the mantras. She is guru-like and her "patients" obediently follow her instructions with their eyes closed and faces expressing devotion. After each encounter Montano bows to her visitors and thanks them.<sup>371</sup>

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<sup>370</sup> Gerhard Adler, "Notes Regarding the Dynamics of the Self" in Gerhard Adler, Edward C. Whitmont, and Erich Neumann, *Dynamic Aspects of the Psyche*, (New York: Analytical Psychology Club, 1956), p. 100.

<sup>371</sup> See *Linda M. Montano: 14 Years of Living Art*, Directed by Jennifer Fisher, Chicago: Video Data Bank, (2004, DVD).





Figure 3.4 -- Linda Montano, *Sacramental Chakra Chaise*, still from the video of the performance, 2003

From the first sight, *Sacramental Chakra Chaise* restages the ordinary medical encounter between the doctor and his patient. Linda in the role of a medicine woman, who embraces the variety of stereotypes on healing professions, from shaman to psychoanalytic, provides help to her audience, giving advice, listening to their life stories and suggesting some sort of ‘express-treatment,’ or immediate solution to problematic life situations. She is patient and empathetic, addressing each particular case individually, and trying to understand what will be the best solution for the person.

However, there is a disquieting context to the performance that makes one question the entire set up of Montano’s art therapy. What is most striking is the strange reversal of healer-patient roles in the performance. Montano reconstructs the settings of a psychoanalytic office: there are chairs and a couch – a doctor and his patients. Instead of sitting “professionally” on a chair, however, Montano takes the position traditionally assigned to the patient – on the couch. She reclines on a wooden bed while her visitors attend to her at the side of the bed. The structure of the piece suggests that Montano is not so much a healer, but rather the patient herself.

This reversal of healer-patient roles is emphasised by Montano's continual deconstruction of the "professional" look of a doctor as suggested by the performative set up. Her behaviour shifts continuously from stark seriousness about her role of life counsellor, to unpredictable laughing, singing and chanting. Her holistic decisions vary from solutions suggested by the traditions of yoga and chakra meditation, to the ones that have an air of absurdity and irony. For example, to one of the 'clients' Montano suggests recitation of the Great Death-conquering Mantra or Mahamrityunjaya Mantra from Rig Veda<sup>372</sup> in order to ensure protection from illnesses and longevity. By contrast, another is advised to wear a swim suit of an orange color as a 'shield' from criticism. Aside from her decision to engage in professional art healing, the artist also performs a "creative schizophrenia," the method that demonstrates her own disquieting states of mind.

In performance, Montano is not only trying to help her spectators to face their fears, but also exhibits her own vulnerability. In her interview with Fischer, Montano points out the necessity of addressing her own weaknesses in *Sacramental Chakra Chaise*: "Now I just want to bless myself... I think it's real important for caretakers to take care of themselves, and for artists to take care of themselves, and for mothers to take care of themselves, for teachers to take care of themselves... I want to do for me what I did for everyone."<sup>373</sup>

Montano's methodology embraces the opposites of healer-patient relationships and demonstrates the necessity to reconcile the opposition within the binary. Montano-healer is also a patient, while her "spectator-patients" actively participate in the healing process helping the artist address her own trauma. From that perspective, Montano embodies the archetype of a shaman as a wounded healer; this model of therapeutic relationships between the healer and the patient

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<sup>372</sup> *Rig Veda*, ed. Wendy Doniger, (London, UK: Penguin, 2005).

<sup>373</sup> *14 Years of Living Art*, dir. by Jennifer Fischer.

inverts the power dynamic within the binary. The archetype of a wounded healer provides the space for both sides to execute “healer” and “patient” roles in the search for ultimate recovery.

In the following section, I analyse Montano’s interactive performance through the lens of the concept of the wounded healer, as discussed in Western anthropological and psychoanalytical discourses, and introduce the variety of ways the artist embodies romanticised Western understanding of shamanism as spiritual healing at an advanced level. In particular, I discuss how healer’s own wounding serves as a prerequisite for the development of the healer’s identity and his/her therapeutic abilities and defines success in holistic practices.

### **The Concepts of Wounded Healing**

In the twentieth century Western anthropological literature, the medical professionals of indigenous peoples were often associated with the term “shaman,” which attained global usage as a result of the popularization of indigenous shamanic traditions in Western academic discourse. In spite of a variety of research on shamanism, the Western understanding of the shaman is highly contradictory. The early anthropological literature defines a shaman as a mentally ill person suffering from severe maladjustments, anxiety, and other mental abnormalities. The 1960s and ‘70s Western counterrevolutionary movements, on the contrary, produced a positive and romanticised image of the shaman as an exceptionally gifted person: a teacher and a healer possessing supernatural abilities. In all cases, the notion of shaman is associated with the process of the shaman’s recovery from initial illness and his development of supernatural abilities as result of his illness.

In the following discussion, I introduce a number of concepts of shamanism developed in Western anthropology, psychology, and psychoanalysis since early twentieth century, which

examine the persona of the shaman as a wounded healer. Throughout the discussion it is important to keep in mind the complexities that surround the Western concept of shamanism and its problematic definitions, which differ from the understanding of shamanism in its authentic context. As Sudhir Kakar, a researcher of indigenous medical practices in India, notes:

To someone belonging to a culture where the shaman is a part of everyday life and shamanism is as exotic as dentistry, however, the romantic image of the shaman that emerges in from the western search for utopias is as incomprehensible as his earlier ethnocentric denigration. The shamanic tradition I am familiar with bears little resemblance to its portrayal in much of Western literature; the shaman, it seems, continues to be invented and reinvented according to the changing needs of Western culture and its restless *Zeitgeist*.<sup>374</sup>

However, in the context of Montano's interactive performance, Western models of shamanism and wounded healing seem to reflect her holistic intentions. Montano's romantic interpretation of folk healing and holistic therapy provides a new paradigm of the shamanistic spirituality, which deviates drastically from that of the cultures it borrows from. Montano often defines artistic practice adapting romanticised understanding of shamanism as a practice of intuitive healing, mysterious and spontaneous transformations, and profound transcendental knowledge. For example, in her short text *Art as Therapy* Montano explains:

Underneath the surface of each artist is a shaman, an instinctual curer and therapist who lives a life outside of and beyond social medicine. Artists have found that the best way to direct their energies, learn hidden information about themselves, and face hidden fears is to pursue the relationships of space, form, color, texture, size, mass, and direction in an obsessive way. Instead of brooding about what is wrong in their lives, artists are trained to use problems as material for their work since work diverts anxiety, fear, and worry into artistic expression.<sup>375</sup>

The artist, in Montano's opinion, similar to a shamanistic medical specialist, described in Western anthropological studies, can use his/her negative psychological experiences and experiences of trauma for constructive purposes of creation, healing and self-perfection. Art

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<sup>374</sup>Sudhir Kakar, *Shamans, Mystics and Doctors*, (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), p. 92.

<sup>375</sup> Montano et al., *Letters from Linda Montano*, p. 111.

serves therapeutic purposes and therefore pursues similar to shamanistic goals of balancing negative and positive forces in the universe and re-constructing the sense of lost unity and order on an individual and collective levels. Montano continuously emphasises the social role of artists as soul-curers, teachers, and counsellors able to assist and heal their spectators using their intuition, instinctive feeling, and empathy. Montano, herself, regularly provides Art/ Life Counseling Sessions over the phone in which she guides her 'clients' into the depth of their psychological experiences using her intuition and vast experience of self-healing developed through the years of performative practice.<sup>376</sup> In her recent video works Montano also reconstructs the images of folk healers, witches and shamans using the narratives of wounded healing. For example, *Starved Survivors* (2011)<sup>377</sup> is based on the dialogue between aging medicine woman and a little girl who searches for the meaning of life.<sup>378</sup> In the video the little girl is educated about the unavoidable suffering of life and is suggested to explore pain in all its diversity in order to gain the superior knowledge of life. From this perspective, Montano's adaptation of the rhetoric and symbolism of wounded healing in her artworks reflects Western paradigms of neo-shamanism and neo-paganism developed throughout the twentieth century.

The notion of a wounded healer was primarily introduced in the texts of Western anthropology in early-twentieth century. The first studies of indigenous cultures linked the concept of the wounded healer to the practices of Siberian shamanism and emphasised the link between shamanism, sickness, and a magical ability to heal. Mircea Eliade defines the shaman as

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<sup>376</sup> For more information see Linda Montano, "A Sample Art/Life Counselling Phone Session" in Montano et al., *Letters from Linda Montano*, pp. 275-278.

<sup>377</sup> *Starved Survivors*, dir. Linda Montano, (2011).

<sup>378</sup> Linda Montano, *Starved Survivors*, script, see Appendix III, p. 260.

