

The Body Performing Rituals:
*The Act of Repetition in Rituals and Ritualistic Art
and its effect on the Performing Body*

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Preface

Religious practice in Malta, my country of origin, is quite physical in temperament and is primarily based on the enactment of festivities, ceremonials, pageantry and rituals. The performing aspect of participating in religion is predominant and the mingling of chants, prayers, movements, actions and sounds create a theatrical atmosphere that incorporates together the physical, the pagan, the spiritual and the supernatural. This has become the main inspiration for my present research as I started questioning the real meaning and significance underpinning religious acts and its implications on the performing body.

The body is a fundamental yet controversial and contradictory concept in the Catholic faith. Throughout the history of the Church, the body has been considered as the lower part of creation, a corruptible flesh, the seat of wrongful desires and the seed of all evils. Moreover, Christian Theology stresses the idea of a temporal material body as the prison of Divine soul. This concept of dualism, crystallised in the writings of St Augustine of Hippo, formed the basis of the Church's attitude of outright hostility towards the body. The concentration of theology on preparing the soul for its final destination and natural home not only leaves little space for consideration to the material body but presents it as something to be sacrificed in the quest of achieving eternal life.

Strangely enough the same structure and system of the church puts a certain emphasis on the physical manifestation of faith through rituals, festivities and ceremonials, in which the body plays a central part. In fact, according to the church's liturgical tradition, the celebration of the Mass, the highest and most important of Christian celebrations, necessitates one's total involvement in participating and becoming one with God in his sacrifice for the salvation of the world. Thus from the early history of Christian celebrations, there was an understanding that religious practice was not to be confined only to interior dispositions but it needed to be corresponded with gestures and words. During Christian celebrations, the body assumes different postures and engages in various practices that involve particular gestures or sequences of movements.

This structure of signs and symbols is thus carefully constructed to express and describe particular concepts: standing is a sign of respect and honour, kneeling signifies penitence, sitting indicates meditation, etc. Essentially, these resemble a language of signs with which to communicate with a higher spirit. For this reason, in religious celebrations, the material body becomes the material producing religion, like mouldable clay shaped to perform particular movements and chants. However, as carefully planned and symbolically rich the liturgy can be, the practice of such rites inevitably falls into a certain ritualism. The same nature of Christian celebrations is essentially based on the re-enactment of the same segments with words and gestures repeated over and over again. What is this? What does repetition in rituals mean? Why is it necessary? And what impact does it have on the performing body?

Contents

Introduction.....	1
Chapter 1 – On Repetition in Rituals.....	3
1.1 Repetition as Remembrance.....	3
1.2 Repetition as Experience of the New.....	5
1.3 Repetition as Reinforcement.....	7
1.4 Repetition as a Compulsion.....	8
1.5 Concluding Thoughts.....	11
Chapter 2 – On Repetition in Ritualistic Art.....	12
2.1 Acts of Remembrance in Ritualistic Art.....	12
2.2 Acts of Novelty through Repetition in Ritualistic Art.....	13
2.3 Acts of Reaffirmation in Ritualistic Art.....	19
2.4 Acts of Compulsive Repetition in Ritualistic Art.....	20
2.5 Concluding Thoughts.....	26
Chapter 3 – The Marking of Skin through Rituals.....	27
3.1 What the Skin Reveals... ..	27
3.2 Writing Skin.....	29
Conclusion.....	35
Bibliography.....	36

Introduction

Eat it! Drink it! Amen! The singing, the clapping, the stretching of muscles, the kneeling, the standing-up and sitting-down, the movement of hands, the bowing of heads... This is the mechanism of Religious celebrations: the hypnotic regurgitation of words, the compulsive repetition of gestures, the trance-like behaviour of bodies. What is this? From where does this originate? What does it reflect?

In this essay I will attempt to examine the meaning and the implications of repetition in rituals and its impact on the performing body. I will focus my attention on religious and sacred rituals. However, as seen in this research, sacred rituals spill into secular circumstances. Thus, the expression or enacting of religious beliefs becomes fused with the everyday life and the ritualistic patterns adopted in conducting customary activities.

I intend to go about this essay by first examining acts of repetition in rituals from a Christian theological, philosophical and psychoanalytical point of view, trying to identify the main functions and significances attributed to ritualized repetition. The points of reference for this discussion vary from a theological perspective on the act of remembrance to Soren Kierkegaard's and Gilles Deleuze's analysis on repetition and Sigmund Freud's interpretation of repetition and obsession in religious ceremonies, also touching upon theories by Judith Butler, Gerald Myers and John Rogers Searle amongst others.

This will be followed by an aesthetic and visual evaluation of repetition in ritualistic art with spiritual connotations or which deal with discourses of transformation and enlightenment. In fact, the second chapter will evaluate in a deeper manner the circumstances of when performance art becomes ritual and an alternative religion. An attempt will also be made to apply the theories on repetition examined in the first section onto acts of performance art. For this task, I will consider some examples of performance art either live, documented or recorded in video, which incorporate ritualistic, rhythmic elements.

Finally, the body as a material performing ritualistic acts will be given particular consideration as a medium that can provide records or tangible manifestation of the effects and imprints that such obsessive, repetitive process leaves on the body. Building on the second chapter, I have opted to focus solely on giving insight on the physical marks, wounds and traces occurring through repetition on the skin of the performing body.

The arguments and considerations presented in this essay are an attempt to record, evaluate and clarify findings and thoughts collected through a process of exploration in research and art practice. The study is not intended to reach any specific conclusions or scientific results but it is essential for the crystallisation of a personal exploration into the relationship between rituals, body and art as it stands at the current point in time. It is therefore an exercise to understand what has been covered and uncovered and to hopefully reveal interesting elements to discover and serve as an impetus to develop future routes both in practice and research.

Chapter 1 – On Repetition in Rituals

In the attempt to analyse the implications and imprints that continuous repetition leaves on the performing body, I will first go through the exploration of the function and significance of repetitive actions in rituals. Therefore, in this section I will examine repetitive ritualistic ceremonials as interpreted from a Christian theological, philosophical and psychoanalytical point of view. I will study the different facades and roles attributed to repetitive acts by exploring repetition as a means of remembrance, as a path to experience the past from a new perspective, as a strategy to re-enforce and re-affirm the status quo and finally as an expression of compulsive, obsessive behaviour.

1.1 Repetition as Remembrance

“This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me.”

Luke 22:19

From its institution during the last supper of Christ, the Christian Eucharistic Celebration was a means to ensure the perpetuation and remembrance of Christ’s sacrifice on the cross through the workings of the Catholic Church. The phrase quoted above, proclaimed for the first time, according to the evangelists, by Christ in his last supper, and repeated in each and every Eucharistic Celebration around the world, is a clear indication of the Church’s role entrusted to it by Christ. This command made by Christ to the apostles and their successors encourages and enforces the necessity of repeating the same actions performed by Him in the Last Supper.

The participants to the Eucharistic celebration ‘remember’ their own salvation through Christ’s sacrifice of life. But according to Christian theology, to ‘remember’ is not simply to passively mark an anniversary or recall an episode through memory, but to defy the historic limitations of time and go back to the original moment again and again.¹ In fact, the catechism of the Catholic Church specifies that “when an event from the past is being ‘re-presented’ before God in such a way that what is being symbolized becomes operative in the present, one ‘remembers’ it.”²

However, this is not an act of re-creation of history but a re-entering in the presence of the moment of sacrifice. This is done through the anamnesis which originates from the very same words uttered by Christ during the Last Supper, “Do this in memory of me”³. It is a process by which every Christian can actively take part in the Paschal mystery. Even now, the participants experience the saving effects of Christ’s death and are delivered from slavery, sin and death.

