

A photograph showing a person lying on a table, their body and face covered in blood. A large, bloody, severed body part, possibly a torso or a large limb, hangs vertically above them, held by hands. The scene is graphic and violent, with blood splattered on the table and the surrounding area. The person's eyes are covered with a white cloth.

Blood Orgies

Hermann Nitsch in America

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Contributions by Adrian Daub, Lorand Hegyi, Susan Jarosi, Jean-Michel Rabaté,
Michèle Richman, Osvaldo Romberg, and Dieter Ronte; work by Hermann Nitsch

Edited and introduced by Aaron Levy

Philadelphia: Slought Books

Produced with the 2007-2008 RBSL Bergman Curatorial Seminar, University of Pennsylvania

Contemporary Artist Series, No. 4

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Nearly fifty years after his first actions it seems that Hermann Nitsch's work, far from disappearing or reaching its conclusion, continues unabated, aspiring after nothing so much as its own reiteration; the pleasure of the work is that it aspires only after its renewal. It should therefore not be surprising that Nitsch makes no effort to formulate any positive content to these perversions save that of repeatedly emphasizing their intensity, immediacy, and frequency—the third attribute calling to mind Pierre Klossowski's definition of transgression as that which "principally reiterates itself only through the same act."¹

In Nitsch's Munich action of 1970, for instance, we watch as a naked woman is tied to a wooden cross and her legs spread open with rope while she is enticed (forced?) to drink animal blood.² Blood and entrails are sacrificially poured over and in her genitalia, and finally the artist appears to penetrate the woman with a dildo as the camera films from behind him. Nitsch's early actions, which not only suggest but also mobilize metaphors of master/slave role-playing, pornography, and rape, represent for me a sort of intense blood orgy that has somehow defied temporal logic by continuing unabated to the present day through more than one hundred such actions. If not for the abrupt end of the film documentation, it is as if the event might continue on indefinitely—the actors (notably the artist himself) immune to fatigue.

Works such as these immediately call to mind the manifestos and work of Nitsch's frequent collaborator, Otto Müehl, who in 1963, against the backdrop of a European cultural and urban landscape literally reduced to rubble by the

Second World War, invoked rhetoric of sacrifice and ruin when he wrote that “I can imagine nothing significant where nothing is sacrificed, destroyed, dismembered, burnt, pierced, tormented, harassed, tortured, massacred.... stabbed, destroyed, or annihilated.”³

In his review of the Los Angeles County Museum of Art's exhibition *Out of Actions*, Michael Rush highlights the role of the artist as agent of destruction, as suggested by Otto Müehl above, arguing that “the voluminous documentation of Viennese Actionists performing ritualized animal slaughters [suggest] an artworld willing to sacrifice anything to make connection with the world beyond the canvas.”⁴ In Nitsch's work, he continues, one has the sense that the human body has been forced to register an annihilating impulse and “destruction” has become the primary, perhaps exclusive, pathway to artistic practice and social freedom. But what are the underlying characteristics of this art of destruction? How can we understand this art of destruction as a form of resistance to the “totalitarian impulse” and its aesthetic aftermath?

The Viennese Actionists' mimetic turn, in which they thought of art as a series of sacrificial metaphors, is for Rush not an attempt to draw inspiration from the “totalitarian impulse” of World War II, but rather a utopic refutation and an expressionist response to a decimated cultural and political landscape. “Repulsed by war,” Rush writes, “resenting the societal repressions and totalitarian impulse of National Socialism (Nazism), and rejecting museumized Modernism, these artists sought a direct art that reflected the releasing of unconscious impulses...”⁵ How, in particular, does this direct art resist the totalitarian temptation yet embody the release of unconscious impulses? And how can we avoid hallucinating fascism when encountering works such as Nitsch's Munich action of 1970?

In a public conversation with Hal Foster that I organized in conjunction with our exhibition at Slought Foundation (an audio is available online at <http://slought.org>), Brigid Doherty reminds us that Nitsch's performances are marked by a rejection of language, but also of historical references, insofar as the performers do not speak and are often stripped of clothing that might signify a given time or place. “From the mid 60s on,” she suggests, “someone is undressed, ritually disrobed; this stages or

marks a kind of removal or extraction of the body from language or from contemporaneity.”⁶ “The body,” Doherty reiterates, “is literally stripped of those things and garments that indicate, that signify, our belonging to a particular time, our belonging to the present. It's a kind of initiation rite, an insertion of the body into the ritual space of Nitsch's performance.” Undressing the body can be thus understood as a cleansing ritual whereby problematic forms of sociality and the totalitarian impulse that marks the historical period in which these works were first produced is thoroughly avoided.

Another reason that Nitsch's work is compelling, yet confusing, is that the performers often appear to have contractually conceded the rights to their own bodies by placing them in a position beyond their control. There are infrequent but important moments in these highly choreographed performances when participants, imitating models whose naïve confidence or enjoyment they can never get quite right, seem to challenge the ritual processions by offering the viewer some acknowledgement that their subjection is for real. Although this sense of entrapment appears occasionally, it should be understood as offering up the only possibility that the next actions will always differ in kind or in metaphor from the preceding actions.

Accordingly, the performers in Hermann Nitsch's actions come across as doomed to a suspended existence between art and life: they must artfully imitate a state of existence that they now suddenly inhabit, that has irreducibly been made their own reality. But the ritualistic frenzy, celebration, and dramatizations cannot eradicate the occasional anguish. What measure of self-consciousness do the characters themselves possess? With what degree of naturalness or ill-ease might they mobilize this self-consciousness after the performance has come to a close? The obsessive theatricality of Nitsch's performances is further compounded by the viewer's awareness of the lack of speech among the participants. This evident lack is amplified through crucifixions and ritual parades that the performers repeat over and again, often accompanied by deafening music, as if to signify that everything political in the performance has been leached out in these perpetually unfulfilled attempts at communication.

*

In her essay "Performance history," Bonnie Marranca argues that for many viewers lacking an immediate experience of the work of performance artists such as Hermann Nitsch, it is often unclear how they might arrive at something approaching a critical position of their own. "What at one time was a *de rigueur* form of social revolt," she writes, "now seems revolting, which only emphasizes how difficult it is to write about performance outside of its historical context."⁷

Marranca goes on to argue that "performance doesn't necessarily transcend its own age," implying that there is something radically ephemeral about all performance practices. The corollary to this line of argumentation is that there is something profoundly misleading about hermeneutic approaches that ignore the historicity of the original performance. At the same time, there is something equally ineffable about the original events themselves that resists any totalizing argument; proximity to the original event may offer sensorial immediacy, but it does not provide some secret key to understanding the work. Attempts at reading the work of extreme artists such as Hermann Nitsch once and for all thus invariably (and frustratingly) gives way to additional readings, or what Peter Weibel, in a recent seminar at Slought Foundation, describes as the composition of "a collective fiction, not written, always rewritten, written wrongly, but always attempted to be rewritten correctly."⁸

This publication resulted from just such a series of extended meditations over the past three years concerning not only its artistic content and corresponding form, but also its precise function in relation to contemporary curatorial practice. Similarly, my curatorial colleagues and I deliberated at some length about what Hermann Nitsch's retrospective at Slought Foundation in 2005 represented at the time, and what opportunities it afforded us as curators. Should an exhibition be a staging ground for provocation and disorientation, for instance? How might our exhibition, we wondered, be presented as a public proposition to be experienced and judged, rather than simply acknowledged or accepted?

Nitsch's penchant for symbolically charged and physically intense actions often deny participants as well as viewers the option of remaining neutral and in the stands, securely watching as a bloody choreography unfolds; in our exhibition at Slought Foundation, we wanted to be attentive to the artist's desire for immediacy, perhaps

even transpose it to our own curatorial position. We also wanted to critically examine and contextualize his work, and the reception it has often received. As curator Osvaldo Romberg argued in his curatorial essay for the exhibition (included in this volume in an abbreviated form), we saw Nitsch's art as offering an opportunity to essay these considerations, but also to engage in dialogue about the relation between the artistic states explored in the work and our lived world.

In hindsight, I suspect that many visitors to the retrospective at Slought Foundation repudiated Nitsch's performances for seeming overly provocative and viscerally unsettling. For many viewers approaching the work of Nitsch for the first time, it was perhaps not clear how they might begin to respond to the intensity and entertaining 'event-character' of Austrian art (see also Dieter Ronte's contribution to this volume). I am thinking in particular of those unfamiliar with the historical context who were familiar with a distinctly American narrative about contemporary art in spite of today's transnational flow of information.

Against the tendency to reject the excessive and extreme qualities of the work when presenting to audiences in the United States, I would argue that Nitsch's work helps us to consider how intensity and immediacy is valued in contemporary art and life. He also invites us to imagine what a new cultural landscape might consist of when artists proceed upon an expanded definition of practice that accounts for acts of historical trauma. The question of how to present such highly charged work to a viewing public somewhat unsure of how to respond remains a vexing and persistent one to consider, for it strikes at the very heart of this publication, its title, as well as the curatorial enterprise itself.

*

This publication is somewhat unique in that it has been published and conceived of in conjunction with a course in the Departments of History of Art and English at the University of Pennsylvania, the RBSL Bergman Foundation Curatorial Seminar. I had the distinct pleasure to teach this class during the 2007-2008 academic year—one of few undergraduate seminars of its kind in the country, providing students with the opportunity to gain practical and theoretical knowledge about the process of

curating an exhibition or publishing a book about contemporary art and critical theory at an organization such as the Slought Foundation. Students in this course participated in all aspects of the publication process, from the solicitation of essays and the collection of artist documentation to the design and layout of the publication.

The title of the publication gestures to the vexed reception Hermann Nitsch's work has received in America—a reception notable for the conspicuous lack of exhibitions about his work as well as publications in the English language. The international visibility of Nitsch's work renders this paucity all the more conspicuous and problematic. The students involved in realizing this publication, as well as my curatorial colleagues and I at Slought Foundation, hope that the availability in one volume of critical essays, combined with photographic documentation, excerpts from his early writings, as well as a special companion DVD video featuring a comprehensive overview of the *Orgien Mysterien Theater* serves to redress this imbalance. It is also our intention that the publication serves as a model for contemporary artist publications, by engaging not just specialized audiences already familiar with Hermann Nitsch, but also those generally unfamiliar with his practice.

In conjunction with this publication, a series of audio recordings have been made available through the Slought Foundation website (<http://slought.org>) that contributors to this volume occasionally cite. These recordings are derived from a series of live discursive events organized in conjunction with the exhibition, and reflect Slought Foundation's ongoing commitment to exploring Viennese Actionism and its historical legacy: They include a conversation between Hal Foster and Brigid Doherty concerning the politics of the body in the work of Hermann Nitsch and other Viennese Actionists; a conversation between Branka Arsic and Gregg Lambert exploring theories about pain and pleasure; a seminar by Cecilia Novero exploring the historical context in which the Viennese Actionists operated; and a seminar by Peter Weibel arguing for a psychoanalytic reading of Viennese Actionism through theories about reaction formation.

Each textual contribution commissioned for this volume addresses a different component of Nitsch's practice. Lorand Hegyi's contribution provides a general overview of Nitsch's work and the baroque castle in which many of the actions have

been situated through a phenomenological approach. Dieter Ronte explores the role ascribed to photography in recording and documenting the actions themselves. Osvaldo Romberg's curatorial essay for the exhibition at Slought Foundation provides an art historical context for Nitsch's work, and interprets the artist's interest in theatricality in relation to present-day geopolitical developments. Adrian Daub's article focuses on the musical compositions of Hermann Nitsch, illuminating a largely neglected aspect of his oeuvre. Michèle Richman's contribution takes the form of a sociological reading of Hermann Nitsch's work and presents us with an archaeology of blood and guts. Susan Jarosi explores the idea of "traumatic subjectivity" in Nitsch's work through a psychoanalytic perspective so as to introduce the idea of a holographic approach to reading his work. Finally, Jean-Michel Rabaté challenges conventional wisdom by suggesting that it is in fact the actions of Hermann Nitsch that are Apollonian, rather than his paintings, which are in turn Dionysian. Prompting diverse considerations such as these, Nitsch's work provides us with a compelling structure within which we may engage and debate questions about the possibilities for extreme art in contemporary life.

Notes

- ¹ Pierre Klossowski, *Sade My Neighbor* (Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1991), 21.
- ² *Das Orgien Mysterien Theater: Die Aktionen 1962-2003*, dir. Hermann Nitsch, 2005, 36:20.
- ³ Otto Muehl in Michael Rush, "A noisy silence," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 61, 21:1 (January 1999): 5.
- ⁴ Michael Rush, 4.
- ⁵ *Ibid*, 5.
- ⁶ Hal Foster and Brigid Doherty, "On Body & Performance." *Slought Foundation Online Content*. [03 March 2005]. <<http://slought.org/content/11264/>>.
- ⁷ Bonnie Marranca, "Performance history," *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 56, 19:2 (May 1997): 118.
- ⁸ Peter Weibel, "Is there a world beyond media? Art as a rewriting program." *Slought Foundation Online Content*. [07 February 2008]. <<http://slought.org/content/11368/>>.

Nitsch's Experiential Aesthetic
Lorand Hegyi

The videos by Hermann Nitsch that were exhibited at Slought Foundation are an unusual phenomenon: they not only document his past performances, but also function as autonomous works of art with an aesthetic identity and festive *esprit* that operates on multiple registers in relation to live events. They are performative processes and happenings with a diverse micro-community of participants and viewers.

I met Hermann Nitsch almost twenty years ago in Budapest. This was in 1986, when I was the director of the Museum of Modern Art in Vienna, and he was living in Prinzendorf in a seventeenth century baroque palace. One should not imagine a palace like Versailles, but a very rural, late baroque Austrian castle. This castle has an immediate connection to the agricultural society surrounding it, and is itself an important aspect of his oeuvre. Together we have organized exhibitions of his work in places such as Rome, in Valencia, in Paris, in Budapest, and in Vienna. I have also presented his work in Buenos Aires at the first Biennale of Buenos Aires.

When organizing these exhibitions, it was interesting to observe how Nitsch is followed by a particular group of friends, fans, and admirers wherever he performs. This micro-community is comprised of a group of people who, we might say, speak a special language by virtue of participating in his strange rituals. In the videos, one notices them eating, drinking, and speaking with each other. From a certain museological perspective, Nitsch's form of art is inseparable from a modality of everyday life—which these followers' presence

makes so evident. Here one can see a similarity to medieval and early modern theater in which people are eating and indeed milling around the actors, blurring the border between aesthetic work and everyday life. This boundary-blurring is a fundamental element of Nitsch's art: if he is concerned with real time, real action, and real encounters, the simultaneity of these experiences are sensually experienced through seeing, smelling, eating, drinking, hearing and listening.

Orgien Mysterien Theater: each of these three words is crucial. In the same way as the audience participated in the theater of the Middle Ages on different levels and in different ways, there are manifold elements that comprise Nitsch's performances. These performances offer us new ways to understand the importance of grasping and internalizing the experience of a totality, and these new forms of participation result in one large collective play.

In modern terminology, at least from the eighteenth century, the theater is predicated on a certain distance between audience and actors. When we reference the theater in discussing Nitsch's *Orgien Mysterien Theater*, we must define more concretely and precisely which kind of theater we are speaking about. In *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche wrote that the origin of Greek theater, as with any mimetic action, was to be found in ritual, and first of all in cults of salvation and sacrifice. This is perhaps the fundamental human predicament: individuals always have to sacrifice something in order to attain a complete life, which is to say, they sacrifice something in order to attain totality. The necessity of sacrifice is present in all religions, and in all mythical or creative imaginings of the world.

Nitsch is an Austrian artist working in the context of a Viennese culture influenced by the heritage of Freudianism. From the point of view of classical Freudianism, sacrifice is always connected to a certain kind of hedonism: we want to enjoy life, and we know we must sacrifice something to enjoy life. These two elements, hedonism and the indulgence of ego, on the one hand, and sacrificial cults and the relinquishing of the ego in collective ritual, on the other hand, are important elements that come together in Nitsch's aesthetic strategy.

If we want to chart the relationship of the ego and its release in twentieth century art

after the destruction of the Second World War, we might begin with happenings and actions, many of which considered anew the creative gesture as a liberating practice. We might also trace a genealogy beginning with the *écriture automatique* of the Surrealists, for whom the conscious elimination of control and the development of techniques which communicate subconscious experiences was paramount. We find this methodical liberation of the subconscious in the work of American action painters and Abstract Expressionists as well.

Aesthetics, according to Nitsch, is a concentration of experience which results in the creation of a basic experience of a total reality, even if, before and after the experience, we exist in and as different fragments of this totality. In this sense, another source of his aesthetics is the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, the total artwork as formulated by Richard Wagner, who sought a new myth about the total experience of existence. Nitsch of course differs from Wagner in that Wagner believed in a new mythology which could serve as a compass for the reorganization of cultural life. Nitsch, on the other hand, does not want to dictate directions for contemporary life; rather, he wants to show alternative conceptions. Nitsch is a truly Dionysian artist who equates the essentially human interest in potentiality and the future with a Wagnerian vision of totality.

If Nitsch wants to suggest that each individual should try to interiorize the experience of totality that he strives for, Nitsch is nevertheless aware that he is an artist, and not a magician or messiah. He never gives up this aesthetic distance, and this guarantees that his work constitutes an aesthetic project instead of a fanatical religion or cult. For this reason, I approach Nitsch's practice first and foremost in relation to so-called performance art, happenings, and practices of body art, which together comprise a vast history from Kaprow and Rauschenberg to radical performance in the late 80s. Nitsch's unique position, in my opinion, is that he is immersed in Central European cultural history and is aware of his own position as an artist.

In considering twentieth century art, or even in the 200 years of Western art from the Romantic period to the present period, how can we experience totality in a world increasingly devoid of this experience? As totality is more and more sublimated in

society, Herman Nitsch radically shows us that we can still grasp an experience of a totality that often eludes us in everyday life. In Nitsch's work it is possible for us to enter into the work, to have this experience, and then to leave. We are not forced to remain inside this space, as has so often been the case with religious doctrine or belief, and instead are free to enter and exit at our own will.

In his introduction to the exhibition “Metabolism” (“*Stoffwechsel*”) at the Kulturhaus Graz during the *Steirischer Herbst* in 1977, Hermann Nitsch explains that

when in the early 60s the first actions of the Viennese Actionists took place, they had one thing in common in spite of all their differences: nothing was mimicked, pictured, presented. Language had been left behind, and there was no more ‘speaking’ on the stage. The limits of the panel were shattered. The artistic act had stepped out of the tableau. Real, live actions and events became a work of art. It was a composition of reality itself. Bits of reality were put into relation with other bits of reality according to the dictates of form. The idea suggested itself of elaborating a *Gesamtkunstwerk* that would emerge directly from life, from reality. Life itself was composed, and was supposed to be sublimated and intensified into an aesthetic ritual. The provinces of all five senses, when combined and put in relation to one another, furnished the basic means of composition. An art developed which used smell, taste, hearing, vision and touch. Again, life itself was raised to a higher power, was supposed to become a celebration. Many of our actions took place in private settings, for financial reasons and because of their extreme character. Those actions could only be documented by means of photography. Viennese Actionism automatically came to influence, for purely instrumental reasons, a new kind of photography; namely,

photography became what it is and what it always ought to be. It was a means of documentation. As it turns out, photography is means and not end. We always were at pains to teach our photographers to document our actions as objectively as possible. No 'artistic' photography was of any use to us, as it would have only served to falsify the content of our actions.

In a few sentences, the visual artist virtually demotes the photographer. He follows the universal notion that photography can create objective documentation through its object lens, so to speak; that photography, at least in the case of the Actionists, is once again means, but certainly not end. Nevertheless, from the very beginning, the Actionists staged their actions quite clearly in a way amenable to black-and-white photography, and later color photography. They "trained" their photographers. Random picture taking was not the point of this means of communication. The Actionists, in particular Hermann Nitsch, but also Rudolf Schwarzkogler, who conceived his private performances for the medium of staged photography, knew full well that all photography is not the same, that the photography of Actionism requires its own aesthetic.

In the past few decades, hundreds and hundreds of photographers have taken pictures of Hermann Nitsch's actions, unauthorized photographers as well as laypeople taking snapshots or even press photographers during art-shows or public actions. What becomes evident by comparing these is that although the "theme" of the pictures exerts a certain dominance, definite styles emerge nevertheless, styles that allow us to understand Actionism better, e.g. Ludwig Hoffenreich's and Heinz Cibulka's early pictures, while others really have the documentary character of a photographed *News Hour*. Does Actionism's photography need its own aesthetic dynamic? Is the photographer allowed to demonstrate his own personal touch and vision, or is the photography of Actionism really, as Hermann Nitsch claims, pure documentation, cold and unsensuous photography, just the copy [*Abbild*] fixed on photographic paper? Is this not the kind of photographic re-creation [*Nachgestaltung*] that the Actionists attempted to leave behind in their art? Is the photography of Actionism thus simply the reproduction of the event, just as we have reproductions of images?

But on the other hand we know the allure and the power of photography, the variety of its personal statements, its brutality and hardness as much as its making-sensible [*Versinnlichung*] of the visible that becomes truly seeable only through photography. We have long accepted the photographer's aesthetically autonomous standpoint. The heroes of photography have long been counted as artists, not mere artisans, because photography—not least due to its dominance among media—has long since emerged as part of our everyday, as well as emphatically art-oriented, aesthetics.

In consigning photography in Actionism to certain boundaries, Hermann Nitsch highlights a problem of realism, very much analogous to his own thinking, namely that Actionism represents reality, and thus re-presents really nothing; but he consigns photography to that realm of representation. Photography thus depicts the realism of Actionism through representation. In contradistinction to the artistic maxim of Actionism, the photograph becomes an ersatz-image.

Let us juxtapose a quote from Berthold Brecht to Nitsch's line of thought, in order to elucidate the difference in their positions, and in order to put into focus the particularities of the photography of Actionism: "The situation is made so difficult that, now less than ever, a simple 'reproduction [*Wiedergabe*] of reality' has anything to say about reality. A photography of the Krupp-plant or that of AEG tells us nothing about those institutions. *Actual* reality has slipped into the realm of the purely functional. The reification of human relations, for instance the factory, no longer reveals anything about the latter. There is thus in fact something 'to construct' here, something 'artificial,' arranged."

In consigning the photographer of Actionism, even the photographer who has undergone an Actionist "education," to the realm of reportage, Nitsch wants to establish a unique value of the action and diminish the powers of artistic disclosure of the photographer, because he knows that Actionism is liable to be misunderstood once documented using a highly evolved aesthetic. However, if the photography of Actionism aspires to transport events as pictures, it has to be more than colportage by means of an object lens. The photographer has to understand much of the things he depicts, if he wants to do more than illustrate the Actionist's assertions through

banal, rabble-rousing, heretical and voyeuristic reproduction. This raises a further question: Does the photography of Actionism favor voyeurism and thus also the resistances to Actionism?

On a trivial level, it can be asserted that the Actionists were integrated into new levels of mediation as technology progressed, whether they meant to or not. The incisive leap occurred at the point where the black-and-white photograph became a color photograph, where the still image became a moving image, where the object lens became a zoom lens, where the individual photos of a series were transformed via motor-winder, where the normal copy became a blow-up—here the photography of Actionism is subject to the strategies of *Pop Art* and the mass media. Here the psychic investment of the observer and participant are objectified into distance by the proximity of the camera. At this point Actionism loses its monopoly over the action, because marketing and publicizing by way of photography can only take place after the action.

There are thus many important questions to answer if we are to understand Actionism—its effects, and its reception. The quote by Nitsch above makes clear that Actionism, in particular Nitsch's, is based on the simultaneity of sensory events. Even when language has fallen away, words cannot be photographed; living actions have to be developed whose interaction alone constitutes the event of the artwork. In this point, Actionism coincides with the old Imperial [*k.u.k.*] Austrian tradition that subsidizes those arts that have event-character, i.e. the theater, music and the opera—those reproductive arts that are animated by a tension of chronology. Theater photographs are thus often quite close to those of Actionism, they focus on the “decisive moment” (as Cartier-Bresson called it), in hopes of allowing the one photo to capture it all. What the photograph searches for is the moment of extreme concentration, the split second, visualized in isolation, as a kind of culmination point of the all-encompassing universe. This contradicts the Actionists' thesis that they do not reproduce and do not represent [*darstellen*]. For Actionism goes beyond this and postulates beyond this, not simply because it wants to raise to a higher power the aesthetic ritual, but because its own combinatorics—especially in the case of Nitsch's *Orgies Mysteries Theater*—puts demands on all five senses. That means: smell, taste, hearing, sight and touch are all pushed to the forefront. It almost

sounds stupid, but smell, taste, sound are hard to photograph, their retinal reception, their sense of touch likewise. But it is precisely this simultaneity of the senses that constitutes the event of Actionism. All concepts of abreaction, of the transformation from passive actor to experiencing viewer, from Apollonian to Dionysian excitation, shuttling between the events to the point of the integration of the total work of art—all this, photography cannot do, so long as it attempts to reproduce events via detailed shots. Photography, like painting, is mimetic, it allows for no synaesthesia. It can only produce a mirage by stimulating the imagination of its viewer. I am not talking about a comparison between war and peace, which the photography of Actionism seems to have established in the media, but rather about the truthfulness of the claim of an adequate aesthetic of Actionism's photography.

Anyone who has ever experienced one of Hermann Nitsch's actions has his own feelings about the psychic and physical mechanisms of liberation (which immanently take hold after the event), about the supercession of egocentric structures of contract [*Vereinbarungsstrukturen*], he knows about the effects of this art, which, it seems, he can never find in the photographs, unless it's a memory being stirred up.

It may be observed that the simultaneity of events in photography cannot be apprehended by a combination of the senses. It is of course significant that rendering in detail particular portions of the event heighten their drastic nature and thus determines the reception of Actionism. Only in passing I would like to mention that Hollywood-films (in particular those of Steven Spielberg, in which Indiana Jones as a rationalizing agent of progress, as a researcher and archaeologist, falls in with primitive tribal rites) are usually rated PG-13, even though the zoom lens allows them to show scenes, for instance the tearing-out of a heart, that are more drastic than anything a participant could experience in the *Orgies Mysteries*.

Nevertheless, society often appears on the scene with the means of the criminal justice system, in order to ensnare the artist in the criminal trap. It is not simply rumor, the breaking of taboos, the love of animals, or religious fanaticism that led to this extremely unpleasant and wrong-headed reception of Actionism—Prinzendorf might have been an Austrian Bayreuth, if given the chance—had not the photography of Actionism with the one-sided, cropped furor of its pictures

transported the very feeling that outrages the bourgeoisie. Photography, which has value due to its documentary character, also harbors all the explosive dangers that turn thinking, reflecting, and sensuously active artists into those “menaces to society” which provoke a public reaction. Precisely because the photography of Actionism is not only understood as an aesthetic problem, it also reveals particularly vehement feedback loops of reception. Especially since the introduction of the zoom lens and color reproduction in the media, photography has become a danger to Actionism. This has nothing to do with the fact that society has failed to mature, that Actionism did not succeed in educating society. Nor is it because Actionism, or Nitsch in particular, is at pains to explore and integrate into art those taboo areas removed from everyday vision that the bourgeois knows are necessary—e.g. the slaughter that stands behind the meat they like to eat—but which they have repressed. Rather, through photography, events become overly conspicuous in Brecht’s sense, artificial, in order to have the explanatory power required to evoke reactions of public opinion. All this thanks to a photography that sells scandals where there aren’t any—as sensational headlines in the name of (journalistic) “objectivity.”

On the other hand we have the needs of the participatory voyeurism of society, which takes Actionism seriously only when, to put it crudely, a photograph is made possible, which—almost as a sign for all photography—already contains the headline [*Sensation*] in itself, much like a crime scene photo. As much as Hermann Nitsch is seeking the extremes, little is the formulation of a headline an implicit concern of his actions. The photography of Actionism thus poses a dilemma, which the artist cannot avoid. Deny permission for photographic documentation and you end up with a private, inner circle; publish those photographs, and you are entering into a level of discussion that is no longer primarily aesthetic. Other aspects come to the forefront, and prejudices emerge that may correspond to the aesthetic willing [*Kunstwollen*] aimed at breaking taboos, but run entirely counter to the seriousness of the idea of art.

Via photography in catalogues and magazines, the *Orgies Mysteries Theater* was transformed by the theater, which takes on forms and techniques, in order to delight the audience in the ranks. Photographically, Actionism becomes stage-play. The photographs look almost identical.

But if an objective observer was to photograph differently, even though his own psychological involvement in the actions is extremely strong—why should he hold back?—then the pictures simply won’t sell. The grandeur of the action contradicts directly the diminutiveness of photography. The document renders tame, and defuses the event. This is why the totality is enlarged and brought into the frame. Now substantial deformations occur, which lie beyond the limits of objective reportage. The photography of Actionism bears the imprint of subjective reportage. Hermann Nitsch himself wanted it that way. The photography of Actionism becomes more drastic the more it mediates the actual event. Photography thus attains a position of its own. It embodies manipulation once again, it cannot present [*aussagen*] objectively, perhaps it even has to exaggerate; it is subject to mechanisms of representation that are anchored beyond the intentions of Actionism. Photography is a danger to Actionism, but Actionism cannot survive without it. The question after the aesthetics of photography poses itself as the general question after the meaning of the actions. Photography means eternalization, an old aesthetic imperative of a bourgeois tradition, which implicitly contradicts the aesthetic imperatives of the Actionists. The event becomes media-circus, it loses its aboriginal aesthetic character; Actionism forgoes its own authentic intentions. What consequences should it draw from this fact?

For Actionism does not command posing, as in the photographs Schiele took of himself, but rather multi-dimensionality and climax—not by physical positing *in extremis*, but through an escalation of psychic abreactions, like tragedies are supposed to release. The photographer already played an important role as a reporter, providing headline-mad journalism, during the *Blutorgel* in 1962. We owe these photographs our knowledge of artworks that have long since been destroyed or lost. That action already was “conceived” for the photographers. Otto Muehl wrote to Erika Stocker:

A half hour before six a whole gaggle of photo reporters showed up. We hadn’t expected that. Before six, they left us again and shot the kicking-down of the wall from the outside. When the hole [in the wall] was large enough to let a person through, they all jumped through the wall into the cellar, formed a phalanx and then their cameras buzzed and flashed, while

above the girl in the evening gown went on demolishing the wall with her feet. Some screamed, not so fast, hike up that skirt. The opening was an absolute sensation.

It is thus the reporter, the visual journalist, who in sequences of snap shots transports the event. This is where the Austrian tradition mentioned above, which demands that art have event-character—an inheritance of the old monarchy and its emphasis on the (aristocratic) residence, which equates culture with the “delectation of the populace” (as Empress Maria Theresa put it)—coincides with the event and entertainment-character of Actionism. The photographs (the clearly framed pictures, the accidental ones, the snapshots, the staged ones) testify that in its quest for a public, Actionism lives off the transformation of painting into event. That is why photography has such a central role to play. The mediation performed by photography is not in itself an intellectual and theoretical explanation, but it points in the direction of one. The picture has entered into motion, the photograph arrests the individual courses of motion. The connection with theater photography is automatic.

Following the conceptual phase of Actionism, there is another phase that is increasingly forced to rely on tradition via photography. The real-time positing of the artwork can be eternalized only if photography arrests it. Otherwise, real time would not become future; an eternal value that might have made Actionism unsure in its principles. For instance, the *mise-en-scène* of the first action that was also determined by photographic considerations, the action that took place on December 19th, 1962 in Muehl's studio on Augartenstraße in Vienna, was documented by the photographer Niederbacher. Photography attains such import, because it acts as a constantly repeatable arrest via repeatable, mimetic pictorialization. Nevertheless, photography remains one-dimensional, silent, and none the more vivid. This is why photographs in Nitsch's *Orgies Mysteries Theater* are always supplemented by relics, the clothes, the biers. As mnemonic-dramatic objects, but nevertheless temporal presences, they replace photographs.

On November 21, 1963, Nitsch, with the help of his wife, Otto Muehl, and Wolfgang Tunnars mounted the fourth *Aktion* in his studio. This time around, it was a pure photographic action without public involvement. Analogous to the later works of

Rudolf Schwarzkogler who never mounted his events publicly, now the *Aktion* is directed at photography, that is to say toward the transmission by the secondary medium photography. Only photography “lends the actions their authenticity” (Peter Weiermair).

The photographer Ludwig Hoffenreich became something of a specialist in the mediation of these actions. His black-and-white photos, freezing moments in actions of much longer duration, show the precision of their structure, their sharp focus; even if some of this was corrected *ex post facto*, these photographs show the subtlety and precision with which the individual actions were staged [*gesetzt*] by the artist. All that which has to be transmitted as horrible or terrifying in words, in the image reveals itself to consist of intimate situations, a consistency not logical but nonetheless stringent; goings-on whose horror is downright poeticized in black-and-white photography, even though the pure evidence of the action was sought in another medium.

Black-and-white photography could not transport any colors or mediate sounds or smells. Nevertheless, for the public it possessed quite enough explanatory power, which demanded not the sacrifice of a lamb, but rather the juridical sacrifice of the artists. The Actionists were quite conscious of the effect, and thus also the force [*Gültigkeit*] of their actions and the photographs resulting from it. The actions displace painting; in 1964 Otto Muehl for the first time showed six photographs of the actions in an exhibition of the artists' group *Burgenland* at the *Künstlerhaus Klagenfurt*.

Hermann Nitsch exhibited in the June of the same year at the Gallery *Junge Generation*, financed by the Socialist Party of Austria (SPÖ). The exhibition was opened on June 23 with the 6th action. Nitsch works with a crucified sheep, he was thus presenting an “action”; at the same time, he presented action photos, next to the concrete objects, next to drip-paintings [*Schüttbilder*] and montages with relics of the actions, religious kitsch pictures and flower prints. The exhibition was shut down when Vienna's mayor Franz Jonas intervened, and Nitsch was barred from giving a public lecture. It is unlikely that Franz Jonas ever set foot in the gallery. He must have judged reports and photographs sufficient.