“a great specialist in the human soul; he alone ‘sees’, for he knows its ‘form’ and its destiny.”<sup>379</sup>

According to Eliade, the shaman is responsible for “guarding the soul” of the community, and protects it from misfortune and death. I.M Lewis talks about shaman as “the one who is excited, moved or raised.” As he writes, “The shaman is an inspired prophet and healer, a charismatic religious figure, with the power to control spirits, usually by incarnating them. If spirits speak through him, so he is also likely to have the capacity to engage in mystical flight and other “out of body “experiences.”<sup>380</sup>

Meret Demant Jakobsen, an ethnographer researching Greenlandic shamanism, emphasises the shaman’s ability to help people to cope with the fear of natural disasters and the fear of uncontrollable emotions of their fellow human beings. As she writes: “The shaman’s role is to reduce the fear of these forces and establish a balance in society as a whole. Some rites can be performed by ordinary members of society but often the shaman is the only one who can travel to the spirits because he knows the way. He is the mediator between the realms of sacred and profane. He is the messenger and the healer of individuals and society as a whole.”<sup>381</sup>

Similarly, Joan Halifax, a renowned anthropologist and a scholar who acquired a status of Zen Buddhist roshi<sup>382</sup> later in her life, emphasises social significance of shamanistic practices in indigenous cultures. As she notes, “The shaman has a social rather than a personal reason for opening the psyche as he or she is concerned with the community and its wellbeing; sacred action, then, is directed towards the creation of order out of chaos.”<sup>383</sup> The principal task of the shaman is to deal with crisis in society on the individual and collective levels, creating order out

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<sup>379</sup> Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism*, (New York: Pantheon Books, 1964), p. 8.

<sup>380</sup> I. M. Lewis, *What is Shaman*, (Folk, Dansk Ethnografisk Tidsskrift, 1981) 23, p. 7.

<sup>381</sup> Merete Demant Jakobsen, *Shamanism: Traditional and Contemporary Approaches to the Mastery of Spirits and Healing*, (New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books, 1999), p. 2.

<sup>382</sup> a title signifying a highly advanced teacher in Zen Buddhism

<sup>383</sup> Halifax, *Shaman: The Wounded Healer*, p. 5.

of chaos, wholeness out of fragmentation, and peace out of disturbance and calamity. Healing the individual members of the community and the community as a whole signifies the central goal of shamanistic activities. The shaman heals and restores the afflicted mind and body of his fellow human beings and establishes a balance in society.

Being a superior healer and peacemaker, the shaman, nevertheless, is often described as a severely afflicted person. In early twentieth century anthropological literature, the shaman often appears as a sick man who continuously engages in self-healing practices and struggles throughout his life with difficult physical and psychological conditions. Researchers describe a variety of “shamanic illnesses” that are characterised by general psycho-somatic symptoms including fugue, mental disturbance, hallucination, etc.

For example, Eliade emphasises the link between shamanism and what in Western medicine is classified as nervous disorder. In his earlier works, Eliade, referring to the term arctic hysteria, introduced in the works of Krivoschapkin, Bogoraz and Czaplicka, emphasises the psychopathological phenomenology of Arctic and Siberian shamanism. As he writes: “The extreme cold, the long nights, the desert solitude, the lack of vitamins, etc., influenced the nervous constitution of the Arctic peoples, giving rise either to mental illnesses (arctic hysteria, meryak, menerik, etc) or to the shamanic trance.

Eliade’s cross-cultural analysis of shamanism demonstrates the tendency of indigenous societies to choose candidates for the role of shaman amongst those who according to contemporary medicine are classified as epileptics, neuropath and hypochondriacs. The future shaman is physically weak, hypersensitive, unstable and eccentric. For example, in Samoa epileptics become diviners. The Batak of Sumatra and other Indonesian peoples choose weak and hypersensitive subjects for the role of shamans. In the Andaman Islands, epileptics are

considered strong shamans. In Chile, shamanistic initiates “are always sickly or morbidly sensitive, with weak hearts, disordered digestions, and subject to vertigo.”<sup>384</sup>

Edith Turner describes the process of the shaman’s initiation as a dramatically painful experience. Often the process of initiation is linked to traumatic experiences and is characterised by intense life-threatening illness that the future shaman must overcome. Despite the variety of shamanic cultures globally, the twentieth century anthropological theories of shamanism define the process of shamanic initiation via sickness as remarkably consistent across the planet. The initial illness of a future shaman strikes unpredictably and is accompanied by uncontrollable visions, ecstasies and dreams that put the initiate into contact with the subjects of the underworld, death and dying. As Turner writes:

The life events of persons destined for the life of a spiritual healer or shaman may vary, but there is one distinguishable pattern that may be followed in many cultures. Healer’s initiations are not planned for them by society; they are not a ‘social construction of society.’ Healers begin by falling into their initiations that are bestowed by spirit agencies. The novice healer feels the impending sense of something beyond his or her comprehension – that is the shamanic gift-to-be – then suffers many troubles, and finally is granted a sense of opening, and with that the gift arrives.<sup>385</sup>

The search for wholeness and the transformation of the shaman’s original fragmented perception of the self results from his original wounding is central to the initiation experience. It is a process of psychological awakening and self-realization attained via trance and dream states. The experience of psychic turbulence and mental confusion is necessary for bringing to the surface the repressed parts of a shaman’s identity, awakening him to a complete picture of the self with all the drawbacks of the wounded consciousness and repressed fears and desires of the subconscious. “The process of encountering one’s own wound is the process of learning to experience the unwanted parts of the self without repression and fear. Learning to control them

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<sup>384</sup> Eliade, *Shamanism*, p. 24.

<sup>385</sup> Joan D. Koss-Chioino and Philip Hefner, eds., *Spiritual Transformation and Healing*, (Lanham, New York, Toronto, Oxford: Altamira Press, 2006), p. 102.



comes much later.”<sup>386</sup> The shaman’s initiation ordeals – sickness, deluded states of mind, uncomfortable physical and emotional states – are meant to prepare him for the life of a realised healer, a life of complete awareness. From this perspective, the symbolism of death and dying in shamanic visions represents the process of transformation of the shaman’s identity, the degeneration and destruction of his old fragmented self, and the formation of a new type of subjectivity characterised by wholeness, unity, and balance.

For the shaman, his initial wounding becomes a trigger in the individual search for recovery. Hypersensitivity and a lack of psychological stability are central in perception of one’s identity as fragmented and incomplete. A process of initiation and shamanic apprenticeship becomes a one of regeneration of shaman’s incomplete individuality and of the formation of a “whole self.” Without the initial wounding, the shaman would never be able to understand the nature of healing and self-transformation.

In performances of Montano the paradigm of wounded healing is introduced through her recognition of the significance of negative psychological background in the artist and the audience. In her interactive works Montano is interested in bringing to light repressed traumatic experiences in herself and her spectators. Connecting to the wound through freely speaking of the most intimate experiences of trauma is at the core of her performative method. Montano, internalising the narratives of shamanism and shamanic healing, developed in Western studies of indigenous cultures, sees the necessity of psychological awakening through psychic turbulence and initial confusion. Understanding the experience of wounding as the first step towards a more profound self-realisation and self-knowledge Montano initiates the situations of active listening in which she encourages her audience members to speak about their deepest anxieties and fears. Through these encounters Montano educates her spectators to search for recovery using methods

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<sup>386</sup> Ibid.

of self-examination and self-healing, while she herself understands this process as mutually beneficial for both -- herself and her 'clients' -- as it stimulates her own awakening. In the following section I discuss the complexities of the concept of wounded healing analysed through the lens of psychoanalysis and its influence on Montano's performative method.

### **The Archetype of the Wounded Healer in Psychology and Psychoanalysis**

The concept of a wounded healer and narratives of shamanic self-transformation through initial trauma were appropriated into archetypal psychology and psychoanalysis, in particular in its Jungian strain. The concept of the wounded healer has been discussed through the lens of the Greek myth of Asklepios; a myth which, in many ways, replicates indigenous shamanistic narratives of initiatory illness.

Asklepios was at the center of healing cults in Ancient Greece. Ritualistic practices in the name of the God Asklepios existed in the Greco-Roman world until their suppression by Christian institutions in the third century AD. Greek mythology introduced Asklepios as a folk healer who lived through multiple traumatic experiences from his very conception. A son of Apollo and Coronis, Asklepios lost his mother even before his birth. According to the myth, the pregnant Coronis cheated on Apollo and was killed by her enraged lover. However, as she lay already dead on her funeral pyre, Apollo had a pity for his unborn son and rescued his child by a caesarean section. Thereafter, Asklepios was sent away to be raised by the centaur Chiron in his cave.

Chiron himself was a wounded physician who suffered from an incurable wound from which he drew his healing powers. Being half-man, half-horse, Chiron was viewed as a dark God, who partially belonged to the destructive natures of the world; the entrance to his cave was

believed to be the entrance to the underworld. Jungian scholar Karl Kerényi writes: “all in all Chiron, the wounded divine physician... seems to be the most contradictory figure in all Greek mythology. Although he is a Greek god, he suffers an incurable wound. Moreover his nature combines the animal and the Apollonian, for despite his horse’s body, mark of the fecund and destructive creatures of nature that centaurs are otherwise known to be, he instructs heroes in medicine and music.”<sup>387</sup> Thus, Asklepios develops as a healer who embraces the opposite aspects of healing: the light, rational side of his father Apollo, and the dark irrational side of his teacher Chiron. In a way, this understanding of the wounded healer as one bordering on the margins of the worlds is similar to a shamanistic interpretation of healing process.

