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*Imitatio Christi: The Christic Body In Performance*

Mikaela Bobiy

A Thesis  
in  
The Department  
of  
Art History

Presented in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
for the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy at  
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## ABSTRACT

### ***Imitatio Christi: The Christic Body in Performance***

Mikaela Bobiy

Concordia University, 2005

In this paper, I endeavor to make a case for the Christic masochistic performance through an examination of selected works by four contemporary artists. In order to do so, I will conduct an investigation into the meaning of the Christic figure in contemporary times, and more precisely, in visual culture -- why appropriate this visual motif and to what ends? What is the audience looking for in the Christic masochistic performance? In approaching these questions, I will examine a number of Christic rituals and iconographic motifs, namely, Eucharistic practice, as it is played out in a number of performances by Chris Burden, Marina Abramovic, Orlan and Bob Flanagan. Also included, is an investigation into the uses of the relic, the icon, the *arma Christi* (etc.), as they are integral to the Christic masochistic performance. This will be followed by a brief inventory of various devotional practices, from *imitatio Christi*, to acts of self-mortification and asceticism, which form the basis for many of these performances. In approaching these issues, this paper will be arguing for an ambivalent Christic figure, one that assumes the roles of mother and father, and incorporates what has been construed as both “male” and “female” devotional practices. I will also look at how these practices, and the Christic figure in general, correspond to the established model of masochistic performance.

In short, this paper examines what I consider to be a lack, or lacunae, in performance art studies, namely, the reluctance to speak about the Christic body in performance. It is my contention that the centralization of the Christic figure, and its rituals in contemporary art, is paramount, and can be related to what Luc Ferry has recently identified as the divinization of the human, thereby further opening up the discussion regarding the meaning of the Christic subject in visual culture and in society in general.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## Introduction:

### ***In Imitatio Christi: What About the Christic Body in Contemporary Art?***

Since its beginnings, performance art has been employing ritual, among other things, as a way to provide order to an exercise that is often chaotic or without order. While this usage of ritual is often recognized, what is not often acknowledged is its borrowing of *Christian* ritual, more specifically, rituals inspired by the life of Christ (Christic ritual). Over the past three decades, performance artists have been making references to the Christian body, more significantly the *Christic* body (as a means of expression); through appropriation, imitation and interpretation, contemporary performance artists are using this body as a locus of meaning. The focus of this project is to investigate representations of the Christic body in performance art and to examine why this has become a recurring phenomenon.<sup>1</sup> I propose to look at how the Christic body functions in the realm of contemporary performance art and the possible reasons behind this exploration of Christic ideals of the body. Through an analysis of various performances, I wish to address the following questions: rather than looking uniquely at what the Christic body *does* in contemporary performance art, I wish to look at what it *produces*. What are its functions and values? How is it being manipulated, and why? Is this indicative of a trend in the "art world," or rather, of a more far-reaching phenomenon affecting society as a whole?

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<sup>1</sup> I have chosen to locate my research in the realm of *performance art* and not *body art* for many reasons. While *body art* infers a wider scope, including much, if not all performance art, *performance art* implies action, process and ritual, all of which I believe are important in the evocation of the Christic figure. Moreover, it implies the performative element, which is an intrinsic part of any masochistic performance; included in this performativity is the role of the theatre and the importance of the relationship between the audience and the artist/art object -- the importance of the *contract*.

Here, I feel it is important to clarify, or rather identify, what I am referring to as the Christic body. This is a body, modeled on the body of Christ, whether through appropriation or imitation. This body takes into consideration elements of Christic practice, such as flagellation, Christ's Passion, crucifixion and the stigmata, with a further emphasis on Eucharistic practice and resurrection. The Christic body is most easily expressed through ritualistic acts and suffering (more accurately, masochism). I will also be discussing the Christic figure in terms of its gendered qualities, arguing for this cultural body as being constructed as both male and female, both mother, father and son. This having been said, when identifying this fluctuating body, one must be conscious of the epistemological risks: What does the Christic body constitute, if anything, historically speaking? What I am attempting to do here is work from a (largely) contemporary model, but one that takes into account its historical precedents.

In order to articulate the Christic body, many artists are looking towards masochism as a tool of appropriation; this *brand* of masochism has been identified by psychoanalyst Theodor Reik as *Christian masochism*. This articulation is often achieved through a reenactment of Christ's sufferings, as well as the suffering of martyrs. I would like to take Reik's concept of Christian masochism one step further, arguing instead for a type of masochism I identify here as *Christic* masochism. As will be demonstrated in Chapter Three, Christic masochism has many of the same characteristics of Christian masochism (as it is elaborated upon by Reik), but bases itself on Christic rhetoric and Christic rituals (actions from the life of Christ, i.e. the Eucharist, crucifixion, resurrection, etc.). Also, Christic masochism is based on the relationship of son-to-mother (as expounded upon by

Gilles Deleuze in his text *Coldness and Cruelty*) and not one of son-to-father, as earlier psychoanalysts have posited, thereby centralizing the maternal figure in the Christic masochistic relationship, rather than centralizing the role of the father. I am not arguing here that Christ was a masochist, but rather, that Christic ritual displayed many similarities to masochistic practice and/or attitudes.

At this point I would like to briefly mention the issue of parody. While parody exists as a form of imitation, employing irony, it does so in a largely derogatory fashion. It is my belief that *the majority* of these contemporary *imitatio Christi* lie outside the realm of parody, involving a more genuine exploration or appropriation of the Christic body. The exception resides in the works of Orlan which often see an explicit parodying of Christian ritual and images, however, they do so to serious ends.

### **The Christic Body in Performance**

While an art historical review is necessary in situating these contemporary performances, the scope of this project will cover the 1970s to the present. I see this appropriation of the Christic body occurring as early as the 1970s, coinciding with the rise of body art, which itself could be considered a reaction against the minimalism and asceticism of modernist painting. Amelia Jones interprets body art as symbolizing a shift in subjectivity from a modernist to a postmodernist mode.<sup>2</sup> While the appearance of such a phenomenon (the appropriation of the Christic body) is traceable to the early 70s, I don't believe it has been recognized as such until recently. Artists creating "masochistic" performance art were

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<sup>2</sup> Amelia Jones. "Presence in absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation." *Art Journal* 56 (Winter 1997): 11-19.

often manipulating the Christic body, but I believe that this Christic body was only minimally acknowledged until the early 1990s. Whether the artists of the 1970s were not willing to allow for the Christic body, or rather felt that it was an insignificant side effect is uncertain. In recent times, I believe artists are more willing to acknowledge this dependence on, or evocation of, the Christic body and are able to explore it on a more tangible level. While I am addressing Christic masochism in performance art, I am assuming that the Christic dimension of the performance is not secondary (an unintentional side-effect of masochistic ritual), but rather a central one.

Thus the question becomes, why this appropriation of the Christic body and its masochistic rituals in performance art? What is interesting to note is that while many treatises on performance art studies make allusions to Catholic ritual, these comments are usually relegated to a footnote, parentheses, or an otherwise secondary reference. Is this simply an art historical matter, or is it indicative of a wider social phenomenon? I would posit that this appropriation is not simply aesthetic (art historical), nor is it entirely political (as Kathy O'Dell argues, with regards to the emergence of masochistic performance), but something more sociological. In the following chapters we will be addressing these concerns, locating the sociological ramifications of these performances. What do these performances mean in terms of the social order? What role, if any, does the Christic masochist play in contemporary society? Is this indicative of a general masochistic attitude toward a post-industrial economy? In considering these questions, I hope to locate the function of what has been said, the function of the discourse, surrounding the Christic body in order to provide possible reasons for this phenomenon.

What will follow is an investigation into the appropriation or imitation of Christ (and of representations of Christ) in performance art of the past thirty years.

## Corpus

Medieval people, moreover, manipulated their bodies for religious goals. Both male and female Saints regularly engaged in what modern people call self-torture – jumping into ovens or icy ponds, driving knives, nails or nettles into their flesh, whipping or hanging themselves in elaborate pantomimes of Christ's Crucifixion. Understood sometimes as chastening of sexual urges or as punishment for sin, such acts were more frequently described as union with the body of Jesus.<sup>3</sup>

In creating a corpus for this project, I looked to performance artists who manipulated the body in a Christic fashion, both in subtle and explicit ways. With each of these performances, (Christic) masochism became the chosen means of rendering or appropriating this body and with each artist, the degree of masochistic involvement varied. Differences also lie in the degree of avowal: while some artists seem to be conscious of the incorporation of the Christic figure in their work, others are more reluctant to acknowledge the role. There is also the matter of gender -- as will be discussed in Chapter Two -- historically, this *imitatio Christi* has been gender-dependent, with obvious masculine and feminine characteristics. Are these same gender divisions applicable to the performances to be discussed?

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<sup>3</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum. *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* (New York: Zone Books, 1992): 184.

While other European artists such as Joseph Beuys and Hermann Nitsch seem to have abandoned irony completely in their appeals to Christian ritual and the militaristic attributes of masculinity, male artists from the United States during the 1960s and 70s tended to work, like [Yves] Klein, in ironic and overtly sexualized ways, both against and with the grain of phallic authority.<sup>4</sup>

For the purpose of this project, I have selected four artists who I feel best exemplify the Christic masochistic performance in its many permutations. Each one of the artists (Chris Burden, Marina Abramovic, Orlan and Bob Flanagan), explores the Christic figure and by extension, Christic ritual. The selected artists are from North America and Europe, suggesting that this could be a Western phenomenon, with the creation dates varying from the 1970s to the present day. Interested in the limits of both the physical and psychical body, American performance artist Chris Burden employs the body as both site of ritual and sacrifice. Performances such as *Shoot* from 1971 and *Doorway to Heaven* of 1973 blurred the boundaries between the interior and exterior, combining acts of exhibitionism with that of (metaphorical and corporeal) sacrifice, exploring the malleable spaces between life and death.

Most clearly evoking the Christic body, *Transfixed* of 1974 saw Burden appropriate Christ's crucifixion in a modern context. In this performance the artist lay on the back of a Volkswagen while accomplices drove nails through his palms. Lasting only two minutes, the performance saw the artist pushed out on to the driveway, and then back into the garage. Referred to as a "modern crucifixion," Burden's "sacrifice" or *imitatio Christi* has been considered as a re-enactment of the *divine* artistic sacrifices of such artists as Vincent Van Gogh or Jackson Pollock.<sup>5</sup> In this respect the *tortured* artist willingly takes on the evils and melancholia of society. According to art historian Amelia Jones, this type

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<sup>4</sup> Amelia Jones. "Dis/playing the phallus: male artists perform their masculinities." *Art History*, 17.4 (December 1994): 555.

<sup>5</sup> Amelia Jones. *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998): 131.

of “artistic sacrifice” or identification with Christ is most certainly a masculine trait, a means of performing one’s (hetero)sexuality. This line of argumentation will be addressed in Chapter Four. Although overtly referencing the Crucifixion, comments regarding the Christic nature of this performance are only made in passing and have not become the focal point of analyses of the work.

The artworks produced by Marina Abramovic also contain elements of ritual and excess as they relate to, and result in, states of physical and psychical transcendence. Considered to be more public ceremony than performance, Abramovic’s performances were meant to invoke spiritual enlightenment. In a performance entitled *The Lips of Thomas* (1975), Abramovic performed a two-hour ritual in which she alternately cut, whipped and attempted to freeze parts of her body in order to achieve a state beyond physical pain or suffering: a particular *jouissance*. The performance ended with the spectators having to remove her freezing body from ice blocks. Invoking the practices (self-flagellations) of martyrdoms, which were in themselves often re-enactments of Christ’s sufferings, Abramovic likewise “performed” her devotion: “It should be remembered though, that torment was the crown of a martyr’s life, the climax of his or her ‘imitation of Christ’.”<sup>6</sup> For the martyr, death was often viewed as a release, a final act of expiation. Abramovic’s performances strike a similar chord in that death is often a *possible* end-result; as with *The Lips of Thomas*, her performances often ended with audience intervention, a hijacking of this final act of expiation.

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<sup>6</sup> Henk van Os. *The Art of Devotion in the Late Middle Ages in Europe 1300-1500* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994): 77.

Producing what she calls “anti-performances,” French performance artist Orlan stages well-crafted and choreographed performances and plastic surgeries that comment on art historical, as well as Catholic, ideals of beauty. Commencing her career as a performance artist in the 1970s, Orlan’s works, which began with tableaux-vivants of the artist as a saint, progressed towards an overtly corporeal examination of beauty as plastic surgeons sculpted her flesh into an amalgamation of feminine ideal beauty. Her most recent surgeries, including *Omnipresence* of 1993, form a kind of self-portrait, a pastiche of art historical portraits. Incorporated into these performances-surgeries, was the relic, with the artist manipulating the by-products of her surgeries as further art material, creating installation works, that while documenting her recovery, also made loving archives of her flesh. Growing up as a practicing French Catholic, Orlan acknowledges and manipulates traditional feminine Catholic rituals, and the arguably emasculating qualities of Christ’s body as well -- an offering-up of flesh, sacrifice, martyrdom, self-mutilation.

Exploring the more traditional side of masochism, poet and performance artist Bob Flanagan used masochism as a means of both controlling and externalizing the pain he suffered as a result of a life-long battle with cystic fibrosis. Succumbing to the disease at the age of forty-four, Flanagan spent the last two decades of his life conceiving of multiple performances that fused his practice of masochism with Christic ritual. Flanagan cites the influence of the Catholic Church upon his interest in masochism, mentioning how catechism classes opened him up to the possibility of the nobility and pleasure to be found in suffering and the guilt that is intrinsic to Catholicism.

Many of Flanagan's performances, for the most part in conjunction with his life partner Sheree Rose, are equal parts masochistic and Christic ritual, although the latter is rarely mentioned, and if so, only in passing. *Gurney of Nails*, produced in 1992 and performed again in the context of *Visiting Hours* in 1994, had Flanagan lying naked on a bed of nails for an extended period of time. Throughout the history of his performances, Flanagan often makes recourse to the use of nails, most notoriously in a work called *Nailed* (1989) in which Flanagan nailed his own penis to a wooden board. Flanagan's lifework culminated in an auto-biographical installation/performance entitled *Visiting Hours*, which saw the artist re-enacting earlier performances, in addition to creating new ones, and surrounding himself with objects from his career as a writer, artist and practicing masochist.

In approaching the aforementioned artists' work, I will be looking toward psychoanalysis as a tool of elucidation. Beginning with the writings of Sigmund Freud, Sacha Nacht, Theodor Reik, and later, Gilles Deleuze and Slavoj Zizek, I hope to carve out a space for the Christic masochist in contemporary performance art. Departing from the rudimentary definition, or diagnosis, of masochism, put forth by Freud, taking into account the erotogenic and moral genesis of the concept, we will then move into more contemporary territory, looking at issues of gender and power relations, as they pertain to the modern masochistic relationship. Finally, through the writings of Zizek, we will fuse the contemporary model of Christic masochism with Zizek's Marxist psychoanalysis of contemporary culture and combine it with a reading of Luc Ferry's notion of the

“divinization of the human.” It is my view that each one of the artworks that form the corpus of this project can easily be considered within this theoretical framework.

### **Dissertation Outline**

Having established the aims of this thesis, the following eight chapters will attempt to address the issue of the Christic figure in contemporary performance art. Chapter One will look at the history of performance art studies, including a review of related literature, in addition to a brief analysis of other artists who can be seen to engage with the Christic body. Chapter Two will examine the iconography of the Christic figure and the gendering of religious experience. This will be conducted through an examination of the writings of Leo Steinberg and Caroline Walker Bynum as they discuss Medieval and Renaissance religious experience; related, is a discussion of the intersections that exist between ecstatic and/or religious experience and eroticism. Lastly, the chapter will examine various Christic indexes and rituals as they form the basis of the performances to be analyzed and discussed. Where the second chapter lays the iconographical groundwork, the third chapter introduces the various theories through which the performances will be analyzed. Considering these works in terms of Christic masochistic performance, the chapter follows the evolution of psychoanalytic theories of masochism, from the earliest models put forth by Sigmund Freud, to some of the latest theories introduced by Gilles Deleuze.

After creating the theoretical framework, the next four chapters consist of individual case studies. Each case study focuses on one artist and includes a brief synopsis, an overview

of early works and then proceeds to analyze in greater detail one or two Christic masochistic performances. Included in this analysis is a discussion of the various Christic rituals, images and tropes on which the performance is based. Lastly, the concluding chapter looks at the Christic masochistic performance in its critical context: why this evocation of the Christic body? Why now? And to what ends? What does the Christic figure denote, if anything, in contemporary society? Is this phenomenon purely art historical? Political?

### **The Return of the Christic Figure**

After exploring the various methods in which the Christic body has been evoked in performance art, one cannot but hypothesize on the possible reasons for this *reenactment*. One, as previously mentioned, is the desire for self-transformation, often achieved through a transgression of established boundaries, both physical and psychical. To this end, what body is more *transgressive* than that of Christ? Implied in this process of self-transformation is the element of catharsis -- catharsis as both a process and product of ritual and sacrifice. Further reasons for this evocation have less to do with self-transformation and more to do with the community as a whole, or what René Girard identifies as the *victimhood mechanism*.<sup>7</sup> Lastly, I believe that this emergence can be attributed to the loss of a body, whether physical or devotional. Furthermore, I would argue that it has to do with the loss of the subject, more specifically a divine subject, and hence, a loss of the Ideal in contemporary culture. These artists are making recourse to one of the most poignant and universally-recognized icons as a means of re-evoking this

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<sup>7</sup> The concept of the *victimhood mechanism* is introduced by René Girard in his text *Violence and the Sacred*. Trans. by Patrick Gregory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979). This concept will be further explored in Chapter Eight.

Ideal, a type of stand-in. Whether it is a result of rising technophilia (with the body becoming obsolete), the growth of the body politic, or the increasing secularization of Western culture, these artists have chosen to attack, through acts of masochism, the most culturally-significant body: that of Christ. At this point, I would like to articulate that I believe these works to not only centralize the Christic body, but more specifically, Eucharistic practice.

What is most telling, perhaps is the location of this emergence. Gaining popular acceptance in the 1970s, performance art would often use the body as a site of meaning-production: performing the body = performing the self. Following this line of argumentation, why not manipulate the body that holds the most cultural signification, the most meaning for Western culture -- in this case, the Christic body? Christ's body becomes both signifier and signified, the *Master-Signifier*, with the ability to denote both a personal and communal body. Furthermore, it is possible to look at the performance artist's body as a type of stand-in, with the performance being a staging of some unfillable void, which can be seen as a direct result of the secularization of Western culture. What follows in the next eight chapters is an exploration of these various questions, an examination of the Christic masochistic performance and the significance of the contemporary Christic figure in all of its many permutations.

## Chapter 1

### Performance Art Studies: A Genesis

“Live gestures have constantly been used as a weapon against the conventions of established art.”<sup>8</sup>

Having established the parameters of this project, I would now like to conduct a brief overview of a number of the more salient texts, from the pioneering works of Lea Vergine and RoseLee Goldberg, to more recent treatises by Peggy Phelan and Amelia Jones, which seek to address the body in performance. What each of these texts has in common is an exploration of the body in performance, from investigations into Artaud’s *Theater of Cruelty* and “live art” produced by the Dadaists, to more recent investigations regarding the feminist possibilities of performance art, in addition to its deconstruction of the Cartesian subject. Despite the breadth of these texts, what lacks is a recognition of the artist’s engagement with the Christic figure; it is within this investigation that this project is embedded. Following this review of literature, which will lay the groundwork for an analysis of Christic masochistic performance, I will briefly address a variety of works as they engage with the Catholic (and arguably, Christic) subject, however, are not part of the corpus of this project. In doing so, I hope to establish a tradition of Christic masochistic performance.

#### “Live Art:” The Performative Body

Often acknowledged as being the first true treatise on performance art, Italian curator Lea Vergine’s text *Il corpo come linguaggio (La ‘Body-art’ e storie simili)* written in 1974,

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<sup>8</sup> RoseLee Goldberg. *Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., Publishers, 1979): 6.

examined the concentrated shift towards the artist's body. Vergine's text provided a new interpretation, or at the least, a new manner of conceiving of the body in art -- the body as both subject and object:

[T]he artist becomes his object. Or better, the artist is the thesis with respect both to himself and his subject, this is to say that he *posits* himself as object since he is conscious of the process in which he is involved.<sup>9</sup>

Not only did this new type of art create new relationships between the artist and his/her artwork and self, it also created new relationships and new spaces for negotiation between the artist and his/her audience:

In accordance with the ability of the artist, we can enter into the game, give ourselves without reserve and penetrate together into a different dimension where the *I* of the artist becomes another, turns itself into phenomenon and spectacle, gives itself entirely to its interlocutor and thus realizes its objective in precisely this manner of *being for the others*.<sup>10</sup>

In answering the question as to why artists began to shift the focus towards their *own* bodies, Vergine looks to the acting out of a repressed body, a body that is always in search of what she calls 'primary love;' it is this search that is at the basis of body art.

Published five years later in 1979, RoseLee Golberg's pioneering text *Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present* paved the way for future histories of performance art and further confirmed the emergence of a new corporeal language. Although it was criticized in the

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<sup>9</sup> Lea Vergine. "Body Language." *Arts and Artists* (September, 1974): 22.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

years following its publication, the text still marks the beginning of a new area of research for the field of art history. What Goldberg provides is a trajectory, a tracing of performance art's history, beginning with Italian Futurism at the beginning of the twentieth century. Goldberg writes, "In tracing an untold story, this *first history* inevitably works itself free of its material, because that material continues to raise questions about the very nature of art."<sup>11</sup> Here she sets forth what is to be *one of the first* investigations of this kind, written at what could arguably be the height of performance art's popularity.

In order to proceed, Goldberg first initiates what could be understood as the primary definition of performance art, which was simply understood as "live art by artists." Goldberg added that any other parameters imposed on the practice would detract from its initial goal, which was to free the art object from any and all constraints.<sup>12</sup> One such constraint were the strict parameters imposed by the gallery. To move beyond this limitation, performance artists took their art out of the gallery and onto the streets, including other semi-public or non-public spaces. Goldberg traces this evolution, or history, through the practices of the Dadaists, the Surrealists and Bauhaus, to the live art and happenings occurring in the 1960s. From the 1960s on, she notes the increased use of the artist's body. Combined with various tenets of conceptualism, this new body work developed into performance art, a unique form of art practice that combined elements of theatre, dance and literature. Above all else, performance art was seen to dissolve the borders between art and life:

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<sup>11</sup> Goldberg, 7, my emphasis.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid., 6.

[P]erformance was seen as reducing the element of alienation between performer and viewer -- something that fitted well into the often leftist inspiration of the investigation of the function of art -- since both audience and performer experienced the work simultaneously.<sup>13</sup>

Of particular importance for this project is Goldberg's discussion of the role of ritual in performance art. In discussing the centrality of ritual in performance art, Goldberg looks to our use and understanding of *collective memory*; by *collective memory* she is referring to the various rituals, rites and ceremonies culled from pagan, Christian and/or American-Indian practices. Taking their inspiration from these "live events," artists such as Hermann Nitsch and the other Viennese Actionists appropriated Christian and Dionysian practices in the hope of achieving Aristotelian catharsis.<sup>14</sup> Elements of ritual were employed not only as a device to push the boundaries of art, but also to further eliminate the divisions between art and life. Ritualized pain became a popular means of achieving these ends.

While Goldberg and Vergine's texts are acknowledged as two of the first in the field of the history of performance art, there has been a significant amount of published material since the 1970s. Many of these texts have explored performance art's contribution to the fields of feminism, gender studies, queer theory, etc., creating an area of research known as *performance art studies*. Seeing an increase in the early 1990s and after, there have been a great number of worthwhile contributions by such authors as Peggy Phelan, Rebecca Schneider, Kathy O'Dell and Amelia Jones, to name a few. In 1992, Peggy Phelan wrote and published *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* which sought to

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., 98.

<sup>14</sup> The notion of catharsis within performance art will be further discussed in Chapter Eight, in particular the writings of René Girard.

examine “the implicit assumptions about the connections between representational visibility and a political power which have been a dominant force in cultural theory in the past ten years.”<sup>15</sup> Employing psychoanalytic and feminist theory, Phelan examined a number of performances and discussed their engagement with, or, impact on, the political environment. How did these performances engage with the “sexual and racial other?”<sup>16</sup>

What is of particular interest for this project is Phelan’s discussion of what she identifies as *ordeal art* or *hardship art*. She describes this type of art as attempting to:

[I]nvoke a distinction between presence and representation by using the singular body as a metonymy for the apparently nonreciprocal experience of pain. This performance calls witnesses to the singularity of the individual’s death and asks the spectator to do the impossible – to share that death by rehearsing for it. (It is for this reason that performance shares a fundamental bond with ritual. The Catholic mass, for example, is the ritualized performative promise to remember and to rehearse the Other’s death).<sup>17</sup>

In 1998, Phelan, along with Jill Lane, edited an anthology concerning itself with performance art studies, entitled *The Ends of Performance*, which consisted of a collection of essays examining the various histories and current manifestations of performance art. The text combined essays from art historians, theorists and performance artists, in addition to a few performative texts, and explored the various guises of performance from dance, to theatre, to music. The text also explored performance art’s intersections with gender studies, feminism, technology studies, etc. Finally, the text included pedagogical material, providing insight into teaching performance art studies.

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<sup>15</sup> Peggy Phelan. *Unmarked : The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1992): 1.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 152.

Of curious note is *On Edge: Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century* (1993), written by C. Carr, a text that points to the *unfashionability* of ‘extreme body art’ in present times. According to Carr, ‘body art’ or ‘ordeal art,’ was a seventies phenomenon, “the performance continuum shifted away from such anti-tainments, towards entertainment – or at least, the proscenium – as boundaries between mainstream and margin began to dissolve.”<sup>18</sup> Where does this leave such artists as Orlan and Bob Flanagan, two artists working in a post-80s art world, who are manipulating the ‘extreme body’?

While the writings of Amelia Jones and Kathy O’Dell will be discussed at length in Chapter Eight (both of whom contributed greatly to the study of ‘body art’ and the performance artworks to be considered as part of this larger distinction), I would like to take a few moments to discuss their respective texts as they help to lay the groundwork for this project. Focusing on body art and its many guises, Jones has spent the last decade and a half examining the cognizant shifts that have occurred with regard to the subject in contemporary art. Her text *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (1998) takes a feminist poststructuralist approach to the body in contemporary art, noting its engagement with the gendered and posthuman body. Most relevant to this project is Jones’ discussion of masculinity and performance art, or how artists *perform* their gender. Following a similar trajectory, are Kathy O’Dell’s investigations into the body and pain. Her 1998 text *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s* looked specifically at cases of what she considered to be *masochistic performance art*. While the

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<sup>18</sup> C. Carr. *On Edge : Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, University Press of New England, 1993): xv.

masochistic aspect of many performances had already been noted elsewhere, this was the first text to exclusively examine the role of masochism, and by extension the *contract*, in performance art of the 1970s. Having established the parameters of masochistic performance art, however, O'Dell tends to view it as a largely 70s phenomenon and one that was a direct reaction to the Vietnam war. While she briefly addresses masochistic performance art of the 1990s, she considers it to be similarly, a reaction to AIDS and the culture wars. It is also worthwhile to note Tracey Warr and Amelia Jones' 2000 text *The Artist's Body*. While not focusing solely on performance art, this exhaustive text addresses the body (as it is presented in body art), in its manifold expressions. Divided up thematically, each chapter addresses one avenue of body art, depicting the work of several body artists working in that tradition, and providing a short description of each work. The introduction to the text, written by Amelia Jones, provides a succinct history of body art and introduces many of the themes to be addressed throughout the various chapters. Both the chapters "Ritualistic and Transgressive Bodies," featuring the works of Hermann Nitsch, Chris Burden, Bob Flanagan and Marina Abramovic, among others, and "Body Boundaries," featuring Burden, Abramovic, Vito Acconci and others, touch upon some of the aspects which will be discussed at length in this project: masochism in art, the role of ritual, audience interaction. However, beyond a cursory mention within the descriptions of certain works, there is no discussion in Warr and Jones' text of the use of Christian or Christic ritual.

Most recently, there has been a shift from the *history* of performance art to the *historiography* of performance art. Jane Blocker, for example, has written a text that

explores the historiography of performance art studies; rather than exploring the performances themselves, Blocker looks at *how* they are being written about, in what historical narratives and to a lesser degree, *for whom* and *why* these histories are being written.<sup>19</sup> Blocker's book both engages with, and does battle against, these recent documents, or *histories*. Where contemporary examples tend to focus on performance art's *topography*, Blocker's text focuses on performance's *historiography*, examining the heteronormative and gendered readings it provokes; inherent in this, is a discussion of the role of desire in creating these histories. Building on arguments already put forth by Jones, Blocker also works through the roadblocks that emerge when approaching the history of performance art: how does one write about a practice that is by nature ephemeral, and forever in the midst of disappearing? What does one do with the traces?

While there has not been much written with regard to the relationship between religion and art, or more particularly, religion and performance art, one recent foray into such territory is Eleanor Heartney's text *Postmodern Heretics – The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art* (2004). An art critic for such publications as *Art in America* and *The New York Times*, Heartney's investigation is less a scholarly treatise or investigation, than a *report* on the usages of Catholicism in contemporary art; rather than approaching the *why* or *how*, she is more preoccupied with the *if*. She sets out to address such issues as: "the relationship between Catholicism's approach to the body and the physically provocative art work it seems to inspire" and "recent art history's suppression of the extent to which religious concerns have shaped modern and post-modern American

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<sup>19</sup> See Jane Blocker's text *What the Body Cost: Desire, History and Performance* (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

art.”<sup>20</sup> However, these concerns were largely ignored in favor of a superficial reading of “Catholic” artworks and their involvement in recent controversies with the NEA and right-wing religious and political factions in the United States. Locating her research in the middle of America’s “Culture war,” her project exists more as a sociological report on the American government’s reaction to Catholicism in art, than as an analysis of contemporary “Catholic” artworks and their subsequent reception. A further discussion of this text will occur in Chapter Eight.

### **Christic Masochistic Performance: An Abbreviated Survey**

Having conducted a review of related literature, I would now like to take a brief look at a number of artists who explore what could be construed as the Christic body but were not included in the corpus of this thesis; thereby establishing a tradition of Christic masochistic performance art, in which the works of Burden, Abramovic, Orlan and Flanagan may be located . There have been points of intersection between contemporary art and religion, without these works being sanctioned as *religious art*. Much has been made of the *spiritual qualities* attributed to abstract art, its engagement with mysticism, transcendentalism and theosophy. While gaining credibility with the abstract works of Wassily Kandinsky, this relationship of spirituality and abstract art became even more pronounced with the advent of the Abstract Expressionists, with artists such as Barnett Newman exploring iconographical themes like the Stations of the Cross. While much has been written regarding this relationship, i.e. the intersections between abstract art and

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<sup>20</sup> Eleanor Heartney. *Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art* (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2004): viii.

spirituality, this particular project looks specifically at the *performative* aspect of contemporary art and its engagement with Christic practice.

Where performance art, and by extension body art, are concerned, there have been numerous instances of what could be construed as *Christic masochistic performance*. Parisian artist Michel Journiac created multiple performances that explored French Catholic ritual, most explicitly in a work entitled *Messe pour un corps*, Paris, 1969 (see Figure 1). With this performance, the artist conducted a public mass, using his own extracted blood as a stand-in for the blood of Christ. After the performance, the artist's blood was used to make a traditional *boudin*, or blood sausage, which was later displayed in a gallery. In this sense, the *boudin* acts as something of a relic, housing the artist's own blood for public consumption, creating a work that centers around the sacralization of the artist's body and the celebration of the Eucharist. Although producing work twenty years later, American performance artist Ron Athey also created works that acknowledged Christian ritual. Growing up within the Pentecostal church, Athey's masochistic performances explored the relationships between his strict Pentecostal upbringing and his lifestyle as a gay artist living with HIV. Performing such sacrificial acts as bloodletting and self-mutilation, Athey used masochistic performance as a means of dealing with illness, including depression and drug abuse. His autobiographical work *4 Scenes in a Harsh Life*, 1994 (see figure 2), explored these various elements, using Christian ritual as a means of purgation and/or expiation.

Perhaps most overt in their borrowing of Christic ritual, are the Viennese Actionists.

Creating highly hedonistic performances, Austrian performance artist Hermann Nitsch used ritual as a means of blurring the borders between art and life. Providing for mock crucifixions and Dionysian sacrifices, Nitsch's weeklong plays/performances and "mystery theatre" festivals, relied on Catholic imagery and evocations of the Christic body in order to create an *art of action* or *Aktions*. Early works, such as *1<sup>st</sup> Action*, performed in Vienna in 1962, saw the artist adopting a crucifixion pose. In later performances, which became a part of the *Orgien Mysteries Theatre*, Nitsch manipulated his role of priest-like figurehead in order to dismantle artist/audience dualisms. This priest-figure which accompanies later works is by no means unintentional, Nitsch muses, "I would say that every working man is also a priest. To me there is no difference."<sup>21</sup> The aforementioned rituals relied heavily on participatory exchange, creating a "theatre of cruelty" wherein elements of Catholic ritual were combined with orgiastic Dionysian rites, creating an experience of art as life. Taking place on the castle grounds of Schloss Prinzdorf in Austria, the Actionists' *80<sup>th</sup> Action: Orgies Mysteries Theatre* of 1984 (see figure 3) combined music, dance and theatre to create a frenzied religiosity where slaughtered lambs stood in for the crucified body of Christ. Believing art to be a religion unto itself, Nitsch performed these contrived crucifixions looking for atonement and redemption through ecstatic projections of excess and expenditure. While there has not been much written in relation to performative explorations of Christic ritual, there has been discussion regarding the creative process in general, as "divine artistic sacrifice," putting the artists in the place of divine creator, or "artist-as-martyr," i.e. van Gogh,

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<sup>21</sup> Robert Enright. "Hermanneutics: A Conversation with Hermann Nitsch." *Border Crossings*. 17.2 (1998): 38.

Pollock and Klein. In these cases, the “creator,” or Christ-figure is almost exclusively male.

### **Performance-as-Document**

Before commencing an examination of the iconographic history of the Christic masochistic performance, to be conducted in Chapter Two, I would like to briefly address the issue of documentation as it serves to enhance the iconographic quality of the work. Not only is it possible to argue for the Christic nature of the performances, but one could also consider the accompanying documentation (photographs, video, archival material) as being iconographic or icons in themselves, in the Catholic tradition. Christian iconography is the primary model of these contemporary Christic masochistic rituals and this is mirrored in their reliance on documentation. Just as the lives of saints were known by the texts and images that depicted their trials (single-image paintings were often understood as tools of learning), so too are the performances to be discussed known or recognized by their photographs. Often shot in black and white, these photos are iconographic and become just as much a part of the work as the performances themselves; they are visual documents, or records, of past events. They too, become teaching tools, symbolic entries in the art historical canon. As an example, one can look at the infamous photo of Chris Burden being shot, or likewise, the iconic black and white photo of *Transfixed* (see figure 4), with the artist crucified on a Volkswagen; both are recognizable images, emblems or markers of a past event. In this sense, the image or document has the ability to stand in for the Thing. As is often the case with performance art, one can know a performance through documentation only, and as a result, this

documentation is raised to the level of the icon. It is how we gain access to the Thing; it is a metonymic relationship of part to whole. In this case, the sign thus plays the same role as the relic in the Catholic context: the presence-absence of divinity.

It is precisely this negotiation of the relationship between performance art and its accompanying documentation, that Amelia Jones argues for in her article "*Presence in absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation*." With this article Jones writes against the oft-cited argument that one cannot write about performance art without witnessing it first-hand. Jones argues that while the practice of seeing a performance "in the flesh" versus reading about a performance in a text, or seeing the documented footage, are clearly different experiences, neither can claim the "historical truth" of the performance.<sup>22</sup> This way, the relationship of the artist to the document, and likewise of the audience or art historian, to the documentation, is just another aspect (and an important one) of performance art studies. The photograph, text, or video acts as an icon, an avenue of access, or replacement and/or supplement to the artist's body, and hence the work: a stand-in for the Thing. Jones continues,

Seemingly acting as a "supplement" to the "actual" body of the artist-in-performance, the photograph of the body art event or performance could, in fact, be said to expose the body itself as supplementary, as both the visible "proof" of the self and its endless deferral.<sup>23</sup>

It is my belief that the documentation functions as part of the performance and in turn becomes indistinguishable from the artwork, just as the Catholic icon is fused with the

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<sup>22</sup> Jones. "*Presence in absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation*," 11.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.

divine figure (saint) it represents. In this sense, the documentation that accompanies these performances only adds to its Christic nature.

What I have attempted to do in this chapter is to briefly encapsulate the burgeoning tradition of performance art studies, thereby locating this project within that tradition, and providing an abbreviated overview of a number of works which could be construed as Christic in nature. In doing so, I hope to have demonstrated that there is a space for the Christic masochistic performance, and one that warrants further investigation. The following chapter will examine representations of Christ and the “gendering” of religious experience through an investigation of Christic ritual, including a discussion of Christ’s Passion, the *arma Christi*, and the Eucharist.

## Chapter 2

### **(E)masculine: The Gendering of Religious Experience**

“It was through an imitation of the sufferings of Christ and the Virgin Mary, recommended by many devotional texts of the later Middle Ages and following, that one could achieve the most intense spiritual experiences.”<sup>24</sup>

In order to proceed with an examination of Christic masochistic performance art, it is first important to lay the groundwork by conducting a brief, but comprehensive, inventory of representations of Christ in both pictorial and written documents, in order to ascertain the foundations for Christic masochism. Selected Christic representations include Christ's Passion, the *arma Christi*, and the Eucharist. Imperative to such an inventory is also an examination of the gendering of religious experience. In order to proceed, the following chapter will be divided up into two major sections. The first section will examine representations of Christ, as well as the lives of Saints, who themselves were participating in an *imitatio Christi*. Through this section I hope to develop a selected iconographic lexicon, one that focuses on many of the tropes that resurface in contemporary performance art. The second section of the chapter will focus more clearly on the writings of contemporary historians Leo Steinberg and Caroline Walker Bynum and their discussions regarding the sexuality of Christ and the subsequent gendering of religious experience. While both historians are working in the realm of the medieval and early Renaissance periods respectively, both provide worthwhile theories with which to examine the performance works to be discussed in subsequent chapters. In addition to Steinberg and Bynum, I will conduct a brief examination of two texts, one by Julia Kristeva, and the other by Georges Bataille, as they both provide alternative views of the

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<sup>24</sup> James Clifton. “A Fountain Filled with Blood : Representations of Christ's Blood from the Middle Ages to the Eighteenth Century.” *Blood: Art, Politics and Pathology*. James M. Bradburne (ed.) (Munich, London, New York: Prestel Verlag, 2001): 83.

psychoanalytic interpretations of religious and/or mystical experience. This discussion will lead us into the next chapter, in which I will analyze psychoanalytic theories of masochism, in order to establish the basis for a discussion of Christic masochism.

### **Representations of Christ**

Representations of Christ and the crucifixion have been a popular visual motif since the fifth century A.D., with a brief decline in popularity from the late 1600s to the late 1800s, resulting in something of a revival in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century by many modern artists.<sup>25</sup> Many twentieth-century painters, from Picasso, through Bacon to DeKooning, have produced a myriad of crucifixion scenes, running the gamut from classical representations to erotic renderings. In addition to figurative representations of Christ, Christ and the crucifixion have also been depicted through various signs and symbols: while images of grapevines and winemaking were meant to be a symbol of Christ's sacrifice and the Eucharist, images of the lamb (made popular in the 1200s by St. Francis of Assisi) were meant to connote Christ as Shepard and sacrificial lamb. Without entering into an examination of idolatry and the church, I would like to briefly examine both the usage and presentation of Christic imagery, before entering into a lengthier discussion of religious experience and devotional practice as it has been discussed by two contemporary historians, Leo Steinberg and Caroline Walker Bynum. Inherent in this is a discussion of gender as it relates to the various instances of *imitatio Christi*.

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<sup>25</sup> For a brief discussion of the history of crucifixion scenes in photography, please see Darwin Marable. "The Crucifixion in Photography" *History of Photography*, 18.3 (Autumn 1994): 256-263.

From the thirteenth-century on, images of Christ's Passion became increasingly popular, particularly with the subsequent emphasis on Christ's humanity. One way to depict Christ's humanity was through a rendering of the suffering body of Christ. Scenes of the suffering Christ were meant to engender feelings of empathy and pity which would, in turn, create a deeper sense of faith and devotion, "One way of making the Passion images more engaging to the devout viewer was to represent the punishment and humiliation visited on Christ as extremely brutal."<sup>26</sup> Throughout the history of Christic representation, there has been a continual focus on the suffering body of Christ. The reasons for this are manifold, the main reason having to do with an identification with the suffering body of Christ: such depictions functioned as an appeal and a reminder of the humanity of Christ, emphasizing his dual role of being both human and divine. To a secondary degree, it also reinforces the positive value of suffering: suffering as something beautiful and divine, to be endured for the common good. To suffer is to experience the Passion.

One of the most graphic depictions of the suffering Christ is the central panel of Matthias Grunewald's *Isenheim Altarpiece* (see figure 5), produced between 1510 and 1515. This altarpiece is one of few examples where Christ's body is not idealized, it depicts the reality of a body in pain. The image, painted in dark hues, features the tortured Christ with grossly elongated limbs stretched by the weight of his body, with contorted and grasping fingers; the body itself is scourged and emaciated as the crown of thorns pierces Christ's skin and blood flows freely from Christ's numerous wounds. Surrounding Christ are the Virgin Mary, Mary Magdalene, St. John the Baptist, St. John the Divine and the

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<sup>26</sup> Gabriele Finaldi. *The Image of Christ* (London: National Gallery Company Limited, 2000): 106.

sacrificial lamb who's own wound is bleeding forth into a chalice. The dour scene is made darker by the surrounding stormy and rugged background, mirroring the ravaged body of Christ. Among its many purposes, this painting encourages grieving, uniting Christ with humanity. As a result, the spectator is made to feel part of the grieving party flanking the cross.

In addition to the cult surrounding the suffering body of Christ, the instruments of the Passion, or *arma christi* also engendered a strict adherence. The five wounds of Christ became visceral symbols of the Passion, and developed into the "cult of the wounds:"

The highly sensual, at times almost obsessively erotic, concern with the wounds of Christ demonstrated in the poetry, devotions and visual imagery of the Middle Ages, indicates that the sensual mode was felt to be a legitimate and effective means of entering into a relationship with the Christ of the Passion narratives.<sup>27</sup>

As will be further discussed in conjunction with the writings of Steinberg and Bynum, the sensuality, or at times eroticism, of Christic imagery did not go unnoticed; the history of Christic imagery is littered with examples of the "ecstatic suffering" of Christ which in turn led to the "ecstatic sufferings" of those experiencing this *imitatio Christi*. The devotion to this tortured body, or body "turned inside out" became obsessive, with the lines being blurred between devotional practice and erotic experience. Throughout the Middle Ages, this identification with Christ led to any number of reenactments of Christ's Passion; these events were usually accompanied by a procession of flagellants who would follow "Christ" through the city streets. Although practiced to a much lesser

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 166.

degree in contemporary times, these mock crucifixions or reenactments are still being staged in countries such as Mexico and the Philippines.

### **The Lives of Saints and the Ascetic Lifestyle**

“The most intense form of compassion for Christ though, is ‘actual’ participation in his sufferings and there is a rich iconography of the saints which has this self-identification with Christ’s Passion as its subject.”<sup>28</sup>

*The Lives of Saints* is a collection of anecdotes outlining saints’ lives, including their genealogy, devotional practices and martyrdoms. These anecdotes or stories presented themselves as transcriptions of the saints’ acts and deeds, they provided evidence of the saint’s participation in an *imitatio Christi*. They demonstrated the very *physical* love the saints had for God. The saints, martyrs, and other devout had a strong desire to participate in Christ’s sufferings, to partake in his trials. Many prayed to God for the ability to experience Christ’s sufferings and/or crucifixion; some were rewarded, such as St. Francis of Assisi and Catherine of Siena, who are both said to have experienced the stigmata.

In addition to experiences of the stigmata, many other ascetic practices emerge in *The Lives of Saints*. There are universal stories advocating *abstinence* from both food and sex; a variety of female saints and mystics (such as St. Catherine of Siena) abstained from food, exercising a form of holy anorexia, where for many, the communion existed as their sole nourishment. While some saints followed Christ’s example and took to preaching, others undertook vows of silence. These saints often internalized their asceticism, as others exercised a very physical devotion to Christ, such as the flagellants -- those

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 107.

traveling in flagellant processions, or who self-flagellated in private (a practice still undertaken today). Perhaps most common among the stories of saints, was the practice of isolation and/or confinement; frequent are the stories of saints and mystics sequestered in cells, or those who lived as hermits, leaving the community of the town for the isolation of the desert. Most are familiar with the story of St. Simeon who became the most important 'stylite' saint, or 'pillar hermit.' After a young adulthood of self-imposed penitence, St. Simeon set himself up on pillars where he remained for the rest of his life. The first pillar measured only nine feet tall, but by the end of his life, Simeon had stationed himself on a pillar over sixty feet tall. From his perch atop the pillars, Simeon lived an extremely ascetic life, taking little food, if any, and spending his time in constant genuflections. Also popular is the story of St. Jerome who became a hermit and sequestered himself in the desert, living among the lions and scorpions. In leading such an ascetic lifestyle, saints and martyrs lived from the bare minimum; an ascetic lifestyle became a means of connecting with and finally, experiencing the life of Christ.