Rarely was art so dependent on photography. Not in the sense of its reproducibility (Walter Benjamin), but rather because of the necessity of its reproducibility by photography. The Satanic, as Gerhard Paul Zacharias describes it in "The Cult of Satan and Black Mass" of 1964, would not have been possible without the photography of Actionism. Even Monsignor Otto Mauer with his avant-garde gallery next to the Cathedral of St. Stephen's finally denied his support to the Actionists, because as a man of the cloth, he fell for the photographic evidence.

Mauer knew full well that Actionism stages, or rather allows, the action [*Handlung*] to unfold, even if not fully in the sense of the 19th century or the photographs of Gilbert & George; it doesn't work directly with staged pictures, but wants to exceed the image in order to provoke an artistic effect with the photograph. Thanks to the cooperation of Günter Brus in the Summer/Fall of 1964, static, momentary photography expanded when Brus staged the action ANA in Muehl's studio in the Obere Augartenstraße, which the filmmaker Kurt Kren taped, the first time the Actionists used the camera itself to create a montage of filmic material. "With the spare means at my disposal I tried to dip the entire room in a white-in-white. An interior stripped of all the specific sensuousness that objects emit. In the end, it was something like the classical white canvas, extended into the third dimension ... an *informel* of the very last days! Muehl poked vicious fun at my relapse into a technique that should have been superceded."

The history of the photography of Viennese Actionism could be continued at will, if we knew all who had taken pictures. By now, there are hundreds of voyeuristic photographers who constantly uncover new statements [*sic*] with their cameras. Technology has evolved, the technology of film (from black-and-white to color), the technology of the objective (from the normal lens to the zoom, from the wide angle to lens with maximum focal distance, the telephoto lens, from manual to automatic). The fragmentary fracturedness nevertheless always certifies the momentary nature of the action. All "closed" photographs are evidence. But they cannot make immediately intelligible what Actionism really wanted—in particular Hermann Nitsch. (The other Actionists have been consigned to repro-photography a long time ago, because they no longer practice Actionism or because they killed themselves, like Rudolf Schwarzkogler).

Here, Brecht's remark, as quoted earlier, turns out to be exactly right. Something artificial has to supplement action if the drama and poetry are to sustain the voyeuristic gaze. Actionism can only be presented photographically *by drawing on its own resources*, that is to say not with a clumsy and direct snapshot. The deformations through photography are numerous, the misunderstandings are legend, and the consequences and results of this kind of photography are juridical. Actionism does not mean a new kind of photography, in the sense of another, innovative photographic style. The individuality [*Handschrift*] of the photographer remains intact. But few manage to implement Actionism in a congenial manner. Where the photographer does not manage, a visual war zone appears, abstruse and odious to bourgeois thinking. Is this reportage photography more honest by this token? It transports the breach of the taboo, as it transpires in the *Orgies Mysteries Theater*, without however visualizing its new secrets. It no longer mediates the traditions, the system of thought, the philosophies and complicated psychologies on which Hermann Nitsch bases his theater. It is probably the solitary achievement of Heinz Cibulka, himself a participant, actor and author, seeker and "employee," liberator and autonomizer, who in his picture sequences charted precisely this path of truth-finding, by integrating iconographic information into his dialectical works. By putting the photography of Actionism (I am talking about color photography, that is to say a photography of the utmost brutality) into a subjective photographic context, he retains their chronology as much as the simultaneity of the impressions a viewer automatically experiences during an action.

This is however where the basic problem of Actionism, as well as that of the *Orgies Mysteries Theater*, lies. Can an experience be repeated by "experiencing" a photograph? Can photography really reproduce that reality which the artist intended; or does it remain *ersatz*, supplement, substrate, concentrate as well as filter? Is it sublation, sublimation by mechanical but selective objectification, or is it simply a means to an end? At the moment where its creation takes place in a photo lab, the end loses its original meaning.

The photography of Actionism has developed an aesthetic that is directly inspired by the event of Actionism. There is hardly a photographer who did not follow the intentions of Hermann Nitsch. He has experienced the same tremor, the same

liberation, the play between excitation and catharsis, but more distanced, perhaps even more excited, because he was involved photographically, without being able to fully transmit the content of the action photographically. The approaches of the photography of Actionism are promising, but they do not live up to their inspiration. Nevertheless, it is photography that transports the event, that informs and disturbs, that confirms and justifies, that provokes reactions that contradict bourgeois notions of art. Now photography eats into the emulsion of the negative.

Translated by Adrian Daub

"But to make a fetish potent outside its cult is precisely the function of the aesthetic."
- Harold Rosenberg

We might look to the period after the Second World War as the point at which the practice of art in America and Europe diverged. In America, painting developed along the lines of improvisation and surrealism (Jackson Pollock, Willem De Kooning, etc), and in Europe, painting developed along the lines of *art brut* and *Cobra* (Pierre Alechinsky, Karel Appel, Jean Dubuffet, etc). At the same time, other groups avoided painting and sculpture altogether as an unproductive *cul de sac*. These groups created events and actions that were often referenced as happenings and performances in America, and actions in Europe, in which the interaction with the public was understood as more meaningful than any past aesthetic practice.

Even today so much American art suffers from a dependence on Clement Greenberg's ideas about aesthetics and sublimity. The European scene, however, has in the past flourished precisely because it was inspired by disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and philosophy. The field of European performance emphasized dramatic and anti-aesthetic practices, and in a certain sense it succeeded in addressing essential questions without being subsumed by popular culture and the allure of entertainment. This difference is most evident in comparing the happenings and performative practices in America including those of Allan Kaprow, Jim Dine, and Claus Oldenburg, among others, with European practices such as Joseph Beuys, Wolf Vostell,

and the Vienna School (founded by Otto Muehl, Gunter Brus, and Hermann Nitsch).

Nitsch's art is best understood within this phenomenon of performance art after the Second World War. Europe was culturally as well as architecturally destroyed by the war. It is important to consider how this destruction manifests itself in the work of artists from Germany and Austria more generally, and in particular in the work of the Vienna school. It is not possible to consider art by the Viennese Actionists developing and finding an audience in America following the war, or in many other countries even today. Their work makes explicit all the violence and atrocities that so many people tend to repress.

Perhaps it can be said that Nitsch abandoned the paradigm of beauty from the very beginning: he has always been ready to sacrifice aesthetic aspects so as to permit catharsis and purification in a participant fully enveloped within the performance and physically in contact with animal parts, blood, smells and music. The dramatic feelings Nitsch's work calls forth in us can be understood in relation to 'the primal scream,' a traumatic moment during development which later serves as a generator of creativity and facilitates artistic fantasy.

We cannot deny the enormous eroticism, and a certain sort of sadomasochism, which is always evident in the work of Nitsch. If we want to recognize ancestors or antecedents to Nitsch's practice beyond that of the history of painting or contemporary art, we might look to early Greek theater, the Roman Coliseum in which Christians were sacrificed in front of the public, or to Mayan games, in which the loser would be executed. Other ancestors might include the public executions in England and France in the 18th century and the way in which violence was exercised as a spectacle, which Michel Foucault examined in *Discipline and Punish*. We might also look to the writings of Sade and Artaud, in which our identification with sadomasochism is probed and encouraged, and the psychological explanations about blood, sadomasochism, and sex by Sigmund Freud that established modern psychoanalysis. Nitsch continues this trajectory, although in a very personal way, by creating artistic spectacles of a Wagnerian scale and duration (a sort of *Gesamtkunstwerk*) that encompass purification, therapy, and an awareness of death through catharsis and participation. (It is possible here to also detect traces of J.L.

Moreno's psychodramatic and group psychotherapeutic performances, which first and foremost sought to heal the participants).

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It is important to consider how Nitsch's work significantly departs from work by other members of the Vienna school. While Nitsch's early actions of 1962 feature his own body, by his second action of 1963 he already began to include bowels and the carcass of a lamb, which amounts to a significant change in subject matter from his previous work and that of his colleagues. Nitsch's subsequent work over the last forty years has consistently addressed not only the human body and the metaphor of crucifixion, but also the animal world and the role of the human body in that world. It is my position that we can interpret this development as one in which man is reintroduced and reintegrated to the spirit of the animal world through a sort of quasi-religious ritual and public ceremony.

Although the exhibition at Slought Foundation focused exclusively on his Actions as documented in video format, it must be emphasized that he has a parallel practice as a painter in the tradition of performative gesture painters such as Jackson Pollock, Yves Klein, Georges Mathieu and *Tachism* in general, and this practice is often integrated into his performances.

If today Nitsch has become a sort of high priest of performance and ritual, we must also recognize that his *Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries* has become increasingly sophisticated over the years, to the degree that he often composes very personal music as an ambience for his performances. More than the history of painting, or even our inherited history of art, Nitsch's art seems to take as its primary inspiration the ludicrous game of life and death. The complete works also connect a number of interrelated points: the crucifixion of Jesus, the murder of Dionysius, the killing of Orpheus, and the idea of resurrection. Evidently, he uses art as a form of redemption bringing about an awareness of our sheer mortality, as opposed to the eternal substance of nature and life.

The subject matter that he takes for his art is, in a sense, the subject matter of every myth and religion in the history of the world. The idea of catharsis is perhaps emphasized the most (as is often the case in work of the Vienna school). It is also important to note the presence of large crowds in his work, participating over an extended period of time. In a sense, the large crowds and the duration of the performance provoke the destruction of individual ego and lessens the individual's psychological resistance. Here I see a big difference between the narcissism evident in performances by Joseph Beuys and his disciples, in which the main participant is the artist, and the work of Hermann Nitsch, in which the actions of the participants are even more notorious than those of the artist.

Nitsch is often criticized for his denial of the symbolic consequences of his actions, and his apparent disregard for animal rights and the desecration of animals in his performances. Evidently, the public is also sometimes mesmerized by the cult of blood, and the executions (or simulated executions) of human beings and animals. Rather than answer to these specific criticisms, which seem to hold the arts to a higher standard and deny the prevalence of these very practices in contemporary life, it is important to emphasize that a work of art permits people to receive their own existential experience, according to their own past. Nitsch's project is rich and extreme in that sense. The diversity of responses to his work should be embraced.

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How should Hermann Nitsch's performances be viewed today in relation to the actual blood orgies performed by militant terrorists in Iraq, Sudan, Chechnya, and other parts of the world? How should we view Nitsch's project, and how will his work survive, in a world of real cruelty and liturgical fundamentalism, and the everyday encounter with images of extreme and bloody genocide and natural disasters (in Sudan, Indonesia, and South East Asia, for example, or even in movies such as Mel Gibson's blockbuster *The Passion of The Christ*)? After many years of viewing Nitsch's work as provocative, now, more than ever, it sadly seems like a kind of prophesy and has taken over the world around us.

Does the ferocity and degree of provocation and cruelty in Nitsch's work diminish when juxtaposed with current geopolitical developments in which Islamic fanatics behead innocent civilians through the medium of cable television? (These activities by militant terrorists must also be seen as performances with their own political and social implications, targets, and agendas.) The ability to remove ourselves from Nitsch's work is an important quality which differentiates the domain of art from the domain of reality, and in particular the domain of terrorism. During Nitsch's performances, one experiences catharsis without risking one's life, either by voluntarily participating as an actor, or by experiencing intense feelings as a viewer. It is the possibility to escape that differentiates this art from its ceaselessly violent other. The absence of fear is what permits the ludic pact for Nitsch, which is so thoroughly contrary to the actual executions now taking place in Iraq and broadcast on cable television.

While Nitsch mainly calls forth the forces of *eros* (life-affirming drives), he also flirts with *thanatos* (death drives). The forms of militant terrorism and fundamentalism that we see today in Iraq and other countries present us with a world marked exclusively by *thanatos*. And that is an enormous difference that needs to be recognized. Art is to art, as life is to life. These are two different domains that never meet completely. If one day these two domains lose their singularity, perhaps one of them will disappear.

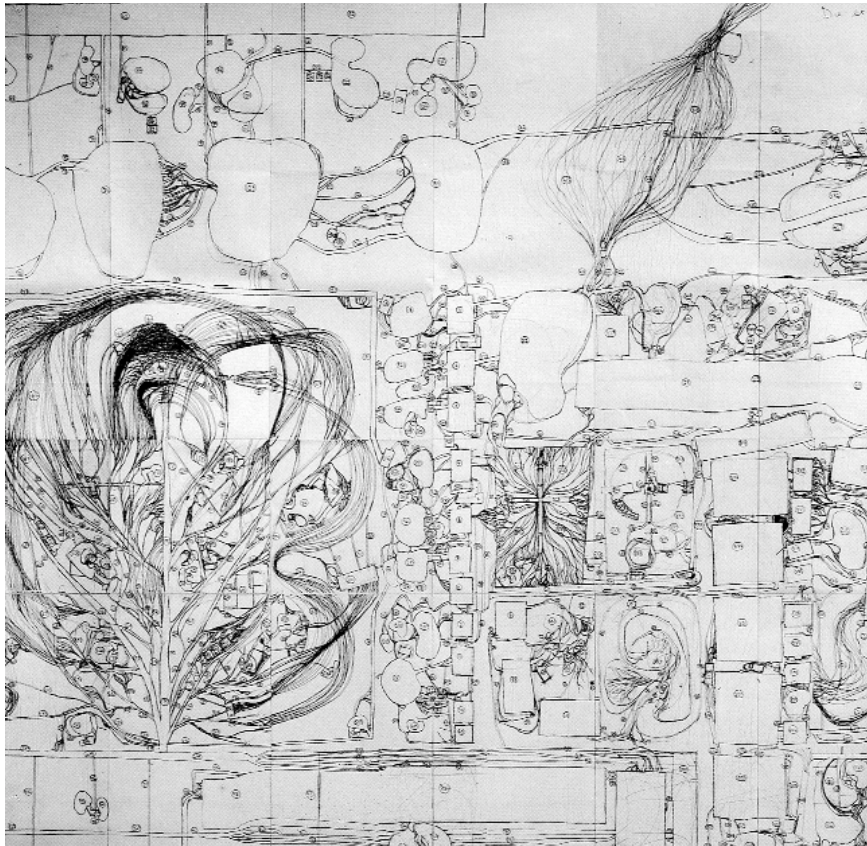


Fig. 1: Hermann Nitsch's topographical map for *Die Eroberung von Jerusalem* (1971; detail).

"The Abyss of the Scream" - The Music of Hermann Nitsch
Adrian Daub

As the cover of this very volume attests, there is a pronounced hypertrophy of the visual both in the work of Hermann Nitsch and in its reception. The sensationalist media coverage as much as the celebrations of the Dionysian liberation of Nitsch's actions have relied exclusively on the visual realm to make their points: It was in the visual arena that charges about pornography or cruelty against animals could be anchored; and those who attacked Nitsch's art turned to photographs or videos for their evidence, not to the "relics" Nitsch keeps of every action, and not to CDs or LPs of the noise, the music of Nitsch's Actionism.¹ And yet it is paradoxically in the sonic realm that these very protests and accusations have actually left a mark on Nitsch's art: on many a recording of the actions at Prinzendorf and elsewhere, the listener can at times discern the faint clamor of the protests that accompany the action. On photos and videos, they are nowhere to be seen; but they can be heard on the soundtrack.

This is a strange and remarkable fact: an art that predominantly seeks to have visual effects, and which has arguably had exclusively visual effects on its audiences; and yet an art that, when sound-recorded, encompasses the clamor of its critics in its soundscapes. Imagine if we were to record CDs of Alban Berg's *Altenberg-Lieder* or Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* only with the accompaniment of the boos from the audience that first greeted them! Clearly, sound has some kind of avenue to offer into Nitsch's work, and the questions and answers arrived along that avenue may well turn out to be more complex and ambivalent than the self-enclosed visual spectacle that most audiences associate with Hermann Nitsch. This chapter wants to embark on a *prima facie*

bizarre gambit: to discount the overwhelming, literally visceral, visuality of Nitsch's performance pieces, and to turn instead to Nitsch's *Aktionen* insofar as they are mediated—scored, directed, written down. To that end, it will focus on three objects that seem at first glance ancillary to the blood and guts of the real action—Nitsch's directions for the imperformable pseudo-action *Die Eroberung von Jerusalem*, the music of his 1977's *Requiem für meine Frau Beate*, and the physical scores written for 1998's *6-Tage-Spiel*.

In particular, I will attempt to explore Nitsch's music, both in terms of how sound is organized within the performance, and by what means that organization is effected, both in terms of the scripts Nitsch prepared for his own actions (performed or unperformed, performable or unperformable), as well as in his own theoretical reflections on the "o.m. theater."² For each "action" Nitsch stages (well over a hundred in the last forty years), there exists a script, detailing not only the "plot" of the performance (whether they have such a plot is a question we will return to), but controlling rather carefully any number of variables, including sound, both the sound produced by mechanical means and the "music" played by the orchestras and brass bands that feature prominently in all of Nitsch's actions.

Nitsch himself calls this a "score" [*Partitur*]; in his *Aktionen*, Nitsch incorporates both music and performance into the *Partitur* (including smells, action and text), effecting at once an integration of the visual/olfactory into the auditory, and creating a certain lack of aural specificity. Nitsch's "scores," because they conduct the visual as much as they do sound, do not leave a specific place for the music that accompanies his *Aktionen*. This music, an invariant of his actionism, is what Nitsch calls "Lärmmusik"—it usually consists of a small traditional ensemble (organ, trumpet, drum set; the whistle seems to be a particular favorite), plus sound and music samples piped in via loudspeaker. These range from animal screams (Nitsch's animals never scream for themselves, a fact to which we will return) to broadly ironic music clips (like Gustav Mahler, Nitsch preferably turns to the *Ländler* and the *Schuhplattler* to this satirical end³).

Why is this a "score" rather than a "script"? Nitsch's own answer seems to be: the sequence of the "spiel," as outlined in the "score," is in fact modeled on musical

structure, in particular symphonic structure. "The six-day performance of the o.m. theater corresponds to a six-movement symphony, [and] all basic motifs are really ordered musically" [*das sechs tage dauernde spiel des o. m. theaters entspricht einer sechssätzigen sinfonie, alle grundmotive werden eigentlich musikalisch geordnet*].⁴ This claim has of course an interesting corollary: If the "score" is musical in structure, then the symphonic "motifs" of this score are not restricted to musical ones. Unlike an opera score, for instance, which denotes actions, light, as well as sounds, but which charts exclusively the development of the *sounding* matter, subjecting only the *sounding* matter to development and variation, Nitsch's *Partitur* treats all the variables (sound, smell, taste, etc.) as motivic, as susceptible to development and variation. In other words, "my o.m. theater is generally to be seen as a musical creation, beyond the music of the o.m. theater itself. The entire score of the action is determined by a musical structure [*von einem strukturellen musikalischen aufbau bestimmt*]." Nitsch accordingly speaks of "all the motifs of action, smell, taste and sound" [*alle actions-, geruchs-, geschmacks- und klangmotive*].⁵

Nitsch integrates his music into his general theory of art as abreaction—music, he claims, is at base "a process of abreaction [*abreaktionsvorgang*],"⁶ an evisceration analogous to the visual ones performed in his actions. Music means spilling one's guts, one's sonic innards. The most basic form of music is thus the inarticulate, unstructured scream: "the scream, the clamor, the noise as the root of [all] music" [*den schrei, das geschrei, den lärm als wurzel der musik*—the "affective beginning of all music" [*affektgetragener begin aller musik*].⁷ Accordingly, Nitsch's music relies on long, extended notes held for minutes at a time, as well as instruments (such as whistles) that simulate screaming voices. The affirmative emphasis on the liberating proto-subjective character of noise finds Nitsch in league with Futurist theories of music, for instance those of Luigi Russolo.⁸ But, in keeping with Nitsch's obsession with organic matter, the paradigmatic noise is the scream, and the "noise-music" is nothing but the posthumous structuring of that scream: "Upon the scream follows noise organized by the pulse (of blood, coitus, orgasm)" [*nach dem schrei folgt der bereits durch den pulsschlag (durch den pulsschlag des blutes, des koitus, des orgasmus) organisierte lärm*]⁹—any rhythm originates from changes in volume and intensity of the scream. In returning music to its most basic form, Nitsch hopes to

“open us up for sounds that lie beyond our usual habits of hearing, and which reach into the abyss of the scream” [*uns klängen aufschließen, die jenseits unserer hörgewohnheiten liegen und die bis zu den abgründen des schreies reichen*].¹⁰

The strangeness of the metaphor “abyss of the scream” provides a hint that this is not the kind of music that easily finds a place on a CD. Not because it is cacophonous (which it certainly is), but because we aren’t meant to *listen* to it (or *only* listen to it) at all. After all, we are asked to peek into an abyss, but that abyss is sonorous. Music is not exclusively, but it is also visible in Nitsch; or, put a different way, music is never self-sufficient, self-enclosed, self-identical, but rather in dialogue with the other senses, referred to the other senses, mediated by the other senses. As the next section will make clear, it is only in the context of a peculiar synaesthetic tradition that Nitsch’s music can be made sense of in terms of (classical) musical history.

1

Legend has it that Lou Reed tried to have his 1975 album *Metal Machine Music* released with RCA’s Red Seal classical imprint. The album famously consists of about 60 minutes of noise, garbled clips and distortion. The question at RCA is likely to have been one that has been debated by fans ever since: is this serious or a joke?¹¹ In coming across the music of Hermann Nitsch on record or CD, often packaged as collector’s editions or as 10 disk sets, many listeners are liable to ask the same question. Visually, Nitsch’s performances often manage to be satirical and dead serious at once—heretical yet deeply felt, richly allusive yet immediate. But when divested of those visuals, somehow this both/and becomes harder to sustain: does Nitsch really mean his music to be part of the musical tradition, or any musical tradition; or is it simply a part of the pageantry and Nitsch is no more trying to revolutionize music than he is trying to advance butchery techniques?

Both Nitsch’s own writings and scholarly discussions of his work tend to avoid rather than address this question. Nevertheless, the question seems to me central to an understanding of Nitsch’s art in general, since whether its motivation lies primarily in the ostensible sources of his performances (medieval pageantry, pagan ritual) or

whether they lie in some kind of European musical tradition speaks of course to how his own distinctive form of *Gesamtkunstwerk* is structured and organized, in other words how its components hang together.

One of the few explicit discussions of Nitsch as a composer comes from his fellow Viennese Actionist Günter Brus.¹² In many ways, Brus’ text only compounds the problem of placing Nitsch’s music within the musical tradition (or even a musical tradition), since his endorsement is so strident and hyperbolic that it is unclear how seriously it is being advanced—we thus have the problem of how serious Nitsch is about his music raised to the second power by the question how serious the partisans of that music are in their advocacy. Brus celebrates Nitsch as the “true successor” of Beethoven, Bruckner and Mahler (invoking as evidence the fact that Nitsch was “called the Bruckner of the happening”¹³), a view that Nitsch’s own writings seem quite prepared to endorse. In particular, Brus juxtaposes Nitsch with the “warmed-over Dadaism” and music as technology (twelve-tone music) of contemporary music, and decries the “imbecilic” music criticism and its myopic version of the “history of music” that celebrates these composers, rather than Nitsch, as the carriers of innovation.

Nitsch, by and large, seems to agree with Brus, although his account of his own relation to the classical tradition is a good deal more conciliatory than Brus’—surprisingly conciliatory given the iconoclasm of his performances. In his *Theory of the Orgies Mysteries Theater—Second Attempt* (1995), Nitsch provides a brief autobiographical sketch of his interest in music. “I really regretted that I was not a musician, well into the 1950s. Later, music was to give birth to itself out of the project of the o.m. theater.”¹⁴ Indeed, as we saw, Nitsch claims not to have imported a music appropriate to his performances, but rather to have developed these performances out of musical principles, which gave rise to its own music immanently. “In the process of creating the o.m. theater, its ecstatic music emerged almost by itself. I wanted a music of the orgy” [*im vollzug des o. m. theaters entstand dessen ekstatische musik von selbst. ich wollte eine musik der orgie*].¹⁵ Nitsch thus seems to view his genesis as a composer as an oblique offshoot from traditional classical music: His performances structurally correspond to classical formal structures, and the tradition asserts itself in Nitsch’s works via the detour of his performances.

What is striking, given the iconoclastic nature of the music of the o.m. theater, is how traditional, downright conventional, Nitsch's understanding of music history is. In general, Nitsch seems to like most of the classical tradition—no composer, nor any particular school comes in for a lot of criticism. Moreover, his assessments of individual composers and their respective achievements are dangerously close to cliché: From the “healthy harmonics and true power of Bach” [*gesunder harmonik und echter kraft bei bach*] to “the powerful screaming sincerity of Bruckner” [*die kraftvolle brüllende lauterkeit bruckners*], his opinions are hardly new; when he associates Bruckner and Wagner with the “Dionysian” and Brahms with the “Apollonian,” Nitsch is essentially spouting the conventional wisdom on the last hundred years of classical music.

Moreover, while the parallels between Nitsch's music and ritual music, both European and non-European, are obvious, Nitsch does not discuss these parallels. He often includes facsimiles of medieval scores in his own theoretical and “musical” writings, but those are not part of the “score” proper. And his theoretical writings make no reference to ethno-musicological dimensions of his work—Nitsch's music, as has been remarked on numerous occasions, sounds a lot like Tibetan music, but he never discusses this as an influence. As happy as he is to draw on medieval imagery, Nitsch places his *music* in a decidedly modern context—it is not historicist in any way, is not sonorous window-dressing to go along with a modernized passion-play. It is Vienna rather than Oberammergau. It is meant to be part of, or stand in some sort of relation with, the *classical* musical tradition.

Of course, there is something willful in Brus' extracting from the metaphor that Nitsch is the “Bruckner of the happening” the notion that Nitsch is indeed a classical composer, much like being the “Einstein of ping pong” does not make one a mathematician. Nevertheless, Brus' encomium, no matter how much it fulminates against traditional classical music, nevertheless attempts to sketch out a musico-historical genealogy for Nitsch's music. While the invocation of Bruckner and Beethoven seems spurious, the link Brus proposes to Scriabin is quite salient: for one thing, because there are indeed, as we shall see, elements of Scriabin's *Mysterium* (*Misteriya*) that make an appearance in Nitsch's aesthetic program; for another, because Scriabin's *Mysterium* already doesn't belong entirely into the

history of music narrowly construed, and it certainly doesn't belong in its mainstream.

The pure logistics of Scriabin's unfinished final project share particular affinities with *Die Eroberung von Jerusalem*, Nitsch's megalomaniacal unperformable action from 1971.¹⁶ Just like much of Nitsch's oeuvre, it owes much to Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy*¹⁷—and, again like Nitsch, Scriabin (following Vyacheslav Ivanov¹⁸) understood the task of his piece as the “dissolution of Apollonian order into Dionysian delirium.”¹⁹ Both Nitsch and Scriabin seem to agree that the Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* constitutes a step in precisely that direction, but that Wagner's fatal flaw lay in his willingness to make the audience into a witness rather than a participant of his operas—(“contemplate” rather than “create” the opera, in Ivanov's terms²⁰).

Scriabin conceived of a mystery play whose performance would span seven days and seven nights continuously.²¹ The performance would not have “a single spectator—all will be participants.” He called for a theater or cathedral filled with “mists and lights, which will modify the architectural contours.”²² The olfactory sense and the sense of touch had to be involved in the performance—the score was to list colors and smells. In the words of Simon Morrison, “it would cease to be a *work* and transform itself into a religious *rite* involving all people and concluding in a higher reality.”²³ At one point, Scriabin contemplated having the theater/temple torn down towards the end of the performance, in order to involve the sounds and smells of the outside world, the starry heavens and the light of the sunset in the performance.²⁴ As to where this theater should be constructed, he seems to have favored the Himalayas, but settled for purchasing a plot of land in Darjeeling.²⁵ The piece was to conclude not with applause or a lowered baton, but rather with nothing short of the end of the world, to be ushered in by its mystic chord progressions.

Of course, Nitsch does not share Scriabin's Theosophical or Gnostic proclivities. Nevertheless, Nitsch's aesthetic program owes an obvious and acknowledged debt to Scriabin's mad mystery play. More importantly, although Nitsch never makes this point himself, the *Mysterium*'s inner contradictions come to inform Nitsch's orgies mysteries theater, in the sense that Nitsch's music is at pains to avoid one central

contradiction of the *Mysterium*, namely the question of authorship.

As Simon Morrison has pointed out, what most centrally confounded Scriabin's original plans was a "crisis of authorship." If his music was to bring about all-unity, a dissolution of subjectivity into a Neo-Platonic world-soul, then what business did Scriabin have composing, conducting and narrating the goings-on? The *Mysterium* ran afoul of a modern notion of artistic subjectivity that had to underpin a ritual that was to be devoid of such subjectivity.²⁶ Scriabin, who appears to have had little practical knowledge of Wagner's project, seems to have assimilated the *Gesamtkunstwerk* into a kind of medieval pageant. The problem was thus that he wanted the ecstatic and the super-determined to coincide—most famously by means of the so-called "mystic chord" (or, in Scriabin's own writings, the *akkord pleromy*), the "open, Sesame!" of the parts of the "action" he scored during his lifetime.

On the one hand, the idea that a chord might liberate Dionysian elements from the dominance of Apollonian melody is certainly in keeping with Nietzsche (who is in turn in agreement with Rousseau on this matter). On the other hand, even the preponderance of harmony over melody does not remove the overweening presence of the author/composer from the work, and thus prevents the transition from "work" to "ritual" that is after all the *Mysterium's* program. It is here that Nitsch is clearly drawing on the lessons of Scriabin: his music disavows authorial control almost entirely. The composer's influence is almost entirely limited to intensity; what rhythm there is comes from modulations of "musical mass, musical substance" [*der musikalischen masse, der musikalischen substanz*]²⁷—itself a trick Nitsch claims to have culled from Scriabin: rhythm by crescendo.²⁷ In other words, the composer sets down intensity of sound (number of instruments playing, volume of notes played), but nothing beyond. In so doing, Nitsch explains, he aimed to create an "uncompromising music of expression [*rücksichtslose ausdrucksmusik*]," with "thoroughgoing freedom of performance" [*weitestgehende aufführungsfreiheit*],²⁸ in which "everything is allowed," in which the pitch of sounds is handed entirely to chance, left to the whim of Nitsch's "dilettante orchestra" [*dillettierendes orchester*].²⁹

Here again, Brus' strange encomium is quite correct: Nitsch's solution is atonality, but not an atonality in the mold of the Viennese school. Brus, very much like Adorno

in his famous piece on *The Aging of the "New Music"*, suggests that twelve-tone constructions usher music into the realm of the mathematical, automatic, whereas truly revolutionary music has to "shiver" (Adorno's term) before the heresy of its own dissonance. Nitsch turns to the aleatory or ludic (what he calls "organized accidents" [*organisierte zufälle*]³⁰) in music precisely to avoid this *Scylla* and this *Charybdis*: a ritual, yes, but neither one overdetermined by the subject, nor dictated by some sort of formal necessity. This is why Nitsch's scores are suffused with an overweening yet dispersed artistic subjectivity, and are at the same time subject-less. There is no "mystery chord"; there is harmony, but that harmony is accidental, because Nitsch's notations leave much to chance—be it the vicissitudes of the acoustic, the clamor of protesters (clearly audible in the background on several CDs of his actions), or simply the whim of the musicians.

It is thus not so much the music that serves to integrate Nitsch into some kind of tradition of music history, it is rather the precise modalities of its synaestheticism. Nitsch picks up on the Neptunian syncretic dimension of early musical modernism—connected with names as diverse as Wagner, Scriabin and Kandinsky (one that Adorno famously balked at, decrying a "syncretism, ... the vague notion of an undialectical continuum of arts in general"³¹). This synaestheticism proceeded *both* in the interest of greater *aesthetic* integration of sensory experience (what Benjamin and Adorno call *phantasmagoria*) *and* in the interest of transferring the absolute-ness of the absolute music onto other arts—that is to say to further divorce the work of art from the happenstances of the world external to it. In Scriabin's terms: the *work* is raised to the status of *rite* in order to become a more perfect *work*.

The tradition Nitsch claims for his works turns precisely on the role of the synaesthetic refinement of the total work of art: from Mahler, who at one point remarked that he had already "composed away" the Alpine panorama around his composing hut in Maiernigg, to Scriabin who wanted to integrate smell into his music, there runs, in Nitsch's view, the thread of a counter- or shadow-tradition. He points to Wagner as an example: during the unveiling of the grail in *Parsifal*, with its "walls of sound" [*klangwände*], "I associated smells and colors" [*konnte ich gerüche und farben assoziieren*].³² But he can point not only to performances, Nitsch can also point to a good many scores: "It isn't an accident that Schoenberg, at the height

of the orgy he stages, the dance around the Golden Calf in *Moses and Aaron*, issues the direction to slaughter and eviscerate cows on-stage.”³³

But Nitsch ties his *Aktionen* into a tradition of literary production, of literary synaesthesia as well. He claims Stefan George as an ancestor (not simply due to his persistent refusal to capitalize anything), because his poetry brings text and ritual, life and art, together.³⁴ Similarly, Nitsch points to Mallarmé’s “Herodias” as an example of synaesthesia—here, it seems, it is not the ritualistic aspect of *l’art pour l’art* that is of central concern, but rather the reliance on space and written matter in poetry.³⁵ There are of course examples of literary synaesthesia much closer to Nitsch: as Brigid Doherty has pointed out, the insistence on the materiality of language mobilized by Austrian post-WWII poets in order to offset “microfascisms of various kinds of propositional ... speech” (Doherty singles out Oswald Wiener and Hans Karl Artmann, though Nitsch himself adds Fritz Mauthner and Ronald Laing³⁶), already tends towards some kind of synaesthesia—writing is meant to be phonogram, pictogram and ritual in one.³⁷ Not only, then, is the compass of *music* to be expanded—the synaesthesia of the score finds its correlates in other areas.