In archetypal psychology, the myth of Asklepios functions as a trope explaining the connection between the healer’s wound and his ability to heal. As Kerényi explains, in his mythic picture of the world, the gift of healing and the inherent wounding of the healer are inseparable: “wounding and being wounded are the dark premises of healing; it is they that make the profession possible and indeed a necessity for human existence. For this existence may – among other possibilities – be conceived as that of a wounding and vulnerable being who can also heal...”<sup>388</sup>

Laurence Kirmayer, the researcher in Transcultural Psychiatry at McGill University, too emphasises this dynamic: “one of the most basic sources of clinical authority is the healers’ own experience of illness. Many systems of medicine, particularly shamanism, emphasize the connection of the healer’s own affliction with his therapeutic power. There is an intuitive logic in

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<sup>387</sup> Cited in Jess C. Groesbeck, “The Archetypal Image of the Wounded Healer,” *Journal of Analytical Psychology*, Volume 20, Issue 2, (July 1975), p. 125.

<sup>388</sup> Laurence J. Kirmayer, “Asklepian Dreams: The Ethos of the Wounded Healer in the Clinical Encounter,” *Transcultural Psychiatry*, Vol. 40(2), (June 2003), p. 255.

the notion that someone who has been afflicted and survived possesses intimate knowledge of the nature of illness and its cure.”<sup>389</sup>

In medical discourses, the myth of Asklepios was appropriated as a metaphor for psychoanalytical treatment. The myth introduces the necessity of a therapist to recognize his own wounding as a principal stage in his development as a healer. In a similar way, the patient needs to address his own inner healing resources in the process of recovery. Only via connecting to his inner physician or healer can the patient fully recover from his condition.

In Western model of allopathic medicine, the healer-patient dichotomy provides only one aspect of the relationships between the patient and his doctor: the patient passively receives the healing from the specialist who has complete and full authority in the healing process. As soon as the person gets sick, a healer-patient archetype is activated and the person is searching for an external treatment. In this type of relationship the doctor is understood as a ‘miracle worker’ of some sort who is capable of curing the patient only by the power of his medical knowledge. The role of the patient in the healing process is minimal and the doctor’s role is overestimated.

Archetypal psychology, on the other hand, introduces a second level of relationships between the healer and his patient. The therapist embraces not only the role of a medical specialist, but also the role of a sick patient, who draws his ability to heal from his own wound. The patient on the other hand appears as a healer who is capable of curing himself via connecting to the resources of his inner physician. As Jess Groesbeck, a Jungian psychoanalyst, points out: “Real cure can only take place if the patient gets in touch with and receives help from his ‘inner healer.’ And this can only happen if projections of the healer’s persona are withdrawn. This presupposes that the physician-healer is in touch with his own wounded side.”<sup>390</sup>

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<sup>389</sup> Ibid, p. 250.

<sup>390</sup> Groesbeck, “The Archetypal Image of the Wounded Healer,” p. 128.

In this second level of therapeutic relationships, the therapist recognises his own wounded side, which is usually repressed in conscious clinical encounters. Kirmayer introduces different stages of the healer's realisation of his wounding, from complete denial in early stages to the merging with his wounded side and development of ability to heal because of his wound.

As Kirmayer writes:

Realizing the wounded can only ever be partly healed, the healer-in-the-sufferer develops his power by remaining in contact with the inner wound. The healer does not remain aloof, but descends again and again to the underworld of suffering and affliction. He comes to see this process, limited and incomplete as it is, as a way to continue. He knows his strengths and limitations to be one and the same. His wounds are his compensation for the threat of hubris and inflation. He must stay in close touch with the dark side of his inner world.<sup>391</sup>

As soon as the physician gets in touch with his wounded side, the healing process becomes progressive and the patient and the healer can meet on the same level as equals. Instead of imposing the external treatment, the therapist relates to the wound of his patient internally, through re-encountering his own suffering. A genuine 'wounded healer' is the one who not only analyzes and heals his patients, but the one who is continuously self-analyzed and self-treated. As Guggenbuhl-Graig writes "such an analyst recognizes time and again how the patient's difficulties constellate his own problems and vice versa, and he therefore openly works not only on that patient, but on himself. He remains forever a patient as well as a healer."<sup>392</sup>

On the other hand, successful healing is not possible without the patient's reactivation of his inner healer resources. The therapist's encounter with his wounded side triggers the process of reactivation of the inner healer of the patient. The therapist who is capable of revealing his own vulnerability in front of the patient, also shows him the way to self-healing and facilitates the patient's active participation in the healing process. The patient, who witnesses the passive

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<sup>391</sup> Kirmayer, "Asklepian Dreams," p. 267.

<sup>392</sup> A. Guggenbuhl-Craig, *Power in the Helping Professions* (New York: Spring Publications, 1971).

wounded side in his doctor, is capable discovering the active healing side inside himself. As Groesbeck writes, in the process of therapy:

The patient 'takes on' the healing strengths of the analyst and also begins to experience the 'healer' contents of the archetypal image. This in turn activates his own personal powers of healing and strengths. .. The patient now begins to participate actively in the healing process. He is able to 'stand off' and get a new prospective. He starts to participate in the cure himself. He is energized in relation to the wounded contents again of the 'inner healer' and the experience of wholeness is constellated.<sup>393</sup>

The relationships between the healer and the patient become mutually beneficial. The healer not only heals the patient but is also healed by him in the process of the therapeutic encounter. In a similar mode, the patient does not only receive help from the healer, but is also capable helping himself and the therapist through encountering his own "inner healer."

The healing potential in the patient is activated through his experience of wounding. The role of a wise healer, shaman, or holistic practitioner is to demonstrate the benefits of wounding by his own example. At last one becomes a successful healer only through encountering and addressing his own wounded side. The wounded healer is able to show not only the dark side of illness, discomfort, and dis-ease, but also the light of the wound.

### **Holistic Ritual in Interactive Performances of Linda Montano**

Montano's interactive performance embodied the variety of narratives of a wounded healer developed in twentieth century anthropology, psychology and psychoanalysis. Derived from a romanticised understanding of shamanism as a vocation of superior healers, gurus and teachers Montano's work provides a performative example of contemporary neo-shamanism.

The role of a shaman, a medicine woman, or a holistic practitioner is inherent to Montano's work. Montano's early engagement with ritualistic performance art was a natural

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<sup>393</sup> Groesbeck, "The Archetypal Image of the Wounded Healer," p. 136.

response to her perception of self as inherently wounded. Early experience with psycho-somatic disorder, anorexia, influenced Montano's understanding of illness as a loss of agency and her desire to re-gain control over her body and mind in the performance. As Montano explains in her video work *Anorexia Nervosa*, her engagement with food was primarily defined by her desire to restrict her body: "I liked more the challenge of making myself do something and controlling my body, controlling my food intake and being high...It took me many years to switch back from all that activity and for years I couldn't go to restaurants because I would have to eat in front of people... I would separate myself off from people around meal times so I could take care of that."<sup>394</sup>

Montano's need to re-gain authority over her chaotic inner and outer experiences through ascetic discipline and religious ritual can be better understood if looked at through the lens of the concept of the wounded healer. The variety of disciplines constructed in the ritualistic routine of Montano's performances aim to bring wholeness and order to her perception of the self as wounded and incomplete. Montano's *14 Years of Living Art*, which was based on highly ritualised behaviour, is a perfect example of that type of holistic ritual. Disciplining her body and mind on a daily basis helped Montano not only to deal with her psychosomatic disorder but also transform her perception of the self as incomplete and fragmented.

Montano's initial traumatic experience became a trigger in her search for recovery and development of her unique performative method based on New Age tradition of holistic ritual. The experience of the wound led her to the understanding of performative healing as an ultimate form of self-transformation and self-regeneration. As she puts it: "I would say basically that my art made me and that I used my audience as healers, until I reached a place where we could co-

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<sup>394</sup> *Anorexia Nervosa*, dir. by Linda Montano, (1981)

heal. That took time, a lot of “bad” performance and the courage to continue this vulnerable working practice.”<sup>395</sup>

Montano’s interactive performance became a logical step in her development as a New Age holistic practitioner. Montano’s fourteen-year engagement in the performative process of self-healing and self-transformation familiarised her with the methods of alternative therapies such as acupuncture, meditation and yoga. Her performative method, rooted in the continuous process of disciplining the body and the mind developed throughout *Fourteen Years of Living Art*, provided the ground for *Sacramental Chakra Chaise* and numerous interactive performances Montano executed in recent years that engaged with subjects of counselling and healing. Montano’s task in the interactive performance is to activate the inner healer’s resources in her spectators. She is doing that by recognising her own woundedness and by exhibiting her vulnerability publicly.