Similarly, **Deleuze** asserts that repetitions of rituals “carry the first time to the ‘nth’ power.”⁴ Therefore, it is the original event that gives sense to all the following reiterations. In fact, he states that repetition is necessary and justified only when what is being repeated is unique and cannot be replaced.⁵ **Deleuze** makes reference to **Peguy**’s statement that it is the fall of Bastille which “repeats in advance” all Federation Days and not the opposite.⁶

¹ QUEEN 2004, pg 136

² *IBID.*, pg 136-137

³ LUKE 22:19

⁴ DELEUZE 1968, pg 2

⁵ *IBID.*, pg 1

⁶ *IBID.*, pg 2

1.2 Repetition as Experience of the New

Even though it is the original event that gives meaning to repetitions, **Kierkegaard** states that there is no exact copy of an action or a recreation of an event that has entered into the realm of history. Therefore, he argues that no repeated act can be identical to any one of the acts that preceded it. In *Repetition*, he also describes an attempt to “repeat what already was”⁷, an experiment which turns out to be a failure.⁸ Since one cannot physically go back or forward in time, **Kierkegaard** remarks that repetition can only exist in its impossibility.⁹

Deleuze also bases his evaluation of repetition on the impossibility of identicalness in the reiteration of the same action. For **Deleuze**, true repetition is only hypothetical and its existence is only agreed upon by convention and not objectively.¹⁰ For a repetition to be a perfect copy of the original action, the two different moments in which the same gesture is acted out must be themselves equal in all aspects. But since repetition does not follow a circular model of time, which allows the return of something that already existed, there is bound to be differentiation in repetitive actions. The subject performing repeatedly the same action does not encounter the same identical experience more than once and thus, the ritualistic act cannot fall into a system of habit.¹¹ **Deleuze** even insists that “something has to be different for there to be repetition, since

⁷ MELBERG 1990, pg 72

⁸ Under the pseudonym of Constantin Constantius, Kierkegaard narrates the attempt to repeat a previous holiday he had had in Berlin. However, the second time round, he is unable to secure the same seats he had the first time in the theatre, he is disappointed with the same company he previously enjoyed, didn't manage to have the same experience at the coffee shop and even the landlord had married in the meantime.

⁹ POUND 2005, pg 1-2

¹⁰ WILLIAMS 2003, pg 35

¹¹ <http://www.iep.utm.edu/deleuze/>

there must be some way of distinguishing two repeated things.”¹² So it is precisely difference which makes repetition significant.

Kristeva agrees with **Kierkegaard** and **Deleuze** in saying that true repetition is impossible. In fact, she states that repetition, particularly in verbal utterances, can never be identical because of temporal and contextual differences.

Deleuze also proposes repetition itself as a pure form of time through the adoption of the Nietzschean concept of the eternal return. This concept does not imply the return of the identical but only of that which differs-from-itself. As **Deleuze** explains in *Difference and Repetition*, “The subject of the eternal return is not the same but the different, not the similar but the dissimilar, not the one but the many.”¹³ Thus, **Deleuze** implies that repetition does not project to the past or to the present but to the future.

On the contrary, for **Kierkegaard**, repetition means looking towards the past: *retaking*, *repeating*, *returning*. However, he goes further as to argue that “that which is repeated has been, otherwise it could not be repeated, but the very fact that it has been makes the repetition into something new.”¹⁴ Thus, the move backwards in reality forces a countermovement forward. In fact, **Loewald** notes that **Kierkegaard**’s repetition “affirms the prototypical importance of the past, but here a prototype exists to be creatively transformed in the act of repetition.”¹⁵ He therefore concludes that repetition is constituted as the basis of creating difference and novelty with a potential to subvert.¹⁶

¹² DELEUZE 1968, pg 76

¹³ IBID., pg 126

¹⁴ IBID.

¹⁵ LOEWALD 1971, pg 64

¹⁶ KIERKEGAARD 1843, pg 149-170

1.3 Repetition as Reinforcement

In one of the early philosophical studies dealing with the repeated performative utterance of words and gestures in rituals, **Myers** builds upon the Kierkegaardian line of thought, indicating a change in meaning between the first utterance of a belief statement and all subsequent ones. Whereas the first act is simply an ordinary statement or a gesture and contains no more implications outside of its content, all following reiterations of the same phrase or gesture build on the first one and on each other. This idea implies that each repetition validates the original action and serves as a confirmation and evidence of its truth, importance and symbolic value.¹⁷ So unlike **Kierkegaard** and **Deleuze**, **Myers** indicates a reformative characteristic in repetition: the significance of an act or statement gains more power and credibility over time as each repeated act serves to reaffirm the previous one and support the following.¹⁸

Evaluating the power of repetition, **Butler** tends to agree with what **Myers** expressed some 30 years before. Furthermore, she states that the performative action is completely reliant on “the accumulating and dissimulating historicity of force.”¹⁹ The act must be itself a ritualistic practice to have a value in terms of meaning and communication of significance. In fact, she states:

“If a performative provisionally succeeds [...], then it is not because an intention successfully governs the action of speech, but only because that action echoes prior actions, and accumulates the forces of authority through the repetition or citation of a prior and authoritative set of practices.”²⁰

¹⁷ MYERS 1967, pg 210-4

¹⁸ MACDONALD 2011, pg 93-5

¹⁹ BUTLER 1997, pg 51

²⁰ IBID.

Examining religious rituals from this philosophical perspective, it can be said that the focus on repetition leads the ritual to become a process of re-affirmation. It is essentially a careful construction of signs and symbols to express the spiritual in an ordered and codified way, sealed by the approval of an authority that regulates behaviour.

“Since to perform liturgical order, which is by definition a relatively invariant sequence of acts and utterances encoded by someone other than the performer himself, is to conform to it, authority or directive is intrinsic to liturgical order.”²¹

Then, **Searle** seems to provide a perspective that fuses together the arguments of novelty and reaffirmation. He implies that each ritualistic act is a self-referential function and develops its own new way of executing actions while still respecting and echoing the original act and all those performed previously. In order to function, the element of mimicking must be avoided and each reiteration created presently in reflection of itself. Yet the elements linking each repeated act serve to enforce the credibility and truthfulness of the original utterance.²²

1.4 Repetition as a Compulsion

Affirmation as a base for change seems to be also the basis of the psychoanalytic approach to repetition. **Freud** argues that repetition evolves from repression and it is repression that makes repetition itself a compulsion. He thus evolves the concept of ‘repetition compulsion’, proposing that the externalization of repeated gestures originate from the inability of beings to remember repressed memories. It is only through repetition that beings could recall repressed

²¹ RAPPAPORT, 1979, pg 192-93

²² MACDONALD 2011, pg 96-7

material and act it out. **Deleuze**, reflecting on this perspective, comments: “I repeat because I repress [...]. I repress because I can live certain things or certain experiences only in the mode of repetition.”²³ Thus, here repetition affirms the compulsion of the being to a particular repressed memory.