There is one important corollary to this self-proclaimed Nitschean tradition: it ties Nitsch’s music and performance into a tradition that predates his own birth by decades. What is much less clear is Nitsch’s relationship to the music of his contemporaries. None of the composers Nitsch refers to in his commentaries on his own music were active post-WWII—and while one of Nitsch’s contemporaries, the composer and music critic Kyle Gann, has suggested a number of modern composers whose music sounds similar to Nitsch’s, it is not clear whether Nitsch knew or was influenced by any of them. Gann lists: La Monte Young, Alvin Lucier, Mauricio Kagel, Charles Ives, and Glenn Branca. Brus’ rabid endorsement invokes Stockhausen as an antipode for Nitsch.³⁸ And in one of the volumes accompanying the *6-Tage-Spiel*, Nitsch’s assistant Hanno Millesi speaks of Nitsch’s “musical models”—Schönberg and Cage.³⁹ But Nitsch is silent on all these, preferring instead to align himself with “Mahler, Richard Strauss, Reger, Zemlinsky, and Scriabin,” as well as “the new atonal Viennese School, Schönberg, Berg, Webern.”⁴⁰ While Nitsch’s association with Fluxus as well as with Joseph Beuys and Nam Jun Paik makes it likely that he was aware of the music of John Cage while honing his own

unique style, he has never set out in any detail his relation to or even his take on Cage.⁴¹

2

The overwhelming cacophony of Nitsch’s *Lärmmusik* forms the invariant backdrop for the artist’s *Aktionen*. The synaesthetic effect Nitsch insists on works to compound the dizzying soundscapes upon the revolting visuals of the action—one presumes the effect is even stronger on participants who bear the brunt of the entire “Nitschean” sensory arsenal. But the fact that *taken together* this synaesthesia has one particular effect does not mean that each aspect of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* has analogous tasks to fulfill. Significantly, however, Nitsch often talks as though it does: Just as the smell and feel of an animal cadaver eclipses the subjective side of the subject, reducing the participant to the pre-subjective automatism of drive and instinct, Nitsch seems to think, so sound has to circumvent “the subject” directly for the id. “The fact that these substances leave such a strong sensory impression demands that the ear receive a similar impression: a self-eviscerating music, a music that vomits, that births itself under extreme pain” [*leben diese sinnlich intensivst zu registrierenden substanzen fordern einen gleichen eindruck für das ohr: eine sich ausweidende, sich erbrechende, unter schmerzen sich gebärende musik*].⁴²

Nitsch insists on the one hand that all aspects of performance are motivic and thus in an extended sense musical; on the other, however, it is clear that he wants his music to have a privileged, a separate position within his *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Nitsch’s version of the *Gesamtkunstwerk* is meant to penetrate the audience’s conditioned responses, to break down their habituated forms of tasting, smelling, seeing and hearing, and even the boundaries between tasting, smelling, seeing and hearing. “The degree of sensory intensity reached by the o. m. theater pierces the schemata of reception and experience of the civilized world,” bringing us instead into contact with the true “basic conditions, basic forces” of our world.⁴³ In order to leave behind the “limits of the transmissive capacities of language [*grenzen der übermittlungsfähigkeit der sprache*],”⁴⁴ we need to turn to aesthetic conditions that contravene our “psychophysical constitution [*psychophysische organisation*]”⁴⁵ —

that appeal to our automatic responses, our gag reflex, our nausea, our disgust.

But here is of course the central question: *can* music be disgusting, nauseating, gag-inducing in the same way that that raw meat doused with urine is?⁴⁶ Of course, music can “open us up for sounds beyond our regular habits of hearing,”⁴⁷ but can music induce automated reactions like putrescence or (according to Nitsch) the color red can? After all, as Adorno knew already, dissonance and musical ugliness can be enjoyed as beautiful and thus recuperated (a reaction Adorno much decried⁴⁸); our reactions to it are mediated, conditioned and no inverse Tristan-Chord (or Scriabin’s Mystic Chord) can precipitate an automated response of the kind Nitsch seems to be looking for—as little as the Mystic Chord can bring about the end of the world.

Nitsch’s music turns around this impossible demand and the depths its dissonances sound out are those of the demand’s impossibility. The goal is always a music that would shatter our very “psychophysical constitution,” but the unattainability of that goal is part of the performance already. This of course means that Nitsch’s music cannot be seen to fetishize immediacy with the same straightforwardness that critics (and some of his proponents) assume at times. Peter Gorsen, for instance, has argued precisely that: for him, the Actionists in general took up Artaud’s notion of “directness” and created a bodily art that “transcends the crisis of language.”⁴⁹ Others have argued that this is a rather essentialist way of understanding the art of Actionism, given the fact that language, however maligned, creeps into the performance from which it is supposedly banned at every turn.⁵⁰

In order to illuminate the strategies Nitsch employs to ban language by using language, and how he aesthetically reflects the impossibility of his own aesthetic demands, I would like to turn to a particularly strange “score” by Nitsch, one that follows Scriabin’s *Mysterium* in many aspects, but especially the defining one: it cannot be produced or realized. Among Scriabin’s biographers (as among his friends at the time), there is disagreement as to whether the *Mysterium* was impossible to put on (and was meant to be impossible) or was simply not put on during Scriabin’s lifetime. In other words, is the impossibility of the creative gesture itself one of the (or perhaps the) defining quality of the work? Of course, what makes the *Mysterium* so exciting is precisely that it isn’t identifiably one or the other—it seems impossible

that, given world enough and time, Scriabin might have actually completed this insane project; yet there is no evidence that he ever blinked (or winked) in the maniacal pursuit of his project. We will now turn to a work of Nitsch that seems to stake out the same position: his mad, megalomaniacal and vile 1971 textual action *Die Eroberung von Jerusalem* (henceforth *DEJ*). While Nitsch himself acknowledged that “with *DEJ*, I wanted to write a conceptual dramatic action, although I was quite aware that it would never actually be performed” [*Mit DEJ wollte ich ein konzeptionelles Aktionsdrama schreiben, von dem mir aber immer klar war, daß es nie tatsächlich aufgeführt werden würde.*],⁵¹ the “action” by its very nature as action-“score” oscillates between the impossibility of its actual performance and the vexing fact that it might yet be *performable*.

Die Eroberung von Jerusalem, a “tragedy” written in 1971 (and published in limited edition in an English translation as *The Fall of Jerusalem* in 1997⁵²), presents itself as the script for one of Nitsch’s *Aktionen*.⁵³ In fact, however, this “script” calls for over a thousand separate *Aktionen*, to be performed in any sequence or even simultaneously, actions moreover that are, even by Nitsch’s standards, gruesome. Nitsch lists these rooms neither in sequential order (though he starts with Room 1, he ends with Room 23 a), nor according to any geographic logic: Nitsch provides a map of a bizarre innards-like tunnel system without entrance or exit in which the different *Aktionen* are supposed to take place [Fig. 1]; and though the first five rooms are indeed in sequence, the text begins leaping within the map immediately afterwards. For each room he lists a number of discrete actions to be performed, a list of musicians to accompany the action (when necessary), and a list of smells to be distributed by “spray cans” within each space. Some rooms are left empty, inviting the participants to listen for the sounds of distant rooms “like the rumble of a subway train.”⁵⁴

Nitsch’s “score” occupies a strange double position: *DEJ* is explicitly framed as an activation of Dionysian energy. In fact, it is only in this sense that it can be said to constitute a “tragedy” at all: It pulls the Apollonian veil from “that lie of convenience that is the ‘human’” [*die Trägheitslüge vom menschen*],⁵⁵ by stripping the ritual of its textual aspect, the human body of speech, and the bodily schema of its boundaries and coherence. Of course, for both Nietzsche and Nitsch, music is central to this

attempted recovery of the Dionysian. And in both Nietzsche and Nitsch, this recovery is a recovery *from* language, or from whatever is language-like in music. While Nietzsche's distinction between Wagnerian *Gesamtkunstwerk* and traditional opera turns on "the understandable word-and-tone rhetoric of the passions,"⁵⁶ so Nitsch's music is desperate to avoid the rhetorical, the expressive, and, most of all, anything to do with grammars of words and tones.

In his opening note, Nitsch calls *DEJ* a "drama," although he concedes that "difficulties in its performance" [*wegen seiner schweren aufführbarkeit*] place it close "to concept art."⁵⁷ He speaks of the separate scenes (or rooms) as *Aktionen*, but slyly suggests that if military expenditure were to be rerouted, the whole "drama" might yet prove performable. There is a war at the heart of *DEJ* and Nitsch's short prefatory note only heightens the sense of the allegorical that prevails in much of Nitsch's performances. But what kind of war it is and what our relation to it is, seems difficult to say. The reference to the huge sums of money "spent on military exercises" [*als für militärische übungen aufgewendet werden*] seems to suggest that *DEJ* presents an aesthetic analogue/displacement for the cold war. As Nitsch remarks of earlier stages of his oeuvre: "I tried to offer a kind of valve [*eine art ventill*] in my work."⁵⁸ The quotation from the 19th century dramatist Christian Dietrich Grabbe with which Nitsch opens his text, seems to suggest something similar: "When there is no war, you have to wage/make it in tragedies" [*Wenn es keinen Krieg gibt, muß man ihn in Tragödien machen*].

Of course, while *DEJ*'s status as "drama" might strike us as dubious, it certainly isn't a "tragedy." And Grabbe (1801-1836) whose writings coincide with the restoration after the Napoleonic wars, seems to want to put the exact reverse reading on the relation war-drama that the cold war-allusion suggested: for Grabbe, drama is the ersatz-war for a war whose very actual waging is a desperate historical necessity.⁵⁹ Drama is where the revolutionary violence goes when reality will not accommodate it. Then of course there is the drama's title, *The Conquest of Jerusalem*—the reference is presumably to one of the most infamous mass slaughters of the Crusades. Here, then, the "war" that the "drama" can make is one in the past and our relation to it as witness to the *Aktionen* (on paper or in reality) is that of Benjamin's angel of history. Speaking formulaically, then, we might say that the prefatory note

suggests three different possible relations of drama and history: the modus of Hans-Jürgen Syberberg's willful aestheticizations, the modus of Futurist embrace of trauma, or Benajmin's contemplative mode.

Not only the historicity of the "drama" is subject to a strange kind of accordion-effect—so is its temporality. "There is no exact duration of the performance. All events can transpire within a few hours, a few weeks, a few months or even years. Even though the events are listed in the score, due to the narrowness of the order of our language, occur in sequence, that does not mean that they have to follow each other sequentially in reality" [*es ist keine genaue aufführungsdauer vorgesehen. es können sich alle geschehnisse innerhalb weniger stunden, einiger wochen, einiger monate oder jahre ereignen. obwohl die geschehnisse auf der partitur, bedingt durch die enge unserer sprachordnung, nacheinander angegeben sind, heißt daß nicht, daß sie sich auch tatsächlich nacheinander ereignen müssen.*] There are two interesting ideas contained in this peculiar passage: Firstly, Nitsch's "score," whether it concerns the organization of sound, image or smell, is not concerned with that which traditionally constitutes the very essence of a score—the sequential arrangement of sound. Secondly, it juxtaposes the ritual temporality of the "score" to the "narrowness of the order of our language." Sequentiality is owed to language; a true "score" has to be evacuated of that sequentiality, its syntagms have to attain autonomy in order to leave behind those constraints.

If textuality as sequence constitutes a debasement of the ritual (a)temporality of the "score," then *DEJ* is of course in a somewhat strange position. After all, Nitsch's preface makes reference to the "difficulties in its performance" [*schwere Aufführbarkeit*], and the rest of the "score" makes clear that even this concession has to be tongue-in-cheek. The book revels in megalomaniacal arrangements of hundreds and thousands of performers, concludes with a map of the underground system of caverns in which the piece is to be performed that could have easily come out of a game of Dungeons & Dragons [Fig. 1], calls for rituals that would violate any number of laws (including its almost obsessive emphasis on child genital mutilation and dissection), and features a lengthy text to be spoken by Klaus Kinski (not as unrealistic a proposition in 1971 as it is today).⁶⁰ So Nitsch's "score" persists at a point of impossibility in two senses: it is a "score" that is mired in language, leaving

open the question what a non-linguistic score would look like; and it is a text straining to become ritual, where that ritualization is always already impossible. Unlike Nitsch's *Orgien Mysterien Theater*, *DEJ* is not an *Aktion* that makes supplemental use of the textual; it is rather an *Aktion* conducted entirely in the supposedly debased sequentiality of the written word.

This paradox is of course already implicitly encapsulated in Nitsch's claim that *DEJ* borders on "concept art" (he uses the English term). What pushes it towards that border is clearly its inability to ever become manifest, concrete, flesh and blood. Nitsch insists that *DEJ* is "close to" rather than simply *is* "concept art." And not by accident: in the sense used here, "concept art" would denote the exact opposite of the Dionysian synaesthetic effects that normally characterize Nitsch's performances—it would always be *mere* concept, bloodless and logical, as opposed to pure bodily *jouissance*. When Nitsch notes that "my theater, my *Gesamtkunstwerk* found music by itself, once I left the word behind" [*mein theater, mein gesamtkunstwerk fand die musik von selbst, als ich das wort verliess*],⁶¹ he makes clear that synaesthesia (the *Gesamtkunstwerk*) does not include language, and is rather constituted in and through the exclusion of language. And yet, in *DEJ* he has to rely on language to effect that exclusion—he has to transmit the clamor of his "Lärmmusik," the abyss of the scream through the mute written word.

3

Die Eroberung Jerusalems is something like a mass without words, albeit staged using nothing but words. The text stages an opposition between the scriptural and the ritual, the first being characterized by sequential arrangement in time, the latter by its active architectonic structuring of time. In his landmark credo "The Future of Music," John Cage famously distinguishes definitions of "music" that rely on "eighteenth- and nineteenth-century instruments" and the more meaningful one that simply posits music as the "organization of sound."⁶² Nitsch similarly notes that in scoring his actions, his aim was "to design scores whose sole purpose was to organize noise" [*partituren zu entwerfen, in denen es nur darum ging, lärm zu organisieren*].⁶³ In his 1962 composition *0'00*, Cage goes one step further by unmooring that "organization" from temporal and sequential constraints⁶⁴—the

"score" consists entirely of one sentence: "In a situation provided with maximum amplification (no feedback), perform a disciplined action." It is this step out of sequence that lies behind Nitsch's music as well—the moment of ritual time in sound. Sound makes time rather than conforming to a pre-imposed sequential schema. *0'00* also marks the first of Cage's compositions that was impossible to notate, that could find no scriptural correlate. Nitsch's music, however, is scriptural as well as ritual: Its time is that of the pure immediacy of Cage's *0'00*; nevertheless, Nitsch insists on *notating* it, on providing a score for it. Nitsch's music doesn't follow through with Cage's radical emancipation of sound from writing. It oscillates between an attempt to abject the deformations entailed by notating systems and the employment of those very systems.

One of the most striking facets of Nitsch's wordless "oratorio" is of course its erotic, bodily and aesthetic megalomania. Nitsch's "stage directions" unfurl before their reader/viewer/participant an enormous underground maze, arranged like a limitless set of organs without body. Nitsch sends through this maze several processions, a number of herds of white horses, several Roman emperors, and crucified choirboys by the dozens. The sublimity of numbers in the directions is simply dizzying. At one point, Nitsch's "score" calls for the "noise" of the following animals: "3200 pigs, 190 horses, 1200 cows, 1800 sheep, 2100 goats, 260 dogs, 530 chicken, 300 geese, 250 ducks."⁶⁵ The Kinski-speech offered in Room 480 ups the ante by providing cosmic stage directions calling for "3,967,800,000,000,000,000,000,000 monstrances."⁶⁶ For one room, the stage directions provide a list of popes whose "dead bodies are to be crucified"⁶⁷—the list turns out to contain nearly every pontiff from the 1st century to the 20th. The exhaustion that inevitably sets in with iteration and massing *ad nauseam* highlights a limit against which the text struggles, but which it cannot cross: Through pure relentlessness, it attempts to create the immediacy that the written word ultimately makes impossible.

DEJ's fetishism of impossible numbers expands to the music as well—Nitsch sends impossible numbers of musicians through his *parcours*, for no reason other than number. In another room, the "slaughterhouse," Nitsch asks for two stationary brass bands, each with "330 horns, 220 trumpets, ... 315 trumbones, ... 220 alphorns," which are directed to "strike one note and try and hold it indefinitely."⁶⁸ Add to this

no less than thirty mobile “orchestras” (marching bands, church orchestras, a “beat music combo”), several dozen choirs (singing children’s songs, liturgical songs and selections from *Des Knaben Wunderhorn*), as well as piped-in sounds of “Hitler-speeches, church-bells and dance music (*Schuhplattler*).”⁶⁹ All of these elements are supposed to add up to little but “noise” (*Lärmmusik*). As a rule, the players are supposed to hold a tone or stick to a rhythm (in the case of percussion) for the duration of their play; the only sense of musical sequence there is comes from the patterns of citation (the dance music, for instance) or of clips of human speech (the Hitler-speeches, the Kinski-reading).

When Nitsch calls for such massive ensembles, he is interested in sheer overwhelming quantity of the music—there is no essential difference that is introduced by the horn beyond the first one, nor by the tenth, nor even the 330th. On the one hand this monolithic (lack of) orchestration forecloses any temptation to read the orchestra as having the character of a community, of being concerned with communication and exchange. The lack of development prevents the music from ever attaining a syntactic structure, something that Nitsch, just as Nietzsche, would associate with the Apollonian. But of course Nitsch’s *DEJ* may be “scored” for 330 horns, but it isn’t actually played by them (the *Requiem*, for instance, was written for and performed by about twenty musicians). The point is thus not what the aesthetic effect would be of 330 horns, but rather what the aesthetic effect is of *writing* of 330 horns, 220 trumpets and 220 alphorns. What matters is not musical quantity, as it were, but written quantity—it’s a gigantomania of numbers, not of sound.

Except of course the written “score” for *DEJ*, teetering somewhere between “concept art” and a will to performance, does not readily make that distinction: *DEJ* attempts to reach sound via the magic of numbers, hopes to reach Dionysian immediacy through an overload of (Apollonian) text. Add one more zero on the number of trumpets, it seems to insist, and the written word “trumpet” might physically ring an eardrum. The paradigm for this kind of synaesthetic megalomania is once again Scriabin, whose *Mysterium* was supposed to be performed for seven days and to usher in the quite actual end of the world.⁷⁰

Sound is not the only avenue towards Dionysian immediacy in *DEJ*—and it is not

alone in being obsessively regimented by the “score.” Indeed, Nitsch’s “score” may be most exacting in arranging a symphony of *smells*. In his parodic Easter celebration, for instance, Nitsch lists the following smells: “spilled wine, damp, cool winecellars, fresh, wet tearoses, fresh lilac, fresh peonies, fresh salad, fresh fruits (cherries), freshly cut grass, bloody hinds of recently slaughtered animals, blood, vomit, warm cow’s milk, goat milk, sheep milk, raw meat, wet, bloody entrails of a steer, feces, bundled stamens of tea roses, flowering acacia lanes.”⁷¹ How exactly these odors are to be created is left to the imagination; often enough twenty or so smells are listed only to be followed by another catalogue of odors. At other points in *DEJ*, Nitsch calls for smells that range from the abstruse (“blood of a freshly slaughtered sheep” vs. “bloody entrails” in the same list) to the impossible (the smell of “ant eggs” or “stone beetles”⁷²).

This overkill creates a strange effect: One wonders what impression these incestuous orgies of odors are meant to (or would quite actually) impress upon their audience—the very fetishism of immediacy that stands behind the score’s constant reliance on the olfactory is undercut by the equally insistent cataloguing and inventorying of smells. One more listed smell, the “score” seems to think, and one of them might actually reach the reader’s nose—there lies behind the synaestheticism of Nitsch’s *DEJ* a profound and desperate dissatisfaction with the written word that transports it. Often enough, Nitsch’s list seem to exhort us to smell for sounds or colors—the smell has to be that of “white sheets,”⁷³ the blood that of a “female, white cow.”

Nitsch’s text, with its outlandish mass spectacles and inachievable aesthetic effects might well remind us of nothing less than a medieval chronicle, for instance of the historic “conquest of Jerusalem.” On an obvious level, Nitsch’s orgiastic geography of blood, penises and entrails is not all that different from historic accounts of the sack of Jerusalem by the Crusaders. But, more importantly, Nitsch’s “verbal score” deploys all the aesthetic effects of the medieval chronicle: the fetishism of numbers, the grisly details, and the shuddering *jouissance* of bodily morification and disfigurement. Medieval chroniclers take number not so much to denote a quantity, but to push up against a qualitative leap, where magnitude would rise into the mathematical sublime of immediate experience. They tell you of thousands, because

they hope that one more will miraculously collapse all mediation (linguistic, numeric) into immediacy. They search for the alchemical quintessence that is trauma in language.

Nitsch, too, wants to tell us of “3,967,800,000,000,000,000,000 monstresses” in order to make us smell, feel, see *one*. This is why Nitsch’s art often seems to oscillate between *Aktionen* and videotapes of *Aktionen*: The tape isn’t there for those unfortunate souls who weren’t around for the ritual. The ritual is televised; ritual and televisualization together outline Nitsch’s art. That means also: the smell of blood and entrails, and the absence of that smell; bodily *Dasein* within the ritual context and objective spectatorship; the time of the ritual and the entirely different ritual parameters imposed by that most modern form of sacerdotal disemboweling and mortification of lazy *existenz*—film editing.

4

Given this overpowering sense of authorial control in the “score” of *DEJ*—and given the megalomaniacal exactitude with which Nitsch dictates smells, sounds, numbers—it becomes of course essential not simply what music Nitsch wants his “330 horns, 220 trumpets” to play, but also how exactly he wants to communicate that music to his performers. This is a question that goes for Nitsch’s more limited *actual* performances as well: Nitsch rehearses these, speaks to his performers and musicians beforehand in order to make sure his vision is realized. But in terms of music, Nitsch’s garden-variety *Aktion* is a lot more like *DEJ*’s script than in any other aspect: In utilizing orchestral arrangements of a complexity that cannot simply be encompassed by a laundry list (“330 horns”), Nitsch “ventures into a complex field [...] where it is imperative to have a vehicle for communication at his disposal.”⁷⁴ The vehicle in question is once again the old anathema *writing*—in this case notation.

The question of how precisely Nitsch’s “Lärmmusik” is notated has been raised time and again—as has the question of how much Nitsch relies on oral compact or even improvisation to produce his sounds: “no way could all these dense tone-thickets be notated in detail,” remarks one reviewer.⁷⁵ This is not simply a theoretical problem for Nitsch—it’s above all a logistical one, one compounded moreover by the fact that,

as Nitsch himself has professed, “up to this day I cannot read the classical notation system, much less use it for my compositions” [*so bleibt es bis heute aus, dass ich das klassische musiknotensystem lesen kann, geschweige denn, dass ich mich seiner für kompositionen bedienen kann*].⁷⁶

In his account of participating in (and organizing) a Nitsch “play,” Nitsch’s assistant Hanno Millesi explains how the artist communicates with the musicians that are to accompany his actions. Significantly, the system Millesi describes is not something that has accompanied Nitsch’s entire musical output. Rather, Nitsch seems to have begun his career as “composer” with purely *textual* instructions (à la *DEJ*), something he himself has characterized somewhat dismissively as a “a detour through words, [...] just writing down what sort of effect I was looking for,”⁷⁷ only to then segue into an altogether new system of notation. Nitsch’s type of musical notation varies from *Aktion* to *Aktion*. “From 1966 to 1977, I asked the musicians to [...] simply produce noise [*nur lärm*] during the actions according to the levels of intensity notated in the score”⁷⁸ In his 1977 *Requiem*, he simply lists instruments and blocks out minute intervals in tabular form. In the earlier *DEJ*, there is no sense of interval at all—rather, unless dictated by dramatic logic, the instruments simply play continuously for the duration of the particular scene (An exception are the air raid sirens: in the aforementioned chapel-setpiece, Nitsch’s score provides for three different kind of air raid warnings common in the Second World War: 30 minutes *Voralarm*, 30 minutes *Fliegeralarm*, 30 minutes *Entwarnung*, then four hours of all three in unison.⁷⁹) In the “Sechstagespiel” of the *Orgien Mysterien Theater* (1998), however, Nitsch provides detailed scores on graph paper. It is this highly peculiar system, which reverts (or advances, as Nitsch would say) from the written to the graphic, that Nitsch has used at least since the 80s:

Nitsch’s own individual score and notation[al] system developed out of the need to relate the action [to] the orchestral music in terms of the structure of the play. Action instructions and notations for the musicians (and conductor, respectively) are written on millimeter paper in DIN A4-format. The actionist employs the grid-like structure of the individual sheets by using the measurement specifications as temporal divisions consisting of one second each. An A4 sheet can thus contain instructions for three minutes of the play.⁸⁰

In his scores [see photographic section], Nitsch denotes intensity (both in terms of how many instruments are to play a note, and at what volume) by horizontal lines that ascend and descend to notate changes. “There are three levels of volume (three further ones were added in the eighties), which are entered as numbers above the lines.” Pitch, harmony and melody “are also not indicated,” as Millesi notes (it is unclear whether the brief melodic elements in the *Island-Symphonie* or the *Achte Symphonie* were indicated in the score, or whether they arose either from improvisations between conductor and orchestra, a non-denoted agreement or command, or simply the musicians’ whims). “The only thing that is set down is the timbre and the dynamic of a specific passage,”⁸¹ something that Nitsch has paid particular attention to since his 1977 *Requiem für meine Frau Beate*.

As Nitsch’s invocations of Mallarmé and George makes clear, Nitsch’s peculiar scores—Nitsch calls them “(structural) scores” [(struktur)partituren]⁸²—are themselves somehow meant to be synaesthetic. The physical scores Nitsch relies on to communicate with his orchestra(s) are not simply denotational, they are concerned with aesthetic effects of their own. Once again, visual and aural registers collapse into one another: The logic of these scores is dictated by a mysticism of numbers, by the geometry of the written word rather than by *strictu sensu* aural, let alone *musical*, concerns.⁸³ Nitsch himself has pointed out that “my scores [Partituren] are entirely shot through with cosmological formulae”⁸⁴—in the score of *DEJ*, we saw that much of the written instructions toy with numbers mysticism; in the physical, handwritten scores Nitsch produces, it is instead a mysticism of shapes and shades, of the score as graphic surface. As Millesi has put it, Nitsch’s scores are “relics” just like the bloody gowns utilized in the performances: “the score sheets are to be seen as artworks, not just because they resemble original manuscripts but mainly [...] because the musical notations have a graphic quality.”⁸⁵

Just as Nitsch’s “score” to *DEJ* stands in an ambivalent relationship to performance (on the one hand it decries all that is not tied to the immediacy of performance, on the other it is clearly an aesthetic construct not meant for performance), so his physical scores take an ambivalent attitude to their own *graphic* character. We may read the book that contains the unperformable *DEJ* as an exercise in “concept art,” even though the text seems to, however facetiously, protest that approach. And

similarly, we are invited to look at the actual scores Nitsch provides for his musicians as elaborate exercises in draughtsmanship, as pieces of graphic design rather than notational systems.

But what strange drawings these “scores” are: obsessively covered in dense scribbles, large portions blackened out by Nitsch’s idiosyncratic “notations.” In fact, one quickly gets the impression that these “notations” function as something of a cover for a secret graphic agenda: in light of the *metaphysics of aggression* Nitsch elaborates in the context of *DEJ*, there seems to be a kind of visual aggression to the *6-Tage Spiel*’s scores as well: as mentioned above, Nitsch marks duration through thick black lines, which, when compounded upon themselves, combine into an ever more solid black mass: The guiding affect of musical notation, it seems, is the aggressive desire to blacken the entire page, and thus for the absolute impossibility of musical notation. The reason to have more instruments play on one particular sheet has little to do with musical reasons—it springs from a desire to be able to add more black bars to the page. Graphically, then, music becomes the blackening-out of writing—sound once again figures as un-writing.

The score to *DEJ* also plays with writing and un-writing, though, since Nitsch does not provide the instrumental scores to the performance, what is written and unwritten are bits of extradiegetic text. A number of texts circulate within the “diegesis” of the ritual: In the extended “Temple of Caligula”-setpiece, a number of leaflets with a kind of intertitles are distributed to the audience. At later points, poems of various provenance are also handed out to the audience.⁸⁶ In each case, Nitsch provides the exact layout of the printed word on the page—putting particular emphasis on the spaces between words, between lines and between blocks of text. The overall effect of this emphasis is that the printed pages that do not contain stage directions, but rather printed text that figures physically in the performance itself, stand out by virtue of being nearly entirely blank.

This insistence on the graphic can hardly surprise in a text that is anything but subtle in its invocations of Mallarmé’s *Un Coup de dés jamais n’abolira le hasard*.⁸⁷ Nitsch has three actual numerological dice thrown, then has a text in the style of Mallarmé’s poem distributed to the audience. Of course, *Un Coup de dés* has itself long been

understood as a kind of score (*une partition*), where the peculiar graphic presentation of the poem allows for, in Nikolaj d'Origny Lübecker's words, "une mélodie en chute se répétant de feuille en feuille."⁸⁸ What Lübecker has in mind when he says "melody" are clearly sonority, development and rhythm: "le poème saisit le rythme des choses pour ensuite le transposer sur la feuille."⁸⁹ But it is characteristic of Nitsch's *partitions* that his black bars *negate* development and rhythm and that their uniformity precludes the notation of sonority or pitch.

Nitsch, it seems, is working with the same kind of association as Mallarmé; and he agrees that sequence is somehow textual. It should therefore not come as a surprise that the allusion to *Un Coup de dés* has to take the shape of a textual irruption into the ritual context. The *textual* score that Nitsch wants to have passed around can allow for development; his scores, to the contrary, tend towards the blackening-out of all development. At one point in *DEJ*'s "score," Nitsch asks for a blank sheet of paper (reproduced in the score) to be passed around.⁹⁰ On a purely graphic level, the perfect poem is the exact opposite of the perfect score: a blank page and one that is entirely blackened out.

In his *Theory*, Nitsch indulges what he calls a "personal fantasy," according to which the universe persists in an eternal recurrence of "black holes" and "white holes."⁹¹ It seems that the question of writing in Nitsch's "scores" circulates in the same orbit: somewhere between absolute sound, graphically represented by the perfectly blackened page, and the perfectly incipient poem, the absolutely blank page.⁹²

5

The speech *DEJ* has Klaus Kinski deliver may obscure it somewhat, but Nitsch's "drama" is something of a silent film. With its poetic intertitles, its numbers mysticism, the score of *DEJ* seems to admit the written word as a necessary evil—spoken expression, be it verbal or not, is much more roundly banished from Nitsch's cavernous stage. In an autobiographical interview, Nitsch was asked why "your actors are mute." Nitsch answered that "My verbal poetry [*Wortdichtungen*] developed in a way that language really couldn't really help me anymore. So I started forcing the audience to actually smell, taste and touch."⁹³

We noted already the preponderance of the visual in Nitsch's art—and even a "score" like *DEJ*, which provides lists of musicians and odors, is incomparably more exhaustive and details in its stage directions for the visual performance. For one thing, this is because only in the visual realm that Nitsch's performances allow for development and change—his descriptions stage elaborate sequences, but his directions to the musicians usually direct to "hold one note," "strike any note," or "to [...] simply produce noise [*nur lärm*]" ... according to the levels of intensity notated in the score."⁹⁴ Any musical transformation within the *DEJ*-score has to do with spatial movement of either the audience or the musicians—it is never intrinsic to the music "itself." For another, the music cannot but seem secondary when compared to the richly allegorical (to say nothing of revolting) visual goings-on; at best, the music can function as one more layer of allegory, but its allegoresis seems at best supplementary.

But it is not the subaltern status of *sound* that renders Nitsch's oratorio "mute": It is the complete absence of *speech*. Within Nitsch's outrageous libretto, there is not a line of "text." The absence of speech, the absence of the *necessity* for speech, is the mark of all ritual (it is immediate, it is that which goes without saying). But there is of course something strange about the fact that in a *textual* oratorio all speech is made to vanish: The oratorio's straining against the limit of performability is identical with the hope that more text might make the text vanish, that one more room, one more exhaustive list, one more ecstatic passage with no breaks between words might dissolve all text, might create that performance that would go without saying. The voice that would say what does not go without saying thus becomes a target for excision.

Just as Nitsch's bodies are not content with nudity, but rather take nudity to its subdermal, Artaudian extreme, so their corporeality is never allowed to assert itself vocally.⁹⁵ Nitsch's bodies excrete everything but sound: the body externalizes blood, sperm, vomit, excrement, its very intestines, but it never speaks. Often enough, the body is/represents a corpse; its mouth is a site of invasion and ingestion, not one of expression—in *DEJ*, Nitsch wants entrails to be stuffed in a woman's mouth, whereupon participants ejaculate into the meat; the *Requiem* similarly repeatedly calls for blood to be poured into an actor's mouth, which he then vomits back up

[*speit es wieder aus*]. The mouth is used as a site of ingression, and what comes out of the mouth has to have been put there within the logic of the ritual economy.

This deprivileging of the mouth as a site of unitary, “subjective” meaning is of course central to Nitsch’s project. In fact, one might argue, Nitsch’s relentless fetishization of the raw, physical *corps morcelé* has as its goal precisely the suppression of “the” body as it stands metaphorically behind ideas of the subject, and as it stands quite physically behind the human voice. After all, what Roland Barthes has called the “grain of the voice” constitutes a trace precisely of the individual embodiment that stands behind vocal sonorities.⁹⁶ And that individual is always already one—one grain, one voice, one body.⁹⁷ Nitsch’s emphasis on Dionysian dismemberment thus entails not merely the dispersal of all unifying bodily schemata, but moreover the outright silencing of all *voice*.

