

# **The Body Performing Rituals: The cyclical nature of relief and re-enforced repression**

**An essay on  
personal artistic practice  
and research**

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February 2013**

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The cyclical nature of relief and re-enforced repression**

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# **The Body Performing Rituals: The cyclical nature of relief and re-enforced repression**

## 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 trancelike behaviour of bodies... What is this? Where does this originate? What does it reflect?

This essay is a first attempt to explore these questions not only basing any attempted answer on the theoretical research I have covered till this point but also on considerations and evaluations emerging from my personal artistic practice.

My interest is in examining the human being caught between instincts and obligations, between passion and morality, between sexual impulses and a strict religious system, between the earthly and the promise of the eternal. I am intrigued to explore how these opposing elements manifest themselves on the performing body, in the physical acts of religious rituals and celebrations.

The initial part of the essay will concentrate on mapping out my basis of influence mainly my personal cultural context and background and then the artistic influences with special focus on artists who explore ritualistic and religious elements in Video and performance art. This will then be followed up by a short overview of the traditional, historical attitude of the Catholic Church towards the body, flowing then to a theoretical explanation of the concept I evolved on the bodily performance in rituals. The arguments presented will be supported and explained through examples from my personal practice.

## Personal Context and Background

My practice is the visual expression of thoughts and personal evaluations about the environment I am most familiar with. Being born in Malta, a staunchly Catholic Mediterranean island, where religion is not only about faith but finds its way also in politics, culture, traditions, way of life and personal decisions, it was almost inevitable for me to be drawn towards religious beliefs and customs as a source of inspiration in my artistic practice.

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

### Artistic Influences: Ritualistic acts in Performance and Video Art

I will now map out my main artistic influences, mentioning a couple of Video and performance artists and explaining how these inform my artistic practice.

Video Art:

#### 1. Bill Viola:

In his video art, Viola makes vast use of symbolisms and elements related to his religious background and Christian tradition to evoke fundamental human experiences such as birth and death. But his use of religious iconography is completely innovative as he selects particular elements and applies them to secular narratives in an attempt to try to distance content from effect. Thus his projects and images would gain a suggestive power while retaining enough ambiguity to allow kinds of different readings. I am also interested in how Viola technically conveys his concepts. During the filming process he locks the camera in a still position to keep undisturbed the motion of continuity and capture a sense of space and unfolding time. His manipulation of time through extreme still motion is also intriguing as these moving stills enable the viewer ample time to feel the shifting emotional relationship between the protagonists. **(Plate 1)**

## 2. Douglas Gordon:

Douglas Gordon also plays with the time element through the use of different forms of repetitions and slow-motion. For example, in *24hour Psycho*, the artist slowed down an entire Hitchcock film to make it last 24 hours. The work also reveals Gordon's interest in using materials and elements from the public realm, something which I also adopt in my practice. Moreover I am influenced by how the Scottish artist visually presents his video clips, employing multiple monitors and multiprojections, mechanisms that he employs in a quest to draw in the viewers and create in them an emotional response. **(Plate 2)**

Performance art:

## 3. Marina Abramovic:

Her works contain a strong meditative and ritualistic element and discusses aspects of spirituality and the process of bodily and mental transformation. Her exploration of the limits of the body and possibilities of the mind seems to move in the parallel if curious way the theological underpins the Christian concept of asceticism. In fact, in performances such as the series 'Rhythms', Abramovic deals with ideas of self-inflicted pain and restraint in the form of violent, ritualized performances. Abramovic's work finds its root in the religious-philosophical traditions and 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. **(Plate 3)**

## 4. Barbara T. Smith:

Another influence is the American feminist artist Barbara T. Smith, whose works, particularly those of the late 1960's and early 70's contain strong references to Christian religious imagery. Works such as '*Ritual Meal*' and '*Mass Meal*' replicate and refer to the Christian Mass, while at the same time defying it and questioning its focus on sharing and consumption. In her works she fuses together religious celebrations and performance art as she exposes the body to ritualized acts. **(Plate 4)**

## 5. Hermann Nitsch:

Nitsch together with Viennese Actionists enacted violent, ritualistic, sacrificial acts that mingled together the Christian and pagan traditions and included ecclesiastical symbolisms and profane acts. These performances which focused on ritual and blood were described as 'an aesthetic way of praying'. Interestingly, these apparently chaotic performances had an underpinning structure and hierarchy of roles adopted from Christian mass celebration. These ritualized

activities sprung from Nitsch's belief that humankind's aggressive instincts had been repressed and muted. Thus these acts were a means of releasing that repressed energy as well as an act of purification and redemption through suffering. This concept of art as therapy evolved from the Actionists' interest in psychology and the study of Sigmund Freud. **(Plate 5)**