Compulsive repetition and ritualistic repetition seem to have the same roots.²⁴ Like neurotic repetition, ritualistic repetition seems to originate from unconscious compulsions by the performers, which are revealed through the automatic re-enactment of trivial every day gestures that have no apparent justification as the original motivations are long forgotten.²⁵ Moreover, ritualistic repetition is presented as a necessity for the performer as much as compulsive repetition is for the neurotic patient, and any deviation or interruption of its flow has the potential to deeply destabilise the performer.

Henceforth, in **Freud**, repetition gains the role of a human vigilant-precaution mechanism that is in charge of monitoring potential danger and taking precautions.²⁶ It becomes a means to master anxiety and lessen the trauma of restrain.²⁷ In fact, **Wilden** implies that **Freud**'s model presents the being as a “mechanical system striving for equilibrium.”²⁸ Thus the act of repeating the same gestures and maintaining the same structure and rhythm²⁹ becomes more

²³ DELEUZE 1968, pg 21

²⁴ FREUD 1907, pg 17

²⁵ *IBID.*

²⁶ BOYER & LIENARD 2008, pg 292

²⁷ ROGERS 2004, pg 581

²⁸ WILDEN 1972, pg 125

²⁹ In the religious environment one can find plenty of examples and evidence of this starting with the Christian Eucharistic celebration which must be fulfilled punctiliously and attentively following minute details throughout the action and the Muslim ritualized prayers which must be repeated five times a day, in very specific times and following a particular conduct that includes kneeling down and bowing of heads while facing in the direction of the holy city of Mecca. Every minute detail seems to be fixed, even the number of Our Fathers and Hail Marys to be recited or when the faithful must bow their heads during Christian ritual celebrations.

understandable in this light as it acts as a stabilizing force, as a known and secure ground to find lost balances.

As a means of lessening the trauma of life, compulsive repetition seems to counteract the discomfort of proposing again and again painful experiences with a sense of satisfaction.³⁰ In fact, **Freud** states: “any given process originates in an unpleasant state of tension and thereupon determines for itself such a path that its ultimate issues coincide with the relaxation of this tension, with the avoidance of ‘pain’ or with production of pleasure.”³¹ Indeed, rituals seem to reproduce something of the pleasures they are instituted to combat and prevent.

At the same time, repetition in rituals still remains a process of re-affirmation. Yet, similarly to the Kierkegaardian thought, psychoanalysts seem to agree that repetition incorporates difference.³² Thus, not even compulsive repetition can be considered a true repetition in the sense that “it is not sameness. It is similarity within a field of difference.”³³ **Freud**’s thoughts on repetition seem to follow the concept of circular difference.³⁴ Similarly to the game described in the Pleasure Principle, adopted by the child to lessen the disturbances of real life,³⁵ for **Freud** compulsive repetition is like the real that disappears and appears in a cycle of events, similar to each other but different. This is because an element of each compulsion always “harks back to the beginning of the development lengthening the path of death.”³⁶

³⁰ In *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, Freud presents repetition of childish gestures as a mechanism to lessen the traumas and disturbances of real life. He puts forward the example of a child who throws away a toy and enjoys its disappearance and, when his mother picks it back, its return. This lessens the trauma of his mother leaving the house for some time.

³¹ FREUD 1922, pg 3-4

³² ROGERS 2004, pg 597

³³ IBID., pg 584

³⁴ IBID.

³⁵ In one of Freud’s observations, a child has a wooden reel with a piece of string wound round it. He throws it over the side of his draped cot while still holding the string, to then pull it back again.

³⁶ FREUD 1922, pg 28

1.5 Concluding Thoughts

The theological, philosophical and psychoanalytical arguments on the question of repetition and ritualization of acts reveal that the structure of reiteration of gestures and phrases, although having certain restrictions and rules to abide by, contain novelty because each act inhabits a specific time frame that cannot be recreated and a unique position in the repetition timeline. Thus, rather than rendering the rituals meaningless and obsolete, repetition builds power and effectiveness in its variety.

Chapter 2 – On Repetition in Ritualistic Art

After examining the implications and significance of repetition in ritualistic acts from a theological, philosophical and psychoanalytical perspective, I will now concentrate on studying the aesthetic component of repetition. This chapter will focus on the physical aspect of rituals, trying to find evidences of the theoretical framework of repetition also in the visual performance of ritualized gestures and sounds.

Rituals have long provided inspiration for artistic manifestations and some have had significant impact on art, theatre and dance.³⁷ But as **Schechner** asserts: “rituals may also be invented”³⁸ and performative art has the potential to become a ritual in its own right. I will here examine how the characteristics of repetition are brought to evidence in ritualistic art. For this thesis, I will concentrate my study on examples of video art and performance art, both live and documented, which reveal elements of ritualistic repetition in their visual enactment.

2.1 Acts of Remembrance in Ritualistic Art

The vast tradition of religious ritual and ceremonies has for long served as inspiration and departure point for ritualistic performances. An important circle of performance artists appropriate segments of liturgical ceremonies and biblical passages in their work. However these re-enactments of the original episodes generally present a subversive and transgressive form of

³⁷ SCHECHNER 2006, pg 83

³⁸ IBID., pg 81

remembrance. In fact, in these examples, elements from the Christian Eucharistic ceremony are explicitly extracted and converted in a way that the focus is turned on the performer's flesh and blood. **Michael Journiac** offered to viewers a piece of a pudding made with his own blood while **Petr Stembera**, in *Narcissus*, stands still gazing at his own portrait lit with candles and later mixes his own blood, urine, hair and nail clippings together and drinks the concoction. Here the command: "*do this in remembrance of me*"³⁹ is completely subverted as the artists adopt strategies that verge on forms of self-deification and idolatry. The act which ought to be remembered is lived anew, but here the flesh and blood of Christ are substituted with the artists' own.

Adopting a similar strategy, **Chris Burden** has nails physically hammered into both of his hands while laying face up on a Volkswagen Beetle in the work *Trans-Fixed* (1974) that recalls Christ's Crucifixion. Yet here, the very fact that the artist subjects himself to pain, enduring a similar torture, can be considered as an attempt to experience himself and make others experience the horror of such acts.

2.2 Acts of Novelty through Repetition in Ritualistic Art

The examples seen so far reveal a borrowing from firmly established religious rituals or episodes. This implies that the performance is a repetition of a historic and already culturally-informed action. On the other hand, certain artists propose personal ritualistic processes that are invented and constructed by the performers themselves. This carries with it different implications

³⁹ LUKE 22:19



CHRIS BURDEN, *Trans-fixed*, 1974.

as in each repeated action the artist refers to him/herself and his/her own work. This is a repetition built in time, and with time being ever-changing, the repeated acts always contain difference.

Exploring **Marina Abramovic**'s long-durational performances of the last decade, it transpires that although the structure always remains quasi-identical from beginning to end, each repetition brings with it a sense of novelty and uniqueness. In both *The House with the Ocean View* (2005) and *The Artist is Present* (2011), **Abramovic** follows a simple ritual, with few objects around, little or no gestures, no talking and no overt communication: she places herself in front of the audiences and gazes into their eyes. Each gaze is direct and personal and thus inviting the particular audience member to cross the line into the performance and reply with his own gaze.