Meeting her audience on the same level not only as a patient, but as a co-healer, Montano gives her spectators an active role in the performance. Her counselling consists of instructions and advices that require an active participation from her spectators. Adapting new Age rhetoric of self-sacralisation, Montano recognises the spectators’ agency as self-healers capable of dealing with illness independently. In one of the interviews with her ‘client’ in *Sacramental Chakra Chaise* Montano encourages her audience member to engage in chakra meditation and visualisation as a part of healing process and to continue working on the issue for the next two months:

Montano (M): What is going on for you?

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<sup>395</sup> Montano et al., *Letters from Linda Montano*, p. 33.



Audience member (A): I am in my first year of my Master's program and it's been a big adjustment period for me because you know I am getting used to new way of working , being in a new place and in a very critical environment, environment with a lot of critic

M: how do you feel about two things: to give a little bit more juice to the courage center and then to do a prayer of protection. With your eyes closed I'd like you to imagine you're embracing your courageous girl, inner child. Now imagine the critic as something so creative, the critic that's happening, make it so outlandishly surreal that when it happens again you are handling it from a new place. And ask a little girl to give you an image of that response to critic. The next time the critic comes along how wild, creative, outlandish, outrageous can your respond to it? Even in imagination. So what do you see?

A: Clothes is very important to me. So I have to wear something fabulous in this image, some sort of ball gown or a bikini or a bikini ball gown.

M: So I'd like you for two months when you go to these classes to wear a bikini top or bottom under your clothes.

A: what color should I make it?

M: Yellow

A: Yellow?

M: Yellow-Orange or critic proof...

A: Thank you

M: Thank you, you are very creative and you helped me so much. I am so grateful. Good luck! You'll be fine!<sup>396</sup>

Montano's interaction with the audience is often based on people's genuine reactions to her holistic instructions and suggestions. The ritualistic set up of her interactive works is often

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<sup>396</sup> *14 Years of Living Art*, dir. by Jennifer Fischer.

taken for granted by the spectators. Although Montano's work embodies romantic outlook on folk healing, it provides a functional model of a new sacred as explored in the performative context. The immediacy of her holistic solutions provides a functional model of the sacred that fits contemporary busy life. It is a suitable late-capitalist model of therapy that fulfills the contemporary desire for immediate results and improvement. If traditional shamanism aims at aiding the community to overcome the anxieties and fear towards nature, Montano's neo-shamanism addresses contemporary fears and insecurities grounded in the general imbalance of the contemporary life-style, with its demanding schedules, excessive workloads, and the pervading sense of alienation. In her analysis of neo-shamanism Jackobsen notes: "Western people feel fear towards the forces of a secular society that might render them unemployed, ill, dependent on the good will of the state and the emotions of others, and become their own healers commencing a quest for re-introducing transcendental values into their lives in the hope that through the New Age network they can ultimately transform the world. To achieve that they undertake what could be described as shamanic behaviour."<sup>397</sup>

Similarly, Montano's interactive performance encourages the process of self-redefinition and self-exploration in her spectators with the purpose of re-introducing the notion of self-healing to Western secular context. Performing "creative schizophrenia," Montano turns into an eccentric New Age healer who has internalised shamanic personality. Her erratic behaviour and attitude breaks the audience's fear of being different, misunderstood or misinterpreted. Montano deconstructs the social formalism and conventions on interaction between two strangers in a public context and makes herself vulnerable and available to her audience. As Montano puts it: "...in order to stay alive and out of the mental hospital and give myself the energy I needed to live, I had to do public actions because there was no sense of me outside the other. There was no

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<sup>397</sup> Jakobsen, *Shamanism*, p. 219

sense of me outside my action done. I was meaningless unless I was the other... By working this way, I used my audience as healers until I reached the place where I eventually got enough public attention, courage and validity to turn this around and give attention to my audiences.”<sup>398</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Montano’s work serves as a form of New Age holistic ritual implemented in a performative context. Engaging with a variety of New Age spiritual practices, including chakra meditation, acupuncture, chanting amongst many others, Montano develops a unique method of performative therapy. While borrowing from Eastern religious traditions and alternative spiritual systems, such as shamanism, is a significant component of Montano’s method, these traditions never remain unmodified in her performances. She does not attempt to reconstruct Eastern systems of the sacred; on the contrary, she is interested in producing a new type of the sacred that reflects contemporary cultural narratives. Her eclectic spirituality, in fact, does not belong to any of the religious traditions she borrows from, and comprises a personalised version of the sacred that fulfills contemporary nostalgia for the mystical perception of the self and reality.

The sacred, appearing in Montano’s ritualistic performance, is based on merging of spiritual and holistic paradigms and embodies the New Age beliefs in self-healing, self-improvement and self-transformation through personalised ritualistic practices. These new territories of the sacred in Montano’s performances are based on the principles of practicality, efficiency and immediacy of the spiritual. Embodying the New Age logic of the accessibility of the sacred, Montano’s performance produces the new understanding of the divine as available to wider audiences.

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<sup>398</sup> Montano et al., *Letters from Linda Montano*, p. 32.

Through performing as a neo-shaman, Montano engages in a public healing ritual and provides an assistance, counselling, and support to her audience. Addressing the difficulties of a contemporary lifestyle rooted in the alienation and isolations of individuals in late-capitalist society, Montano brings to the surface repressed problems of contemporary secularism. Loss of faith, the fragmentation of private and public life, failure to fulfill one's commitments and responsibilities, a constant anxiety surrounding conformity to ambiguous public standards and the simulation of intimacy is at the core of secularist paradigm. According to Montano, fear and anxiety underlie all realms of the contemporary life. As she puts it: "In our culture everything is a taboo: food, intimacy, feelings, closeness, disclosure, upsetness, sex, the body, the condition of the body, the aging body, money, disclosing how much, how little, spending, not spending, death..."<sup>399</sup>

The New Age ritual developed in Montano's performance is based on artist's understanding of contemporary individual as needing assistance and healing. Montano acknowledges a sense of crisis and introduces the methods of holistic rituals probed in her performances to deal with it. Self-examination and self-sacralisation are the principal components of her performative strategy, which encourages her audience to engage in individual process of healing and transformation. From this perspective, Montano's project demonstrates contemporary understandings of the sacred, while Montano herself embodies a paradigm of neo-sainthood.

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<sup>399</sup> *14 Years of Living Art*, dir. by Jennifer Fischer

## Conclusion

### The Sacred as the Collective

Prior to or in retreat from the “political” there was this, that there is the “common,” the “together,” and the “numerous,” and that we perhaps do not at all know how to think this order of the real.<sup>400</sup>

Jean-Luc Nancy

The intent of this dissertation was to demonstrate the variety of ways ascetic rituals are reconstructed in a secularised framework of contemporary performance art. Analysing the ritualistic performances of Marina Abramović, Ron Athey, and Linda Montano I demonstrated the performative methodologies utilized in the construction of the sacred body and the sacred spaces resulting from artistic appropriation and modification of traditional religious rituals.

I was examining the process of physical and psychological transformation enacted in the performances of these artists through internalisation of modified ascetic rituals from a variety of religious traditions including Theravada Buddhism and Zen Buddhism, Tantric practices of Kundalini yoga, Christian rituals of pain and self-deprivation among many others. Appropriating the variety of rituals of self-injury, self-discipline, and holistic healing, Abramović, Athey, and Montano re-create narratives of the sacred that are almost entirely excluded from contemporary secularised cultures.

These performative rituals result in the formation of public spaces of suspended belief which embody collective nostalgia for mystical perception of the self and the other. In the framework of ritualistic performance, the artists are understood as neo-saints, while the environments they create are interpreted as the domains of a new sacred that have similar

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<sup>400</sup> Jean-Luc Nancy, *The Confronted Community*, trans. by Amanda Macdonald., *Postcolonial Studies*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (2003), p. 30.

connotations with traditional religious institutions, such as churches, temples and mosques. In the context of modern secularisation of Western religious life and decline of traditional religious systems of Catholicism and Protestantism these performative spaces represent alternative spiritual paradigms which embody New Age religiosity and its eclectic and syncretic approach to religion. Instead of following dogmatic religious systems artists, practicing ritualistic performance art, create their own modified versions of the sacred based on combining and merging multiple ritualistic practices. This type of free play with dogmatic religions results in more available and intimate models of the sacred which can be easily accessed by wide audiences. In contemporary rationalised cultures, in which the experiences of the supernatural are deemed abnormal, ritualistic performance art provides temporary resorts for the collective sentiments related to the sacred and the search of reality beyond the limits of the individual self.

As in religious paradigms of asceticism and ritualistic sacrifice the artists are perceived as mediators between the realms of the sacred and the profane. Risking their lives or at least challenging the paradigm of socially-acceptable subjectivity in the performances of endurance, self-injury, and self-deprivation, these artists perform the transgression of profane subjectivity and demonstrate alternative models of physicality and subjectivity associated with ascetic self and the process of self-transcendence. The models of the ascetic body introduced in performances of Abramović, Athey and Montano are formed in opposition to dominant models of individual physicality and demonstrate the potentiality of ritualistic performance to transform cultural stereotypes of the body and the self.