#### 6. Joseph Beuys:

Beuys Secular Rituals are self-invented but still demonstrate a strong fascination with the religious content of proper rituals as he adopted and referred to numerous iconic gestures and rites from the Christian tradition throughout his performances. Simultaneously, he had a fascination with the social potential of rituals as a self-healing and transformative experience. Also intriguing is his use and invention of symbolisms and his idea of prolonged ritualistic performance particularly evident in the work *'I like America and Americans like me'*. **(Plate 6)**

#### Historic Views of the Church on the Body

The body is a fundamental yet controversial and contradictory concept in Catholic faith. Throughout the history of the Church, the body has been considered as the lower part of creation... It is described essentially corruptible and easy prey to temptation, 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 crystallized in the writings of St Augustine of Hippo forms the basis of the Church's consideration that the physical body must be sacrificed in the quest of achieving eternal life. Thus Christian doctrine, through its strict web of rules, imposes the restriction and restraining of those irrational, animalistic instincts and sexual drives that inhabit the human being. Bodily need must be suppressed: praying, fasting, celibacy and moral behaviour are necessary. This implies that body actions should be strictly controlled by a strong sense of self-discipline, self-denial and asceticism.

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. It becomes the material producing religion, mouldable clay shaped to perform ad nauseam the same movements and chants.

## The Conflicted Being in Rituals:

Rituals seem to adopt a multitude of contradictory facades and roles that play on the performing body during religious ceremonials. I will go through different facades of the ritualistic act with the aid of theory and simultaneously explaining my artistic practice and development.

### 1. The Ritual as Obsession and Senseless Repetition

The fundamental structure and mechanism of religious rituals reveals a strong emphasis on the repetition and regurgitation of the same set of words, chants and phrases. As the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy implies: “...it’s perhaps the repetition par excellence, to the point of obsession.”<sup>1</sup> Similarly, Sigmund Freud puts forth the argument that the obsessive and hypnotic repetition in religious rituals has the same roots and characteristics of obsessive compulsive behaviour.<sup>2</sup>

These elements are explored in the piece ‘*And What Remains*’ (**Plate 7**). This is a multi-projection installation playing on the element of life intersection of projected images on muslin panels and the layering of sounds. The project started with the collection of similarly filmed clips of individuals reciting religious prayers, nursery rhymes and other poems they were forced to commit to memory when they were children at school, at religious lessons or at home. Thus at the basis of this work there is the exploration of the concept of indoctrination, and how the forced adherence and repetition of certain acts leads to a loss in their significance and rich symbolisms. In fact Freud notes that the religious practitioner seems to carry out certain gestures and recite passages in a conscientious manner, when in reality, he has little control over the activity.<sup>3</sup> The performer does not seem concerned with the significance or precise motivation of most gesture or phrases and ultimately, he is largely unaware of why he performs these rituals. The visual aspect of this work tries to capture this concept through the annihilation of the individualisation of the actors. Clips are mostly identical to one another and fused together in a looping system to emphasise the obsessiveness and lack of presence of the practitioner in ritualized acts.

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<sup>1</sup> NANCY 2008

<sup>2</sup> FREUD 1907

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

This installation plays on this concept of divorce between the religious practice and its original goal or motivation as prayers and hymns and examined only as sound. The deep meaning of prayers as a means of conversation with a higher entity disintegrates in repetition and what remains is a rhythm of senseless sounds. The use of the projected stained glass window also enhances this line of thought. This artefact represents the stylistic idiosyncrasy of the 2 dimensional medieval representation of nature, and thus enforces the idea of flatness and lack of meaning that prayers retain through repetition.

The installation utilizes the projection of sounds and images from three different points within the space. Senselessness and unhealthy obsession emerge as sounds and images are diffused and layered on. Bleeping colours, moving mouths and inaudible sounds are intended to engulf the viewer as he walks into and around the installation, providing him with a cacophonous and disturbing experience that certainly encapsulates an element of madness.