However, this simple gesture triggers a profound experience⁴⁰ as the performer and participant become engaged in “an energy dialogue”⁴¹ with the “amazing possibility for transformation and elevation of spirit.”⁴² **Abramovic** did nothing, yet she offered a space for people to sit in silence, open up and communicate.⁴³ From the participants' perspective, this experience became like a confession, with **Abramovic** taking the role of the priest. In fact she states: “I became the mirror for them of their own emotions.”⁴⁴ The audience described their

⁴⁰ MACDONALD 2011, pg 252

⁴¹ <http://marinafilm.com/>

⁴² ABRAMOVIC & SPECTOR 2007, pg 27
MACDONALD 2011, pg 258

⁴³ <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/oct/03/interview-marina-abramovic-performance-artist>

⁴⁴ IBID.

MACDONALD 2011, pg 255



MARINA ABRAMOVIC, *Balkan Baroque*, 1997.



MARINA ABRAMOVIC, *The Artist is Present*, 2012.

experience as a quasi-religious and life-altering episode and for a while the exhibition spaces became like Lourdes.⁴⁵

The structure of the two performances discussed enabled participants to have one on one time with the artist. The personal and intimate way in which both sides reacted to each other indicates that the only constant element in this repeated ritual in the basic framework and idea. The difference between each repetition of the performance is not only apparent or external but goes deeper, reflecting the emotional landscape, cultural background and social reality of each participant. Interpretations and impressions are not fixed and thus vary also in repetition.

Orlan's cosmetic operations as art performances also enforce the concept of repetition as novelty. However, differently to **Abramovic's** works, which seem to be closer to **Deleuze's** idea that each reiteration refers to the original action in a new way, **Orlan's** performances follow a **Kierkegaardian** model in that each repetition is effected by the previous actions and impacts the ones following, thus ensuring difference.

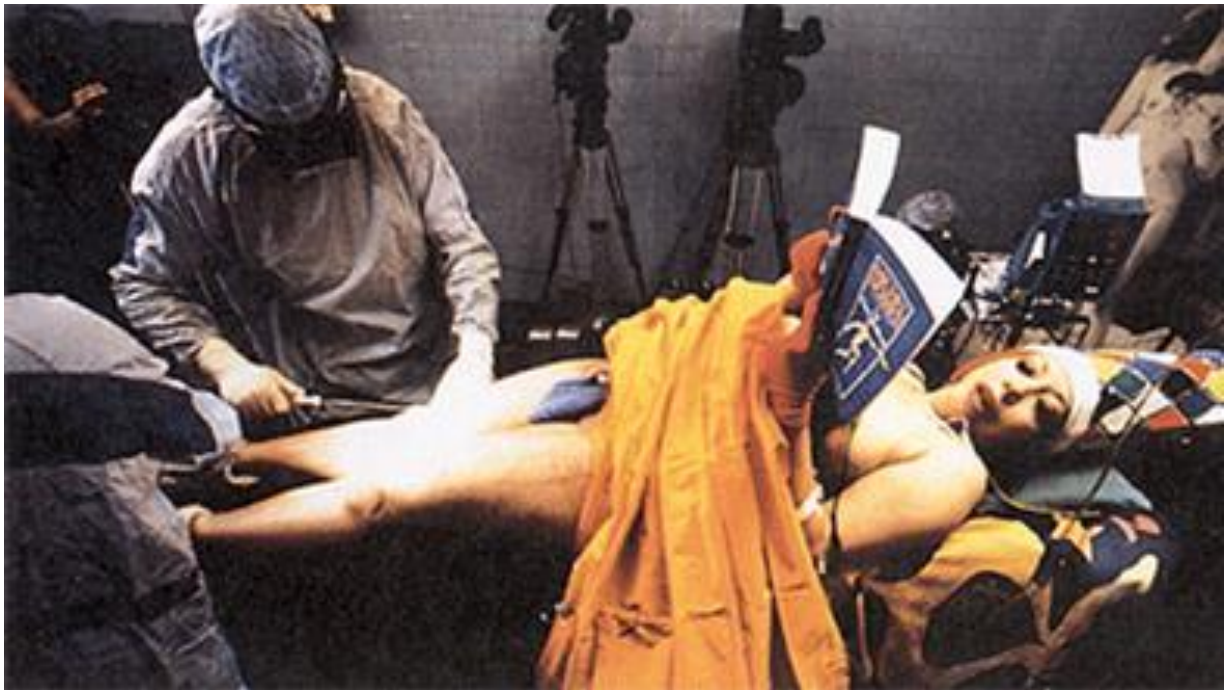
From the 1990's onwards, the artist underwent numerous cosmetic operations in order to transform herself into a new being. **Orlan** subjects herself to tremendous pain and torture as she remains conscious for the duration of the operation and performs acts that incorporate religious imagery, food and loud recitals on spirituality.

Similarly to **Abramovic**, **Orlan's** oeuvres focus on the body and transformation. However, while in **Abramovic's** work, the focus is on spiritual enlightenment and transformation, for **Orlan** the transformation is initially conceived as very physical and aesthetic. The silent space as a material that transfers energy in **Abramovic's** work is substituted with a

⁴⁵ <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/oct/03/interview-marina-abramovic-performance-artist>

chaotic, frenetic, violent and loud atmosphere in **Orlan's** performances. Yet, these rituals seem to exemplify the process of body mortification and sacrifice as a way to obtain spiritual elevation and ecstasy.

But the spiritual elevation in **Orlan** is of a different nature to that of **Abramovic**. While **Abramovic** can be experienced as a Shaman, in the sense that she becomes like a spiritual leader facilitating profound experiences and a process of healing⁴⁶, **Orlan** is not to be experienced but to be seen, to be admired and perhaps even adored. Through her radical transformations, **Orlan** seems no longer human in form, as if she has achieved the level of Sanctity. She has reincarnated herself into Saint Orlan.⁴⁷



ORLAN, *Plastic Surgeries*, part of the project 'The Reincarnation of Saint-Orlan', 1990.

⁴⁶ MACDONALD 2011, pg 258

⁴⁷ CLARKE 2000, pg 193

2.3 Acts of Reaffirmation in Ritualistic Art

Other instances of ritualistic performances reveal a sense of novelty and creativity which however is overshadowed by an element of enforcement and reaffirmation of its meaning and significance, such as **Stelarc**'s series of twenty-five body suspensions performed over a period of thirteen years.⁴⁸ Although a single performance is both visually and conceptually impactful, with each repeated act, the rituals gain meaningfulness and strength. While the first action can be perceived as a masochistic act recalling Indian Fakir rituals necessitating the endurance of pain, the series as a whole becomes a testament to **Stelarc**'s idea of a superhuman body.⁴⁹

Gentler in approach are **Spartacus Chetwynd**'s ritualistic live performances with carnivalesque themes. Similarly to what happens in **Stelarc**'s masochistic ritual, the repetition of **Chetwynd**'s spectacles seems to reinforce the power of the ritual through time. Transferring what **Myers** asserts about the utterances of a belief statement to **Chetwynd**'s ritualistic acts, the first representation of an act is considered solely on an artistic basis but each successive re-utterance adds legitimacy and meaning to the ritual itself. In these rituals, the artist draws from modes akin to liturgical ceremonies, such as the use of symbolic objects and theatrical ambience, the repetition of simple gestures and the incorporation of audience in a communal act.⁵⁰ Through this strategy, the audience is given the opportunity to understand and learn the ritual, and participate in it while reinforcing its relevance. Although her ritual's main concern is with social responsibility and behaviour, **Chetwynd**'s re-interpretation of old testament biblical stories,

⁴⁸ <http://stelarc.org/?catID=20316>

⁴⁹ GOLDBERG 1998, pg 119

⁵⁰ MACDONALD 2011, pg 272-74

medieval morality plays and ceremonial pageantry in a seemingly positive and jolly manner, also hints at a reaffirmation of the values and tradition of Christian rituals.