Another means of *connecting* with, or *experiencing* Christ was through devotion to the icon. Produced since the sixth century, icons are small portable paintings which served a prominent role in the Orthodox Church. Located both in the church and later in private residences, these images were imbued with a spiritual potency, no matter their means of production. These domestic icons, objects of personal devotion, were often smaller versions or copies of the original (which could often be found in the church). However, the fact that these images were copies did not detract from their spiritual value or authenticity. For the layperson the icon became a means of experiencing the life of

Christ, the Virgin Mary or any number of saints (such were the typical pictorial subjects of icons). Above all, the icon was an object of veneration. As briefly outlined in Chapter One, the icon also served as an instructional tool. These were didactic images, they were meant to be *read*. For the illiterate, these images were to be read as texts, prompting the lay person to live by example. Many devout of the Middle Ages, and this is still being practiced today, although to a lesser degree, had miniature depictions of saints in their homes; these images were prayed to and kissed, creating an intimacy between the lay person and the saint. Many are familiar with the statue of St. Peter in Rome, whose feet are worn down from the constant tactile attention (through touching and kissing) showered upon them by visitors. In a more liberal sense, the icon can refer to any religious image, and in contemporary times, images in general. The cult, or general popularity, of icons has even lead to *iconophelia* whereby the devotion to, and veneration of, any religious image becomes manic in its intensity.

Related to the intense veneration of the icon, is the devotion to the holy relic. In a sense, the relic exists as just another icon, one in which the part stands in for the whole. Many cults have formed in devotion to a single relic, and those churches housing reliquaries became popular sites of pilgrimage. The relic is a solid, physical remnant or remainder of the saint or religious person. It constitutes a physical connection to the divine. Relics are most often housed in reliquaries, which tend to be given the shape of the presented body part. Many of these reliquaries tend toward the ornate, using gold leaf, precious gems and glass to ensconce the relic. In many cases, pieces of glass or crystal are cut into the reliquary in order for the visitor to see a piece of the relic (i.e. hand, finger, etc.). The

shape and materials of the reliquary did much by way of imbuing the relic with a sense of the divine, giving the object a godly presence.

### ***The Sexuality of Christ: Christ as Expression of Humanity and Masculinity***

In *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion* (1983) Leo Steinberg examines the pictorial tradition of Christic imagery in terms of the various manifestations of Christ's sexuality. Throughout his research Steinberg came across numerous examples of devotional imagery that feature the genitalia of the Christ Child, as well as those of the dead Christ, finding these to be almost as prevalent as images depicting the wounds of Christ. As such, Steinberg's text was one of the first to look exclusively at the issue of sexuality with regards to the Christ figure and does so through multitudinous examinations of pictorial representations of Christ's genitalia. The ubiquitous nature of these images demands closer analysis, argues Steinberg, with specific attention paid to their iconological and theological significance. In proceeding with this project, Steinberg begins by outlining his three-tiered approach: firstly, the author looks to prove, that there was indeed a proliferation of imagery depicting Christ's genitalia; secondly, Steinberg attempts to provide reasons or hypotheses as to why this may be the case; lastly, he asks for what purpose these images were made, what symbolic action do they serve. In order to achieve this, Steinberg advocates reading these images as *texts*. While there is a reliance on printed material, the written texts are, more often than not, featured only as corroborating material. For Steinberg, there is an iconological, as well as iconographical, reading to be made of Christic imagery.

In his text, Steinberg revisits many images, demonstrating that there is both theological and aesthetic significance to the scenes that are depicted. While many argue in favor of reading these images as *realist* (in terms of the frank presentation of Christ's genitalia), Steinberg finds this approach to be lacking, arguing that these depictions function in a "close-knit symbolic system." Steinberg asserts that the focus on Christ's genitalia is more than incidental; he writes, "[A]n infant Christ in Renaissance images differs from the earlier Byzantine and medieval Christ Child not only in degree of naturalism, but in theological emphasis."<sup>29</sup> What Steinberg is attempting to do, by and large, is to debunk many of the theories which have, up to this point, explained the proliferation of images of the naked Christ.

Steinberg begins with an investigation of images of the Christ Child, demonstrating that, even as an infant, Christ engages in mature acts, foreshadowing the sacrifice to come. Christ personifies, at all times, "the Incarnation." In approaching early Christian and Byzantine works, Steinberg points to the inherent emphasis on the Christ Child and to indications of his "Godhood," while later Renaissance works focused on the Christ Child's humanity: "[F]or a Western artist nurtured in Catholic orthodoxy – for him the objective was not so much to proclaim the divinity of the babe as to declare the *humanation* of God."<sup>30</sup> In this case, Christ is sharing in man's humanity. Steinberg goes on to analyze numerous works, and subsequent related documents, that appear to focus on the Christ Child's genitalia (and later those of the dead Christ), from images of

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<sup>29</sup> Leo Steinberg. *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and in Modern Oblivion*. 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition revised and expanded. (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1996): 10.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

Christ's circumcision to images of Christ's (perceived) erect penis. In each of these works, Steinberg views the Christ Child as being "shame-less,"

Where the maker of a Byzantine cult image enthroned the incarnate Word as an imperial Christ, satisfied that the manhood assumed was sufficiently evident in his filiation from Mary, the art of the West sought to realize that same manhood as the common flesh of humanity."<sup>31</sup>

In early medieval examples and, to a certain extent, in Renaissance examples, Christ's upper body was consecrated to his divinity, whereas the lower body, and consequently his genitalia, were indicative of his "humanity." Although discussed to a lesser extent, a section of Steinberg's text is entitled: "The necessary nudity of the suffering Christ," in this case, Christ's nudity simply indexes his humanity, once again creating an identification with the suffering Christ: to suffer is human.

In addition to a discussion of Christ's genitalia, Steinberg also focuses on images of, and consequent symbolism of, Christ's circumcision. In many of these images, the circumcision was seen as "prefiguring and initiating the sacrifice of the Passion." Steinberg goes on to say,

[B]y the end of the seventh century, and long before its emergence as a common subject of art, the circumcision of Jesus in Christian thought has become manifold – initiatory, exemplary, sacrificial, eschatological.<sup>32</sup>

Christ's circumcision is the first instance in which there is a shedding of Christ's blood, something of a miniature sacrifice that both mimics and foreshadows Christ's impending

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., 53.

sacrifice in the crucifixion. As with all depictions of Christ's genitalia, Steinberg considers scenes of the circumcision as appearing to highlight his humanity.

"Tirelessly, they confess the mystery of the dual nature of Christ and his manhood's surrender to suffering."<sup>33</sup>

In discussing the abundance of images that focus on Christ's genitalia, Steinberg comes to the universal conclusion that these images function in order to render Christ *real*, enfleshed, the prevalence of his penis alluding to the fact that Christ was *human* and *male*. Furthermore, these images act as a manifestation of the humanation of God: God's descent into manhood, through the Christ figure. In addition to the humanation of Christ, Steinberg cites two supplementary considerations regarding the necessity for representing the genitalia of Christ: 1) that the emphasis placed on the sexuality of Christ only further underscores his divine abstinence (Christ as the model of Chastity) and 2) as Christ is free of sin and shame, his displayed genitalia correspond to "that aboriginal innocence which in Adam was lost."<sup>34</sup> Here Steinberg argues that Christ was sexualized in art of the Renaissance, through an emphasis of the Christic phallus, whether touched, hidden, etc. Through an examination of paintings that were meant to be read as texts, Steinberg analyzes the various representations: Why was Christ sexualized? To what purpose? What did these images symbolize? "To the penis of the Christ Child, the images we are discussing assign a crucial, positive role in the redemption, not only as proof of Christ's humanation, but as the earnest of his self-sacrifice."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 41.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 48.

Following the publication of *The Sexuality of Christ* in 1985, Steinberg's work met with much discussion and subsequent controversy which prompted him to add an addendum, or what he refers to as a "Retrospect," in later printings. In this "Retrospect" Steinberg seeks to confront many of his detractors while, at the same time, rectifying what he perceived to be shortcomings of the initial publication. Steinberg continues to wonder about the genital focus of many Renaissance images and imports additional visual and textual material to further reinforce his arguments. What is of interest here is less the auxiliary material however, than Steinberg's engagement with questions of gender, as they relate to the Christic body.

### **The (E)masculine Christ**

In addition to the supplemental visual material and texts, Steinberg enters into several new discussions in the addendum, one of which is entitled "The 'Feminization' of Christ." This particular section acts as a reaction against remarks made by French scholar Jean Wirth, wherein the writer addresses many works of art in which Christ appears to be lacking genitalia. Wirth considers these images to be emasculating and feminizing. Steinberg writes:

Wirth believes that the neutering of the corpus in 14<sup>th</sup> century *Crucifixions* (blank loins exposed through transparent loincloths) was meant to facilitate, or even induce, the perception of a womanly, therefore life-giving, Christ.<sup>36</sup>

In addition to the numerous depictions of Christ lacking genitalia, Wirth also points to the many images in which Christ's wounds seem to be lactating; as well as to the fact that

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<sup>36</sup> Ibid., 247.

Christ “gives birth” to the Church. Steinberg, on the other hand, argues ardently against this *feminization* citing examples where Christ’s genitalia are omitted for *other* purposes: where some historians see this omission as an emasculating sign or a “gender shift,” Steinberg considers it in terms of “aesexuation, an ideal of manhood without blight of sex.”<sup>37</sup> Most importantly for Steinberg, a reading of Christ as “feminized” would be incommensurate with the gender politics that would have been in place during that period.

In a section entitled “*Ad Bynum*,” Steinberg also enters into dialogue with Caroline Walker Bynum as she echoes many of Wirth’s concerns. In an essay entitled “The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg,” Bynum takes direct aim at Steinberg’s refusal to examine Christ’s often *emasculating* qualities, providing a reading of Steinberg’s text as masculinist, Bynum writes:

Steinberg sees Christ’s sexuality (by which he really means Christ’s genitality) as a basic symbol of his humanity. He therefore stresses the maleness of Christ in fifteenth-century art and piety, whereas I, beginning with food symbolism, find a Christ whose humanity is symbolized in female as well as male images.<sup>38</sup>

Steinberg rebuts by stating that he intended no such “vendetta” of the sexes:

I read the new genital emphasis as an imaginative reintegration of the sexual into the ideally human, the projection upon Christ of a sexuality which in him – in him as in the First Adam anterior to sin – exists without guilt.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Caroline Walker Bynum. *Holy Feast and Holy Fast: The Religious Significance of Food to Medieval Women* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987): 307, n. 3.

<sup>39</sup> Steinberg, 365.

A further discussion regarding Christ's perceived emasculation, in relation to Bynum's writings, will occur below.

While Steinberg's research is somewhat dated and masculinist, he nevertheless brings about a discussion which had remained largely, up to this point, sacrilege -- namely a discussion of Christ's genitality. Steinberg's text also spearheads questions of gender with regard to devotional imagery and, more specifically, the possible emasculation of Christ. While his visual analyses are not always thorough, they provide us with new tools with which to engage with contemporary Christic art.

### **Christ as Mother**

Compiled in 1992, Caroline Walker Bynum's text *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion* is comprised of a collection of seven essays written between 1982 and 1989. Each essay corresponds to a different topic, however, all of the essays work together to provide a comprehensive investigation into the gendering of religious experience and the subsequent importance of the body in the Medieval period. Concentrating specifically on the religious experiences of women during the late Medieval and early Renaissance period, Bynum looks to their often "extravagant and self-punishing asceticism," and proceeds to distinguish the various types of female piety and devotion. The first three essays of the text engage in a dialogue with three male historians, all of whom discuss medieval religious practice in some manner; for our purposes, it is only the third essay in this section, a reply to Leo Steinberg's aforementioned text, that is of interest. The second section of the text features

essays which focus more clearly on Bynum's own research into gender and religious experience in the middle ages.

In "The Body of Christ in the Later Middle Ages: A Reply to Leo Steinberg," Bynum uses Steinberg's text as a sounding board from which to pursue an analysis of depictions of Christ's body, both textual and pictorial, in the late Medieval period: what did depictions of Christ's body entail, how was this body perceived? In response to these questions, Bynum considers Christ's body as having both male *and* female characteristics. Before discussing Christ's dual role as father and mother however, Bynum addresses what she considers to be her main concern with Steinberg's text: that Medieval and Renaissance writers and thinkers did not think the same way as modern society does about "biological sex and culturally constructed gender."<sup>40</sup> Therefore, by focusing on Christ's genitalia, artists of the Middle Ages and the early Renaissance were not necessarily looking to emphasize his *sexuality* or *masculinity*, but rather, and in this she agrees with Steinberg, his *humanity*. However, for Bynum, this *humanity* is one that is gender inclusive as she points to 'the fluidity' of gender in the Medieval period. In examining a different set of Medieval images, Bynum is looking to provide an alternative reading of the masculine Christ:

I wish to call attention to artistic depictions that suggest another sex for Christ's body -- depictions that suggest that Christ's flesh was sometimes seen as female, as lactating and giving birth.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>40</sup> Bynum, *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, 16.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 82.

By the fifteenth century, much theological thought was devoted to the body of Christ, and was supported by documents of the period; in such documents, *all* of Christ's body parts were perceived as indications of his humanity -- not only his genitalia -- and such parts were not categorically *male*.<sup>42</sup> For Bynum, the Medieval devout identified with Christ not necessarily because he was male, but because he suffered, just as all humans suffer. Throughout her book, Bynum discusses texts, and to a lesser degree images, in which Christ's body is depicted as female, or having female characteristics, in an effort to create a unified being, identifiable to all. In this case, Christ's flesh is conceived of as female flesh, emphasizing his dual role as nurturer and mother. Bynum writes, "Theologians did not discuss Christ as a sexual male; they did discuss Jesus as mother."<sup>43</sup> Literature of the Medieval and Renaissance periods often cites Christ's wound as "lactating" or providing life; to this end, Bynum looks to the similarities between depictions of Mary as the nursing mother and Christ as providing food from the wounds in his side.

Such images go further in depicting the *Jesus-as-mother* motif, as well as another textual and pictorial motif in which Jesus is seen as giving birth to the Church (images abound in which the Church is shown as emerging from Christ's side). After establishing this textual and pictorial tradition, Bynum then goes on to identify three main theories as to why Christ's flesh could be conceived of as female; included in these theories is a discussion of the possible female genealogy of Christ, beginning with Mary's mother, Anne, who begat Mary without male intervention, and so on.<sup>44</sup> Also, Christ's flesh was seen to engage in female practice, "Not only was Christ enfleshed with flesh from a

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>44</sup> For a discussion of these three strands, please see Bynum, pp. 98-101.

woman; his own flesh did womanly things: it bled, it bled food and it gave birth.”<sup>45</sup> In this sense, the female devout could better identify with Christ, as his experiences were similar to their own: “Holy women imitated Christ in their bodies; and Christ’s similar bleeding and feeding body was understood as analogous to theirs.”<sup>46</sup> Subsequently, it has been noted, that in twentieth-century Mexico, images of the crucified Christ have “regularly been dressed with female underclothes, a practice which has been interpreted as showing that some peasant women regard Jesus as having suffered in the manner of women.”<sup>47</sup> While Bynum’s research is firmly located in the later Medieval period, it would seem that these metaphors, or motifs of Jesus-as-female persist into the modern era.

“Although both men and women manipulated their bodies from the outside, so to speak, by flagellation and other forms of self-inflicted suffering, cases of psychosomatic manipulation (or manipulation from within) are almost exclusively female.”<sup>48</sup>

Basing her research on female devotional practices between 1200 and 1500, Bynum notes the concentrated shift in how the body is perceived in the West; female spirituality was beginning to manifest itself as squarely somatic, which in turn engendered a re-conceiving of the relationships between spirituality and matter. One of the reasons for this re-conception, or rather, new relationship, of spirituality to the body, was the continuous association of women to the body and flesh.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>47</sup> Jane Garnett and Gervase Rosser. “Christianity and Art.” *Apollo* 151.455 (January 2000): 14.

<sup>48</sup> Bynum, 186.

“Women’s devotion was characterized by penitential asceticism, especially self-inflicted suffering.”<sup>49</sup> Often cited as *erotic* in literature of the period, female piety (which many times manifested itself as experiences of self-torture) was often of an inward, secret nature. Unlike the men who frequently *performed* their faith and projected their relationships with Christ, women seemed to have more of an introspective, clandestine relationship with Christ, “Through the practice of abjection, then, the mystic undoes the hierarchy of self and other and ‘becomes’ through mystical union, one with the Other, one with her God.”<sup>50</sup> As with the devotion to the Eucharist (a discussion of which will follow), the majority of female devotional practice of the Medieval period centered upon the devout’s relationship to Christ, which frequently manifested itself as an imitation thereof. Often referred to as *paramystical phenomena*, these acts were considered psychosomatic and have since been categorized as hysteria or pathology. The label of *hysteric* had much to do with the perceived extravagant or extreme asceticism that was displayed by many pious women, this could include whipping oneself, starving oneself, burning oneself and even hanging oneself, “Holy women saw themselves as acting – not merely as suffering -- in *imitatio Christi*.”<sup>51</sup> While both men and women *performed* their devotion, female Christic devotion tended to be more introspective; their experiences were less about *showing*, than *experiencing*, *empathizing*.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 60.

<sup>50</sup> Christine Mazzoni. *Saint Hysteria* (Ithaca, N.Y. : Cornell University Press, 1996): 190.

<sup>51</sup> Bynum, 54.

<sup>52</sup> I will later argue that it is this offering up of flesh that propels the performances of Burden, Abramovic, Orlan and Flanagan.

## The Eucharist

“To receive was to become Christ – by eating, by devouring and being devoured.”<sup>53</sup>

After consulting numerous texts and images, Bynum comes to the conclusion that devotion to the Eucharist is the most popular form of devotional practice among women of the thirteenth century. Devotion to the Eucharist existed as devotion to Communion: eating and drinking the body and blood of Christ. This devotion manifested itself in many ways: holy anorexia, abstaining from food, save for the Communion; it was even as common as considering the act of eating as holy practice. There is the story of a certain female mystic, who, while too ill to eat any food, absorbed the host through her skin. Such attention to the Eucharist begs the question: Why? What was the appeal for pious medieval women? Numerous are the stories of female saints and mystics who subsisted on the Eucharist alone, exercising a form of holy fasting; in eating the crucified body, one would *become* the crucified body.<sup>54</sup>

Following the doctrine of transubstantiation, the Eucharist denoted the *real* presence of Christ, and in turn God (order of the real); metaphors of eating, drinking, ingesting and taking communion all stood in for a personal union with God.<sup>55</sup> More than a particularly *female* form of Christic devotion, the Eucharist became a chance, an opportunity, for women to experience the *humanity* of Christ: “Christ’s humanity was Christ’s body and blood.”<sup>56</sup> This was Christ’s humanity expressed as “flesh and food.” The Eucharist

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<sup>53</sup> Bynum, 126.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 129.

presented itself as an *ecstatic* union with Christ.<sup>57</sup> During Communion the Priest says, “The Body of Christ, which was given for thee. The Blood of Christ, which was shed for thee.” Communion provides the opportunity to reestablish man’s and woman’s link with God. In short, the Eucharist was experienced as a very physical reminder of Christ’s sacrifice; it was a way to connect, identify and take part in *this sacrifice*. To donate blood (in contemporary times) is still a partial sacrifice for the common good, a means of reconnecting with society and providing life.

Endemic to a discussion of female devotion to the Eucharist, is a discussion of ecstasy and *imitatio Christi*, as they are both devotional practices. There was an abundance of visions and ecstasies among the female devout of the period which culminated in the fusion of eroticism and asceticism, an important element of Medieval female devotion, “The image of bride or lover was clearly a central metaphor for the woman mystic’s union with Christ’s humanity.”<sup>58</sup> As previously mentioned, mystical union or ecstasy was often accompanied by what Bynum refers to as ‘paramystical phenomena.’ In such cases women saw, and more often than not *experienced* the touch of God, through any number of visions and experiences.<sup>59</sup>

Perhaps the most oft-cited example of this ecstatic union or relationship with Christ, was that of St. Catherine of Siena (1347-1380). In addition to experiencing the stigmata,

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<sup>57</sup> For a lengthier discussion of why the Eucharist and Christ’s humanity were so important to medieval women, see Bynum, 135.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>59</sup> Here, we can cite a contemporary example, the film *Agnes of God* (1985), directed by Norman Jewison, wherein the central character, novice nun Agnes, sees herself as having experienced an erotic union with God, which resulted in a virgin birth.

Catherine was often overtaken with “ecstasies” during her visions of Christ. These “ecstatic visions” led to her not being taken seriously by the Church. In many of these visions, Catherine of Siena imagined, or rather *experienced*, herself marrying Christ, with the holy foreskin adorning her finger as a wedding band (see figure 6). Catherine of Siena is also a fine example of the extreme female devotion to the Eucharist; it has been suggested in literature of the period, that Catherine subsisted solely on the bread of the Communion.

### *Imitatio Christi*

“No religious woman failed to experience Christ as wounded, bleeding and dying.”<sup>60</sup>

In her discussion of female Christic devotion, Bynum also notes the importance of self-mortification. This form of female devotion often manifested itself in both divinely-occurring and self-induced stigmata, and various acts of self-torture (including various acts of asceticism: fasting, sleep deprivation, self-flagellation etc.). Bynum writes:

Illness and asceticism were rather *imitatio christi*, an effort to plumb the depths of Christ’s humanity at the moment of his most insistent and terrifying humanness – the moment of his dying.<sup>61</sup>

Many such demonstrations resulted in an imitation of Christ’s crucifixion, they resulted in the *becoming* of Christ:

Women’s efforts to imitate this Christ involved *becoming* the crucified, not just patterning themselves after or expanding their compassion toward, but *fusing with*, the body on the cross.<sup>62</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Bynum, 131.

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

Bynum saw this as being achieved in two ways: through asceticism and eroticism.

Bynum also briefly addresses the role of blood in the *imitatio Christi*. Throughout the Medieval period, blood was symbolic of all bodily fluids and the shedding of such was considered an act of cleansing or purgation. In turn, Christ's blood was also understood in similar terms, the shedding of Christ's blood became a symbol of expiation.<sup>63</sup> With the Communion, wine became the symbol or manifestation of the blood of Christ. In many of the performances to be discussed, there is a reliance on the symbolism of blood, its iconographic meaning, as a symbol of sacrifice, purgation and expiation, as well as on its more contemporary connotations as carrier.

In discussing the female experience of *imitatio Christi*, Bynum also looks to the importance of the suffering body within this Medieval practice. During the Middle Ages, the body acted as a significant locus of suffering: Medieval women saw themselves fusing with Christ through self-imposed and involuntary suffering, as a result of illness or self-mortification. To this day there is a fine line drawn between suffering and ecstasy and this was no less the case during the Middle Ages: many transcribed visions or mystical experiences describe a melding of these two senses (as would be described centuries later by Freud as a "trenching" of pleasure into pain). In suffering, one could experience ecstasy. In many texts and images of the period, and to a greater degree in the transcriptions of various visions and ecstasies, women were depicted as the brides or lovers of Christ: these ascetic and ecstatic experiences were often, though not always, laced with sexual feelings. This relationship to Christ was also mirrored in the many

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 87.

experiences of the stigmata that arose during the period, the majority of which were experienced by women.

While it is true that Bynum is working almost exclusively from texts, what is most important here is her discussion of female *acts* or *performances* of devotional practice, namely *imitatio Christi*. Her investigation of “bodily metaphors for spiritual states,” is useful and can be applied to the performances to be analyzed (as it has been applied to Medieval religious practice). While still acknowledging the duality of mind and body, Bynum looks to the enmeshing of the two, whereby medieval religious experience, specifically women’s devotional practice, saw a manifestation of body-as-soul and vice versa. Bynum also analyzed Medieval female devotional practices as belying the social position of women of the period, *imitatio Christi* was no exception. Also useful for us, is Bynum’s understanding of the positive value of suffering for the Medieval lay person, as well as for the mystic or saint. This Medieval experience of pain was one that was not merely kept to the realm of the body (matter): “In technical theology as in popular miracle stories, pain was understood to be the experience of a psychosomatic unit.”<sup>64</sup> Suffering became just another means to connect or identify with Christ.

While both Steinberg and Bynum are working exclusively with Medieval and Renaissance models, what I want to glean from their projects is the various manners in which to talk about the gendering of Christ and, subsequently, religious experience. While Steinberg argues for the masculinization of Christ, Bynum argues for his *emasculinization*; what I would argue here, rather, is for the emergence of an

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 234.

androgynous body of Christ; one that is both father and mother, masculine and feminine. It is within the context of the *androgynous* body of Christ that one can best analyze the performances of Burden, Abramovic, Orlan and Flanagan.

### **Gendered Religious Experience: An Analogous View**

In her text “Le Bonheur des Béguines,” Julia Kristeva provides her own interpretation of female mystical devotion in the Medieval and Renaissance periods, with a discussion of “l’amour mystique” as it is experienced by the Béguines: “[O]n n’entre au couvent ou en béguinage que pour une seule raison: l’amour mystique.”<sup>65</sup> According to Kristeva, this manifestation of mystical love, or Christic love, is more than the interiorization of a *male* model of Christic devotion (one which often manifested itself in acts of self-mortification) and was not solely a result of the social position of religious women at the time, one that mirrored their roles as “servants and victims.” As with Bynum before her, Kristeva notes the intersections of suffering and ecstasy that marked female devotional practice, a love so intense that acts of self-mortification took on a pleasurable, even erotic quality:

L’identification amoureuse avec le Christ fut sans doute le noyau de cette aventure singulière qui a conduit une femme à passer des affres de la douleur aux cimes de la sérénité: douleur masculine (celle du Christ) dans laquelle se transfèrent maintes blessures et humiliations féminines, pour mieux se hisser à une image glorieuse de soi.<sup>66</sup>

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<sup>65</sup> Julia Kristeva. “Le Bonheur des Béguines.” *Le Jardin clos de l’âme* (Bruxelles : Martial et Snoeck, 1994): 167.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

Many of these acts of self-mortification were a result of an intense identification, or at times emulation, of Christ's passion, what Kristeva identifies as "*la réciprocité passionnelle de la femme mystique avec le corpus mysticum Christi.*"<sup>67</sup> This was iterated by medieval mystic Angèle de Foligno as "I am you and you are me."

For Kristeva, this "amour mystique" can stem from the isolation women feel as they enter the realm of the symbolic, leaving the mother and trying, to, although failing, to connect to the Other. In this respect, women are fundamentally alone. Where men can reconnect through sexual relationships, women are left (in most cases) without this outlet, creating something of a "secret garden." However, for some an *imitatio Christi* fulfills this role,

La religieuse, la béguine construit une expérience à la fois imaginaire (série de fantasmes), symbolique (adhésion à une loi sacrée) et réelle (modulation de son corps, de son existence, de son être entier) qui lui permet d'éviter ce choix ou plutôt de réconcilier ses deux versants: elle aime l'homme absolu (Jésus), se dévoue aux hommes (en soignant les symptômes des autres), apaise ses passions féminines (solitude et promiscuité tissant le travail collectif et les prières).<sup>68</sup>

Above all else, Kristeva's text examines what constitutes the solitude, isolation or loneliness of these female mystics, what constitutes this private relationship with Christ. For Kristeva the figure of Christ also reinforced what these women knew to be true, that in essence, "il n'y a de l'homme que castré."<sup>69</sup> For these women, the wounded, suffering and eventually dead Christ was their child, re-establishing their roles as women, caregivers, mothers; he was baby, son, husband, father and grand-father.<sup>70</sup> Kristeva also looks to the experience of *jouissance* as endemic to the ecstatic experience. For the purposes of

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 168.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

Medieval female religious experience, *jouissance* denotes an experience that is uniquely female; it is fluid, unending, and it belongs to the realm of the Imaginary, it is excessive and limitless and, finally, it is the experience of enjoyment.

### ***Eroticism and the Devotional Body***

In order to better understand the links between the suffering and the ecstatic experience, I would like to turn briefly to the writings of Georges Bataille as he sheds some much needed light on the murky crossroads of the two, and provides an alternative to Kristeva's largely psychoanalytic interpretations of the mystical experience. In the introduction to his text *Erotism: Death and Sensuality*, published for the first time in 1957, Georges Bataille writes, "Eroticism, it may be said, is assenting to life up to the point of death."<sup>71</sup> This assertion, not to be read so much as a definition, but as a formula, sets the tone for Bataille's discussion of eroticism, which includes an analysis of the myriad of intersections to be found between the suffering and ecstatic body; the similarities between the act of love and the act of sacrifice. In the chapter entitled "Mysticism and Sensuality," Bataille discusses the many similarities in rhetoric to be found within an examination of *divine love* and *sexuality*. However, while many psychiatrists of the mid-twentieth century discussed the experiences of mystics and visionaries as being solely sexual in nature, resulting from potential or established neuroses, Bataille begged to differ. Admitting that the affinities between the two were undeniable, Bataille asserted that these ecstatic visions, or mystical experiences, amounted to more than "transposed sexuality."

There are staggering similarities and even corresponding or interchangeable characteristics in the two systems, erotic and mystical. But these connections can

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<sup>71</sup> Georges Bataille. *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1986): 11.

only be at all clearly perceived if the two kinds of emotion are actually experienced.<sup>72</sup>

For Freud, religious experiences, more particularly mystical experiences, were often nothing more than suppressed sexuality. Taking particular aim at psychoanalysis, Bataille felt that psychiatrists were unable to describe, or ascribe to, a situation they had never experienced themselves, therefore their explanations as to the basis of mystical experience were unfounded. Hence, the question becomes: How does one negotiate the liminal space between eroticism and mystical spirituality?

Throughout the chapter, Bataille frequently refers to a text written by Carmelite Father Tesson entitled *Sexualité, morale et mystique*, which espouses a more liberal account of the relationship between sexuality and religion, “two forces attract us towards God: one, sexuality is ‘written into our nature’; the other one, mysticism, ‘comes from Christ’.”<sup>73</sup> While traditional Christian doctrine does not take such a liberal stance towards sexuality, Father Tesson’s remarks do elucidate the nebulous relationship between eroticism, spirituality and the *Christic* relationship or experience. For Bataille, the key to such an understanding lies in the often synonymous spaces between life and death, “The bond between life and death has many aspects. It can be felt equally in sexual and mystical experience.”<sup>74</sup> Throughout the entire book, Bataille is continuously attempting to demonstrate the common ground between sex and death, “For the truth is that between death and the reeling, heady notion of little death, the distance is hardly noticeable.”<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>72</sup> Ibid., 226.

<sup>73</sup> Father Tesson, *Sexualité, morale et mystique* as cited in Georges Bataille’s *Erotism*, 227.

<sup>74</sup> Bataille, 230.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 239. In French, an orgasm is also referred to as “the little death” or *la petite mort*.

Important for Bataille's writings is the French term *jouissance*, a term which can connote female sexual pleasure, excess, multiplicity, fluidity; for Bataille the term also relates to death and eroticism and sensuality. Equally important for followers of Lacan, the term has a place in the realm of the Imaginary and later firmly planted itself within the tradition of "l'écriture féminin."

In a lengthy passage, Bataille notes the many similarities that arise in erotic and mystical experiences; in both cases there arises a:

non-attachment to ordinary life, indifference to its needs, anguish felt in the midst of this until the being reels, and the way left open to a spontaneous surge of life that is usually kept under control but which bursts forth in freedom and infinite bliss.<sup>76</sup>

Lastly, in both instances there is a complete detachment from material conditions. I believe that Bataille's examination of eroticism and mystical experience is imperative to an understanding of Christic masochistic performance, illuminating the various links to be found between ecstasy and suffering, eroticism and death.

During the Medieval period, "[I]mitation of the martyrs, of the apostles and of Christ – became more and more literal."<sup>77</sup> What I have attempted to do in this chapter is twofold. I began by mapping a brief trajectory through the various investigations of Christic iconography beginning with the more traditional avenues of study, such as the Passion, the *arma Christi* and so on. In doing so, I hoped to create a selective inventory of Christic

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 247.

<sup>77</sup> Bynum, 145.

practice, which included the various devotional practices of saints and mystics, from the practices of isolation and confinement, to the more aggressive forms of piety such as flagellation and other forms of self-mortification. It is these practices which constitute *imitatio Christi* and to which I will be referring back to in subsequent chapters. Following this inventory, I moved on to the more progressive research examining Christ's sexuality and the gendering of religious experience. What emerges from these discussions is the centrality of suffering within the experience of the *imitatio Christi* and the positive value that suffering accrues during this period. In some religious experiences and devotional practice, suffering takes on a pleasurable edge, mixing elements of pain, with ecstasy and *jouissance*.

In my readings of Steinberg and Bynum, (whose theories I hope to have shown are just as applicable today), I have attempted to map the arguments regarding the gendering of Christ, in order to put forth my own arguments, which urge for an *androgynization* of Christ's body, one where he is both father and mother, masculine and feminine. It is in this interpretation of the Christic body, one that acknowledges the *ambivalence* of the Christic body, that we can best pave the way for an examination into the phenomenon I have identified as Christic masochism and the subsequent Christic masochistic performances to be discussed. In each performance, a discussion of gender is central. In the next chapter, I will be laying the groundwork for a theory of masochism that is conducive to Christic masochistic performance.

## Chapter 3

### The Law of the Mother: Psychoanalysis and Masochism

First described as a “perversion” in the nineteenth century, the term *masochism* was officially coined by Krafft-Ebing in 1869 and was used to denote a specific perversion whereby the subject experienced pleasure through pain, humiliation and subjection. The illness was named after the nineteenth century writer Leopold von Sacher Masoch whose novels featured this kind of unique sexual behaviour.<sup>78</sup> For the purpose of this project, we will be examining various psychoanalytic interpretations of masochism and how these relate to the Christic body in performance art and performance art in general. What are the links between the masochist’s body and the Christic body? To what end is suffering used, and to what purpose? Why have acts of masochism been employed in order to recall the *Christic* body? While masochism has been a subject of interest to philosophers and theologians alike much before the advent of psychoanalysis, it is through psychoanalysis that the concept was developed, and subsequently, the discourse. In this chapter I will be charting the progression of such theories in an effort to better understand the psychoanalytic interpretation of masochism. In addition to establishing a general definition of the practice, I will also examine its gendered history and its engagement with Christic practices and ritual. Once this provisory groundwork has been laid, the following chapters will examine the works of Burden, Abramovic, Orlan and Flanagan, as they engage with Christic masochistic performance.

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<sup>78</sup> As will be discussed further on, Gilles Deleuze is one of few who examine masochism from its literary genesis, focusing his analysis on the novels, letters and practices of Leopold von Sacher Masoch. This he does through a psychoanalytic approach.

## Sigmund Freud: Progression of a Theory

Within the fields of medicine, psychology and psychoanalysis, masochism was considered a “perversion” -- one which was defined as the desire to experience suffering and pain at the hands of the sexual object.<sup>79</sup> It was defined as a *passive* perversion and one that was, initially, thought to merely be a reversal of its *active* counterpart: sadism (the desire to inflict suffering upon the sexual subject). The development of Sigmund Freud’s theories regarding masochism is convoluted and often paradoxical. Within his studies regarding the ego and the superego, Freud notes that at times, the subject’s sadistic impulses were turned back upon the self, creating a unique situation referred to as masochism. As early as 1900, within the context of *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Freud asserts that there is a masochistic component to the sexual constitutions of many people. At this point, the masochistic component stems from a reversal of an aggressive, sadistic component, there is no *primary* masochism: “[I]t may be doubtful at first whether it [masochism] can ever occur as a primary phenomenon or whether, on the contrary, it may not invariably arise from a transformation of sadism.”<sup>80</sup> In this case, the targeted sexual object, which in sadism is an external object, becomes internalized and it is the self that becomes the targeted sexual object (the ego). The two tendencies, sadism and masochism, often occur within the same individual: he who likes doling out pain, also enjoys receiving it. In this instance, however, one of the two inclinations will be stronger and will dictate the individual’s sexual behaviour.

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<sup>79</sup> This definition is put forth in Sigmund Freud’s “Three Essays on Sexuality” (1901) *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. VII. Translated and edited by James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-analysis, 1974): 158.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

By 1919, with his work, *An Infantile Neurosis*, Freud points to the *passive* nature of masochism and aligns it with femininity. Also of note within this essay is Freud's discussion of a child's neurosis which often manifested itself in masochistic acts. In this case, the masochistic child identified himself with Christ. This is the first instance in which Freud discusses masochism, passivity and femininity with regard to the figure of Christ and his suffering and eventual (passive) sacrifice. Guilt also plays a strong role within this particular analysis and will continue to play a role in Freud's on-going discussions of masochism. In *A Child is Being Beaten* (1917), which he would later describe as being a paper on masochism, Freud continues, "The transformation of sadism into masochism appears to be due to the influence of the sense of guilt which takes part in the act of repression."<sup>81</sup>

With *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), Freud begins to amend his previous interpretation of masochism and alludes to the fact that there may indeed be a primary masochism, one that may precede sadism,

The account that was formerly given of masochism required emendation as being too sweeping in one respect: there *might* be such a thing as primary masochism – a possibility which I had contested at that time.<sup>82</sup>

By 1924 and the publication of the essay *The Economic Problem of Masochism*, he is certain of there being a primary masochism and goes so far as to divide it into one basic form and two derivatives thereof. Up to this point, Freud had been discussing the possibility of an *erotogenic masochism*, but here he adds two other forms: *feminine* and

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<sup>81</sup> Freud, "A Child is Being Beaten" (1917) Vol. XVII: 194.

<sup>82</sup> Freud, "Beyond the Pleasure Principle" (1920) Vol. XVIII: 55.

*moral* masochism: “Masochism comes under our observation in three forms: as a condition imposed on sexual excitation, as an expression of the feminine nature and as a norm of behaviour.”<sup>83</sup> By 1932, Freud posits that masochism may indeed be older than sadism.

### **Erotogenic, Feminine and Moral Masochism**

This primary masochism is what Freud dubs “erotogenic masochism;” it is undeniably linked to sexual excitation and lies at the base of its two derivatives: feminine and moral masochism. In his text *The Economic Problem of Masochism*, Freud looks at how masochism can exist in relation to the pleasure principle – why would one deliberately search for pain and displeasure? As a partial explanation Freud writes,

[I]t may well be that nothing of considerable importance can occur in the organism without contributing some component to the excitation of the sexual instinct. In accordance with this, the excitation of pain and unpleasure would be bound to have the same result, too.<sup>84</sup>

For Freud, the answer to these questions, regarding pleasure in suffering, lies in the existing relationships between the pleasure principle and the life and death instincts.

Freud worked with a dualistic notion of the subject’s instincts: these are the life instincts (made up of feelings of pleasure and later, self-preservation) and the death instincts (made up of destroying forces). In masochism, the destroying forces of the self (death instinct) are turned back upon the ego. One of the roles of the libido is to placate or

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<sup>83</sup> Freud, “The Economic Problem of Masochism” (1924) Vol. XIX: 161.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 163.

annihilate the “destroying forces” of the self, this is accomplished by turning the majority of these forces outwards towards objects in the external world, “The instinct is then called the destructive instinct, the instinct for mastery, or the will to power.”<sup>85</sup> A portion of this instinct becomes swallowed up by the sexual function; this becomes *sadism*. Another portion of this instinct remains within the organism itself and becomes part of the libido with the self as object; this in turn becomes the primary *erotogenic masochism*. For Freud, this type of masochism is a remainder from the phase in which there is a coalescence between the death instinct and Eros – after these instincts have been projected to the outside world (sadism), it can then be re-interjected as a secondary masochism.<sup>86</sup> Erotogenic masochism accompanies the libido through its various phases; this is evidenced by the assorted fantasies of the masochistic subject, for example, the wish to be beaten by the father comes from the *sadistic-anal phase*, whereas castration fantasies arise from the *phallic stage* (the psychosexual stages are as follows: the oral stage, the anal stage, the phallic stage and the genital stage).

At this point, Freud divides erotogenic masochism into two sub-forms, the first he refers to as feminine masochism.<sup>87</sup> Before the publication of *The Economic Problem of Masochism*, Freud had already examined cases of feminine masochism in his text on beating fantasies. According to Freud, feminine masochism is the most easily understood manifestation of the perversion and the one that relies most heavily on fantasy. Restricting the majority of his comments to male cases, Freud noted that the fantasies

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<sup>85</sup> Ibid., 163.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., 164.

<sup>87</sup> While *feminine* masochism connotes a particular type of masochism that favors passive and submissive behavior, it is experienced by men and not to be confused with what we identify here as *female masochism* which is the experience of masochism by women.

(which he would later refer to as “performances”), would often involve the subject being gagged, whipped, humiliated, and otherwise forced into obedience. Freud notes in his text that he is basing his findings on cases of masochism in men, as the majority of his masochistic patients were of this gender. His comments on masochism in women are few and create theoretical problems for his discussion of the perversion, this gendering of masochism will be discussed towards the end of the chapter. In short, the masochist wanted to be treated as a “naughty child,” with all of the accompanying punishments. Freud goes further to say that where these fantasies are elaborated upon, the subject often finds himself experiencing feminine feelings and situations, feelings of being castrated, copulated with and childbirth.<sup>88</sup> Already described as feminine in nature, here masochism takes on perceived female behaviours and experiences; the subject places himself in submissive or passive situations. Guilt also plays a role in feminine masochism, largely stemming from feelings associated with infantile masturbation. It should be noted that while the feelings of guilt need to be expiated, they do not feature as prominently here as with moral masochism.

Where feminine masochism was largely sexualized, moral masochism, is, at first glance, thought to be *loosened* from sexual excitation. Rather than searching for pleasure in pain, it is a search for punishment for the expiation of guilt; this sense of guilt lies mostly in the unconscious. Freud refers to this type of masochism as *moral* as it deals with the function of the ego in relation to the superego, with our ensuing sense of morality stemming from the Oedipal complex. The consciousness of guilt arises as a result of the

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<sup>88</sup> Ibid., 162.

“expression of tension between the ego and the super-ego.”<sup>89</sup> Here Freud differentiates between what he refers to as an “unconscious extension of morality” and moral masochism,

In the former the accent falls on the heightened sadism of the super-ego to which the ego submits; in the latter, it falls on the ego’s own masochism which seeks punishment, whether from the super-ego or from the parental powers outside.<sup>90</sup>

As moral masochism is unconscious, the “perversion” must be deduced by the subject’s behaviour and can be brought to the surface and treated through psychoanalysis.

While Freud considers this *unconscious sense of guilt* as being paramount to the moral masochist, he replaces the term with *a need for punishment* as it more closely personifies the goals of the subject. For the moral masochist, it is the suffering and punishment that matter most. In this respect, the moral masochist purposefully places himself in situations which cause him to suffer; he searches for situations, or performs “sinful acts” which elicit punishment from what Freud calls the *great parental power of Destiny*. In order to provoke these parental powers the subject often performs acts that go against his own interests, culminating in his own destruction. What causes these cases to still be referred to as *masochistic* is the continued involvement of the libido:

Conscience and morality have arisen through the overcoming, the desexualization, of the Oedipus complex; but through moral masochism morality becomes sexualized once more, the Oedipus complex is revived and the way is opened for a regression from morality to the Oedipus complex.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>89</sup> Ibid., 166-167.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

These acts of self-destruction sought after by the moral masochist provide such libidinal satisfaction.

What is interesting to note is that Freud sees masochism as arising when there is a “cultural suppression” of outwards aggression; the turning back of sadism upon the self occurs “where a *cultural suppression of the instincts* holds back a large part of the subject’s destructive instinctual components from being exercised in life.”<sup>92</sup> Following this conjecture, women would tend be more masochistic in that their aggressive instincts are suppressed through education, social environment and family. However, it is in this area that Freud’s theories regarding masochism lack, his discussion regarding masochism in women is almost nil and it is up to later psychoanalysts such as Sacha Nacht and Theodor Reik to develop this area.

What is most relevant to our project is the eroticizing of guilt that takes place in moral masochism, with morality being sexualized afresh. This way the subject unconsciously desires to feel guilty, desires punishment; these desires can manifest themselves in a number of ways. Self-punishment can suspend the ego’s fear of the superego, it can defer or delay this fear. This passive sexual attitude is not only related to guilt, but to castration complexes as well. Briefly, the castration complex is understood in psychoanalytic terms as the anxiety, and more importantly the guilt, the male child experiences during the phallic stage. Upon discovering the anatomical differences between male and female, the male child is led to believe that the female child’s penis has been “cut off.” Feeling guilty for experiences of sexual desire for his mother, the male child experiences anxiety

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., 170.

(castration anxiety), fearing that the father will discover these feelings in the child and punish him accordingly (castration). According to Freud, in addition to experiencing a different type of “castration complex,” the female child experiences “penis envy,” and must “create” one of her own, hence childbirth. This problematic theory has been fodder for many feminist critiques of psychoanalytic theory.

### **Sacha Nacht: Masochism and the Sacrificial Act**

Noted psychoanalyst and one of the founders of *L'institut de psychanalyse* in Paris, Sacha Nacht (1901-1977) also put forth a theory on masochism, dividing it up into two types: erotogenic and moral masochism. In his text, *Le Masochisme*, written in 1953, Nacht defines masochism as: “Un état névropathique caractérisé par la recherche de la souffrance. Le masochiste éprouve un véritable besoin, un ‘appétit’ de souffrir.”<sup>93</sup> Where Freud gave equal attention to the three types of masochism, Nacht concentrates his study on *erotogenic masochism* whereby the search for pain and suffering is a conscious one, and *moral masochism*, whereby suffering is sought after indirectly and unconsciously.<sup>94</sup> In both of these instances, masochism is not so much an end, but a means to an end.<sup>95</sup> It is a defence mechanism, “d’autodéfense pathologique,” whereby a partial sacrifice is made in order to save the whole, “Tout se passe dès lors ainsi qu’il sera démontré plus loin, comme si le masochiste devant le danger de tout perdre, consentait à un sacrifice partiel pour sauver le reste.”<sup>96</sup> This partial sacrifice (masochism) is made to stave off castration,

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<sup>93</sup> Sacha Nacht. *Le Masochisme*. 3e édition (Paris: Editions Payot, 1965): 5.