This may be surprising, in particular as Nitsch follows Nietzsche’s *Birth of Tragedy* in reading the (primal) scream as the ur-form of all music. The origin of music, Nitsch explains, is the scream: “the scream, the clamor, the noise as the root of [all] music” [*den schrei, das geschrei, den lärm als wurzel der musik*]—the “affective beginning of all music” [*affektgetragener begin aller musik*].⁹⁸ And if screaming is preserved in its sublation into the “basic elements of my music,” “screaming, ecstatic noise created by instruments” [*das geschrei, der ekstatische, durch instrumente erzeugte lärm*]⁹⁹, then how can the voice be said to disappear in Nitsch’s performances? The difference turns on two German words Nitsch uses to describe screams: “der Schrei,” the individual emission, the vocalization of a particular person, on the one hand and “das Geschrei,” the collective, chorus-like clamor divested of any individual body and agent, on the other. Impossible, for instance, that Munch’s *Skrik* would be a *Geschrei* in German—its solitary figure, and only its solitary figure, is capable of a *Schrei*. Nitsch’s “screams” are really *Geschrei*, they are ecstatic clamor that comes from beyond and before the individual subject. *Geschrei* comes across no one’s lips. Nitsch himself notes that “the situation of the scream occurs, when the ID asserts its rights” [*zur schrei-situation kommt es in der regel, wenn das ES seine rechte geltend macht*]—but the scream (in the sense of *Geschrei*) constitutes not only the eclipse of the *ego*, but also that of the unified bodily schema.¹⁰⁰

This effacement of vocal effects is perhaps most noticeable in Nitsch’s *Requiem für meine Frau Beate*. The *Aktion*’s genre, it seems, would demand at least a nod to the human voice—but all we get are the usual sound effects, whistles, percussions and brass instruments. And yet the voice is not the most egregious omission from the *Requiem*—it is after all explicitly a requiem *für meine Frau Beate*. But those who would play a game of *cherchez la femme* with Nitsch’s *Requiem* would be in for a disappointment. The “Arbeitspartitur” to the *Requiem* lists four participants, and calls all of them “he”—and the *Requiem*’s performance at the 56th *Aktion* used four male participants. We thus have a strange requiem on several counts: a requiem without voices, and a requiem without its object. The two are of course connected: it could be argued that in a traditional requiem the body of the deceased becomes precisely the body “behind” the voices, that the choir stages nothing less than the spectral presence and absence of a body. The choral voice in some strange way becomes the mourned body that cannot attend its own mass.

In Nitsch’s requiem-performance, this organizing absence is dispersed: the absent female body becomes a matter of overweening masculinity, and of insistent “Lärm-musik.” And the screams that are audible in that music are in fact nothing but *instrumental* effects—whistles that sound like screams and horns that, as one reviewer notes, “one can’t help but notice [sounding] like the moaning of dying cattle.”¹⁰¹ The absent body of the traditional requiem is still *one*, is still somehow spectrally *present*; the Dionysian imperative of Nitsch’s *Requiem*, by contrast, has to abject even the absent, mourned body. If the choral voice in the traditional requiem mass is the vessel for the absent body of the dead, then the musical score of Nitsch’s *Requiem* constitutes nothing short of a denial of that body. The fact that this music rejects development as Apollonian is of course significant in this context: the music is agrammatical noise on the one hand and emphatically voiceless on the other, as opposed to a recognizably individual voice that could speak or symbolize.

Although no structuring absence can be expected in *DEJ*, the displacement of vocal effects is noticeable in Nitsch’s fantasy-score as well. An odd effect that arises from the organization of Nitsch’s *Partitur*, one which only a participant in Nitsch’s previous *Aktionen* could satisfactorily address, concerns the location of animal voices. The “score” calls for *Tiergeschrei* or variations thereof again and again—but exactly

where these are meant to come from is anything but clear. Are they listed along with other sound effects (air raid sirens, *Schuhplattler*) only for conveniences sake (just as one surmises that the smell of entrails in the list of smells is simply a notation of something that arises from the performance itself, rather than of something that needs to be sprayed around the room)? Or are we to assume that Nitsch wants animals to be driven through the room and *additionally or separately* animal noises to be piped in via loudspeaker?

It should be clear why the distinction is significant: the latter arrangement would serve to sever body and voice, to all the more decisively dissociate the animal or the carcass from the voice that would be-speak the innards that Nitsch so obsessively uses as a prop in his actions. Even the most inarticulate of vocal effects, the nonsensical scream, a pure effect of *zoe*, is admitted into the ritual only as a disembodied technological effect via loudspeaker.¹⁰² The body so obsessively thematized is precluded from actively making meaning—the immediacy of the body, on which Nitsch’s resurrection of the Dionysian relies, is here blocked through purposeful technological mediation.

But here lies the problem. Brigid Doherty describes a brief scene in one of Nitsch’s most recent performances: “For instance, there’s a blonde young man in one video. When they start pouring materials on him you can see him gagging over and over again, and he keeps his mouth closed and he’s so dutiful.”¹⁰³ What matters in Doherty’s observation is not the sado-masochistic element in the actions—Nitsch himself is perfectly explicit on that count. The question the young man’s gag reflex (and its eventual suppression) raise is the following: What’s the place for slippage, for goof-ups, for that which is contrary to plan in Nitsch’s actions? We could easily imagine processions taking off in the wrong direction, we can see bodies behaving out of turn. Whether Nitsch’s *Gesamtkunstwerk* might simply recuperate them is another matter. But what seems most noteworthy that there is one thing none of the bodies can do: speak up. The deafening noise of Nitsch’s music, the very sadistic massing of music makes it impossible for the “blonde young man” to yell stop, to question what is happening, or even to simply find out why. Just as the blackened-out space of Nitsch’s “scores” seemed to announce nothing less than a space absolutely closed to writing, so the noise that the big black surface denotes delimits a space of voicelessness.¹⁰⁴

We have thus encountered in Nitsch’s scores and their performance an intemperate demand for immediacy, but a simultaneous insistence on bracketing and mediating that immediacy. If this seems like a facile point to make, it is central to realize that this holds true *only* for the sonic dimension in Nitsch’s *Gesamtkunstwerk*. Nitsch really wants his audience to interact with putrefied meat, and he genuinely hopes for a visceral un-mediated reaction (which he gets with biological certainty); and his dismissive view of the photographs produced during the actions shows that he indeed assigns absolute primacy to the immediate and hopes to keep it as unobstructed as possible by any mediation.¹⁰⁵ Sound, on the other hand, appears to be in a comparatively ambivalent position: there is the same demand for immediacy (a sound that will act like a gag reflex), but at every turn an admission that this demand is liable to be frustrated. What Nitsch searches for is the sonic equivalent of putrescence, but he seems unsure if it exists and, if it does, how to arrive at it.

There is of course no answering that question, but it seems central to Nitsch’s project to properly locate it. We have seen that Nitsch, almost by necessity, has to provide a more comprehensive genealogy for his music than he would, for instance, for his composition of smells or tactile surfaces. And yet music is much more likely to frustrate the demand for Dionysian immediacy than, say, smells or tactile surfaces. Clearly, then, Nitsch’s emphasis on his music and his concomitant acknowledgment of its problematic status are not primarily embarrassing hiccups that would need ironing out—they lie rather at the very heart of the phenomenon that Nitsch is interested. Precisely because they so insistently stage the demand for immediacy and its subversion, they hold a certain interest for Nitsch.

What is Nitsch’s music after? Nitsch seems to be interested in a second immediacy, the negative form of what Hegel calls *Sittlichkeit*—contingent, mediate history so traumatic that it becomes a kind of Pavlovian immediacy. The persistent echoes of air raid sirens that reverberate throughout Nitsch’s music and scores are perhaps the *shibboleth* to this kind of naturalized history. A memory that, in keeping with the previous section, has no (one) voice—purloining a phrase from Nabokov, we could

term this project *Scream, Memory*. We have already pointed to the fact that where Nitsch is most concerned with transcending language, he is nevertheless forced to rely on it—in his sequential, textual scores. In *DEJ*, a work much more explicitly (and ambivalently) in dialogue with history than Nitsch's other actions, Nitsch seems to be looking for precisely a means of bypassing the linguistic nature of memory, to admit the voice of memory only as *Geschrei*, not the individual's *Schrei*. However, those means are persistently frustrated.

In a central setpiece of *DEJ*, Nitsch stages a scene that is so clear in its historical references that the older among the action's participants (had it been performed) might in fact remember some of the impressions it is meant to conjure up. Those memories are mostly connected to sound. Throughout the scene, Nitsch includes sonic signposts: In fact, he has the loudspeakers blaring the siren signals of the three stages of WWII air raids: *Voralarm*, *Fliegeralarm*, *Entwarnung*. The scene to be accompanied by these sounds is described as follows:

From room 11, labyrinthine steps lead down, eventually leading to a chapel-like space. The chapel is many hundred meters under the earth. It has no roof; rather, a mine shaft of the same dimensions as the chapel leads back to the surface. Above the shaft, 'enemy' bombers can be seen passing. The chapel is filled with white lilac, everywhere there are baskets with overripe fruit, with bees and yellowjackets buzzing around them. Swallows are flying in and out, but the room itself is quiet, only the noise of the airplanes and the bees and yellowjackets can be heard. The open tabernacle is filled to the brim with nicotine-poisoned tea-roses. The ostensory is on the ground and adorned with roses. Pigs are let into the chapel, they smell their way to the ostensory.¹⁰⁶

The scene ties together the imaginary that animates the entirety of *DEJ*: A pervasive though perverse engagement with religion, a preoccupation with ripeness and decay, and the echoes of allegorized war. More importantly perhaps, this scene's allegory is much more straightforward than most of the *Aktionen* encompassed in *DEJ*: The underground cathedral with an overwhelming smell of decaying fruits and flowers and "enemy bombers" overhead is a rather obvious allegory for Nitsch's native Austria.

And just in case the scene's allegory was not clear enough, Nitsch's concluding remarks to *DEJ* make clear that this scene has also autobiographical dimensions—something of course rather odd from an artist so disdainful of the *bios* and the *grapheme*. (Even Nitsch's 56th *Aktion*, a *Requiem für meine Frau Beate* (1977) contains no such concrete allegoresis.) "I was between 5 and 6 years old when Vienna was bombed by 'enemy' airplanes" [*ich war zwischen 5 und 6 jahre alt, als Wien von 'feindlichen' Flugzeugen bombardiert wurde*]. The idea that this is a formative experience, and that an artist may make reference to it in his art may not seem that surprising. But at this point we really need to take seriously just how far Nitsch goes in dissolving the (feeling, remembering, speaking) subject, how far he goes in dispersing the voice, in muffling the individual scream. To allow the individual remembering subject (perhaps even melancholic subject) back into his project could be read as inconsistent, could be read as a capitulation—it is certainly the admission of a pronounced ambivalence at the heart of Nitsch's performances. The ambivalence is the following: is the scream that is to be the object of our Dionysian excavations in the end nothing other than an air raid siren?

But the autobiographical ambush Nitsch stages at several select points of his oeuvre has stranger echoes still: earlier, I pointed to the blackening-out of which consist Nitsch's "scoring" as a form of graphic aggression, suggesting that ultimately the "perfect score" for Nitsch would be a black, and thus uninscribable page. The air-raided episodes that may lie at the bottom of the "abyss of the scream" into which Nitsch invites us to peek synaesthetically suggest another reading of this seemingly aggressive impulse: In an interview with Danielle Spera, Nitsch relates his memories of the bombing of Vienna, pointing to the instinctual, knee-jerk panic, the flight reflex that still sets in every time he hears an air raid siren. Then he turns to a discussion of the horrific noise (*Lärm*) of the bombings, the rhythm of the bombs and the drone of the airplanes—the structural kinship between this *Lärm* and Nitsch's own *Lärmmusik* is obvious. But when Spera suggests the tired line that there is an element of repetition-compulsion in Nitsch's actions, Nitsch offers a strange and revealing detail: "When there was a hit somewhere close, then everything shook and there was dust. People sat around with damp cloths covering their faces, so they wouldn't have to breathe in the dust. They said, if you heard nothing, then a bomb had hit [your house]. So as long as you heard something, everything was okay."¹⁰⁷

The infernal noise of the bombing, as terrifying as it is, means nothing other than salvation from silence, from the silence that would mean a “direct hit.” The only thing worse than the *Lärm* is no *Lärm* at all. Nitsch is not quite specific what it means that “as long as you heard something,” you would be fine—something that us *Nachgeborene* can scarcely understand. Are you okay because it means your house isn’t hit? Is it in other words simply a bizarre acoustic effect, something about how sound waves travel? Are you okay because the noise, however intense, is still audible, whereas the direct hit transcends volume into inaudibility (a qualitative leap not unlike those fetishized by the “score” of *DEJ*)? Or does it mean you are okay, because you still have an eardrum that can hear, because your very anatomy would cave in under the pressure of a direct hit? It should be clear that each of these possibilities is in dialogue with “Nitschean” preoccupations—with the added twist that the very thing that threatens to shake the subject means paradoxically surcease from something else (silence, oblivion). That is not to say that understanding Nitsch’s sound as aggressive, or reading Nitsch’s blackened-out scores as aggressive is wrong—it simply means that this aggression carries a weak messianic charge that buys surcease, that puts something far worse into abeyance.

Notes

- ¹ See also Dieter Ronte’s essay in this volume.
- ² Hermann Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters—Zweiter Versuch* (Salzburg and Vienna: Residenz Verlag, 1995).
- ³ Nitsch himself does cast some doubt on just how ironic or just how affirmative his use of pre-recorded music-clips is: He asserts in his *Theory*, that he genuinely enjoys popular genres—“I am even open to kitsch” [*sogar dem kitsch gegenüber vermag ich mich zu öffnen*]. Cited in Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 375.
- ⁴ Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 383.
- ⁵ Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 390.
- ⁶ Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 380.
- ⁷ Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 377.
- ⁸ Luigi Russolo, *The Art of Noises* (New York: Pendragon, 1986).
- ⁹ Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 379.
- ¹⁰ Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 27 (#36).
- ¹¹ Reed’s own answer in an interview was: “I was serious about it. I was also really, really stoned.”
- ¹² *Projekt Prinzendorf—o.m. theater von hermann nitsch* (Catalogue, Kulturhaus der Stadt Graz) (Graz and Vienna: Breicha, 1981).
- ¹³ In his own recollections of the statement, Nitsch attributes the quote to Al Hansen. Cited in Hermann Nitsch, Danielle Spera, *Hermann Nitsch—Leben und Arbeit* (Vienna: Brandstätter, 1999), 204.
- ¹⁴ Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 375.
- ¹⁵ Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 381.
- ¹⁶ Henri-Louis de la Grange, ‘Prometheus Unbound,’ *Music and Musicians*, 20/5: 34-43.
- ¹⁷ Ellen von Tiedeböhl, ‘Memories of Skryabin’s Volga Tour (1910),’ *The Monthly Music Record* 6 (1926): 168.
- ¹⁸ Rosamund Bartlett, *Wagner and Russia* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 126ff.
- ¹⁹ Simon Morrison, ‘Skryabin and the Impossible,’ *Journal of the American Musicological Society*, 51/2 (1998): 289. As Martin Jay has pointed out, this of course is not in fact Nietzsche’s program. Martin Jay, ‘Somaesthetics and Democracy: Dewey and Contemporary Body Art,’ *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 36/4 (2002): 61.

- 20 Malcolm H Brown, 'Scriabin and Russian "Mystic" Symbolism,' *19th Century Music* 3 (1979-80): 42-51.
- 21 Boris de Schloezer, *Scriabin: Artist and Mystic* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1987).
- 22 Morrison, 292.
- 23 Morrison, 287.
- 24 Schloezer, 265.
- 25 Morrison, 296.
- 26 Morrison, 285.
- 27 Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 380.
- 28 Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 380.
- 29 Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 381.
- 30 Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 380.
- 31 Theodor W. Adorno, 'On Some Relationships between Music and Painting,' trans. Susan Gillespie, *Musical Quarterly* 79 (1995): 89; 'Über einige Relationen zwischen Musik und Malerei,' *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1978), 628-42.
- 32 Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 377.
- 33 Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 382.
- 34 Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 59 (#89).
- 35 Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 376.
- 36 Nitsch and Spera, *Hermann Nitsch—Leben und Arbeit*, 188.
- 37 Conversation between Brigid Doherty and Hal Foster at Slought Foundation on Thursday, March 3, 2005, organized by Aaron Levy (audio at <http://www.slought.org/content/11264/>).
- 38 *Projekt Prinzendorf—o.m. theater von hermann nitsch* (Catalogue, Kulturhaus der Stadt Graz) (Graz and Vienna: Breicha, 1981).
- 39 Hanno Millesi, 'Participating in the Play,' *Hermann Nitsch: 6-Tage-Spiel in Prinzendorf 1998* (Vienna: Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, 1999), 87.
- 40 Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 374.
- 41 Malcolm Green (ed.), *Writings of the Vienna Actionists* (London: Atlas Press, 1999).
- 42 Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 381.
- 43 Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 86 (#140).
- 44 Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 9 (#13).
- 45 Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 27 (#36).
- 46 Winfried Menninghaus, *Disgust: The Theory and History of a Strong Sensation* (New York:

SUNY Press, 2003), 122.

47 Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 27 (#36).

48 Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Aging of the New Music,' in *Essays on Music* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 181-202.

49 Cited in: Philip Ursprung, "'Catholic tastes': hurting and healing the body in Viennese Actionism in the 1960s,' *Performing the Body/Performing the Text*, eds. Amelia Jones and Andrew Stephenson (London: Routledge, 1999), 146.

50 See for instance Ursprung.

51 Nitsch and Spera, *Hermann Nitsch—Leben und Arbeit*, 188.

52 Hermann Nitsch, *The Fall of Jerusalem* (London: Atlas, 1997).

53 Hermann Nitsch, *Die Eroberung von Jerusalem* (Napoli and Berlin: Edition Morra and Verlag die Drossel, 1971).

54 Nitsch, *Die Eroberung von Jerusalem*, 1.

55 Nitsch, "Die Metaphysik der Aggression," in *Die Eroberung von Jerusalem*, 210.

56 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy* (New York: Random House, 1967), 115.

57 Nitsch, *Die Eroberung von Jerusalem*, 1.

58 Nitsch, 'Die Metaphysik der Aggression,' *Die Eroberung von Jerusalem*, 207.

59 Nitsch's invocation of Grabbe as *DEJ*'s patron saint is not accidental: Grabbe revolutionized German drama by creating plays that relied on a staccato of mass and domestic scenes largely divorced from the traditional dramatic conventions. He did so in the interest of a program of historic recovery (a sense of "how it really was") and a certain politics of remembrance seems to lie at the heart of *DEJ* as well.

60 Nitsch, *Die Eroberung von Jerusalem*, 93.

61 Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 377.

62 John Cage. *Silence—Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1961), 3.

63 Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 277.

64 See for instance James Pritchett, *The Music of John Cage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 138-39.

65 Nitsch, *Die Eroberung von Jerusalem*, 105.

66 Nitsch, *Die Eroberung von Jerusalem*, 94.

67 Nitsch, *Die Eroberung von Jerusalem*, 99.

68 Nitsch, *Die Eroberung von Jerusalem*, 187.

69 Nitsch, *Die Eroberung von Jerusalem*, 187.

- 70 Morisson, 'Skryabin and the Impossible,' 291.
- 71 Nitsch, *Die Eroberung von Jerusalem*, 116.
- 72 Nitsch, *Die Eroberung von Jerusalem*, 134.
- 73 Nitsch, *Die Eroberung von Jerusalem*, 134.
- 74 Hanno Millesi, 'Participating in the Play,' *Hermann Nitsch: 6-Tage-Spiel in Prinzendorf 1998* (Vienna: Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, 1999), 86.
- 75 Kyle Gann, 'Symphony in Beef Major,' *The Village Voice*, Oct. 13, 1998: 116.
- 76 Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 376.
- 77 Nitsch and Spera, *Hermann Nitsch—Leben und Arbeit*, 212.
- 78 Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 381.
- 79 Nitsch, *Die Eroberung von Jerusalem*, 82.
- 80 Millesi, 'Participating in the Play,' 86.
- 81 Millesi, 'Participating in the Play,' 86.
- 82 Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 380.
- 83 Christoph Cox, 'Visual Sounds: On Graphic Scores,' in: Christoph Cox, Daniel Warner, eds. *Audio Culture—Readings in Modern Music* (London: Continuum, 2004), 187-188.
- 84 Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 70 (#111).
- 85 Millesi, 'Participating in the Play,' 86.
- 86 Nitsch, *Die Eroberung von Jerusalem*, pp. 44-45; 50-51.
- 87 Nitsch, *Die Eroberung von Jerusalem*, pp. 140-41.
- 88 Nikolaj d'Origny Lübecker. *Le Sacrifice de la sirène: "Un coup de dés" et la poétique de Stéphane Mallarmé* (Copenhagen: Museum Tusculum, 2003), 27.
- 89 Lübecker, 29.
- 90 Nitsch, *Die Eroberung von Jerusalem*, 132-33.
- 91 Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 73.
- 92 Karl Eric Toepfer, 'Nudity and Textuality in Postmodern Performance,' *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 18/3 (1996): 76-91.
- 93 Nitsch and Spera, *Hermann Nitsch—Leben und Arbeit*, 202.
- 94 Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 381.
- 95 Hubert Klocker, 'Gesture and Object: Liberation as Aktion.' *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979*. (London and New York: Thames and Hudson, 1998).
- 96 Roland Barthes, 'The Grain of the Voice,' *Image, Music, Text* (London: Hill and Wang, 1977), 181-182.

- 97 Adriana Cavarero, *For More Than One Voice* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2005), 173-182.
- 98 Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 377.
- 99 Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 377.
- 100 Nitsch, *Zur Theorie des Orgien Mysterien Theaters*, 378.
- 101 Kyle Gann, 'Symphony in Beef Major,' *The Village Voice* 13 Oct (1998): 116.
- 102 Mladen Dolar, *A Voice and Nothing More* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007), 121.
- 103 Conversation between Brigid Doherty and Hal Foster at Slought Foundation on Thursday, March 3, 2005, organized by Aaron Levy (audio at <http://slought.org/content/11264/>).
- 104 I would hesitate to speak here of a "totalitarian" or even "fascist" impulse, not least because this is an objection that Nitsch himself addresses. "I know that the banal charge of fascism will be leveled at me" [*ich weiß, daß man mir den banalen faschismusvorwurf machen wird*—not an implausible worry, given Nitsch's aesthetics [Nitsch, *Die Eroberung von Jerusalem*, 209].
- 105 See also Dieter Ronte's essay in this volume.
- 106 Nitsch, *Die Eroberung von Jerusalem*, 81.
- 107 Nitsch and Spera, *Hermann Nitsch—Leben und Arbeit*, 17.

That the most recent installation in the United States dedicated to the work of Hermann Nitsch should take place in Philadelphia—rarely associated with cutting-edge artistic events—was not a question for the crowd gathered at the Slought Foundation's opening soirée in his honor. Strategically positioned at the periphery of the University of Pennsylvania's campus, Slought has accustomed audiences to expect nothing less than the most innovative global cultural phenomena. Indeed, with their heuristic, often polemical, introductions to contemporary theory and practices, Slought's curators have reinvented the *salon* as a hybrid venue for the twenty-first century.

On this occasion, Slought furnished its raw space with video screens of Nitsch's *Orgien Mysterium Theater* (hereafter OMT), a six-day performance held at his Austrian residence in 1998. Attendees mingled against a backdrop of startling images—humans pouring or disgorging blood over their naked bodies, others blindfolded and affixed to wooden crosses. They could observe OMT participants ceremoniously transported across the Prinzendorf castle grounds or follow processions along the winding paths of surrounding vineyards. Vying for viewers' attention, massive carcasses of animal flesh were splayed and exposed in a parody of the crucifixion, while male and female participants immersed themselves in oozing entrails superimposed on a human torso. Blood-drenched white vestments mirrored the expanse of gigantic canvases dripping with blood-red color. The sound effects accompanying the performances were drowned by conversational buzz. My own exchanges with colleagues were distracted by the enormous projection of a long metal sword

as it inched menacingly toward a naked female pubis.

In reaction to the *blood orgy*—curator Osvaldo Romberg’s descriptive phrase—the local newspaper’s art critic ultimately dismissed the OMT events as “quaint” attempts at transgression.¹ Already at the time of Nitsch’s 1984 American exhibition, Robert Mahoney had warned against a shallow reading that would reduce the artist to “a sly old roué bent on shocking the bourgeois world by fashioning iconoclastic f-yous at the forms of Christian ritual.”² Convinced that Nitsch’s “cult of the moment” has more in common with pagan than Christian rite, Mahoney set about deconstructing its sources according to Sir James George Frazer’s compendium of rituals in *The Golden Bough*.³ His caveat did not stop art historian Julius Anthony’s subsequent dismissal of the OMT and *Actionen* events as jejune manifestations of “transgressive art,” an otherwise admirable pedigree initiated by Manet’s mid-nineteenth century aesthetic revolution.⁴

At Slought, introductions provided by Osvaldo Romberg and Lorand Hegyi refrained from explicating images, Mahoney’s goal when he attempted to match them with specific references. Instead, they preferred to relate the OMT to the broad spectrum of post-Wagnerian European aspirations to a *total* art form by surveying the eclectic philosophical, ethnographic, social, religious, and psychoanalytic landscapes Nitsch has traversed in his lengthy career. The artist himself supplied a precise list of inspirational sources including “Buddha, Christ who rose from the dead, Nietzsche, Greek tragedies, Christian mass, Gregorian chants, early polyphony, Gothic cathedrals, Michelangelo’s sculptures, El Greco’s bright colors, Rembrandt, Tristan’s chromatics, Cezanne, Van Gogh, Munch, Schiele, Kandinsky and Schonberg, Arnulf Rainier...” even if he lamented it as but a “sketchy, futile attempt to capture the world encyclopedia without claiming completeness.”⁵

Arguably more revealing are Nitsch’s own extensive writings. Besides the actual scripts for the events, he has written an eloquent defense of his lifework, effectively translating modernism’s distinctive notions into a rapturous style. Viewers conditioned to the hard-edged violence of his early *Actionen* events may be unprepared for effusive paeans to the eternal return. But key terms such as orgiastic excess, attraction and repulsion, cruelty in art equated with extreme experience, the

proximity of orgasmic *jouissance* [bliss] to death, the Dionysian principle, sacrifice and slaughter, will resonate with seasoned readers of continental cultural criticism. Irreducible to the individual authors named by Nitsch or his commentators, whether Nietzsche, Freud, Frazer, Jung, Eliade, Artaud or Bataille, they testify to a synthesis and inter-textuality within European cultural and philosophical modernisms encompassed by the socio-anthropological perspective.

Nitsch’s art is therefore situated in relation to broader phenomena than his idiosyncrasies of style, esthetic predilections, or personal neurosis. One must look instead to the cultural legacy of European Modernism, whose distinctive turn was fashioned in the wake of the horrific carnage that put the lie to the claim of ending all such conflagrations and would eventually engulf Europe in what one historian has described as the twentieth century’s Thirty Years’ War.⁶ Stepping into the space left by the death of God, the generation that matured “between two hells” devised an esthetic of extremes responsive to the collective violence Nitsch witnessed first-hand. Playing at the limits of representation, of what is discursively communicable or tolerable for the senses, art and culture were now located “at the height of death.”⁷ Archaic rituals, Greek tragedy, and non-Western cultural forms were among the recurrent esoteric elements from which a new esthetic would emerge. After 1945, it would also furnish European art with a rich trove of images at the forefront of the deconstruction of modernity. Whether directly familiar to Nitsch or not, their legacy within the OMT can be detected throughout the “blood orgy” and is discussed below. Hegyi traces the divergence between American Abstract Expressionism and the art scene across the Atlantic to the assumptions and possibilities derived from this socio-anthropological sensibility.

Without denying the acuity of the underlying esthetic as well as political differences between New York and European art worlds, it is also the fact that the tension between *abstraction* and *expression* had already incited polemics within European avant-garde circles of the 1920’s. Briony Fer reminds us that the extreme claims made for abstract art elicited skeptical responses among those who viewed its as a kind of fantasy and the art itself as a new type of fetish: “It had become an object of fixation surrounded, like the art it was supposed to shore up, by all the delusions of a magic rite.”⁸ In the audacious review *Documents* he helped to edit between 1929

and 1930, the German émigré art critic Carl Einstein—author of the 1915 milestone study of African sculpture, *Negerplastik*—repudiated the stainless, pristine space of the picture envisaged as an ideal form of the modern. For Einstein, continues Fer, “it was a vision that was both terrifying in its dogmas but also born of terror. Rather than distinguish it from those magic rites usually associated with the primitive, he likened its repetition of forms to the same underlying drives. He claimed they ‘derive from the anxiety before the invisible and before the sudden disappearance by death.’”⁹ In the same context, Georges Bataille, director of the journal, declared even more explicitly that painting should be the scene of trauma, loss, and castration.

With their exploration of myth, sacrifice and violence, the OMT as well as Nitsch’s earlier Actionen events can be said to represent the implementation of ideas and experiments embraced, explored, and then abandoned in the prewar period. Subject to suspicion in the aftermath of fascism, they nonetheless continue to engage thinkers across academic disciplines and ideological persuasions. One could attribute their staying power to a strong commitment to the *real*, to encounters with phenomena so diverse, extreme, daring, elusive yet *insistent*, they demand recognition. The so-called dissidents from surrealism, including several contributors to *Documents*, repudiated the movement’s dubious “sur”relation to reality—taken over by dreams and susceptible to appropriation as symbols—as Michel Leiris clarified for a review of Picasso’s 1930 drawings: “For him it strikes me much less a matter of redoing reality in the sole goal of re-creating it, than in the imaginable ramifications, so as to tighten one’s grasp on it, to really be able to touch it. Instead of being a vague relation, a panorama of far-flung phenomena, the real is now lighted in all its pores, one penetrates it, it becomes for the first time and truly a REALITY.”¹⁰

The first goal of the present essay will therefore be an inquiry into the distinctive sensorium of visual, tactile, olfactory, auditory and gustatory experiences the OMT events activate, even if we must rely on the mediation of written accounts or video simulations to appreciate their effects. I propose we take seriously Nitsch’s claim to have *turned the body inside out*. Projected beyond the conventional realm of the senses, we observe an outpouring of blood and guts. I argue that these

extraversions constitute the distinctive aesthetic feature of the OMT. As such, they are central to the archaeology of the senses explored by Nitsch throughout his career culminating in the OMT.

Second, my intervention is motivated by the following argument: that the socio-anthropological perspective is fully relevant to an appreciation of Nitsch’s work on condition that its critical dimension be equally acknowledged. Here I refer to Nitsch’s explanation that the OMT is a dramatization of the contest between Dionysus and Christ: “My drama stages a formidable fight—that between Dionysus and Christ, the crucified.”¹¹ The abundance of blood and entrails provides a visual instantiation of the forces Nietzsche delineated when he famously claimed to be the “first” European disciple of Dionysus on the one hand, and the “Antichrist” on the other.

Indeed, less familiar than the widespread appropriation of the Dionysian/Apollonian duality is Nietzsche’s explanation for a tortuous trajectory that led to a “return to” Christianity. For it is by dint of the detour into archaic Greek culture initiated at the time of his first major work, *The Birth of Tragedy* [1871] that he was able to formulate his complex relationship not to Christianity—those repudiations will become only more vehement in his last works—but to the figure of Jesus. His final writings denounce the Pauline doctrine as well as the Gospels as a betrayal of “his” Jesus, the one who appears in the moving portrait of “The Antichrist.” In perhaps the most incisive formulation of his position, Nietzsche exhorted readers not to shirk the needed sacrifice of living without Christianity. For it is only by straying as far as possible from one’s native soil and by wandering into the wide world, as he urges, that one can earn the right of return to the homeland.

What is to be gained by a sacrificial relinquishment of personal quietude in the face of isolation, suffering, even despair? Nietzsche’s response is unequivocal: herein resides the legitimating basis for a new perspective: “No, your evidence will be of no weight until you have lived for years on end without Christianity, with an honest, fervent zeal to endure life in the *antithesis* of Christianity: until you have wandered far, far away from it. Only if you are driven back, not by homesickness but by judgment on the basis of a *rigorous comparison*, will your homecoming possess any significance!”¹²

As a serious reader of Michel de Montaigne's essays, Nietzsche had assimilated his daring example of circumventing censorship by enlisting evidence from other cultures to forward incendiary critiques. The ethnographic detour resulting from contact with New World Amerindians reported to be cannibals undoubtedly furnished the most dramatic comparisons. But as the anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss pointed out, the rediscovery of the pagan world transmitted through Greek and Roman classics is what provided the Renaissance mind exemplified by Montaigne with its most comprehensive alternative to regnant mores. A sustained immersion in a pre-Christian universe, he argued, initiated the first ethnographic experience of modern Western culture.

Historians of the eminent French mode of *anthropological thinking*—to borrow Lévi-Strauss's description—noted that it fuelled a counter-discourse of critical ideas for two centuries until their dramatic efflorescence during the Enlightenment. Short of culminating in a revolution, however, Nietzsche suggested that to overcome a paralyzing *ressentiment* toward the present requires a reckoning with history: "The men of the future will one day deal in this way with all evaluations of the past; one has voluntarily *to live through* them once again, and likewise their antithesis—if one is to possess the *right* to pass them through the sieve."¹³

It is now possible to suggest that the OMT fulfills the dual requirements of the Nietzschean mandate. With its effusions of blood and guts, the OMT offers an expanded gamut of sensory experiences relatively inaccessible to most participants. Their commitment to the six-day performance entails a living through of stimuli and sensations antithetical to the modern *habitus*. Most dramatically, the staged contest between Dionysus and Christ at the center of the performances, visually reveals one of several oppositions whose dynamics inform our aesthetic unconscious.