In this research, I demonstrated the variety of ways the sacred is produced in Abramović's performances of endurance. The artist's internalisation and enactment of Buddhist ascetic rituals of seclusion, fasting, abstinence, and continuous engagement in prolonged periods

of meditation is aimed at transgressing the model of the individual self and at the formation of an alternative type of subjectivity, associated with Buddhist monastic self.

The reversal of the flow of the body from the realm of physical desire to that of negation of desire enacted in Abramović's works contributes to the process of transformation of her subjectivity from profane to sacred. Transgressing the model of individual self Abramović performs a passive, non-producing, and non-consuming body dwelling on the border of survival. Embodying the symbolism of the Buddhist ascetic body associated with the process of renunciation of desire, silent contemplation, and seclusion, Abramović reconstructs the physicality of the sacred represented in the paradigm of Buddhist monasticism.

The artist's body is physically transformed in the performances of endurance. Abramović visibly exhausts herself through fasting, seclusion and prolonged periods of meditation, and refraining from moving and talking. Her body loses weight, becomes physically fragile and inactive. The new ascetic physicality emerging in Abramović's performances contributes to spectators' perception of her body as divine, devoid of material desires and needs of profane subjectivity.

Abramović's pursuit of the goals of mind transformation through insight meditation provides another dimension of the sacred as a process of profound alteration of the ascetic subjectivity. Abramović's continuous practice of meditation contributes to her internalisation of Buddhist religious narratives of self-loss and absence of individual subjectivity, the state of reality that reveals itself in result of prolonged ascetic practices. In her durational performances Abramović attempts to enact the loss of the individual self through public meditation and the process of "energy exchange" with her spectators. From this perspective, Abramović performs

the sacred as a collective experience rooted not only in the process of individual transformation of the artist but also profound alteration of her spectators' states of mind.

Ron Athey, on the other hand, engages in the performance of the sacred through internalisation of Christian narratives of martyrdom and the ascetic practices of self-injury. Performing the abused and humiliated body, Athey pursues the goals of self-transcendence and annihilation of rational subjectivity. His exposition of the HIV-positive body as a type of transcendental body associated with the bodies of Christian saints and martyrs contributes to the process of re-definition of HIV-positive queer subjectivity from marginal to sacred. The understanding of AIDS in the context of Christian narratives of deliverance and resurrection enacted in Athey's pieces demonstrates the potentiality of ritualistic performance to transform the stigma of HIV-positive body in a type of sacralised or divinized body. The analysis of rituals of pain in Medieval Christianity, undertaken in this research, demonstrated the potentiality of self-injury in transforming ascetics' self-images from the understanding of self as profane to that of a sacred merging with the spirit of Christ. Similarly, Athey interprets Christian ascetic ritual as a form of healing and psychological transformation. Examined through the lens of psychiatry and psychoanalysis, Athey's performance demonstrates a method of re-gaining control over his body and of purifying the negative image of the self in order to form a better, more perfected subjectivity. For Athey, who is struggling with AIDS, the performance of self-injury helps to reconsider his relationships with his own sickened body and with his illness from the denial of HIV infection to its acceptance and the search for its existential meaning.

Concurrently, Athey's performance reconstructs the narratives of ritualistic sacrifice. In his multiple works Athey explores the possibilities of the abject body of sacrifice as a type of a sacred body. The performance of bleeding, abused, sexualised body in Athey's works is linked to



the process of sacralisation of abject physicality and the formation of sacred experiences through physical humiliation and abuse. According to Caillois, the sacred body is rooted in both – defilement and sanctity. Athey’s performance of sacrifice demonstrates this intrinsic link between decaying body, sexual body and transcendental body that unite in the image of sacrificial victim. The sacred in Athey’s performances functions as both: the domain of repulsion and horror and the realm of most ecstatic experiences of self-loss and self-transcendence. Dwelling on the margins of sanctity and defilement, Athey’s sadomasochistic character embodies the possibilities of the sacred in transgressing the limits of binary thinking and hierarchies of profane subjectivity.

Linda Montano engages in performative re-definition of doctrinal religious understandings of the sacred through New Age holistic practices and proposes the merging of the spiritual and holistic in a type of new religious paradigm. Developed within the context of 1960s and 1970s counterrevolutionary spirituality, Montano’s ritualistic performance is rooted in the New Age methods of self-therapy and self-healing through personalisation and adaptation of traditional religious rituals. Instead of directly borrowing from doctrinal religious systems, Montano modifies religious rituals in a creative way and develops her own personalised models of the sacred. Combining a wide variety of religious rituals from Hindu, Buddhist and Christian traditions, Montano introduces the sacred as an individual process of self-sacralisation in ritualistic framework. Montano engages in the process of redefinition of the sacred as personalised and intimate experience of the divine that doesn’t require the assistance of religious institutions in order to be accessed or experienced.

In Montano’s works the sacred is always linked to the process of self-healing and self-restoration. Addressing the drawbacks of contemporary secularism rooted in alienation and

separation of the individual from the community, Montano performs the sacred as re-integrating and therapeutic collective experience. In Montano's performances the sacred appears as a publicly available and efficient model of emotional and psychological healing. Engaging her audience in a public process of self-therapy through recreating the paradigm of wounded healing, Montano promotes the belief in everyone's ability to access the resources of the sacred in the process of self-restoration. The sacralisation of the human and the belief in the ability of everyone to receive higher knowledge, enacted in Montano's performances, proposes a unique dimension of the sacred as available and efficient public model of communication with the divine. Encouraging her spectators to heal independently, Montano demonstrates the potentiality of ritualistic performance to function as a domain of new spirituality that is grounded in holistic approach to health and life.

Ritualistic performances of Abramović, Athey and Montano analysed in this dissertation demonstrate the variety of ways of re-constructing the spaces of the sacred outside traditional religious paradigms. Their works address the collective nostalgia for the sacred and propose temporary resolutions for the feelings of spiritual void and existential crisis that pervade contemporary secularised societies. The contemporary suffering originates in the collapse of communal public culture and lack of shared values as a result of the processes of individualisation that took place within the last three hundred years of capitalist development. Jakobsen explains contemporary discourses of suffering as follows:

Human suffering originates from a fragmented society whose value system has collapsed into mere materialism and whose spiritual values are starved out of existence. The sense of impotence is therefore directed towards the structure of society, and the secularisation of the institutions that uphold it. Medical care, the treatment of mental diseases and the social system as such have all lost contact with the sacred and, therefore, misfortune, disease and death cannot be explained from a spiritual point of view.<sup>401</sup>

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<sup>401</sup> Jakobsen, *Shamanism*, p. 217.

Ritualistic performance art provides a resort to the realm of the sacred where the individual can temporarily escape from the negative forces of contemporary societies and demanding culture of late-capitalism. These are the spaces where spectators can freely address the feelings that are normally repressed in contemporary everyday life – the feelings of existential fear and discontent, experiences of trauma and alienation, the feelings of anxiety and grief resulting from physical and psychological illnesses; as well as feelings related to experiences of the supernatural and transcendental, such as spiritual ecstasy, the feelings of self-transcendence and self-loss, that are deemed abnormal in contemporary secularised framework. Contemporary domains of the sacred function as the realms of emotional exhibitionism, self-exposure and self-revelation of both -- the artists and their spectators.

Abramović, Athey and Montano initiate the experiences of the sacred that are excluded from contemporary public discourses rooted in the values of individual self-sufficiency and self-control. Emotionality and emotional exhibitionism, public exposure of vulnerability and weakness are almost a taboo in contemporary Western world. The realm of ritualistic performance, on the contrary, celebrates psychological experiences which deviate from the dominant cultural and social paradigms of individualism and established norms of appropriate behaviour.

As any other type of sacred experience, ritualistic performance is rooted in the ambiguity and ambivalence. On the one hand, it produces the feelings of awe, and reverential respect in the spectators. On the other hand, it results in the feelings of repulsion, disgust and fear. The shameless exhibitionism of the body – abused body, sexual body, urinating and defecating body – in performances of Abramović, Montano and Athey aims at shocking the spectators and shaking them out of their zone of comfort. While ritualistic performance operates according to

the logic of healing, it does so by exhibiting the dark, negative side of the sacred. It is intrinsically linked to both – purity and pollution; the ecstatic experiences of self-transcendence and the experiences of death and decay. It is not only the realm of holiness and sanctity, but also the domain of most extreme sentiments related to sexuality, death and dying. In ritualistic performances of Athey, Montano and Abramović sacred is enacted as the realm of reconciliation of sanctity and defilement with the purpose of psychological healing and emotional release. Through reconstructing narratives of the sacred, ritualistic performances create the sense of belonging to a larger emotional community in the artists and their spectators and provide the feelings of emotional support and unconditional acceptance for the duration of the work.