<sup>94</sup> Nacht dispensed with the category of “feminine masochism” as he felt it was not one of the primary forms of masochism, i.e. erotogenic or moral masochism. Furthermore, he believed that the behavior exhibited by the feminine masochist could be considered an extension of that of the moral masochist. See Nacht, 30.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

or the fear thereof; while the suffering is real, the act from which the masochist is trying to save him/herself is not. Nacht also recognizes the role guilt plays. Here suffering is used by the superego as a means of auto-punishment which in turn reduces the guilt complex. The superego becomes indispensable in the understanding of masochism. While Nacht's studies of masochism stem from Freud's research, he goes further in trying to find the exact cause of this behaviour, and subsequently, its cure. According to Nacht, there have been no satisfactory reasons given for how pain becomes pleasure/*jouissance*. Rather than theorizing, he wishes to conduct his research through clinical observation, beginning with the possible intersections between the death drive and the libidinal impulses: the masochist seeks suffering in the hope of attaining sexual satisfaction.

For Nacht, masochism is divided up into two types: erotogenic and moral masochism, with the element of "feminine masochism" being inherent in both of these types. The two can be differentiated by, among other things, their degree of avowal: where the erotogenic masochist consciously seeks pain and suffering, the moral masochist does so indirectly and unconsciously. Where one is largely focused on sexual practice, the other focuses on one's general attitude, or personality. Nacht furthers these distinctions by providing an analysis of both. The erotogenic masochist seeks corporeal pain and relations that rely on dependence, subordination and humiliation. Implicit in these acts of masochism are elements of suspense and anticipation – these elements become an intrinsic aspect of all examinations of masochism and characterize all of the performances to be discussed. In addition to its anticipatory nature, it is necessary for the masochist that the pain and suffering not surpass a certain degree, it must be *manageable*.

In his discussion of erotogenic masochism, Nacht relies on the same binary divisions as Freud: *masochism* is passive and feminine by nature whereas *sadism* is aggressive and masculine by nature. Both erotogenic and moral masochism arise from experiences in the pre-genital stages, “La perversion masochiste repose sur le mécanisme habituel des perversions sexuelles: *fixation et régression à des phases pré-génitales de l’évolution sexuelle*.”<sup>97</sup>

The majority of Nacht’s analysis is spent in discussing moral masochism, which upon first examination does not appear to be of a sexual nature and if so, it must be unconsciously realized. The moral masochist does not recognize that he/she is such and negates the fact that all suffering is self-imposed, and likewise does not recognize that these sufferings are related to libidinal impulses. According to Nacht, this type of masochist needs to undergo psychoanalysis before he/she recognizes that his/her behaviour is of a masochistic character.<sup>98</sup> The main characteristics of the moral masochist are thus: a constant feeling of pain, indefinite suffering, tension and dissatisfaction, a need to complain, a need to demonstrate one’s self as being unhappy, a constant feeling of frustration and an incapability of solving life’s small complexities and an inability to enjoy life.<sup>99</sup>

### **Masochism in Women**

Where Nacht provides his most original research is in his examination of masochism in women, an area, that up to that point, had been little touched by psychoanalysts as a

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<sup>97</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>98</sup> Nacht uses the terms *moral masochist* and *masochistic character* interchangeably.

<sup>99</sup> Nacht, 76.

result of its alleged paradoxical nature. According to Nacht, male-dominated societies have forced women into roles of submission, passivity and dependence. This stems from woman's role as "biologically inferior" to her male counterpart. With less physical strength, and a "passive" sexual organ, it would be simple to assume that all women are, by nature, masochistic. This exists in relation to what Nacht refers to as "painful reproductive functions:" childbirth, menstruation. In addition to their passive nature, therefore, women also bear intermittent pain. However simple the diagnosis of the female masochist may appear, Nacht assures us that this is not the case -- this is indeed the crux of the problem: what constitutes masochistic behaviour in women?

It is in this respect that Nacht disagrees with Freud -- these feminine traits deemed masochistic in men, are not so in women. For Nacht, the difference lies in the degree of behavior and its location:

Ce qui est vrai c'est que l'érotisme plus diffus de la femme et son attitude dans l'étreinte amoureuse, font que les caractères de sa sexualité diffèrent de ceux de l'homme. Si ces mêmes caractères mènent l'homme droit au masochisme lorsqu'il les emprunte à la femme, ils ne constituent pour celle-ci que des éléments normaux. Ce n'est que leur *accentuation* dans des circonstances ayant troublé l'évolution sexuelle infantile qui conduira la femme à une perversion ou à une névrose masochiste.<sup>100</sup>

Here Nacht furthers another sexist categorization. Masochism may manifest itself in a woman through a failure to successfully enter the Oedipal stage, and the wish to revert back to a phallic stage where she has not yet discovered her lack of the phallus. Women who experience regression early on in life will forever be competing against men, will demonstrate outwardly aggressive behaviour and wish to prove their virility; however,

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., 114-115.

while their outward behaviour is characteristically *male/aggressive* their inward behaviour is of a self-punishing kind. In this case, it is the *aggressive* woman who is most likely prone to masochistic acts.

In other cases, Nacht sees masochism arising as a reaction to a perceived castration. Upon entering the genital stage and realizing the lack of a penis, some women believed it to have been cut off, a castration, “elle s’imaginera cette castration comme un châtiment mérité.”<sup>101</sup> In this respect, the castration is a “merited punishment” and the woman continually looks for a repeat of this punishment, aligning it with feelings of guilt and sexual pleasure which result in masochistic acts. Throughout his clinical observation, Nacht noted that there tend to be more cases of erotogenic masochism in men, however, masochistic fantasies tend to be more common among women. Moral masochism is found to an equal degree in both men and women and is not elaborated upon in length in Nacht’s study of masochism in women.

### **Theodor Reik: Christian Masochism**

“Le Masochisme est une tendance instinctive commune en tant que possibilité et réalisation à tous les êtres humains, et ne devient pathologique qu’en dépassant certaines limites et en adoptant une nature qui exclut presque toutes les autres directions de l’instinct.”<sup>102</sup>

As both a disciple and detractor of Freud, Theodor Reik produced a collection of essays regarding the origins and social effects of masochism: *Le Masochisme* (1953). The collection, produced over three decades of psychoanalytic research, attempts to shed some much needed light on the “problem of masochism.” For Reik, masochism is above

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<sup>101</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>102</sup> Theodor Reik. *Le Masochisme* (Paris: Éditions Payot, 2000): 210.

all else, a paradox, a search for pleasure through pain. He then goes on to list the main characteristics of masochism: “l’élément passif, le sentiment d’impuissance, la soumission à une autre personne, le traitement cruel, humiliant et honteux infligé par cette personne, et l’excitation sexuelle résultante.”<sup>103</sup> Each of these characteristics manifests themselves in some form or other, whether in masochism as a perversion, or the masochistic character (social masochism).<sup>104</sup> Where Reik produces the most original research is in his dissection of masochism into three main elements, “la signification spéciale de la fantaisie; le facteur d’attente ou de suspense (la nécessité d’un certain développement de l’excitation); le trait démonstratif.”<sup>105</sup> Each of these elements is to be found in all cases of masochism.<sup>106</sup>

### **Fantasy, Suspense and Demonstration**

The first element, which Reik characterizes as *fantasy*, is to be found in all cases of masochism, whether physical or psychological. It is the element upon which all else hinges, “L’importance de ce facteur est prouvée par le fait que les individus doués de peu d’imagination ne montrent pas de tendance à devenir masochistes.”<sup>107</sup> It demonstrates the importance of imagination and the role it plays in any masochistic act (or performance).

These fantasies can be acted out alone, or with the help of others (the development of the *contract*), or in some cases, these fantasies remain as psychological exercises. Inherent in

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<sup>103</sup> Ibid., 50.

<sup>104</sup> Here Reik uses the same paradigm as Nacht: masochism exists as both a “physical perversion” and a general attitude towards life, what he terms a “masochistic character” (or social masochism).

<sup>105</sup> Reik., 78.

<sup>106</sup> These three elements, in addition to the importance of the contract, make up much of the subsequent research regarding masochism, see Deleuze and Zizek.

<sup>107</sup> Reik, 53.

masochistic fantasy is the role of ritual: each masochistic fantasy is dictated by strict parameters regarding order and practice. It is bound up in rules and contracts and has much in common with both rituals of religion and magic. A change of order or costume can often lessen the result. What is interesting to note, is that in many cases of masochistic fantasy, the subject acts as spectator only, the attraction here being a certain kind of voyeurism. This places the audience of a performance art piece in a particular light as he/she becomes the masochistic voyeur in an elaborate scene of someone else's machinations. This aspect of voyeurism in relation to the audience/performer will be further elaborated.

In addition to the element of fantasy, Reik places much emphasis on the element of *suspense* within the masochistic paradigm. This element of suspense often manifests itself in a type of tension or anxiety -- a pleasurable/painful anticipation, "La tension masochiste oscille plus fortement que tout autre tension sexuelle entre le plaisir et l'anxiété, et tend à éterniser cet état."<sup>108</sup> Within the masochistic fantasy there is a tendency to prolong events, in anticipation of a heightened pleasure. In addition to the psychological suspense, there is also physical suspension. Many masochistic fantasies include some form of suspension, a sense of stasis. While not the same thing, I believe there to be a link between suspense and suspension.

Both elements of fantasy and suspense lead to Reik's third requisite component of masochism, that is its demonstrative nature, "[le trait démonstratif] souligne le fait que dans tout cas de masochisme authentique, la souffrance, la gêne, l'humiliation, la honte,

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<sup>108</sup> Ibid., 67.

sont montrées et pour ainsi dire exhibées.”<sup>109</sup> This demonstrative trait is also present in non-sexualized forms of masochism. At this point Reik specifies why he chose the term “demonstrative” and not “exhibitionist.” By using the term “exhibitionist” it is implied that the subject is proud of what he/she is exhibiting, the subject deems it beautiful or worthy of an audience. This is not the case for the masochist, indeed he/she finds his/her actions to be degrading, humiliating and shameful.<sup>110</sup>

Fréquemment nous trouvons le mélange du désir de cacher et de montrer manifeste dans la démonstration par le masochiste qu’il peut souffrir en silence.... Cette souffrance silencieuse soulignée tient à être observée, le calme avec lequel elle est supportée est là pour être admiré.<sup>111</sup>

In this case there is an oscillation between hiding and showing, even the masochist’s silent sufferings are displayed, or demonstrated – they are endured to be observed. Again this demonstrative trait is both physical and psychical, Reik cites the confession as being an example of the latter. It is in the discussion of the demonstrative nature of masochism that Reik first explores the possible masochistic nature, or masochistic traits of religion; he looks to the martyrdoms of saints as obvious examples of the public nature of the masochist’s sufferings,

Les martyrs du Christianisme primitif attachaient une importance capitale au fait que leur souffrance *ad majorem Christi gloriam* était publique... Ils aimaient montrer leurs blessures et leurs humiliations; ils désiraient que le monde entier connut leur zèle passionné.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>109</sup> Ibid., 79.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid., 87.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid., 83.

<sup>112</sup> Ibid., 84.

In most cases, martyrdoms were *performed* in front of an audience, crowds would gather for the executions of the devout. In the cases where the subject would endure his sufferings alone, (i.e. St. Anthony's trials in the desert), even these martyrs had an audience: God.<sup>113</sup> Each of these three elements, as laid out by Reik, is integral to all practices of masochism and consequently are inherent in all masochistic performance art. Elements of fantasy, suspense and demonstration also add to the theatrical quality of masochistic performance.

Before discussing Reik's views on masochism in women, I would like to briefly mention his thoughts regarding the feminine traits of masochism. While Freud believed the male masochist to display definitive *feminine* behaviour (masochism as a 'feminine' perversion), Reik notes the limitations of these observations. Acknowledging the "passive" nature of the masochist as being a feminine trait, and some elements of masochistic fantasy, Reik suggests that what is being played with here is not true femininity, but rather a caricature thereof, "Si le masochisme, comme le croyait Freud, est l'expression du caractère féminin, c'est une expression déformée et caricaturale."<sup>114</sup> Rather, for the practicing male masochist, the woman exists as benevolent tormentor. As Deleuze later discusses, the women in Masoch's novels are cold and cruel, but not without a maternal nature, she reaches the level of the Ideal. Reik similarly writes: "Pour le masochiste, la femme qui tourmente a le même charme que ces idoles."<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Ibid.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid., 201.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid., 206.

## Masochism and Women

As with Freud and Nacht before him, Reik believed masochism to be less common among women. Where he disagreed with Nacht was in the actual make-up of the perversion; where Nacht saw male and female masochism as the same clinically-speaking, Reik saw them as differing greatly. Where Nacht merely approached female masochism in terms of a sexual perversion, Reik goes further to explore its social contexts, going as far as to say that women are conditioned and encouraged through education to exercise a "vague and light masochism."<sup>116</sup> However, these passive tendencies must be exercised and enjoyed to the extreme for them to be considered a perversion; they must also be accompanied by a search for humiliation and expiation. This is where one of the many paradoxes lie, while women are conditioned to have masochistic characters, they are nonetheless found, as a whole, to be less masochistic than men.

In an earlier text where Reik focused more closely on masochism in women, he wrote, "The masochistic phantasy of woman has the character of yielding and surrender rather than that of the rush ahead, of the orgiastic accumulation, of the self-abandonment of man."<sup>117</sup> He goes further to express female masochism as almost anaemic, relating it to a conscious transgression of bourgeois order rather than a hostile enemy takeover. The reasons for differences in make-up of the masochistic fantasy are twofold: differences in the capacity of the libido in men and women and differing levels of intensity with regard

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<sup>116</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>117</sup> Theodor Reik. *Masochism in Sex and Society*. Trans. by Margaret H. Beigel & Gertrude M. Kurth (New York: Grove Press, 1962): 216.

to the sadistic impulse in men and women.<sup>118</sup> Here is where the crux seems to lie: masochism has its origins (according to Reik) in sadistic fantasies, without these strong sadistic fantasies there can be no development of masochism. Women are found to be less sadistic than men and are taught to repress their sadistic impulses, where men are encouraged to let them flourish. Reik also believes women to be almost physically incapable of sadism as they lack the *preliminary condition* of sadism, that is, the penis. This is a problematic statement and one that I reject in my dismissal of “female masochism.” Considering all of these factors, it would seem that women, according to Reik, are certainly less prone to masochistic fantasies and when indulged, their fantasies, or masochistic practices have more to do with a quiet submission than anything more ardent and passionate. In addition, Reik observed that the levels of guilt and shame never reach the same intensities in women and therefore the need for expiation is lessened. They are also less destructive than men and this can also be applied to self-destruction. Here Reik examines the *less physical* forms of suicide favoured by women, for example, drowning and poisoning.

### **Social Masochism**

At this point Reik makes a distinction between sexual and social masochism. Where Freud had termed this form of masochism “moral,” Reik calls this desexualized form “social masochism” as it has less to do with “morals” than with unconscious feelings of guilt. The designation also implies its engagement with the social sphere of the subject, rather than his/her private sexual life, “Il s’agit d’une continuation de la peur infantile du père, et plus tard de la substitution à celle-ci de la peur de la société et de ses

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<sup>118</sup> Reik, *Le Masochisme*, 213.

représentants choisis.”<sup>119</sup> As previously mentioned, the social masochist often finds him/herself in humiliating, shameful situations which are usually unconsciously sought after. Where social masochism differentiates itself from sexual masochism is in the apparent lack of pleasure and also in the absence of a second party,

Lorsque le masochiste sexuel tire son plaisir des mauvais traitements, le masochiste social ne ressent que du déplaisir, se sent seulement humilié, maltraité, dégradé et insulté. Dans le premier cas, la souffrance est négligée ou valorisée comme un moyen d’obtenir du plaisir, dans le second elle est intensifiée et considérée comme un désagrément.<sup>120</sup>

Where others have suggested that there are no comparisons to be made between the two types of masochism, Reik sees several “bridges” that link the two forms. These bridges are to be found in the unconscious fantasies of both, with the preliminary link being the inclusion of feelings of guilt. There is also possible transformation from one sphere to the other: often repressed or “cured” sexual masochism can manifest itself in social masochistic acts. For Reik, acts of religious masochism belong in the sphere of social masochism, however, as he had previously ascertained, there are commonalities between the two types -- social masochism was at times an indication of a repressed sexual masochism. Where does this leave the performances to be discussed? Can they be expressions of sexual and social masochism, having attributes of both? This will be further discussed with regard to the individual artists and performances.

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<sup>119</sup> Ibid., 285.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid., 296.

## Christian Masochism

“Certains des paradoxes du Christ, tels qu’ils nous furent transmis, sont comme forme et comme contenu, d’une nature en ce sens masochiste. Ils indiquent la tendance de faire de la gêne et de la souffrance les éléments de plaisir, de l’humiliation, et de la honte des instruments du désir.”<sup>121</sup>

In a section entitled, “Les Paradoxes du Christ,” Reik looks specifically at how the masochistic paradigm has much in common with Christ’s teachings, and more generally, with Christian rhetoric; Christian behaviour and ideals often correspond with what Reik sees as being the psychological basis of social masochism. Within Christianity, suffering developed legitimacy and value. Just as the masochist, the ideal Christian (modelled on the life of Christ) experiences pleasure in the face of discomfort and suffering, with guilt and humiliation becoming tools of desire.<sup>122</sup> For Reik, a masochistic attitude is evident not only in the suffering of Christ, but in the establishment of this model of suffering. In Christianity, the life and death of Christ become the glorification and the overall legitimization of suffering. In addition, Reik sees Christ as subverting social order, “Le Christ comme les vieux prophètes, était un grand hérétique, qui attaquait les institutions les plus respectés par son peuple.”<sup>123</sup> Here Christ’s behaviour can be compared to that of the exemplary masochist, both criticizing established institutions and power structures, questioning ruling authority; Christ as a revolutionary.

In addition to the physical and mental affinities between the two, there exist also similarities in rhetoric. The Christian doctrine, is filled with oppositions, paradoxes, contradictions, just as the masochist is in essence a contradiction – as someone who finds

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<sup>121</sup> Ibid., 332.

<sup>122</sup> Ibid.

<sup>123</sup> Ibid.

pleasure through the experience of pain and suffering. The main tenet of Christianity follows the belief that those who suffer, those who are poor, ill, humble or persecuted, will be rewarded in heaven. For Reik, the most apparent of these oppositions is held in the belief that one should love his/her enemies, forgive those that hurt you and pray for their eventual salvation, “*Aimer ses ennemis et prier pour ceux qui vous persécutent: cela sonne comme la traduction du comportement masochiste moulé en un format religieux.*”<sup>124</sup> This ideal is replayed over and over in any number of masochistic fantasies, all in the pursuit of pleasure.<sup>125</sup>

Here Reik associates what could be termed *Christian masochism* with what he refers to as social masochism -- the teachings of Christ advocate a certain masochist attitude towards life. However, there are also affinities with sexual masochism, for example, while the subject is both victim and victimizer and performs masochistic acts in the hope of expiation (as does the social masochist), the *Christian masochist* still requires an audience. In Kaja Silverman's text *Male Subjectivity at the Margins* (1992) where she examines masculine performances in film, she articulates this would-be Christian masochist as a revolutionary of sorts, she writes, “What is being beaten here is not so much the body as the “flesh,” and beyond that sin itself, and the whole fallen world.”<sup>126</sup>

This *Christian* masochism also incorporates elements of anticipation, dilatoriness, and delayed gratification -- all of Christ's sufferings were in the anticipation of the salvation

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<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*, 334.

<sup>125</sup> One need not look further than Mel Gibson's 2004 film *The Passion of the Christ* which has been described as masochistic in its depictions of the sufferings of Christ. Indeed the film centers around Christ's very physical sufferings: flagellation, scourging and his crucifixion.

<sup>126</sup> Kaja Silverman. *Male Subjectivities at the Margins* (New York: Routledge, 1992): 197.

of humankind. Likewise, those virtuous and true will be rewarded in the future life, in heaven -- the reward (pleasure) is promised in the future, to suffer now is to be duly rewarded in the future. Therefore for Reik, the masochist's general attitude towards life becomes nothing more than a *distortion* of the Christian attitude.<sup>127</sup> To this end, Christ imitates the prototypical masochist:

L'histoire de sa vie, de son acceptation volontaire et douce de la souffrance, de sa mort et de sa résurrection, pointent dans cette direction. Il a supporté sa punition afin de monter au Ciel, il paya le prix le plus élevé pour devenir Lui-Même Dieu. Il a gagné la vie éternelle par la mort, il est entré dans la gloire divine par l'humiliation; il a conquis par la défaite, il est la victime et le vainqueur.<sup>128</sup>

"L'attitude masochiste envers la vie paraît ici comme une distorsion de l'attitude chrétienne."<sup>129</sup>

According to Reik, religious literature has long pointed to martyrs as being masochistic, with the sexual feelings of masochism located within the unconscious. However, Reik sees the martyr as being motivated by more than latent sexual feelings. As an example he provides us with the story of St. Francis of Assisi who, while trying to combat lustful feelings, threw himself into the snow and rolled in a thorny rosebush. With this apparently masochistic act St. Francis was not looking for pleasure, but rather a "shield against sin," here punishment was used to avoid or hijack lustful pleasure. This having been said, there are cases where these expiatory acts stimulate sexual excitation.

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<sup>127</sup> Reik, *Le Masochisme*, 335.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.

As with the social masochist, the martyr requires the three elements of masochism: *fantasy, suspense and demonstration* -- with Christ's death as the model to imitate. In relation to *fantasy*, the martyr relies on collective fantasy, namely that the individual will be joined with the divine glory of heaven, an identification with Christ's image. With regards to *suspense and anticipation*, the martyr is continually awaiting his/her union with God: to suffer now is to find pleasure in the next life,

En dernier lieu, l'agonie finale coïncide avec la joie du paradis vécue en imagination tandis que le martyr rendait son dernier soupir, l'extase suprême le comblait et dans son humiliation il vivait son triomphe.<sup>130</sup>

There exists also the prolonged anticipation of Christ's second coming. The *demonstrative aspect* is perhaps the most evident -- the tortures of saints always met with an audience, at least a divine one, the spectators rejoicing in the heroic acts of the martyrs. Martyrdom is described as a "témoignage," a confession/witnessing, between the individual and God. In addition, the presence of an audience ensures the preservation of the martyrdom. Reik cites the Lives of Saints as giving testimony to the social masochistic nature of the martyr: the martyr's blood is his/her key to paradise.<sup>131</sup>

### **Gilles Deleuze: A Literary Analysis of Masochism**

"It is the victim who speaks through the mouth of his torturer, without sparing himself."<sup>132</sup>

Both following and diverging from Freud and Reik's model is philosopher Gilles Deleuze in his text *Coldness and Cruelty* (1991). Published alongside a re-print of Sacher

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., 342.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., 341.

<sup>132</sup> Gilles Deleuze. *Coldness and Cruelty* (New York: Zone Books, 1991): 22.

Masoch's text *Venus in Furs*, Deleuze takes a literary approach to the case of masochism (and sadism): "Because the judgement of the clinician is prejudiced, we must take an entirely different approach, the 'literary approach,' since it is from literature that stem the original definitions of sadism and masochism."<sup>133</sup> Here Deleuze combines established psychoanalytic findings with their literary progenitor. Proceeding from the literary texts, Deleuze begins to make a case for the masochist with regards to the masochist's role in the novels of Masoch, this he does by comparing and contrasting his role against that of the Sadean hero.

Deleuze begins his systematic examination with a discussion of language, or rather the function of language within the texts of Masoch and Sade. Through this investigation of language, he gleans some important characteristics of masochism, namely that the masochist's role is to educate and the sadist's role is to instruct. While the sadist is looking to demonstrate, the masochist is looking to persuade and to educate; with Masoch we are dealing with "a victim in search of a torturer and who needs to *educate, persuade and conclude* an alliance with the torturer in order to realise the strangest of schemes."<sup>134</sup> In Masoch's novels, and so too in the masochistic relationship, the victim uses the education of his torturer as a step towards the Ideal. It is this search for the Idea and the Ideal that propels the masochist, "The ascent from the human body to the work of art and from the work of art to the Idea must take place under the shadow of the whip."<sup>135</sup> Also discussed is the "dialectical spirit" of Masoch's writing, as it relates to the "dialectical

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<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 14.

<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 20, my emphasis.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid., 22.

spirit” of the characters -- where Sade’s language is descriptive and demonstrative, Masoch’s is dialectical, mythical and persuasive.<sup>136</sup>

Having established his model of masochism, Deleuze proceeds to demonstrate how his literary understanding differs from the clinicians -- Krafft-Ebing, Freud, Reik, et al. Following the literary paradigm, Deleuze demonstrates how the *sadomasochistic* entity is an impossibility. For Freud, as was previously discussed, each individual has both sadistic and masochistic tendencies, with either the passive or active form of the practice dominating. Deleuze admits to the few affinities that are to be found in the sadist and the masochist, but these are as analogy only. For Deleuze, the masochist is only able to become a sadist through expiation, “The masochist is able to change into a sadist by expiating, the sadist into a masochist on condition that he does not expiate.”<sup>137</sup> The act of expiation is a fundamental aspect of Christic masochist practice.

Also of great importance is the role of women within Masoch’s novels and how Deleuze sees these prototypes as playing out in the masochistic relationship. According to Deleuze, the three women in Masoch’s novels are as follows: the hetaera, the sadist and the woman located in between the two poles. According to Deleuze, each of these women corresponds, respectively, to a fundamental “mother figure,” the primitive mother, the Oedipal mother and the oral mother. This woman in between, or the oral mother, is the ideal masochistic partner, she is all of the following: cold, maternal, severe, icy,

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid., 40.

sentimental and cruel.<sup>138</sup> "What characterises masochism and its theatricality is a particular form of cruelty in the woman torturer: the cruelty of the Ideal, the specific freezing point, the point at which idealism is realised."<sup>139</sup> This coldness, so expounded upon by Deleuze, is not one of negation (as with Sade), but rather of disavowal -- a delayed sensuality.

For Freud and later Reik, these mother-figures, the female torturers, were simply stand-ins for the father figure, they were his representative. As with sadism, it was thought that masochism was paternal. However, for Deleuze, the masochistic relationship is one of son to mother, the "transference of the law onto the mother and the identification of the law with the image of the mother."<sup>140</sup> All three mother-figures work together to abolish the father figure in the realm of the *symbolic order*, however, this does not mean that he does not serve a role in the *order of the real*. The masochistic contract serves to solidify these roles, ensuring that the mother figure dominates and that the father figure is the one that is beaten and humiliated: "He ensures that he will be beaten; we have seen that what is beaten, humiliated and ridiculed in him is the image and the likeness of the father, and the possibility of the father's aggressive return."<sup>141</sup> Interestingly, while it is the son that forms an alliance with the oral mother, it is also possible for a daughter to assume the role of the son and to play victim to the mother's *ideal* phallus. According to Deleuze, the ultimate mother/son relationship is that of Jesus and Mary; the likeness of the father is abolished and it is in fact Mary who puts Jesus on the cross -- masochism as the

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<sup>138</sup> Ibid., 51.

<sup>139</sup> Ibid., 55.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid., 91.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 66.

culmination of the Marian fantasy, "The cross represents the maternal image of death, the mirror in which the narcissistic self of Christ (Cain) apprehends his ideal self (Christ resurrected)."<sup>142</sup>

### **Masoch's Tools**

"Disavowal, suspense, waiting, fetishism and fantasy together make up the specific constellation of masochism."<sup>143</sup> Part of this search for the Ideal that is masochism, incorporates the elements of disavowal and suspense -- elements taken directly from the writings of Freud, however, interpreted to different ends by Deleuze. The fetish object, which is always present within any masochistic exercise, aids in maintaining disavowal and suspension of belief; within Masoch's novels, the fetish object often takes the form of fur or a pelt. The role of disavowal and suspense does not limit itself to the fetish object, but is also to be found within sexual pleasure itself; for the masochist, pleasure is postponed for as long as possible and is thus disavowed, "We should note here that the art of suspense always places us on the side of the victim and forces us to identify with him."<sup>144</sup> Again, here, I would like to mention the role of suspension, in relation to suspense, within the masochistic paradigm, as outlined by Masoch. Numerous are the instances of physical suspension littering Masoch's novels: crucifixion, hanging, etc.

It should be briefly noted that while Deleuze recognizes the three elements of masochism as elaborated upon by Reik (fantasy, suspense and demonstration), Deleuze disagrees with the categorization of moral masochism. While he allows for the role played by guilt

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<sup>142</sup> Ibid., 97.

<sup>143</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>144</sup> Ibid., 34.

and expiation in the masochistic exercise, it is not the guilt of one who has sinned against the father (as believed by Reik and Nacht), but rather it is the recognition of the likeness of the father in oneself that needs to be expiated – “for it is the father who is guilty in the son, not the son in relation to the father.”<sup>145</sup>

“The situation that the masochist establishes by contract, at a specific moment and for a specific period, is already fully contained timelessly and ritually in the symbolic order of masochism.”<sup>146</sup>

Lastly, I would like to examine the role of contract within Masoch’s novels. Where the *institution* plays the central role within any Sadean relationship, it is the *contract* that is at the root of all masochistic exercises. Here Deleuze discusses the role of contract and law within the masochistic relationship: the law is transferred to the mother and there is an identification of the law with the mother-figure, “The masochistic contract excludes the father and displaces onto the mother the task of exercising and applying the paternal law.”<sup>147</sup> It is the contract that keeps this law in place. Within the masochistic contract traditional gender roles are reversed, this reversal works to “challenge” the contractual basis, it is a *demystification* of traditional contract law. The conventional contract is one of master to slave, but within the masochistic contract, it is the slave that has control. In each of Masoch’s novels there is a contract that is drawn up between the woman torturer and the masochist. Also of interest in the role of ritual within the contract; according to Deleuze the masochistic contract leads straight into ritual, “ritualistic activity is essential to him [the masochist], since it epitomizes the world of fantasy.”<sup>148</sup>

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<sup>145</sup> Ibid., 101.

<sup>146</sup> Ibid., 102.

<sup>147</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>148</sup> Ibid., 94.

## The “Problem” with Female Masochism

Throughout this chapter I have been examining psychoanalytic theories of masochism that posit that there are distinct and important differences between masochism as it is experienced by men and masochism as it is experienced by women. The theories of Freud, Nacht and Reik are patriarchal in nature, aligning female comportment with submissive, passive, repressive and less “physical” behaviour. Many of these readings no doubt stem from Freud’s research into femininity. In a short lecture of the same title, Freud looks into the ‘problem of femininity,’ a subject that had hitherto been largely avoided by psychoanalysts. Freud’s research showed, among other things, that women were more prone to passive behaviour:

It is perhaps the case that in a woman, on the basis of her share in the sexual function, a preference for passive behaviour and passive aims is carried over into her life to a greater or lesser extent, in proportion to the limits, restricted or far-reaching, within which her sexual life thus serves as a model.<sup>149</sup>

This passive behaviour is due, in part, to the suppression of women’s aggression, which is achieved both constitutionally and socially. In tracing the progression of women’s “passive nature,” Freud looks at the psycho-sexual development of girls, stating that they are, on the whole, *less* “aggressive, defiant and self-sufficient” than their male counterparts, thus becoming more dependent on others (men), etc.<sup>150</sup> Part of this passive behaviour relates to a woman’s experience of penis-envy, which stems from the female experience of the castration complex. As a result of this experience of lack, women are often more prone to feelings of jealousy, envy and shame. The woman overcomes this

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<sup>149</sup> Freud. “New Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis” (1932-1936) Vol. XXII: 115-116.

<sup>150</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

lack only when she gives birth to a male child, thus “reclaiming the penis.” With regard to “female masochism,” it would seem that women are predisposed to masochistic behaviour as the experience of femininity already implies passivity and submission as both are inherently “female” characteristics, according to Freud. Reik takes this notion even further, stating that women are incapable of being sadistic because they lack the impetus behind sadistic behaviour -- the penis. Because of this lack of sadistic behaviour, women are also less likely to experience masochistic fantasies. Thus, while women demonstrate a predisposition to masochistic attitudes or characteristics, they are nevertheless less apt to experience masochistic fantasies as they are, in fact, less “sadistic.”

Throughout the decades following Freud’s publications, many female psychoanalysts rejected Freud’s understanding of femininity, among them: Luce Irigaray. In her text *Ce Sexe qui n’en est pas un*, Irigaray takes a second look at the psychoanalytic interpretation of women, taking specific aim at the perceived libidinal structure of women: despite being defined by activities that occur after puberty (i.e. marriage, childbirth, etc.), why is the libidinal structure of a woman established before puberty? With regard to childbirth, Irigaray asks why maternity or maternal feelings play into a woman’s sexuality. According to Freud, a marriage is only successful when the woman cares for her husband, as a mother would a child. Most important for our research into masochism, Irigaray asks why the distinction between active and passive behaviour is consistently at the heart of psychoanalytic discussions of femininity.<sup>151</sup> The “problem” of femininity and female masochism is not one adequately resolved in early psychoanalysis. Rather than

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<sup>151</sup> Luce Irigaray. *Ce sexe qui n’en est pas un* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1977): 61-62.

putting forth another interpretation of female masochism, I urge against this gendering of masochism and reject the notion that there is a distinctly *female* masochism that differs from the masculine counterpart. As will be demonstrated in the case studies to follow, each performance, whether produced by a male or female, displays characteristics of both “genders” of masochistic practice, thereby making it virtually impossible to locate it within such a duality.

Throughout this chapter I have attempted to present the main psychoanalytic theories on masochism. From Freud to Deleuze, psychoanalytic examinations of masochism have yielded varying results with some recurring characteristics. Prior to Deleuze’s investigations, there seemed to be a consensus regarding the division of masochism into both sexualized and non-sexualized forms. Sexual masochism was characterized by a relationship of pain to pleasure, with elements of fantasy, suspense and demonstration as features thereof. Implicit in this form were feelings of guilt, a conscious search for submission and the adoption of so-called feminine behaviours. Whereas sexual masochism was thought to be conscious, moral masochism was thought to be unconsciously experienced and tended to personify a “masochistic” approach to life where the individual continuously sought out destructive social situations. Masochism in women came to be a different “perversion” altogether, one with its own pathology. In instances of Christian masochism, Reik looked at Christ’s teachings, Christian rhetoric and Christianity in general, as demonstrating distinct masochistic traits. Implicit in this discussion was an examination of the various paradoxes and contradictions that exist in both Christic and masochistic practice. The most divergent research comes from Deleuze

and his examination of masochism as being a relationship of son to mother, a maternal relationship as opposed to paternal, with the mother as not merely a stand-in for the father. Also of significant importance is his emphasis on the contract and its subsequent subversive nature.

In the last two chapters I have laid the groundwork for a theory of *Christic masochism*, one that I identify as being similar to, but at the same time different than Reik's theory of *Christian masochism* and one that is based on the Christic rituals and iconography elaborated upon in Chapter Two (the Eucharist, crucifixion, resurrection, etc.). Christic masochism is modeled on the life of Christ and follows the Deleuzian paradigm whereby the masochistic relationship is one of son to mother, based on the ultimate masochistic relationship, the Marian fantasy: Jesus to Mary. Christic masochism is also gender-neutral in that it can be experienced equally by men and women, just as Deleuze acknowledges that the daughter can also take the place of the son in the son-to-mother relationship that is at the basis of masochism. This runs contrary to many theories of masochism whereby the masochistic relationship is one of son to punishing father, as Freud, Nacht and others have articulated. Also important is the centrality of guilt, expiation and redemption, as they are integral to Christic ritual. In the following chapters I will conduct an analysis of several performance art pieces that I perceive to be masochistic in nature. Utilizing the methods outlined in this chapter I hope to demonstrate how these masochistic performances could be viewed as modelled on a Christic body, one that uses pain as a means to achieve various ends.

## Chapter 4

### *Transfixed: Artistic Martyrdom or Post-Modern Suicide?*

Interested in the limits of both the physical and psychological self, American performance artist Chris Burden employs the body as both site of ritual and sacrifice, exploring its limits and challenging the malleable spaces between life and death. Performances such as *Shoot* from 1971 and *Doorway to Heaven* from 1973 blurred the boundaries between the interior and exterior, combining acts of exhibitionism with that of (metaphorical and corporeal) sacrifice. Dubbed an image of the “contemporary martyr icon,” *Doorway to Heaven* saw Burden shove two live wires into his chest.<sup>152</sup> Likewise, *Transfixed* saw the artist crucified atop a Volkswagen. Each one of these performances serves to strengthen Burden’s role as “divine artistic martyr,” or at the very least, a proponent of Christic masochism. The following chapter is the first in a series of four case studies focusing on the work of a singular artist. In this chapter I will briefly examine a number of Burden’s earlier performances, centering my discussion on one performance in particular, *Transfixed* of 1974, which I feel best exemplifies the artist’s engagement with Christic masochistic performance. It is my belief that the issue of Christic masochism is central to Burden’s work and not simply a secondary avenue of inquiry. Following the models put forth in Chapters Two and Three, I will also be examining Burden’s work in terms of practices of endurance, isolation, deprivation, etc., as they relate to the Christic subject, in addition to their engagement with differing models of masochism.

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<sup>152</sup> Daniel Wheeler. *Art since Mid-Century: 1945 to the Present* (New York: The Vendome Press, 1991): 257.

Chris Burden was born in 1946 and earned his first degree, a BA, in 1969 from Pomona College in Claremont, California. While completing his college education, Burden took several courses in physics, developing an ability to calculate the outcome of an event and a burgeoning interest in machines. This interest would later influence the direction of his art practice, though not all of his calculations would prove to be successful, as in *Shoot*.<sup>153</sup> After completing his BA, Burden went on to earn an MFA at the University of California at Irvine, where he studied with several notable artists, including Robert Morris. Burden began his art career as a sculptor, creating minimalist works. These minimalist “sculptures” evolved into outdoor works and what Burden would later identify as “apparatus pieces.” Increasingly, Burden’s apparatuses began to require audience participation, thus developing into a career in performance art. In addition to his performances, Burden has created conceptual art works, as well as installation works. These installations have largely focused on the military, war and machinery, with his latest pieces concentrating on feats of engineering and metal toy construction. More recently, Burden has teamed up with a number of engineers in an attempt to erect his bridge designs, which, until this point, have existed only in draft and model replica format. As with earlier works, these later installations concern themselves with form, function, mathematics and the mechanics of every-day functionality. During this time, Burden has continued to exhibit works throughout the world, participating in a handful of retrospectives, while at the same time continuing to teach at UCLA’s Department of Art.

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<sup>153</sup> In this performance, the sharpshooter was instructed to let the bullet graze Burden’s arm, instead the bullet caused minor physical damage, requiring the artist to seek medical services.

## Early Works: Endurance, Risk and Isolation

"I don't think I am trying to commit suicide. I think my art is an *inquiry*, which is what *all* art is about."<sup>154</sup>

In an attempt to better understand Burden's engagement with masochistic performance art, more specifically *Transfixed*, I would first like to turn to a number of his earlier performances. This overview of early works is divided up thematically, with an emphasis on elements of Christic ritual, such as endurance, risk, isolation and so on, as they are played out in Burden's corporeal inquiries.

Completed in partial requirement of his Master's degree at Irvine, *5-Day Locker Piece* of 1971 (see figure 7), was Burden's first major work to garner popular attention. The piece ran April 26-30, 1971, and consisted of Burden being confined to a small locker for five consecutive days; Burden states: "I was locked in Locker Number 5 for five consecutive days and did not leave the locker during this time. The locker measured two feet high, two feet wide and three feet deep. I stopped eating several days prior to entry."<sup>155</sup> Throughout his self-imposed seclusion, Burden received many visitors and related how people treated the piece as something of a confessional. While Burden could see outside of the locker, he remained hidden; this prompted visitors to communicate, relating personal stories. To these confessions Burden remained silent.<sup>156</sup> At night the school was locked and Burden would spend the nights alone; on occasion his wife would sleep on the floor outside of the locker to keep him company. The performance marked the beginning of a unique relationship Burden was to have with his audience: one where he would play

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<sup>154</sup> Quote is taken from Jan Butterfield's article "Through the Night Softly," *Arts Magazine* 49 (March 1975): 68.

<sup>155</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>156</sup> This notion of a confessional is at play in many of Burden's performances, see later works: *Bed Piece* and *Oh Dracula*.

both master and servant, one where there would be a continuous shifting and inversion of control.

With this first performance, Burden is already working with many of the elements which would come to characterize his performance work: elements of risk, privation, seclusion, suspension, etc. Particularly in this performance, Burden works within the tradition of Christian asceticism and monasticism, whereby the practice of sequestering or cloistering was considered characteristic of devotional practice. Numerous are the examples of saints and martyrs who practiced self-imposed isolation or seclusion, such as St. Paul who spent several years in isolation in Arabia, as well as St. Leonard, a popular saint of the Middle Ages, who spent the latter part of his life as a hermit, living in a cell of his own construction. This performance also marks the beginning of a series of works in which the artist engages with masochistic practice. In this instance, the artist willingly locks himself in a metal box, remaining cramped for five days.

In another of what I dub Burden's "confessional pieces," entitled *Oh Dracula* from 1974 (see figure 8), the artist spent one day suspended in a homemade chrysalis attached to a museum wall. In a gallery room devoted to Renaissance paintings of religious subjects at the Utah Museum of Art in Salt Lake City, Burden chose a spot among the works to attach a chrysalis (constructed out of adhesive tape) that would house his body from museum opening until closing. Mounted on the wall, the chrysalis replaced one of the religious paintings, with Burden posing as religious subject; a lit candle was placed close to his head and feet and an engraved plaque mounted beside the work (identical to the others in the room) gave the artist's name, the title of the work and the date of

production. In this instance, Burden's act of seclusion and suspension is more literally linked with the depicted martyrdoms that surround him. Here he is more closely aligning himself with what could be construed as Christic masochism, or at the very least, Christian iconography. As the literal title suggests, the work also alludes to the legend of Dracula, the blood-sucking Transylvanian known to spend his days confined to a coffin; a gothic legend focusing on the reversal of Christian ideals. In this instance, there is the juxtaposition between the sadistic predatory nature of the vampire character and the actual masochistic nature of the performance.

Most resounding with elements of asceticism and self-imposed isolation, was the 1972 performance *Bed Piece* (see figure 9). With *Bed Piece*, Burden spent twenty-two consecutive days and nights laying in a white bed in a stark white gallery. On the first day of the exhibit, Burden entered the gallery, proceeded to undress and climbed into bed, where he stayed for the duration of the exhibition. Like the majority of his performances, the work sees the artist on passive display, although in a highly controlled environment. It was an exercise in asceticism and privation and one that almost pushed Burden over the edge. He speaks of the seduction of the work and of the overwhelming desire he felt to remain in the bed even after the allotted 22 days. It was also an exercise in suspense: the artist laid still for twenty-two days, movement and language were suspended or deferred. The element of silence is a recurring one in Burden's works and could be related to the vow of silence undertaken by the religious devout. It was a test, not unlike those self-imposed trials by Christian martyrs such as St. Francis of Assisi who renounced his inheritance and the clothes on his back, to wander alone for three years, experiencing deliberately chosen poverty and living as a mendicant.

"In *Bed Piece* it was like I was this repulsive magnet. People would come up to about 15 feet from the bed and you could really feel it. There was an energy, a real electricity going on."<sup>157</sup> As with *Locker Piece*, many spectators interpreted Burden's seclusion and/or silence as an invitation to speak. Finding themselves alone in the gallery with Burden, they would begin relating stories to the passive figure under the sheets.<sup>158</sup> In a similar piece entitled *White Light/White Heat* from 1975, Burden remained out of sight, laying on a platform located high up on a wall, at the Ronald Feldman Gallery for 22 days. Although more removed from the audience, it was similar to *Bed Piece* in that he put himself on display (although in a semi-hidden format), a passive exercise during which he seemed oblivious to his surroundings. However, contrary to *Bed Piece*, it was Burden's wish that the gallery not divulge his presence, but rather, the artist hoped that the visitors would be able to *feel* his presence although he remained, largely, out of view. As with *Bed Piece* there were elements of silence, isolation, seclusion and deprivation; a self-imposed sequestering.

While many of these early performances displayed a willingness to take risks and calculate and gamble the outcome, there were yet other performances where the element of risk was even more pronounced, instances where physical harm was a probable, if not anticipated, result. Taking place at the F-Space gallery in Los Angeles from September 10-12, 1971, *110* has often been recognized as being the first performance piece to introduce a real and pronounced sense of danger. Burden writes: "I was strapped to the

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<sup>157</sup> As quoted in Robert Horvitz. "Chris Burden." *Art Forum* 14.9 (May 1976): 25.

<sup>158</sup> This element of "confession" was at its most literal in a work of Burden's appropriately titled *The Confession*, from 1974. Here the roles were reversed: Burden sat in front of a small audience of people he had just met and proceeded to share intimate details and disturbing stories of himself.

floor with copper bands bolted into the concrete. Two buckets of water with 110 lines submerged in them were placed near me. The piece was performed from 8-10 PM for three nights.”<sup>159</sup> The artist was strapped to the floor by copper bands around his neck, wrists and ankles. Two buckets of water were positioned close to him, with two live 110 volt lines sitting in the water. Although Burden believed the risk to be low, there was the distinct possibility that one of the buckets could be pushed over, carrying the electrical current, resulting in possible electrocution. This element of chance or possibility was implied in the performance. Burden conceived of this performance as a response to negative audience reaction to an earlier work, *Shout*. In *Shout*, visitors entering the gallery space were met by the artist, face painted red, sitting on a platform, with his amplified voice instructing visitors to “Get the fuck out.” Reactions to this aggressive performance bordered on hostile. Burden states, “People were angry at me for the *Shout* piece, so in *110* I presented them with an opportunity in a sacrificial situation – to atone for the earlier piece.”<sup>160</sup> While Burden remained in this precarious position, any one of the spectators could have chosen to tip the buckets, resulting in Burden’s electrocution; in this case, chance wasn’t left up to nature, but to human design and action.