Dionysus and Christ

By placing the bleeding carcass of a slain bull at the heart of the OMT performances, Nitsch projects one of the most potent icons of the ancient world to also stimulate the modern imagination. Whether in his magnificent ancestors of prehistoric cave art and the Minotaur of the Cretan labyrinth, the Spanish *corrida* or Picasso's elaborate

minotauromachie, the bull's extraordinary force and menacing power signal an ambivalent, erotically charged fascination with death. Ancient Bacchanalia honoring the god Dionysus incarnated in a bull are reputed to have entailed sacrificial mutilation of the phallus and culminated in the consumption of raw flesh. Wine and blood figure at the nexus of this deity's heady associations with inebriation, castration, and rebirth.

References to Dionysus are ubiquitous throughout Nietzsche's writings and equated with the liberation of repressed energies. To this end, he remains surprisingly optimistic regarding the efficacy of his latter-day rituals. Yet one also can infer from the protracted nature of the six-day OMT, the modulated cadences of the processions, and his detailed instructions, that Nietzsche heeded the injunction of *The Birth of Tragedy* to be wary of delirious intoxication and respect the distance separating *tragic* Dionysian power from its abject sources. By decanting the barbarian "witches' brew," the Greeks, Nietzsche claimed, had purged it of sensuality and cruelty, leaving nonetheless "a curious blending and duality in the emotions of the Dionysian revelers [which] reminds us of the phenomenon that pain begets joy, that ecstasy may wring sounds of agony from us. At the very climax of joy there sounds a cry of horror [...]"¹⁴ Thus, it is not the proliferation of Dionysian avatars that intrigues us now so much as how they alert us to be wary—as Nietzsche counseled—of facile temptations in place of the prolonged sojourn in the wilderness. At stake is art's capacity to wrench a celebration of life from the will to confront death.

To do so, art's *agon* must sustain the tension of extremes neutralized in other domains. Nietzsche, for instance, reproved Christianity's willingness to "digest opposites like pebbles"¹⁵ in its zeal for hegemony. The propensity to assimilate other religions represses their specificity while promoting a deceptive model of universalism. It also eradicates access to comparisons Christians could enlist in their challenge to its life-denying morality. In the end, "The Christian church is an encyclopedia of prehistoric cults and conceptions of the most diverse origin, and that is why it is so capable of proselytizing [...]"¹⁶ Of the two illustrative deities Nietzsche names, Mithra is an ancient Iranian god probably derived from India and master of cows. Mithra's cult in the ancient world, especially among Roman soldiers, was consecrated by the sacrifice of a bull. As in André Masson's illustration included

here, Mithra himself was often represented sacrificing the primordial bull. His festival day, December 25th, is at the origin of Christmas.

With this striking illustration of how a pagan deity informs one of the holiest of Christian celebrations, it is now possible to appreciate the ideological import of Nitsch's visual archaeology. The recurrent figure of the splayed bull evokes a trace image of Christ on the cross and therefore could be dismissed as another of Nitsch's [in]famous transgressions. Alternatively, the esoterically informed may view it as a reminder of Christianity's pagan sources. Missing from both, however, is the comparison the OMT dramatizes between sacrifice and slaughter.

Sacrifice and Slaughter

In a collection entitled "Sacrifices," published in 1936, Masson's lithographs furnished visual renderings of the widespread interest in archaic cults. Already in Bataille's *Documents* piece, "Rotten Sun," explicit details regarding the sacrifice of Mithra illuminate their enactment in the OMT: "The Mithraic cult of the sun led to a very widespread religious practice: people stripped in a kind of pit that was covered with a wooden scaffold, on which a priest slashed the throat of a bull; they were suddenly doused with hot blood, to the accompaniment of the bull's boisterous struggle and bellowing—[...]."¹⁷ From the point of view forwarded by Bataille, the blood orgy obviates utilitarian interpretations of sacrifice—either for expiation or propitiation—in favor of a celebration of the life force that literally overflows in an excess of gushing, spraying blood.

Bataille's enthusiasm for the Mithraic celebration is credited with an influence on his friend Picasso's "Crucifixion" of 1930, where the artist's personal archaeology as well as cultural references bathe in the vibrant red and yellow evocative of the ritual's central motifs of sun and blood. Picasso's voracious eclecticism drew from the major journals of the interwar period, whether *Documents*, *Minotaure* or *Cahiers d'art*. Besides the already familiar exposure to the arts of Oceania, Africa and pre-Columbian peoples as well as European art of the archaic periods, these reviews also featured "Christian art that was demonic or heretical [...]."¹⁸ Irrespective of any religious affiliation, Nietzsche recognized in the pull exerted by the image of Christ

on the cross, the expression of a pervasive longing: "Of all the means of producing exaltation, it has been human sacrifice which has at all times most exalted and elevated man."¹⁹ Sacrifice so conceived embraces the freedom from subservience he admired in Jesus. Christian doctrine, however, channels the potential for sovereign exaltation into the "psychology of the redeemer," leading to the instauration of an eternal debt between sinners and their savior. After Nietzsche and Bataille, yes-sayers like Nitsch repudiate a redemptive morality trapping human energies into a cycle of guilt and expiation by affirming life as an exuberant expenditure projected beyond the self.

In her presentation at Slough, Brigid Doherty alluded to *Actionen* events entailing violence on a slaughtered lamb, the object of Nitsch's enraged exorcisms. This earlier stratum of his career documents the most evident use of superimpositions and physical montage in the OMT's dramatizations of the agony of Christ. Nitsch himself is quite insistent that despite the OMT's esoteric antecedents, it would be a serious lacuna to neglect the place of Christianity in his work. Nor should the recurrence of familiar icons be dismissed as gratuitous jabs at a religious experience he qualifies as sadomasochistic. With comparisons to the Isenheim altarpiece, Nitsch followed the inspiration proposed by Grunewald's depiction of Christ's agony. The painting is effective precisely because it encompasses a complimentary ecstatic moment, resulting in the *coincidentia oppositorum* characteristic of the sacred.

The possibility to conceptualize the sacred outside the bounds of organized religion in purely social terms, was the contribution made by Emile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* [1912] to the socio-anthropological paradigm. Renewing with the example we have traced from Montaigne to Nietzsche, Durkheim distanced himself from his early treatises on suicide and the division of labor to examine archaic religious practices. His prolonged ethnographic detour into the literature on Australian Aboriginals was rewarded when he could claim that their effervescent festivals of intense and transformative sociability—which he qualified as sacred—were essential to viable social entities, including modern ones. In contrast with the profane realm of activity primarily dedicated to survival, sacred moments offered a collective release from the requirements of production by engaging in a joyful "squandering"—even pleasurable destruction—as Nietzsche would have it.

Indeed, in 1887 the latter's life-affirming aesthetic had exhorted art to reclaim the superior form of the festival, "What good is all the art of our works of art if we lose that higher art, the art of the festival?" He then went so far as to propose a modern, albeit measured, version of the ancient bacchanal, allowing for a "brief lustful moment: a *little* intoxication and madness."²⁰

That such festivities could mobilize the totality of a culture was the central hypothesis of Marcel Mauss's celebrated essay, *The Gift* [1924-25], arguably the single most influential work of post-Durkheimian sociology of the interwar period. As intellectual heir to the French school's distinctive refusal to segregate non-Western or pre-modern cultures into the separate discipline of anthropology developed by British and American field researchers, Mauss's sociology was renowned for his daring comparisons. Intentionally dismantling the hierarchical distinctions erected by Western taxonomies, Mauss forwarded what he described as "archaeological conclusions" regarding the foundations of social life. The archaeological analogy offers a viable alternative to Nitsch's obvious frustration with an encyclopedic inventory by highlighting obscure or hidden social practices whose stubborn persistence notwithstanding, are dismissed as insignificant for the modern world. When sociology effected an ethnographic detour via other cultures in order to return to the most pressing challenges confronting modernity, it demonstrated that an issue censored or repressed by the dominant research paradigm had to be accessed by an alternative route.

Mauss's archaeological model also provides a corrective to Freud's, which had compared the mind's capacious storage of memories to the city of Rome's accumulation of antiquities. Missing from this metaphor, Freud later acknowledged, was the repressive dynamic central to psychoanalysis. In its sociological counterpart, cultural comparison provides the methodological cover for inquiries into a controversial subject. Or as one reader of Mauss astutely observed, the archaeological approach's²¹ ethnographic illustrations highlight what modernity had to isolate or eject in order to support its claims to heightened rationality. For sociology's contribution to unearthing hidden truths and revealing the process of repression with which science and philosophy may be complicit, the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu compared it to a psychoanalysis of the social.

Thus, rather than de-sedimentation of accumulated, discrete layers, the archaeology we have just described exposes the persistence of the archaic within the modern. The model's dynamism provides a riposte to the frequent critiques directed against the socio-anthropological approach to which the OMT would also be subject. Debasing the ethnographic reference to a regressive "mythic primitivism" fuels the OMT's detractors without acknowledging the central question it raises regarding the myth of modernity itself. Yet more deleterious to the socio-anthropological perspective is the willingness of its critics to jettison forms of activity equated with the irrational and therefore accused of being incubators for fascism.

The far-reaching implications of socio-anthropology may seem remote from the OMT's orgiastic celebrations marked by blood and guts. But not if one considers that the dynamic nature of its sensory archaeology dramatizes the repression of archaic forms. How else to construe Nitsch's claim that the events stage a contest between Dionysus and Christ? As metonyms for conflicting forces and civilizations, they challenge the version of progress hailed as the triumph of monotheism over the ancient gods animating myths and tragedy. In the wake of Nietzsche's example, Jacques Derrida's earliest deconstructions of the Western metaphysical tradition targeted the repression of Eastern religions in the name of Platonic reason.²² Hegyi hails Nitsch's version of the archaeological approach as exemplary for its commitment to examining the present in its *totality*—a totality, I would add, that is attained through its relation to earlier cultural forms, including those often evidenced in Nitsch's own Middle European backyard.

This brings us to the local farmers in the region of Prinzendorf who nurture and live in close proximity to the animals they kill, a striking contrast with the debased anonymity of the urban slaughterhouse. Eli Lotard's famous photograph of the Villette slaughterhouse in the late nineteen-twenties has become an iconic reference to the abattoir. The actual—or assumed—animal it conjures is shrouded, an amorphous mass closer to a cleaning rag than the sacred animals of the holy temples in India described by Bataille's accompanying text. The Villette photograph graphically reminds us of the degradation of sacrifice from open temples to shunned slaughterhouses, where blood must be wiped from the floor instead of licked by Kali's delirious worshippers.

Despite the displacement of animal slaughter to isolated abattoirs increasingly distanced from the city center, the practice was never abandoned in the country farms where Nitsch acquires animals for the OMT performances. In one notable picture, we observe a farmer, knife poised, admiring his handiwork. Like his legendary forebear Tristan, who revealed noble origins by artfully carving game, a demonstration of comparable skills wins the local Austrian farmer/butcher pride of place in the OTM ritual. Thanks to him, participants gain access to the bull's entrails, an experience described by Nitsch as recovering the hunter's tactile contact with his prey, while touting triumph over an archaic adversary. Fondling the viscera precipitates the archaeological recovery of an inner truth [since] "it is the long-forgotten sensation of the hunter, the predatory animal that is essential. Hands plunge into the body of the defeated enemy (the animal), and the flesh is cut to be eaten. I feel the utterly organic softness of feces-filled, warm, damp, and steaming intestines. The *lost sense of touching* is reactivated, as is the experience of deep areas of sensation."²³

Predictably, some of the most vocal opposition to Nitsch's utilization of dead animals emanates from animal welfare activists. His considered response is that so long as humans indulge their carnivorous habits, then he too will continue to integrate that important sensory experience into his events. Moreover, for centuries, dead animals have been featured in artistic representation, and he is no less esthetically motivated than his canonical predecessors. The lambs and bulls included in the OMT rituals or processions are then consumed during Prinzendorf's feasts.

Bodily Architectures

From the earliest projections for the OMT events, Nitsch was convinced of the correlation between their success and the nature of the architectural space in which they could flourish. Acquisition of the Prinzendorf Castle by his wife Beate in 1971, therefore marked a critical turning point in Nitsch's lifelong aspiration to implement the OMT. Located in proximity to a village some thirty miles from Vienna, the property encompasses lovely surroundings as well as a vineyard, and is reminiscent of fields where the youthful Nitsch used to place himself in a trance. Shrieking sirens, however, like those that compelled him as a child to seek cover from bombs

overhead, contribute to the OMT's cacophony, just as tanks crush the bucolic idyll. These sensory disturbances evoke the etiology of Nitsch's war-induced traumas and, as Susan Jarosi convincingly argues, repeat the turn toward an aesthetic consolation that would continue throughout his entire career.²⁴ Indeed, the goal of mastery-through-repetition described by Freud is the constant Nitsch himself equates with the *abreaction* determining all of his work, attested by the constancy of the scenarios depicted, their attendant objects, and obsessively recurrent symbols. Yet the sheer beauty of the Prinzendorf setting informs multiple facets of the OMT which merit further consideration.

Foremost is the architectural significance of the castle itself. Already in the late 1920's, Bataille denounced the principles of domination and authority embodied in the formal constraints inherited from classical architecture. Nitsch's equally vehement anti-architecture animus targets the buildings of commercial modernism as apotheosis of the warrior mentality sublimated into the aggressive spirit of capitalism. Both found refuge in labyrinthine caves, either the painted, prehistoric ones of Lascaux or the womb-like subterranean enclaves of the Prinzendorf castle. Its "rooms burrowed out of the rock or earth and left either in a raw state or lined with cement," Prinzendorf castle provided an objective correlative to the OMT's "extreme sensuality." As such, they evoke "*The turning inside out of the psychic and corporeal reality [...]*"²⁵—already highlighted as a signal feature of Nitsch's art, the abundance of blood and guts as extra-versions of inner life.

The parallel archaeologies of psychic and physical space are further manifested in Nitsch's drawings, where the visual archaeology of the OMT translates into a superimposition of layers described this way: "In accordance with [his] concept of several stories on top of one another in the earth, he began to print one ground-plan over another in separate colors, as in a projection."²⁶

Nitsch points to notable antecedents whose curiosity for knowledge of the body's invisible workings is evidenced among 17th century Dutch still-life paintings, just as it finds an outlet in the exploration of human anatomy. Such august comparisons, however, do not account for the innovations for which Nitsch is justly renowned. Rarely have montage and superimposition been mobilized to more dramatic ends

than as in his multi-layered tableaux. Among the most striking is the placement of animal organs on human figures (or the reverse), as it visually instantiates the archaeological strata of references the OMT excavates.

In keeping with the OMT's goal of mobilizing the full array of senses, the possibility to physically manipulate organs bulging with blood and excrement and thereby savor the variety of their colors and shapes, smells and textures, provides a virtually unique access to the nature and vibrancy of the life forces. Lest one accuse him of fixating on the lurid or shocking, Nitsch noted a similar reaction consistent with this visually stunning aesthetic when visiting the fish market in Barcelona, where "animals are cut up efficiently and used on an industrial scale, characterized by an impressive order and aestheticism. An exuberance of moist, inebriating colors, a wealth of color unfolds before our very eyes. The sea discloses its living entrails, its Dionysian vitality."²⁷

That these *tableaux* are not entirely *vivants* also contributes to their pungency. One also cannot avoid being reminded of mortality when immersed in the viscera of a slaughtered creature's smelly, oozing materiality of non-sublimated being. Like the other central actions of the OMT entailing excessive amounts of blood, this one concentrates all the senses by provoking an encounter between the forces of attraction and repulsion. Nitsch acknowledged as much when explaining the protracted nature of the events as a necessary response to *disgust*: only by means of a sustained counter-conditioning to spontaneous refusal can one accede to the full range of sensory possibilities. In their evocation of such entrenched ambivalence, the OMT events demonstrate modern culture's devaluation of our capacity to engage antithetical impulses.

Nitsch's orchestration of the OMT qualifies as art in his ambition to enact the violence inherent to otherwise sublimated versions of the same story. The prevalence of blood throughout the events ostensibly dramatizes the opposition between Dionysus and Christ and their respective fates within the history of Western civilization. But at some point, we also get the impression that religious or cultural specificities are blurred by the urge to plunge participants into an array of associations whose archaeology of references spans the sacrificial to the sadistic.

But what does it mean to produce art inspired by bloody organs? The ethnographic detour via Dionysian sacrifices relays the idea that such a possibility has been either marginalized or suppressed, while often continuing to manifest itself in an alternative form.

The Poetics and Politics of Blood

Drama, Carl Einstein suggested, is the work of the artist-as-shaman, whose histrionic narrative translates a group's inchoate feelings into form. Nitsch's initial concentration on the expression of the vital sensations associated with "pain, suffering and death" first led to the exclusion of formal considerations in his early work. But the artist chronicles his subsequent shift to the recognition of form's centrality this way:

Form enticed me to strengthen my commitment to expression. Because of form and its ramifications, I was driven into yawning chasms of erotic, sadomasochistic liveliness. The form of artistic designing and the commitment to expression pushed my art to extremes, they were like a maelstrom, sucking me into the depths of depravity and immorality, where notions of good and evil are no longer valid. [...] Form is not committed to morality. On the contrary, form represents a deeper, more anticipatory intention, i.e. that of coming to be.²⁸

Unlike the mechanistic model of liberation in which he places considerable faith, whose lifting of constraints releases repressed feelings—a causality even Freud acknowledged was not necessarily reliable—Nitsch's eventual commitment to form encourages us to consider its relation to the production of extreme sensations. Thus, the archaeological appreciation of why inner organs play a central role in the unfolding of the OMT drama would be incomplete without this assessment:

The artist must obtain information about the status of our organs to learn how the organs can be used for form. I am talking about the color, property, and consistency of an organ or flesh: is it soft, bulging, damp, slimy, wet? [...] The artist and dramatist, [...] wants to identify, see, smell,

taste, and, most importantly, touch the inner flesh, the all-pervasive blood, and the inner organs in their intoxicating flowery colors.²⁹

Both this passage and the description of the Barcelona fish market cited above refute the rapprochement between Nitsch and Bataille on the basis of a shared delectation for the *abject* and the *informe*, calling instead for an appreciation of the Nitschean sensorium's originality.³⁰

The question of the morality of form raised by Nitsch recalls Romberg's observation that terrorist groups also stage their *bloody* orgies, but for the purpose of harnessing the stimulated energies toward their own ends.³¹ In a rare allusion to fascism Nitsch said as much, when he described evil as the outcome of a "misguided use of energies."³² Surely his revulsion against Nazism explains the absence of any teleological pretense regarding the outcome of the OMT events. Other than the ideal of liberated senses, no goal is mentioned. At no point can one detect aspirations for the formation of a new community beyond the one created by the events themselves. For this reason, I concur with Romberg when he rejects any facile equation between the OMT's *blood* orgy and the *bloody* ones enacted by terrorists throughout the world. That such a comparison would become a stratum of the OMT's exploration of blood is a consequence of the open-ended nature of the archaeological totality. It should be welcomed as an incentive to further investigate the specificity of the OTM, especially as it touches on the question of violence.

In the 1930's, Bataille understood that his exhortations to violent expenditure would not be immune to political recuperation. The key to his position is that extreme action resists the acquisition of material gain or symbolic power, especially domination, over an individual or group. Bloody orgies are a byproduct of motives antithetical to those of the OMT when devoid of respect for forces beyond one's control; especially heinous is that they may be galvanized by the desire to appropriate them for a self-serving agenda.

Nitsch's Aesthetics

In the final analysis, Romberg and Hegyi agree to a primarily aesthetic assessment of the OMT, leaving us to question whether it is possible to do so according to criteria consistent with the socio-anthropological perspective. Hegyi leads us to believe that is indeed Nitsch's preference, since in his performances "Heathen, Christian, and Nietzschean concepts are radically re-interpreted so as to be able to analyze the functions of artistic activities and processes of artistic creation."³³ Nonetheless, extreme artistic activities continue to elicit extreme reactions, whether those of the Austrian public servants who wished to ban them, or their dismissal by critics as outmoded transgression.

Transgression returns us to the relevance of the OMT to culture today. Unlike the immediate postwar period when American *Abstract Expressionism* evolved at ideological and aesthetic antipodes to the European *Tachism* or *Nouvel Art* with which Nitsch identifies, the art scenes of the last decades on both sides of the Atlantic witnessed the proliferation of happenings, body and performance art. As international phenomena, they would appear to challenge the viability of the earlier geo-cultural dichotomy and give credence to the view that they are indeed *Actionen's* successors. A further convergence may be evidenced in Nitsch's own vast canvases of brilliant blood-red drippings. Not surprisingly, Nitsch himself is invested in maintaining a sharp distinction between his work and that of American counterparts. Even when acknowledging his debt to Action Painting's dripping technique, he insists on distinguishing the sensory impact sought through his substitution of dirt and blood for paint.

If the socio-anthropological aesthetic tests the boundaries of a culture in a specific time and place, then it follows—as Carl Einstein suggested—that art functions as a psychoanalytic gauge of the fears, drives, and desires of the artist as well as those of viewers, professional critics, and academic commentators. Unlike Nitsch, his precursors in the interwar period put little stock in the possibility for an ultimate liberation from the effects of social constraints. But like him, they turned toward innovative social and cultural forms for the exploration of sensations virtually unattainable in isolation, short of courting madness or self-destruction. In a similar

vein, the participatory aspect of the OMT is touted as a crucial ingredient to its success. Hanno Millesi provided a rare testimonial of his role in the events, in which he carried the burdensome entrails of a sacrificed bull on heavy wooden stretchers. The climax of reaching the summit of a steep incline, he declared, was nothing less than an “aesthetic” element of the drama.³⁴

In this presentation, I have argued for a shift in focus away from identification or denunciation of transgressions, to considering the OMT as a *process*. For as Hegyi argued, one need not necessarily be able to identify specific references in the OMT events in order to react to them: “His [Nitsch’s] art creates the myth [...] It creates the social and mental background able to decipher the message and meaning of rituals.”³⁵ According to the following passage, Nitsch stresses a mythic commonality between Dionysus and Jesus occulted by several thousand years of doctrine only the aesthetic, sensory experience could ultimately reclaim. Here is his recapitulation of the necessary trajectory from painting to action:

The substance and sensuality of color led to flesh and blood, to the act of opening and gutting animal carcasses, to our showing and touching slimy and moist entrails. Blood splatters. We understood the reason why cruelty and killings had become a part of myths. Annihilating the substance of life, tearing apart the flesh, Dionysus encounters the crucified Jesus. The two mythical appearances meet in Resurrection.³⁶

Locating Nitsch in a genealogy ranging from Montaigne to Nietzsche and Durkheim and Mauss, points to his revitalization of art forms along the lines of critical thinking which have always incited recourse to an ethnographic detour. The resulting comparisons—ideally as rigorous as Nietzsche called for—are not to be confused with differences essentialized for political ends. Rather, we recall that the sacrifice Nietzsche prescribed must endure a distancing from one’s own culture, including its aesthetic conditioning, in order to better re-engage with it. Ever the total artist, Nitsch the painter, writer, musician, architect and dramatist displays remarkable virtuosity in pursuit of a single goal: to free himself and companion travelers from impediments to the realization of their sensory potential. It remains a matter of aesthetic preference whether to follow his path strewn with blood and guts.

Notes

- ¹ Edward J. Sozanski, ‘What’s intense to some may disgust others,’ *The Philadelphia Inquirer*, Sunday, February 27, 2005: H10.
- ² Robert Mahoney, ‘Hermann Nitsch and Gunter Brus: Worlds Beyond Painting,’ *Gunter Brus and Hermann Nitsch at White Box* (New York-Philadelphia: 1984, in collaboration with Galerie Heike Curtze, Vienna), 7.
- ³ Mahoney, 7.
- ⁴ See Anthony Julius, *Transgressions: The Offences of Art* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002).
- ⁵ Hermann Nitsch, ‘A Life in Review,’ in *Hermann Nitsch: 6-Tage-Spiel in Prinzendorf 1998* (Wien: Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien), 25.
- ⁶ Arno Mayer, *The Persistence of the Old Regime. Europe to the Great War* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981), 3.
- ⁷ Georges Bataille, ‘Hegel, la mort et le sacrifice.’ *Oeuvres complètes XII Articles II 1950-1961* (Paris: NRF Gallimard: 1988), 330.
- ⁸ Briony Fer, *On Abstract Art* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), 2.
- ⁹ Fer, 2-3.
- ¹⁰ Michel Leiris, ‘Toiles récentes de Picasso.’ *Documents 1930* (Paris: Jean-Michel Place, 1991), 2:64. My translation.
- ¹¹ Op cit., 31.
- ¹² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Daybreak. Thoughts on the prejudices of morality*. Trans. by R.J. Hollingdale. Introduction by Michael Tanner (Cambridge, London, New York, New Rochelle, Melbourne, Sydney: Cambridge University Press, 1982), #61.
- ¹³ Nietzsche, *Daybreak. Thoughts on the prejudices of morality*, #61.
- ¹⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche *The Birth of Tragedy, in Basic Writings of Nietzsche*. Introduction by Peter Gay. Trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: The Modern Library, 2000), 40.
- ¹⁵ Nietzsche, *Daybreak. Thoughts on the prejudices of morality*, #70.
- ¹⁶ Nietzsche, *Daybreak. Thoughts on the prejudices of morality*, #70.
- ¹⁷ Georges Bataille, ‘Rotten Sun.’ Trans. Allan Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*. Ed. and intro. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 57.
- ¹⁸ Ruth Kaufmann, ‘Picasso’s Crucifixion of 1930,’ *The Burlington Magazine*, September 1969: 553.

- ¹⁹ Nietzsche, *Daybreak. Thoughts on the prejudices of morality*, #45
- ²⁰ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*. With a Prelude in Rhymes and an Appendix of Songs. Trans. with commentary by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage Books, Random House, 1974), #89. Emphasis added.
- ²¹ See Bruno Karsenti, *L'homme total. Sociologie, anthropologie et philosophie chez Marcel Mauss* (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 1997).
- ²² See Jacques Derrida in 'La Pharmacie de Platon,' in *Disséminations*.
- ²³ Nitsch, 'A Life in Review,' 35. Emphasis added.
- ²⁴ See Susan Jarosi's contribution to this volume.
- ²⁵ Hermann Nitsch, *Die Architektur des Orgien Mysterien Theaters/Band I*, translated as *The Architecture of the O.M. Theatre/Volume I* (Munich: Verlag Fred Jahn, 1987), 25-26.
- ²⁶ Wolfgang Wunderlich, 'The Iconography and Aesthetics of Nitsch's Lithographs,' Hermann Nitsch, *Die Architektur des Orgien Mysterien Theaters/Band I*, translated as *The Architecture of the O.M. Theatre/Volume I* (Munich: Verlag Fred Jahn, 1987), 30.
- ²⁷ Nitsch, 'A Life in Review,' 35.
- ²⁸ Nitsch, 'A Life in Review,' 26.
- ²⁹ Nitsch, 'A Life in Review,' 35.
- ³⁰ Cf. Martin Jay's focus on a certain shared concept of violence and the 'informe' in Bataille according to the reading provided by Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss in his 'Somaesthetics and Democracy. John Dewey and Contemporary Body Art,' *Refractions of Violence* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 163-176.
- ³¹ Osvaldo Romberg, 'Redemption through Blood: Hermann Nitsch's Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries.' (Philadelphia: Slought Foundation, 2005): no pagination.
- ³² Op.cit., 27.
- ³³ Lorand Hegyi, 'Taking an Unbiased Look at Hermann Nitsch's Six-Day-Play,' in *Hermann Nitsch. 6-Tage-Spiel in Prinzendorf 1998* (Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Palais Liechtenstein 27.März-16. Mai 1999), 7.
- ³⁴ Hanno Millesi, 'Participating in the Play,' *Hermann Nitsch. 6-Tage-Spiel in Prinzendorf 1998* (Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien, Palais Liechtenstein 27.März-16. Mai 1999), 85.
- ³⁵ Lorand Hegyi, 'Performance with Mythological References. Hermann Nitsch's Contribution to the Gesamtwerk, Gunter Brus and Hermann Nitsch at White Box (New York-Philadelphia: in collaboration with Galerie Heike Curtze, Vienna, 1984), 18.
- ³⁶ Nitsch, 'A Life in Review,' 27.

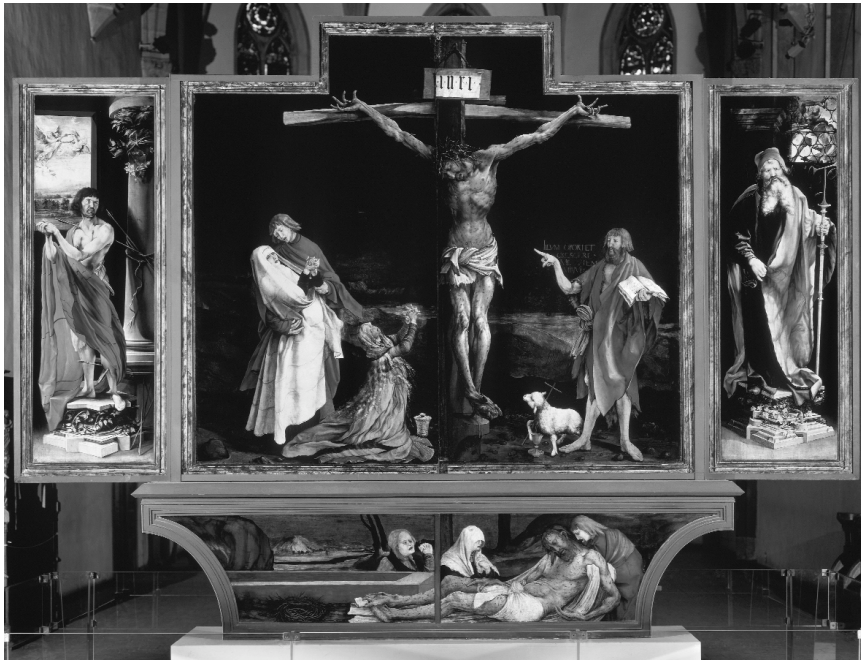


Fig. 1: Matthias Grünewald, Isenheim Altarpiece, closed state, *Crucifixion, Lamentation, Saints Sebastian and Anthony*, ca. 1516, oil on panel, 2.97 x 3.28 m. Musée d'Unterlinden, Colmar (photograph provided by Scala/Art Resource, NY)

“The Grünewald of Happenings” - On Traumatic Subjectivity
 Susan Jarosi

In keeping with this volume's title, I would like to begin my contribution with an anecdote derived from Nitsch's earliest encounters with America, one that he shared with me during his visit to Seattle in 2004. Having just stepped off the plane from Vienna, we were chatting in a taxi on the way to a restaurant downtown. The conversation turned to his interest in the history of European art, and he acknowledged the particular influence of Peter Paul Rubens. I offered that he also seemed conspicuously enamored of Matthias Grünewald, and he enthusiastically agreed, volunteering, “Allan Kaprow liked to call me ‘The Grünewald of Happenings.’” This epithet struck me as remarkably felicitous, suggesting through unflinching yet elegant means the richness of Nitsch's artistic and intellectual engagement between Europe and America. Nitsch's extensive (and seemingly fond) personal experiences in America began in the late 1960s, a time when his work was increasingly censored (as was that of his fellow Actionists) in Austria. Having just been through a legal trial that resulted in a suspended prison sentence of six months, Nitsch left Vienna for Berlin in the summer of 1967. Soon thereafter, his friend Peter Kubelka, with the assistance of Jonas Mekas—both filmmakers were then collaborating at the Filmmakers' Cooperative—arranged for Nitsch to travel from Germany to New York to present his work.¹ Nitsch has described this first visit to America as a personal and professional success: it availed him of a fortuitous opportunity for much-needed economic support, an overwhelmingly positive professional reception, and also dovetailed with his romantic involvement with and marriage to his first wife, the psychologist and poet Beate König.

I have often since reflected upon Kaprow's characterization of Nitsch, and it strikes me as a useful means through which to introduce the primary focus of this essay—a consideration of the experiential components of Nitsch's 1998 six-day performance of the *Orgies Mysteries Theater* as they relate to traumatic subjectivity. Nitsch's engagements with Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece range from the explicit to the allusive, such that the painting's relevance to his thought and work would seem beyond dispute. The image of Grünewald's *Resurrection*, for example, makes repeated appearances in his publications on the *Orgies Mysteries Theater*—most notably serving as the ultimate illustration in the comprehensive catalog of the 1998 *sechs-tage-spiel*.² His work also invites both formal and historical comparisons to the *Resurrection* in particular (and I am thinking here of Nitsch's brilliant yellow *Schüttbilder*, which evoke the blinding halo around Christ's head in that painting) and to Grünewald's contribution to the “monumental paintings of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century masters” in general.³ These concerns notwithstanding, I want to push the parallels between Grünewald's masterpiece and Nitsch's *Orgies Mysteries Theater* still further in order to draw attention to the peculiar phenomenological structure that they might be thought to share—a structure redolent, as I shall argue, of traumatic subjectivity. The point is not to suggest that Grünewald's altarpiece functions as a historical precedent from which Nitsch's art would then be considered to derive, but rather to assert that the correspondences or points of overlap in viewers' experience of both artists' work might prove constructive for considering how artworks engage traumatic experience. This visual paradigm of trauma, then, will be encapsulated through recourse to a metaphorical model—that of the holograph—as a means to systematically identify and examine those aspects of Nitsch's performance that recreate the conditions of traumatic subjectivity.