## 2. The Ritual as Oppression

Interestingly, in the apparent senselessness of rituals, a strong element of formality and pre-fixed rhythmic character can be detected. In fact, nothing is left to chance in religious rituals and all action and all minute details rely on a specific, well defined and clearly laid out structure and order of things.<sup>4</sup> In fact, Freud indicates that “The performance of a ceremonial can be described by replacing it, as it were, by a series of unwritten laws”.<sup>5</sup> Therefore, it can be concluded that the ritualistic structure is sacred and untouchable and thus oppressive in nature.<sup>6</sup>

The video installation ‘*In Thy Name*’ (**Plate 8**) exploits this obsessive characteristic of rituals not only from the point of view of the repetition of militarized gestures but also in a wider sense of gender roles within the institution of rituals. The hypnotic repetition of the same gestures is intended to reveal the personal disorders and discomfort of the performer. In fact, her face reflects the frustration of a contemporary woman in a male dominated organized religion. The video installation contains no sound...it is silent like women in institutional religion. She has no

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<sup>4</sup> 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

<sup>5</sup> FREUD 1907

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.askwhy.co.uk/truth/324Psychology.php>



voice...She is only obliged to perform, to succumb to the oppressive repetition of gestures and to conduct her life according to what is expected of her. In this work, an internal struggle is evident as the protagonist finds it hard to come to terms with things, and in fact, gets it wrong every time! Tension arises between the willingness to commit to religion and a deep sense of anger towards church institutions. This tension is also projected out on a visual, aesthetic level. The strong chiaroscuro lighting used in the process of filming creates a dramatic shadow in the video frame, in which the woman's features almost melt. This evokes a sinister feeling and relates back to a psychological state of mind which is defiantly darkened by conflict. Moreover, there is a clash between her angelic, virginal appearance and her manic way of performing gestures and also between an element of purity evoked by the white shirt which is then balanced by vanity through the use of red lipstick and pearls.

Structurally, the video is presented as five diversely edited clips playing concurrently on five different television monitors stacked one upon the other. Five is the number of small arm movements that constitute the Christian symbol of the sign of the cross. However, most importantly, the intention was to create a structure that towers slightly higher than human height in order to draw the viewer and make him participant in this internal struggle resulting from religious oppressiveness and restrictions.

### 3. The Ritual as Prevention and relief from Guilt

Although the ritual is oppressive and regimental, the pious religious practitioner seems unable to move away from it as according the Freudian thought, any deviation from these ceremonial acts or any interruption of their predetermined flow seems to deeply destabilise the performer. The inability to participate in religious acts may lead deeply devoted individuals to feel anxious and fearful of punishments and repercussions.

Thus the ritual is presented as a human vigilant-precaution mechanism that is in charge of monitoring potential danger and taking precautions.<sup>7</sup> Ritualized obsessive acts seem to be essentially a defence mechanism or self-protective measures against the feelings of guilt and anxiety, a relief from the dark temptation that spring spontaneously and without any prerequisite in the human conscious. The ritualized procedure becomes a process of liberation from fear by supressing and neutralizing what arouses it. It takes the role of a strengthening exercise that prepares the individual to combat the sudden intrusion of tempting thoughts and threats. Thus the focus on repetition of the same gestures, of maintaining the same structure

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<sup>7</sup> BOYER & LIENARD 2008

and rhythm, and of following the same ritual in its minute details becomes more understandable in this light as it acts as a stabilizing force, as a known and secure ground to find lost balances. This particular interpretation of ritualized religious acts is explored in the video installation '*This little Urge inside*'. **(Plate 9)**

This digital double portrait showing a male and a female, separated by a bitten apple in their midst, is referential to the passage of the Geneses narrating the first fall to sin by Adam and Eve. The original sin leads us to the realisation of the inevitability of committing sin and the impossibility of an escape from this dooming cycle of temptation and guilt. These tormenting feelings of anxiety and fear of repercussions resulting from an innate conflict and discomfort springs outward and expresses itself in a physical form. In this work, the external manifestations of a continuous internal battle is represented through the obsessive and compulsive moving of heads, eyes and mouth, an effect that is enhanced by the layering of clips. The repetition of religious gestures here serves as an attempt to find a stabilizing, tranquilizing element which could counter act the state of angst.

This explanation also fulfils the intentions intended to be conveyed in the short performance at the beginning of this talk. The repetition of ritualized gestures takes the role of a protection act, informed also by an element of superstition. The religious gestures become almost a symbol of desire for good luck and good fortune, comparable to the secular signs of touching wood or iron.