By this point, Burden recognized the element of *sacrifice* that is inherent in the majority of his performances. He considers this particular piece to be a self-sacrifice of sorts, putting himself in the hands of the audience. There is also an element of atonement or expiation: the artist is looking for absolution. In this instance, the buckets were left alone, with visitors maintaining a great distance between themselves and the artist. Where in

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<sup>159</sup> Burden quoted in Butterfield, 69.

<sup>160</sup> *Ibid.*

many other of Burden's performances, the outcomes were calculated and controlled by the artist, this case was rare in that it was the audience that maintained ultimate control, with Burden gambling on the outcome.<sup>161</sup>

"At 7:45 p.m. I was shot in the left arm by a friend. The bullet was a copper jacket 22 long rifle. My friend was standing about fifteen feet from me."<sup>162</sup>

Perhaps his most infamous performance piece, *Shoot* of 1971 (see figure 10), saw the artist shot at close range (the bullet grazed his arm), in front of a small group of friends and fellow artists in Santa Ana, California. The friend was a trained sharpshooter and the bullet was intended to graze the skin, but instead caused enough damage to require medical assistance. Rather than focusing on the risk of the exercise, Burden explained the impetus of the project as being the desire to know what it felt like to be shot -- the mental preparation for such an endeavor: "I never feel like I'm taking risks. What the pieces are about is what is going to happen. Danger and pain are a catalyst -- to hype things up. That's important. The object is to see how I can deal with them. The fear is a lot worse than the actual deed."<sup>163</sup> As demonstrated in many examinations of masochism, the pleasure elicited by the anticipation, preparation and fantasy, often supercedes the actual pleasure gained from the masochistic exercise. I would hazard to say that the anticipation and being prepared-ness of the performance was more important, or more "real," to the artist than the actual action, the experience of being shot. It is the fantasy, as extension of

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<sup>161</sup> This piece was not unlike a later performance by Marina Abramovic entitled *Rhythm 0* (1974). In this performance the artist stood motionless in the gallery space while spectators were invited to use any number of seventy-two objects upon her passive body. Objects included a whip, knives, nails, scissors, etc. The performance lasted six hours, during which time she was cut, painted, whipped and so forth. Both *Rhythm 0* and *Prelude to 220 or 110* are exercises in passivity, placing the control of the situation firmly in the hands of the spectators. A further discussion of *Rhythm 0* will take place in the next chapter.

<sup>162</sup> Chris Burden. *Chris Burden 71-73* (Los Angeles: Chris Burden, 1974): 24.

<sup>163</sup> Burden as quoted in Butterfield, 69.

the subject's desire, that fuelled the performance, that suspense or tension which was, in fact, the measure of the performance's success. *Shoot* also demonstrated the curious relationship Burden had begun to cultivate with his audience. By not stopping the act, Burden claimed that all those attending the performance were implicated; they were witnesses as well as active participants, co-conspirators as it were. As previously mentioned, this mimicked traditions of martyrdom, whereby an audience was often required to play witness to the martyr's cause and/or suffering.

"When I use pain or fear in a work, it seems to energize the situation."<sup>164</sup> Less passive than previous works, *Through the Night Softly* from 1973 (see figure 11), saw a near-naked Burden crawling, with hands tied behind his back, across a parking lot littered with broken glass. Taking place in the middle of the night, the 50 feet of broken glass shone against the black tarmac, creating one of Burden's most visually aesthetic performances. There were few spectators, the audience being made up of, in large part, passers-by. The performance was documented with 16mm film, to be aired later as a "commercial spot" on public television. At this point, the performance's risk-level becomes negligible: Burden took great pains to calculate the pressure a body would create on broken glass, negotiating the point of injury. In this case, the glass was to cause only superficial damage. Although the outcome was highly calculated and controlled, it rendered the performance no less masochistic. If we consider the traditional masochistic relationship, it is, more often than not, a highly-orchestrated scenario, taking place in a controlled environment. Although less "dangerous" than those instances where actions are left up to chance, these controlled exercises still indicate a desire on the masochist's part.

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<sup>164</sup> As quoted in Roger Ebert. "Art of Fear and Pain." *Chicago Sun-Times* (April 8, 1975): 31.

“At 6 pm I stood in the doorway of my studio facing the Venice Boardwalk, a few spectators watched as I pushed two live electric wires into my chest. The wires crossed and exploded, burning me, but saving me from electrocution.”<sup>165</sup> One of Burden’s most documented performances, *Doorway to Heaven* of 1973 (see figure 12) saw Burden push the boundaries of performance art, producing what one critic saw as an “immoral” performance, a work of vanity, self-sacrifice and sensational masochism.<sup>166</sup> The title of the work *Doorway to Heaven*, points to the level of risk involved in this performance and to the *possible self-sacrifice* implicit in the work. It is Burden making a martyr of himself, creating a work that would undoubtedly cause physical harm, but that would likewise be sensationalistic. The documented photo of this work is one of the most frequently reproduced, an icon of 1970s performance art or more precisely, 1970s “risk art.” It is Burden exploring the infallibility, or rather fallibility, of the human body, in a most demonstrative, attention-grabbing fashion, a play with light and darkness, electricity and the human form. Here the Christic tone is implied in the title. The performance can be interpreted as another physical test, pushing the body to the limits of itself, challenging the “after-life.”

Also testing the limits of the physical body, *Movie on the Way Down* of 1973 (one of the few performance that featured the artist’s naked body), had Burden suspended by his ankles from the roof of a gymnasium, holding a small camera pointed at the gym floor. A small crowd entered the gym to the sounds of soft piano music. As the music ended, an assistant cut the rope and Burden fell to the gym floor. He then proceeded to get up and

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<sup>165</sup> As quoted in Butterfield, 71.

<sup>166</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

exit the gym. As much as any of the other performances, *Movie on the Way Down* demonstrates the level of control, organization and forethought that make up Burden's performative oeuvre. As will be later discussed, this performance has met with much criticism regarding the "masculinity" of the piece, the infallible quality of the male body, its virility, and its role as heroic subject. Amelia Jones writes of this performance:

Apparently, nothing but the macho drama of an axe blow could symbolize the physical risks of the artistic process for Burden. While constructing a situation of extreme vulnerability, exposing his flesh to the desiring and surely horrified gazes of his audience, Burden still maintained an explicitly masculine relationship to pleasure, pain and creative risk.<sup>167</sup>

### **Performative Traces**

Before commencing an analysis of *Transfixed*, I would like to meditate on the role of the relic within Burden's performances. Serving to heighten the Christic aspects of his works, the relic serves as a visual trace of the ephemeral performance. By leaving us a trace, an archive, we are able to reconsider these early performances. The relic also serves to maintain a metonymic relationship, one where the part stands in for the whole, for example, the bullet from *Shoot*, the nails from *Transfixed* or the wires from *Prelude to 220*. In the summer of 1976, the Ronald Feldman Gallery in New York hosted an exhibition by Chris Burden entitled "Relics" which, was comprised of relics from his performances of the early 1970s. These included, among others, the copper bands from *110* or *Prelude to 220* and the nails from *Transfixed*.

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<sup>167</sup> Amelia Jones. "Dis/playing the phallus: male artists perform their masculinities," 570.

In addition to the performance's "left-overs," one can also look to the accompanying documentation as having a similar metonymic relationship to the performance itself. These images often reach the level of iconography, with the replicated image attaining iconic status, becoming a stand-in for the thing itself. Each one of Burden's performances was documented, whether through photography, as was most often the case, or through film: Super 8 and 16mm. This documentation was often exhibited alongside the "relics" left from the performances. Furthermore, one could argue, as was done in Chapter One, that the documentation only serves to emphasize or even create, the religious dimension of the work.

***Transfixed, Venice, California, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 1974***

Inside a small garage on Speedway Avenue, I stood on the rear bumper of a Volkswagen. I lay on my back over the rear section of the car, stretching my arms onto the roof. Nails were driven through my palms onto the roof of the car. The garage door was opened and the car was pushed halfway out into the speedway. Screaming for me the engine was run at full speed for two minutes. After two minutes, the engine was turned off and the car pushed back into the garage. The door was closed.<sup>168</sup>

Most clearly evoking the Christian body and combining all of the elements mentioned above: endurance, risk, etc., *Transfixed* (see figure 13) saw Burden conduct the most provocative of sacrificial works. In this performance Burden lay on the back of a Volkswagen while accomplices drove nails through his palms. The performance lasted a mere two minutes as the car was pushed out and then back into Burden's garage. The environment was silent save for the humming of the car's engine. The nails, which were

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<sup>168</sup> As quoted in Butterfield interview, 71.

removed from Burden's palms, were kept and later displayed as relics in a gallery space. As with the other artists to be discussed, these reliquaries of documentation (in Burden's case, the actual tools of the performance) became sites of pilgrimage, creating a double relationship with the work: an interaction with the work as performance and later, as relic, or installation.

Referred to as a "modern crucifixion," Burden's "sacrifice" or *imitatio Christi* has been considered a reenactment of the *divine* artistic sacrifices of such artists as Vincent van Gogh or Jackson Pollock. In this respect the *tortured* artist willingly takes on the evils and melancholia of society. According to art historian Amelia Jones, this type of "artistic sacrifice" or identification with Christ is most certainly a masculine trait, a means of performing one's (hetero) sexuality: "*Trans-fixed* evokes the crucifixion of Christ and the martyrdom of his saints, positioning Burden metaphorically within the ranks of divine artistic sacrifice attained by the suicides of Vincent van Gogh or Jackson Pollock."<sup>169</sup> I think that this is a reductivist reading of the catholic or religious aspect of the work; I believe this performative sacrificial aspect to extend beyond the realm of aesthetics. Again, the element of religion is largely skimmed over in Tracey Warr and Amelia Jones' survey of body art. In writing about *Transfixed* Warr adds: "Placing himself in a quasi-religious context, Burden presented himself as a modern martyr to contemporary consumerism as represented by the cars in California's burgeoning freeway culture."<sup>170</sup> As will be discussed further, just as Burden's evocation of the crucifixion extends beyond

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<sup>169</sup> Jones. "Dis/playing the phallus: male artists perform their masculinities," 568.

<sup>170</sup> Tracey Warr (ed.) and survey by Amelia Jones. *The Artist's Body* (London: Phaidon Press, 2000): 102.

an allusion to “artistic sacrifice,” so too is it indicative of more than a martyrdom to contemporary consumerism.

Through Burden’s own description of the events of the performance, it is evident that the piece was, again, *highly controlled* – for example, much time was spent searching for the correct nails for the performance: they had to be a specific size, length, width, etc. In an article by Herbert Blau, the author recognizes the strategic control exerted by Burden with regard to the performance. If Burden calculated the point and the depth to which the nail could be driven through the palm without causing irreparable damage, then where was the actual risk?<sup>171</sup> This was also Blau’s view of the 1973 performance *Through the Night Softly* where the artist calculated the resistance of a body crawling on broken glass. Blau writes,

Avec cette imagerie sacrificielle, il cherchait moins à participer à un rituel qu’à susciter une certaine connaissance: la conscience décisive, à la fois en lui et chez le spectateur, de quelque chose qui échappât, en termes de politique du corps, à la contingence limitée de la douleur, à savoir son immersion dans la réalité sociale et historique.<sup>172</sup>

### Action/Inaction

In each of Burden’s performances, there is a high level of control being exerted by the artist. For critics such as Jan Butterfield, this element of control demonstrates the “non-masochistic” nature of Burden’s performances, “The *seemingly* masochistic element is

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<sup>171</sup> Herbert Blau. “Les rhétoriques du corps et la guerre des nerfs.” *Cahiers du Musée National d’Art Moderne* 51 (Spring 1995): 29.

<sup>172</sup> *Ibid.*

the most misunderstood. Burden's control over his mind and body is a rigidly ascetic one."<sup>173</sup> In my opinion, this element of control is intrinsic to the masochistic performance: there needs to be order and organization. In the preceding chapter we examined Deleuze's theories regarding masochism, which emphasized the control of the masochistic subject and the inversion of the typical master/slave paradigm. Where Butterfield sees this control as precluding any masochistic element, I would say, rather, it reinforces it. The level of control varies from performance to performance; at times, roles of master and servant are reversed. In some performances, such as *Shout Piece*, Burden is the dominant one, retaining command of the situation; in other works such as *110*, the control, and eventual outcome of the performance, is held in the hands of the audience. This having been said however, masochism often complicates the simple reduction of action and passivity. In his treatise on masochism, Sacha Nacht emphasized the "controllable" nature of the masochist's pain: pain must be manageable and must not surpass a certain degree. Following Blau's interpretation, this would hold true for Burden's performances -- the pain is anticipated, regulated and controlled; however, this does not make the exercise any less masochistic.

Burden's performances have often been referred to as "suicidal;" this has also been said of the masochist. Rather than being suicidal or self-destructive however, I would argue that Burden's performances, as well as the masochist's exercises, are inquiries into issues of control, limits and boundaries. The performances can be interpreted as being "threatening" to both the artist and the viewer, again falling back onto issues of control: How far can the body be pushed? What are the artist's limits and those of the audience?

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<sup>173</sup> Butterfield, 69., my emphasis.

Why risk the body? Finally, Burden's works have been interpreted as amoral, prompting C. Carr to argue otherwise, "While Burden's work exposes power without judging it, his project is not amoral -- it forces the moralizing onto us."<sup>174</sup> Without entering into a discussion regarding the moral or amoral nature of Burden's work, it is important to note this shift mentioned by Carr, which places the onus back onto the audience. Threatening as the performances may be, Burden places the audience within the work.

### **Violence and Masculinity**

"Chris Burden's body woundings act as tests to ensure and reinforce the ultimate impermeability of his masculine subjectivity (his masochism is linked to the exhibitionistic suffering associated with Christian martyrdom)."<sup>175</sup>

Where Freud saw masochism as being feminizing or emasculating with regard to the male subject, much of the criticism regarding Burden's masochistic performances focuses on its role as confirming the (perceived) masculinist, heterosexual aspects of "the artist."

As previously noted, Amelia Jones discusses Burden's works in terms of a "performance" of heterosexuality. Within her article "Dis/playing the phallus: male artists perform their masculinities," Jones discusses the works of artists Yves Klein, Vito Acconci and Chris Burden with regard to this heterosexuality. She argues,

[B]y displaying and performing their own bodies, these 'body artists' shift to varying degrees away from the transcendental and singularly masculine conception of artistic authority put into place with modernism -- a conception that relies on the veiling of the actual body of the artist such that his divinity (his phallic powers) can be ensured.<sup>176</sup>

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<sup>174</sup> C. Carr. "This is Only a Test: Chris Burden." *Artforum* 28 (September 1989): 121.

<sup>175</sup> Warr and Jones, 32.

<sup>176</sup> Jones, "Dis/playing the phallus: male artists perform their masculinities," 547.

In this respect, she seems to be following Lacan's diagnosis of the phallus as not merely a physical signification, but rather as a link to the realm of the symbolic and the law of the father. According to Jones, Burden's performances, which can be seen as interpretations of phallic authority, are, largely, reaffirmations of his heterosexuality and masculinity. At times this "masculinity" can be facetious. In *The Artist's Body*, Jones writes, "The tragic existentialist artist-hero becomes an exaggeratedly, even facetiously macho (as in the works of Paul McCarthy, Vito Acconci, Bruce Nauman and Chris Burden)...subject of the work of art."<sup>177</sup> In an earlier text, Lucy Lippard attributes the often violent, self-destructive performances of Burden and Acconci as being manifestations of *anxiety* towards their masculinity, but her interpretations situate the artists in a more positive light, emphasizing the anxiety of this masculine body, rather than its infallibility.<sup>178</sup>

Jones also sees Burden's (and Acconci's) works as raising:

[T]he question of how violence operates in relation to masculinity: do violent acts perpetrated on the male body build up its image as an inviolable vessel of unified subjectivity, or dislocate the strategic coherence of masculinity through the desecration of its physical repository?<sup>179</sup>

She goes on to argue that it does both, but continues to focus her research on the "masculine" properties of Burden's performance. In an attempt to shed light on the works of Burden, she looks to Freud, Reik and Deleuze and finds within Reik's writings a substantiation of Burden's work as a reinforcement of the male body as infallible, she

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<sup>177</sup> Warr and Jones, 21.

<sup>178</sup> Lucy Lippard. "The Pains and Pleasures of Rebirth: Women's Body Art." *Art in America* 64.3 (May/June 1976): 72-81.

<sup>179</sup> Jones, 564.

writes, "Hence, the masochist's self-induced mutilations serve to reinforce the impenetrability of the heroic male body, its survivability under any violent circumstance."<sup>180</sup> Again, this runs contrary to the masochist's aim: the goal is not to attack the body in an effort to demonstrate its 'infallibility,' but rather to revel in the pain, to suspend those limits to which the physical body has been submitted. A further discussion regarding the social aspects of Burden's performances will occur in Chapter Eight.

In a discussion of Burden's work in relation to the performances of Vito Acconci, Jones finds the latter's work to unhinge the seamless masculine subject, whereas Burden's work seems only to reaffirm this male, heterosexual artist-as-genius paradigm, "...I experience Burden's work as leaning toward a confirmation of male privilege vis-à-vis artistic production."<sup>181</sup> As previously mentioned, this assumption or interpretation only serves to underscore her view that "Pollock's image" as male, heterosexual tragic artist-as-masculine-hero is both reaffirmed (Burden) and contradicted or undermined (Acconci) in male masochistic performance art. More specifically, Jones relates this Pollockian performative or the "Pollock myth" as being played out in any number of Burden's performances: "Thus, it is precisely Pollock's image of ambivalent transcendence that is both countered and in some ways reinforced by the riven, punctured, suffering body of the masochistic male body artist:...Chris Burden having himself shot."<sup>182</sup> How does this interpretation apply to female artists such as Orlan, Marina Abramovic and Gina Pane? Are they not also manipulating the masochistic body? To what ends? Is it solely an investigation into the masculine properties of the masochist's body? Indeed it is not.

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<sup>180</sup> Ibid., 567.

<sup>181</sup> Jones. *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, 132.

<sup>182</sup> Ibid., 128.

Jones briefly entertains the possibility of Burden's performances as parody: by "reiterating normative codes of masculine artistic genius-as-transcendent," Jones asks whether Burden's work could be a parody of a stereotype.<sup>183</sup> Where parody, as a form of imitation that relies on exaggeration, underscores an element of humor or derogatoriness, a playing-up of a stereotype, I see Burden's performances as being serious, genuine appropriations of, or engagements with, the Christic figure. The *imitatio Christi* in these contemporary performances are not simply ironic or parodying (although Orlan's works do tend to center on such a reprisal of Christian images and ritual). While these performances could be argued to be "exaggerated" imitations of Christ, they do so, for the most part (excluding Orlan, and at times, Flanagan), not in any effort to undercut or "poke fun" at the Christic figure, but rather to use the figure as signifier, one that is both culturally and spiritually meaningful.

### **Fantasy, Demonstration and Suspense: A Reikian Check-List**

Let us now look at how various elements of masochism (fantasy, demonstration and suspense), as illustrated by Theodor Reik, come into play in Burden's performances. As demonstrated in the preceding chapter, the element of fantasy plays an integral role in any psychoanalytic interpretation of masochism, from Freud to Deleuze. The element of fantasy is no less important for masochistic performance art, which leads us to ask the question: How does *fantasy* function in Burden's art? Each performance is itself an acting-out or a realization of a fantasy. Many of the elements Freud found to be intrinsic in any masochistic fantasy, (i.e. to be gagged, strung up, whipped etc.), are all characteristics of the artist's performances. In Burden's case, the organization and

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<sup>183</sup> Ibid., 132.

forethought that must take place before the execution of a performance is, in itself, part of the fantasy process (is a type of fantasy). In addition, the importance of ritual within each performance (such as *Movie on the Way Down*) is an indication of the level of fantasy. If we look at the Freudian interpretation of fantasy, each of these performances consist of an acting out of the subject's desires on both the conscious and subconscious levels. The fantasy is a socially-acceptable means of giving free rein to the imagination and to desire. In many cases of masochistic fantasy, the subject acts as voyeur only. This is no less true of Burden's works: within his performances the role of voyeur is often forced or placed upon the audience, at times this role is unintentional. In other performances, Burden seems to adopt the role of voyeur; in what I would designate as his "confessional" performances, such as *5-Day Locker Piece*, the artist becomes a type of voyeur, remaining passive, but always watching. Briefly, one could also mention the element of collective fantasy. Reik looks to Christianity as being an instance of collective fantasy: Christ's crucifixion being a collective fantasy that each Christian believes and accepts. *Transfixed* functions on the same level, tapping into this collective fantasy that has become one of the foundations of Christianity.

As with all masochistic performance pieces, suspense is one of the most important elements of Burden's works. Many of his performances consist of actual physical suspension: *Movie on the Way Down* saw Burden suspended from his ankles while spectators watched in anticipation. The tension of performances such as *Prelude to 220* or *110* was integral to its success, the anxiety and waiting involved only served to heighten the suspense. *Oh Dracula* saw the artist suspended in a homemade chrysalis, while

*Transfixed* was perhaps the most literal, with Burden crucified on the top of a car -- the nature of a crucifixion is the physical suspension of the victim as well as the suspense of the onset of death. In opposition to the more static visual arts, performance art evokes and in fact necessitates suspense, with audience members anticipating the artist's next move. This puts both the audience and the artist in a state of suspense and in turn, places the audience members in a masochistic position. The audience itself exists to increase the tension. The theatre is founded on suspense and this is no less true of performance art.

By its very nature, masochism necessitates suspense: gratification and pleasure are delayed, at times indefinitely. Freud saw the passivity inherent in masochism as a provocation of suspense, while Nacht found anticipation and suspense to be intrinsic elements of a perversion which concerned itself with subjects who sought relations that relied on dependence, subordination and humiliation. Most importantly, Deleuze writes, "the art of suspense always places us on the side of the victim and forces us to identify with him."<sup>184</sup>

While we have acknowledged the role of fantasy and suspense with Burden's works, what of the element of demonstration? Each one of Burden's performances exists as a demonstration, an exhibition or a display. In his early investigations into masochism, Freud recognized the masochist's need for an audience, his need to demonstrate or to show. The fact that all of Burden's performances met with an audience, in some manifestation or another, is a testament to his desire to show -- to put his body on display. The public nature of his pain and suffering, whether calculated or not, is an exhibition,

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<sup>184</sup> Deleuze. *Coldness and Cruelty*, 34.

just as martyrdoms have been traditionally seen as public displays of faith, as emulations of Christ's sufferings. *Transfixed* can be interpreted as one such martyrdom, with the ensuing documentation ensuring the preservation of the act. Furthermore, Deleuze asserts that while the sadist *instructs*, the masochist *educates*; the masochist uses education (the education of his torturer) as a means of attaining the Ideal. Can this be said of Burden's performances? Do they exist as a means of education, a way of reaching the Ideal? The torturer, within the Deleuzian masochistic fantasy, exists as the subject's audience, student and witness. For Burden, the audience fulfills a similar role.

### **The Contract**

Kathy O'Dell's book, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s* (1998), is largely an exploration of the contract in 1970s masochistic performance art. Without too much reiteration, I would like to briefly explore the role of contract as it relates to Burden's relationship with his audience. In each of Burden's performances, contracts are forged, (both actual and implied), with audience members, spectators and accomplices. In works such as *Shoot* and *Transfixed*, contracts were established between Burden and his "accomplices," i.e. those who were engaged to shoot him at close range, or those ordered to drive nails through his palms. The notion of the contract, and its importance in the masochistic relationship, was greatly elaborated upon by Deleuze: the contract signifies a transferal of power from the torturer to the victim. This is also the case with Burden's performances: while Burden is the one "suffering" (being shot, crucified and strung up), he nonetheless maintains control, venturing into a voluntary, if

invisible, contract. The contractual element is also necessary for the carrying out of ritual, which, was demonstrated in the first chapter, is an integral aspect of performance art.

While each of Burden's performances is produced with an audience in mind, this audience is not always intentional. In performances such as *Dos Equis* (1972), the artist blocked a road in Laguna Beach, California with two flaming Xs, with each segment of wood measuring sixteen feet. In this instance, the audience consisted of the first driver to come across the burning Xs. In *Deadman*, also from 1972, Burden lay on the street next to a parked car in front of a Los Angeles gallery. For those who were aware of Burden's performance (the performance was put on in conjunction with the gallery), the body lying by the car was nothing more than an artwork; for those passersby who came across Burden's body unknowingly, it could have been a victim of a car accident. One such passerby, believing Burden to be hurt, called the LAPD and paramedics were called to the scene. Burden was arrested for creating a false emergency and later released.

### **Burden as Christic Masochist**

Just as Christ's crucifixion was the model on which all martyrdoms were based, so too does Burden engage with the martyred subject in many of his performances. In discussing the performance *Movie on the Way Down* of 1973, Jones writes of Burden, "like Yves Klein and like Deleuze's masochist – he rigorously directs situations of putative danger in order to construct himself as both heroically martyred and bravely surviving."<sup>185</sup> Here, I would argue less for Burden's role as "survivor," than as martyr, one who tests the body following Christian tradition. However, while these performances center around acts of

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<sup>185</sup> Jones. "Dis/playing the phallus: male artists perform their masculinities," 571.

sacrifice (i.e. *Doorway to Heaven*) there is also an element of resurrection or re-birth, the *overcoming* of said situation.

In accessing, or appropriating the martyred subject, Burden looks beyond the rhetoric of Christic physical ritual and moves into the realm of objects, his engagement or use of the *arma Christi* serve as further visual indicators, additional means by which Burden engages with the Christic subject. These *arma Christi* then gain the status of relics, an index created by the ritual or performance. In appropriating the Christic subject, Burden not only manipulates the physical signifiers, the instruments of the Passion, but also engages with the various practices, as set out in the second chapter, which have come to be associated with, and are integral to, Christic masochistic performance, these being: silence, isolation, endurance, risk, and so on.

Throughout this chapter I have endeavored to make a case for Burden as creating performances that can be interpreted and understood as being masochistic, in the Christic sense, with each performance being an embodiment of the elements of masochism, and consequently Christic masochism, as identified in the preceding chapter. What I have attempted to do here is demonstrate the importance of Christic masochism within the performances of Burden, through a discussion of previous analyses of works by other scholars; the reasons behind this re-visitation will be examined in the final chapter. I have examined Burden's works with regard to sacrificial practice and atonement, with *Transfixed* being the most literal example. The following chapters will examine why

many other contemporary artists are using the Christic figure and to what ends. This will be demonstrated in the following chapters, with a discussion to follow.

## Chapter Five

### Marina Abramovic: Exercises in Endurance

As a performance artist, sculptor, video and installation artist, Marina Abramovic continues to create artworks that explore both the body's mental and physical limits; this she achieves through the use of ritual, in all of its many permutations. Born in Belgrade, Yugoslavia in 1946, Abramovic divided her childhood and adolescence between her grandmother, a staunch Serbian orthodox who surrounded Abramovic with the rituals of the Catholic church (including the legend of a grandfather who was a patriarch of the Serbian Orthodox church, theoretically murdered by order of the state, and then given sainthood)<sup>186</sup> and her parents. Both Yugoslavian partisans, her mother became the director of the National Museum of Revolution and Art in Belgrade and her father became a general in the military. Abramovic graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Belgrade in 1970 -- an environment saturated with socialism -- where she began to create works of art exploring elements of ritual, risk and sacrifice. All of her works, whether they are performance or sculpture, concern themselves with the limits of the body and the mind and the transcendence of those limits. While her works are noted for their engagement with Aboriginal, Chinese and Australian cultures, little has been said regarding the incorporation of her Catholic heritage (including her usage of relics, Christic ritual, and acts of martyrdom). What follows is an overview of a number of Abramovic's performances, thus establishing her work within the tradition of masochistic performance. Once this base has been solidified, we will then analyze her performances

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<sup>186</sup> Steven Henry Madoff. "A Viewable Fast, Enforced by Knives." *The New York Times* (Nov. 10, 2002), electronic version.

in light of Christic masochistic performance, examining the various ascetic practices and Christic rituals with which they are engaged.

### **Modern Iconography: the Performance and the Document**

From the early days when I was working in Yugoslavia and didn't have video, only photography, I found that the most interesting way to present my work was not to look at sequences of how the performance developed, but rather to decide which photograph had the energy by itself as a photograph and then just show that one. The photograph then has power itself.<sup>187</sup>

Before launching into a discussion of Abramovic's early work, I would like to address the role of documentation as it pertains to her oeuvre. As mentioned in Chapter One, when creating performance art, the documentation becomes as integral to the work as the performance itself and this is no less true of Abramovic's performance work. The accompanying documentation serves an iconographic purpose, establishing the image as something of an icon (and in some cases, relic). It becomes an object of worship, providing a metonymic relationship between the artist and the work. In this sense, I believe the documentation serves to heighten the Christic quality of the work. In addition to photographic and video documentation, Abramovic's performances were often accompanied by a wall panel with an artist's statement, as well as participatory instructions. In this case, not only did the documentation create a relic or icon -- as with *Burden* many of Abramovic's performances are known by their black and white photographs only -- but they also became tools of instruction much the same way as medieval paintings of the trials of saints (or the *Lives of Saints*) became teaching tools. In performances such as *Biography* (1992), the work consists almost solely of past documentation. Performing it since 1992, Abramovic's *Biography* consists of a ninety-

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<sup>187</sup> As quoted in an interview by Janet A. Kaplan. "Deeper and Deeper: Interview with Marina Abramovic." *Art Journal* 58 (Summer 1999): 11.

minute performance in which the artist re-enacts scenes from her life, as well as re-staging segments from various performances. In addition to live performance, *Biography* consists of video and photographic elements, both of which are projected on to screens behind the artist. In this case, the documentation *is* the artwork.

### **Early Solo Work: Asceticism and Endurance**

“For me, performance is a means of research to find mental and physical answers.”<sup>188</sup>

From 1973 to 1976, Abramovic produced twelve solo performances which each examined both corporeal and mental limits. While there were many performances throughout the 1970s that pushed the limits of the physical body, Abramovic was one of few artists to focus on psychosomatic relationships.<sup>189</sup> The majority of these performances could be considered tests of endurance and contain a sacrificial element; these same concerns or themes will continue to fuel her later performances. What follows is a brief discussion of a selected number of early works as they personify many of the elements of the Christic masochistic performance: endurance, asceticism, Eucharistic practice, and so on.

Many of these early works centralized ascetic practices and exercises of endurance. In what was to be the last of a series of *Rhythm* pieces, *Rhythm 0*, 1974 (see figure 14) saw Abramovic conduct an experiment in passivity. Performed in Naples, the artist stood

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<sup>188</sup> Abramovic quoted in Kaplan, 8.

<sup>189</sup> While there has already been an investigation into the “masochistic” nature of the collaborative performances of Abramovic and Ulay (for a more detailed analysis of the masochistic nature of many of their collaborative performances, please see Kathy O’Dell’s *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970’s*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), there has been little attention paid to the masochistic aspects of her solo work, nor to her engagement with the Christic body.

motionless and expressionless next to a table littered with seventy-two objects of random use. Spectators were invited to use any number of the objects on the artist, in any way that they desired; a wall panel read: "There are seventy-two objects on the table that can be used on me as desired. I am the object. During this period I take full responsibility."<sup>190</sup> The objects included a gun, bullet, saw, axe, fork, comb, knife, nails, scissors, etc. The performance lasted six hours, at which point it was halted by audience members. By the end of the performance, Abramovic was partially naked, had been alternately cut, painted, cleaned, dressed in a crown of thorns and had a loaded gun pressed to her head. In this performance, the artist is opening her body up to voluntary, possible harm. It is a test, a trial, that pushes the limits of self-control, passivity, trust and responsibility. As with many of her performances, there are elements of Christic ritual: just as Christ relinquished his body, so does Abramovic -- this performance is a type of self-sacrifice, an exercise in detachment; a metaphoric martyrdom. As well, many of the presented objects had an iconographic resonance: crown of thorns, nails, etc., -- a reworking, or revisiting of the *arma Christi*.

From the years 1976 to 1988 Abramovic collaborated on a number of art projects with German artist Uwe Laysiepen, otherwise known as Ulay. Together, these projects have been referred to as 'relation works.' Conceiving of themselves as partners, in both the business and romantic sense of the term, the pair sought to create performances in which a certain egalitarianism was maintained; this egalitarianism became one of the foundations of their practice. The pieces were often referred to as "symmetrical," with

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<sup>190</sup> Germano Celant. *Public Body: Installations and Objects 1965-2001* (Milano: Edizioni Charta, 2001): 52.

each body mirroring the other, working together to eliminate, or rather, transcend, political, social, and gender barriers. It has been argued however, that in attempting to eliminate gender through their performances, they only further reinforced heterosexual gender divisions, reestablishing the barriers or obstacles associated with such dualisms. Their works also sought to experiment with the relations, both physical and mental, between two bodies in any given space, whose purpose it was to create a unique unified being. In many of these performances, both Abramovic and Ulay engaged in exercises that could be construed as *masochistic*. For the purpose of this study, I will discuss only a few of these works, as they typify what could be construed as “masochistic performance” and highlight Abramovic’s (and also Ulay’s) employment of ritual (both pagan and Christic) and risk.

Throughout the 1970s, Abramovic and Ulay engaged in a number of performances they considered *Relational Works*. In *Relation in Space* (1976), the artists, both naked, ran and collided with each other repeatedly, for an hour. As with many of their performances, this one highlighted the constant obstacles, barriers or boundaries an individual is forced up against, whether they are related to individuality, gender or institutions of power. On a more physical level, the performance also addressed the simple and stubborn relations between two bodies in space. As with Abramovic’s early solo performances, *Relations in Space* could be seen to follow a Reikian model of masochism, exhibiting elements of fantasy, suspense and demonstration.

As with *Relation in Space, Imponderabilia* (1977) saw both artists naked, facing one another on either side of the entranceway to a gallery in Bologna. Spectators had to choose which naked figure they felt most comfortable coming in contact with while entering the gallery. Abramovic writes, "We are standing naked in the main entrance of the museum, facing each other. The public entering the museum has to pass sideways through the small space between us. Each person passing has to choose which one of us to face."<sup>191</sup> A camera was located near the entranceway of the gallery, and images of the visitors passing through the door composed of Abramovic and Ulay were projected onto monitors in the gallery space. The performance lasted ninety minutes at which point it was interrupted and halted by the police. With this performance the artists were once again working with issues of sexual difference and the possible/impossible transcendence thereof.

In one of their more overtly ascetic collaborations, *Nightsea Crossing* of 1982 (see figure 15), performed for A Space in Toronto, the two artists sat motionless, facing each other at either end of a table. The duration of the performance varied. Abramovic writes,

We are sitting motionless at either end of a rectangular table facing each other, our profiles turned to the audience.(...) Most museums in the world are open from 10am to 5pm. We decided to sit for the entire opening time of the museum (7 hours). (...) During the entire period in which the performance takes place both inside and outside the museum we remain silent and completely abstain from food, only consuming water.<sup>192</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Abramovic quoted in Celant, 60.

<sup>192</sup> Ibid., 74.

As with earlier performances, *Nightsea Crossing* demonstrates elements of endurance and risk, as well as ritual elements of meditation and asceticism. *Nightsea Crossing* is not singular in its ascetic qualities, many of Abramovic's performances explore issues of abstinence, from the abstaining of food and communication, to the renouncement of material goods and shelter. However, in this work, there is a concentration on immobility -- a physical and psychological test integral to devotional practice.

Produced in 1988, their final collaborative performance *The Great Wall Walk* saw the two artists begin at either end of the Great Wall of China and walk towards each other; the performance was to end with a wedding ceremony. Although the relationship between Abramovic and Ulay ended before the commencement of the walk, the simultaneous performance went on as planned, taking three months to complete. For both Abramovic and Ulay, the performance signaled the end of a collaborative career in performance that had spanned thirteen years. This physically and mentally exhausting performance took on the semblance of a pilgrimage in the Christian tradition. It was an act of endurance, meditation and isolation.

As a prelude to such ascetic performances, Abramovic and Ulay spent time in the Australian desert, living for one full year with the Aborigines. Subscribing to an ascetic lifestyle (which included exposure to extreme climates), the two sought to purify their minds and bodies through catharsis. They chose a nomadic lifestyle while visiting different locales, keeping with them few belongings, seeking the most minimal of existences. This form of voluntary seclusion is keeping in line with the practice of saints

who sequestered themselves in monasteries or banished themselves to the desert, such as St. Sharbel who lived as a hermit, sleeping on a mattress made of leaves and a pillow made from a block of wood. Although less *Christic* in nature than her solo performances, what emerges from Abramovic's collaborative performances with Ulay is an interest in identity, gender, politics, risk, endurance and ritual, all of which will resurface in her later work.

### **Self-Mortification**

In addition to elements of asceticism and endurance, many of Abramovic's early works dealt with self-mortification and risk. A large number of these early performances were collectively titled "Rhythms." As number five in the series, *Rhythm 5* (1974) saw the artist create a five-pointed star on the pavement outside of the Student Cultural Centre in Belgrade.<sup>193</sup> Once the star was completed, Abramovic lay down within the construction and set it on fire. Not realizing that fire consumes all of the oxygen within a given space, Abramovic lost consciousness. The performance ended when a spectator recognized the danger and pulled the artist to safety. Many of Abramovic's performances, such as *Rhythm 5*, placed the artist in a dangerous situation that often relied on audience intervention. In the end, these interventions became part of the work. Each one of the *Rhythm* pieces saw the artist putting the body on display and engaging in various acts of risk, drawing the audience in through participatory exchange.

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<sup>193</sup> The five-pointed star became a recurring symbol in Abramovic's work, with both political and spiritual connotations. During the communist era in Yugoslavia, communists were identified by the five-pointed star. The five-pointed star, also known as the "Star of Life," or pentagram, has also had a long history within pagan religions and the occult. A popular symbol within both Eastern and Western philosophy, it symbolizes the ability to bring spirit to the earth. The star reappears in works such as *Lips of Thomas*.

*Rhythm 2*, 1974 (see figure 16), performed at the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Belgrade, sought to demonstrate the mental and physical effects of certain mood-altering prescription drugs. Seated at a small table in front of an audience, Abramovic proceeded to take various psychoactive medications for such illnesses as schizophrenia and catatonia. As the medications took effect, Abramovic related to the audience, in plain detail, the changes she was undergoing, from simple agitation, to hallucinations. As with the majority of her works, this performance sought to test, or rather experiment with, the body's limits and self-control. This performance of cause and effect was as punishing for the audience as it was for the artist, with spectators trying to anticipate the artist's sometimes aggressive reactions to the medications. In this sense, it was also a means of communion between the artist and the audience, a way for the spectators to participate in the performance.

In another one of her early performances -- *Art Must be Beautiful, Artist Must be Beautiful* (1975) -- the artist examined the relationships between art and self. Exploring the role of beauty in art, Abramovic stood naked and brushed her hair until it became painful, repeating the line, "Art must be beautiful." With *Art Must be Beautiful, Artist Must be Beautiful*, suffering takes on a redemptive purpose; as with many of her performances, suffering has a positive quality. In addition, this performance overtly blurs the lines drawn between artist and artwork, as in all performance art pieces.

With these early pieces, it becomes evident that Abramovic is attempting to transcend the traditional dualisms set up between mind and body. As with other body artists, she is

attempting to move past this Cartesian dialectic, working towards the conception of a more holistic, unified self. This exercise is not always successful and many of her works fall back on the very Catholic division of the self that she is trying to transcend: pure mind/corruptible flesh. Each one of Abramovic's performances seeks to transcend the physical self, creating a collusion between mind and body, through a transgression of political, gender and social orders. In addition to a transgression of Cartesian dualisms, Abramovic's early works also explore the issue of suffering, more specifically, the notion of suffering as something positive or valuable, a means of achieving certain ends; suffering as a kind of currency.

### **Sculpture: Relics**

Following her long engagement with performance art, Abramovic moved into the realm of sculpture, and from 1989 on, she produces what she calls "transitory objects for *human* use." These are objects which engage the audience both physically and spiritually, and can be seen as fetish objects, "these are objects that the audience can perform."<sup>194</sup> While these objects are not intended for audience interaction, they nonetheless retain a certain human functionality, (such as copper baths and ladders) and transmit what Abramovic described as "energies." These are ritual objects or "relics," objects imbued with spiritual meaning; these objects are also metonymic, in that they are but a representative part of a larger whole. While incorporating various crystals, wood, iron and minerals, Abramovic also makes recourse to what she refers to as "risk objects," these are recurring objects, prevalent in her performances, such as the knife.<sup>195</sup>

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<sup>194</sup> Abramovic quoted in Kaplan, 8.

<sup>195</sup> Celant, 21.

The sculpture *Double Edge* produced in 1995, consisted of four ladders. The first and second ladders were made of wood, with the second ladder having upturned knives as steps. The third and fourth ladders were made of metal, the third ladder with steps made of ice and the last ladder with steps of glowing, hot iron. Exploring various natural elements, the piece also resumed Abramovic's investigation of physical risk and endurance. Although the piece was not meant for physical use, the mental projection of the activities associated with the sculptures, made for uncomfortable consideration, bringing to mind the various self-torturing acts associated with the objects: the trials of the saints and various pagan rituals. As with her performance work, Abramovic continues to mix elements of shamanism and aboriginal culture with Catholic ritual. In addition to her work with minerals, Abramovic also looks to animal blood as an artistic medium. In an on-going series which began in 1996 entitled *Power Objects*, the artist began experimenting with pig's blood as paint. Imbued with a certain energy and laced with various religious connotations, blood becomes a cultural signifier, "I poured blood over the 'power objects' to stage a certain emotion, to make a power center."<sup>196</sup>

### **Autobiography: The Life of Christ**

In addition to her sculptural works, Abramovic's most recent performances tend to revolve around the artist's own history, working in an autobiographical tradition that is at once art historical as it is Catholic. As previously mentioned, *Biography*, 1992 (see figure 17), which consisted of a ninety-minute performance in which the artists re-enacts scenes from her life, as well as re-staging segments from various performance, revisits the artist's life, elevating it to divine status in the Christic tradition. As will be discussed in

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<sup>196</sup>As quoted in Celant, 378.

Chapter Eight, this was achieved in a partial effort, however conscious, of the sacralization, or divinization of the artist. This was achieved through a sense of identification or communion in the Eucharistic sense.

"In the middle of the space I wash 1,500 fresh beef bones, continuously singing folksongs from my childhood."<sup>197</sup>

First presented in June of 1997 for the XLVI Venice Biennale, *Balkan Baroque* (see figure 18) lasted four days and six hours. In addition to the bones, there were three screens onto which were projected images of the artist and her parents. Also in the space, were three large copper bathtubs filled with water. This performance manifested itself as an act of mourning for the civil wars in the Balkans. It explored both the futility of war and the tragedy and violence it provokes. While the artist aggressively scrubbed the bones clean, the metallic bathtubs projected feelings of calm, rebirth and shelter. As with many of her performances, there was a concentration on repetitive actions -- the cleaning of the bones being an act of cleansing and purgation; it was a meditation on suffering and conversely, a resurrective act. According to Abramovic, this was the most emotionally-demanding work, requiring the artist to explore personal, rather than universal, themes of loss and mourning.

### **The Masochistic Performance**

Before beginning a discussion of those works that incorporate most clearly the Christic masochistic body, I would like to reiterate some of the main tenets of masochism as they pertain to Abramovic's performances. In her text on masochism and performance art,

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<sup>197</sup> As quoted in Kaplan, 12.

Kathy O'Dell briefly examines the work of Marina Abramovic, but only in the context of the "Relation Works" produced in conjunction with Ulay. I would argue that Abramovic's engagement with masochistic practice, insofar as it has been identified in a previous chapter, is more evident in her solo performances, such as those listed below.

In his discussion of moral masochism, Freud attests that it is not the sexual excitement, but rather the punishment and subsequent suffering that accompanies masochistic practice that matters most. As was demonstrated in Chapters Two and Three, this falls in line with the trials of the saints, whose suffering was a link to the divine -- an indication that Christic rituals contain masochistic elements. Likewise Abramovic's performances are less about the enjoyment of, or desire for, pain than the value of the suffering body, a testing of its limits and the positive repercussions of such trials. As stated by Sacha Nacht, masochism is but a partial sacrifice, in preservation of the rest; for Abramovic, masochism is not the goal, but a means to an end.

In addition to the affinities with Freud and Nacht's interpretations of moral masochism, Abramovic's performances also adhere to the Reikian model of masochistic practice, incorporating each of the three main elements: fantasy, suspense and demonstration. As with most performances, Abramovic's pieces stem from a fantasy, and are, in essence, an *acting out* of said fantasies. This acting-out, or establishment, of fantasy, requires an engagement with the imagination and in turn, the realm of the Imaginary. Also integral to the development of fantasy is the role of ritual. While it has been argued that ritual is at the root of all performance art, this is doubly evident in the work of Abramovic; as

previously demonstrated, her performances borrow from the rites and rituals of both Pagan and Christic practice.