Re-animating the Isenheim Altarpiece

Matthias Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece (ca. 1516) is an object whose phenomenology is defined, above all else, by simultaneity (Fig. 1). Its apprehension is at once shocking and familiar, an effect produced by a dramatic conflation of the particular and the iconic, of the descriptive and the stylized. In the central panel of the *Crucifixion*, for example, the pronounced verisimilitude of Christ's horrific wounds, dislocated joints, and coagulating blood animate an otherwise conventional

Christian image; the acutely mimetic rendering of festering pustules that replicate the pathogenic effects of ergotism plague a body exaggerated in scale and distorted in posture.⁴ The perspectival construction of the *Crucifixion* scene proves equally disjunctive by virtue of its simultaneous articulation of multiple viewpoints: while the figure of Christ is seen as if from below, the grouping to the left that includes the Virgin, the Magdalene, and the Evangelist is viewed from slightly above, and the Baptist on the right is pictured parallel to the viewer's groundplane.⁵ This compound vantage destabilizes the viewer's positionality, confronting the supplicant with a seemingly incommensurable physical relationship to the narrative staged upon the panel. What therefore might be characterized as an indeterminacy of formal and compositional features also bleeds into the temporal implications of the *Crucifixion*: there is a conspicuous coincidence of historicity and contemporaneity at work here, whereby distinctions between centuries past and immediate present are collapsed within the space of this single image. Thus, St. John the Baptist, beheaded approximately three years prior to Christ's crucifixion, stands yet hale and whole beside the cross as a living witness to the event;⁶ Christ himself, in addition to the wounds suffered throughout his Passion, bears the distinctive disfigurements of St. Anthony's Fire, the disease for which patients at Isenheim's Antonite monastery were primarily treated in the early-sixteenth century.⁷ And the crucifixion itself demarcates Christian theological time, signaling the passage from the old dispensation to the new and heralding the final epoch of human history before the Apocalypse. The sixteenth-century worshipper, by extension, participated not only in an unbroken continuum instantiated by Christ's sacrifice, but also in the perpetual renewal of its salvific power through the provender of immediate solace in the present.

In extending this examination of simultaneity, we might turn to a consideration of the ways in which the experience of the altarpiece constructs its audience as both witness (“I see”) and participant (“We share”). St. John the Baptist's deictic gesture calls upon the spectator to acknowledge the body of Jesus, his extended finger and glance directed pointedly at the side wound, attesting through visual means to the fact of Christ's expiration. Plied with such attention, the representation of Christ's body further reveals the evidence of his extraordinary suffering—a suffering that is, in part, literally shared by the patient. The meticulous description of Christ riddled

with the ravages of St. Anthony's Fire sets up a subjective equivalence that bridges the represented body and the patient-witness through the shared experience of suffering, simultaneously humanizing the deity and heroicizing the sick. This "observance" of Christ's suffering—and I mean this in its dual senses as both the painter's recorded representation and the patient's ritualized exposure to the altarpiece—forms a key component of the phenomenology of the painting, namely, an empathic response rooted in somatic identification. In short, likeness and presence collapse through the shared subjectivity of suffering.⁸

Like the disease itself, the patient's exposure to the altarpiece was both protracted and progressive, framing a pattern of engagement that engendered the phenomenon of repetition as a fundamental condition of the viewer's experience. Patients were not only brought before the high altar upon their admission to the hospital but, in light of its curative promise, were likely to have seen it on a regular basis.⁹ Such repetitive encounters mobilized the continued immediacy of the image and a reinvestment in the intensity of redemptive experience. Moreover, given that the altarpiece is both manifold and multi-layered, successive engagements were by no means fixed or static. Rather, the flexible and mobile construction of the altarpiece presented the viewer with multiple states, such that the *Crucifixion*, for example, unfolded to reveal the exuberant image of the resurrected Christ, miraculously healed of his ergotism. The mutability of the altarpiece also activated the role of memory, prompting worshippers to reconstruct or re-imagine the various images unavailable at any given viewing and thus extending the impact and duration of the singular experience. This dynamism of the altarpiece's physical properties introduced a decidedly performative aspect of its signification, in that the openings of both the central panel and the predella visually and physically simulated the amputation of Christ's limbs, and thus mirrored one of the most common (if grisly) practices in the contemporary medical treatment of ergotism. With right arm and lower legs severed, Christ became a "model amputee."¹⁰ Finally, Christ's literal and symbolic amputation was repeated immediately in front of the altarpiece through the ritual celebration of the Eucharist, during which the priest fractured the Host first along its vertical axis and then along its horizontal.¹¹ The compound status of the altarpiece—integrating properties both mental and physical, literal and symbolic, fixed and performative—cultivated a model of visual and cognitive experience

remarkable in its intensity, not least because of the prospect of impending death with which the contemporary patient-viewer was likely faced. Marked by the density and simultaneity of its signification and fueled by the context in which it operated, the encounter with the altarpiece was directed toward the transcendence of spatio-temporal experience.

This reading, familiar in parts, nevertheless calls attention to the unusual phenomenological qualities of this canonical work of art. We have grown accustomed to the violence and literalism of the Isenheim Altarpiece, inured to the graphic details that characterize its representation and, by extension, desensitized to the complex challenges posed by its contemporary reception. In attempting to reanimate the visceral impact of Grünewald's altarpiece through the reconstruction of its provocative effect, my intent is to inflect the consideration of the *Orgies Mysteries Theater*—a work of performance art produced nearly five centuries later—by foregrounding its emphasis on intensely empathic engagement, symbolic and material force, temporal distortion, individual and collective transcendence, and repetitive ritual experience. Like the altarpiece, Nitsch's performance is conspicuously thick in its layered signification and distinguished by a celebration of sacrificial violence and blood; like the altarpiece too, the *Orgies Mysteries Theater* instantiates a compound sensory experience ultimately directed towards the radical reorientation of subjectivity. In sum, despite the shock and revulsion that so often attends its initial apprehension, the *Orgies Mysteries Theater* draws upon precisely such fundamentally accessible (art-) historical and phenomenological traditions as encountered in the Isenheim Altarpiece.

Sources of Trauma

Numerous studies have detailed the remarkably rich array of sources—mythological, religious, philosophical, psychoanalytic, and historical—that Nitsch mobilizes in the context of the *Orgies Mysteries Theater*.¹² For the moment, I would like to focus more narrowly on the consequences that might be thought to extend from Nitsch's cultural and iconographic allusions to the Second World War. The conspicuous references to warfare, chiefly realized through the incorporation of Panzer tanks, bulldozed trench, and blaring claxons, necessarily frame the *Orgies Mysteries*

Theater within the context of violence and trauma. And in fact, these same elements can be linked to Nitsch's own experience in Austria during the war. Nitsch was five years old when he survived the Allied bombings of Vienna in 1944,¹³ which he subsequently recalled at length:

I was between five and six years old when Vienna was bombed by 'enemy' aircraft.... In 1943 [sic] the Viennese made pilgrimages to the Floridsdorf *spitzerpark* to see the first bomb strikes (bomb craters). Soon this lust for sensation was transformed into a permanent state of mortal fear that became more acute with every air raid. I can still remember being fully aware of this mortal fear in myself during the daily air raids, and in a sad way it dominated all my young existence. After the all-clear signal a surreal landscape constantly presented itself. The middle-class world had become totally alien. In place of streets were enormous heaps of earth and bomb craters, the houses were destroyed, furniture and other household goods lay shattered on the streets. The sky was darkened by enormous clouds of black smoke climbing from burning factories. The adults were distraught and despairing.... Now and then I had anxiety dreams that again it was war, airplanes were again bombing Vienna. Each time I woke up happy that the war was over. These dreams pursue me to this day. Whenever I hear an air-raid warning or an air-raid siren, it still sets my teeth on edge. A horrible, agitating ringing sound deeply penetrates my consciousness, striking more profoundly than any verbal formulation. My increasing distance from these terrible experiences of the bombings was accompanied by a stranger and—perhaps even more dangerous—a sweeter optimism in memory. The swarms of silver airplanes that flew several thousand meters above us were beautiful. Beautiful was the peculiar droning sound of the 'enemy' airplane engines, which enveloped everything and set everything in a low vibration. The word 'enemy' is necessary, for through it the sound of droning became dangerous and, in this last respect, sweet. The beauty of all these ghastly events becomes ever more apparent. I mean only to say that war, despite the suffering it brings, or perhaps precisely because of it, can assume an aesthetic appearance, and the compulsion that war exerts to live intensely, although it is a world of suffering, is also undeniable.¹⁴

This extraordinary testimony reveals the extent to which Nitsch was and still is affected by the trauma of the Vienna bombings. Nitsch comments in particular on the intensity with which the sound of sirens continues to haunt him, and on their ability to penetrate the core of his memory and resuscitate acute feelings of unease. Equally striking is the attendant dissociation he ascribed to this terrifying experience, which was simultaneously both distancing and immersive: on the one hand, his description contains a telling reference to the great height of the airplanes above the earth—and thus from Nitsch himself. This physical distance, I would suggest, belies a temporal distance, a psychological distance, and an aesthetic distance: it is precisely through such detachment that Nitsch locates the possibility of the "beauty of all these ghastly events"—that is, of the aestheticization of the traumatic. On the other hand, within these multiple frameworks of disconnection, Nitsch described a simultaneous yet seemingly paradoxical immersion or absorption in the vibrating sound waves produced by the bombers, which literally formed a connective field of sensation that enveloped everything, including himself.

This memory illuminates the clinical stages of psychological response to violence with remarkable clarity and economy. Nitsch described the first public encounters with the bomb craters as a collective experience grounded in voyeuristic curiosity, a "lust for sensation." But this initial curiosity was shortly overtaken by fear, and a mortal fear at that. Nitsch's observation of this psychological shift resonates closely with clinical studies of trauma that pinpoint the trigger for traumatic response as the moment when recognition of unavoidable, life-threatening danger shifts to a surrender to that danger.¹⁵ Significantly, Nitsch experienced trauma's "acute" and "permanent state" of gripping fear, which he remembers as a formative component of his youth.

The parallels between Nitsch's description of the unfolding of his traumatic experience and the immersive environment he creates in his *Orgies Mysteries Theater* are particularly compelling: both are characterized by voyeuristic curiosity, intensity of sensation, mortal fear and dissociation and, ultimately, by the aestheticization of violence and suffering. While Nitsch has never explicitly linked his biography to specific references or elements in the texts and actions of the *Orgies Mysteries Theater*, the correspondences between the description of his memory of

the war and the aesthetic philosophy of his art actions are conspicuously consistent. I should be clear here: I do not wish to suggest that the *Orgies Mysteries Theater* can be readily encapsulated by a reductive biographical reading that constrains Nitsch's project within a specific childhood trauma. Instead, my intent is to draw attention to the ways in which Nitsch's traumatic experience may have motivated a significant range of his artistic interests: from psychoanalysis and its humanistic investments in repression, catharsis, and collective unburdening, to the exploration of the philosophical, experiential, and aesthetic parameters of trauma, to probing the transformative and potentially life-altering power of traumatic experience.

It might be appropriate here to briefly outline the clinical parameters of traumatic subjectivity. Traumatic response occurs when life-threatening situations or personal encounters with violence and death overwhelm ordinary adaptive mechanisms.¹⁶ The common denominator of psychological trauma is a feeling of "intense fear, helplessness, loss of control, and threat of annihilation."¹⁷ Traumatic response is often accompanied by dissociation, an altered cognitive state that produces perceptual fragmentation.¹⁸ The experiential symptoms of dissociation take various and contradictory forms: enhanced perception versus distancing or tunnel vision; intensity versus numbness of sensation; alterations of temporality; and alterations of spatiality experienced as out-of-body phenomena.¹⁹ The last, known as the "dissociation of self," are characterized by a person's consciousness becoming detached from the body and taking up a remote viewing position.²⁰ For example, a rape survivor described her dissociation of self as follows:

I left my body at that point. I was over next to the bed, watching this happen.... I dissociated from the helplessness. I was standing next to me and there was just this shell on the bed.... There was just a feeling of flatness. I was just there. When I re-picture the room, I don't picture it from the bed. I picture it from the side of the bed. That's where I was watching from.²¹

This description succinctly encapsulates dissociation's emotional, perceptual, and physical detachment: the victim speaks of her "feeling of flatness," of being a "shell"; in remembering images from the event, she "re-pictures the room" from "over next to

the bed," from where she was watching; and finally, she describes the physical experience of being outside of herself, of leaving her own body and standing next to herself. Such qualitative aspects of dissociation, which occur as part of the traumatic state itself, are marked by the frequency with which they entail paradoxical occurrences, such as being in two places at once or seeing visual details inexplicable from one's physical location.

By causing a "radical discontinuity" in the intrapsychic self, traumatic dissociation becomes central to post-traumatic stress reaction.²² The after-effects of dissociative experience often result in debilitating repetitive memories and behaviors that are always symptomatic of the original traumatic event.²³ Clinical psychology has codified these after-effects of trauma under the rubric of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).²⁴ One particularly useful aspect of this term is the implication that the symptoms represent a *continuation* of the traumatic process. PTSD presents a persistence of the traumatic state: in ongoing, hyper-aroused expectations of danger; in cognitive constriction or surrender patterns manifested in personality or behavior—e.g. lack of assertiveness or passivity; and in repetitive anxiety dreams and phobias related to the trauma.²⁵ In this sense, the manifestations of traumatic dissociation demonstrate a further example of space-time dislocation, whereby individuals may find themselves repeatedly reliving the traumatic event—known as intrusive re-experiencing—as if the past and present are no longer distinct.

The consistency of traumatic symptomology suggests two compelling features: one, a biological or physiological basis for traumatic response, and two, the uniformity of that response.²⁶ In regard to the former, clinical studies utilizing the most advanced technologies, such as functional magnetic resonance imaging (fMRI), have demonstrated that PTSD physiologically affects brain connectivity and thus neurological encoding of memory: patients diagnosed with PTSD produce nonverbal recall of traumatic memory in contrast to the verbal pattern demonstrated by comparison subjects.²⁷ Significantly, such studies point to an understanding of trauma as an essentially visual phenomenon. As regards the matter of the universality of traumatic response, art historian Kristine Stiles has underscored the fact that heterogeneous causes of trauma precipitate homogeneous symptoms. If, then, a disparate range of traumatic stimuli consistently produce a uniform response,

when considering the visual representation of traumatic experience, it becomes possible to propose that a “heterogeneous body of images and actions” should nevertheless be recognized as “homogeneous representations of trauma.”²⁸ This last point supplies the clinical and theoretical foundation upon which an analysis of the *Orgies Mysteries Theater* that foregrounds the homogeneous phenomenological markers of traumatic subjectivity can be constructed.

The 1998 six-day-play

Throughout the six-day-play, each day’s events took place from sunrise to sundown and were comprised of multi-sensory, synaesthetic, and thematic actions interspersed with breaks for eating and drinking. Viewers were not constrained to follow a specific agenda during the performance; actions conducted at various locations were often staged simultaneously, thereby deliberately obviating the experience of a singular, unified narrative program of the *Orgies Mysteries Theater*. There were also periods of rest (after meals, for example) during which no actions took place. And approximately twice a day, once in the morning and once in the afternoon, a single, elaborate action lasting several hours occupied all the actors, musicians, and Nitsch himself. While the flexible structure ultimately allowed the individual viewer to adjust the rhythm of his or her own experience after a few days, the immediate and overwhelming stimulatory demands imposed by the performance quickly led to physical, sensory, and psychological exhaustion: some reached their experiential limits early in the series of events and sequence of days.²⁹

The first day of the *Orgies Mysteries Theater* began at 4:40 a.m., some forty-five minutes before sunrise, as actors and spectators gathered for the procession that inaugurated the *sechs-tage-spiel*. At the conclusion of the procession, three professional butchers escorted a steer into the castle courtyard; before a backdrop of three monumental blank canvases, one of the butchers drove a metal spike through the animal’s brain. They then severed its jugular vein and bled it, catching the blood in buckets (for subsequent use in the performance). The animal was flayed, disemboweled, and strung up on meat hooks in front of the central canvas. From its earliest moments, then, the *Orgies Mysteries Theater* brought viewers into direct confrontation with death. This powerful fact established the definitive

conditions under which trauma itself occurs. Nevertheless, the mortal violence and the threat implied by it were concentrated by the discrete structural characteristics of the performance medium, combining as it does presentation with representation.³⁰ That is, the *Orgies Mysteries Theater* both *presented* actual slaughter at the same time that it also *represented* killing and violence as tropes that operated within multiple historical, religious, and mythological narratives. The materials utilized in the performance—especially the animal carcasses, blood, and entrails that emitted a singular and inescapably overpowering odor—and the real confrontation with death (the presentational aspect) functioned simultaneously as mimetic re-enactments of violence (their re-presentation). The episteme of the actions, therefore, remained elusive and indeterminate, oscillating between reality and artifice.

This element of sacrifice, which formed one of the core signifiers of the *Orgies Mysteries Theater*, was also one of its most controversial. The public slaughter of a steer is an act so alien within the spectacular conventions of contemporary culture that it is readily sensationalized. Animal rights activists, cordoned off by police outside the main entrance of the property, organized daily demonstrations; the protestors climbed trees surrounding the walls of the estate and shouted through bullhorns throughout the entirety of the six-day-play. The incendiary power of the animal sacrifice in the *Orgies Mysteries Theater*, I would argue, was compounded by the direct correlation it established between the unmediated act of the slaughter and its numerous (potentially disruptive) mediated representations that referenced both contemporary and historical violence. For example, directly implicated in the staging of this conspicuous death were the antithetical conditions under which industrially-raised and processed food animals are born, bred, and slaughtered. Maintained far from urban centers, industrial meat-packing plants not only facilitate the mass-production and execution of animals under what might be generously termed deficient circumstances, they also precipitate the disassociation of comestible meat from the animal slaughter that necessarily attends it. The disembodied, neatly-wrapped Styrofoam packages of bloodless flesh ubiquitously available in modern supermarkets encourage the anesthetization of consumers, whose complicity is marked by their willingness to ignore this otherwise quite obvious chain of events. Put simply, when was the last time any of us saw a food animal slaughtered? In exposing the “sanitized” relationship the public has to the obfuscated killing

necessary for meat consumption, the *Orgies Mysteries Theater* enacts a confrontation with death that the contemporary omnivorous viewer tacitly sanctions every day. Real death thus serves simultaneously as a representation of death conventionally displaced.

The presentation of death also linked the present with the historical past through allusions to Dionysian rending and Christian sacrifice. Nitsch's work traces the savage violence at the heart of these narratives, palliated through centuries of conventionalized, symbolic representation, back to its historical origin in lethal events. Through the process of translation from icon back into action, the *Orgies Mysteries Theater* re-animated the experiential force of these trauma-based cultural symbols for the contemporary viewer. This strategy of presenting actual slaughter brought the graphic aspects of these ancient rituals most vividly into reality, fusing past and present through acts and images of traumatic violence. Such visual interplays were condensed in the subsequent actions, for example, when real animal carcasses were placed in a crucified position against a backdrop of canvas drip-painted with blood, effectively framing them and thus drawing attention to their aesthetic qualities. This juxtaposition of carcass and canvas associated the symbol of crucifixion with both the history and the act of painting, a transformative association whereby this highly aestheticized presentation of symbolic crucifixion was made coextensive with provocative presentational elements—real blood, real crosses, and real animal carcasses.

By intermingling real and symbolic elements through the medium of performance, the *Orgies Mysteries Theater* cultivated an environment of immersive experience—a purposeful attempt to create aesthetic situations that would generate for the participants an encounter that reoriented their perception of time and space. In my own experience of the 1998 performance, the smell of blood and entrails proved literally overwhelming, provoking a response that I can only be described as primal in its intensity and in its irresistible compulsion to immediate action (that is, to run away). Nitsch's affront to the limits of perception was deliberate:

Intensely sensual acts challenge the sensual perceptibility of human beings.... Utter intensity is experienced, the audience and participants in

the play are suddenly wide-awake, they are put on the alert, *into another state*, into a form of being, they become acutely aware that they exist.³¹

This experience of “utter intensity” as a strategy of immersion was one of the Nitsch's fundamental goals of in constructing the *Orgies Mysteries Theater*; significantly, it is also one that I assert directly invoked trauma by virtue of its disruption of viewer's normal perception of spatio-temporal boundaries. Nitsch has sometimes described this altered state as “intoxication”: the experience of being overwhelmed by intense sensation—visual, aural, and olfactory. Indeed, intoxication was pursued both literally and phenomenologically: the consumption of wine figures prominently in both Nitsch's theoretical writings on the *Orgies Mysteries Theater* and its performance, linking it historically and mythologically to Dionysian ritual at the same time that it provides a very effective means of producing a predictable physiological response.

The decidedly protracted immersive environment of the *Orgies Mysteries Theater* compounded the spatio-temporal disruption of the audience's consciousness. The staggering scope of the performance and, in particular, the extended duration of the event interrupted circadian rhythms, restructuring patterns of consciousness that became attuned to the alternative realities it created. The carousing—itself both ritualized and real—that in part defined the performance was modeled upon the Eleusinian Mysteries. In the drama *Ion*, for example, Euripides described the all-night revelry pursued in anticipation of the ritual's climax: on the holy sixth night, the initiates arrived at the sacred well beside the gate to the sanctuary; there they sang and danced throughout the night in honor of Dionysus and his mother, Persephone.³² Similarly, the physical and mental endurance required to maintain attentive participation in the *Orgies Mysteries Theater* over six full days and nights contributed to the alteration of the viewer's consciousness. The prolonged state of exhaustion and intoxication established an impressionable perceptual framework that was continually subjected to a sustained multi-sensory barrage (often traumatic in content), forming the baseline condition for the experience of the performance. I want to emphasize that the combination of sleep deprivation, intoxication, and overstimulation produced a distorted perceptual paradigm, one that once again simulated aspects of the experience of temporal disjunction precipitated by trauma.

Significantly, this alteration of perception instantiated by the exhaustive, immersive environment of the *Orgies Mysteries Theater* was stretched across an armature of repetition. In the most literal sense, the entire program was constructed around a principle of repetition: symbols, actions, processions, music, and meals furnished the patterned building blocks of the performance. Each day's events were executed on much the same schedule, such that the arrangement and experience of the actions became an exercise in the variation on theme, wherein almost identical actions were re-staged and particular sequences and images were continually repeated. In effect, repetition formed the very structure of the viewer's experience; moreover, it did so in terms that seemed perhaps contradictory. On the one hand, the repetition of actions measured the passage of time and thus demarcated a linear chronology. On the other, the blurring of distinctions effected by the similarities between repeated actions encountered in a state of exhausted intoxication induced a circular experience—the experience of re-experiencing—suggesting the deconstruction of temporal linearity. The repetition of key forms, symbols, and actions offers structural parallels to the etiology of trauma and its “intrusive re-experiencing,” in which elements of the original traumatic event are re-played as a continuation of that event in post-traumatic stress disorder.

The repetitive structure of the *Orgies Mysteries Theater* and the temporal circularity derived from it also suggested a multiplicity of perspectives: the altered perceptual paradigm induced by the six-day-play challenged the viewer to reconcile the repeated experience of almost identical actions viewed from different perspectives on different days. The collapsing of temporal distinctions in the experience of these actions was reminiscent of viewing the same event from multiple perspectives simultaneously—akin to the dissociation of self in traumatic symptomology. The element of simultaneity in fact encapsulated all aspects of the experience of the *Orgies Mysteries Theater*—sensory, spatial, symbolic, conceptual, and perceptual—such that this accretion of signs was comprehensively integrated by simultaneity. In this regard, the *Orgies Mysteries Theater* compressed both past and present visual symbols, whereby rituals, sacrifices, and processions retained their sense of the ancient as the actions stripped away centuries of historical time; at the same time, those rites seemed presently relevant and palpably topical—alluding to contemporary warfare, genocide, and even industrial meat production—ultimately

establishing a temporal back-and-forth (a continual shifting) between past and present that synchronized them into a singular experience. The collapsing of these dual pictures of past and present into simultaneous experience explicitly achieved their connection through the immersion in traumatic violence and the confrontation with death.

Conclusion: a holographic model of art informed by trauma

The impetus to introduce this reading of Nitsch's *Orgies Mysteries Theater* through the example of Grünewald's Isenheim Altarpiece was not predicated simply upon a desire to foreground a gory artistic precedent both familiar to modern audiences and influential for Nitsch. I think the comparison is in fact far more evocative still. Despite their seemingly profound disparities in medium and historical moment, both works illustrate the potential interpretive richness of trauma studies as a discursive framework, and I would like to conclude by weaving the phenomenological threads shared by the Isenheim Altarpiece and the *Orgies Mysteries Theater* into a coherent picture of the representation of traumatic subjectivity.

The experience of both works is initiated by an unmitigated confrontation with death. This fact lays the groundwork for the contemplation of those deaths, albeit contemplation in its abstracted, meditative sense does not sufficiently capture the ways in which the respective works demand or provoke immersion in the experience of death. Rather, the impact of the viewer's direct experience is reinforced through the cultivation of an immersive environment: in the case of the Isenheim Altarpiece, immersion is achieved by means of the viewer's empathic identification in the shared experience of suffering; in the case of the *Orgies Mysteries Theater*, it is accomplished through the viewer's inundation in an overwhelming and all-encompassing performative event. In both cases, the intensity of and immersion in these viewing conditions precipitates a protracted experience designed to induce heightened awareness characterized by altered consciousness. This subjective state engenders the perception of spatio-temporal disjunction and projection in various expressions, whether in the conflation of past and present realized in the representation of Christ's body riddled with the ravages of St. Anthony's Fire or in the revitalization of ancient ritual and sacrifice set in contemporary Austria. Such spatio-

temporal distortions underscore the perception of simultaneity as a defining phenomenological marker of both works. Finally, and instrumental to the effect of each, is a prolonged, cumulative engagement characterized by the repetitive re-experiencing of these intense encounters.

I believe that attending to these attributes of viewer engagement with Grünewald's altarpiece and Nitsch's performance illuminates powerfully constitutive (yet largely unexplored) aspects of their affective mechanisms. As I have argued, these phenomenological qualities are coextensive with the clinical parameters that define traumatic symptomology. The physical and historical distinctions of each work notwithstanding, they share a demonstrable overlap in their construction of the viewer's subjective experience and are linked, I contend, though trauma. I am suggesting, therefore, that these structural similarities can be located across a variety of works in different media and from disparate cultural geographies. The question remains, how might such characteristics be systematically extended for art historical analysis? To my mind, the key lies in Stiles' formulation of heterogeneous sources of trauma producing homogeneous response. This consistency or universality in the etiology of trauma makes it possible to delineate a range of formal markers and experiential cues that can be applied towards the identification and analysis of art informed by trauma, which are embedded within the readings I have offered above. To recapitulate, they include: subject matter marked by explicit violence or death; alterations between intense and deadening experience; repetitive immersion; distortions of temporality; and simultaneity and multiplicity of perspectives. This list is neither definitive nor exhaustive; rather, it serves as an initial attempt to provide a rubric for understanding the ways in which any analysis of art informed by trauma ought necessarily to include a consideration of its unique (and uniquely visual) paradigm of subjectivity.

In closing, I propose that the above criteria might be given more concrete expression through the intercession of a visual model based on the holograph.³³ Today, most people possess an empirical familiarity with holographs and how they work, appearing as they do almost ubiquitously, for example, on driver's licenses and credit cards. Shifting these holographic images by hand and thus changing one's angle of view causes the image to move or precipitates the appearance of a different

image. The manner in which holographs integrate multiple images on the same surface, and their capacity to thereby resolve the seeming contradiction of divergent viewpoints existing simultaneously, offers a visual analogue to the experiential paradoxes that define traumatic subjectivity. Holography supplies a conceptual framework within which such apparent contradictions can be understood not as paradoxical, but as integral—as individuated components of a whole that is rendered incomplete and ineffective if these multiple layers are read in isolation. As a model, then, the holographic binds distinct temporal experiences in a singular space and fuses multiple spatial positions in a discrete moment of time. I should note that I do not mean to suggest that holographs furnish a literal visual equivalent to art informed by trauma; instead, I think them critically useful as a means to conceptualize the shifting and simultaneous spatial and perspectival conflation that defines traumatic subjectivity and, by extension, that characterizes its representation in art. To return our attention to the *Orgies Mysteries Theater*, then, the holographic can be thought to encapsulate the experiential aspects of the performance—demarcated as they are by shifting layers of visual and historical signifiers—that are integral to its conception, construction, and function. In this way, the phenomenological structure of the performance can be granted significance equal to the performance's iconographic and intellectual sources. By modeling the subjective experience of the *Orgies Mysteries Theater*, the paradigm of the holographic encourages viewers to think about the nature and role of traumatic subjectivity as the fundamental structuring agent of Nitsch's most sustained project.

Notes

¹ Nitsch's 16th *Action* (December 15, 1965) was performed in Vienna in the artist's studio and filmed by Stan Brakhage, who later incorporated footage of the action in his film series *The Songs*. This meeting was facilitated by Nitsch's close friend, the filmmaker Peter Kubelka, then working with Jonas Mekas at the Filmmakers' Cooperative. Kubelka, Brakhage, and Mekas were instrumental in helping to bring Nitsch to America for the first time in 1968 to stage the following performances: two at the Cinematheque on Wooster Street (March 2 and 16); one at the invitation of Raphael Ortiz and Al Hansen at Judson Memorial Church for the Destruction in Art Symposium-U.S.A. preview events (March 23); and one at the University of Cincinnati (April 4). See Malcolm Green, ed. and trans., *Writings of the Vienna Actionists* (London: Atlas Press, 1999), 149; Nitsch, *Nitsch, eine Retrospektive: Werke aus der Sammlung Essl* (Vienna: Edition Sammlung Essl, 2003), 45; Hubert Klocker, ed., *Wiener Aktionismus*, vol. 2 (Klagenfurt: Ritter, 1989), 290; Lil Picard, ' "Crucifyin" and Chicken Pluckin,' *East Village Other* 3, no. 15 (March 1968): 14; Michael Kirby, *The Art of Time* (New York: Dutton, 1969), 169-170, 215-216; and Elly Dickason and Jerry G. Dickason, eds., *Remembering Judson House* (New York: Judson Memorial Church, 2000), 329-330, 339-342.

² Hermann Nitsch, *Das Sechstagespiel des Orgien Mysterien Theaters 1998*, ed. Otmar Rychlik (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz, 2003).

³ Hermann Nitsch, 'Vorwort zur ersten Wortdichtung 1957-1962,' in *Das Orgien Mysterien Theater: das Wortdichtung II* (Vienna: Freibord, 1996), 13-14.

⁴ Andrée Hayum, *The Isenheim Altarpiece: God's Medicine and the Painter's Vision* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1989).

⁵ Hayum, 73-74.

⁶ The temporal significance embodied by the figure of the Baptist is underscored by his demonstrative gesture and the accompanying inscription taken from John 3:30: *Illum oportet crescere me autem minui* ('He must increase, but I must decrease'), as seen in Hayum., 79-80; 89-117. In addition, St. John the Baptist serves as a typological prefigurement of Christ, a trope that implicitly bridges space and time as a means to assert the fundamental veracity of Biblical prophecy. This relationship is reinforced in the foreground of the panel, as Hayum has observed, by the overlapping of John's right foot and the hind leg of the Lamb of God.

⁷ Hayum, 20: "Aymar Falco [Lyonnaise author of a 1534 history of the Antonites] declared the primary goal of the monastery to be the care of those afflicted with a disease perceived to be like a plague—*ignis plaga, pestilentia ignis*—which often went under the name of [its] patron:

Saint Anthony's Fire, *Feu d'Antoine, Antonius Feuer*."

⁸ Here I appropriate from Hans Belting's definitive study of the veneration of sacred images, *Likeness and Presence: a History of the Image before the Era of Art*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994).

⁹ As noted in Hayum, 20-21: Antonite reforms dating from 1478 stipulated that newly admitted patients undergo a medical examination before the altar: "The next day they must be led before the chapel of said hospital and they must be examined to find out if the disease is the *infernal fire*." These same reforms advocated prayer and entry into the church "as a steady routine for patients" (28), at the very least on the six major feast days of the liturgical calendar when communion was administered (29).

¹⁰ Kurt Bauch, 'Aus Grünewalds Frühzeit,' *Pantheon* 27 (1969): 93, as cited in Hayum, 32-33; 158-159, notes 43 and 44. Hayum expands upon Bauch's conception of the predella as a physical amputation of Christ's lower legs by noting that the central panel of the *Crucifixion* also severs his right arm.

¹¹ Hayum, 158-159, note 44, describes a "teaching missal for priests published in 1523... [that] shows diagrams of the Host as a circle with the crucified Christ inscribed in it. Illustrating a text that instructs the priest on how to break the wafer, they show the Host first halved along the vertical axis, thus down the center of the crucifix, then quartered with another crucified Christ split at the diameter."

¹² Hubert Klocker, 'The Dramaturgy of the Organic,' in *Wiener Aktionismus*, vol. 2, 41-55; Peter Gorsen, 'The Realization of the Murder of Passion or Hermann Nitsch's Contribution to the Drama of the "Non-Aesthetic,"' in Nitsch, *Orgien Mysterien Theater* (Darmstadt: März, 1969), 25-33; Wieland Schmied, 'Subterranean Cosmos: Reflections on Hermann Nitsch's Orgy Mystery Theater and His Architectural Visions,' *Hermann Nitsch: die Architektur des Orgien Mysterien Theaters* (München: Galerie Fred Jahn, 2000), 27-43; and Ferdinand Schmatz, 'Viennese Actionism and the Vienna Group: The Austrian Avant-Garde after 1945,' *Discourse* 14, no. 2 (1992): 59-73. In this last, Schmatz writes that "the artistic claims put forward by Nitsch were and remain mythological" (66).

¹³ Nitsch's father was killed the following year while fighting with the Austrian army on the Eastern Front. See Karlheinz Essl, "Im Gespräch mit Hermann Nitsch," in *Nitsch: eine Retrospektive*, 37-55.