#### 4. The Ritual as Transformation

The religious ceremonies usually incorporate within their structure strong warnings from potential danger and indications of appropriate behaviour presented as a sequence of rigidly described precautionary measures: You must not do this, You must avoid this, You must behave this way, you must disagree with that instance and more like this...These indications activate a reaction within the pious religious performer, changing his perception on particular issues and actions. The described actions or issues suddenly become completely compelling or attention grabbing in his mind.<sup>8</sup> Thus the ritual contains a transformative power. Its own structure and theatrics push towards reformation and re-pacification with the rules and regulations of the Church and the covering up of personal sinful acts and thoughts. The set of 4 photo montages 'Confessions', portrays this transforming path that passes through phases of anxiety, temptation, the feeling of guilt and re-pacification through the covering up and burying of sins.

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<sup>8</sup> BOYER & LIENARD 2008

It tries to encapsulate a process of liberation from the torments and internal conflicts in the attempt of self-restriction and resistance against instinctive attractions. **(Plate 10)**

#### 5. The Ritual as Subversion and Transgression

Psychoanalysts seem to identify within the oppressive, obsessive ritualised acts, a counter acting force of liberation from self-denial and relief from the tension of restrain and repression. Thus, the robust physicality of ritual worship, the hypnotic regurgitation of words and prayers, the trancelike state of bodies seem to present the rituals as a window of opportunity to subvert and let free the instinctive impulse towards transgression. It is the expression in movement and dance of a temporal, metaphorical escape from the restrictive structure of imposed, artificial behaviours. In fact, Freud indicates that the obsessive repetitive ritual seems to reproduce something of the pleasures it is instituted to combat and prevent.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, these ceremonials provide a temporal satisfaction and gratification of the body, an act that religion itself restricts and limits. This happens through the expression of corporality and the freeing of violent instincts through clapping, singing, praising and more. The video piece *'Hypnotic Rhythms'* is based on this concept of pleasure and freedom within ritualistic acts. The focus on physicality and energy of movement, and the rhythmic editing of the clip are intended to recreate this feeling of pleasure. **(Plate 11)**

Here I also want to quickly mention this on-going series of photo drawings called *'Impulse'* **(Plate 12)**. Old postcards are manipulated and re-contextualised through the application of writing, scribbling, incisions and paint, to completely alter their significance and what they were originally intended to represent. Images of objects familiar in the Christian community are transferred onto the postcards and arranged in a way that these would achieve suggestive qualities. Forms with sexual connotations and erotic symbolisms are pasted on images of churches as a means of subversion. But also the process of production contains an element of transgression as old culturally informed postcards are vandalized and manipulated beyond repair. This deformation is the result of a spontaneous, aggressive and violent technical approach that is in itself liberating and refreshing

#### 6. The ritual as renewal and re-affirmation

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<sup>9</sup> FREUD 1907

The obsessive alternation and repetition of temptation, feeling of guilt and penitence or body mortification that engulfs a rigid observer of religious faith is explored in a visual way in the project entitled '*Lead us not into Temptation*' (**Plate 13**). The work has as a starting point one of the most well-known stories of sexual temptation, the one suffered by St. Anthony the Abbot. This subject was widely exploited as a narrative in the visual art. I was particularly attracted towards a symbolic painting by Belgian artist Felicien Rops, who in 1878 painted a sensual version of the temptations of St. Anthony, with the saint holding his head in his hands and looking away from the vision of a nude female figure crucified on Christ's cross. St. Anthony's looking away and almost closing his eyes lead me to consider the element of covering up, of concealing of temptation through the performance of rituals. Expressed in the form of a corporal performance-ritual, the act documented in this video clip examines the religious ceremonials as metaphorical spaces for relief and liberation.

This ritual act plays within the blurred lines of death and resurrection in the sense that it considered the religious act as a repercussion to sin and at the same time as regeneration from the fall to evil. The soil as a symbol of creation and death<sup>10</sup> takes a focal role in this ritual as it symbolizes the concept of spiritual death through the fall to temptation, the idea of the burial of temptation, thus the temporal liberation from sin, but also the element of bodily death or mortification through repressions and restrictions.

At the same time, it becomes clearly evident through repetition and renewal, that the collective ritual is essentially a reaffirming process, a mechanism of a cyclical nature, thriving on elements of obsession and addiction. As liberating or regenerating as it can be, the religious performance act is still controlled and sealed by an authoritarian regime that regulates behaviour. There is the realisation that the religious performance is a non-liberating liberation; it is no more than a controlled release of repressed tension to ensure further obedience, a slight taste of subversion to calm down impulses and animalistic instincts.