As well as the role of fantasy, suspense is also an integral part of Abramovic's oeuvre. While many of her works have been discussed in terms of "tests of endurance," i.e. *Nightsea Crossing*, *Rhythm 0*, *Rhythm 2*, *Balkan Baroque*, implied in these acts of endurance is a sense of suspense, a sense of waiting for something to happen. In *Rhythm 2*, Abramovic waited for the effects of mood-altering medications, creating a tension or anxiety between the performer and the audience. In *Rhythm 0*, a piece in which she put her safety in the hands of the audience, the entire performance was an exercise in waiting. Lastly, Abramovic's works contain what Reik referred to as the *demonstrative trait* whereby the masochist seeks to show or demonstrate. In the case of the Christic masochist, this desire to show culminates in the demonstration of suffering; for the martyr, suffering was often endured to be displayed with the end result being for educative purposes. According to Deleuze, where the sadist looks to instruct, the masochist seeks to educate, and this is no less true of masochistic performance. In essence, each performance is but a demonstration or a desire to *show*. In Abramovic's case, this desire to show or communicate is achieved through what we could dub the "Eucharistic experience," a sense of communion between artist and audience whereby spectators are looking to take part, or at the very least identify, with the figure of the artist.

Following the psychoanalytic model, while erotogenic masochism centered around sexual desire, social masochism concerned itself more with the individual's social sphere (rather than private sexual lives). Within Christic masochism however, there is no longer a clear distinction between the public and private and likewise, between the erotogenic and the social. With Abramovic's performances, it is both the social spheres, or rather social institutions (gender, economics, politics) that are being challenged, through erotogenic means with the end result being the Christic masochistic performance. As identified by Reik, acts of Christian masochism are more closely aligned with those of social masochism, but with identifiable affinities or intersections with erotogenic masochistic practice. Performances such as *Lips of Thomas*, *Rhythm 5* and *Rhythm 0*, could be said to resemble the various ascetic practices of female saints and mystics, a testing of the body's limits through self-flagellations, cutting and extreme temperatures. In *Rhythm 0* there is a willingness to renounce, or sacrifice, the body to a further purpose; the body merely as flesh. Throughout her performances, it becomes apparent that Abramovic understands and manipulates the Catholic value of suffering while working with Serbian Orthodox Christic models, with both *Rhythm 0* and *Lips of Thomas* seemingly torn from the pages of the *Lives of Saints*. In addition to the aforementioned elements, Reik also provided original research in relation to the experience of masochism in women. As elaborated upon in Chapter Three, Reik considered female masochism to be less *aggressive* than its masculine counterpart; it is less about "self-abandonment" than a softer "yielding and/or surrender," female masochism is subtler, and one could even say, under-handed.

Before abandoning a theoretical discussion of masochism, I would like to briefly address the Deleuzian model as it pertains to Abramovic's performances as it diverges from those previously-mentioned. Where the Freudian model of masochism was one based on the relationships between father and son, the Deleuzian masochistic relationship is one of son to mother (one modeled on the relationship of Jesus to Mary). This role reversal begs the question of who is being punished and why? What role is Abramovic fulfilling and to what ends? What role do we, the spectators and participants, inhabit? In some cases, it is the spectators who are the victims, the ones punished.<sup>198</sup> Also interesting to note is the juxtaposition between elements of control and passivity. Following the Deleuzian model of masochism, it is the illusion of passivity that is the most misleading. Just as many of Abramovic's performances seem to center upon the passive individual, the artist retains full control, voluntarily placing herself in situations of risk. Even at her most *passive*, as in *Rhythm 0*, Abramovic still directs the performance: she chose the objects, the location, the duration; each parameter of the performance was decided upon by the artist. The wall panel accompanying this exhibit read: "During this period I take full responsibility." Aiding in maintaining this level of control is the forging of a contract between artist and audience. By witnessing, and in some instances by participating in, these performances, audience members are entering into collusion with the artist. In such performances as *Imponderabilia*, and *Rhythm 0*, the spectators are accessories, material as integral to the work as the artist herself.

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<sup>198</sup> It has been argued that with any masochistic performance piece, it is the audience that suffers, being forced to bear witness to any number of disturbing practices. This has often been said with regard to Orlan's often gruesome plastic surgeries.

## Devotional Practice

“Art has to have a spiritual value and something that opens certain states of consciousness, because we are losing ourselves so much.”<sup>199</sup>

In a work entitled *Private Archaeology* produced between 1997 and 1999, Abramovic exhibited a collection of personal items and works of art, both belonging to, and created by, the artist; included in these materials, was a collection of Russian icons. Throughout her career, Abramovic's Serbian Orthodox upbringing has been a common thread within her art practice. From the early performances to the more recent, Abramovic's work seems to forge a close relationship with the devotional and/or mystical practices of late Medieval and Renaissance female Catholic saints and mystics. What follows is a discussion of two works that best exemplify the Christic masochistic performance.

### *The Lips of Thomas* (1975)

In this four part performance (see figure 19), Abramovic, seated at a small table covered with a tablecloth, began by ingesting one kilogram of honey, followed by a bottle of red wine. After rising from the table, she smashed the wineglass in her hand and proceeded to cut a five-pointed star on to her stomach. Once the cut was completed, Abramovic crouched over and whipped herself until she bled. The final part of the performance consisted of the artist laying down on a block of ice. This segment was halted after thirty minutes, when a concerned spectator pulled her from the ice.

Just as many of Abramovic's performances involve the ingestion of food, *Lips of Thomas* begins with the artist eating a kilogram of honey. In her text *Fragmentation and*

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<sup>199</sup> Abramovic, as quoted in Kaplan, 16.

*Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, Bynum devotes an entire chapter to female eucharistic devotion, in which the expression or reception of Christ's love is demonstrated through the act of eating. Understood as a characteristically female trait, themes of food and feeding were associated with femininity as a result of medieval social constructions, Bynum writes: "metaphors of eating and drinking... are central images for union with God."<sup>200</sup> In turn, Eucharistic devotion was also an expression of the "ecstasy" inherent in female mystic devotion, as well as a specifically feminine expression of the *imitatio Christi*, "To receive was to become Christ -- by eating, by devouring and being devoured."<sup>201</sup> In such cases, participating in the Eucharist became a means to forge a union with Christ; Medieval descriptions of such "ecstatic" unions were often colored by distinctly sexual, erotic language.<sup>202</sup> With *Lips of Thomas* acts of eating are combined with acts of self-mortification (cutting and self-flagellation). As one of the oldest Christian practices, self-flagellation modeled itself on Christ's Passion. In this performance, as with many others such as *Spirit House*, the artist participates in acts of self-flagellation, embroiling herself in one of the oldest Christic rituals:

No religious woman failed to experience Christ as wounded, bleeding and dying. Women's efforts to imitate this Christ involved *becoming* the crucified, not just patterning themselves after or expanding their compassion toward, but *fusing with*, the body on the cross.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>200</sup> Bynum. *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, 124.

<sup>201</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>202</sup> In addition, Bynum discusses a phenomenon known as "holy anorexia," in which abstaining from food (also a female trait), is a form of *Christic* devotion (one of the more strict forms of *female* asceticism). This element of fasting is also at work in Abramovic's performances, but more so in relation to her work with Ulay.

<sup>203</sup> Bynum, 131.

In addition to the performances discussed in this section, any number of the *Rhythm* performances could also be seen to engage with this kind of devotional practice. Bynum saw this *fusing with*, or *imitation of*, Christ, occurring in two ways: asceticism and eroticism.

"There are moments in my life when I need to completely withdraw and do ritual practice. I go to a monastery and spend three months in total retreat. I do not see anybody, and I do very radical things."<sup>204</sup>

Bynum writes, "Common ascetic practices included thrusting nettles into one's breasts, wearing hair shirts, binding one's flesh tightly with twisted ropes, enduring extreme sleep and food deprivation, performing thousands of genuflexions and praying barefoot in winter."<sup>205</sup> From *Nightsea Crossing* to *Lips of Thomas*, Abramovic can be seen to imitate, emulate female acts of devotion; there have been many performances in which she fasted, abstained from speech and human interaction and refused material goods. Often, these acts of suffering devotion were said to be laced with feelings of ecstasy, creating a fusion of both.

All of the aforementioned elements (the Eucharist, self-mortification and to a lesser degree, asceticism) are present in *Lips of Thomas*. Like the majority of her early solo works, as well as the relation works with Ulay, this performance centered upon exercises of endurance and self-mortification. While engaging with the holy communion, the ingestion of honey and wine, the artist also made recourse to political symbolism with the cutting of the five-pointed star; followed by self-flagellation, this performance also sought to combine elements of *Christic* ritual with those of pagan rituals. Following these

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<sup>204</sup> Abramovic, as quoted in Celant, 10.

<sup>205</sup> Bynum, 132.

acts of self-mortification, the artist continued to test the flesh by laying on blocks of ice -- a test of endurance and faith. What Abramovic was hoping to achieve through these physically challenging, and physically harming works was an elevated mental state, something of a purity of mind and body through catharsis and purgation, expiation and redemption. For our purposes, what is most telling, is her engagement with Christic ritual, through both an imitation or re-appropriation of the Christic body as well as a participation in devotional practice.

### **Crucifixion Pose**

In an interview conducted in 1999, Abramovic discusses her interest in elements of sacrifice, specifically female sacrifice, going so far as to suggest a re-appropriation, or re-staging of Burden's pivotal 1974 performance *Transfixed*.<sup>206</sup> This desire to be crucified is partially played out in a few of her performances, but perhaps none more so than *Luminosity*, 1997 (see figure 20). Although provided as a title for several of her more recent performances (1995 - on), this particular performance took place at the Sean Kelly Gallery in New York in 1997 and consisted of the artist suspending herself naked on a stand, in a crucifixion pose, in the gallery space. This piece was also part of a larger work entitled *Spirit House* which had taken place earlier in an abandoned slaughterhouse in Portugal. There were five stages to *Spirit House: Dissolution, Lost Souls, Insomnia, Luminosity* and *Dozing Consciousness*; the five stages comprised of projections of the artist participating in self-flagellation, iconographic gestures, dancing a tango, suspending

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<sup>206</sup> "The idea of female sacrifice is quite interesting to me. I would like to be crucified, but not on a Volkswagen, because I don't like the car. I would choose another car." As quoted in Germano Celant. *Public Body: Installations and Objects 1965-2001*, 14.

herself in a crucifixion pose and sleeping with crystals on her face, respectively. Evoking Christ's crucifixion, the piece also incorporates pagan practices.

While many of Abramovic's performances explore aspects of Christic ritual, as well as masochistic practice, both *Lips of Thomas* and *Luminosity* center around what I would argue to be *Christic masochistic* practice and, as demonstrated above, one that models itself on female devotional practice of the Medieval period, once again evoking Christ's ambivalent gendering as both male *and* female. In doing so, Abramovic evokes the Eucharistic experience with performances that involve eating and drinking, in addition to Christic ritual (also engaging with the retrospective or autobiographical performance which divinizes or sacralizes the artist's life, further elevating her to the level of the Thing, with the performance filling the space of the Void).<sup>207</sup> Incorporating these practices, many of Abramovic's performances can be understood as modern-day martyrdoms, performances that highlight the positive and humanistic value of suffering.

Now that we have identified Abramovic's performances as engaging with Christic masochistic practice, the question to pose becomes: why? What does this culturally/historically invested body represent, why appropriate the *Christic* body? And secondly, is this representation a gendered one? Is Abramovic appropriating the Christic body inasmuch as she is restaging the acts of the female Medieval devout?

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<sup>207</sup> This concept will be discussed in relation to Slavoj Žižek's reading of contemporary art in *The Fragile Absolute* (London, New York: Verso, 2000).

## Chapter 6

### Orlan: the Reluctant Masochist

Where Chris Burden and Marina Abramovic appropriated the Christic body in terms of their own subjecthood, French performance artist Orlan began a literal self-transformation in the early 1970s, creating an alter ego, or new personae, she dubbed Sainte Orlan. Through the following decades, this self-made persona would alter and evolve, but never abandon its Christic roots. Commencing her career as a performance artist in the 1970s with overt engagements with the Christic body, Orlan's performances progressed towards an overtly corporeal examination of *female-ness*, as plastic surgeons sculpted her flesh into an amalgamation of feminine ideal beauty. Later producing what she calls "anti-performances," Orlan went on to stage well-crafted and choreographed plastic surgeries that commented on art historical, as well as religious, standards of beauty. The artist does not consider her work to be against plastic surgery, but against contemporary (and in turn historical) standards of femininity, which have been put in place by dominant patriarchal ideologies. While there is often an acknowledgement of Catholic iconography in Orlan's work, discussions of her art practice tend to focus more on her role as "post-human," and the feminist possibilities therein. While these analyses concentrate on figurations of the self in a futurized, technologized world, I would like to examine Orlan's performances as they engage with the past, more specifically, a Christian past. While all of her works involve a questioning or revising of identity, this chapter extends this line of inquiry, focusing on Christic identity in an aesthetic context. In the following pages I would like to concentrate on two aspects of Orlan's oeuvre: the

Madonna works of the 1980s and the surgeries of the 1990s; in doing so, I hope to demonstrate the emergence of a practice that relies on Christic ritual and iconography. Included in this analysis will be a discussion of the role of the icon and of the relic, and of Eucharistic practice and Resurrection, as they engage with, or are featured within Christic masochistic performance art.

Growing up in France during the 1950s and 60s, Orlan was surrounded by a country on the brink of change. While the stringent Catholicism of the 1950s gave way to the student protests of the 1960s, Orlan maintained her ambivalent relationship to the Catholic Church. Although the artist recognizes the Catholic iconography woven through her work, she nonetheless maintains that her art practice is a “reaction against God.” Formally beginning her art practice at the age of twenty-three, Orlan nevertheless claims to have been producing “street performances” since the age of eighteen. It has been suggested on several occasions that Orlan’s French upbringing was a direct impetus behind her sacrilegious subject matter, establishing links between her work, her national identity, and the French context from which it arose.<sup>208</sup> While not an avenue of inquiry that I will be exploring, it remains to be said that Orlan’s cultural and political environment provided fertile ground for the production of experimental and avant-garde art; both the Catholic rule, and the new order which was to proceed from it, had an effect on her artistic direction. While the events that took place in France in the 1960s have already demonstrated to have had an effect on the cultural production of women during

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<sup>208</sup> Among others, this suggestion has been made by Kate Ince, in her text *Orlan: Millennial Female* (Oxford: New York: Berg, 2000).

the 1970s, most notably with regard to female writing, this can also be applied to the visual arts.

In addition to the cultural and political dimensions from which they arose, Orlan's artworks are interpreted as being embedded in both portraiture and Body Art. Although her tableaux and surgeries can be seen to continue in these art historical traditions, Orlan is careful to make a clear distinction between *general* Body Art and the Body Art she is producing. Dubbing her brand of body art, "Carnal Art," Orlan announces its main characteristics: "Carnal Art is a work of auto portraiture in the classical sense, but with the technological means of its time. It oscillates between disfiguration and refiguration."<sup>209</sup> In this sense, her artworks are based on historical models, but with the aim of creating a new hybrid self. Where this self is seen to quickly abandon its traditional antecedents, I would argue that these self-transformations only solidify the historical molds from which they arose. Where Orlan's "Carnal Art" and traditions of Body Art intersect is in their exploration of limits. Just as each of the artists to be discussed in this project pushes the limits of the self, so too does Orlan look to transcend the limits of the body: "For me, it is about pushing art and life to their extremes."<sup>210</sup> In so doing, Orlan canonizes herself *Sainte Orlan*.

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<sup>209</sup> Orlan, "Intervention." *The Ends of Performance*. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane eds. (New York: New York University Press, 1998): 319.

<sup>210</sup> *Ibid.*, 319.

## The Creation of *Sainte Orlan*

Sainte Orlan was interested in acts of self-revelation throughout the seventies; thus she engaged in performances that questioned the relations between prevalent female social roles (woman as saint, whore, Madonna) and the institutions that instrumentally determined them (the history of art, the museum, the art gallery, the market, the tradition of religious iconography, and the Catholic Church).<sup>211</sup>

Throughout Orlan's art practice, one constant has remained: her desire for re-invention, self-transformation and self-creation. One could argue for Sainte Orlan as an alter ego; however, these transformations are fully-realized, creating a multiplied or fragmented ego, one which, nonetheless, retains its wholeness as a unified being. In 1962, at the age of fifteen, Orlan baptized herself as Sainte Orlan, conducting the first of many self-transformations, or re-inventions. The artist's first public appearance as Sainte Orlan, occurred in 1979 at a Body Art conference in Paris, although, it was not until the early 1980s that Orlan made the complete transformation. Since that time, the artist has created a multitude of works that center upon this new persona, ranging from installations to faux cinema posters. These early installations and tableaux vivants were derived directly from Catholic models, appropriating art historical religious imagery, with Sainte Orlan's self-canonization manifesting itself in various mise-en-scènes. These tableaux featured either the *white* or *black-clad Virgin*: Sainte Orlan was a multiple personality, allowing the artist to explore all angles of her sacred personae. In refashioning these often Baroque religious paintings into tableaux vivants, the artist, while re-appropriating the past, is also including iconic modern paraphernalia, from the fabric of her costumes (artificial fabric: vinyl, leatherette) to the industrial materials of the tableaux vivants (man-made materials: bubble wrap, cardboard, etc.). Although her tableaux of Sainte Orlan tapered off in the

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<sup>211</sup> Tanya Augsburg. "Orlan's Performative Transformations of Subjectivity." *The Ends of Performance*. Peggy Phelan and Jill Lane eds. (New York: New York University Press, 1998): 294-295.

late 1980s, to be replaced by her performances-surgeries, there remained strong iconographic and Christic images and rituals that surfaced in these later works. In the following section I would like to concentrate on four performances as they best exemplify Orlan's early engagement with the Christic body and female religious practices of the Renaissance and Baroque periods.

Before commencing her *Madonna* series, Orlan produced what have come to be known as her *Measurement* works (see figure 21), in which the artist used her own body to measure physical spaces, from that of the church to the museum. Dressed in her bridal trousseau -- a visual motif that featured prominently in her early works -- the artist stretched out on the pavement or floor and marked with chalk the length of her body, thus measuring the public space in a very private and physical manner. Once the performance was completed the artist ritually washed the trousseau fabric, preserving the dirty wash water in jars to later be displayed as relics. With this early performance, Orlan began her exploration of physical limits, tests of endurance, and the physical traces left by the body. Given the Christic resonance, it is not surprising that this methodical work has already been discussed in terms of Christ's Passion.<sup>212</sup> Art historian Tanya Augsburg continues this line of analysis stating, "Orlan underscored and transformed the sense of Christ-like self-sacrifice by calling her outfit a trousseau, thus linking her artistic sacrifice more closely with bridal sexual sacrifice."<sup>213</sup> Abandoning the theme of 'sexual sacrifice' for the moment, I would like to concentrate on the sacred aspects of this "Christ-like sacrifice." In this work Orlan undergoes a very physically challenging ordeal, one that is

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<sup>212</sup> As suggested in Bernard Ceysson's "Orlan: Ultime chef-d'oeuvre." in *Les 20 ans de pub et de ciné de Sainte-Orlan* (Caen, France: Contemporary Center of Art of Lower Normandy, 1990): 13.

<sup>213</sup> Augsburg, 298.

methodical and requires both endurance and patience. It is a painful and slow procession -- a marking, a measuring of time and space against the physical self. Where the Stations of the Cross marked Christ's path/progression so, too, do the chalk markings indicate the physical progression of the artist. Moreover, Christ's measurements have important value within traditional theology as, for example, the sacred column upon which Christ may have been tied is considered a measure of his body.

Following the *Measurement* series, Orlan continued to produce work that centered on her bridal trousseau. One such work was the 1976 photographic series, *One-off Strip-tease with Trousseau Sheets*.

*One-off Strip-tease with Trousseau Sheets* (1976)

This performative photo series was one of Orlan's first works to engage with the female Catholic figure or, more specifically, the figure of the Madonna or Virgin. Reminiscent of Hannah Wilke's 1974 series *S.O.S*, *One-off Strip-tease* saw the artist, through a series of performative photographs, methodically remove a religious costume. Working from Baroque art historical models, the artist uses her own bridal trousseau to recreate the iconic costume. The first photograph depicts the artist swathed in fabric, holding what appears to be a swaddled baby. Although virtually covered, the artist's breast is exposed, alluding at once to the nursing Madonna, while at the same time acknowledging the Catholic dualism of Virgin and Whore. With each frame, the artist proceeds to disrobe, mimicking the iconic stances of Baroque examples, such as Bernini's *Ecstasy of St. Theresa*. The artist unwraps herself, with each photograph symbolizing another stage of

unveiling. By the last few photographs, the artist is completely nude, standing in the classical art model pose, which is at once sexual and chaste. The final photograph of the series features a pile of trousseau fabric, highlighting the absence of the figure, with the female caricature being reduced to its limits, or beyond its limits, until all that is left are the traces or shadows of the self.<sup>214</sup> Like the *Measurement* series, these photographs are about process (transformation), performance and the unwrapping of the body and of the self. As with many of her early works, it also acts as a rejection of traditional female roles, i.e. saint, wife, bride, etc. Instead, Orlan vouches for a strong, independent female entity, one not bound by imposed (man-made) constraints.

In the early 1980s, Orlan began constructing mise-en-scènes, or tableaux vivants, which mimicked or re-appropriated classical religious art works. Taking cues from numerous sources, Orlan reconstructed these works in a contemporary light, with a reliance on technology and new media. These tableaux vivants were both photographed and recorded on video, adding a further technological dimension to these iconic works. In each photograph and/or tableau, the artist is experimenting with fabrics, ranging from more traditional fabrics to leatherette and vinyl. As with *Strip-tease*, these religious tableaux, which are also performances, retain their level of performativity even in the photographic format. The *saintly* Orlan resurfaced in many works throughout the 1980s, including an exhibition in Paris entitled “Skaï et Sky et video” which took place at the J&J Donguy Gallery in 1984. This exhibition featured both the white and black clad virgins of Sainte

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<sup>214</sup> The abandoned pile of fabric could also be discussed in terms of a shroud, with its implication of Catholic ritual and, more specifically, funerary rituals.

Orlan's oeuvre. In each of these tableaux, there is a mingling of religious and art historical iconography.

*White Madonna in Assumption (1984)*

In this tableau vivant, Orlan adopts the sacred persona of the "White Virgin," one which reappears throughout the artist's oeuvre (see figure 22). Here, she is posed atop a video monitor, surrounded by clouds of industrial bubble wrap. While her pose and costume are conventional, the fabric is not: the Baroque-style draping reflects the camera's glare, indicating the fabric's slick, plastic surface -- in this case, leatherette. In this tableau, as well as in the *Strip-tease* photographs, the drapery of Orlan's costume is reminiscent of the glossy white marble of any number of Bernini sculptures, with the leatherette reflecting the light in the manner of smooth white marble. In addition to the materials, Orlan's pose remains Berniniesque, evoking the abandon or ecstasy of Bernini's *St. Theresa*. In this sense, Orlan's Madonna is traditional, relying on classical art historical models: the artist reclines her head and opens her arms as if in some kind of swoon. These poses also mimic many medieval woodcuts, depicting saints and mystics such as St. Catherine of Siena, as she experienced ecstatic visions and other paramystical phenomena.

Where this model differs from its classical precedents is in the exposure of the breast, an act that can be construed as both sacred and sexual. As previously mentioned, the exposed breast alludes to the woman as mother (Leo Steinberg provides numerous

pictorial examples of the nursing Virgin with one exposed breast),<sup>215</sup> as well as sexual object, once again alluding to the Virgin/Whore dichotomy. Furthermore, one could consider this tableau as creating an intersection between sexual jouissance and religious ecstasy, as previously set forth by Georges Bataille, by exploring the similarities in visual rhetoric, or aesthetics. It is about the experience of Christ through ecstatic visions. Finally, this work also bridges the gap between art's past and its future, with its engagement of both the art historical and technological body and the juxtaposition between High Art (Baroque drapery, classic Assumption pose -- the Virgin ascending to the heavens) and Low Art (industrial materials, faux fabrics).

#### *Black Virgin and Video (1984)*

Where the *White Madonna in Assumption* appropriated a classic art historical model, Orlan's *Black Virgin* embodies the Madonna's alter-ego, one based in earth and matter. More profane than sacred, the *Black Virgin* finds herself draped in black leatherette, a fabric with obvious sadomasochistic and fetishistic connotations. As with *White Madonna*, the juxtaposition between sexuality and chastity is central; in this case, the iconic Virgin figure is subverted and replaced with a black leather-wearing crusader. Similarly to Orlan's *White Madonna*, the *Black Virgin* exposes her breast, referring both to imagery of the nursing Virgin, as well as the sexualization of the female body. As with *Strip-tease*, Orlan is once again invoking the Virgin/Whore dichotomy that marks so much sacred literature and imagery.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> In his book, *The Sexuality of Christ in Renaissance Art and Modern Oblivion*, Leo Steinberg makes a virtual catalogue of images of the nursing Virgin and Christ child.

<sup>216</sup> The nursing Virgin is also a visual trope taken up by Cindy Sherman in her performative photographs.

It has been suggested that the black-clad Virgin is more of a Judeo-Christian figure, almost more warrior-like than Madonna-like, while the white-clad Virgin is a traditional copy of classical art historical representations, both Renaissance and Baroque.<sup>217</sup> It has also been suggested, by Gladys Fabre, that Orlan's black-clad Madonna might be referring to the female biblical character of Lilith.<sup>218</sup> The character of Lilith has been a reoccurring figure in much feminist writing and imagery, exemplifying a strong, independent woman. Orlan's black-clad Virgin is self-assured and confrontational (staring out to the spectator) and certainly less maternal. Where the *White Madonna*'s glance is heavy-lidded and ambiguous, the *Black Virgin* meets the spectator's gaze head-on, staring down her nose to the camera's eye. Where the *White Madonna* was surrounded by clouds of bubble wrap, carrying her towards ascension, the *Black Virgin* balances atop cinder blocks (another contemporary industrial signifier), which, in turn sit atop a black video monitor. The monitor is flanked by angel wings and features a close-up of the Virgin's fragmented body. In this case, the video features Orlan's painted counterpart. With all of the Virgin/Madonna works, there is a heavy concentration on Baroque drapery, from the trousseau fabric of *Strip-tease* to the leatherette and vinyl of the *Virgin* tableaux. This interest in fabric and drapery folds, continues even into her surgeries, with a concentration on costumes, drapery, etc.

In addition to the tableaux vivants, Orlan also created a number of faux film posters employing the Sainte Orlan character. Collectively titled "Les 20 ans de pub et ciné de Sainte Orlan," these cinema posters featured images of the artist as either the white or

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<sup>217</sup> Ince, 17.

<sup>218</sup> As cited in Ince, *Orlan: Millenial Female*, 17.

black clad Madonna, in her Baroque religious drapery, and featured titles such as: "Orlan before St. Orlan."

Orlan's iconographical work reached an apex in the 1980s with *Chapel raised to St. Orlan*, a multimedia installation exhibited in Lyon. The exhibition featured a marble-like resin statue of the artist as Sainte Orlan, topped with a video halo of the artist's face. Below the sculpture were two photographs of the white-clad Virgin (Sainte Orlan). The installation also included mirrors, flowers and a bird cage with doves. In her text on the artist, Ince writes, "Sainte Orlan literally achieves transcendence through technology rather than any conventional spiritual means."<sup>219</sup> This is most evidenced in the Chapel work, with all of the traditional kitsch of a Baroque chapel interior, mixed with the technological tools of the modern age.

### **Catholic Iconography and Ritual**

The attitudes to institutional religion struck in these installations and performances -- form ornate pastiche to pointedly disrespectful parody -- tapped and exploited a rich source, the conflict-ridden store of imagery in Catholic art history in which sexuality and religion coincide.<sup>220</sup>

In creating this careful pastiche, which makes up most of Orlan's early works, the artist borrows greatly from Christian and Christic ritual, rendering the gallery space into a virtual pilgrimage site. These works also act as an intersection between her sacred and sexual personae, between religion and eroticism, with works such as *Strip-tease* being the most obvious attempt. Much has been written regarding the dualisms at work throughout Orlan's oeuvre, from the juxtaposition between High and Low Art, historical and

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<sup>219</sup> Ibid., 20.

<sup>220</sup> Ibid., 2.

contemporary materials and the sacred and profane. In manipulating these juxtapositions, Orlan's works act as holy self-transformations, self-baptisms, and more importantly, self-canonizations. While theoretically appropriating saintly imagery as a means of criticizing it, could it not be said that the artist is also reaffirming, or confirming, that which she tries to transgress? Is it not a sanctification of the artist through the construction of a metonymic network of relics -- *natural* or *technological*?

### **The Reincarnation of Sainte Orlan**

"My surgical performances began on May 30<sup>th</sup>, 1990, in Newcastle, England. It was the logical development of my proceeding work, but in a much more medical form..."<sup>221</sup>

Commencing her surgeries-performances in 1990, the events leading up to the conception of this series are seemingly legendary. Having to undergo emergency surgery for an extra-uterine pregnancy, which caused the cancellation of an artist-talk, Orlan instead opted to bring a camera crew along for the operation, and submit the recorded footage in lieu of her planned lecture. This incident, along with what she considers a natural progression of her art practice, led her to conceive of the surgery-performance in which the female body (and in this case, the artist's body) would be surgically altered in a visceral and aggressive commentary on the standards of beauty and the subsequent characterizations of women. The surgeries further commented upon the fragmentation and segmentation of the female body.<sup>222</sup> In Orlan's case, we can ask where the body ends and the subject begins: is this liminal point gender specific? How do her performances relate to the fragmentation of the sacred body in terms of the relic?

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<sup>221</sup> Orlan, "Intervention," 316.

<sup>222</sup> The idea of fragmentation with regard to the medieval woman's body is one of the subjects of Bynum's text, as discussed in Chapter Two.

Before discussing the specifics of the surgery, one can also discuss the textual genesis of these performances. In addition to her personal experiences of pain and the ill body, Orlan discusses the influence of psychoanalysis upon her work. Orlan cites specifically a text by Lacanian psychoanalyst Eugénie Luccioni, entitled *La Robe*, as impetus for her surgical works. Among other things, Luccioni's text examines the relationship between interior and exterior, between self and other and, most importantly, between self-perception and public reception. It is rare that one is perceived in the manner he/she sees him/herself. Reading excerpts from *La Robe* at the beginning of each surgery, the artist uses the text as a template examining the psychoanalytical relationships of the subject to the self. While using a handful of theoretical texts as models, Orlan also bases each surgery on a specific "philosophical, psychoanalytical or literary text," ranging from Antonin Artaud to Julia Kristeva.

With regard to the performances themselves, Orlan discusses the surgeries as being "female-to-female transsexualism." While the early surgeries consisted of liposuction, later surgeries consisted of surgical manipulation, altering Orlan's face to incorporate the features of various art historical models of "female beauty." Orlan is quick to point out that these surgeries were not completed in order to ameliorate or enhance the artist's body, in terms of traditional notions of beauty, but rather to make a cutting commentary on the impossible ideals one is forced to emulate, or achieve. It was also a means of reconciling the interior and exterior of the body, of reducing the gap discussed by Luccioni, between how we perceive ourselves and how we appear, or are received by others. Where do we draw the line between interior and exterior, between mind and

body? As with each one of her works, these surgeries act as a self-transformation or a *re-*creation of the self and as the series' title suggests -- *Reincarnation* -- they simply mark another reinvention of the artist.

Lastly, I would like to briefly discuss Orlan's surgeries as they relate to the "ill" body. The adolescent Orlan was surrounded by a hypochondriac mother and an ill sister. From an early age, the artist learned that sickness was equated with consideration and worth. To this end, it was the sick body, or *patient* that received the most attention. While hospitalized for her extra-uterine pregnancy, Orlan was to write that suddenly, "My body was a sick body that needed attention."<sup>223</sup> It was partially this attention, the attention given to the "operated-on" body that propelled her to consider surgery as a valid artistic practice. Likewise, it was the ill body that held the most worth, for it was the sick subject that forged the strongest identification with Christ. The sick individual understood what it meant to suffer, how this altered one's relationship to the corporeal self. This Christian attitude toward the ill body continues to persist.

### **Omnipresence**

In devising the surgeries that were to comprise *The Reincarnation of Sainte Orlan*, Orlan digitally grafted (through the aid of a computer program) particular facial features culled from a number of female portraits on to her own face. The artworks were not selected randomly, and Orlan provides precise reasoning for each choice. Over the course of the surgeries, Orlan looked to graft the nose of *Diana* (a strong female character, a leader); the forehead and temples of the *Mona Lisa* (a non-conventional beauty, with masculine

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<sup>223</sup> Orlan, "Intervention," 317.

features); the mouth of *Europa* (an adventurer); the eyes of *Psyche* (as the opposite of *Diana*, representing a more feminine side) and finally the chin of *Venus* (Orlan feels that *Venus* embodies or personifies all of the qualities of “Carnal Art”).<sup>224</sup> Together, each one of these art historical *icons* represents a different facet of the female character; they are symbolic both in their position within the art historical canon, and in their personifications of female strength.

As the most popularized of the surgeries-performances, *Omnipresence*, which took place November 21<sup>st</sup> 1993, in New York, was only one installment of this amalgamized self-portrait, or art historical pastiche (see figure 23). With this seventh surgery -- and according to Orlan, the most important -- surgeons inserted implants in the cheeks, chin and above the eyes in a recreation of *Mona Lisa*’s brow. In subsequent media descriptions however, the implants seemed to give the appearance of horns, rather than an enhanced brow. Many elements made up the Carnavalesque spectacle that was *Omnipresence*. To begin, the costumes were meticulously designed by leading fashion designers, such as Paco Rabanne and Issey Miyake. As with her earlier tableaux, *Omnipresence* also sees a focus on Baroque drapery and dramatic lighting, which, combined with the gathered participants, gave the operation the impression of a Baroque religious tableau. A recording of the surgery-performance was simultaneously broadcast to several galleries worldwide via satellite, including the McLuhan Centre in Toronto and the *Centre Georges Pompidou* in Paris. Through these live feeds, people were encouraged to ask questions and converse, when possible, with the artist. This “opening-up” to the public played into the demystification of the surgical procedure. Orlan writes,

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<sup>224</sup> *Ibid.*, 319-320.

“The performance was about, among other things, desacralizing the surgical act and making a private act transparent, public.”<sup>225</sup> In this sense, the surgical room was transformed into a theatre,<sup>226</sup> drawing room and, obviously, a television studio -- a salon with the still-conscious artist conversing with her guests. Where the performances of Burden, Abramovic and later Flanagan, took on the appearance of a confessional, with spectators confiding in the artist, Orlan’s performances took on the appearance of a lecture room (with audience members asking questions of the artist) in addition to that of a public confessional. Similarly to the early Madonna tableaux and installations, the surgeries pass from the Carnavalesque (a Bahktinian spectacle), through the Baroque and to the high-tech.<sup>227</sup>

It has been argued that Orlan’s works are a form of *travestissement*, which in French means both disguise and transsexualism.<sup>228</sup> In both the Madonna works and the subsequent surgeries, there is a concentration on costume and disguise, from the trousseau Madonna garb, to the Paco Rabanne-designed operating room couture. In both instances there is also the exploration of transsexualism, with Orlan discussing her works, and herself, in terms of a female-to-female transsexual. In addition to the discussion of her body as transcending gender, there is also talk of Orlan’s surgical body transcending the limits of the body itself. Just as Stelarc before her, Orlan considers the physical body outdated, outmoded for contemporary technological practices and advances, “Like the

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<sup>225</sup> Ibid., 322.

<sup>226</sup> The surgical room was originally referred to as “the operating theatre” and was depicted as such in Renaissance works.

<sup>227</sup> Orlan, 321.

<sup>228</sup> As suggested in Ince’s *Orlan: Millennial Female*, 16.

Australian artist Stelarc, I think that the body is obsolete.”<sup>229</sup> As much as Orlan looks to work against the past, and more specifically, against Catholicism, she nevertheless falls back on Catholic paradigms, such as the temporality of the physical body, with the physical self acting merely as a house, or cage, for the spiritual or cerebral self and the conflation of Christic divinity and stardom through metonymic representation or relics.

Orlan has already discussed the Catholic resonance of the operating theatre, recalling her first (involuntary) surgery. She refers to the sanctity of the operating room; her surgeries act as an undermining of this sacred space. The artist also recalls the quiet of the operating theatre, the Church-like atmosphere, and the surgeon as God. Subsequently, Orlan also began drawing parallels between the atmosphere of the operating room and the ambiance of a Baroque painting: the drapery, lighting, silence, mood, etc.<sup>230</sup> In another discussion of the performance, the surgeon’s gown was referred to as a *shroud*,<sup>231</sup> with “Each operation [acting] like a rite of passage”<sup>232</sup> and therefore an identification of the artist’s body with that of Christ.

Occurring simultaneously with the surgery, was an installation at the Sandra Gering Gallery in New York which included forty-one diptychs, each featuring a post-operation photo of Orlan recording her day-to-day recovery, coupled with a digitally-morphed photo of the feature the artist was attempting to reproduce. There was one diptych for

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<sup>229</sup> Orlan, “Intervention,” 325.

<sup>230</sup> As cited in Michelle Hirschhorn’s “Orlan: artist in the post-human age of mechanical reincarnation: *body as ready (to be re-) made*,” from *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts*. Griselda Pollock ed. (London & New York: Routledge, 1996): 116.

<sup>231</sup> As mentioned in Jill O’Bryan’s “Saint Orlan Faces Reincarnation.” *Art Journal* 56 (Winter 1997): 52.

<sup>232</sup> Orlan, “Intervention,” 321.

every day of the exhibition, creating something of a visual diary, or journal, providing archival footage of Orlan's bruised and swollen face (Stations of the Cross).

### **The Performance/Surgery as Christic Ritual**

While perhaps not as overtly religious as her earlier works, these surgeries-performances seem to engage more complexly with the Christic body, evoking the usage of relics, the act of Resurrection, the Eucharist and the martyrdom of saints.

The operating room becomes my studio, from which I am conscious of producing images, making a film, a video, photos, drawings with my blood, relics with my body fat and my flesh, kinds of sudaria and other objects that will later be exhibited.<sup>233</sup>

As with her earlier performances and installations, these surgeries also produced by-products, or *relics*. Just like the dirty wash water in the *Measurement* series, so too do the surgeries preserve the "left-overs." Referred to as "relics" (of the performances), the artist preserved the fat from liposuction and the removed flesh from the facial surgeries and sealed them in jars, or *reliquaries*. Orlan writes, "Our era hates the flesh," in this sense, it is akin to the sculpting away of one's own body.<sup>234</sup> Referring largely to the Judeo-Christian era in which we are still immersed wherein the flesh is considered corrupt, Orlan looks to forge a relationship with her flesh (considering it to be both an object of fascination -- and even fetishization -- and an object of disgust), through both her surgeries and her loving preservation of its by-products. In Orlan's manifesto, "Carnal Art," the artist discusses how her art practice differs from that of traditional Body

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<sup>233</sup> Ibid., 321.

<sup>234</sup> Ibid., 321.

Art. Part of this disparity lies in the recuperation of flesh, or the preservation of body material as relic. Where Body Art practices tend to end with the living body, Orlan's "Carnal Art" works carry on past the body's physical limits:

The idea of these series is to produce the most reliquaries possible, all presented in the same manner, always with the same text but each time translated into another language, until the body is depleted; each time in a different language until there is no more flesh to put in the center of the reliquary.<sup>235</sup>

In a series of works produced after the surgeries, *Small reliquary of flesh and words*, Orlan's removed flesh was preserved in resin and then measured, weighed and mounted in frames. Accompanying these pieces of flesh, were excerpts from a text written by Michel Serres (entitled *Le Tiers-Instruit*), which were also read at the beginning of several of the surgeries. With each wall-mounted work, Serres' text is translated into a different and lesser-known language.<sup>236</sup> Orlan writes of this work:

I use some Christian iconography of course. One example is my large reliquary which is really a big sculpture in which there is a piece of my flesh, preserved in special fluids to prevent it from decaying ... This is accompanied by a text written by Michel Serres. It was originally in French, but I'm having it translated in many languages, including many that are becoming extinct ... So, there's another layer of the Christian relationship between the flesh and the verb.<sup>237</sup>

In this way the artist is reducing the body into its most irreducible parts. The body and the word are inextricably linked and one does not end without the other. When there are no more languages or words there is no more flesh: the body is exhausted. Alternatively, the

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<sup>235</sup> Ibid., 327.

<sup>236</sup> Ince, 48.

<sup>237</sup> As quoted in an interview with Robert Enright. "Beauty and the I of the Beholder: A Conversation with Orlan." *Border Crossings* (1998): 44-47.

text, as it relates to flesh, is then decaying and in need of preservation. In a sense, the word is not presented here as something divine that may create the real (as God's word) but as something human (or half-human as Christ) and multiplying.

This preservation of flesh carries on from Orlan's early reliquary works made up of dirty washing water, or the preservation of her trousseau. As with the nails removed from Burden's palms, Orlan's leftover body material became *relics*, which were later displayed as such in various gallery spaces. Just as in the work of Bob Flanagan (to be discussed in the following chapter), Orlan's works can be seen to focus on body parts or on *the fragmented body* -- where Orlan's relics vary is in the preservation of actual flesh. In this case, they most closely mirror traditional Catholic reliquaries, in which the fragmented part stood in for the whole. As explored in Chapter Two, it was the spirit imbued in the fragmented or segmented body that allowed for the devotion to relics.

This offering up of flesh has already been mentioned in terms of the Eucharist, but I believe that it deserves more attention here. Each one of Orlan's surgical performances is a mini-sacrifice, a sharing of the body which she accomplishes through the display of bodily relics. While Bynum has remarked upon the popularity of Eucharistic devotion during the medieval period, I would like to argue that Orlan's performances fall into this category, with the artist and her public participating in an allegorical Eucharist. Bynum writes:

To thirteenth-century women, the mass and the reception or adoration of the Eucharist were closely connected with mystical union or ecstasy, which was frequently accompanied by paramystical phenomena.<sup>238</sup>

In Orlan's case, her works exist less as a *devotion* to the Eucharist, than as their own Eucharistic exercise. Where her earlier *Madonna* works explored the common ground between religious devotion, ecstasy and sexuality, these later performances experience the female religious body in an altered and yet related fashion. Rather than *receiving*, the surgical body is *providing* -- offering up the artist's own flesh in a voluntary sacrifice, "To receive was to become Christ -- by eating, by devouring and being devoured."<sup>239</sup>

"Few images force us to close our eyes: Death, suffering, the opening of the body, certain aspects of pornography (for certain people) or for others, birth."<sup>240</sup>

It has already been written that *The Reincarnation of St Orlan* is a "Passion Play for our times, with all the drama, mystery and anxiety generated by surgical procedure, followed by the triumphant resurrection of unscarred Flesh."<sup>241</sup> It is this element of resurrection, one that is integral to Christian faith, on which I would like to explore here. Throughout her surgeries, the issue of self-transformation is tied to this idea of resurrection. Each surgery personifies a partial sacrifice of the artist's body, only to be resurrected in an altered form. In this case, the resurrection is a melding of the body's fragmented or segmented parts into a cohesive whole, once again unifying the subject. The resurrection

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<sup>238</sup> Bynum, 126.

<sup>239</sup> *Ibid.*, 126.

<sup>240</sup> Orlan. "Intervention." 315.

<sup>241</sup> Quote from Sarah Wilson. "L'histoire d'O, Sacred and Profane" from *Orlan: ceci est mon corps* (London: Black Dog, 1996): 15.

connotes material continuity; a reunion with the body, and in turn, a hyper-valuation of the physical self. It is the body resurrected through surgery.

Taking the idea of resurrection even further, Orlan has also conceived of a project to be completed upon her death: an installation that would include the artist's mummified body.<sup>242</sup> Orlan writes, "I have given my body to Art. After my death it will therefore not be given to science, but to a museum and mummified, will form the centerpiece of an interactive video installation."<sup>243</sup> In this sense, the artist is looking to overcome death; she is looking for a means of resurrecting the body through technology.<sup>244</sup> She is both technomorphizing and transcending death through an exploitation of the abjecthood of the corpse. The abject corpse is both subject and object, self and not-self, interior and exterior. The corpse bridges the gap between matter and non-matter, between life and death. With this proposed "resurrection" piece, the artist is further closing this gap, emphasizing the temporality of the body and its dispensability and, most importantly, its sacred transcendence.

While there has been much written with regard to *faciality* in Orlan's works (with critics and art historians invoking the writings of Deleuze and Guattari, among others), I would like to focus on the face as it relates to the traditional conception of the Catholic icon, with its concentration on the face of Christ, the Virgin and the saints. As discussed in

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<sup>242</sup> For a discussion regarding the abject status of the corpse, and its mediation through technology, please see Chapter Seven.

<sup>243</sup> Orlan. "Intervention," 327.

<sup>244</sup> This is not unlike a proposed performance by Bob Flanagan to be discussed in the following chapter, wherein the artist conceives of a post-mortem performance -- a live feed, video documentation of the artist's decaying body.

Chapter Two, the icon is imbued with a certain power. In the case of the *Madonna* works, they are both icon and documentation and, as discussed in Chapter One, the two are not mutually exclusive. In the case of Orlan's surgeries, the entire performance hangs on the investiture of the face, this metonymic relationship of fragment to whole, with the face being the most culturally-significant emblem of the self.

While already compared to a Passion Play, each one of Orlan's surgeries can also be discussed in terms of martyrology, with each saintly martyrdom symbolizing a reenactment of Christ's Passion. Where Medieval martyrdoms ranged from acts of self-mortification, to asceticism and eventual sacrifice, Orlan's surgeries combine each one of these practices in a revisioning of traditional ritual. Just as Burden and Abramovic personify the artist as martyr, Orlan makes a martyr of herself: a martyr in the name of Art and in the name of Feminism. Each one of the surgeries is a mini sacrifice, in fact the title of one of the first surgeries is *Sacrifice*. Her performances are ritualized sacrifices of a sort, an offering up of her flesh -- a transubstantiation. While the artist is reluctant to discuss her surgeries in terms of masochistic performance art, there is also, undeniably, an element of self-mortification at work in each performance.