This position of reaffirming elements of Christian liturgy is extremely rare in performance art. In fact, performance art seems to have adopted an anti-Christian standpoint, even in its early manifestations. The **Orgien Mysterien Theater** founded by **Hermann Nitsch** enacted violent, ritualistic, sacrificial acts that demystified Christian religious symbolisms and references, mingling them with the pagan traditions.⁵¹ Yet, despite the violently anti-Christian appearance of these rituals, their underpinning structure, ritualistic system and hierarchy of roles seem to reaffirm that of Christian liturgical celebrations. Even more so when considering that the aim of these rituals is to purify, redeem and serve as therapy, a concept the **Actionists** evolved from their interest in psychoanalysis.⁵²

2.4 Acts of Compulsive Repetition in Ritualistic Art

The element of compulsive repetition so characteristic of Religious rituals is also explored in ritualistic performance art. According to **Freud's** concept of Death Instinct, the compulsion repetition of repressed memories helps us to surpass the trauma through masochistic activities of self-harm. Deriving pleasure from suffering is at the same time also a way to resist temptation and protect the body. **Roselee Goldberg** asserts that “ritualized pain has a purifying

⁵¹ http://www.phoresis.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=16:..

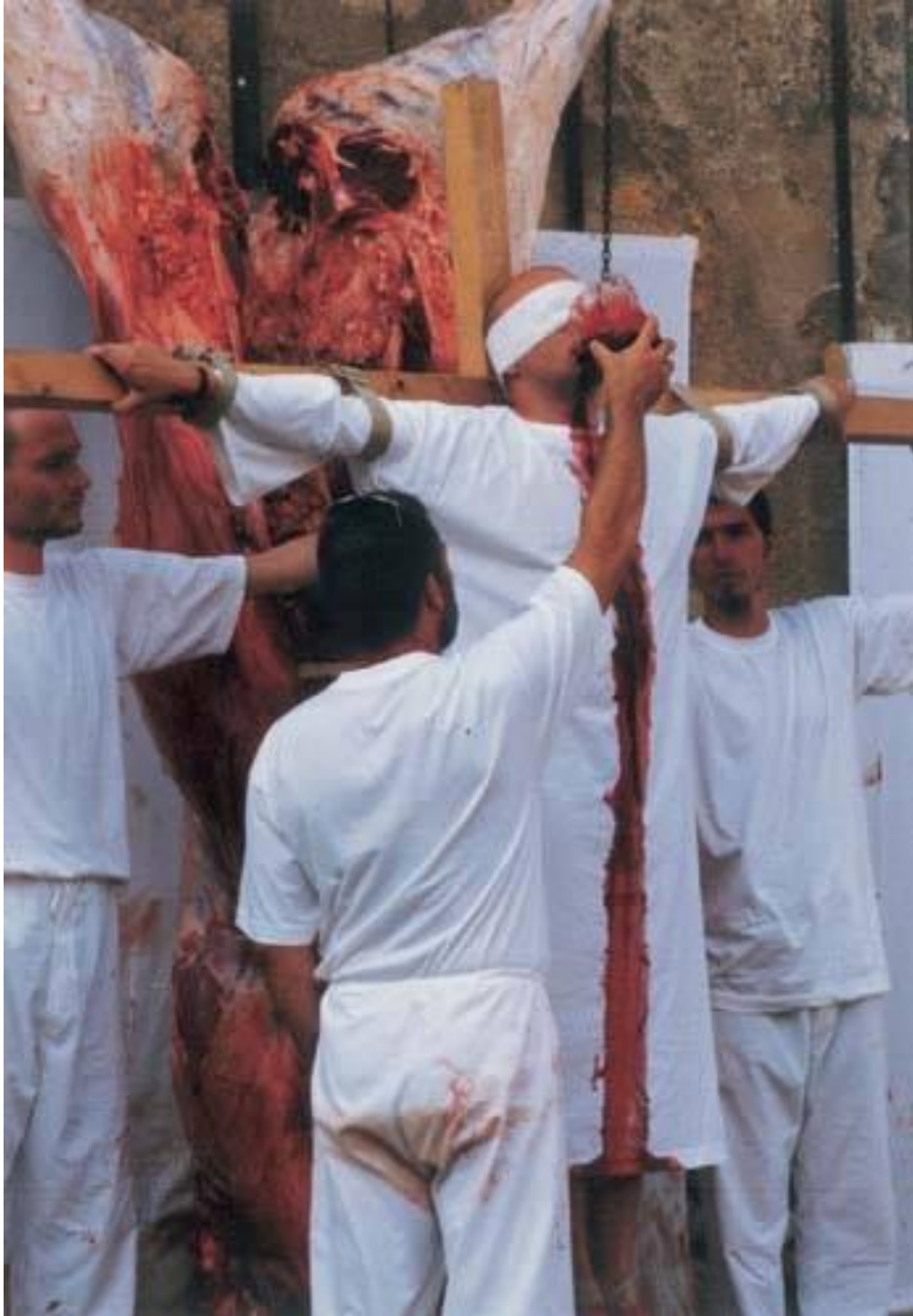
⁵² GOLDBERG 1998, pg 119
PERLMUTTER 2002, pg 127-28



STELARC, *Sitting/Swaying: Event for Rock Suspension*, 1980.



SPARTACUS CHETWYND, *Odd Man Out*, 2011.



HERMANN NITSCH, *Action Eindhoven*, 1983.

effect”.⁵³ Following this line of thought, various artists indulge in repetitive, violent and self-harming performances.

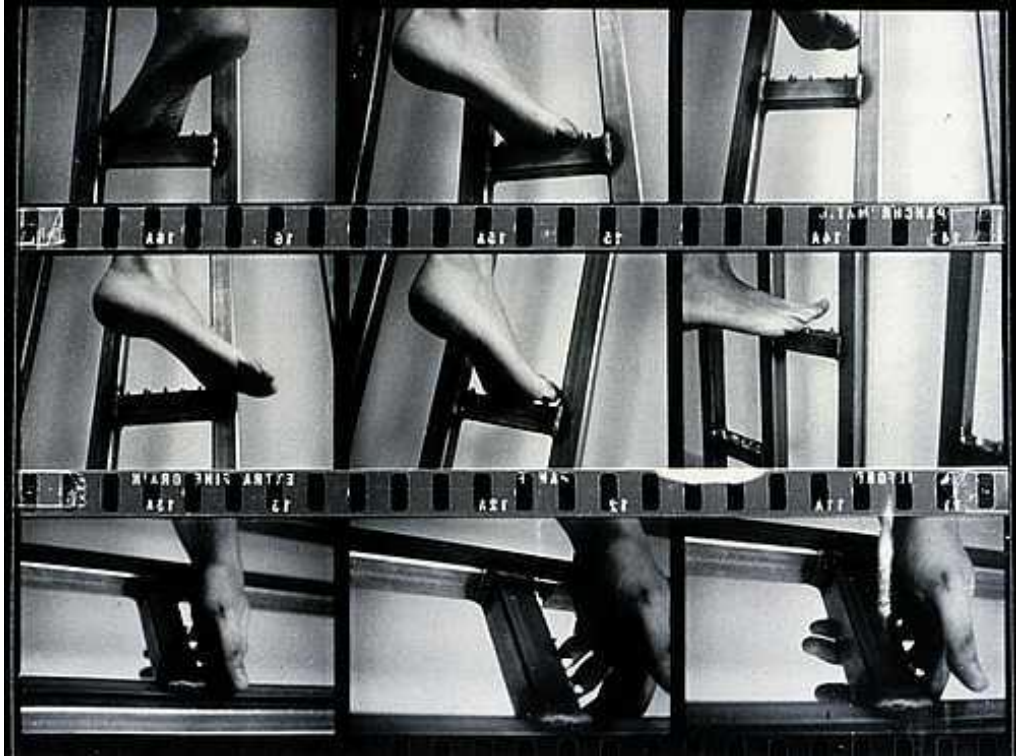
Gina Pane’s obsessive repetition of self-harming rituals that cut open the flesh explored idea pain endurance, self-control, restraint and asceticism. Similarly, **Abramovic**’s *Rhythm 10*, which involved stabbing her fingers obsessively for 20 times, is rooted in the religious-philosophical doctrines that indicate mortification as a means of facilitating the transition to a higher state of consciousness of mind and spirit that would lead out of suffering.