This dooming cycle of relief and repression of rituals is for me an intriguing concept to evaluate, also in relation to performance art. I am particularly attracted to the possibility of continuing this project through the repetition of the same performance and thus the subsequent new imprint or stain on the same poster. Thus the poster with its layers of soil would become a physical record the cyclical nature of relief and re-enforced repression of religious rituals.

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<sup>10</sup> "You were made from dust, and to dust you will return" (Gen 3:19)

## Conclusion

It is clearly evident that obsessive, compulsive repetition is a focal characteristic of religious rituals and ceremonials. However, within this repetitive, never-ending, cyclical process, there still seems to be a space for novelty and renewal. Kierkegaard in fact states:

*“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”*.<sup>11</sup>

Each performance is not an act of following or copying the previous one, but an act of remembering and participating a new sacrifice, death and resurrection of Christ. Thus this implies a renewal of memory, a creation of a new experience stemming from the original one, because each performance adds a new layer upon the previous, writes a new narrative upon the body.

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<sup>11</sup> KIERKEGAARD, 1946

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*Plates:*

Plate 1:

**Bill Viola**  
*Emergence*  
Video Art  
2002



Plate 2:

**Douglas Gordon**  
*24 Hour Psycho*  
Video Art  
1993



Plate 3:



**Marina Abramovic**  
*The Artist is Present*  
Performance  
at MOMA  
2010

Plate 3:



**Barbara T. Smith**  
*Ritual Meal*  
Performance  
1968

Plate 5:



**Hermann Nitsch**

*48th Action*

Performance at

Munich Modernes Theater

1974

Plate 6:



**Joseph Beuys**

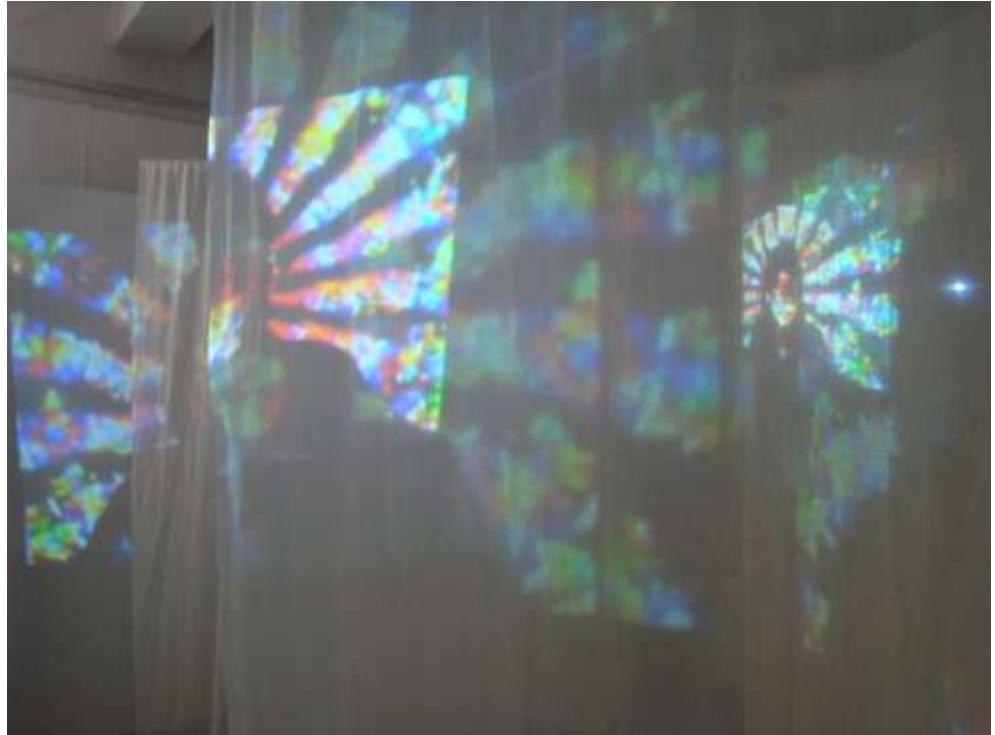
*Coyote*

Performance at

Rene Block Gallery

1974

Plate 7:



*And What Remains*  
Installation  
November 2012

Plate 8:



*In Thy Name*  
Video Installation  
October 2012

Plate 9:



*This Little Urge Insides*  
Video  
Installation  
January  
2013

Plate 10



*Confessions*  
Photo Manipulations  
December 2012

Plate 11:



*Hypnotic Rhythms*

Video

February 2013

Plate 12:



*Impulse*  
Photo Drawings  
November 2012

Plate 12:



*Lead us not  
into  
Temptation*  
Installation  
January  
2013