¹⁴ Hermann Nitsch, 'Zur Metaphysik der Aggression,' in *Die Eroberung von Jerusalem* (Berlin: Die Drossel, 1977), 210. Author's translation.

¹⁵ Henry Krystal, 'Trauma and Aging: a Thirty-Year Follow-Up,' Cathy Caruth, ed., *Trauma*:

Explorations in Memory (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), 76-99: 80-81.

¹⁶ As cited in the *Comprehensive Textbook of Psychiatry*, quoted in Judith L. Herman, *Trauma and Recovery* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 33. For the complete diagnostic criteria for post-traumatic stress disorder, see the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual*, 4th edition (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 1994).

¹⁷ Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 33.

¹⁸ Herman, 34-35. See also Robert Scaer, *The Trauma Spectrum: Hidden Wounds and Human Resiliency* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2005), 178-179; and Onno van der Hart et al., 'Somatoform Dissociation in Traumatized World War I Combat Soldiers: a Neglected Clinical Heritage,' *Journal of Trauma and Dissociation* 1, no. 4 (2000): 33-66.

¹⁹ See Herman, *Trauma and Recovery*, 43.

²⁰ Neurology researchers have been able to consistently produce experiences of "dissociation of self" in laboratory procedures for the treatment of epilepsy. In September of 2002, scientists at Geneva University Hospital "elicited illusory transformations of the patient's arm and legs and whole body displacements" after applying electrical stimulation to the angular gyrus in the right cortex of the brain. The patient described these perceptual transformations as seeing herself lying in bed, from above, and sometimes only seeing her legs and lower trunk. Her observations were accompanied by an "instantaneous feeling of 'lightness' and 'floating' about two meters above the bed, close to the ceiling." An "instantaneous feeling of 'lightness' and 'floating' about two meters above the bed, close to the ceiling, accompanied her observations. See Olaf Blanke et al., 'Stimulating Illusory Own-Body Perceptions,' *Nature* 419 (19 September 2002): 269-70.

²¹ Herman, 43.

²² See Robert J. Lifton, 'From Hiroshima to the Nazi Doctors: the Evolution of Psychoformative Approaches to Understanding Traumatic Stress Syndromes,' John P. Wilson and Beverly Raphael, eds., *International Handbook of Traumatic Stress Syndromes* (New York: Plenum Press, 1993), 12.

²³ See Bessel A. van der Kolk and Onno van der Hart, 'The Intrusive Past: the Flexibility of Memory and the Engraving of Trauma,' *American Imago* 48, no. 4 (1991): 425-54.

²⁴ The term Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) officially entered the literature in 1980, in the third edition of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (DSM III).

²⁵ Krystal, 80-81.

²⁶ Authors Bessel A. van der Kolk and José Saporta point to Pierre Janet's *L'automatisme psychologique* (1889) in their study entitled 'Biological Response to Psychic Trauma,' John P.

Wilson and Beverly Raphael, eds., *International Handbook of Traumatic Stress Syndromes*, 25-33. See also Israel Liberzon and Stephan F. Taylor, 'Brain Imaging Studies of PTSD,' in Arie Y. Shalev, Rachel Yahuda, and Alexander C. McFarlane, eds., *International Handbook of Human Response to Trauma* (New York: Plenum Publishers, 2000), 285-297: "multiple lines of evidence have demonstrated stress-related neurobiological changes and neuroanatomical sequelae of traumatic exposure. Accordingly, an increasing number of investigators are actively pursuing possible structural or functional neuroanatomical abnormalities that are associated with PTSD or that underlie PTSD symptomatology" (285).

²⁷ See Ruth A. Lanius et al., 'The Nature of Traumatic Memories: a 4-T fMRI Functional Connectivity Analysis,' in *American Journal of Psychiatry* 161, no. 1 (January 2004): 36-44 [emphasis added]. See also Scaer, *The Trauma Spectrum*, 180-181.

²⁸ Kristine Stiles, 'Shaved Heads and Marked Bodies: Representations from Cultures of Trauma,' *Strategie II: Peuples Méditerranéens* [Paris] 64-65 (1993): 95-117; reprinted with a new "Afterword" in Jean O'Barr, Nancy Hewitt, and Nancy Rosebaugh, eds., *Talking Gender: Public Images, Personal Journeys, and Political Critiques* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1996), 36-64: 39.

²⁹ My attendance at the 1998 performance was made possible by the generous support of the Department of Art, Art History, and Visual Studies at Duke University.

³⁰ This point draws upon what Kristine Stiles has identified as one of the fundamental qualities of performance art, namely the medium's unique ability to both heighten and blur the relations between reality and imitation: "By making art and reality sometimes *appear* seamless, performance art thrusts viewers into a confrontation with the conflict between reality and the truth claims of mimesis (realized through imitation, dramatic realism, and other representational tactics)." She cites Nitsch's *Orgies Mysteries Theater* as exemplary of performance art that challenges the "distinctions between the real and the artificial." See Stiles, 'Performance,' in Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff, eds., *Critical Terms for Art History*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003), 75-97: 90, 88.

³¹ Hermann Nitsch, 'A Life in Review,' in *Hermann Nitsch: 6-Tage-Spiel in Prinzendorf 1998* (Wien: Museum Moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig Wien), 28 [emphasis added].

³² See R. Gordon Wasson, Albert Hofmann, and Carl A.P. Ruck, eds., *The Road to Eleusis: Unveiling the Secret of the Mysteries* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1978), 76-77.

³³ For a more detailed discussion of holographs and my holographic model that includes an extensive historical and conceptual analysis of holography and its various theoretical applications, see my doctoral dissertation, *Art and Trauma Since 1950: A Holographic Model* (Duke University, 2005).

Hermann Nitsch has been visibly active since 1957, when he was associated with radical Viennese Actionists like Otto Mühl, Günther Brus and Rudolf Schwarzkogler. Then his artistic practice shifted from provocative "actions" in the late 1950s and 1960s to vast pageants that he organizes every summer in the courtyard of his princely castle. It was in 1971 that Nitsch bought Prinzendorf in the north of Austria, a huge farm seen from outside, a Sadean castle seen from within, at any rate a mansion big enough to house the many rituals, orgies and ceremonies that he has since then organized (to be exported elsewhere). At the same time, he has kept exhibiting paintings in various parts of the world. To a superficial onlooker, it may seem that Nitsch combines Dionysiac rituals mocking or parodying sacred Christian rituals like the mass of the crucifixion, with a more Apollonian practice aiming at giving a form to his visions. I will suggest that this view is superficial and that it is actually the contrary that takes place: the ritual "orgies" in the castle appear to me as great Apollonian spectacles, while it is to the paintings, drippings, splashed garments or other visual traces that can be kept and visualized independently from their context of production that the task of embodying a tradition of Dionysian excess would be given.

An example of an early action could be the "lamb dismemberment" of 1962, a private happening during which Nitsch locked himself in a basement with two assistants, crucified a lamb, and then staged his own crucifixion while they doused him in the animal's blood. The stained cloth became a painting and also a "relic" of the event. This was meant to release the participants' sadistic and

sacrificial urges so as to lead to religious ecstasy. It was also intended to bring a deeper understanding of pagan orgies later transformed by Christian rituals. More pointedly, these “actions” were meant to startle Austrians, and to remind them of the dire reality of the Second World War, with its attendant slaughters—since the official thesis was that Austria had been seduced by Germany and coerced into participating in unbelievably cruel genocides. The point was well taken by the police and the establishment—Nitsch was jailed repeatedly until he fled and eventually settled in Bavaria.

Today, Nitsch’s “orgies” are elaborately staged shows in which willing participants mix with actors and friends, while most people watch. From a distance, it looks like a medieval pageant with curiously monochromatic baroque stage music composed by the artist; however, it is clear that something shocking is happening. Naked men and women are carried on crosses, blindfolded, and drink blood. Animal viscera are rolled on their bellies, while men and women are coupled, and often inserted in carcasses. No one speaks during the hieratic ritual as the haunting music swells regularly, reaching incredible crescendos when performed in unison by more than hundred players at a time. Some notes for the third day of an “orgy and mystery” on the theme of resurrection, almost taken at random, exemplify the whole process: “All are invited to drink. A mass intoxication is imperative... Slaughter of a pig. GRAPES, FRUIT and TOMATOES; ANIMAL LUNGS, FLESH and INTESTINES are trampled on in ecstasy. People trample in SLAUGHTERED ANIMAL CARCASSES FILLED WITH INTESTINES, in troughs full of blood and wine. Extreme noise from the orchestras. Slaughtering of the bull, slaughtering of the two pigs. Dismemberment.” Such “mysteries” include sessions of painting, which involve splattering the walls or clothes with blood and other paints that look like blood, so as to remind one of the 1950s action painting, of their drippings and allover.

Is this type of art aggressive or subversive? The shock value of these shows has now waned; on the one hand, the police have grown more tolerant of these “actions,” while on the other hand, the neighbors, who live on farms, seem now tolerant of art forms that re-enact their seasonal slaughter of animals. Nitsch’s mysteries have thus managed to integrate the rhythms of country life with the recurrent dispatching of poultry, pigs, bulls and lambs. Some images call up the *Bataille of Story of the Eye*,

as when we discover the naked body image of a pregnant woman with crushed eggs on her belly. In one film of the “orgies,” one sees for a while a blindfolded man, bound naked to a cross, who gags as he is forced to swill gulps of animal blood mixed with wine. Was that a fleeting moment of truth that testified to the body’s common sense? However, there was no disruption of the choreography—the show went on, in a spectacle including eroticism and religion, voyeurism and exhibitionism, displaying human bodies and animal viscera, the whole scene bathed in the light and symbolism of the crucifixion. Indeed, one cannot forget that Austria is a dominantly Catholic country, and as such, better equipped to make sense of apparently blasphemous, heretic or perverse representations of “sacred” collective actions.

These actions are each unique performances, but they are determined by a repetitive structure that leaves room for surprise while minimizing improvisation. Nitsch aims at rivaling Wagner’s *Gesamtkunstwerke*, and his “shows” are more in the spirit of Nietzsche’s subversive re-reading of Greek classicism in *The Birth of Tragedy*, which highlighted the archaic and literally wild elements of Greek tragedies, than of Wagner’s Bayreuth operas. A touch of Artaud is discernible, the theatre of cruelty lends a slight sadistic edge and stresses that the body is alive fully in the present, defying representation. All these actions are finally nothing but carefully contrived simulations, with lots of hearty eating and drinking in communal lunches and dinners. The aggressive component seems to have been wholly sublimated.

There is another side of Hermann Nitsch’s art, which is most obvious in the stunning beauty of the paintings made in public at these occasions. Nitsch was originally influenced by Pollock’s concept of “action painting” as he said in an interview.¹ His large canvases play on the limitations of the medium, while changing the medium as often as possible: he paints on bodies, on canvases, on religious garments, on shirts and linens, etc. Even if he never uses excrement as a pigment, other body fluids and animal secretions are employed. The aim is fundamentally modernistic in so far as Nitsch blends artistic experimentalism with an archaic quest when he revisits the roots of religions, their underpinnings in ritual sacrifice of humans and animals.

There is a seriousness in these paintings and actions that distinguishes them from Dadaist pranks. While the “orgies” are repeatable, all these procedures are codified

and often written down extensively before being executed, a similar repetitive procedure characterizes the blood splatters. They do look like the allover of 1950s action painting and exhibit all the features that Greenberg appreciated in the later Monet: large canvases at times covered in color, at times barely striped, marked by regular zigzagging. More recently, in 2005, an exhibition at the Saatchi museum in London (the first part of a trilogy entitled “The Triumph of Painting,” with a majority of German and Austrian artists) made clear the link between the rediscovery of Nitsch’s work and the concept of a “return to painting” (which was the theme of three exhibitions). Nitsch’s paintings were often used on shirts and bags for the exhibition, testifying to their iconic appeal.

Saatchi’s announced “return to painting” heralded a new exploration of sensuality after a surfeit of dry or ironic conceptualism. It is clear that Nitsch’s powerful and large canvases are visual, indeed “retinal” to the utmost. They are made to be seen, and could not be described in terms of pure ideas as most post-Duchampian production could be. The Saatchi exhibition of splatter paintings by Nitsch amply demonstrates that he stood out as the most powerful artist exhibited. The strength of the paintings hits one even if one had no idea of the actions, mysteries and “orgies.” Is it because the danger of a ritual murder of art has been cleansed by the mere simulation of sacrifice?

Nitsch himself used to go to jail fairly often for his earlier actions, but now he may appear as a priest of some new-age cult who happens to be producing beautiful canvasses once in a while. To a superficial onlooker, it seems that Nitsch combines Dionysiac rituals mocking or parodying sacred Christian rituals like the mass of the crucifixion, with a more Apollonian practice aiming at giving a “form” to his visions and demons. In what I would like to call the “chiasmus” at the heart of Nitsch’s work, I will suggest that this view is false and that it is actually the contrary that takes place: the “orgies” should be seen as great Apollonian spectacles while the paintings embody the tradition of Dionysian negativity and excess.

Such a conceptual chiasmus would find its origin in Nietzsche’s work, especially in his evolution from being a Wagnerian devotee to a radical philosopher who chose the hammer to debunk all the Romantic myths about art and life. Nietzsche’s critical

revisions of his earlier texts were, for him, a sign of his having finally reached the status of being “modern.” We see this in his 1885-86 notebooks (“If I once wrote the word “untimely” on my books, how much youth, inexperience, peculiarity that word expressed! Today I realize it was precisely the kind of complaint, enthusiasm and dissatisfaction that made one of the most modern of the moderns.”)² This is also perceptible in the “Attempt at Self-Criticism” (1886), which prefaced the reissuing of *The Birth of Tragedy* first published in 1872. In 1886, Nietzsche condemned the “excess” an immaturity of a book too marked by Schopenhauer’s *passé* pessimism: “Is pessimism necessarily the sign of decline, decay, of the failure of the exhausted and weakened instincts? —as it was for the Indians, as it is to all appearances for us “modern” men and Europeans?”³ This auto-critical re-reading follows the parallel between the enervation of Indian Buddhism (Schopenhauer’s ultimate utopia) and European modernity, recently fascinated by science as the last refuge against life.

The critical appraisal of juvenile bombast bearing traces of *Sturm und Drang* pathos⁴ led Nietzsche to a series of displacements re-connecting philosophy with science and science with life: “What I began to grapple with at that time was something fearful and dangerous, a problem with horns, not necessarily a bull exactly, but in any case a *new* problem: today I would call it the *problem of science* itself, —science grasped for the first time as problematic, as questionable.”⁵ Here, Nietzsche treats the problem not like a matador who kills the bull and cuts the horns, but more like ancient Cretan bull dancers who execute capers and somersaults over the animal’s bodies in motion. Just sixteen years later, Nietzsche discovered that the solution lay not in Wagner’s *Gesamkunstwerk*—heralded before as the true heir to the lost communal art of Greek tragedies—but in a chiasmic interplay of perspectives, or a parallactic calculation leading to a deliberate strabismus. This is the condition for a mode of thinking in which one can “...view science through the optic of the artist, and art through the optic of life...”⁶

Fundamentally, for Nietzsche, for Rimbaud, and also for Nitsch today, it is not only thinking about art that must be radically transformed, but the whole of life. By attacking the common-sense beliefs on which we rely all too uncritically, we need to take a distance from science and rethink our daily practices in the name of art. Nietzsche asserted life as the ultimate value, and thus any “evaluation” of life

returned one to a consideration of style and personality. By claiming that “God is dead,” he meant that the power to create should remain a purely human faculty—since humans have created God, they can now create like God. Accordingly, *The Birth of Tragedy* reclaims for art a role usurped by God. Nietzsche writes that his book recognizes an “ulterior artistic meaning hidden behind all events—a ‘god,’ if you like, but certainly only a completely thoughtless and amoral artist-god, who wishes to experience the same pleasure and self-satisfaction in building as in destroying, in good as in bad, who by means of creating worlds frees himself from the distress of abundance and over-abundance.”⁷

Such insights gained through a confrontation with tragedy (seen as the supreme art form because it embodies suffering and cruelty, and revised crucially sixteen years later) can be applied to the situation of art as understood by Nitsch in the second half of the twentieth century and today as well. His ability to face unblinkingly the darker forces of humanity betrays a paradoxical hope for renewed artistic strength. In doing this, Nitsch goes beyond the sense of tragic excess in life and moves from form to the *informe*, an insight developed first by Georges Bataille in his critique of a well-meaning (whether incurably idealistic or belatedly Romantic) Surrealism.

Let us go back to the most basic determination of the experience of art to make sense of this chiasmus. If we follow Lessing’s famous distinction, it seems indeed that the actions in the castle and elsewhere follow the principle of the *nacheinander* typical of music (they imply a duration, there is the unfolding of a narrative, a sequence of carefully scripted “events”), whereas the allovers and drippings fall under the category of the *nebeneinander* typical of painting. Lessing’s formulations provide a blueprint for the actions taken as such: “Objects or parts of objects which follow one another are called actions. [...] Painting can use only a single moment of an action in its coexisting composition and must therefore choose the one which is most suggestive and from which the preceding and succeeding actions are most easily comprehensible.”⁸ However, if we are true to the phenomenological experience of Nitsch’s paintings, we realize that the opposition between the succession of the actions and the simultaneity of the canvases soon vanishes.

First, the paintings do not illustrate “actions”: they are not representative of anything else but a certain form of activity that may or may not be documented by the camera, as when one sees Nitsch splashing a vertical surface with blood and paint. Then, they are not just suspended between a “before” and an “after,” for on the contrary, the very materiality of the painting caught dripping, oozing or overflowing, in its slightly uneven but regularly distributed striations, in its swarming blotches, in its evocative suggestion of the volume of bodies wearing certain clothes shows that the paintings are traces of gestures that always point to their internal temporality.

If I take a *Schuettbild* from 1989, I see a plaster cast of a feminine torso, with the breasts and nipples outlined in slightly darker red, with a few ridges indicating folds in the belly. The cloth splattered with blood or something that looks like blood is cut in the form of a cross and superimposed on a large rectangular canvas that keeps the myriad traces of some pouring of reddish colors. These lines merge at times and stream out beyond the confines of the canvas, suggesting a vast streaming into infinity. Similar in function to walls lashed and darkened by rain splatters, the painting betrays its own temporality, with which the temporality of the viewer’s gaze has to measure itself, even though it remains stubbornly a bi-dimensional surface covered with color. And we cannot forget that it strongly suggests an affinity with a traditional crucifixion or a “station of the cross,” but with the delightful variation that in this case, we imagine a feminine Christ whose taut breasts now carry erotic overtones.

Then, these paintings betray another type of historicity if we pay attention to the painter’s trajectory. Nitsch began as a painter but soon questioned the value of painting itself.⁹ One can safely state that in the Austrian context of the 1950s, he would have been a “cad” if he hadn’t done so. He could not continue the tradition of Klimt, Schiele and their fellow expressionists. He had to reject painting quite logically, choosing “actions” as a more direct mode of expression. It was then as if the *performance* as a genre could by itself unleash the performative nature of flat paintings. When he later returned to painting as a side-effect of the actions, a series of “traces” of actions, Nitsch also marked his connection with the history of Western culture by repeated formal allusions to the genre of the crucifixion.

Thanks to Nitsch, we can hear and see the “fiction” concealed in crucifixion, until it turns into a “supreme fiction.” This is why Nitsch’s art matters so much and is so relevant today. By combining the formalist idea of pure color, flatness, and the rejection of illusionistic tendencies with a more iconological approach to one of the oldest genres in European painting, Nitsch demonstrates that he is still a modernist—but a “new modernist,” as it were, someone capable of blending the formal concerns of Clement Greenberg for flatness and color saturation with the anarchist rage of Georges Bataille, who compared the world to a crashed spider or to a pool of spittle. His paintings make us realize that the “universe resembles nothing and is only *formless*,” which is tantamount to seeing the universe “like a spider or spit.”¹⁰ For the spider keeps on spinning its web while the spit drips down in spontaneous traceries...

Notes

- ¹ Hermann Nitsch, *Nitsch, eine Retrospektive: Werke aus der Sammlung Essl* (Vienna: Edition Sammlung Essl, 2003), 40.
- ² Friedrich Nietzsche, *Writings from the Late Notebooks*, ed. Rüdiger Bittner, trans. Kate Sturge (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 98.
- ³ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. Douglas Smith (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 3. Hereafter referred to as BT.
- ⁴ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 5.
- ⁵ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 4.
- ⁶ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 5.
- ⁷ Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 8.
- ⁸ Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, *Laocoön: An essay on the limits of painting and poetry*, trans. Edward Allen McCormick (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1984), 78.
- ⁹ See the excellent recapitulation by Wieland Schmied, ‘Images between Spontaneity and Calculation: The role of painting in Hermann Nitsch’s work,’ *Museum Hermann Nitsch*, edited by the MZM Museumszentrum Mistelbach, in collaboration with Wolfgang Denk, (Mistelbach: MZM, 2007), 204-233.
- ¹⁰ I am quoting Bataille’s definition of *informe* in “Formless,” in Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess*, trans. Allan Stoekl (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1985), 31. See also Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind Krauss, *Formless, A User’s Guide* (New York: Zone Books, 1997), 15-25.

Das Orgien Mysterien Theater
Hermann Nitsch

Das Orgien Mysterien Theater
Hermann Nitsch

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Companion DVD



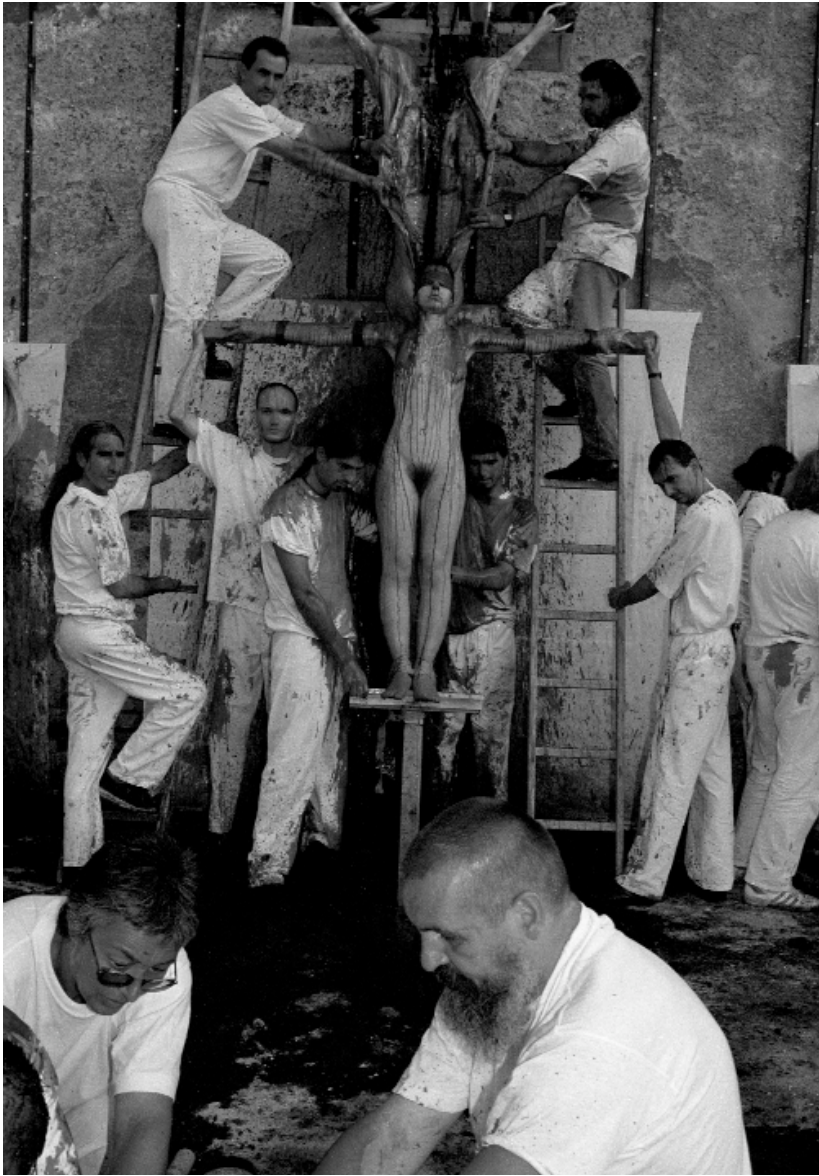








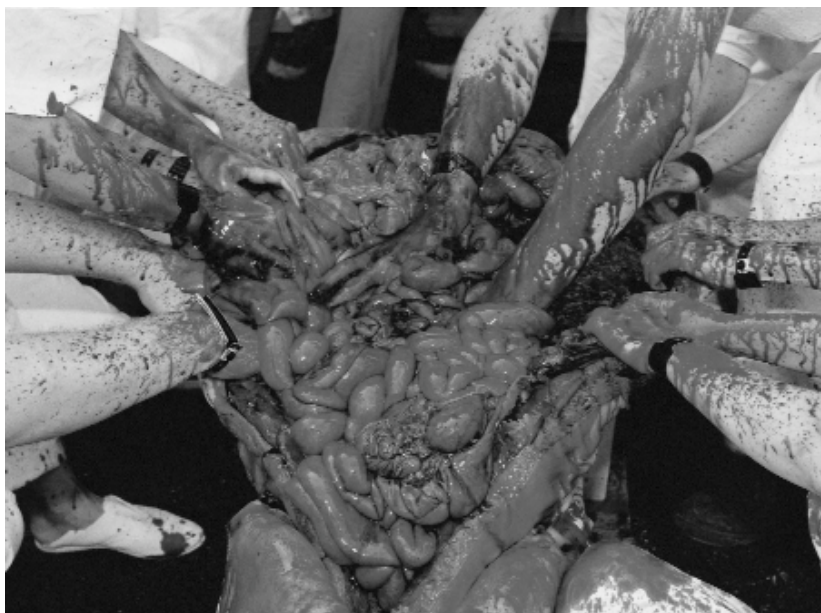














276

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Während der Fahrt den äußern Zirkel im Kopf behalten
5.25 gegengewogen ist. Nicht das ich bis zum Ende des Lebens damit
30.11 alle Passanten zu guten Menschen aufwachte.



Image Credits

- Page 128: Police raid at the 3rd action, Festival of Psycho-Physical Naturalism, Vienna, 1963//Ludwig Hoffenreich
- Page 129: 16th action, Vienna, 1965 (for Stan Brakhage)//Franzika Krammel
- Page 130: 3rd action Vienna, 1963//Ludwig Hoffenreich
- Page 131: 5th painting performance, Vienna, 1962//K. Bauer, P. Jurkowitsch
- Page 132: 12th action, Vienna, 1965//Franzika Krammel
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- Page 138: 100th action, 6-day play 1998//C.-F.A.
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- Page 157: 100th action, 6-day play 1998//C.-F.A.

The first Abreaction-Play (1961)

(Each theoretical text inserted represents an extended stage direction, which explains the intensity required of the actions by the play.)

In the abreaction play, abreactive happenings are constructed and experienced by the production of an ecstatic release from inhibitions. A concentrated regression into more subconscious psychic states of man reveals the values of the tragedy, the basic state of excitement, rooted in existence, a state which lies behind the word in the shout. In the history of humanity, the use of the shout occurs before the word developed from the mating cry.

The shout is a more immediate expression of the subconscious, of the sphere of human urges, than the word is. The need to shout normally comes about when the 'ES' asserts its rights, overcomes an intellectual control and allows the elemental drive to break through into life. The shock of torment, the sudden break-in of extreme enjoyment, in fact all those situation which result in a diminution of consciousness, cause the shout to break out. The shouts produced by direct ecstasies in the abreaction play should render audible the deeper psychic possibilities open to us. It is a matter of freeing subconscious regions of our psyche by means of excitement and shouts which are the concrete images of these stimuli. What is aimed at here is a deliberate regression into earlier states of the human psyche. The ego of early man was even more firmly related to the animal/vegetable elements of the subconscious (and therefore also to the mystic/religious elements). This negation of the word, this retrogression into the ecstasy of the shout is a communication with the subconscious, the conscious analytical submersion into the subconscious. One gives oneself up to the intoxication of vegetative, often hectically dynamic laws. One flees the "constraint" of the intellect.

Some years ago in Berlin, there was a negro film, "Hosiannah;" in it you saw negroes going into a state of trance by singing together. The potential for this lay in their particular nature, it happened sensually as if consciously. The same is said about the Indians. "The Great Night Song" is one of their main festivals, the men take hold of each other, move rhythmically and go into a trance. The affinity of trance with the

transition into a collectively intensified feeling of existence is obviously of a primitive character. The assembly provokes the transition by rites, movements and certain ancient song. It is a call of the race. Its essence is religious and mythical. A stimulating communion with the universe, a communion which intensifies the essence of the individual.

Gottfried Benn

For this reason one must know who one is. For scarcely does the subconscious touch us, but that we become part of it, by becoming unconscious of ourselves. This is the original danger which is known to the primitive being and is an object of fear, the being who himself is so near to this "PLEROMA." For his consciousness is still unsure and is unsteady. It is still childlike, has just emerged from the depths. The subconscious can easily wash over it and he forgets who he was and does things in which he does not recognize himself any more. For this reason, primitive beings avoid uncontrolled affects, because consciousness can all too easily sink and give way to possession. Therefore all the efforts of humanity were directed towards a securing of consciousness and this is what the rites were for...

C.G. Jung

Dramatis Personae:

Esos.

A chorus of nine actors.

An orchestra of nine noise raisers. The instruments of the orchestra have the sole purpose of producing as much noise as possible. I would suggest the following: pan lids, wooden drums, cymbals, flutes, violins, metal containers, trombones, cow bell tubas, ocarinas etc.

Several actors.

A time-keeper. The time-keeper sits in the first row of the auditorium and determines the length of the actions by raising and lowering both hands. If the situation demands it, the time-keeper must stand up and leave his place. It is essential that he can be seen by all the actors during each action.

Explanation of the text: The details of the shouted parts of the action are indicated in the same way as in the texts of classical dramas. The duration of the shouting is laid down by the times given at the end of each instruction.

Number 1 sings the vowel Ah (7 seconds).

Number 2 sings the vowel Ah (7 seconds).

The above instruction conveys that Number 2 does not start singing until Number 1 has sung for seven seconds.

When actions take place simultaneously or when a new action is added to one which is already taking place, this will be indicated separately.

A gap of one or more lines in the text signifies the start of a new action.

On the stage is a bed covered with a white sheet.

The chorus is grouped around Esos, as used to be the case in the Greek theatre. The orchestra is positioned at the back of the auditorium.

Esos is dressed in a shirt similar to a monk's cowl. All the others taking part are dressed in normal, everyday clothes.

As the shouted parts which are required of the actor portraying Esos are possibly too strenuous for one person to manage for the duration of the whole play, the actor playing Esos may be changed several times. The change is carried out on the stage, with the two actors who are changing parts exchanging their clothes. The proceedings are accomplished by the applause of the audience and the chorus. The same applies to the players of the chorus, who may also be changed.

Esos and Number 7 detach themselves from the chorus and take up position at the front of the stage facing the audience.

Esos sings the vowel Ah at any pitch he chooses (7 seconds).

Number 7 sings the vowel Ah at the same pitch as Esos (7 seconds).

The alternating singing of the two lasts for three minutes.

Number 1 sings the vowel Ah (7 seconds)

Number 2 sings the vowel Ah (7 seconds)

Number 3 sings the vowel Ah (7 seconds)

Number 4 sings the vowel Ah (7 seconds)

Number 5 sings the vowel Ah (7 seconds)

Number 6 sings the vowel Ah (7 seconds)

Number 7 sings the vowel Ah (7 seconds)

Number 8 sings the vowel Ah (7 seconds)

Number 9 sings the vowel Ah (7 seconds)

Esos sings the vowel Ah (7 seconds).

Number 1 sings the vowel Ah and with the aid of pauses for breath attempts to sustain his singing until the unfolding chorus of song gradually becomes a shout.

Number 2 comes in after a further 15 seconds. He also sings the vowel "Ah" and with the aid of pauses for breath attempts to sustain his singing until the unfolding chorus of song gradually becomes a shout.

Number 3 comes in after a further 15 seconds. He also sings the vowel "Ah" and with the aid of pauses for breath attempts to sustain his singing until the unfolding chorus of song gradually becomes a shout.

Number 4 come in after a further 15 seconds. He also sings the vowel "Ah" and with the aid of pauses for breath attempts to sustain his singing until the unfolding chorus of song gradually becomes a shout.

Number 5 come in after a further 15 seconds. He also sings the vowel "Ah" and with the aid of pauses for breath attempts to sustain his singing until the unfolding chorus of song gradually becomes a shout.

Number 6 come in after a further 15 seconds. He also sings the vowel "Ah" and with the aid of pauses for breath attempts to sustain his singing until the unfolding chorus of song gradually becomes a shout.

Number 7 come in after a further 15 seconds. He also sings the vowel "Ah" and with the aid of pauses for breath attempts to sustain his singing until the unfolding chorus

of song gradually becomes a shout.

Number 8 come in after a further 15 seconds. He also sings the vowel "Ah" and with the aid of pauses for breath attempts to sustain his singing until the unfolding chorus of song gradually becomes a shout.

Number 9 come in after a further 15 seconds. He also sings the vowel "Ah" and with the aid of pauses for breath attempts to sustain his singing until the unfolding chorus of song gradually becomes a shout.

Esos comes in after a further 15 seconds, sustains his singing for 15 seconds after which it breaks down into a free shout, which is continued until the end of this sequence.

After 15 seconds Number 1's singing breaks down into a free shout, which is continued until the end of the sequence.

After 15 seconds Number 2's singing breaks down into a free shout, which is continued until the end of the sequence.

After 15 seconds Number 3's singing breaks down into a free shout, which is continued until the end of the sequence.

After 15 seconds Number 4's singing breaks down into a free shout, which is continued until the end of the sequence.