### **The Reluctant Masochist**

"Her [Orlan's] aggression, some of which she admits is still turned back upon herself, is primarily directed outwards to her viewers."<sup>245</sup>

At this point I would like to briefly discuss Orlan's work as it relates to the masochistic body, and in turn, masochistic practice. Where Ince discusses Orlan's work in terms of

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<sup>245</sup> Ince, 57.

the sadistic subject, I would like to concentrate on the idea of “aggression turning back upon the self.” It is on this idea of reversed aggression that Freud’s theories on masochism are based. Where Freud sees one’s destructive forces as being, for the most part, externally-directed, there are occasions when this *destructive force*, or *destructive instinct*, becomes swallowed up by the sexual function. This is known as sadism and it is within the framework of this ‘neurosis/diagnosis’ that Orlan’s works are most readily discussed.<sup>246</sup> However, as Freud points out, another portion of this destructive instinct remains within the libido and adopts the self as object. This becomes *erotogenic masochism*.

As previously discussed, the issue of pain is a sensitive one within the context of Orlan’s performances. In responding to the question posed to her during the *Omnipresence* surgery as to whether or not she was in any pain, the artist replies, “The initial injection hurt. After that the painful part is lying on an operating table for six hours.”<sup>247</sup> Orlan’s relationship to pain is a fitful one: she repeatedly asserts that “Carnal Art” is not about pain, rather, it avoids pain through anesthesia. However, one cannot discount the fact that Orlan is voluntarily opening up, cutting and sewing up the body and that these are painful processes. While Orlan’s relationship to pain is not as clinically masochistic as that of the other artists whose work I explore, her artistic practice nonetheless revolves around the *idea* of pain, more than the physical *experience* of pain, in addition to her incorporation of the highly intellectual dimension of masochism. The artist is consciously and voluntarily putting herself in these surgical situations; she is submitting to the surgeon’s

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<sup>246</sup> For example, Ince discusses Orlan’s works in terms of the sadistic impulse, with her works being sadistic vis-à-vis the audience.

<sup>247</sup> Quote by Orlan reproduced in Jill O’Bryan’s “Saint Orlan Faces Reincarnation,” 50.

knife, the cutting up and fragmenting of her body. The surgical process is one that is non-separable from the experience of pain. For example, while the initial injection of anesthetics is admittedly painful, it pales in comparison to the very dolorous recuperation stage, which immediately follows the operations -- the photos which make up the accompanying installation attest to this. Orlan relates,

I compare myself to a high-level athlete. There is the training, the moment of the performance, where one must go beyond one's limits -- which is not done without effort (or pain) -- and then there is the recuperation.<sup>248</sup>

Whether or not the surgeries in themselves are painful is debatable; rather, it can be argued that the artist's engagement with masochism has less to do with the enjoyment of pain per se, and more to do with acts of endurance, and the manipulating, stretching and exploiting of the body's limits.

In fact, it has been argued that Orlan's suffering is replaced by that of the spectator, as it is they who suffer as they watch these often uncomfortable surgeries -- they are the masochistic subjects, "In fact, it is really my audience who hurts when they watch me and the images of my surgeries on video."<sup>249</sup> Orlan's performances are often met with a mixture of fascination and revulsion; there exists the desire to watch, to look, but at the same time the desire to avert one's eyes, "When you watch my performances, I suggest that you do what you probably do when you watch the news on television. It is a question

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<sup>248</sup> Orlan, "Intervention," 326.

<sup>249</sup> Ibid.

of not letting yourself be taken in by the images and of continuing to reflect about what is behind the images.”<sup>250</sup>

In discussing Orlan’s performative surgeries in terms of their masochistic, or more importantly *Christic masochistic* involvement, it is first necessary to examine the role of contract and the dominant/submissive relationship of doctor to patient; each surgery-performance acts as a reversal of this initial relationship. As with any masochistic relationship, it is the submissive that retains control and Orlan’s case is no different. While the surgeon performs the painful task, it is Orlan who sets out the initial parameters and instructions. This is all to say that while her artistic practice is not as overtly, or clinically masochistic as that of Bob Flanagan, her performances nonetheless invoke the masochistic paradigm.

It is also possible to discuss her works in terms of Reik’s three main tenets of masochism: fantasy, demonstration and suspense. Each tableau, performance and surgery embodies the materialization of a fantasy. Likewise, and this is most strongly evidenced with the performance-surgery, each work serves as a demonstration: a willingness, or desire to *show*, to *exhibit*. Lastly, there is the element of suspense, which is justifiably at work within the religious tableaux, as both a performative tool, and as an indication of the dilatoriness associated with masochistic practice. Each of Orlan’s works, whether religious tableau or surgical performance employs the element of suspense, from the suspense of the mimed tableau to the waiting for surgical results. Orlan’s surgical theatre is equal parts operating theatre and waiting room. Where Orlan’s works are most overtly

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<sup>250</sup> Ibid., 315.

masochistic, are in their *Christic masochistic* nature, with its reliance on acts of endurance, staged martyrdoms, the incorporation of relics, Catholic iconography, and the evocation of the Passion.

Also important to the works of Orlan is the role of the fetish object. With each *Madonna* work, there is a fetishization of the religious figure, with a focus on religious drapery and costume. In her surgeries, Orlan has been said to fetishize the operating room and, in essence, the entire surgical practice or medical technology in general -- operating equipment, surgical tools, "hospital fashion," effectively creating a sadomasochistic environment. Finally, one could argue for the fetishization of flesh, itself: the fragmenting, cutting, labeling and finally preserving of the artist's flesh. Just as Christ's flesh was fetishized so too can there be said to be a similar action with regards to Orlan's conception of her own flesh.

In her performances and installations, Orlan is creating a corporeal language, one that models itself on the reversal, or "turning out" of the body. Just as Burden and Abramovic explored the limits of the body in relation to what could be construed as Christic masochistic practice, so too does Orlan engage with the Christic body, examining the intersections between religious practice, female sexuality and the fragmented self.

While Orlan's works have been discussed in terms of being "post-Christian,"<sup>251</sup> I would argue that her works strongly anchor themselves within a Christian rhetoric, utilizing Catholic and Christic iconography, rituals and attitudes towards the body. In doing so,

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<sup>251</sup> Ince, 136.

she is not so much moving past, or transcending the tradition of the Christic body, as she is embedding herself within it. What I have attempted to do in this chapter is to provide a new avenue of inquiry with regards to the artworks of Orlan. Rather than focusing on the artist's body as technologically altered, or *post-human*, I have endeavored to consider the artist's work as being rooted in Christic ritual and iconography and the artist's body as being rooted in physical and Christian materiality. Rather than engaging in "devotional practice," Orlan's performances re-appropriate Christic ritual, with the artist enacting her own sacrifice and subsequent resurrection. Where Orlan's engagement with the Christic body relied largely on the fractured, surgical body, the following chapter addresses the work of performance artist Bob Flanagan as it engages with the terminally ill body.

## Chapter 7

### Bob Flanagan: “*because I’m Catholic*”

In a poem entitled “Why,” poet and visual artist Bob Flanagan provides thirty or more reasons for his engagement with, and passion for, masochistic practice; listed among the chief reasons, is the Catholic Church. Just as Orlan looked to “re-create” the Catholic body, so too does Flanagan manipulate this cultural signifier, citing Christic imagery and the Catholic Church as impetus for his masochistic practice, Flanagan writes, “because I was humiliated by nuns; because of Christ and the Crucifixion; [...] because I’m a Catholic; [...] because of the cross.”<sup>252</sup> Throughout his career, Flanagan’s *masochistic* practice has been fodder for his *art* practice. Working within the mediums of spoken word, video, installation art and performance art, to name a few, he pushed the limits of his own body in an effort to better control it.<sup>253</sup> As the only true *clinical* masochist of the lot, Flanagan used masochism as a means of both controlling and externalizing the pain he suffered as a result of a life-long battle with cystic fibrosis. The last two decades of Flanagan’s life were spent conceiving of multiple performances which fused his experiences of masochism and illness with Catholic ritual. Where artists such as Burden and Abramovic engaged in masochistic practice purely for the sake of art (to most extents), Flanagan adopted it as a lifestyle. Succumbing to the disease at the age of forty-four, Flanagan’s contribution to masochistic performance art was unique in that it incorporated humor and Christic rhetoric. In the following chapter, I will be tracing the

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<sup>252</sup> The poem is reproduced in *Art Journal* 56 (Winter 1997): 58-59. Please see appendix A for a reproduction of the poem in its entirety.

<sup>253</sup> When discussing Flanagan’s sexual proclivities and lifestyle, I use the term *masochistic* as opposed to SM as I am following a Deleuzian model, whereby sadism and masochism are incommensurate. In the instances where the term SM is used, it is because the artist has identified it as such.

trajectory of Flanagan's art practice, from poet to performance artist, through an examination of his usage of Christic ritual and iconography. Focusing on themes of confinement, isolation, endurance, and the emasculation of the Christic figure, I hope to make a case for Flanagan's art as Christic masochistic performance art, placing his work among the ranks of Burden, Abramovic and Orlan.

"I was born with a genetic illness that I was supposed to succumb to at two, then ten, then twenty, and so on, but I didn't and in a never-ending battle to subdue my stubborn disease, I've learned to fight sickness with sickness."<sup>254</sup>

Diagnosed at an early age with cystic fibrosis, Flanagan lived a life of corporeal awareness, consistently conscious of his own body, as he experienced pain, both involuntary, and of his own infliction. Not expecting to live past his early twenties, Flanagan began writing about his experiences with illness and masochism in the 1970s, finding his niche in LA's spoken word communities. Within these communities, Flanagan -- a self-proclaimed exhibitionist -- found an ideal space, and receptive audience, for his often graphic and visceral poetry. During this time, Flanagan also began "performing" in many California SM clubs, which provided him with a venue in which to express the more physical side of his practices and to act out his many fantasies. In each of these performances, Flanagan combines his enjoyment of pain with that of humiliation, submission and exhibitionism. In 1980, Flanagan had met a photographer by the name of Sheree Levin, also known as Sheree Rose, who would fill both the roles of life and work partner. From the early 80s on, Rose and Flanagan began a masochistic relationship that would last the duration of his life; their relationship also melded into an artistic

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<sup>254</sup> Taken from an interview with Flanagan from Andrea Juno and V. Vale (eds.). *Bob Flanagan: Supermasochist* (New York: RE/Search Publications, Inc., 1993 and 2000): 1.

collaboration, with Rose assisting with, and helping to create, many of Flanagan's works. What resulted was a unique vein of performance art that centered upon the suffering body. However, what often separated Flanagan's performance pieces from others working in the realm of *masochistic performance art*, was his commitment to masochism, as not only visual trope, but also lifestyle, as well as his humorous approach to often-uncomfortable material. Throughout his career, Flanagan approached his work, and life in general, with humor and irony, looking to the lighter side of masochistic practice and cystic fibrosis.

### **Catholic Guilt**

"I was intrigued by (and perhaps identified with) the idea of being a martyr, especially since I was sick a lot."<sup>255</sup>

More than any of the artists discussed thus far, Flanagan acknowledged the role of the Catholic Church upon his upbringing and later personal and artistic development. Flanagan felt that he could relate to the tortured Christ and experienced the positive side of suffering. Over the course of many interviews, the artist recalls the childhood "thrill of being punished," which he later related in part, to Catholic guilt. Part of this "Catholic guilt" was gleaned from attending Catholic school and catechism classes, which opened him up to the possible *nobility* and *pleasure* to be experienced in suffering and the guilt that is intrinsic to Catholicism:

I got to experience Catholic guilt and confession, the Stations of the Cross, and the saintliness of suffering. I think I related my suffering and illness to the suffering of Jesus on the Cross – the idea that suffering in some way was kind of holy.<sup>256</sup>

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<sup>255</sup> Flanagan, as quoted in Juno and Vale, 47.

<sup>256</sup> Flanagan, as quoted in Juno and Vale, 13.

The influence of Catholicism upon Flanagan's adolescence was further solidified through popular culture. The artist recalls receiving the *Jesus Christ, Superstar* album as a child and proceeding to lash himself, as in the manner of Christ, "(...) and there I was naked in the living room giving myself the full 39 lashes along with the record – feeling *somewhat* guilty and stupid... but if it was good enough for Jesus, it was good enough for me!"<sup>257</sup> In addition to *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, Flanagan also cites *King of Kings* as another film that explored the guilt and suffering associated with the Catholic Church. As with *Jesus Christ, Superstar*, it was the whipping and torture scenes from *King of Kings* that marked and inspired the young artist,<sup>258</sup>

In Catholicism, torture was considered something beautiful and spiritual: something to rise above and change your life. And as kids those influences stuck with us... we never shirked from torture or pain *because* of the church. So it's not a reaction *against*, it's a reaction to. The Catholics teach the Stations of the Cross, where whipping and scourges ending up in crucifixion – death by torture. Jesus always has this great smile on his face and this expression of *release* when it is all over.<sup>259</sup>

In many of Flanagan's works, as we shall see, there is this type of engagement with the pleasure/punishment paradigm and the joy of expiation. While it was Flanagan's later art practice that would exploit the ties between masochism and Christic ritual, it was these early experiences that uncovered the links between suffering, guilt and pleasure. Flanagan notes, "Catholicism is great for cultivating young masochists."<sup>260</sup> In his writings, such as the poem "Why," Flanagan discussed experiences of pleasure and the

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<sup>257</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>258</sup> One can only imagine Flanagan's response to Mel Gibson's *The Passion of the Christ* which featured an extended flagellation scene and numerous other scenes of torture.

<sup>259</sup> Flanagan interview, Juno and Vale, 90.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid., 71.

consequent Catholic guilt. Here we could invoke the writings of Freud and his location of guilt as a primary motivating force in the masochistic individual. For Freud, moral masochism is a search for punishment for the expiation of guilt. While Flanagan's feelings of guilt and expiation would place him among the ranks of Freud's moral masochists, his experiences of pleasure through pain are, for the most part, purely erotogenic; in Flanagan's case, feelings of guilt only heighten the pleasure.

As previously mentioned in Chapter Two, there also existed a relationship between Christic devotion and illness, where suffering from illness was a way of identifying with Christ. There exist many stories in which saints and mystics sought the prolongation of a disease, or prayed for the onslaught of a disease, as a means of experiencing Christ's love. For Flanagan, the link between illness, suffering and pleasure was no different. While referring to his early experiences with illness, the artist remembers learning, at a young age, that there was a positive value to suffering: suffering brought him attention and pleasure.

While Flanagan's engagement with Catholic practice comes across plainly in his writings and interviews, art historians have largely overlooked this aspect of his art and masochistic practice. Barring the text written by Andrea Juno and V. Vale (although, this too is a collection of interviews with the artist), critical texts tended to focus on the artist's often extreme masochistic practices, rather than his experiences with Catholicism. In her book *Body Art: Performing the Subject* Amelia Jones discusses the work of Flanagan in terms of its engagement with masochism and its e/masculating effects, but

her examination of Flanagan's work in relation to the Catholic subject is relegated to a footnote. When writing about Flanagan's work in the main body of her text, she has only this to say: "Flanagan ritualized his pain through performances that borrow from and transgress the flamboyant fetishization of suffering and martyrdom in the Catholic tradition."<sup>261</sup> While this relationship to Christ and the history of martyrdoms will be covered in this chapter, a further discussion of this phenomenon will occur in Chapter Eight.

### *Arma Christi*

"Suffering, sacrifice and pain are themes of the Catholic religion."<sup>262</sup>

By the early 1980s, Flanagan had moved from the realm of written poetry and spoken word, to the realm of performance art. These early works were performed in alternative art spaces throughout California and combined elements of humor, poetry and masochistic practice.<sup>263</sup> Many of Flanagan's performances, for the most part in conjunction with his life partner Sheree Rose, are equal parts masochistic and Christic ritual, although the latter is rarely mentioned by critics, and if so, only in passing. *Gurney of Nails* produced in 1992, and performed again in the context of the installation piece *Visiting Hours* (1994), featured Flanagan lying naked on a hospital gurney; embedded in the gurney, were 1400 upturned nails (see figure 24). This work, like many of Flanagan's performances, combined elements of what could be construed as Christic masochistic practice, for example, suffering, pain, endurance and confinement. In addition, all of the

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<sup>261</sup> Jones. *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, 230-231.

<sup>262</sup> Flanagan interview, Juno and Vale, 47.

<sup>263</sup> During this time, Flanagan was also publishing books of poetry: *Slave Sonnets* (published by Cold Calm Press in 1986) and *Fuck Journal* (published by Hanuman Books in 1987).

masochistic elements, as set up by Reik, are in play: *fantasy* – all of Flanagan’s performances are externalizations of his masochistic fantasies; *suspense/suspension*: as balance is key in this performance, all movement was suspended and deferred, also there is suspense in endurance; *demonstration*: this piece was *performed* in front of an audience. Apparent in the early performances and continuing on with Flanagan’s later works, there is the incorporation of what could be considered the *arma Christi* or the tools from Christ’s passion. In so many of his performances, *Gurney* being no exception, there is an emphasis on tools and objects (such as nails, hammers, spikes and whips) each of which carries a certain iconographic resonance in the Christic tradition.

Throughout the history of his performances, Flanagan often made recourse to the use of nails, most notoriously in a work called *Nailed* (1989). This particular piece began with a slide show of Flanagan partaking in various masochistic practices and ended with the artist nailing his own penis to a wooden board. This performance was also reworked in *Auto-Erotic SM* and later in 1991, for a work entitled *You Always Hurt the One You Love*, which saw Flanagan nailing his penis to a wooden stool. It is not superfluous that Flanagan attacks and mutilates the most *vulnerable* and yet, most *sexual* and *masculine* part of the body. In this way he is undermining the power of the phallus, by exposing the phallus, thereby exposing inherent power systems, which tend to remain hidden and by “castrating” or otherwise debilitating the phallus and what it represents.<sup>264</sup>

In her discussion of this piece, Amelia Jones invokes the theories of Sacha Nacht who considers acts of self-mutilation as means of warding off castration. I would argue that

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<sup>264</sup> This idea has also been put forth by Juno and Vale in their text.

this piece is both a *warding off* of castration, in addition to a *self-imposed* castration, one that is both emasculating and debilitating. Flanagan's partner Sheree Rose also understood the piece as being a symbolic castration of sorts. Discussing a proposed work for Flanagan's birthday, wherein the artist would be wheeled out on a gurney of nails, Rose talks about the addition of a cake in the shape of a phallus that would be placed on Flanagan's stomach, with each guest taking a piece. In describing the work, Rose states:

You could say that was a symbolic castration, or a symbolic eating of the body of Christ. It was joke, too – we weren't saying you were going to be saved, not at all. But there was that spiritual structure, which I enjoyed playing with.<sup>265</sup>

By evoking the castration symbolism, Rose also invokes Christic ritual, including the practice of sharing in the body of Christ through Holy Communion. As with the performances by Burden, Abramovic and Orlan discussed earlier, Flanagan's works contain a Eucharistic element, producing a divinization of the artist, one that elevates him to the status of divine or sacred presence. In this instance it was a means of sharing Flanagan's body, but also his fragmented sexuality, his castration, and his fractured self. This *emasculat*ion can be said to be carried out in any number of Flanagan's works. Several performances saw the artist sewing up the scrotum so that the penis is hidden, creating something of a surrogate vagina. This exercise could also be construed as a symbolic castration, just as Vito Acconci *hid* his penis (in an effort to castrate it?) in the 1971 performance *Conversions III*.<sup>266</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> Interview by Deborah Drier entitled "Rack Talk" from *Artforum* 34.8 (April 1996): 80.

<sup>266</sup> The possible *feminizing* or *emasculating* effects of Flanagan's performances have already been explored in articles such as Amelia Jones' "Dis/Playing the Phallus: Male Artists Perform their Masculinities," 546-84.

While this exercise of nailing one's penis to an object has already been discussed in terms of castration, in both its masculating and emasculating effects, what has been neglected, or excluded, is a discussion of the piece in terms of crucifixion -- a self-stylized crucifixion. This way, the very act of nailing one's penis to a board, exerts a type of sacrifice. Likewise, the tools used for these particular performances, a hammer and nails, have an iconographic quality; they can be construed as surrogate *arma Christi*, becoming objects of veneration and idolatry. In addition to its crucifixion iconography, it is also possible to discuss this work in terms of circumcision: Flanagan, who's engagement with genital mutilation as performance art points to a sort of self-imposed circumcision. According to Freud, circumcision is understood as a "symbolic substitute of castration," whereby the child submits to the power of the primeval father through this partial sacrifice.<sup>267</sup> Early psychoanalysts also believed that circumcision, perceived as an attack of castration, rendered the boy predisposed to sexual confusion and a tendency towards femininity. As the majority of Flanagan's work engages with the Christic body in some way, shape or form, would it not be possible to approach works such as *Nailed* in terms of Christ's circumcision? Christ's circumcision has been exhibited in many icons and religious depictions, just as Flanagan's notorious act has been popularized, or mediated, through video, film and photography.

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<sup>267</sup> A further discussion of the relationship between circumcision and castration can be found in Freud's text "Moses and Monotheism" (1939).

## Masochism as Everyday Practice

“...Flanagan/Rose use performative violence -- which they accept cheerfully or even ecstatically -- as if to exorcize the internal violence being done on their bodies by illness.”<sup>268</sup>

For Flanagan, it was impossible to recall a time when pain was not linked to pleasure, from the trips to the hospital to the commencement of self-inflicted suffering, it was rare for one to exist without the other. While other boys were playing baseball and soccer, Flanagan was at home suspending himself by his wrists from his bedroom light, or whipping himself in the bathroom. Flanagan's relationship to his own body was a unique one, he understood and related to his body, his physical self, in terms of pain. Growing up in and out of the hospital, he recalls the attention he received as a result of his sickness, this produced the perceived relationship of pleasure to pain: pain could also invoke a positive, or rewarding experience. In turn, Flanagan's masochistic performances incorporated elements of control, endurance and suspense. In the following section, I would like to address these elements as they can be identified with Christic masochism.

Flanagan's masochistic performances, as well as his life practice in general, engage with issues of control -- the pain he suffered at the hands of his masochistic practice was of his own volition, it was controllable. As becomes clear throughout his writings and through video footage, such as Kirby Dick's documentary *Sick: The Bob Flanagan Story*, while Flanagan retains the position of the submissive, he remains in control of the exercise through constant instruction. As a result, he controls how much, when, where, and so on. In these cases, Flanagan is enacting the roles of the traditional masochistic relationship: he is both victim and abuser, master and slave. Just as Abramovic recognized the control

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<sup>268</sup> Warr & Jones. *The Artist's Body*, 32.

she held in the performance *Rhythm 0*, going so far as to mount a wall text that read: "I take responsibility," Flanagan also acknowledges his power, "I am ultimately (this is what every masochist hates to hear or admit) in full control."<sup>269</sup>

Related to this issue of control, is the element of the contract. An integral part of the masochistic relationship, as defined by Masoch, and further explored by Deleuze, the contract exists as a tool of control whereby the "slave" sets the parameters for his master. Early on in their relationship, Flanagan bought Rose a copy of Masoch's *Venus in Furs* which served as a guideline for their masochistic practices, Flanagan states, "[T]o me this [book] was a great role model."<sup>270</sup> It was as a result of reading *Venus in Furs* that Flanagan and Rose first came up with the idea of establishing a contract; the two began with a verbal contract, committing themselves to two months of verbal and physical dominance. This would later lead to written contracts, wherein the parameters were set out by Flanagan -- this way, Flanagan could control the situation (by proxy) by stating what was permissible and what was not permissible, and by dictating his own punishment, by way of written directives. For Flanagan, it was the tedious restrictions that were the most exciting -- when asked about the appeal of a day-to-day master/slave regimen, the artist relates, "The restrictions. What really gets me going is lots of restrictions: having to operate in a confined space either psychologically or physically, and enduring that."<sup>271</sup> The majority of Flanagan's everyday activities were regulated (through contracts) from what to eat (diet) to household chores. As dictated a variety of contracts, Flanagan lived as something of a houseboy, doing housework, preparing meals

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<sup>269</sup> Flanagan interview, Juno and Vale, 32.

<sup>270</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

<sup>271</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

and picking the kids up from school. This incorporation of masochism in their daily routines was exemplified in works such as "*Dear mom...*," a video which saw Flanagan dictating a letter to his family, describing his mundane home life, while cutting to images of Flanagan in bondage, house-cleaning, practicing masochistic acts, and so forth.

Also related to issues of control, was the element of endurance. The artist considered his performances, and his masochistic practices in general, to be tests, or rituals, of endurance. As with Burden and Abramovic before him, many of Flanagan's practices and performances centred on the exercise of *waiting*. Before beginning his career as a 'performance artist,' Flanagan often engaged in masochistic acts of endurance, or suspension, both literally and metaphorically. Flanagan recalls how, even as a child, he was continuously suspending himself from things, by his wrists or ankles. When he reached adulthood, Flanagan continued these acts of suspension -- he cites instances of being tied up in the backyard overnight and waiting for the morning when Rose would come to untie him (utilizing both suspense and suspension). Other times, these confinements, or endurance tests were acted out alone; Flanagan recalls another instance where he handcuffed his own wrists behind his back and sent the key to himself in the mail. Or yet, other examples where he would shackle himself and have the key sitting on a block of ice, with no hope of unlocking his wrists and ankles until the ice had melted. In many, if not all, of his performances, the element of endurance, or suspension was tantamount. The performance *Nailed* began with Flanagan attaching fifty or more clothespins to his naked body, he then waited until each one had snapped off before continuing with the rest of the performance. Likewise, in the performance *Gurney*,

Flanagan *endured* lying on a bed of nails for a predetermined amount of time. In the more literal sense, any number of Flanagan's masochistic practices and performances saw him strung up by his wrists and ankles, such as *Visiting Hours*.

For Flanagan, pain became a central means of language and communication. What Flanagan's performances achieved was an inversion of the private and the public, each performance was an acting out of a private fantasy, an exhibition of private practices for the public. In this sense there is a distinction between traditional masochistic practices and masochistic performance. In addition to the elements of suspense mentioned above, this inversion ties into the *demonstrative* or *exhibitionist* aspect of Flanagan's masochistic practices. As a self-affirmed exhibitionist, Flanagan often speaks of the thrill of making public, his private fantasies, the pleasure invoked by *showing* or *demonstrating* his masochistic practices. These demonstrations also exist as a form of boasting, Flanagan writes: "There's also a cockiness to it: showing how much I can *take*."<sup>272</sup>

Before moving on, I would also like to mention the role of the fetish object within Flanagan's work: what are Flanagan's performances but fetishizations of pain? For Freud, the fetish object was tantamount, an everyday object or body part imbued with sexual connotations. The cementing of the fetish object arises when the male child realizes for the first time that women do not have a penis. At this point, fearing his own "loss of a penis" (castration), the child identifies some other object, everyday object, as the missing organ. To this degree, fetishism is especially prevalent in masochism. In Sacher Masoch's texts, the fur pelt worn by the dominating woman fulfills this role; on to

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<sup>272</sup> Ibid., 43.

it are transposed displaced (or repressed) sexual feelings and fantasies. For Deleuze, fetishism is defined by the process of “disavowal and suspension of belief,” as it pertains to masochism, “[T]here can be no masochism without fetishism in the primary sense.”<sup>273</sup> In addition, fetishism acts as the suspension of reality for the realization of the Ideal. For Flanagan, there is what I would call the fetishization of his own penis, going as far as to symbolically castrate himself. Also, within masochistic practice there is the fetishization of certain objects, such as whips, handcuffs, and masks, and for Flanagan: hammers, nails, and clamps. Each one of these objects is imbued with sexual allure, symbolizing the positive relationship between pleasure and pain.

Towards the end of his life, Flanagan’s interest in masochism waned, perhaps as a result of the increasing pain he was suffering of the uncontrollable variety (in addition to the prescribed assortment of medication). His engagement with masochism was soon relegated to performance art only, while the majority of his energies went into staying healthy and completing his art projects. Throughout this period, Flanagan began to keep a journal, what he referred to as the “Pain Journal” which chronicled his illness to his last days, sometimes with humor and other times with bleak directness,

Up again at 3 am -- what gives? Sound asleep since 11. Up at 3, no matter what. Thought I'd escape writing tonight, but found myself mulling over why it is I don't like pain anymore. I have this performance to do on April 1st, and I'm shying away from doing or having SM stuff done to me because pain and the thought of pain mostly just irritates and annoys me rather than turns me on. But I miss my masochistic self. I hate this person I've become. And what about my reputation? Everything I say to people is all a lie, or at least two years too late.<sup>274</sup>

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<sup>273</sup> Deleuze. *Coldness and Cruelty*, 32.

<sup>274</sup> Excerpt from Flanagan’s “Pain Journal” available on-line as part of the *Terminals* project, <http://vv.arts.ucla.edu/terminals/flanagan/flanagan.html>

## The Ritualization of Pain

When discussing the works of Flanagan, it is necessary to acknowledge the role of ritual. While the role of ritual has already been considered one of the more important components of performance art, it is especially prevalent in masochistic performance art. If following Reik's formula, ritual would find its place within the elements of demonstration/exhibition, suspense and, to a lesser degree, fantasy. While discussions have already been conducted around the role of ritual in performance art, and, more particularly, the "ritualizing of pain" in Flanagan's work, it nevertheless demands some attention here.<sup>275</sup>

Going back to RoseLee Goldberg's text regarding the genesis of performance art, ritual exists as a means of ordering, or giving structure to, this type of artistic practice. While Flanagan incorporates this element of ritual, as do all performance artists, he also incorporates "the ritualization of pain" (as a sub-category and activity), as well as Christic ritual. The artist takes inspiration from, or models his performances on a variety of Christic rituals. One Christic ritual that both Flanagan and Rose observed *religiously* was the practice of Lent. Flanagan writes of the excitement engendered by depriving oneself of something, of enduring this period of restriction. Flanagan's Lent practices ranged from sleeping on the floor, rather than the bed, for forty days and forty nights, to more common forms of restriction, such as depriving oneself of television or a certain food. In a related scenario, Flanagan also ate nothing but oatmeal (and vitamin supplements) for a similar period of time. This element of *sacrifice* was something that

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<sup>275</sup> Both Amelia Jones and Kathy O'Dell have discussed the notion of "ritualizing pain" as it relates to the works of Bob Flanagan in *Body Art: Performing the Subject* and *Contract with the Skin*, respectively.

featured prominently in Flanagan's masochistic practices and performance art, "I loved the idea of giving things up. Sacrifice was a big theme that I liked and carried with me."<sup>276</sup> In Flanagan's performances, the combination of ritual and sacrifice are tantamount.

### **Later Work: *Visiting Hours* and *Memento Mori Trilogy***

By the early 1990s, Flanagan was becoming increasingly ill, spending more and more time in the hospital. These prolonged hospital stays and the detrimental toll that CF was now taking on his masochistic life, provided fodder for one of his most well known works, *Visiting Hours*.

#### *Visiting Hours*

First exhibited at the Santa Monica Museum of Art in 1992, and later at the New Museum of Contemporary Art in New York (1994), *Visiting Hours* (see figure 25) was equal parts installation work and performance art, combining elements of video, text and photography. As with all of his works, but perhaps most explicitly with *Visiting Hours*, the piece sought to combine his experiences of cystic fibrosis and masochism, integrating elements of pleasure and pain, guilt and expiation. It was the penultimate point at which his masochistic practice and illness converged.<sup>277</sup>

The installation itself consisted of several elements. Combining his poetry with his visual art practice, Flanagan constructed a wall out of 1400 children's alphabet blocks, with

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<sup>276</sup> Flanagan interview, Juno and Vale, 47.

<sup>277</sup> For excerpts of this installation, please see Kirby Dick's documentary *Sick – The Bob Flanagan Story*.

each section of blocks spelling either “CF” or “SM”. On the opposite side of the blocks, Flanagan had sanded off the children’s images (images of toys and animals) and replaced them instead with SM and CF iconography (padlocks, whips, chains, hospital equipment, doctors, and so forth) -- “my own personal talismans or iconography.”<sup>278</sup> A children’s play-area was also constructed, simulating those found in hospitals or doctor’s offices. Also included was a “toy box” containing various children’s toys that held dual meanings for the practitioner of masochism, such as toy doctor’s equipment, toy handcuffs, chaps, tool belt, etc. As with the toy blocks, the exterior of the box was decorated with SM and CF iconography, as well as by a text written by Flanagan. Other textual components existed in the form of wall-mounted texts with portions of his poem “Why?” written on the walls of the exhibition space.

The installation was also comprised of photographs of equipment used in masochistic practice and what Flanagan referred to as the “Wall of Pain” which incorporated over 750 photos of the artist in various stages of pain. In addition to the photographs, the installation included several monitors featuring close-ups of Flanagan’s body parts engaging in masochistic practice.<sup>279</sup> Each monitor represented a different body part (head, chest, hands, penis and feet) and spliced video from past performances with images from popular culture (Dumbo the elephant, Betty Boop and other cartoon characters) -- together, these monitors formed a large cruciform -- a stand-in for Flanagan’s ailing body. Separately, each monitor presented the said body part, as

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<sup>278</sup> Flanagan interview, Juno and Vale, 66.

<sup>279</sup> In describing this performance, I am working from video footage from Kirby Dick’s documentary *Sick*, as well as descriptions by the artist, made in interviews with Juno and Vale, in addition to photographs in their text.

experienced through CF and SM. For example, the “head” monitor featured close-ups of Flanagan’s face, as he is being slapped and force-fed. Film clips, including scenes of Christ on the cross, frequently interrupted these images. Likewise, the monitors focusing on Flanagan’s hands also cut to images of Christ’s hands being nailed to the cross (Christic images from mainstream cinema). Together, these monitors created a virtual body, one that was at once deeply technological and yet, rooted in the flesh.

While the technological elements (photography and video) served to create an SM room and the toys and texts, a simulated hospital waiting area, Flanagan also constructed a makeshift hospital room, complete with hospital bed, flowers, hospital gown, medical equipment and pacifying peach-colored walls. Adorning the makeshift hospital room was various catholic paraphernalia, including a crucifix. With Flanagan playing the dual role of hospital inmate and host, spectators were invited to visit with the artist during “visiting hours;” these visits were interrupted several times a day with Flanagan being strung up by his ankles above the hospital bed for specified intervals -- Flanagan would later state: “Being in a bed is an endurance test.”<sup>280</sup> Throughout the performance, Rose was often in attendance, sitting on a chair at Flanagan’s bedside, acting as co-host while engaging in conversation and answering questions.

As with the performances of Burden, Abramovic, and Orlan, there existed a certain level of intimacy with *Visiting Hours*, where gallery-goers treated Flanagan’s makeshift hospital room as a confessional and the host as both counselor and priest. In these instances, gallery-goers would relate their experiences with hospitals, pain, illness and

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<sup>280</sup> Flanagan interview, Juno and Vale, 83.

CF; others were practitioners of SM and recounted their sexual fantasies. Flanagan recalls, "Actually, it came down to: not being afraid to talk about pain. [S]eeing someone who purposely focused on pain gave people a doorway to come in and explode about their own painful situations, whether they were sexual or hospital related."<sup>281</sup> While this was not the impetus behind the work, it nevertheless added another dimension, creating a "safe" space for dialogue and exchange -- "Most of the time people wouldn't even *ask*, they'd just come in, sit down and start talking."<sup>282</sup> While this created a "confessional" space, it also emphasized the idea of expiation, with the artistic figure replacing that of Christ, a maternal stand-in.

Above all else, *Visiting Hours* tended to function as autobiography, dealing with Flanagan's past as a sufferer of CF and as a practicing masochist, and the relationships that existed between the two. Both the hospital room and the SM room explored Flanagan's experiences with pain and were filled with objects which mirrored this relationship -- the "tools" of SM, were not unlike the hospital equipment particular to Flanagan's disease. In this way, the installation/performance also functioned as something of a retrospective. This autobiographical dimension is important in Flanagan's works, in addition to those of Abramovic, as it contributes to the divinization of the artist in relating his/her life to the life of Christ. The installation contained elements from his many past performances, including objects, as well as video and photo documentation. In essence, these objects and photos functioned as relics. Each object was imbued with a history, a physical reminder, or remainder from previous performances. In this respect it

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<sup>281</sup> Ibid., 99.

<sup>282</sup> Ibid.

resembles Abramovic's performance *Biography*, mixing audio, visual, and material remnants of past performances, existing as a reliquary of sorts. In an interview, Deborah Drier says this about *Visiting Hours*, "In *Visiting Hours* you [Flanagan] seem to be making yourself into an artifact."<sup>283</sup> I would argue, that rather than "making himself" into an *artefact*, he is working at making himself into a *relic* -- an object of worship, a pilgrimage site. However, nowhere is this "relic-ization" more dominant than in the unfinished series *Memento Mori Trilogy*.

### *Memento Mori Trilogy*

Flanagan's final work, *Memento Mori Trilogy*, was to be composed of three casket installations. The first, entitled *Video Coffin*, 1994 (see figure 26), which was the only one of the three to be produced as a result of the artist's death, comprised of a decorated casket. The open head of the casket was adorned with symbols of death (such as knives and bullets) and featured the text "I was promised an earthly death, but here I am, some forty years later, still waiting." Inside the casket lay a video monitor in the space reserved for the corpse's head. Featured on the monitor was a recorded loop of the artist's face; however, when the spectator approached, Flanagan's head was replaced by the spectator's face, forcing us to confront our own deaths, just as Flanagan was confronting his. Having constantly been faced by his own impending death, having the threat hover at the perimeters of his previous performances, *Memento Mori Trilogy* looks to confront Flanagan's death "head-on." Incorporating elements of humor, *Video Coffin* technomorphizes death, mediating, and at the same time distancing, our experience of death through the video monitors.

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<sup>283</sup> Drier, 79.

The second work in the series, *Dust to Dust*, was comprised of a simple wooden casket, which was to contain heaps of confetti, which, upon closer examination, would be composed of thousands of tiny photographs of the artist. In this case, even the title, *Dust to Dust*, retains spiritual connotations, with the words being taken from Christian funeral rites, a ritual in themselves. This work exists as a prolongation of Flanagan's self, multiplications of the fragmented subject. The tiny photos, or confetti, act like ashes, evoking the practice of cremation, a scattering of the subject.

The final work in the trilogy, *The Viewing*, was conceived of as a documentary of Flanagan's decomposing body: a camera would be located in Flanagan's actual coffin and through a video link, the images of his decomposing body would be displayed on a monitor in a gallery setting. Gallery visitors had the option of turning on the monitors and seeing the decaying body. This uncompleted work acts as a resurrection of sorts, a means for Flanagan-as-body to overcome, or even transcend death. Just as each one of his previous performances looked to exhibit or display the body, so too does *The Viewing* expose the body in its most intimate setting: death. It is also the penultimate fantasy, one that saw the apex of Flanagan's obsession with the masochistic body and lastly, the piece personifies the ultimate state of both suspense, and suspension. Mimicking those saints who are remembered through relics, a physical rem(a)inder of the self, Flanagan's body is also compartmentalized and/or fragmented. In this case, the body itself becomes a relic, the coffin a reliquary and the gallery space a pilgrimage site. The corpse becomes a stand-in for Flanagan himself. As with the other pieces in the trilogy, *The Viewing* is also a way of technologizing death, mediating our experience of death through technology. It

is a means of prolonging the physical self through digital intervention: the expired physical body living on in a virtual space. Even these last uncompleted performances explore the same themes as previously mentioned works: themes of confinement, isolation, endurance, resurrection through image, relic and technology.

The inclusion of the corpse provides an interesting paradox, it is both living and non-living, it is both *I* and *opposed to I*. It is something abject, material that is both repulsive and inclusive. In her text *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (1980), author Julia Kristeva explores *the corpse* in all of its abjective glory. While Kristeva points to the multiple signifiers of death that are deemed acceptable, such as the flat line of a heart monitor or the ritual of a funeral, it is when we are confronted by death proper, such as the corpse, that we experience feelings of abjection. In this case, the corpse threatens order, more specifically, the order of the living self. Kristeva writes, "The corpse seen without god and outside of science, is the utmost of abjection. [...] It is death infecting life."<sup>284</sup> Whether Flanagan's corpse would have been any less abject as a result of it being mediated both through the television monitor and the gallery space is impossible to say, however, it is telling that the piece never came to fruition, perhaps as a boundary that could/should not be breached. In an excerpt from Flanagan's "Pain Journal" he relates the discomfort of the piece:

Ants are crawling in and out of my teeth and around my eye sockets and my nostrils. The moisture is draining out of me and I'm starting to shrivel up. My little apple head effigy looks great, almost as good as the real thing, the real thing being me, when I'm dead, buried with a video camera to document my ongoing "deconstruction," but Sheree's having second thoughts.<sup>285</sup>

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<sup>284</sup> Julia Kristeva. *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection* (New York : Columbia University Press, 1982): 4.

<sup>285</sup> Excerpt from Flanagan's "Pain Journal."

While this performance was never produced, one can speculate that it was too intrusive and finally, too performative for comfort -- it was the ultimate resurrection, or melding of body and technology, to the point that the body is effaced.

### **Audience Interaction/Reaction**

It has been argued that masochistic performances are not only painful for the performer, but also for the audience. How do we as an audience, experience Flanagan's performances? Although somewhat mediated through print, photography or film, Flanagan's performances nonetheless retain their aggressive edge. How do we feel watching his already ill body be further tortured? Do we suffer along with the artist, or do we experience feelings of triumph, as does Flanagan? Are we also masochists in watching, or deriving any pleasure from his performances?

In response to audience reaction, Flanagan talks about the "charge" he experiences from seeing audience members squirm in their seats during the performances. However, more than a general experience of unease, or embarrassment, Flanagan recognizes, above all else, a sense of communal pity or *sympathy*. Although approaching the material with humour and demonstrating the obvious pleasure he derives from masochistic performance, audience members identify him as a "victim" to a disease. Flanagan writes: "Yes. The reaction I'm most surprised at when I get lifted up in the air by my ankles, or when I lie on a bed of nails, like at my birthday party, is that people break into tears. My own reaction is more like, this is very funny."<sup>286</sup> As mentioned in previous chapters, the audience members are also entering into an unwritten contract with the artist by attending

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<sup>286</sup> Flanagan interview, Drier, 78.

his performances -- they are colluding a type of alliance with the performer. As will be discussed in Chapter Eight, it is this sense of *collusion* or *communion* that unites audience and performer.

### Hero Worship

"For all the obsessive specificity of his interests, Bob was a complex man who wanted simultaneously to be Andy Kaufman, Houdini, David Letterman, John Keats, and a character out of a de Sade novel."<sup>287</sup>

On more than one occasion, Flanagan has been referred to as a "hero," what does this mean in light of his masochistic performance art? What made him a hero? Was it his tolerance of pain, his often-humorous approach to dire circumstances, his working credo of never quitting?

Flanagan was unique in that he was the only one of the four artists who was actually suffering from an illness; his experiences with pain were both voluntary and involuntary, thus he approached masochism and performance art in a different fashion. Flanagan understood the fine line that existed between pain and pleasure, as has been examined for centuries. Flanagan also understood and exploited the relationships between Catholicism and suffering, between Christic ritual and masochism. While there is certainly an inherent and/or implied element of danger in the performances of Burden, Abramovic and Orlan, Flanagan's performances, and day-to-day existence, are unique in that death is always present. If not necessarily as a possible *outcome* of the performance, the threat of death infringes on every one of the artist's performances as it does on his life. To this end,

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<sup>287</sup> As described by friend and colleague Dennis Cooper, in his article "Flanagan's Wake." *Artforum* 34.8 (April 1996): 75-77.

Flanagan engages in masochistic practices and performance in order to stave off death, among other things.

In this chapter I have examined the work of Bob Flanagan in light of its engagement with masochistic practice and Christic ritual. While a discussion of his works in relation to masochism is nothing new, an investigation into his engagement with the Christic body, whether through its emasculation (the emasculation of Christ) or its mortification, is imperative. Also explored were the themes of isolation, confinement, endurance, suspense, all of which correspond to hagiographic experiences, as explored in Chapter Two. Also explored were themes of resurrection and abjection, as they pertain to the corpse as subject, and art object. In the following chapter, I will analyze the works of Burden, Abramovic, Orlan and Flanagan in terms of their engagement with Christic practices and discuss the possible impetus behind this particular visual trope. Why appropriate the Christic body and its practices? Is this body hyper masculine, emasculated or both? How do these artists engage with this body and more importantly, *why?*

## Chapter 8

### The *Christic* Body in its Critical Contexts

In this chapter I will endeavor to demonstrate that the Christic body, as it is appropriated or interpreted by the artists discussed in this project, is not a peripheral element in these works, but an essential one. Nor is the Christic body a purely art historical phenomenon, but rather, its presence in art may have a wider social meaning; by presenting the artist as martyr, it proposes a resacralization of aesthetic experience which itself, has wider-reaching effects. In order to examine these new appropriations of the Christic body in contemporary performance art, I will first review how the masochistic body has been discussed in contemporary art historical texts. Next, I will examine the relationship that exists between the masochistic and Christic body, which, will include a discussion of the various Catholic tropes used by the selected artists. Following this I will look at the gendering of the Christic body, making an argument for the ambivalent nature of this culturally-specific body. And, lastly I will look at why artists are evoking this Christic masochistic body: why now, why here and to what effect? Why appropriate the Eucharistic experience through the Christic body and to what ends?