Genesis P-Orridge engaged in violent acts and strong outbursts of instinctive animalistic instances in his ritualistic performances. One of his most famous pieces was *COUM Transmissions*, in which he instinctively started scratching and cutting his body without control until he was rushed to hospital in near-death conditions. Such acts reveal an unconscious urge towards sacrifice and punishment as a means of liberating the soul from its unworthy rotten cage that is the body. In fact **P-Orridge** states: “I was punishing myself to the point of being declared nearly dead”.⁵⁴ Like in the case of **Pane** and **Abramovic**, this self-imposed martyrdom is intended to harm the physical body as a means to purify it from its sinfulness and dependence on wrongful desires.

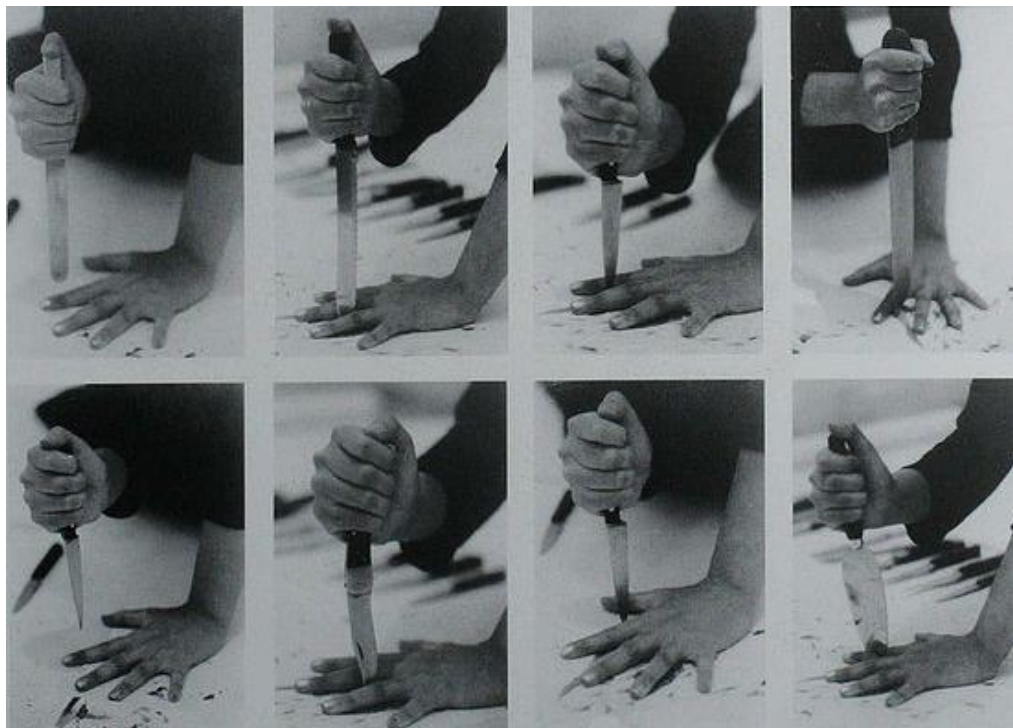
This fact reveals an element of frenzy and unhealthy obsession in repetitive ritualistic art. Perhaps the best example of this is the work of **Ron Athey**. Traces of religious fanaticism, paranoid schizophrenia and hysteria emerge in performance acts where the artist mutilates his

⁵³ GOLDBERG 1988, pg 165.

⁵⁴ VALE & JUNO 1989, pg 167-68



GINA PANE, *Escalade non Anesthésiée*, 1971.



MARINA ABRAMOVIC, *Rhythm 10*, 1973-4.

body and punishes himself in an uncontrolled manner. In fact, **Athey** is quoted as saying: “I move frantically and repetitively like I’m having a nightmare, or am an autistic”.⁵⁵

This concept of modification through mortification is interestingly explored in performance art through the expression of a physical, corporal reflection of an internal modification. In fact, in some cases of performance art, the post-modern notion of permanent body modification and the spiritual and religious ideal of modification seem to intersect. These acts in a way seem a modern interpretation of the medieval religious concept of body mortification and self-torture aiming to achieve a passage to a higher level of spirituality and a deeper closeness to the Creator. This practice, widely adopted and established in religious cultural traditions, includes specific forms of bodily discipline ranging from sleep deprivation to ritual forms of abuse. In this process of self-discipline and restraint, the most significant element is the symbolic journey of death and regeneration, thus an element of spiritual modification.

In the performance act *Autopsy* by the duo **Sheree Rose** and **Bob Flanagan**, **Rose** repeatedly beats, whips and pinches the static body of **Flanagan**, lying nude on an autopsy table. Finally, she has his penis sliced with a knife. In a way, this act follows the Pauline idea of Christian mortification as an act of participation in the crucifixion of Christ by putting to death the desires of the flesh.

In a similar manner, **Fakir Musafar** permanently modifies his body in an urge to explore spirituality through art. **Musafar** says, “We’re suffering from a lot of repressive conditioning, which you can’t undo in just a mental way.”⁵⁶ He responds to the instinctive callings of the body by subjecting it to painful manipulations as acts of self-discipline and restraint. Thus, similarly to

⁵⁵ ATHEY 2004, pg 87

⁵⁶ <http://suspendtherules.wordpress.com/2008/06/06/body-play/>

the Christian saints and monks that performed private rituals of mortification, **Musafar** recognizes that restricting the body and letting go of personal egos is essential in the personal spiritual journey towards enlightenment.

2.5 Concluding Thoughts

The robust element of ritualization in all the instances of personal or collective performance art mentioned throughout this chapter, and others with similar concern and direction, is strongly influenced by organized religions. However, whether the performance is intended as a means to achieve personal enlightenment or to project the transition to a higher level of spirituality to a larger audience, the art goes on to become itself a religion, a ritual on its own right.