It seems most urgent that this research should close with a call to further address the politics of de-individualisation in contemporary Western cultures and encourage the attempts to reclaim the lost sense of community and collectivity. The principal failure of capitalism is defined by its politics of individualisation resulting in the formation of a cultural standard of disciplined body. Although the democratic politics of individualization presuppose the freedom of choice, freedom of speech and freedom of the assembly, they nevertheless are incompatible with the simple freedom-to-be. Contemporary subjectivity is trapped in multiplicity of discourses and choices imposed on him/her by dominant political and cultural discourses that form his/her identity as fragmented, scattered and always incomplete.

Ritualistic performance of Abramović, Athey and Montano provides a variety of methods and techniques of the formation of alternative subjectivities and alternative communities. Reconstructing ascetic ritual and the models of sacred body associated with it, these artists enact the possibility of self beyond the constraints of dominant political and cultural signification. Pursuing alternative self-knowledge through the methods of meditation, physical endurance, self-

injury and seclusion they attempt to reclaim “the self” in its original unity and continuity with the other.

Addressing the problem of collectivity within performative context these artists demonstrate that the community is possible only through disappearance of the individual self. The audience as a group of self-sufficient individuals does not form the community. The ritualistic performance of sacrifice and ascetic transformation of individual body is what triggers the process of alteration of a group of individuals in a type of ultimate collectivity.

For Bataille the community is not compatible with the world of profane affairs. Only collective experience of rapture and anguish can lead to deconstruction of ego-centered subjectivities and their transformation into community. Bataille sees sacrifice as a principal condition for the formation of this type of dis-alienated collectivity that emerges only in and through death. Death is at the core of the sacred that appears in relation to transcendental experiences beyond the limits of life. Sacrifice provides the ground for the formation of transcendental communities based on unity and continuity of collective sentiments. As Bataille explains: “The victim dies and the spectators share in what his death reveals. This is what religious historians call the element of sacredness. This sacredness is the revelation 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 remains, what the tense onlookers experience in the succeeding silence, is the continuity of all existence with which the victim is now one. Only a spectacular killing carried out as the solemn and collective nature of religion has the power to reveal what normally escapes notice.”<sup>402</sup>

According to Bataille, the community *is* the actual sacred, as without the witnesses the sacrifice is not a ritualistic experience, but an act of killing. Only public performance of ritual

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<sup>402</sup> Bataille, *Erotism*, p. 22.

gives it a significance of transcendental experience. Communal experiences of the “unspeakable and unimaginable” are at the very core of sacrificial ritual.

Performing different types of sacrifice, Abramović, Athey and Montano recreate the sense of lost community. The symbolic death of individual self in performances of self-injury, self-deprivation and endurance staged in the works of these artists create the ground for the formation of a transcendental bond between the artists and their spectators. Symbolic sacrifice of individual self in ritualistic performance triggers the process of collective de-individualisation. Contemplating the suffering of the artists, the spectators experience profound affinity and unity with the other.

It is almost impossible to conceive true empathy in a culture that puts individual interests much higher than the interests of the other human being. Ritualistic performance provides a sort of shock therapy that brings the notion of individuality into question. Is it possible to remain aloof and uninvolved watching the explicit suffering of the other? Is it possible not to open up to the person who is sincerely listening to you? Is it possible not to react, physically or emotionally, seeing the artist crying or bleeding on stage? What unites Abramović, Montano and Athey is their continuous attempt to reach out, to tell their story of trauma, to find witnesses to their emotional and physical pain. In this exhibitionism of suffering the artists make themselves completely open and available to the audience. They are ready to listen, to witness and to accept the stories of others. What results in the end is not an individual narrative of personal trauma but a communal sentiment that unites artists and spectators in a type of collective body.

## Appendix I

### Vipassana Meditation: Introduction to the Technique and Code of Discipline<sup>403</sup>

#### Introduction to the Technique

Vipassana is one of India's most ancient meditation techniques. Long lost to humanity, it was rediscovered by Gotama the Buddha more than 2500 years ago. The word **Vipassana** means seeing things as they really are. It is the process of self-purification by self-observation. One begins by observing the natural breath to concentrate the mind. With a sharpened awareness one proceeds to observe the changing nature of body and mind and experiences the universal truths of impermanence, suffering and egolessness. This truth-realization by direct experience is the process of purification. The entire path (Dhamma) is a universal remedy for universal problems and has nothing to do with any organized religion or sectarianism. For this reason, it can be freely practiced by everyone, at any time, in any place, without conflict due to race, community or religion, and will prove equally beneficial to one and all.

What Vipassana is not:

- It is not a rite or ritual based on blind faith.
- It is neither an intellectual nor a philosophical entertainment.
- It is not a rest cure, a holiday, or an opportunity for socializing.
- It is not an escape from the trials and tribulations of everyday life.

What Vipassana is:

- It is a technique that will eradicate suffering.
- It is a method of mental purification which allows one to face life's tensions and problems in a calm, balanced way.
- It is an art of living that one can use to make positive contributions to society.

Vipassana meditation aims at the highest spiritual goals of total liberation and full enlightenment. Its purpose is never simply to cure physical disease. However, as a by-product of mental purification, many psychosomatic diseases are eradicated. In fact, Vipassana eliminates the three causes of all unhappiness: craving, aversion and ignorance. With continued practice, the meditation releases the tensions developed in everyday life, opening the knots tied by the old habit of reacting in an unbalanced way to pleasant and unpleasant situations.

Although Vipassana was developed as a technique by the Buddha, its practice is not limited to Buddhists. There is absolutely no question of conversion. The technique works on the simple basis that all human beings share the same problems and a technique which can eradicate these problems will have a universal application. People from many religious denominations have experienced the benefits of Vipassana meditation, and have found no conflict with their profession of faith.

Meditation and Self-discipline

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<sup>403</sup> The text is available on-line at the Vipassana Meditation Centre, Dhamma Suttama, Montabello, Quebec, *Vipassana Meditation, Introduction to the Technique* as taught by S.N. Goenka, <http://www.dhamma.org/en/about/code> (accessed 21 April, 2014).

The process of self-purification by introspection is certainly never easy--students have to work very hard at it. By their own efforts students arrive at their own realizations; no one else can do this for them. Therefore, the meditation will suit only those willing to work seriously and observe the discipline, which is there for the benefit and protection of the meditators and is an integral part of the meditation practice.

Ten days is certainly a very short time in which to penetrate the deepest levels of the unconscious mind and learn how to eradicate the complexes lying there. Continuity of the practice in seclusion is the secret of this technique's success. Rules and regulations have been developed keeping this practical aspect in mind. They are not primarily for the benefit of the teacher or the course management, nor are they negative expressions of tradition, orthodoxy or blind faith in some organized religion. Rather, they are based on the practical experience of thousands of meditators over the years and are both scientific and rational. Abiding by the rules creates a very conducive atmosphere for meditation; breaking them pollutes it.

**A student will have to stay for the entire period of the course. The other rules should also be carefully read and considered. Only those who feel that they can honestly and scrupulously follow the discipline should apply for admission.** Those not prepared to make a determined effort will waste their time and, moreover, will disturb others who wish to work seriously. A prospective student should also understand that it would be both disadvantageous and inadvisable to leave without finishing the course upon finding the discipline too difficult. Likewise, it would be most unfortunate if, in spite of repeated reminders, a student does not follow the rules and has to be asked to leave.

#### Persons With Serious Mental Disorders

People with serious mental disorders have occasionally come to Vipassana courses with the unrealistic expectation that the technique will cure or alleviate their mental problems. Unstable interpersonal relationships and a history of various treatments can be additional factors which make it difficult for such people to benefit from, or even complete, a ten-day course. Our capacity as a nonprofessional volunteer organization makes it impossible for us to properly care for people with these backgrounds. Although Vipassana meditation is beneficial for most people, it is not a substitute for medical or psychiatric treatment and we do not recommend it for people with serious psychiatric disorders.

#### The Code of Discipline

The foundation of the practice is **sīla** — moral conduct. **Sīla** provides a basis for the development of **samādhi** — concentration of mind; and purification of the mind is achieved through **paññā** — the wisdom of insight.

#### The Precepts

All who attend a Vipassana course must conscientiously undertake the following five precepts for the duration of the course:

1. to abstain from killing any being;
2. to abstain from stealing;
3. to abstain from all sexual activity;
4. to abstain from telling lies;
5. to abstain from all intoxicants.

There are three additional precepts which old students (that is, those who have completed a course with S.N. Goenka or one of his assistant teachers) are expected to follow during the course:

6. to abstain from eating after midday;



7. to abstain from sensual entertainment and bodily decorations;
8. to abstain from using high or luxurious beds.

Old students will observe the sixth precept by having tea without milk or fruit juice at the 5 p.m. break, whereas new student may have tea with milk and some fruit. The teacher may excuse an old student from observing this precept for health reasons. The seventh and eighth precept will be observed by all.