#### The Artist-as-Masochist

In her text *Contract with the Skin – Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s* (1998), author Kathy O'Dell examines masochistic performance art of the 1970s, and, to a lesser degree, the decades following. It is her supposition that masochism, as it is explored through performance, does not center upon the personal relationships between pain and

pleasure per se, but, rather, is evidence of a larger political phenomenon. These performances, the majority of which were produced during the 1970s, were a direct result of the context and period from which they arose. To this extent, O'Dell considers the works by Chris Burden, Vito Acconci and the like, largely as reactions to the Vietnam War and the political helplessness and frustration many people felt as a result. For O'Dell, these performances were a form of political protest: a way of negotiating the *public* (body), through the *private* (body). Reaching its apogee in the 1970s, masochistic performance art was predominantly an American phenomenon, with ripples being felt throughout Europe, by artists such as Gina Pane. While masochistic performance appeared to dwindle in the 1980s, it was only to be followed by something of a revival in the 1990s. This revival was sparked, according to O'Dell, by new "wars," namely the war against AIDS and the war against culture involving the National Endowment for the Arts. O'Dell writes: "Masochistic performance models resurfaced in the late 1980s, I would argue, because the need for negotiation became as strong during the war on culture and the war on AIDS as it had been during the Vietnam War."<sup>288</sup> For O'Dell's research purposes, masochism, and more specifically the masochistic performance, is understood as an American phenomenon.

Throughout her text, O'Dell focuses on the importance of the *contract* within any masochistic relationship; this she borrows from the writings of Deleuze. In this instance, by being a spectator of such a performance, the audience member was entering into a type of contract with the artist; it was through the contract, that any kind of negotiation

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<sup>288</sup> Kathy O'Dell. *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s*. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998): 78.

was possible. Therefore, masochistic performance art was a way of negotiating difficult circumstances. It was a means, or tool, of power, that was accessible to the artist, and to the public in general. By negotiating (harming) one's own body, one was negotiating the body politic. O'Dell writes in her conclusion:

What I have tried to suggest is how masochistic performance artists, in particular, were affected, how they were moved to create metaphors for a type of negotiation – *contractual* negotiation – that might bring balance to the war-induced instability they were experiencing.<sup>289</sup>

However, where in the 1970s and 1980s, the masochistic performance artist's body was directly exhibited for the audience, the more contemporary performances of the 90s, did not directly feature the body, or rather they featured the "turning away" of the body, "What does this act of turning away from the audience mean in this context?"<sup>290</sup> In order to provide an answer, O'Dell falls back on the Lacanian concepts of the mirror stage and the separation between I and Other, between the "viewer and viewed;" it is a reenactment of a "metaphoric mirror-stage experience."<sup>291</sup> Returning to her initial thesis, it is through negotiation that there are political and social victories -- it is an accessible means of retaining power. To conclude, O'Dell considered these masochistic performances to be part of an essentially American phenomenon (largely limited to the 1970s), subsequently overlooking their Christic dimension, or, at the very least, understanding it as an

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<sup>289</sup> Ibid., 75.

<sup>290</sup> Ibid., 80.

<sup>291</sup> Ibid., 82-83.

accessorial element of general masochism. Thus, what of the Christic masochistic performance?

For Amelia Jones, the masochistic performance is not as much about negotiation, although she does acknowledge and support O'Dell's work (stating that the male masochistic performance has, in part, to do with social contracts and institutional power), but more about the male artist's subject-hood and subsequent emasculation. In her text "Dis/playing the phallus: male artists perform their masculinities,"<sup>292</sup> the author discusses the masculine performance, and by extension, the male masochistic performance, as having both emasculating and macho effects, both "threatening and reinforcing the male body."<sup>293</sup> The article goes on to consider the masochistic performance in light of artistic subjectivity, and more specifically the gender relations and related power structures therein. Jones' Lacanian investigation also links male masochistic performance to the "shift of conceptions of the self in Western culture," a shift she considers to be intractably "post-modern"<sup>294</sup> and one that would become the overriding theme of her 1998 text *Body Art: Performing the Subject*. While not the primary subject of analysis of the text, male masochistic performance is examined in light of the works of Vito Acconci. Jones writes, "[M]asochism, I would insist, is gendered and sexualized in its deepest structures."<sup>295</sup>

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<sup>292</sup> Published in *Art History* 17.4 (December 1994): 546-584.

<sup>293</sup> In her text *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, Jones titles one of her subsections "Masochism: Threatening or Reinforcing the Male Body."

<sup>294</sup> Jones. "Dis/playing the phallus: male artists perform their masculinities," 548.

<sup>295</sup> Jones. *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, 129.

Discussing the works of Vito Acconci, Ron Athey and Chris Burden, amongst others, Jones looks to the masculine masochistic performance as having potentially emasculating effects: while some male masochistic performances look to reinforce the infallible phallus (Burden), others look to undermine it (Acconci). Related to this, is the idea of “divine artistic sacrifice,” a concept Jones aligns specifically with Burden’s performances as they personify the male artist-as-martyr. However, on this grander scale, the masochistic performance has a social function -- it is also an examination into gender and heterosexual power relations as they pertain to the construction of the subject. Jones writes, “Far from being simply radical and subversive, or simply regressive and phallogentric, each of these pieces both strategically unhinges the phallus/penis/artist equation and, in some ways, reinforces it.”<sup>296</sup> Where the Christian masochistic performance is concerned, Jones identifies it merely as a sub-genre of this larger phenomenon, another (albeit minute) aspect of the masochistic performance.

In discussing the Christian masochistic performance, Jones takes her cue from Kaja Silverman who looks to the emasculating qualities of the Christian masochistic figure. In her text *Male Subjectivities at the Margins* (1992), Silverman examines various marginal masculinities, more specifically, those traditionally understood as “feminine,” through a feminist and psychoanalytic lens. Included in this investigation is a discussion of male masochism as it is presented in film; while Silverman writes about the male masochistic figure in film, her theories are no less relevant or applicable to performance art. In summing up her short discussion of Christian masochism, Jones relates it to her overall thesis, which concerns itself with new concepts of masculine subjectivity. According to

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<sup>296</sup> Jones. “Dis/playing the phallus: male artists perform their masculinities,” 578.

Jones, these performances, which are often understood as embodying a type of male narcissism, are directly related to the 'evolution' of masculinity in America in the 70s and 80s. To this end, the Christian masochistic performance explores gender dualisms, gendered identity and the phallus. As such, performances like Burden's *Transfixed* verge on Christian masochism, however, they lack the requisite emasculation (according to Jones), instead replacing it with macho reinforcement. Where Jones' text looked to analyze the masculine masochistic performance, Eleanor Heartney's text *Postmodern Heretics -- The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art*, explored the "Catholic imagination," as it surfaced in contemporary art. At this point, I would like to take a few moments to discuss Heartney's text, highlighting the practical and theoretical conflicts that arise between our two projects.

To begin, Heartney identifies her project as being an investigation into the "Catholic imagination" that seems to manifest itself in so many works of contemporary art.<sup>297</sup> What emerges throughout the text is not an exploration of the Catholic body, but rather the "imagination," a vague term with a myriad of characteristics and experiences. To this end, it is difficult to pull out any commonalities beyond an involvement with Catholicism. In identifying her main arguments, she writes:

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<sup>297</sup> Eleanor Heartney. *Postmodern Heretics: The Catholic Imagination in Contemporary Art*. (New York: Midmarch Arts Press, 2004). The term *Catholic Imagination* is taken from a book of the same title written by sociologist and Catholic priest Andrew Greeley. His adoption of the term is, in turn, taken from a book written by the theologian David Tracey. In both instances it refers to "the existence of a distinctly Catholic consciousness which is immersed in sensuality and sexuality." (Heartney, 7) While Heartney identifies instances of this sensual and sexual "Catholic consciousness," she does not delve into the reasons for choosing to express this side of Catholicism or the general reaction provoked by such representations.

Why have artists who were raised as Catholics figured so prominently in the battles of the Culture war? Are there religious roots to their tendency to create work, which is perceived as blasphemous, sacrilegious or pornographic by the moral crusaders of the religious right? Why is a carnal vision so potentially inflammatory? Is there something peculiarly American about these conflicts?<sup>298</sup>

Heartney's reading of this "Catholic Imagination" is limited to a very particular national and historical context as she centralizes the Culture Wars in the United States. In doing so, Heartney discusses the controversies that arose between the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) and various exhibitions that were government-funded, i.e. exhibitions by Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano.<sup>299</sup> In this first chapter, Heartney lays the groundwork by locating her work in the "American war between art and morality."

Entitled "The Trials of the Body Artists – Blood Rituals and Endurance Art," the chapter dealing with body art seems to be less concerned with actual body artworks and more with the Catholic backgrounds of the artists. It should be emphasized here that Heartney's text deals with Catholicism and not what I would consider to be Christic masochism. While referring to some of the works as "*so-called* 'masochistic' body art"<sup>300</sup> and briefly addressing the concept of *Christian masochism* as interpreted by Theodor Reik, she quickly dispenses with what she sees as a psychoanalytic interpretation of "*so-called* 'endurance art'"<sup>301</sup> in favor of a sociological examination of the artist's personal relationship to Catholicism. She goes on to write,

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<sup>298</sup> Ibid., 6.

<sup>299</sup> For a more detailed account of these controversies, please see Wendy Steiner's *The Scandal of Pleasure* (Chicago and London: the University of Chicago Press, 1995).

<sup>300</sup> Heartney, 45, my emphasis. The term "so-called" would seem to imply a lack of conviction or unwillingness to accept the terminology or interpretation of this specific art practice.

<sup>301</sup> Ibid., 46, my emphasis.

I do not mean to argue here that contemporary twentieth century endurance artists are deliberately mimicking the trials of the saints which, of course, were undertaken for quite different purposes. The point is that Catholicism provided an imaginative structure which artists from Catholic backgrounds have been able to *exploit* for their own ends.<sup>302</sup>

The question to ask becomes thus: Why choose this model, and for what ends? What type of reaction do these cultural signifiers evoke; none of these issues are addressed in the text.

Choosing to abandon any discussion of masochism with regards to these works, Heartney instead opts to address the works of Vito Acconci, Linda Montano, Ana Mendieta, Ron Athey and to a lesser degree, Chris Burden through a biographical investigation of their relationship to Catholicism: did they attend Catholic school; what is their relationship to the church; do they continue to be practicing Catholics? While this chapter promised to shed some much-needed light on the usage and reception of Catholic imagery in contemporary art, Heartney chose instead to provide a cursory reading of a great many works, again focusing on whether there were manifestations of the “Catholic imagination” in these works, but not addressing issues of why and to what ends; any discussion of gender, identity and masochism seemed to be rejected in favor of a biographical interpretation.

In the final chapter, entitled “Knowledge Through the Body: The Female Perspective,” Heartney looks at the work of several female artists, including Kiki Smith, Renée Cox and Janine Antoni, and their engagement with a *female* Catholic body, namely the body

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<sup>302</sup> Ibid., 47, my emphasis.

of Mary. Evoking the Marian body, these artists seem to be challenging, among other things, traditional notions of female sexuality. Heartney writes,

By denying Mary a sexual nature, many modern commentators believe that the Catholic church has seized upon a doctrinal justification for its refusal to deal honestly with female equality and human sexuality.<sup>303</sup>

By working with, rather than against, this corporeal knowledge, Heartney sees female artists of the 60s and 70s appropriating the figure of Mary to feminist ends.

The text's post-script, which I envisioned as elaborating on the common thread of the chapters and the point at which Heartney would examine these visual signifiers in a more critical vein, instead concerns itself with the status of morality in a post-9/11 America. Bringing her text full-circle she concentrates on the rise of religious fundamentalism in the United States and points to the new directions in which the religious right might be headed. As previously mentioned, Heartney's text exists, for the most part, as a report on instances of the "Catholic imagination" in contemporary art and the various controversies they have provoked. There are few analyses of the artworks themselves and little or no theoretical or methodological approach. In addition, her investigation is broad and deals with a universal "Catholic imagination" and its appearance in contemporary art; at times this investigation also enters the realm of music, theatre and film, once again addressing these particular works in relation to the NEA and arts funding in the United States.

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<sup>303</sup> Ibid., 134.

Where Heartney's work was preoccupied with identifying instances of the "Catholic imagination" in contemporary art and their relationship with American right-wing policies and institutions, my investigation is more concerned with the emergence and appropriation of a *Christic* body, both the representation of, and relationships to, this culturally-specific body. Where her text deals with contemporary art as a whole, my project centers specifically on performance art, as I believe this *imitatio Christi* to be endemic to this area of contemporary art. Where she concerns herself with incidents of perceived "sacrilege" in contemporary art, looking at such controversies as those surrounding the artwork of Andres Serrano and Robert Mapplethorpe, I am less interested in the controversies that have surrounded modern and postmodern forays into "the spiritual and art," than the reasons for using this imagery. While she claims to address the lack of attention given to this type of work, it is thrust aside in favor of a discussion of the NEA controversies. It would have been worthwhile to note why this is an avenue of research that has been so little mined, why have the Catholic, or spiritual aspects of a contemporary artwork been largely ignored in critical research? Hence, Heartney's argument is too limited, it is unable to take into account similar works that do not belong to this particular American context and likewise, is unable to take into account the specificity of performance. I am interested in the *why*: what does this body signify? How is this body understood in the twenty-first century, why choose to present such a body? While Heartney addresses the reception of the work in terms of controversy and government reaction, I am interested in the question of meaning in these works (*internal* meaning). Why this specific cultural signifier and more importantly, why now?

## **The Masochistic Exercise**

Where O'Dell and Jones examined the masochistic body in performance art, what follows is a brief re-examination of some of the more salient points regarding the masochist in general, and in society, through psychoanalytic interpretations. In conducting this brief detour, I would like to emphasize several of the particulars of the masochistic subject as they relate directly to the performances in question and further our understanding of their impetus and to understand the articulation between masochism and Christic ritual in contemporary performance. As previously mentioned in Chapter Three, Freud considered masochism to be the reversal of the subject's sadistic impulses; where once they were turned outwards, these sadistic impulses are now turned back upon the self. While his discussion of erotogenic masochism is rather straightforward, and can be applied, to a certain degree, to the works of Flanagan, it is Freud's discussion of moral masochism that provides the most interest. For Freud, moral masochism hinges on guilt, and arises where there is a "cultural suppression" of outwards aggression. It is this development or negotiation of guilt and this idea of the "cultural suppression" of outwards aggression that is most pertinent to this project. While the role guilt plays in the masochistic subject is largely acknowledged, what of this "cultural suppression?" How does society, or culture at large, suppress our aggressive tendencies so that they are reversed, with the self as subject?

The writings of Sacha Nacht provide further valuable theories that can be applied to the artworks that have been discussed, with particular regards to the issue of *sacrifice* and *female masochism*. While it is a "desire to suffer" that is the common denominator of

each of these various theories, what differs is to what ends and why. For Nacht, masochism arises when a partial sacrifice is made in order to save the whole. In this sense, we can relate it to René Girard's theories of the "victimage mechanism" and the "mimetic triangle," where a victim, or sacrificial lamb, is offered in order to maintain or preserve the community. However, in Nacht's case, it is this *partial castration*, which fulfills this role. Where Flanagan was seen to conduct something of a literal "auto-castration," it could be argued that each one of the artists that have been discussed, has also undergone a voluntary, partial sacrifice, in order to preserve the whole: the body or society at large? In Orlan's case, her surgeries present a literal *partial sacrifice* wherein the artist had pieces of her own flesh (the private body) removed as a statement against characterizations, idealizations of women (the public, gendered body). With *Transfixed*, Burden sacrificed himself in the most recognizable fashion, with the ensuing documentation and relics being further proof of this forfeiture. Likewise, Abramovic's performance *Luminosity*, in addition to those of *Lips of Thomas* and *Rhythm 0*, also embodied sacrifice -- from the religious, to the political and finally, the gendered subject, with the relics of these performances resurfacing in *Biography* of 1992.

It is in the area of gender and masochism that Nacht also makes his most worthwhile contribution. Where many theorists avoided the issue of masochism in women, Nacht was one of the first to give the issue serious attention. It was Nacht's supposition that the most outwardly aggressive women were also the most inwardly masochistic. Relating back to his idea of the *partial sacrifice* that is required of masochistic practice, female masochism, or masochism in women, can arise as a result of several scenarios. In some

instances, female masochism arises out of a failure to enter the Oedipal phase, or a desire to remain in the phallic stage. In other instances, female masochism is a response to a perceived castration in childhood. To this end, the castration is a 'merited punishment' and one that the woman continually seeks the reenactment of, through masochistic acts. Whether this is applicable to the works of Abramovic and Orlan is difficult to say, I would argue that these performances are not gender reductive and cannot be reduced to masochistic stereotypes or characterizations; however, I would argue that each performance deals with the element of power and the wielding of that power. Each performance is a reversal of traditional power relationships, whether against dominant patriarchal ideologies, or hegemonic political institutions of power. They are examples of outward aggression turned back upon the self. Conversely, the traditional "reading" of masculine masochism looks to its *feminine* and passive side, and the "destroying forces" of the self which, in this case, are turned back upon the subject. This traditional masochistic relationship (traditional in its initial readings), is one of son to punishing father, excluding women from the equation. Examining the interpretations of both *male* and *female* masochism, it becomes increasingly difficult to reduce the performances to experiences of gendered masochism, as each performance articulates aspects of both. I would argue that contrary to traditional (patriarchal) readings of masochism, there is no such thing as "female masochism," but rather, that all masochisms involve the same dialectic of gender, whether the masochist is male or female. It does not *suppress* sexual difference, but *deconstructs* it in those dialectics.

Where Nacht provided the most useful research regarding masochism in *women*, Reik contributed a substantial theory on masochism, providing the strongest case for the Christian masochist. However, before entering into a discussion regarding Christian masochism, I would first like to briefly touch upon its more common characteristics. Reik writes:

Le masochiste n'est aucunement capable de supporter la dépendance ou la sujétion; il développe inconsciemment une forte volonté et veut atteindre ses objectifs par une voie qu'il choisit lui-même, qui est souvent un détour, et dans laquelle il s'engage avec la plus grande énergie, prêt à tous les sacrifices nécessaires.<sup>304</sup>

In describing the phenomenon known as masochism, Reik outlines its three main characteristics: a reliance on *fantasy*, *suspense* and *demonstration*. Throughout the course of the previous four chapters, I have attempted to demonstrate how each *Christic masochistic performance* has also relied on, or incorporated, these three elements. Each performance was the physical manifestation of a fantasy, likewise, each performance depended on the element of suspense, and in some cases, suspension or a certain stasis, and lastly, each performance was an exhibition, or demonstration.

At this point, I would like to say a few words regarding Reik's view on "social masochism." As to masochism in women and its social context, Reik asserts that women are conditioned and encouraged, through education, to exercise a moderate form of masochism. Interestingly enough, Reik likens female masochism to a conscious transgression of the bourgeois order, rather than the hostile take-over, which is

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<sup>304</sup> Reik, *Le masochisme*, 354.

characteristic of her male counter-part. Thus Reik, like Freud before him, argues for a *lesser* masochism in women, or one that is *less aggressive* and *violent*. Again, I would argue against these gender reductions; where the performances of Abramovic and Orlan are concerned, I would argue that they are no less aggressive than those of Burden and Flanagan. In fact, as has already been argued, there is something *emasculating* regarding these latter performances. Finally, Reik argues for a form of *social masochism* (as did Freud with his third category of masochism: moral masochism), which is characterized by a general masochistic attitude towards society and life in general and has less to do with the subject's private sexual life and more to do with his/her social sphere. While the two types of masochism (sexual and social) seem to be incommensurate, links can be found in the centrality of guilt. All of the artists seem to be oscillating between these different types of masochism, exploring at once the erotogenic and social masochistic body. Reik's thoughts on social masochism will be further discussed in relation to Žižek's findings on the matter.

Lastly, I would like to briefly recapitulate Deleuze's speculations regarding the son-to-mother relationship, which becomes the basis of all masochistic practices. In his analysis of the masochistic subject and relationship, Deleuze begins by emphasizing the importance of education for the masochist. It is through the education of his torturer, that the submissive reaches the Ideal. As previously mentioned, this element of education is paramount in the (Christic) masochistic performance. Also intrinsic to the Deleuzian model of masochism, is the contract, both the private and social contract. Beyond the contract, Deleuze discusses the three female prototypes that lay at the basis of Masoch's

novels and subsequently, masochism itself. These are: the primitive mother, the Oedipal mother and the oral mother; it is the oral mother that is the ideal masochistic partner. The role of the mother is tantamount in the Deleuzian analysis, as all masochistic relationships are fundamentally that of child-to-mother. Where traditional masochistic models were based on the threat of the “punishing father” (as have claimed Freud, Nacht, etc.), Deleuze’s model differs in that the importance is placed on the *punishing mother*. In Deleuzian masochism there is a reversal of traditional power relations; where the father still exists with the order of the real, masochism sees the abolishment of the father in the symbolic order. Part of the masochistic drive (and this is applicable to the son as well as to the daughter, who can take the son’s place), relies on the recognition of likeness of the father to oneself/the subject. Here, I would like to mention the role of the fetish object, as it has played an integral in each of the performances, from the nails used in Burden’s and Flanagan’s performances, to the flesh itself, culled from Orlan’s performative surgeries. In Deleuze’s writings, the fetish object fills the role of disavowal and suspension of belief. It exists as a means of sustaining the masochistic fantasy.

### **The Christic Masochistic Body**

“Il est évident que la création de la figure du Messie constitue l’analogie collective à la fantaisie individuelle du masochiste social.”<sup>305</sup>

As demonstrated in Chapter Three, it is through the writings of Theodor Reik that we are provided with the clearest understanding of what could be construed as *Christian masochism*, serving as an introduction to what I have identified or coined as *Christic masochism*. Throughout his treatise on masochism, Reik draws parallels between the

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<sup>305</sup> Ibid., 379.

masochistic model and the life of Christ, and by proxy, Christian rhetoric on the whole. In large part, these similarities rely on the valuation of suffering, or rather, the positive value acquired by suffering and the redemption, which it precedes. Following this model, the life of Christ symbolizes the ultimate glorification and legitimization of suffering. Reik also considers Christ to be something of a revolutionary, subverting traditional power structures (“the meek shall inherit the earth”) and questioning established social orders and ruling authorities; just as the masochist “rules from the position of the submissive,” so too does Christ rise above social orders.

Where the similarities in rhetoric are concerned, Reik discusses the end-reward of suffering and the experience of pleasure. This promise of an end-reward plays into the whole notion of suspense, which is at work in both the Christic and masochistic model; Christianity is based on ideas of judgment and resurrection. In addition, Reik considers masochism and Christianity to both be based on oppositions or paradoxes. Reik also finds similarities or affinities between Christianity and his diagnosis of social masochism: it is as if Christ’s teachings advocate a certain masochistic attitude towards life. In both cases, the individual is searching for, or is in anticipation of, expiation, it is through such acts of punishment that expiation is achieved or *earned*. Finally, I would like to mention the need of an audience that is at work in both the masochistic and Christian exercise, particularly with regards to martyrdoms. Gilles Deleuze writes: “Why is Christology an all-pervasive element in the work of Masoch?”<sup>306</sup> While Reik recognizes the affinities between masochism and Christianity, Deleuze focuses more intently on the all-important role of the Christic figure within the masochistic paradigm. As previously mentioned,

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<sup>306</sup> Deleuze. *Coldness and Cruelty*, 97.

what is the masochistic relationship but a fulfillment of the Marian fantasy (Jesus-to-Mary)? In Deleuze's writings, it is conceivable that Christ fulfill the role of masochism's primordial practitioner, with the resurrected Christ the embodiment of the Ideal self.

In each of their performances, from Burden's performative crucifixions to Flanagan's Eucharistic feasts, there is an examination, or manipulation, of the Christic masochist's body. In doing so, each artist makes recourse to several iconographic tropes and Christic practices. I will now briefly review some of these tropes and practices, as they surfaced in many of the works and provide us with indications of what this body might mean in contemporary art, and society in general.

### **Icons, Indexes and Ritual**

While each performance addressed different concerns, in differing manners, what remained constant were the various iconographies and Christic practices evoked in each work. To begin I would like to mention the use of the relic, or reliquary, in the varying performances. As previously demonstrated, the relic acts as a part that stands in for the whole. It is a physical remnant or rem(a)inder of the holy individual, creating a link, or physical connection to the divine. In this sense, the nails removed from Burden's palms after the completion of *Transfixed* best illustrate the traditional use of the relic. After Burden's performance, the nails were mounted on red velvet and displayed in glass cases. These cases were exhibited in galleries and museums, transforming the gallery space into something of a "pilgrimage site." In a less traditional sense, Abramovic engages with the relic in several performances, but most overtly so in a work entitled *Private Archaeology*

in which the artist displayed personal items from her house and private collections (i.e. Russian icons), as well as items from past performances. With regards to the performances of Orlan, from the earliest works onwards, there has been an engagement with the relic. In early performances such as the *Measurement Series*, the artist kept the dirty wash water of her trousseau, which was later, displayed in jars. Likewise, the pieces of flesh and fat from her performances/surgeries were lovingly documented, archived, preserved and later displayed in what she calls “reliquaries.” Lastly, Flanagan collected remnants, or tools, from past masochistic performances, along with photographs and video, to be displayed in *Visiting Hours*, a performance/installation that functioned as something of a retrospective or autobiography. Flanagan’s last project *Memento Mori Trilogy*, was also supposed to function as a live video relic.<sup>307</sup> In addition to the relic, each artist engages with the *icon* in some fashion or another. Where the iconic photos of Burden’s *Transfixed* and Flanagan’s *Nailed* fulfill this function on their own,<sup>308</sup> Abramovic used actual Russian icons in many of her works. And like Burden’s “crucifixion,” Abramovic’s “crucifixion” also creates an icon of the artist. As discussed in Chapter One, the role of documentation within the history of performance is tantamount, creating an icon in and of itself, and, more than an icon, an index, a relic -- an object of art historical veneration and worship with the particular interplay of presence and absence of the divine body.

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<sup>307</sup> Despite its electronic and often digital nature, video has some of the properties of a relic and may be perceived as one.

<sup>308</sup> For a further discussion of the photograph as relic, please see Roland Barthes’ *Camera lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1981).

In addition to the static iconographic elements, each artist also participates in or re-stages, various Christic practices. It has been argued here, that each artist engages with the Eucharistic body, from Orlan's offering up of her own flesh, to Flanagan's "phallic" birthday cake, which acted as an extension of the artist's own body. In doing so, each artist is staging a partial sacrifice of the self for the good of the whole -- an act of communion between artist and audience, elevating the status of the artistic figure. Also, each of the performances that have been discussed incorporates the element of endurance, from Abramovic's *Nightsea Crossing* to Flanagan's suspensions. This element of endurance can be incorporated into the larger category of privation, or ascetic practices. While the saints performed acts of privation, from the renouncement of all physical belongings, to seclusion and to the practice of holy anorexia, the artists also practice forms of asceticism or deprivation within their performances. One has to look no further than Burden's *Bed Piece* or *White Heat/White Light*, or Orlan's *Measurement Series*, which has been compared to a Passion Play. Likewise, Flanagan spent the majority of his life devising various scenarios of deprivation, from mock crucifixions, to stints of isolation and bondage. Whether through an incorporation of iconographic elements or Christic ritual, these artists and subsequent performances are imitating Christic images and texts, in addition to the practices of saints and martyrs which were already themselves imitations of Christ. I would now like to address the role of gender and the Christic masochistic subject.

## Gender and the Christic Subject

Having established the presence of the Christic figure in the aforementioned performances, I would now like to turn to the gendering of this Christic body. Is it enough to say that Abramovic and Orlan are appropriating a female mystic body and Burden and Flanagan, the male Christic body? Although it would seem convenient, this is not the case. While the Christic masochistic performance cannot be reduced to a matter of gender, it is worthwhile to examine how the Christic figure is conceived and appropriated in terms of gender issues. As covered in Chapter Two, Leo Steinberg looks to Christ's body as an exemplary *masculine* body, with the multitude of images of the naked Christ Child (including depictions of the circumcised and erect penis) being indicative of this masculinity. In discussing Christ's *humanation*, the author considers images of Christ's circumcision as foreshadowing the Passion and his eventual sacrifice; therefore, in this sense, the spilt blood from the circumcision is a signifier of masculinity, pointing to Christ's experience as a male child, in addition to his connection to the divine (Passion). According to Steinberg, while these images focus on Christ's masculinity, they do so in an effort to emphasize, above all else, his humanity.

Where Steinberg focuses his research on the *masculine* traits of the Christic body, Bynum focuses her research on its *emasculine* qualities. While Bynum recognizes Christ's masculine traits, she considers Christ's body as also being female, a symbol of motherhood and nurturing: the Christic figure as *lactating* from the wound in his side, as *giving birth* to the church. In this sense, it is not anomalous for the female devout to participate in *imitatio Christi*, as many of Christ's qualities are perceived to be female.

Particularly, Bynum looks to the often self-punishing asceticism of the female devout, and to the intersections that arise between suffering/ecstasy/eroticism that often occur in female devotional practice. It is also this intersection of religious ecstasy and eroticism that marks Kristeva's discussion of "*l'amour mystique*," with regards to female identification with Christ.

It is my argument here that the Christic figure can be both male and female, as well as mother and father. Following the Deleuzian schemata, the submissive, modeled on Christ, can be both son and/or daughter, to the dominating mother. In each of the performances, the artist is appropriating this gender-inclusive Christic body. In some aspects of the performances, there is a testing, or revising of Christic rituals, one whereby the artistic figure is almost infallible. With Burden's performances, there is a testing of the body, an aggressive turning in towards the self, mini-sacrifices in which the artist was shot and later "crucified." Where Orlan's performances are concerned, the artist first begins by conducting her own Passion Play with her *Measurement Series*, then moves on to appropriations of the female saint, with the creation of *Sainte Orlan*. Following these works, the artist begins her surgical performances, which see the artist offering up her own flesh, a sacrificial exercise with Eucharistic resonance. In this sense, Orlan can be seen as appropriating both the masculine and feminine side of the Christic body, or masculine and feminine aspects of the *imitatio Christi*.

In addition, all the artists discussed seem to engage in ascetic practices, falling in line with female devotional practices, as examined by Bynum. Incorporating acts of anorexia,

endurance and self-punishment, Abramovic's performances find much in common with the penitential acts of female mystics. Likewise, one can examine Flanagan's performances in terms of their engagement with a more feminine Christic body, through his adoption of the role of "house-wife," mother and nurturer. Flanagan is also unique in his manipulation of the ill and weak body. Bynum relates how Medieval women suffering from illness saw themselves identifying with and fusing with the body of Christ; this can be applied to the works of Flanagan. Lastly, I would like to mention the often *erotic* nature of female piety. With her numerous explorations of the naked and passive body, many of Abramovic's performances have been considered to be erotic, with *Rhythm 0* being the most obvious example. Likewise, one can look at Flanagan's performances -- while not always erotic for the viewer, Flanagan talks about the erotic charge he experiences from both public and private masochistic practices.

Having established the Christian masochist's prototype, or rather, determined the affinities between masochism and Christianity, and the gendered receptions thereof, we are left with the question of: Why Christic masochism today? While Christian fundamentalist groups are continuously surfacing, we still live in a largely secular and multi-religious society; why make recourse to such a dated and ineffectual body? Or is this body indeed *ineffectual*? What does Christ's body *mean*, if anything, in contemporary society? Is this trend happening only in a post-industrialist society? Is this purely a North American and European trend?

## **Masochism in Society: Reik and Zizek**

Now that we have established a basis for the Christic masochist, I would like to examine the role or model of masochism in society. Is masochism indicative of a general attitude towards society? Are we all masochists in our approach to quotidian life? If so, why? How does one negotiate this relationship? Where does this leave the Christic masochist? To begin, I would like to briefly discuss Reik's thoughts on masochism in society, to be followed by a discussion of Slavoj Zizek's diagnosis of contemporary society and culture as it relates to the Christic masochistic subject and finally, an analysis of Luc Ferry's concept of the divinization of the human.

Where Freud considered the moral masochist's search for displeasure/pain as being an unconscious one, Reik considered social masochism to be a mix of conscious and unconscious pleasure. These pleasures, or displeasures, are to be found in the realm of culture. For Reik, masochism in society is directly linked to the "progression of culture" - the more culture progresses, the more society suffers: "Nous devons d'abord admettre que les progrès de la Culture produisent beaucoup de nouvelles souffrances, que chaque pas en avant se paye par des frustrations, des pertes et autres conséquences pénibles."<sup>309</sup> There are various ways to deal with, or react to, this suffering: we can try to resist it, we can try to escape it, and finally, we can try to embrace the pain and suffering, with this final reaction being the most appropriate.<sup>310</sup> It is with this embracing, or acceptance, that

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<sup>309</sup> Reik, *Le Masochisme*, 367.

<sup>310</sup> *Ibid.*

we find masochism in society.<sup>311</sup> Reik writes, “Je suggère d’appeler le Masochisme une déviation de l’impulsion sadique dans la direction sociale.”<sup>312</sup> The questions Reik begins to ask are: what is the cultural value of the masochistic tendency? What role does the masochist play in contemporary culture? His answer lies in the fact that masochism in society is linked to cultural development: where culture is highly “developed” or “progressive” (here Reik demonstrates his reliance on colonial attitudes and rhetoric), there is an augmentation of sensitivity and therefore a heightened experience, or at the very least, reception of, suffering. Here, Reik draws parallels between the desire for punishment, the identification with the victim and the individual feelings of guilt which are at the basis of the masochistic attitude, and those at the basis of “cultural progression” -- punishment, identification, and guilt form both the foundation of masochism and of cultural progression. While Reik’s comments are inherently colonial, what is important to note is this general masochistic attitude towards society. According to Reik, it would seem the more time passes, the more masochistic we become. Is it time-sensitive and culturally inevitable?

This leads Reik to consider the issue of morals: does the progression of culture hinge on a society’s morals? What is, and is not, acceptable behavior? Is this sublimation of “unacceptable” thought and behavior at the root of masochism in society? Reik writes:

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<sup>311</sup> Reik believes that masochism can exist only in societies of “superior culture.” In societies where “inferior culture” is the norm, there is not such a high development of suffering, as individuals are deemed to be less “sensitive.”

<sup>312</sup> Reik, 369.

Il (le sentiment exagéré de culpabilité) montre que nous croyons que nous ne pouvons pas tolérer en nous des idées aussi 'basses' ou moralement inacceptables, et que nous sommes trop bons pour nous permettre d'élaborer des pensées si violentes et si dangereuses. La conséquence de cette estimation exagérée de la nature humaine est l'accroissement du besoin de punition qui fait plier la fantaisie agressive et la dirige contre le moi.<sup>313</sup>

In this respect, there is a repression of outward violent and aggressive tendencies that are not deemed socially and/or culturally acceptable, in repressing these tendencies, they become directed inwards at the self, « La fantaisie masochiste est, dans mon opinion, une phase inévitable de transition dans le conflit entre les demandes de l'instinct et les exigences de la société, et ceci, dans le développement de tout homme civilisé. »<sup>314</sup> Having established the links between the individual, society and masochistic attitudes and practices, the question thus becomes: are suffering, humiliation and deprivation useful (in a utilitarian sense) to the individual subject and to the community in general? While Reik's views on the matter are outdated and even ethnocentric, what I want to draw from his writings is an understanding of masochism in society as a reaction against culture and an inevitable outcome of "societal advancement" (a highly problematic and colonial term in and of itself).

### **The Christic Masochistic Performance**

Slavoj Žižek's latest treatise on Christianity and Marxism, *The Fragile Absolute*, is a text which takes up, once again, the writer's central preoccupation of psychoanalyzing the Western World and the strict indictment of the Capitalist state. Where previously Christianity and Marxism had been considered to be disparate entities, Žižek feels that

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<sup>313</sup> Ibid, 374.

<sup>314</sup> Ibid., 375.

they should combine forces in an effort to combat new forms of dogmatic spiritualisms and fundamentalisms. According to Žižek, with capitalism comes the secularization of society and culture, but with this forced secularization comes the cropping up of various kinds of religious and spiritual fundamentalism. Throughout his text Žižek returns to the Marxist adage that in the capitalist state, “all things solid melt into air,” or the capitalist idea of “anything goes, all is fluid.” Žižek uses this concept to explain much of post-modern art and its attempts to shock and disgust and finally to transgress; in short, these *faux-subversive* works are grounded in global capitalism. The author relates this notion of “anything goes” to contemporary modes of sexuality, “Here again, as in the domain of sexuality, perversion is no longer subversive: such shocking excesses are part of the system itself; the system feeds on them in order to reproduce itself.”<sup>315</sup> For Žižek, the real subversion lies in something far more traditional.

In continuing with his diagnosis of *post-modern*, and to a larger degree, *modern* art, Žižek discusses what he refers to as the “paradoxical identity of opposites,” which begs the question, “are not Modern art objects more and more excremental objects [...] displayed in -- made to occupy, to fill in -- the sacred *place* of the Thing?”<sup>316</sup> With modern art, the space between “the elusive sublime object and/or excremental trash” is minimal and negotiable; there is the constant threat of the one infecting the other. Providing a Lacanian analysis of contemporary art, Žižek writes of its role in contemporary society: where premodern art had to find a beautiful object to fill the Void

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<sup>315</sup> Slavoj Žižek. *The Fragile Absolute* (London, New York: Verso, 2000): 25.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*, 26.

of the Thing,<sup>317</sup> or had to find an object to elevate to the status of Thing, with modern art, there is no guarantee that this Void of the (Sacred) Place exists. In this regard, modern art's job becomes to guarantee that this Place exists.<sup>318</sup> Zizek writes: "in other words, the problem is no longer that of *horror vacui*, of filling the Void, but rather, that of *creating* the Void in the first place."<sup>319</sup> Zizek sees a direct shift, or rupture, if I may borrow the Foucauldian term, between premodern and modern art. At the end of the premodern art historical era, a collapse occurred, "so the only way to re-establish the minimal structure of sublimation is directly to stage *the Void itself*, the Thing as the Void-Place-Frame, without the illusion that this void is sustained by some hidden incestuous object."<sup>320</sup> If this is the role destined for post-modern art, where does that leave our Christic masochistic performance artists? Are they simply staging the Void itself or attempting to give the illusion of there being one? Are they staging the Void, through a divine, Eucharistic experience? Are they reaffirming the global capitalist structures on which they are built?

Another important element of masochism, as interpreted by Zizek, is the suspension of social reality, which occurs within all masochistic exercises, "the surrealistic passionate masochistic game, which suspends social reality, none the less fits easily into that everyday reality."<sup>321</sup> By "suspending social reality," Zizek is referring to the traditional structures of power where the slave/victim does the bidding of the master, there is no

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<sup>317</sup> In Zizek's interpretation of Lacanian psychoanalysis, the Void is an empty 'sacred' place -- it is Nothingness, to be filled by the Thing. In turn, whatever fills this Void is elevated to the status of the Thing.

<sup>318</sup> Zizek, 27.

<sup>319</sup> Ibid.

<sup>320</sup> Ibid., 38.

<sup>321</sup> Slavoj Zizek. *The Metastases of Enjoyment -- Six Essays on Woman and Causality* (London: Verso, 1994): 92.

contract per se, the subordinate position is not voluntary and the subject retains *no* power. In this sense, the masochistic relationship is a suspension, or in some cases, a reversal of this reality. Here, masochism is a reversal of the capitalist order, with the role of the contract implicit in this reversal. As with Deleuze, Zizek sees masochism as carrying a political function, an upheaval of established political/social orders, with the servant taking control, "the masochist's theatre is a private *mise en scène* designed to recompense the guilt contracted by man's social domination."<sup>322</sup> It should be noted that Zizek's understanding, or conception, of masochism stems largely from Lacanian psychoanalysis, Sacher Masoch's writings, and Deleuze's interpretations of Sacher Masoch's text.

In concluding his discussion, Zizek also looks to the role of sacrifice within this "new" subversive order. Much has been written on the topic of sacrifice and the sacred, notably by anthropologist and literary critic René Girard, who examined the subversion of the social contract through an exploration of violence and the sacred. Girard, who writes extensively on the role of sacrifice within both historical and contemporary cultures, relates acts of sacrifice to the mimetic triangle, a triangle composed of subject, object and rival. This triangle is mimetic in that the subject desires the object simply because the rival does, therefore, desire becomes mimetic as the subject copies the rival in attaching desirability (the same desirability) to a certain object. This rivalry results in what he terms the *victimhood mechanism*, in which a surrogate victim is sacrificed in order to solidify a common enemy in addition to a common desire. This *victimhood mechanism* eliminates the violence that is a result of competing desires and in turn becomes the *sacred*. The sacrificed is the one onto whom all evils are projected: a "double" taking on

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<sup>322</sup> Ibid., 108.

the sins/desires/production of the chosen community, “Violence is not to be denied, but it can be diverted to another object, something it can sink its teeth into.”<sup>323</sup> This mechanism is woven through the Old Testament; violence is delayed, displaced and eliminated.<sup>324</sup> As an example, Girard provides us with the story of Abraham in which a surrogate object (human victim) was chosen for sacrifice as a means of appeasing/displacing violence, and then was later replaced with an alternate surrogate (animal victim). Sacrificed as the ‘lamb of God,’ Christ was to become the most recognized surrogate object, “Religion is simply another term for the surrogate victim, who reconciles mimetic oppositions and assigns a sacrificial goal to mimetic impulses.”<sup>325</sup> Girard even goes so far as to consider Jesus the ultimate example of this, the prototypical scapegoat, with the Crucifixion being the “sacrifice to end all sacrifices.” On this point, Žižek is in agreement. Although using various examples from film, Žižek explores the idea of sacrificing a part (of oneself) for the good of the whole. In addition to being the ‘ultimate’ sacrifice, Žižek also sees Christ as being the ‘ultimate’ icon, “Christianity operates a kind of ‘synthesis,’ a partial regression to paganism, by introducing the ultimate ‘icon to erase all other icons,’ that of the suffering Christ.”<sup>326</sup> In this sense, the suffering Christ, Christ on the cross becomes the ultimate icon, the ultimate image of veneration. It is out of this tradition that these artists are working.

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<sup>323</sup> René Girard. *Violence and the Sacred* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1979): 4.

<sup>324</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>325</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

<sup>326</sup> Žižek. *The Fragile Absolute*, 104.

### **Fantasy/Eucharist/Communion**

So where does this leave the Christic masochistic performance? If we are to believe that the Christic masochistic performance takes place outside the social order, staging itself in galleries, museums or other public, yet suspended spaces, then the role of fantasy becomes an integral and rudimentary one; fantasy becomes the basis on which the performance is hinged and is as important for the audience as it is for the artist. As we have already established, the masochistic performance is, in part, a fantasy of control, one where there is a reversal of accepted or traditional hierarchies of power, one where the master becomes the subversive. However, this is only part of the equation. While I believe that the Christic masochistic performance is one based on fantasy, this fantasy has less to do with a reversal of power and more to do with the fantasy of a divine and physical *communion* between the artist's body and the audience, a fantasy of immortality which, in itself is related to the staging of the Void. How this communion is achieved lies in the pseudo-practices, as they have been interpreted or appropriated in these performances, of the Eucharist and resurrection, both of which are related to the search for redemption, expiation and finally, a kind of immortality or re-birth. In achieving this, each performance engages with what Luc Ferry has identified as the *divinization of the human* and consequently, the *humanization of God* (a way to re-inject spirituality, or worship, into the human league).

### **The *Divinization* of the Artist**

In Luc Ferry's recent treatise, *Man Made God: The Meaning of Life*, the author looks at what has become of *meaning* in an increasingly secularized world. With the advent of

secularization, which has been considered a by-product of the rise of democracy (and capitalism) and the fall and/or failure of such political systems as communism, Ferry finds that “the question of meaning no longer finds anywhere it can be collectively expressed.”<sup>327</sup> Where continuation was once thought to be achieved through Christian faith, immortality now lies in those politicians, scientists, etc., who become *immortalized* in our “new sacred texts: our history books.”<sup>328</sup> In this case, human beings are creating their own divinity through an updated humanism: we no longer rely on the divine subject to provide answers but look to the individual him/herself. Henceforth, belief becomes a personal affair, rather than a collective one -- a reliance on the individual (subject) rather than the collective (Church). While many have argued for numerous forms of “ethical theory” (which in turn perpetuate their own laws), to replace the diminishing sway of the Church, Ferry posits that these theories fail to address the issue of meaning and consequently, transcendence. Furthermore, these theories fail to *fill the void* that has been left by the secularization of society. Just as Žižek sees modern art as not only trying to *fill* the Void, but actually attempting to *stage* the Void, so too does Ferry consider contemporary culture as a negotiation of the void, with each one of these ethical systems lacking what Ferry considers “the essential.” So where does this leave the contemporary individual: bereft of spirituality and lacking the means of transcendence? Not quite, Ferry writes: “It may be that not all transcendence has disappeared to the profit of some cosmic order or the individual as king, that instead it has been transformed to adjust to the limits that modern humanism henceforth imposes on it.”<sup>329</sup>

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<sup>327</sup> Luc Ferry, *Man Made God: The Meaning of Life*. Trans. by David Pellauer (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002): 7.

<sup>328</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>329</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

In mapping this new type of humanism, Ferry looks first at the “humanization of the divine,” which sees the *humanization* of “good” and “evil,” in addition to the social sciences which attempt to provide a “science” of the human. In both cases, there is a secularization of ethics. Secondly, Ferry looks at the *divinization of the human*, or rather the *sacralization* of the human, which locates the *ideology of human rights* at its core, in addition to the sacralization of the human body through medicine, and biosciences. Implied in this *sacralization* is the action of sacrifice: with the diminution of the divine authority of God and State, on what grounds is sacrifice to be ordered? Ferry writes, “we live in a time of passing from a logic of heterosacrifice to one of autosacrifice.”<sup>330</sup>

According to Ferry, the answers to this “spiritual” conundrum lie in the hands of humanism as it harbors the possibility of “genuine spirituality,” one that is free from theological constraints:

It may well be that, in exact contrast to these clichés of antimodern ideologies, humanism, far from abolishing spirituality, even to the benefit of ethics, on the contrary gives us access for the first time in history to a genuine spirituality, freed of its faded theological trappings and rooted in human beings, not in some dogmatic representative of the divine.<sup>331</sup>

Therefore, this *new* spirituality, or *divinity*, begins and ends with the human being. However, this new spirituality does not entirely leave its theological compatriot behind, but rather, “Without disappearing, the contents of Christian theology no longer come before ethics, to ground its truth, but come after it, to give it meaning.”<sup>332</sup> The space

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<sup>330</sup> Ibid., 69.