Chapter 3 – The Marking of Skin through Rituals

So far, the study has touched upon the spiritual implications of ritualistic art and how these have the potential to transform, enlighten and elevate the existence of the performer and the viewers alike. In the array of examples of ritualistic art examined in the second chapter, one can notice that in a considerable number of cases, the strategies adapted to achieve spiritual enlightenment are violent acts of masochism, self-harm and both permanent and temporary body modifications. Thus, the fact that the body plays a first-hand role in this experience must not be underestimated. It becomes the material of experience, the material that endures the pain and is marked by it.

Following these considerations, this section will thus put the focus on the skin and evaluate how it is tempered with, how it is imprinted and affected. I will go about this discussion by examining the properties of the skin and looking at what the skin can reveal, while referring to examples illustrated in the previous chapter.

3.1 What the Skin Reveals...

“Nothing is deeper in man than his skin”⁵⁷

Paul Valéry

⁵⁷ VALÉRY 1988, pg 31

Skin, in the last decades, has been so obsessively shown everywhere and excessively made visible solely for its own qualities and surface in cinema, photography, mass media, advertisements, internet and in all other means of communication, that its public display has become as normalized and obvious as can be. All this seems to prove how right **Joyce** was to state that “modern man has an epidermis rather than a soul”⁵⁸. This is because the exposition of skin puts immense value and focus on appearance. As **Connor** comments in *The Book of Skin*, the meaning of skin has been de-sublimated to a point that it is treated only as a “surface whose only purpose [is] to substitute apparition for appearance.”⁵⁹ **Warhol** puts it more bluntly, affirming that skin is simply a surface waiting to be seen.⁶⁰

Yet, **Valéry** suggests that the skin, apparently the most superficial aspect of human beings, is paradoxically their deepest and most profound aspect.⁶¹ The skin is not merely a surface or a screen, but it is essentially a meeting place of world and body. As **Michel Serres** explains, “Through the skin, the world and the body touch, defining their common border.”⁶² The skin touches the world, is pressed against it and is affected by its pressure. Thus it has the role of registering the traces of the primary communication with the outer world. In practical terms, it is the skin that carries in the most visible manner the effects and implication of the world on the body starting from signs of diseases, wounds from accidents and so on.

Moreover, the skin can also be considered as a space between the outward and the inward, a link between appearance and the spiritual complexion. It is between these levels of the

⁵⁸ BERRONE 1977, pg 21

⁵⁹ CONNOR 2004, pg 1

⁶⁰ JONES 2009, pg 134

⁶¹ VALÉRY 1988, pg 31

⁶² SERRES 1998, pg 97

body and the world that according to **Maurice Merleau-Ponty**, visibility⁶³ exists. In other words, the skin, being an interlocated material, becomes the most direct manifest of how the social and the psychic fabrics play together and impact individuals.

The skin, being also a screen of the inward world, can be considered a space of revelation and declaration of the self. In fact, **Nancy** states “The body declares- It isn’t silent or mute [...]. The body declares outside language [...]. The body declares in such a way that, foreign to any interval and any detour of the sign, it announces absolutely everything.”⁶⁴ Therefore, skin is compared to a photography of the body through which one can explore human subjectivity and experience.⁶⁵

3.2 Writing Skin

The understanding of the perspectives presented above seem to be an underpinning force behind artists who treat their body as the primary material of expression, as a surface that could be marked and manipulated or blank canvas on which ideas are given form.⁶⁶ However, this idea of making visible is not based on a fanciful desire to put oneself on show or to expose one’s experience just for the sake of doing so. In most cases, this act of marking the body becomes an exercise in finding and understanding oneself, releasing disquietude and giving a tangible, physical presence to nightmares to be able to deal with the blackness inside. Indeed, most artists that engaged in such performances seem to touch upon traces of existentialist philosophies. As

⁶³ MERLEAU -PONTY 1964, pg 131

⁶⁴ NANCY 2008, pg 115

⁶⁵ NANCY 2008, pg 47

⁶⁶ FREEMAN 2007, pg 81

GOODALL 2000, pg 157

Amelia Jones puts it, artists who perform the act of mark-making on the body “work the surface to explore the depths”.⁶⁷

The methods adopted by artists in attaining this are varied and each carries its own motivations, sources and implications. Some artists “hover on the surface of the body”⁶⁸, treating skin as a blank surface to be inscribed, painted and written upon while others “penetrate the very



ORLAN, in bandages several days after her surgery *The Second Mouth*, part of the project 'The Reincarnation of Saint-Orlan', 1993.

⁶⁷ JONES 2009, pg 134

⁶⁸ *IBID.*

deepest orifices of the flesh” creating new holes, wounds and eventually bruises and scars. It is on the latter form of intervention on the skin that I will concentrate for the rest of this writing.⁶⁹

Artaud proclaims that the only method of liberating oneself from the pains of being human is to place him “on an autopsy table to remake his anatomy.”⁷⁰ Hence, he seems to indicate that the only method to surpass humanness and achieve spiritual enlightenment is through body manipulation and violent transformation. After all, it is through the torture of the crucifixion that the spirit passes from Father to Son: ‘The Body’. Here the spirit exposes its body, ‘Ecco Homo’, in the wounded body of Christ.⁷¹

Wounds announce to the world the tangibility and mortality of the flesh: “I suffer therefore I am.”⁷² Wounds externalize the pain endured.⁷³ Wounds, each in its uniqueness, are the ‘sign-of-self’⁷⁴, in the sense that each reveals its own history.⁷⁵ **Abramovic**’s permanent scars, **Orlan**’s swollen, bruised and scratched post-operation face, **Musafar**’s modified and reshaped body, **Athey**’s manipulated flesh, **Stelarc**’s overly stretched skin, **Burden**’s pierced hands...All these “provide [their] own testament and the text that abides is not written in ink.”⁷⁶ It is written from and in flesh.

⁶⁹ Although acknowledging other types of mark making on skin such as inscriptions, painted forms, signs, writings, makeup, tattooing, piercing and more, in this essay I will concentrate on marks that reflect violence and pain such as wounds, bruises and holes in flesh. This is because the study on ritualistic performance art carried out in the second chapter reveals that methods of self-harm, self-modification and masochism are the most common in works with motivations of spiritual enlightenment.