#### Acceptance of the Teacher and the Technique

Students must declare themselves willing to comply fully and for the duration of the course with the teacher's guidance and instructions; that is, to observe the discipline and to meditate exactly as the teacher asks, without ignoring any part of the instructions, nor adding anything to them. This acceptance should be one of discrimination and understanding, not blind submission. Only with an attitude of trust can a student work diligently and thoroughly. Such confidence in the teacher and the technique is essential for success in meditation.

#### Other Techniques, Rites, and Forms of Worship

During the course it is absolutely essential that all forms of prayer, worship, or religious ceremony — fasting, burning incense, counting beads, reciting mantras, singing and dancing, etc. — be discontinued. All other meditation techniques and healing or spiritual practices should also be suspended. This is not to condemn any other technique or practice, but to give a fair trial to the technique of Vipassana in its purity.

Students are strongly advised that deliberately mixing other techniques of meditation with Vipassana will impede and even reverse their progress. Despite repeated warnings by the teacher, there have been cases in the past where students have intentionally mixed this technique with a ritual or another practice, and have done themselves a great disservice. Any doubts or confusion which may arise should always be clarified by meeting with the teacher.

#### Interviews With the Teacher

The teacher is available to meet students privately between 12 Noon and 1:00 p.m. Questions may also be asked in public between 9:00 and 9:30 p.m. in the meditation hall. The interview and question times are for clarifying the technique and for questions arising from the evening discourses.

#### Noble Silence

All students must observe Noble Silence from the beginning of the course until the morning of the last full day. Noble Silence means silence of body, speech, and mind. Any form of communication with fellow student, whether by gestures, sign language, written notes, etc., is prohibited.

Students may, however, speak with the teacher whenever necessary and they may approach the management with any problems related to food, accommodation, health, etc. But even these contacts should be kept to a minimum. Students should cultivate the feeling that they are working in isolation.

#### Separation of Men and Women

Complete segregation of men and women is to be maintained. Couples, married or otherwise, should not contact each other in any way during the course. The same applies to friends, members of the same family, etc.

#### Physical Contact

It is important that throughout the course there be no physical contact whatsoever between persons of the same or opposite sex.

#### Yoga and Physical Exercise

Although physical yoga and other exercises are compatible with Vipassana, they should be suspended during the course because proper secluded facilities are not available at the course site. Jogging is also not permitted. Students may exercise during rest periods by walking in the designated areas.

Religious Objects, Rosaries, Crystals, Talismans, etc.

No such items should be brought to the course site. If brought inadvertently they should be deposited with the management for the duration of the course.

Intoxicants and Drugs

No drugs, alcohol, or other intoxicants should be brought to the site; this also applies to tranquilizers, sleeping pills, and all other sedatives. Those taking medicines or drugs on a doctor's prescription should notify the teacher.

Tobacco

For the health and comfort of all students, smoking, chewing tobacco, and taking snuff are not permitted at the course.

Food

It is not possible to satisfy the special food preferences and requirements of all the meditators. Students are therefore kindly requested to make do with the simple vegetarian meals provided. The course management endeavors to prepare a balanced, wholesome menu suitable for meditation. If any students have been prescribed a special diet because of ill-health, they should inform the management at the time of application. Fasting is not permitted.

Clothing

Dress should be simple, modest, and comfortable. Tight, transparent, revealing, or otherwise striking clothing (such as shorts, short skirts, tights and leggings, sleeveless or skimpy tops) should not be worn. Sunbathing and partial nudity are not permitted. This is important in order to minimize distraction to others.

Laundry and Bathing

No washing machines or dryers are available, so students should bring sufficient clothing. Small items can be hand-washed. Bathing and laundry may be done only in the break periods and not during meditation hours.

Outside Contacts

Students must remain within the course boundaries throughout the course. They may leave only with the specific consent of the teacher. No outside communications is allowed before the course ends. This includes letters, phone calls and visitors. Cell phones, pagers, and other electronic devices must be deposited with the management until the course ends. In case of an emergency, a friend or relative may contact the management.

Music, Reading and Writing

The playing of musical instruments, radios, etc. is not permitted. No reading or writing materials should be brought to the course. Students should not distract themselves by taking notes. The restriction on reading and writing is to emphasize the strictly practical nature of this meditation.

Recording Devices and Cameras

These may not be used except with the express permission of the teacher.

Course Finances

According to the tradition of pure Vipassana, courses are run solely on a donation basis. Donations are accepted only from those who have completed at least one ten-day course with S.N. Goenka or one of his assisting teachers. Someone taking the course for the first time may give a donation on the last day of the course or any time thereafter.

In this way courses are supported by those who have realized for themselves the benefits of the practice. Wishing to share these benefits with others, one gives a donation according to one's means and volition. Such donations are the only source of funding for course in this tradition around the world. There is no wealthy foundation or individual sponsoring them. Neither the teachers nor the organizers receive any kind of payment for their service. Thus, the spread of Vipassana is carried out with purity of purpose, free from any commercialism.

Whether a donation is large or small, it should be given with the wish to help others: 'The course I have taken has been paid for through the generosity of past students; now let me give something towards the cost of a future course, so that others may also benefit by this technique.'

Summary

To clarify the spirit behind the discipline and rules, they may be summarized as follows:

**Take great care that your actions do not disturb anyone. Take no notice of distractions caused by others.**

It may be that a student cannot understand the practical reasons for one or several of the above rules. Rather than allow negativity and doubt to develop, immediate clarification should be sought from the teacher.

It is only by taking a disciplined approach and by making maximum effort that a student can fully grasp the practice and benefit from it. The emphasis during the course is on work. A golden rule is to meditate as if one were alone, with one's mind turned inward, ignoring any inconveniences and distractions that one may encounter.

Finally, students should note that their progress in Vipassana depends solely on their own good qualities and personal development and on five factors: earnest efforts, confidence, sincerity, health and wisdom.

May the above information help you to obtain maximum benefit from your meditation course. We are happy to have the opportunity to serve, and wish you peace and harmony from your experience of Vipassana.

#### THE COURSE TIMETABLE

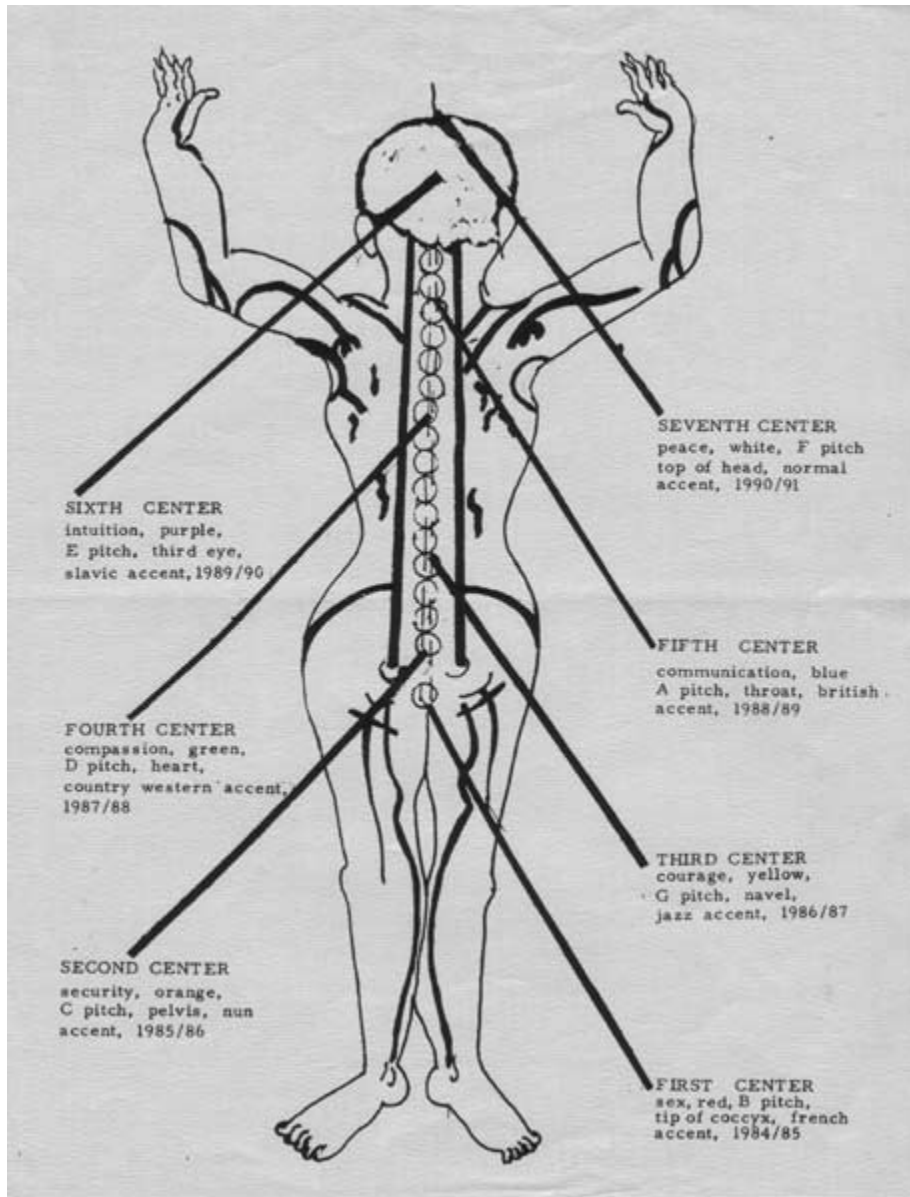
The following timetable for the course has been designed to maintain the continuity of practice. For best results students are advised to follow it as closely as possible.