<sup>331</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>332</sup> Ibid., 31.

separating Christianity and humanism is not as wide as suspected. In fact, humanism can be felt or recognized to be at the basis of the Church. Ferry asks, "Are the different episodes of the life of Christ reported by the Gospels historical facts or symbols stemming from the depths of the human soul, endowed with an atemporal significance?"<sup>333</sup>

In addition, the notion of freedom that is at the heart of Ferry's *transcendental humanism* is merely a reinterpretation of the main tenets of Christian faith, the main difference lying in the transferal of the sacred on to the human, rather than God. Questions of meaning are inseparable from questions of the Sacred, in whatever its present shape or manifestation. This intersection between humanism and divinity, or the "humanization of the divine," began in the eighteenth century and is evident in contemporary society from our focus on humanitarianism to bioethics. In short, it is the human who has become *Sacred*.

To achieve this *new spirituality*, Ferry argues for what he posits as *transcendental humanism*, whose roots can be found in the writings of Rousseau, Kant, Husserl and Levinas as together they, "affirm the mystery at the heart of humanity, its capacity to free itself from the mechanism that rules overall in the nonhuman world and that allows science to know it thoroughly and to make predictions about it."<sup>334</sup> *Transcendental humanism* implies a reconciliation of humanism and spirituality, both of which argue for freedom and a transcendence of deeper-lying values. Where transcendence was once a matter of *vertical* movement, as in the relation between a human being and something

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<sup>333</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>334</sup> Ibid., 135.

above/higher than the human, such as God and/or State, transcendental humanism calls for a *horizontal* transcendence which involves the relationships of others to the self. In addition, the notion of sacrifice serves a lateral purpose. Where sacrifice is understood as the acknowledgment of a higher power or meaning, one which is more important than our own existence, transcendental humanist sacrifice implies a horizontal movement: sacrifice for the sake of others. Ferry is calling for the "humanization of sacrificial values" whereby "sacrifice is required only *by and for humanity itself*."<sup>335</sup> In this case, there is not an abolishment of the sacred, but rather a *displacement*, a *transference* of the sacred onto the human. Providing examples of this *sacralization* of the human and more specifically the human body, Ferry cites bioethics, general science, secularized charity, and so forth, with television being the largest proponent of this sacralization. However, the most telling example is the centrality of humanitarianism and its attempt to separate itself from politics -- it is in humanitarian actions that one once again finds meaning (which otherwise had been reserved for the Church and Christian faith). Meaning is made and experienced through our relationships to others, a *meaning in common with others*, "a new relation to the sacred -- a transcendence inscribed in the immanence of human subjectivity in the space of a humanism of man made god."<sup>336</sup> Finally, Ferry considers "love" to be the privileged site of meaning, one that is common to everyone, with divinized humanity replacing the absolute subject.<sup>337</sup>

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<sup>335</sup> Ibid., 71.

<sup>336</sup> Ibid., 130.

<sup>337</sup> Related to this notion of the *divinization* of the artist, is the notion of narcissism as it pertains to the artist and artistic experience. Understood in psychoanalytic terms as being the love directed towards oneself or one's own ego, or the inability to distinguish oneself from the world, the term is often used in conjunction with performance art as it emphasizes the centrality of the self. This narcissistic aspect can be said to be further apparent, or exploited, in the Christian masochistic performance, as the artist is often appropriating or aligning him/herself with the Christic or divine subject.

In essence, the goal of transcendental humanism is the filling, or rather, the staging of the Void. While Žižek posited or located a lack, so does Ferry seek to locate *meaning* in contemporary culture. While we might not agree with all of Ferry's contentions, what I want to stress is this "divinization of the human" which is key to understanding the aforementioned performances. However, this begs the question: how, why and where does the *sacralization* of the artist occur?

### **Resurrection and Eucharistic Experience**

Following Ferry's thesis of a man-made God and the sacralization of the individual, how can this be extended towards the artist and the Christic masochistic performance? In studying the Christic masochistic performance, we are led to ask the following questions: what are the artists looking to achieve from the performance and by extension, what is the audience looking for, what kind of experience are they hoping to undergo in relation to the Christic masochistic performance? While part of this answer lies in the reversal of power or control, an even larger part lies in the idea of communion: audience members may be looking for a particular experience that is otherwise unfulfilled. This relates back, in part, to Žižek's diagnosis of modern and contemporary art, and its quest to not only fill the Void, but in fact, to stage the Void itself. Furthermore, it incorporates what Ferry identifies as the sacralization or divinization of the human.

"I am the resurrection and the life. Those who believe in me, even though they die, will live, and everyone who lives and believes in me will never die." (John 11:25-26)

In each of the aforementioned performances, the artists are enacting their own sacrifice and subsequent resurrection through Eucharistic rituals. These resurrective acts or

appropriations, as they are elicited by the Eucharistic experience, exist in the service of re-birth, self-transformation, with the end-result being a sense of redemption or expiation. Christ's body serves as the paradigm for the resurrected body, placing resurrection at the center of Christian faith. Following this line of logic, the centrality of resurrection also indicates or emphasizes, the centrality of the body in Christianity; it is the reunion of the soul to the body. It is the guarantee of continuation, of materiality. However, the question then becomes: what new form will this body take? If it all? What does "resurrection" mean in terms of identity? From Burden's crucifixion to Orlan's surgeries/body transplants, each reenacts this transformation or re-birth of a new individual/subject. It is a continuation of the subject; a movement from the fragmentation of the body, to its (re)unification. Perhaps the two most obvious examples are Orlan's re-birth or resurrection as Sainte Orlan and likewise, her self-transformation as a result of cosmetic surgeries, and Flanagan's final, incomplete work *Memento Mori Trilogy* which looked to the continuation and resurrection of the body/self through technology.

More important than its investigation of the resurrected or *continuous* subject, each one of these performances interprets the performance as a Eucharistic experience -- an act of communion and of expiation and the redemption it is meant to engender. Bynum, who considered Eucharistic practice as further indication of Christ's "humanness," writes, "By eating it and, in that eating, fusing with Christ's hideous physical suffering, the Christian not so much *escaped* as *became* the human."<sup>338</sup> The Eucharist provides a direct connection to the Divine, a sense of closeness to the Divine (the act of 'eating' Christ). It

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<sup>338</sup> Bynum. *Fragmentation and Redemption: Essays on Gender and the Human Body in Medieval Religion*, 44.

is an act of communion, receiving Christ's body and blood as a means of joining him, with this sense of *imitatio* or *becoming/being Christ* at the root of the Eucharistic experience, "The fact of transubstantiation is crucial. One *becomes* Christ's crucified body in *eating* Christ's crucified body."<sup>339</sup>

In undergoing or appropriating the Eucharistic experience, there is a sacralization of the artist, a renewed worship of the "sacred" body of the artist, within the secular context of art and capitalist society. Part of this sanctification takes place through the metonymic network of relics, both natural and technological, with spirit being imbued in the fragmented or segmented body. This is in addition to the elevation of documentation to an indexical and iconographic level: the art historical document taking on the status of an icon. And so, just as Christ was considered half-human, half-divine, so too is the artist considered such a hybrid, invoking similar audience response: communion, worship, etc.

In each one of the performances, there is an acting out of Eucharistic experience, with the figure of Christ serving as the traditional Eucharistic host, from the more literal reenactments of Orlan, Flanagan and Burden to the more subtle works of Abramovic. Each artist undergoes an allegorical, if not physical, sacrifice; a sacrificing of a part of the self, for the good of the whole. With performance art, this sacrifice is not only experienced by the artist, but equally by the audience, whether through the actual performance or experienced through the mediation of relics and icons. Each one of the performances is, in essence, a Eucharistic experience emphasizing the sacralization or divinization of the artist (amidst a hyper-secularized world), thus creating a sense of

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<sup>339</sup> Ibid.

divine communion between artist and audience. With reference to the works of Orlan and Flanagan, one can also evoke the sacralization of the human that comes about through medicine, the privileging of the body. It is a reinsertion of a *maternal* presence (the ultimate Christic and masochistic experience as being one of son/daughter-to-mother) in a hyper-mediated world, it is this “maternal presence” that Bynum addresses in relation to Christ’s body: Christ’s body as a symbol of motherhood and nurturing.

Related to the understanding of masochistic performance art as Eucharistic experience is the element of confession, or to adopt the Foucauldian term: *l’aveu*. While confession plays an integral role in Catholicism, this is no less true of the Christic masochistic performance, the element of public confession play in to each performance, from the unsolicited confessions of Burden’s *Five-Day Locker Piece* to the confessions in Flanagan’s pseudo-hospital room in *Visiting Hours*, the “confessional” provides further means for the audience to engage with the divine performance, or divine figure of the artist -- a further means of *communion*.

### Staging the Void: The Sacralized Subject

What is certain is that the masochist has made himself a BwO under such conditions that the BwO can no longer be populated by anything but intensities of pain, *pain waves*. It is false to say that the masochist is looking for pain but just as false to say that he is looking for pleasure in a particularly suspensive or roundabout way. The masochist is looking for a type of BwO that only pain can fill, or travel over, due to the very conditions under which that BwO was constituted.<sup>340</sup>

This BwO, or Body without Organs, is a limit, a body of experimentation, a body of desires, a plane over which nothing and everything flows. While I may not entirely agree

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<sup>340</sup> Gilles Deleuze & Félix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Trans. by Brian Massumi (Minneapolis & London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987): 152.

with Deleuze and Guattari's "diagnosis" of the masochistic subject as it corresponds to their conception of the Body without Organs, what I want to take away from this brief excerpt is that in creating masochistic performances, these artists are trying to fill a void (with pain), or essentially, as posited by Žižek, trying to stage the Void itself.<sup>341</sup>

Furthermore, in creating and fostering this *communion* between artist and audience, both are reenacting a desire to sacralize the artist as a divine figure (and in this case maternal) in a secular world (through what Ferry identifies as transcendental humanism); a transference of the Sacred onto the human or artistic figure. The social reasons for this activation of Christic masochism have much to do with the secularization of culture and the divinization of the human as an attempt to stage the Void. Besides a general re-visiting of the Christic figure, what unites these artists is this understanding of performance as a Eucharistic experience (or communion), and resurrection, transformation, re-birth, and the redemption and expiation which it produces. It is a sacralization of the artistic figure. What the audience is drawing from the experience of these performances, is not only a substitute self-affirmation through identification with the Christic and artistic figure, but also a form of worship in relation to the artist and the performance. In more universal terms it is the establishment of a community through the strength of the individual -- a sacrifice of the self for the good of the whole wherein the human/artist/performance takes the place of the Sacred.

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<sup>341</sup> It is important to note that this trend of the divinization of the artist, as it has been explored here, is both a North American/European trend, in addition to a post-industrial one.

## Conclusion:

### *Imitatio Christi: the Christic Masochistic Body in Performance*

L'histoire de sa vie (la vie de Jésus), de son acceptation volontaire et douce de la souffrance, de sa mort et de sa résurrection, pointent dans cette direction (l'attitude du masochiste). Il a supporté sa punition afin de monter au Ciel, il paya le prix le plus élevé pour devenir Lui-Même Dieu. Il a gagné la vie éternelle par la mort, il est entré dans la gloire divine par l'humiliation; il a conquis par la défaite, il est la victime et la vainqueur.<sup>342</sup>

What I have attempted to do with this thesis is to investigate the centralization of the Christic body and its rituals in contemporary performance art, in order to provide a possible hypothesis as to the impetus, and meaning, behind these appropriations. This was conducted in response to what I perceive to be a lack, or lacunae, concerning the discussion of Christic representations in performance art. While the discourse surrounding the masochistic body in performance is widening, there is still little mention of what I have defined as the Christic (masochistic) body; moreover, most discussions of the Christic body, or appropriations of Christ's body, have been made in passing. The reasons for this lack, or unwillingness to address the Christic subject, may have to do with the uncertain meaning of the Christic figure in contemporary times. Critics and artists alike are unsure as to what this figure signifies, thus making it difficult to speculate as to its role in contemporary art and, more specifically, in performance art.

In choosing a corpus for this project, I looked to the works of Chris Burden, Marina Abramovic, Orlan and Bob Flanagan as they seemed to demonstrate a variety of engagements with the Christic figure in what could be construed as masochistic

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<sup>342</sup> Reik, *Le Masochisme*, 335.

performance, from the reluctantly masochistic works of Orlan, to the more clinically masochistic performances of Bob Flanagan. While this project chose to focus on the work of these four artists, there are others who's work engages with the Christic subject through masochistic means, thus opening up further opportunities of study.

In establishing a basis for the Christic masochistic performance, I formulated a lexicon of visual motifs and Christic rituals that became recurring motifs within the Christic masochistic practice, this included a discussion of icons (with the suffering Christ presented as the "ultimate icon," according to Zizek) and relics (as a physical connection to the divine) as they are integral to, and residual elements of, the Christic masochistic performance. This was established in addition to an examination of various elements, such as endurance, isolation, asceticism, and so on, as they make up Christic rituals and practices. Included in these rituals and practices, was the centralization of Eucharistic practices, the crucifixion and resurrection, in addition to other rituals from the life of Christ. In centralizing Eucharistic practice, I examined it in terms of a communion between the human and the divine, the Eucharist denoting the *real* presence of Christ. This was later extended to the Christic masochistic performance. Also integral to an understanding of the Christic figure as it was articulated in performance, was an emphasis on the suffering Christ, and the positive value suffering accrued within Christic, and by extension, Christian practice. Ties between the ill body and the Christic body were also addressed in relation to the works of Orlan and Flanagan.

Departing from this interpretation of the Christic body and accompanying rituals, I looked to the “gendering” of this figure, examining the writings of Steinberg, as he argued for a “masculine” Christ, one that emphasized his humanation, while Bynum argued for an “emasculine” Christ, one that argued for his role of mother and nurturer. However, while Steinberg and Bynum looked to the different genderings of the Christic figure, they both did so in an effort to underline his humanity. In examining these two polarities, I argued instead for an ambivalent Christic figure, one that was both mother and father, masculine and feminine and one that incorporated both male and female mystical and devotional practices within *imitatio Christi*. These performative articulations of the Christic figure also underscore his humanity and this aspect was later related to the notion of the divinization, or sacralization of the human as it is played out in the Christic masochistic performance.

In considering these performances, I adopted psychoanalysis as a methodological tool, a means of understating the masochistic performance. Each of the examined theories looked at the centrality of guilt, as it is featured in all types of masochism (for example, erotogenic and moral masochism). The element of guilt, and the expiation which the masochistic exercise provokes, are central to the Christic masochistic performance. Also of distinct importance to this project was Reik’s identification of the three main elements of masochism: fantasy, suspense and demonstration, as each of these elements is played out in any number of Christic masochistic performances. In the process of establishing my theory of Christic masochism, I rejected the notion of a distinctly “female masochism” and instead argued for a masochistic experience that was gender neutral, or

rather, one that was not deconstructed through the dialectics of gender. I argued here for a masochism that involved an equal interplay between passivity and control, action and inaction (hitherto understood as gendered qualities within patriarchal explorations of masochism).

Expounding upon the psychoanalytic interpretations of Freud, Nacht, Reik and Deleuze and later, Zizek, I put forth my own interpretation of masochism, identifying what I considered to be *Christic masochism*. Departing from Reik's concept of Christian masochism, I identified *Christic masochism* by its similarities to Christic ritual and the centralization of an ambivalent Christic figure, one that is both mother and father. In this case, the *imitatio Christi* that is at the base of Christic masochistic performance is one that incorporates both "male" and "female" devotional practice. Included in this Christic articulation, was the centrality of the icon and the relic, especially within the Christic masochistic performance. Above all else, the Christic masochistic performance was to initiate a divine and physical communion between the audience and the artist. Also centralized within the Christic masochistic performance was the relationship of son/daughter-to-mother; this Deleuzian concept was to replace the traditional psychoanalytic interpretation of the masochistic relationship as being one of son to the punishing father, thereby reinserting a maternal presence.

In terms of the location of this phenomenon, I considered Christic masochism and by extension, Christic masochistic performance to be a North American and European trend, surfacing in the 1970s and thus coinciding with the rise of performance art. Having

formulated a model for the Christic masochistic performance, I analyzed the works of Burden, Abramovic, Orlan and Flanagan as they each engaged with the Christic body in performance. While exploring the Christic masochistic body in different fashions, what each performance had in common was an appropriation of Christic ritual -- mock crucifixions, self-flagellations, exercises in seclusion and asceticism, resurrection (at times, the continuation of the body through technology, as is the case with the works of Orlan and Flanagan), in addition to an engagement with Christic iconography: icons, relics and the *arma Christi*. Most telling was the centrality of the Eucharistic experience within the various performances, thereby creating a link between artist and audience; just as holy communion was a means of identifying with Christ, a way to partake in Christ's sacrifice, so too was the Christic masochistic performance a means of identifying with the artist -- the creation of a new divinity. A way of entering into this relationship was the contract, an important aspect of the Deleuzian model of masochism, and one that is central to Christic masochism. The contract was a means of subverting traditional relationships of power, relating to "the transference of the law onto the mother and the identification of the law with the image of the mother."<sup>343</sup> In this instance, one enters into a contract with the woman, she is both master and punisher. Also implied in the Christic masochistic performance was the element of self-transformation or reinvention, which was intrinsic to the divinization or sacralization of the human that was to take place in the performance. Related to this is the retrospective or autobiography, such as those produced by Abramovic and Flanagan.

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<sup>343</sup> Deleuze. *Coldness and Cruelty*, 91.

Integral to the Christic masochistic performance was the role of documentation. As an art form that is temporal and fleeting, its ensuing documentation, through video, photography and digital media, developed a means of engaging with the performance on a different experiential level. In this case, the images of the performances can be understood as *icons*, further adding to the Christic nature of the work, focusing on the absence/presence of the artist, just as was the case with the religious figure. The iconographic images become a stand-in for the Thing, or in some cases, the Thing itself. It has also been suggested, by Barthes and others, that a photograph can assume the space of the relic, and this is no less true of the documentation of the Christic masochistic performance. Certain images, such as Burden's *Shoot*, have reached an iconographical level within the art historical canon.

Having examined these issues, the question thus became: what of the Christic masochistic performance, why here and why now? In responding to these questions, I looked to Žižek's theories on contemporary art which identified contemporary art as not only trying to fill the Void of the Thing, but of staging that very Void itself; it is modern art, and hence postmodern art's job, to ensure that the Void of the Place exists. It was my argument that the Christic masochistic performance was staging such a Void. Related to this was Ferry's notion of the divinization or sacralization of the human. In this sense, raising the level of the human to divine status, or the transferal of the Sacred onto the human, also filled a void that was left by the increased secularization of Western society. Where immortality was once guaranteed through the Church, this fantasy of immortality now revolved around the staging of the Void. Intrinsic to both a discussion of the Void

and the sacralization of the human was the element of sacrifice, one which I examined through Girard's theories of the mimetic triangle and the victimage mechanism. It was Girard's supposition that Jesus exemplified the prototypical scapegoat, with the crucifixion exemplifying the ultimate sacrifice. The element of sacrifice is integral to masochism, concepts of the Void and the sacralization of the human, and hence, the artist and the Christic masochistic performance.

In staging the Void, or creating this divinization of the human, the artists staged performances which I have examined in light of Christic practice, more specifically, Eucharistic practice. While Eucharistic practice often revolves around eating (as exemplified by Abramovic and Flanagan), it also, more generally, demonstrates an offering up of the body, a sacrifice of the part for the whole, a way of identifying with the divine figure; a means for the audience to identify with the figure of the artist. In doing so, these performances have incorporated elements of sacrifice and resurrection in the staging of re-birth, self-transformation, redemption and expiation; this re-birth having to do with the re-birth of a new individual or subject. Audience members look to the Christic masochistic performance for an experience that is otherwise unfulfilled, they are looking for communion and identification, the centrality of the human subject. It is also the re-insertion of a maternal presence, relationships of son/daughter-to-mother in a patriarchal, capitalist society.

Throughout this project I have been arguing for a new way of thinking about the body, by re-centralizing the body, or rather, the embodied subject. I am also proposing a new way

of considering a certain type of performance through the examination of what I call the Christic masochistic performance. In doing so, I am re-thinking or re-interpreting the Christic subject in contemporary art, more specifically, how this significant body is *performed*. While current studies of performance art tend towards discussions of the technologization of the body, I am arguing for a re-insertion of the sacred body, a *humanization* of the body, arguing for the Christic masochistic performance as a way of *sacralizing* this body (although, this can, and does, incorporate technological means). Through an appropriation of past visual motifs and ritualistic models, these artists are experimenting with new ways of staging the Christic subject, thereby engaging with art's past in creating a newly secularized, but at the same time divine, subject. Through Christic masochistic performance, they are reiterating a gender-inclusive body, one that exhibits a maternal presence and one that incorporates metonymic sacrifice.

This inventory of Christic masochistic performance is by no means exhaustive, but is a sampling of performances that could be considered under this heading. What I hoped to propose was a new, or alternative, way of considering a certain type of performance. In doing so, this thesis will have, hopefully, opened up an alternative avenue of inquiry in the burgeoning field of performance art studies, while at the same time, putting forth some new theories regarding the roles and relationships between the artist and his/her audience. In a broader sense, I have also provided further contributions to the meaning and reception of the Christic figure in an increasingly secularized society.

In what direction is the Christic masochistic performance headed? Recent studies of the body tend to focus on its posthuman possibilities and the fragmentation of this hybrid figure. In the field of contemporary art, where things seem to be merging towards a more technological reading of the body, will there be a space for the Christic body, and moreover, one that focuses on this body's suffering, the centralization of pain in a society that seems to be forever devising means by which to eradicate suffering and further anaesthetize pain? What will happen to the centralization of the body? Will we be moving further away from embodiments of the self? What meaning will these iconographic motifs and rituals have in fifty, or one hundred years, time? What will be the meaning or significance of the Christic body as we head further into the digital age? These questions are impossible to address at present, beyond a cursory and superficial projection. What they do infer however, are further avenues of inquiry, that suggest that our engagement with the Christic subject as it is represented in visual culture, has not reached its "earthly" end.

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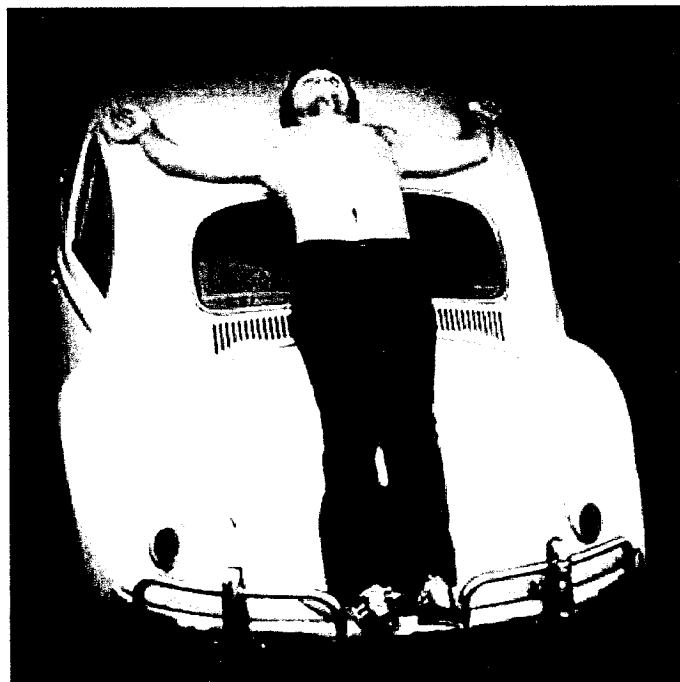
1. Michel Journiac, *Messe pour un corps*, 1969



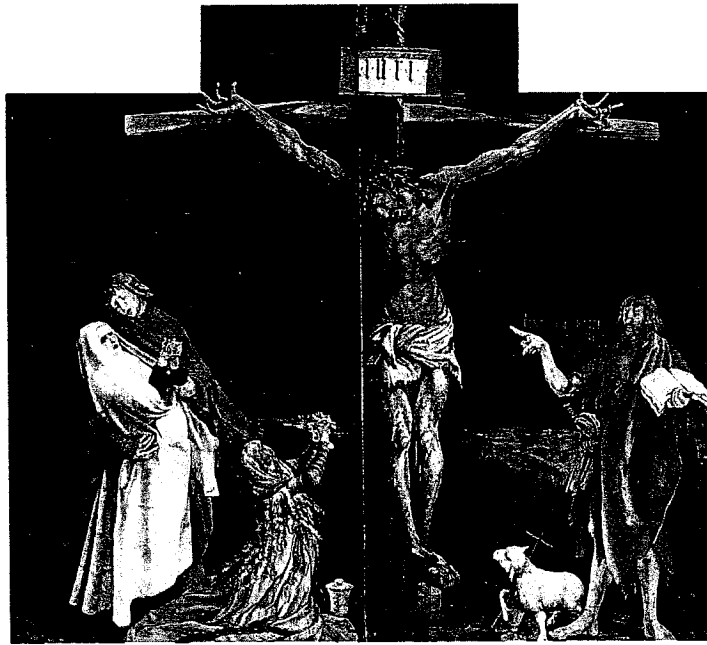
2. Ron Athey, *4 Scenes in a Harsh Life*, 1994



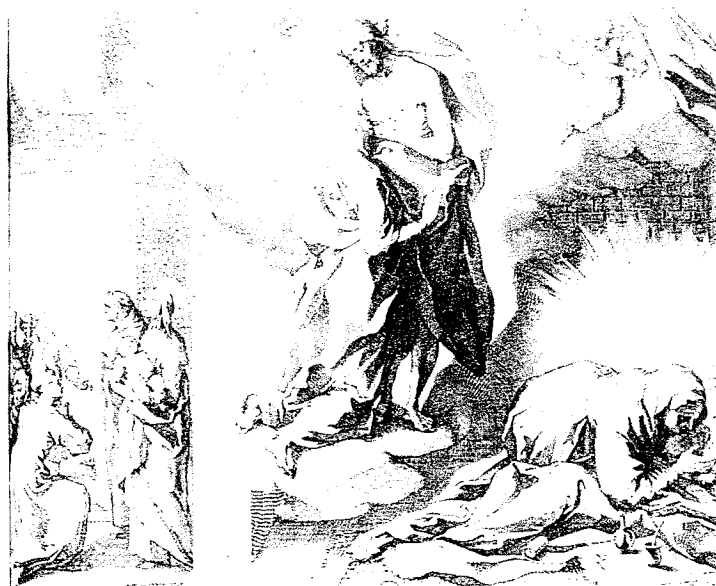
3. Viennese Actionists, *Orgies Mysteries Theatre*, 1998



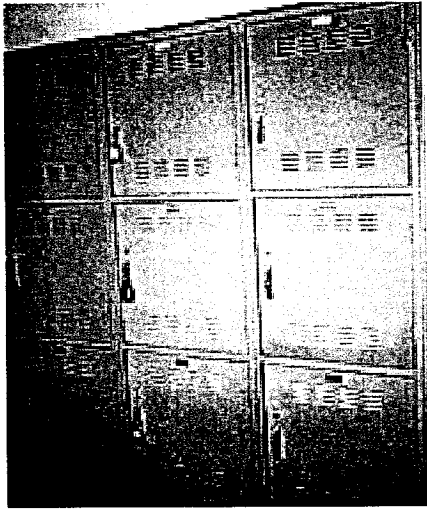
4. Chris Burden, *Transfixed*, 1974



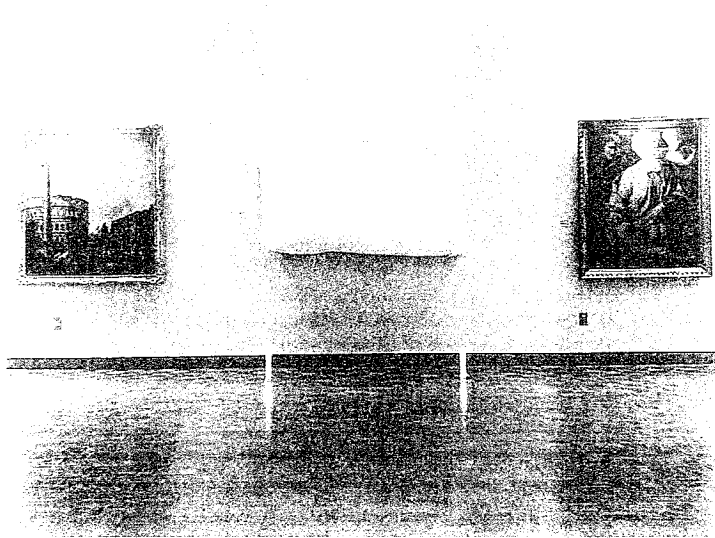
5. Matthias Grunewald, *Isenheim Altarpiece*, closed, c. 1510-1515



6. M. Fiorini after F. Vanni, Saint Catherine of Siena; from the *Legenda Maior*, 1597



7. Chris Burden, *5 Day Locker Piece*, 1971



8. Chris Burden, *Oh Dracula*, 1974



9. Chris Burden, *Bed Piece*, 1972



10. Chris Burden, *Shoot*, 1971



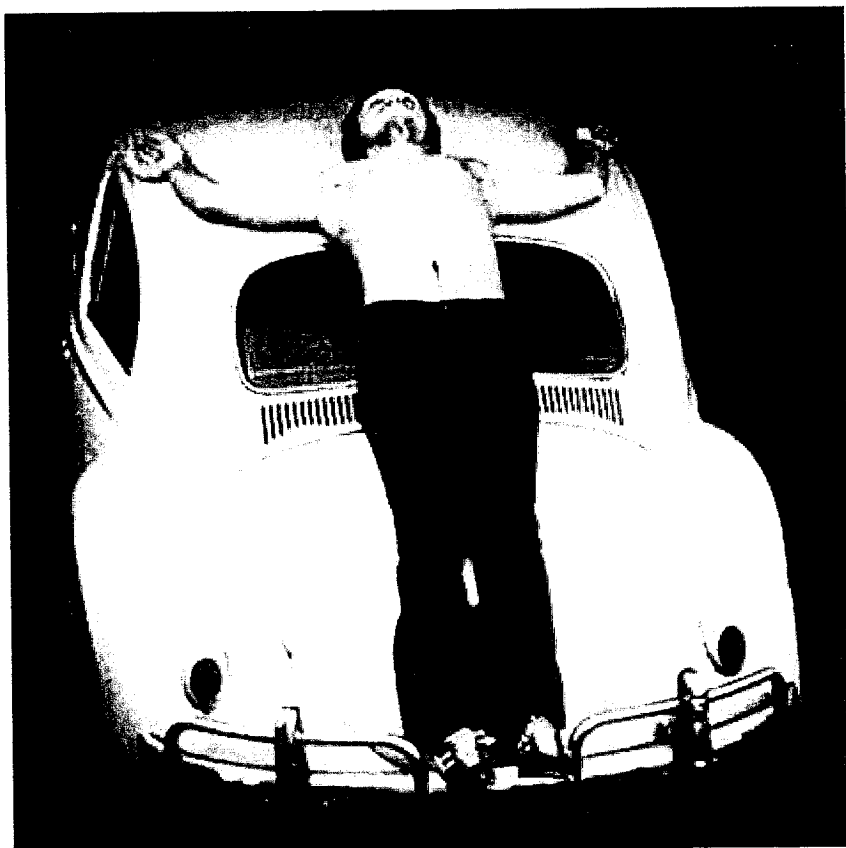
11. Chris Burden, *Through the Night Softly*, 1973



*Doorway to Heaven*  
November 15, 1973

At 6 p.m. I stood in the doorway of my studio facing the Venice boardwalk. A few spectators watched as I pushed two live electric wires into my chest. The wires crossed and exploded, burning me but saving me from electrocution.

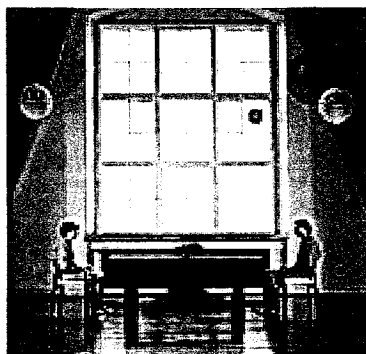
12. Chris Burden, *Doorway to Heaven*, 1973



13. Chris Burden, *Transfixed*, 1974



14. Marina Abramovic, *Rhythm 0*, 1974



15. Marina Abramovic and Ulay, *Nightsea Crossing*, 1982



16. Marina Abramovic, *Rhythm 2*, 1974



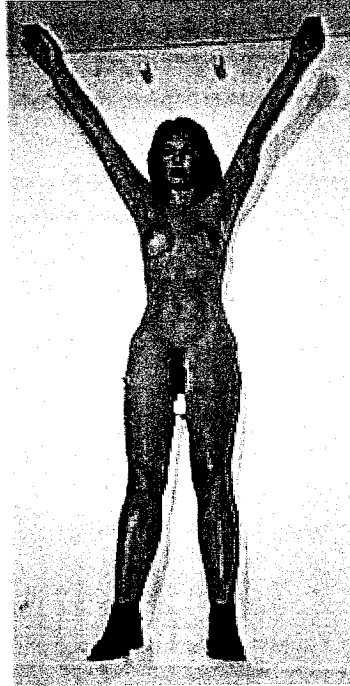
17. Marina Abramovic, *Biography*, 1992



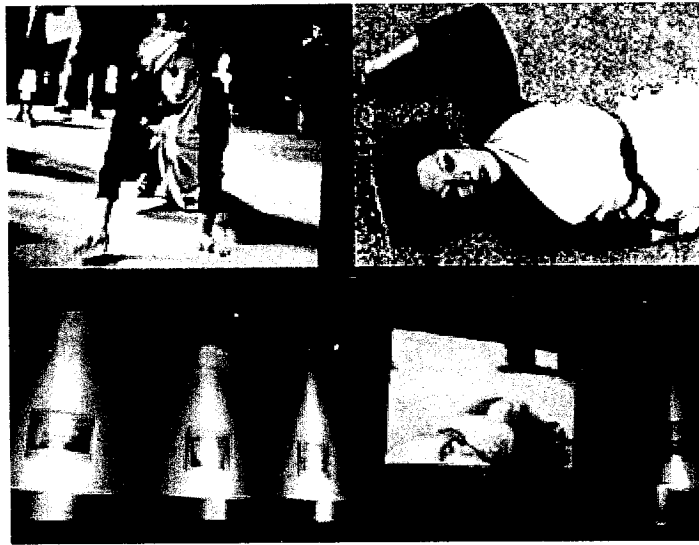
18. Marina Abramovic, *Balkan Baroque*, 1997



19. Marina Abramovic, *Lips of Thomas*, 1975



20. Marina Abramovic, *Luminosity*, 1997



21. Orlan, excerpt from *Measurement Works*, n.d.



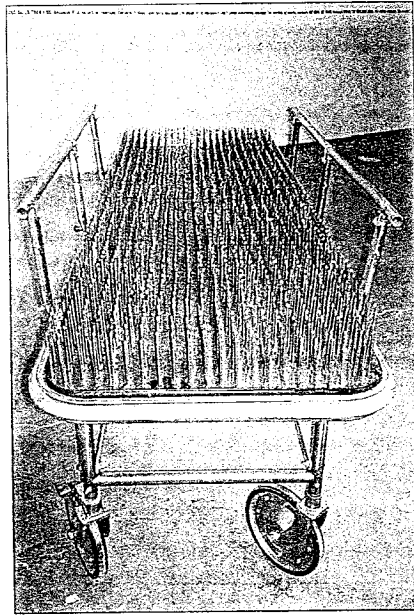
22. Orlan, excerpt from *White Madonna*, 1984



22. Orlan, Excerpt from *White Madonna in Assumption*, 1984



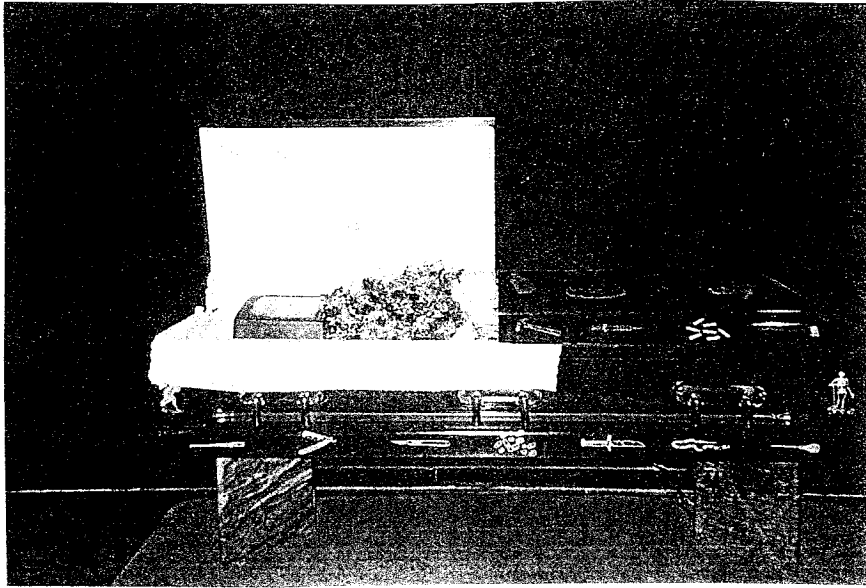
23. Orlan, *Omnipresence*, 1993



24. Bob Flanagan, *Gurney of Nails* (as reproduced for *Visiting Hours*), 1992



25. Bob Flanagan, *Visiting Hours*, 1992



26. Bob Flanagan, *Video Coffin*, 1994

the gay male community in the most literal sense, testing the limits of "community" and community support.

I am most surprised by how funny the piece is (is drag always funny?), and how much audiences like it, given its messy, un-PC mixed messages. My fear is people that aren't questioning me because they think I'm simply confessing rather than crafting a performance; or alternatively, as some other artists of color and I have discussed, the primarily Caucasian performance audiences are too polite to confront a nonwhite artist.

And just briefly I'd like to clarify that, contrary to popular belief, like most performance artists, I support myself through a regular job (in my case, as a journalist). However, I consider myself lucky because my performance serves as a healthy outlet to examine all the feelings and experiences I have that are outside the boundaries of work and family—an arena in which for everyone, I believe, a whole lot of living takes place.

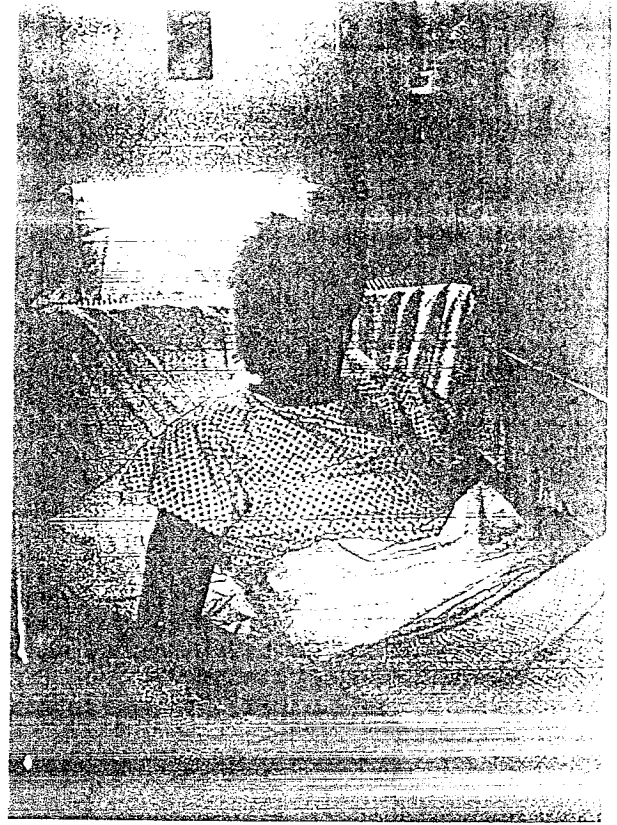
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CATHAY CHE is currently contributing editor at Time Out New York and a freelance writer for other media outlets. Che has performed comic monologues at the Kitchen, the Public Theater, P.S. 122, and for Franklin Furnace in Exile.

## WHY

BOB FLANAGAN

Because it feels good;  
because it gives me an erection;  
because it makes me come;  
because I'm sick;  
because there was so much sickness;  
because I say FUCK THE SICKNESS;  
because I like the attention;  
because I was alone a lot;  
because I was different;  
because kids beat me up on the way to school;  
because I was humiliated by nuns;  
\* because of Christ and the Crucifixion;  
because of Porky Pig in bondage,  
force-fed by some sinister creep in a black cape;  
because of stories of children hung by their wrists,  
burned on the stove, scalded in tubs;  
because of *Mutiny on the Bounty*;  
because of cowboys and Indians;  
because of Houdini;  
because of my cousin Cliff;  
because of the forts we built and the things we did  
inside them;  
because of what's inside me;  
because of my genes;



Bob Flanagan

because of my parents;  
because of doctors and nurses;  
because they tied me to the crib so I wouldn't hurt  
myself;  
because I had time to think;  
because I had time to hold my penis;  
because I had awful stomachaches and holding my  
penis made it feel better;  
because I felt like I was going to die;  
because it makes me feel invincible;  
because it makes me feel triumphant;  
because I'm a Catholic;  
because I still love Lent, and I still love my penis,  
and in spite of it all I have no guilt;  
because my parents said BE WHAT YOU WANT TO BE,  
and this is what I want to be;  
because I'm nothing but a big baby and I want to  
stay that way, and I want a mommy forever, even a  
mean one, especially a mean one;  
because of all the fairy tale witches, and the wicked  
stepmother, and the stepsisters, and how sexy Cin-  
derella was, smudged with soot, doomed to a life of  
servitude;  
because of Hansel, locked in the witch's cage until  
he was fat enough to eat;  
because of "O" and how desperately I wanted to be her;

because of my dreams;  
 because of the games we played;  
 because I've got an active imagination;  
 because my mother bought me Tinker Toys;  
 because hardware stores give me hard-ons;  
 because of hammers, nails, clothespins, wood, pad-  
 locks, pullies, eyebolts, thumbtacks, staple-guns,  
 sewing needles, wooden spoons, fishing tackle,  
 chains, metal rulers, rubber tubing, spatulas, rope,  
 twine, C-clamps, S-hooks, razor blades, scissors,  
 tweezers, knives, pushpins, two-by-fours, Ping-Pong  
 paddles, alligator clips, duct tape, broomsticks, bar-  
 becue skewers, bungee cords, sawhorses, soldering  
 irons;  
 because of tool sheds;  
 because of garages;  
 because of basements;  
 because of dungeons;  
 because of *The Pit and the Pendulum*;  
 because of the Tower of London;  
 because of the Inquisition;  
 because of the rack;  
 because of the cross;  
 because of the *Addams Family* playroom;  
 because of Morticia Addams and her black dress  
 with its octopus legs;  
 because of motherhood;  
 because of Amazons;  
 because of the Goddess;  
 because of the moon;  
 because it's in my nature;  
 because it's against nature;  
 because it's nasty;  
 because it's fun;  
 because it flies in the face of all that's normal (what-  
 ever that is);  
 because I'm not normal;  
 because I used to think that I was part of some vast  
 experiment and that there was this implant in my  
 penis that made me do these things and that allowed  
 THEM (whoever THEY were) to monitor my activities;  
 because I had to take my clothes off and lie inside  
 this plastic bag so the doctors could collect my  
 sweat;  
 because once upon a time I had such a high fever  
 that my parents had to strip me naked and wrap me  
 in wet sheets to stop the convulsions;  
 because my parents loved me even more when I was  
 suffering;  
 because surrender is sweet;  
 because I was born into a world of suffering;  
 because I'm attracted to it;  
 because I'm addicted to it;

because endorphins in the brain are like a natural  
 kind of heroin;  
 because I learned to take my medicine;  
 because I was a *guy* for taking it;  
 because I can take it like a man;  
 because, as somebody once said, HE'S GOT MORE  
 GALLS THAN I DO;  
 because it is an act of courage;  
 because it does take guts;  
 because I'm proud of it;  
 because I can't climb mountains;  
 because I'm terrible at sports;  
 because NO PAIN, NO GAIN;  
 because SPARE THE ROD AND SPOIL THE CHILD;  
 because YOU ALWAYS HURT THE ONE YOU LOVE.

*In collaboration with his partner, Sheree Rose, Bob Flanagan's performances combined text, video, and live performance in an exploration of sex, illness, and mortality. BOB FLANAGAN succumbed to cystic fibrosis on January 4, 1996.*

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## *The Fall and Decline of Ancient the Bronx*

ANNIE LANZILLOTTO

*"The Peoples' Voice Café is an alternative coffeehouse providing a space for artistic expression of a wide variety of humanitarian issues and concerns,"* but this is not where we are. We are on Arthur Avenue, where men ran out of the cafés to overturn a city bus as a protest to keep blacks out, in the city that listened, immediately rerouting the bus service. But that was the seventies and this is 1997. True, White Castle is still the hamburger joint on the corner and a white castle the neighborhood still thinks it is, but something has happened now that could not have happened then, when this was the absolute throne of the Bronx underworld. The Trojan Horse has entered, in the guise of a baby grand piano. Artists have set up shop in the market, alongside the potatoes and onions. Mussolini's portrait hangs behind the provolones, and now you might find a lesbian performance artist singing "summertime and the livin' is easy," right across the aisle. Artists have infiltrated, to make an opera in the market, and highlight the opera that is already there, daily. The performers' arms are around jailhouse widows in the sing-a-long of "O' Sole Mio." This is the only market where ex-mob wives can come back and be guaranteed free pancreas wrapped in