⁷⁰ CLARKE 2000, pg 194

SONTAG 1988, pg 571

⁷¹ NANCY 2008, pg 77

⁷² JONES 2009, pg 138-9

⁷³ *IBID.*

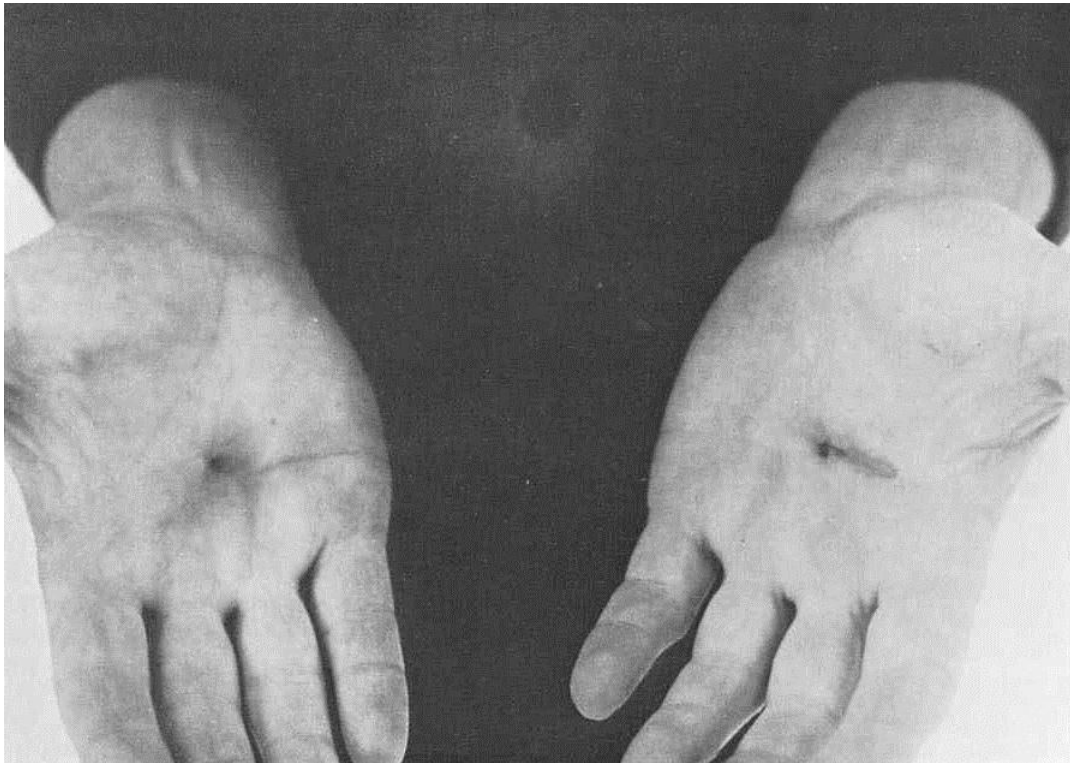
⁷⁴ NANCY 2008, pg 79

⁷⁵ *IBID.*

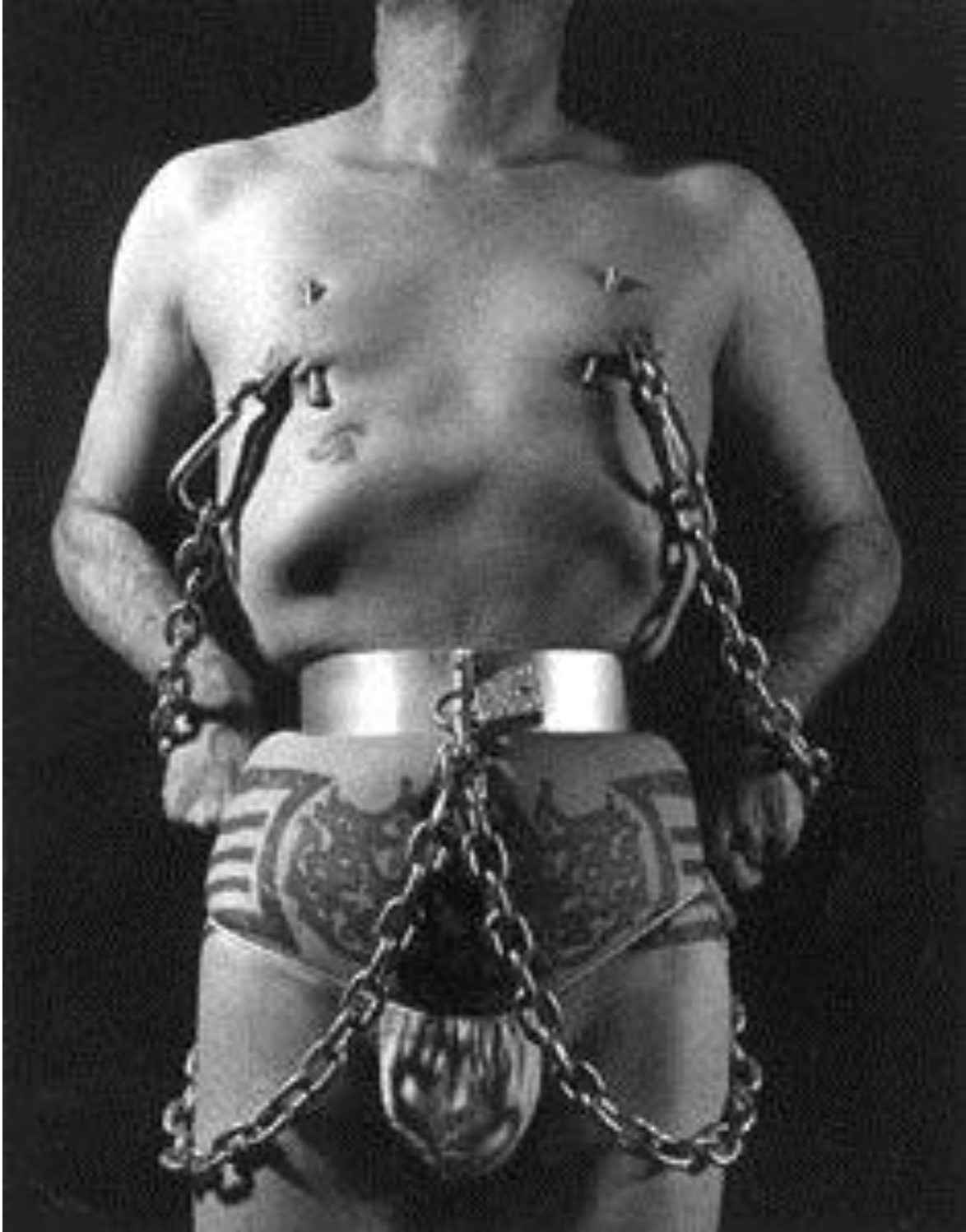
⁷⁶ FREEMAN 2007, pg 113



MARINA ABRAMOVIC, *Thomas Lips*, 1979.



CHRIS BURDEN, with pierced hands after his performance *Trans-fixed*, 1974.



FAKIR MUSTAFAR, CHAINED, 1978.

Analyzing the works studied in the second chapter from the perspective of the body surface, it becomes clear that the motivations and meanings of each performance are extenuated by the implications of marking and mapping on living skin. This is because the skin has the potential of recording, preserving and protecting these marked codes as glorious enigmas. It is true that some of the scars and bruises disappear with time and do not indelibly taint the flesh surface. However, the skin itself renders them permanent as each sign on the flesh, even the erased ones, marks the body and leaves a trace on memory.

Conclusion

The initial part of this study, where the Christian theological perspective on rituals is examined, seems to manifest a predominance given to the spirit over flesh. Yet a contradiction seems to emerge as it is evident that the spiritual depends on the physical to be manifested. However, in the Christian tradition of thinking, the body always remains at the service of the soul.

Moving forward in this investigation, I looked into the method of manifestation of the spiritual in bodies during rituals, that is repetition, through theory and ritualistic performance art. It emerges that repetition of actions is in itself a method of spiritual enlightenment. In fact, the array of ritualistic performances illustrated and examined reveal how the repetition of violent techniques of self-inflicted harm are adopted as a method to strengthen the body against temptation and elevate it over pain and humanness.

The final chapter of the study returns to concentrate again on the relationship between spirit and body in rituals. Focusing the analysis on skin and the violent marks inflicted on it during masochistic performance art, what emerges is that these tangible carvings in the material flesh expose the spiritual. Wounded bodies are holy: in opening their depths to the world, they become relics. We as spectators could in return open our spirit to these experiences “allowing them to invade our bodily contours and mark us.”⁷⁷

⁷⁷ JONES 2009, pg 141

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