4:00 am	Morning wake-up bell
4:30-6:30 am	Meditate in the hall or in your room
6:30-8:00 am	Breakfast break
8:00-9:00 am	Group meditation in the hall
9:00-11:00 am	Meditate in the hall or in your room according to the teacher's instructions
11:00-12:00 noon	Lunch break
12noon-1:00 pm	Rest and interviews with the teacher
1:00-2:30 pm	Meditate in the hall or in your room
2:30-3:30 pm	Group meditation in the hall
3:30-5:00 pm	Meditate in the hall or in your own room according to the teacher's instructions
5:00-6:00 pm	Tea break
6:00-7:00 pm	Group meditation in the hall
7:00-8:15 pm	Teacher's Discourse in the hall
8:15-9:00 pm	Group meditation in the hall

9:00-9:30 pm Question time in the hall  
9:30 pm Retire to your own room--Lights out

## Appendix II

Linda Montano, *Seven Years of Living Art*, Chakra drawing, 1984



## Appendix III

### *Starved Survivors* by Linda M. Montano

Once upon a time, a very, very long time ago, in a very, very verdant green Italian village, there lived a girl child, an orphan girl child. All the other girls who lived there had long, thick, dark hair, olive skin, world-sharpened eyes and a freed up throat that could scream, yell, talk and cry. Orphan Girl, who was almost a mute, had blond hair, green eyes and as a cultural outsider, was shunned by her classmates who called her Orphan Girl. The name echoed in the mountains, "Orphan Girl, Orphan Girl, where are you?" She went into the forest, sat with the trees and flowers, drank cafe late from a thermos that she always carried and wrote nice words on the surface of a mountain stream, loving it when they instantly disappeared.

Of course, like in every fairytale, there is someone who represents wisdom and in this story, the deus-ex-machina is a wizened, wrinkled, long skirted, foul smelling, crabby, bent, rough talking but truth telling woman elder. Was she really a woman? It was hard to tell because her features had glued themselves together----her nose to her chin, almost; her eyebrows to her cheeks, almost; her toenails grew into the bottoms of her crusty feet, almost. The gossipy villagers called her lots of names: witch, strega, bad news, nuscience, bother, charity case, pest, liability, and on and on...but for Orphan Girl she was a refuge and like-minded soulmate.

For the beauty of this story, let's give this elder an extraordinary gift and talent....it seemed simple and was nameless and it was that she could tell when the train which stopped in her village was 33 miles away and with her acute sensitivity she predicted the exact time the train would arrive at the station. Of course this savant knowing and sensing was so non-consequential that it impressed no-one but Orphan Girl. Who wants to listen for a train by putting your ear to the earth? Not a very practical skill!

Of course, she passed on this pedestrian knowledge to Orphan Girl but hidden beneath this simple circus-like-act was something more spectacular, something more usefull..a secret knowledge she handed onto Orphan Girl one rainy November day when the veil between life and death; the veil between truth and ignorance; the veil between suffering and happiness is very thin.

Here's how it happened: they were sitting in front of an open-pit fire, poking sticks at the embers, and the elder said: " Today is the day for me to tell you the complete story. Yes, I listen for when trains are near but also I know when they have wrecked. I know when trains have wrecked 700 miles away and Orphan Girl , it is important to know that life has many , many , many train wrecks because life is about change, vulnerability, flux, unpredictability, old age, sickness and

death. You think you have it bad, being an orphan but I want to tell you the whole story about other weird and terrible things that have happened, might happen and could happen. Close your eyes and I will read you a story that I call: ONCE UPON A TIME THERE WAS A TRAIN WRECK. Shhhhh. Let's listen."

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ENTER

Admittedly we are all sensing a pre-renaissance black-out, a "dark age" with recognizable and historically accurate symptoms witnessed by historians of the fall (and/or transformation) of other dynasties teetering on the brink of armageddon.(The Roman ,Ottoman, German, British Empires perchance?)

BREAK

Can't we all agree that in this 21st century, we are communally experiencing a bad taste and aftermaths from universally experienced phenomena such as:

CIRCLE 475 PHENOMENON

Financial fumblings, cultural buffooneries, pervasive paranoia, modified mea culpas, bipartisan shenanigans, uncompassed morality, bipaped starvations, political circus acts, theological tsunamis, global tamperings, cyclical catastrophes, faux apologies, misleading marketing, conspicuous consuming, muddled multitasking, apocalyptic battering, padded documenting, salted wounding, power shifting, self loathing, hierarchical covering, pious grandstanding, spasmed tremoring, bankrupted dreaming, disintegrated remembering, virtual relating, techno crazing, outrageous compensating, congressional bullying and foreclosed trust!

CIRCLE 189 PHENOMENON

Diseased despondents, surrendered suicidals, unheld newborns, hooded jihadists, fundamental fanatics, antsy therapists, inattentive nannies, selfish narcissists, bonused buddies, media darlings, unconscienced thieves, suffocating egoists, discarded seniors, trafficked innocents, self inflicting terrorists, vulnerable victims, jolly junkies, over dutiful daughters, celebrity addicts, killer drones, spiritual materialists, scheming CEOs, interminable visitors, jealous sisters,

stubborn students, lying boasters, ungrateful patients, cyber bullies, skeletoned anorexics, emotional mutes, nasty narcissists and miserable millionaires!

### CIRCLE 362 PHENOMENON

Creepy oppressors, hypersexual prowlers, Holocaust deniers, death cheaters, begging borrowers, scud sharp shooters, carbon foot printers, attention mongers, greedy brokers, depressed designers, public apologizers, prepared preppers, subcutaneous cutters, sophomoric obsessors, inappropriate responders, furious professors, tormenting victimizers, parent starvers, neurotic neighbors, reputation slanderers, magnetic womanizers, surprise attackers, glad handers, halitosed dancers, grid locked commuters, grieving skaters, arrogant outsiders, soul sellers, gift refusers, aggressive reporters, sloppy visitors, pill stealers, animal abhorrrers, hate disseminators, stinky passengers, authority balkers, sloppy foodmakers, name callers, energy suckers, germ spreaders, information secretors, junk hoarders, sacchrine sympathizers, sweaty hand shakers, misguided worshippers, internet scammers, morphed murderers, obese outsiders, child abusers, frozen floormatters, dysfunctional reconfigurers, beauty kidnappers, unread biographers, gender assaulters, monumental mistakers, satanic afflictors, silent contemptors, counterindicated elders, hungry survivors, childhood stealers, guilty enjoyers, ponzi schemers, medical compromisers, careless caregivers, enraged partners, jailed minors, paralyzed players, unemployed loners, adulterous trespassers, vaccinated teenagers, double crossed informers, technological traumatizers, disabling humiliators, monetary misusers and nose pickers!

### SHIFT

Oh, our poor bodies/minds are dodging the toxic arrows of it all! Dodging thoughts about pcb's and thoughts of no more potable water or no more fish or ice-sliding-glaciered polar bears! Thoughts about what to do about our arthritic thumbs twittered to spasm. Thoughts about ourselves and the suffering others! Not only thoughts but also memories of once looking in the mirror at our faces sweetly smiling back with innocent anticipation of a McDonalds. NO MORE. In preparation for a post-modern re-look at Revelationed-robotization, our current faces are facebooked/addicted into social shyness, not to be relieved by a 1970's Kumbayaah singing picnic on a green, chemical free lawn. That chapter is closed, my friend.

### DELETE

Now, our poor bodies, steel-tight with earthquaked fear of the next day's news or trembling over the calories and sugar content of the morning's Starbucks or tripping out of buildings quickly when rumblings at yet another fault-line are recognized by sensitive dogs,....our battered bodies.... run on PTSD/empty seeking refuge in second-lifed, C-PAPED-accompanied



nightmares.

HIDE

But wait, out of this harrowing scenario of a reality show gone bad, comes Hope?

SHIFT

PAUSE

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The fairytale ends here and the old woman said, "That's it, Orphan Girl, you know the whole story. Now open your eyes and your voice and don't ever be surprised again when you encounter a life-wreck. They happen all the time and you are prepared, never to be surprised when strange things happen in your life." Orphan Girl was elated, glad she had been taught these important secrets and danced the OPEN HEART VOICE DANCE, around the fire.

That night, at 8pm, they both slept with their ears to the earth, in silent preparation for the next train to come.

The beginning of an end.

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