After 15 seconds Number 5's singing breaks down into a free shout, which is continued until the end of the sequence.

After 15 seconds Number 6's singing breaks down into a free shout, which is continued until the end of the sequence.

After 15 seconds Number 7's singing breaks down into a free shout, which is continued until the end of the sequence.

After 15 seconds Number 8's singing breaks down into a free shout, which is continued until the end of the sequence.

After 15 seconds Number 9's singing breaks down into a free shout, which is continued until the end of the sequence.

The shouting of the whole group increases in volume to a pitch of ecstasy.

They shout to the full extent of which the human voice is capable (30 seconds).

Esos and Number 3 turn towards each other.

Esos shouts the vowel Ah (10 seconds).

Number 3 shouts the vowel Ah (10 seconds).

Their alternating singing continues for three minutes.

The chorus forms into a procession in a circle around the two. As they repeatedly walk round them, Number 1 shouts at the two in the middle (10 seconds).

Number 2 shouts at the two standing in the middle (10 seconds).

Number 3 shouts at the two standing in the middle (10 seconds).

Number 4 shouts at the two standing in the middle (10 seconds).

Number 5 shouts at the two standing in the middle (10 seconds).

Number 6 shouts at the two standing in the middle (10 seconds).

Number 7 shouts at the two standing in the middle (10 seconds).

Number 8 shouts at the two standing in the middle (10 seconds).

Number 9 shouts at the two standing in the middle (10 seconds).

The whole of the above sequence is repeated, except that only Esos and Number 3 maintain during the shouting of the procession a shout which starts from the vowel Ah and sounds out above everything else at somewhat higher pitch. (With the aid of pauses for breath.)

The procession moves noiselessly in a closed circle round Esos and Number 3 (1 Minute).

The procession continues as above.

Number 1 steps out of the procession, takes up a position at the front of the stage, utters a brief shout, and then steps back into the procession.

All the actors in the chorus repeat this after 15 second intervals.

The procession continues to move, the actors in the chorus, beginning with Number 1, shout out more quickly one after the other (2 minutes).

Two minutes of silence, with the procession standing still (otherwise the group of the chorus remains the same).

The procession starts to move again.

Half of the chorus (Numbers 1,2,4,5) sings the vowel Ah. The other half of the chorus (Numbers 6,7,8,9) shout quickly in succession one after the other.

At the same time, Esos and Number 3 attempt to drown out all the rest.

Two minutes silence, with the procession standing still (otherwise the grouping of the actors remains the same).

The procession starts to move round again.

Number 1 starts a sustained singing of the vowel Ah (with help of pauses for breath).

After 15 seconds Number 2 begins a sustained singing of the vowel Ah (with the help of pauses for breath).

After 15 seconds Number 3 begins a sustained singing of the vowel Ah (with the help of pauses for breath).

After 15 seconds Number 4 begins a sustained singing of the vowel Ah (with the help of pauses for breath).

After 15 seconds Number 5 begins a sustained singing of the vowel Ah (with the help of pauses for breath).

After 15 seconds Number 6 begins a sustained singing of the vowel Ah (with the help of pauses for breath).

After 15 seconds Number 7 begins a sustained singing of the vowel Ah (with the help of pauses for breath).

After 15 seconds Number 8 begins a sustained singing of the vowel Ah (with the help of pauses for breath).

After 15 seconds Number 9 begins a sustained singing of the vowel Ah (with the help of pauses for breath).

Their singing swells to a shout, which degenerates to become louder and more penetrating.

After about 20 seconds the shouting is intensified by the noise produced by the orchestra (1 minute).

The above proceedings are repeated three times.

The whole chorus begins to shout loudly, shrilly and uninhibitedly. The orchestra also produces noise in the same way. The shouting and the noise of the instruments

are motivated by the sole intention of the shouting drowning out the noise of the instruments and vice versa.

The actors in the procession, which is still continuing, are carried away with brutal stamping and dancing movements. After one minute, the noise of the instruments starts to become rhythmical. They produce noise at short regular intervals.

The chorus continues its unrestrained shouting.

Number 6 alone shouts in the same rhythm as the noise of the instruments (2 minutes).

After the chorus has grouped itself again with Esos on the stage as at the beginning, the chorus continues shouting and the orchestra making a noise (1 minute).

Actors bring on a trough filled with lukewarm water and in which there are five pieces of raw meat.

Esos wraps the wet pieces of meat in brown paper and gives them to a member of the audience sitting in the first row. The meat is passed round the audience from one person to another. Whoever receives it last throws the pieces of meat back on to the stage.

Actors bring on a white freshly washed cloth, smelling of incense, and a white cloth which has been immersed in sweetened wine. Both cloths are passed round to all the members of the audience.

Esos walks casually around in the auditorium (3 minutes).

The chorus leaves the stage and takes up position at the back of the auditorium. The stage curtain is drawn. Esos and Number 2 have remained on the now concealed stage.

Esos shouts. At the same time Number 2 sings the vowel Ah.

After 30 seconds, the curtain is suddenly torn open.

Number 2 pours yolk over Esos who is shouting.

The chorus sings into the vowel Ah and their singing swells in volume until it degenerates into a guttural shrill shouting (2 minutes).

Esos walks around the auditorium with his soiled clothing and talks with members of the audience.

Esos then goes back stage and changes his clothes. He throws the soiled clothing into the auditorium so that it can be handed round the audience. The last person to receive it gives it back to Esos, who immerses it in vinegar, lymph and hot water and then gives it back to the audience. When Esos receives the wet clothing back again, he puts it on over his new clothes.

Esos tears the wet clothing to pieces on the stage with the help of a sharp instrument. Whilst he is, doing this, the chorus shouts loudly (2 minutes).

The return to the burlesque of the Darstellungstheater

Esos (Oedipus) lies down with Number 4 (Oedipus' mother) on the bed on the stage, they shout obscenely and act as if they were having sexual intercourse (30 seconds).

Numbers 2, 5, 6, and 7 carry the bed upon which Esos and Number 4 are lying round the audience three times. Esos and Number 4 shout very loudly and now and then put their tongues out and thumb their noses at them. The orchestra produces a lot of noise. After the third time round the bed is replaced on the stage.

Oedipus' mother realizes that she has slept with her son. She seizes Esos putting her fingers in his mouth and shouting.

They get off the bed and take up position at the front of the stage and shout as loudly as they possibly can. After 15 seconds Number 4 leaves and Esos (Oedipus) shouts even more loudly and presses both thumbs into his eyesockets, whilst the four fingers of each hand are clasped round the back of his head (castration gesture) for

1 minute.

Esos goes off.

Shouting from the chorus and noise from the orchestra (25 seconds).

Esos and number 4 come to the front of the stage holding hands.

The chorus whistles with their fingers and stamps. The orchestra makes a great deal of noise. After 30 seconds Esos and Number 4 leave the stage.

15 seconds without any action.

Esos and Number 4 come to the front of the stage again. The chorus whistles with their fingers in their mouths and stamps. The orchestra makes a great deal of noise. After 30 seconds Esos and Number 4 leave the stage.

15 seconds without action. The above proceedings are then repeated three times.

The chorus and Esos take up their original positions upon the stage again.

The orchestra produces noise (30 seconds).

The chorus shouts the vowel Ah (10 seconds).

The orchestra produces noise (30 seconds).

The alternation between chorus and orchestra lasts six minutes.

Number 6 (orchestra) makes a noise by banging together pan lids (20 seconds).

Esos shouts the vowel Ah (10 seconds).

Number 6 (orchestra) makes a noise by banging together pan lids (20 seconds).

The alternation between the two lasts for four minutes.

The musicians in the orchestra go up to the stage with their instruments. The shouting of the chorus increases until it reaches a pitch of extreme ecstasy. At the same time the orchestra makes the maximum possible amount of noise.

An ecstatic abreaction is produced by noise. (The direct break-through to the

“mating-call”.) The duration of the noise (10 minutes) can be shortened at will, except that it must be the longest period of continuous noise of the play. Each individual unburdens himself by shouting and making a noise. The subconsciously present human instincts are released through abreaction, break through and remove the controlling level of consciousness and reveal themselves openly in the intoxication of satisfaction (an excess of the comprehension of existence is experienced).

[...]

Preliminaries of the Eucharist (Identification schemes)

1. The basic excess = the excessive break-through of instinct, end-point and most elemental, sado-masochistic form of abreactive experience. (The need for this radical abreactive excess was increasingly suppressed as culture and civilization advanced.)
2. Totem meal and tearing up on the dead animal.
3. All those mythical situations in which a mythical figure (a god) is cruelly sacrificed or innocently killed in the sense of a salvation. (Isis and Osiris, Attis and Agdistis, Dionysius, Adonis, Orpheus etc.)
4. The sacrifice of an animal in general as a substitute for a human sacrifice and as the object of identification (identification by eating of the animal's body).
5. The Greek theatre challenges the onlooker to identify with the hero as he is destroyed.
6. The Eucharist as the culmination of these preliminaries. Christ took upon himself the guilt of humanity, he became humanity, he sacrificed himself for all. He embodies a masochistic urge for suffering, as well as the propitiation of a collective guilt feeling.

The convinced Christian identifies himself with Jesus Christ during the transubstantiation by eating the host, that is the body of Christ (communion, imitating Christ).

In the O.M. Theatre, the hero Esos experiences a direct abreaction achieved by analytic, theatrical means. An identification of the audience with the hero is possible.

But it is the aim of the O.M. Theatre-form that the onlooker experiences direct abreaction through participation.

[...]

Plan for the Six Day Play (1963)

[...]

washing hands

washing feet

washing body (torso, nipples, armpits)

washing genitals

washing side wound

[...]

BLOOD I

BLOOD
BLOOD ARTERIES
BLOOD ALGAE
BLOOD BANK
BLOOD BLISTER
BLOODBROTHERHOOD
BLOODBURST
BLOODCHRISTENING
BLOOD CAKE
BLEEDER
BLOOD BRUISE
BLOODBANNER
BLOOD-BRAIN-BARRIER
BLOOD CORPUSLELS (red)
BLOOD CIRCULATION
BLOOD CLOTTING
BLOOD CONGESTION
BLOOD CONSERVES
BLOODCLOT
BLOODCLEANSINGTEA
BLOODCOUGH
BLOOD DEFICIENCY
BLOODRAIN
BLOODDONOR
BLOODDISCRACE(INCEST)
BLOODDROP
BLOODDEW
BLOODSDAY
BLOOD EXCREMENT
BLOOD EMPTY
BLOOD FACTORS
BLOOD FLOWER
BLOOD FORMATION
BLOOD FORMULARS
BLOODFEILD
BLOOD GROUP

BLOODHOUND

BLOOD II

BLOODLINE
BLOODLAKE
BLOODLOUSE
BLOODLESS
BLOODMARK
BLOODMEAL
BLOODMILKING
BLOOD MONEY
BLOODWEDDING
BLOOD PICTURE
BLOODPOISEN
BLOODPARTICLE
BLOODPRESSURE
BLOODPRETZELSALT
BLOODREFRESHMENT
BLOODREVENGE
BLOODRAIN
BLOODREPLACEMENT
BLOODROOT
BLOODSALIVA
BLOODSHAME
BLOODSPONGE
BLOOD STONE
BLOOD STREAM
BLOODSNOW
BLOOD SERUM
BLOOD SERUM
BLOOD SPECK
BLOOD STAINS
BLOODSUGAR
BLOODSPONGE(STRAWBERRY MARK)

BLOODSINKING(SEDIMENTATION TEST)
BLOODTRANSFUSION
BLOOD VESSELS
BLOOD VOMIT
BLOODWASHING
BLOODWEEK
BLOODWITNESS

Milking blood from a cow. Red
colouring of the milk, by blood, occurs
as a result of a bruised udder.

first aid for	coughing blood
	vomiting blood
	breast feeding blood

[...]

Total Conception of the 6 Day O.M. Theatre Play (1963)

First Day:

Introduction of all the actions.

Demonstration and short practice of the shouting and noise actions.

Participation of the onlookers.

Actions with substances and liquids such as vinegar, wine, ether, perfume, hydrogen-peroxide, blood, lymph, lukewarm water, etc.

Tactile actions.

The perception of sensations of smell and taste.

(The actions of all six days are connected with deliberately arranged sensations of taste and smell, which are transmitted to the audience.)

Actions with meat and slaughtered animals.

Introduction of the disembowelment action which is continually repeated on all the later days.

Symphonic evaluation of the noise music and the shouting-choruses.

Exposure of the sexual organs.

The finale of the first day is a great abreactive action in the slaughterhouse.

Second Day:

The actions paraphrase myths of creation and myths about original sin and the fall.

Actions with animals' genitals.

The killing of animals (in the slaughterhouse) is seen.

Theory of the killing experience.

The contrasting of sexual organ and monstrosity.

Procession of the onlookers, wounds are made in naked corpses at every point at which the procession stops. (Noise and shouting during this.)

Actors are carried through the theatre on stretchers. Their sexual organs are sprinkled with powder, rubbed down with tea-roses and blood and egg yolk are poured over them.

Third Day:

DIONYSIUS-Liturgic.

Activation of Dionysian (break-through of urges).

Slow intensification of the actions, continual repetition of previous actions.

Theoretical texts on the essence of the dionysian.

Dionysian ferment equals abreaction. Dionysius = God of abreaction.

Huge orgiastic action in the slaughterhouse. (Provocation of a breakthrough of urges.)

Slaughtered skinned cows are disembowelled on beds, torn up and blood is poured over them. Tea-roses, dusted with powder, are stuffed into the torn-open carcasses.

The onlookers wallow around in the entrails, on the meat and in the puddles of blood, shouting. They trample about on the bloody entrails.

Shouting from the chorus.

Noise from the orchestra

Shouting and stamping from the audience.

Dionysius = War.

(War as a Dionysian phenomenon, regression into the chaotic, into the uncontrolled regions.)

ACTIONS IN THE OPEN AIR (tank-training ground).

Tanks drive over bloody entrails and slaughtered cows. Meat and entrails are squashed. Whilst blood is being poured over everything, noise from the engines and noise of trombones.

Several slaughtered cows are fastened to a concrete wall as if crucified. The tanks fire explosive shells at them. The corpse of a boy is fastened to a concrete wall as if crucified, a wreath of tea-roses is put on his head, his sexual organ is torn up. The entrails are torn out of the resultant wound.

Great orgiastic action in the theatre.

Intensification of the above mentioned slaughterhouse action.

Beds covered in white and 21 slaughtered cows are brought into the theatre. The cows are disemboweled and torn up by the shouting onlookers, while blood is poured over everything.

During the climax of this action, the naked corpse of a boy is fastened to one wall of the theatre, as if crucified.

A wreath of tea-roses is put on his head. His sexual organ is torn up. The entrails are pulled out through the resultant wound.

Ecstatic shouting from the chorus.

Ecstatic noise from the orchestra.

Ecstatic shouting and stamping from the audience.

Fourth Day:

Burlesque variation on hellenic mystery-cults.

Actions in underground rooms and concrete passages.

Dramatic environments.

Actions with human and animal embryos.

Actions with human corpses, cutting and tearing up of corpses, actions in the open air.

Gigantic trenches are filled up with blood, slaughtered cows and entrails.

Planes bomb the meat. The onlookers watch the proceedings from a nearby hill.

Processions of the audience in the open air. Actions in vineyards and wine cellars.

Consumption of alcohol, mass intoxicification of the audience, contemporary music, march-music, brass band music.

Fifth Day:

Variations on a catholic service.

The Mass is transformed into a orgiastic abreactive festival during the Eucharist.

The most excessive action with animal carcasses, intensification of the final action of the third day. Most extreme noise. Climax of the play. Cultivated break-through of urges, thorough and complete abreaction of the audience.

Suppressed regions are brought into the conscious.

Sixth Day:

Volksfest

Liturgical repetition summary of all actions.

Essential repetition of various actions.

Meanwhile, the procession of other members of the audience in the open air.

Loudspeakers are all around. Beat-music, slow country waltzes, contemporary music can be heard. The noise orchestra, the choruses and the brass band orchestra move about the countryside.

All the church-bells ring.

The audience applauds and cheers itself.

Wine tasting. The members of the audience sit in wine-gardens, drink wine and peacefully await the midnight hour.

Symbolically completed process of individuation, self-recognition, mysticism of being.

More detailed directions for the third day

Dionysius-Liturgy.

The activation of the Dionysian (Abreaction, break through of instincts).

Distribution of objects to the participants.

Lunch in a very big room in the theatre.

MEAL IN A LARGE ROOM OF THE THEATRE

All the tables are covered with white freshly washed clothes. The room is filled completely with huge quantities of (moist) roses, like a church.

The tastes of the dishes and the drinks have synaesthetic points of reference (combination of taste – values as art, the extended lyric and drama).

4 times during the meal, brass band music (Schuhplattler) is played. Each time the noise orchestra drowns it.

Actions during the meal:

Animals are disemboweled (preferably smallish animals, hares, smallish lambs etc.) on tables covered only with white towels, and are washed clean of blood with lukewarm water, the flesh is washed, the organs of the animals are washed
kidneys
the fat around
the entrails
entrails
liver
lungs.

Number 0 lays his penis on one of the tables.
A lamb is hanging as if crucified on one wall of the room.
Action with the wound in the side.
The lamb is disemboweled, the entrails are repeatedly stuffed into the lamb's breast, blood is poured over them and they are torn out again.

Texts from Goethes "Farbenlehre" are spoken.

In addition to this meal, very small amounts of food are distributed to the audience to sample, to broaden the wealth of "harmonic relationships" of the sequence of dishes. The "syn-aesthetic comprehensibility" of the events of the play should be brought out.

End of the sequence of dishes at the lunch:

smell of incense
smell of wet white lilac
smell of hydrogen-peroxide
smell of raw meat
taste of lukewarm red wine
taste of the overripe flesh of a red grape, squashed between tongue and gums,

A harmonium is played, in tones relating to the dishes and smells.

taste of lukewarm sugarwater
taste of white bread dipped in hot saccharine water.

These samples are handed out in very small tins. The smells are conveyed by wads of cotton wool which are dipped into the appropriate essence.

Actions with slaughtered, skinned lambs, action with a slaughtered, skinned ox (various actions of disemboweling are carried out).

Slaughterhouse

The participants are taken into a slaughterhouse. At least 12 to 20 skinned, slaughtered oxen are hanging on the walls of the slaughterhouse, head down as if crucified. Broad beds, covered with white sheets, are under most of the animal carcasses, on several of the beds are lying white feather mattresses and white pillows. A noise orchestra (20 men) and a boys chorus (40 boys) are grouped at the back wall.

In the middle of the slaughterhouse, many broad beds covered with white sheets, are so arranged that they form one huge bed. White feather mattresses and pillows are also lying on these beds. Huge quantities of raw meat and intestines are brought into the slaughterhouse and thrown on to the concrete floor in front of the group of beds in the middle.

Actors being to stamp on them and pour and splash light-red frothing blood, hot water, hot lymph and egg yolk on to the entrails lying about, the raw meat, the concrete floor and each other. Other actors spray water from hoses on to the entrails covered in blood and on to the bloody raw meat. At the same time, butchers hack open the oxen hanging on the walls and partially disembowel them. Blood, hot water, and lukewarm lymph are poured from buckets on to the intestines as they are falling down and into the hacked open bodies of the oxen. The participants dip entrails in blood, egg yolk, hot lymph and hot water, slap them against the walls and on to the floor, stamp about on them, kick them along and kick about between them. They throw them at each other, the oxen and the group of beds in the middle of the slaughter-house. They also dip pieces of raw meat in the blood, egg yolk, hot lymph

and hot water and throw them at the walls and the floor. Blood is poured into the inside of the hacked opened bodies of the oxen. Cotton wool and bundles of white tea-roses, dipped in hot water, are stuffed in and then torn out again. (Non-poisonous) purple aniline dye and blood is poured over the roses as they fall down. The participants tear pieces of raw meat from the hacked open bodies with their bare hands and grope about in the still warm entrails. Some actors climb into the hacked open bodies of the carcasses lying on the floor and stamp about on them. Huge quantities of entrails and other intestines and pieces of raw meat are hauled on to the beds grouped in the middle of the slaughter-house; while people are trampling about ecstatically on them, blood, egg yolk, hot lymph and hot water are poured over them. (The skin of many of the entrails bursts when trampled upon and the excrement gushing out of them mixes with the blood and egg yolk, the white bed clothes are splashed with blood and egg yolk.) Some participants wallow about on the blood-soiled beds (on the bloody feather mattresses and pillows) and on the bloody moist entrails lying there. Several slaughtered, skinned oxen are hauled on to the group of beds. (Their bodies are already chopped open) and blood and hot water are continually poured over them while this is being done. The carcasses are disemboweled (the warm entrails and other intestines are torn out with bare hands).

Tea-roses, dipped in ether (smelling of ether), tea-roses dipped in hot water, tea-roses sprinkled with rose-perfumed talcum powder, cotton wool sprinkled with rose-perfumes talcum powder and bloody moist entrails are stuffed into the open bodies of the oxen. While the cotton wool and tea-roses are being torn out again, still warm, frothing, light-red blood, hot lymph, hot greasy dish-water, egg yolk, sugared urine and hot water are poured over them and into the broken open bodies of the oxen. Spectators and actors stamp about on the carcasses. An ox is dragged to the end wall and fixed to it, head down as if crucified, and the previously described actions are repeated on the hanging ox. Everything degenerates into a general orgy. They all pour and splash blood over each other. All the PARTICIPANTS throw moist entrails and raw meat at each other. The actors and participants, soiled with blood and egg yolk, wallow about shouting with the carcasses and entrails on the floor and on the beds. The animals are torn to pieces.

Climax of the orgy

A naked, dead boy, whose forehead is wound with a wreath of fresh tea-roses, is carried into the slaughterhouse and nailed to a free space in the wall as if crucified. A circular, bloody wound is cut with a scalpel slightly to the right of the boy's navel. Through the hole of the wound, the boy's entrails are drawn out and put on to a white cloth beneath his feet. Lurid, aniline dye flows out of the boy's mouth and out of his wound. During the entire action, the boys' chorus shouts ecstatically and the orchestra produces ecstatic noise. The shouting and noise of the two groups intensifies until the climax of the action. As the action is progressing, all the participants begin gradually to shout ecstatically, to clap their hands and to stamp on the floor. Hitler speeches, church bells, and brass band music (Schuhplattler) are heard from very powerful loudspeakers during the entire action.

Sensations of smell and taste felt during the action:

smell of fresh raw meat
 smell of hot water
 smell of blood
 smell of hot lymph
 smell of egg yolk
 smell of entrails and excrement
 strong sweet smell of talcum powder
 smell of ether
 smell of urine
 smell of hot greasy dish-water
 the intense smell of incense mixed with the smell of beeswax water, in which lilac has been washed
 ammonia
 the smell of narcissi
 and of strong disinfectant
 smell of wet fresh tea-roses
 smell of surgical spirit are spread out in the slaughterhouse with sprays.

The following objects and liquids are distributed during the action to the audience to be tasted:

hot water and saccharine water

red wine mixed with warm water

one saccharine tablet each

lukewarm and hot water

sugar water and hydrogen peroxide.

The participants rinse clean of lymph the lacerated bloody flesh of the wound in the crucified dead boy by means of cotton wool, smelling of ether and the following liquids:

hydrogen peroxide

hot water

lukewarm water.

Pink talcum powder smelling strongly and sweetly of jasmin is sprinkled on to the wound, the wound is dabbed with a wilted tea-rose smelling of incense.

The participants go into the open air. Many slaughtered lambs are crucified in the open air on wooden planks, the walls of houses and churches and gardens, garden fences and hoardings, disemboweled and soaked with blood and hot water.

The audience drive to a field wet with rain, the softened earth of which is criss-crossed with the tracks of vehicles (tank training ground).

The body of a 42 year old man is nailed to a concrete wall as if crucified. The wounds in his feet are washed with hydrogen peroxide and rinsed clean with cotton wool and lukewarm water. A deep 4 cm long wound is cut with a scalpel under the right nipple. The wound is opened up. An actor puts his index finger deep into the moist wound, pulls his finger out again and rinses the gaping wound clean of blood and lymph with cotton wool. Several lorries loaded with slaughtered skinned oxen, raw meat and moist bloody entrails, drive approximately to the middle of the ground. While the meat, entrails and carcasses are being unloaded, blood, and hot water are poured over them. Many large white cloths are spread out on the damp, earth of the field. Many feather mattresses and pillows covered with white bed-clothes are also lying in the field. A group of beds is arranged so as to form a giant bed, and feather mattresses, pillows and huge quantities of entrails lie on that as well. Some oxen are dropped on to the white surface.

Tanks drive here and there in the field at full speed. They drive over the slaughtered oxen, squashing their flesh and shattering the bones, the entrails gush bloodily from

the carcasses and are squashed. The skin bursts and excrement flows out. Then, the tanks drive over huge heaps of meat and intestines, over which blood, lymph, hot water and egg yolk have been poured, and which are lying on the ground on white cloths or on the beds. All the white cloths and all the bed-clothes are splashed with blood and hot water. Actors pour blood, lymph, hot water and egg yolk over all the meat, all the entrails, all the carcasses and all the tanks in the action. Blood is poured and splashed over everything. The tanks leave bloody tracks, slimy bloody excrement and scraps of squashed meat on the white cloths and beds. The bed-clothes, soaked with blood, are mixed up with the bloody excrement. Many pools of blood form on the white cloths and the earth which is wet with rain and the tanks drive through them continually. Then, they drive over trenches filled with blood, egg yolk, hot water and entrails, blood splashed from the trenches. The participants stand around these happenings in groups. Many slaughtered oxen are fastened to a strong, white-washed concrete wall, head down as if crucified. They hang about 2 m from each other. White cloths are spread out under the oxen or beds covered in white stand under the dead animals. Some oxen are disemboweled, the entrails fall on to the beds. Tarpaulins, filled with blood, are stuffed into the disemboweled carcasses of the oxen. The other oxen remain untouched. The tanks shoot at the oxen, the flesh of the animals' bodies is partially shredded, blood splashes on to the white wall, on the white beds and the white cloths. The entrails are torn out, excrement splashes on to everything.

The beds are soiled with blood again and again. The tanks drive this way and that over the beds and the entrails and carcasses lying on them in the middle of the ground, an ox is fixed to a framework, as if crucified. The ox is disemboweled, blood and aniline dye are poured on to the entrails as they fall down.

The participants go back into the theatre. A noise orchestra (20 men) a boys' chorus (40 boys), a chorus (20 men) are grouped at the back wall.

17 lambs are nailed to the wall in seventeen different places as if crucified, disemboweled, soaked with blood and hot water and removed again.

There is a small doorway in the end wall of the large room which leads to a room behind the end wall (the room measures 6 x 6 m). The room is filled with entrails soaked in lymph to a depth of one metre.

Six actors with trombones go into the back room and pour blood, lukewarm lymph, egg yolk and hot water on to the entrails. They stamp about on the entrails, blowing their trombones (the skin of the entrails bursts and excrement gushes out). Three more actors come into the small room and wallow about ecstatically in the bloody entrails and smear the bloody excrement on to the walls and floor. During this action, one player of the orchestra whistles.

About 20 slaughtered, skinned oxen are brought into the theatre and fastened to the walls of the room, head down as if crucified. Under most of the animal carcasses are broad beds covered with white sheets. On several of the beds white feather mattresses and white pillows are lying. In the middle of the theatre several broad beds, covered with white sheets, are arranged so as to form one huge bed.

Feather mattresses and pillows lie on these beds as well. Finally, the oxen hanging on the wall are disemboweled. The action of the disembowelment is carried out slowly. The entrails are stuffed into the chopped open bodies again several times and torn out again. Various liquids are poured over the opened bodies and the entrails as they are falling out.

[...]

Actions in any room of a suitable size. The projection of colour films on to a cinemascope screen. Texts by Novalis, from Goethe's "Farbenlehre," from Schlegel's Lucinde and from police reports are spoken by choruses. During the screening of the film, which is still going on, an ox is nailed to the cinemascope screen as if crucified. In the moment when the ox is being disemboweled and blood is being poured over it, very strong LIGHT (magnesium light). The ox is illuminated by a klieg light. Very loud noise from the chorus and the orchestra.

On the Symbolism of the Side-Wound (1964)

[...]

On the sensual reality of feeling of the side-wound

The frequently quoted side-wound (of the lamb) in the actions is by no means merely to be understood from its outward, vulgar symbolism. The (formal) stimulating factors of the side-wound (which I convey through the actions) can be separated into two groups, which achieve their effect by merging with each other. We are concerned on the one hand with a specifically sensual factor and on the other hand with symbolical references which can be comprehended by association and which enrich the sensual reality. In order that the one-sided symbolical interpretation is not overemphasized in my actions, the specifically sensual aspect of the side-wound must be worked out and separated from its symbolism in as far as this is possible.

The non-symbolical use of the side wound of an animal corpse must be justified, the actual primary reason which leads to the use of the side wound is turned round.

...one of the soldiers with a spear pierced his side, and forthwith came there out blood and water...

The blood and water flowing out make themselves evident in the most intense manner. The light-red blood flowing out is of such a colourful intensity that the human being by his very nature is made intensively aware of it; it forces him to take notice of it. (The blood, still with the living warmth of the body, is connected with the signal for death, for injury, blood pours out, when a destructive incision is made in the flesh.) The intensity of the impression made by the wound is heightened by the water which flows out from the wound. As well as blood, water also flows from the wound. The body, into which the lance was stabbed was already dead, was already decomposing, is almost bled dry.

Apart from the liquids which flow from the wound, the moist wound itself, the incision into the flesh (the torn open edges of the incision) convey a strong sensual effect. Finally, the redeeming act of the stabbing of the body (this time without PROCREATIVE phallic symbolism) must be executed as a strong sensually felt action. As sharp object is stabbed into the soft, slightly injured flesh of a human

body, the flesh at first resists somewhat, the sharp tip of the lance tears the skin, cuts its way into the flesh a little and then passes into the soft flesh.

As well as the illumination of the quote with reference to my plays, the opening up of the side-wound often portrayed in art must be taken up. Here also we are dealing with an action which has a strong sensual effect, soft, moist flesh is opened up. (By an incision, the moist inside of the flesh is revealed, an association is made with the pain which is caused by torn flesh.) A finger stuck into the wound has the same effect. A finger is inserted into the soft flesh of the moist wound (here also the emphasis should not lie on the phallic symbolism but on the sensual act). In short, we are dealing with the basic sensual effects, which can be stimulated by realities (substances, objects, actions) with the aim of making them conscious and utilizing them for art. It can perhaps also be assumed that the side-wound has a strong symbolical character because it provokes such an intense sensual effect, it seems a reasonable assumption that the origination of and formation of symbols is closely connected with sensually intensive impressions. Since the "INFORMEL" (tachism) the basic sensual stimulation has been comprehended and utilized in art. THE "INFORMEL" was sympathetic toward the spraying, pouring, splashing, running and smearing of dyes and taught us to recognize the stimulating factors of the liquids flowing from the wound.

FONTANA demonstrated through his pictures (WITH SLITS IN THEM), the sadistic act of stabbing and cutting (he cut a wound into the picture). The break-through of anal and sadistic sensuality which has been suppressed becomes aesthetically, consciously an essential creative form of the actions of the O.M. Theatre.

The Lamb Manifesto (1964)

On the symbolism of the lamb

Starting from the sensually felt reality of the bloody, skinned carcase, associations can be drawn with the beginnings of the mythical. The chain of associations so revealed touches directly upon the mastering of the collective surges of human vitality which are continually forcing towards the orgiastic. The lamb appears for the most part in a symbolical relationship with their end-points, sublimations and repressions. The dionysian frenzy ends in the tearing up of the god Dionysius (of the bull symbolizing him), ends in excess.
[...]

O.M. Theatre (1968)

The O.M. Theatre (orgies-mysteries theatre) is the attempt of an absolute "Gesamtkunstwerk". The world of the phenomena is understood through synesthesia. Drama (lyric, epic), painting and music combine themselves in a 6 day feast of glorification of existence. The spectator (participant, player) is thrown into a more intensified aesthetic-mystic understanding of the surrounding world.

(Form [aesthetic] – essential aim of practice of art. Intensified registration of the world through the form. Form condenses the surrounding world in the enjoying sense and moves it closer to us, drives us more strongly into being. Practice of art = mystic of being. Aesthetic even deep into cruelty. Aesthetic of the cruel.)
Establishing synesthetically relations between:
perception of touch,
perception of taste,
perception of smell,
perception of acoustic and visual registrations
shall inspire our sense orgiastically. The accelerating activation of all sense can be compared to psychoanalysis. Instead of associating, actions are instituted which heightened the perceptions of the senses until the endpoint of orgiastic "abreaction."
(Evaluation of elemental sensuous aggressive-sadistic perceptions, dilacerating of raw meat, disembowelment of slaughtered animal cadavers and trampling on the entrails. The use of cry – and noise actions [noise-music]). The result is a descending into subconscious regions. We have a sex drive originating which reaches to the very bottom of sado-masochistic excess. The basic excess = end-point of the "abreactive" experience, sado-masochistic acting; breakthrough as well

as demonstrable and consciousness of the subconscious regions, catharsis. Dramatic climax of the play. The "abreactive" events become automatically playacting. Through thorough "abreaction" this playing contributes to overcome excessive experiencing, and replaces it by sublimated experience. The events which are presented in the O.M. Theatre are not acted as it is the case in classical theatre, but they are occurring in reality. The spectator is place into the event. He is himself occurring, he shall reach his own self – reach the mystic of being. The action of the play brings the spectator to the realization of his own existential reality. Through the explanation of mystic symbolic originates a demythologized awareness of mythic projections. (Dispute with the collective unawareness.) After the "abreaction," provoked by the play, the excessive can be overcome. There comes a quite, meditative understanding of existence. Sublimation, mystic of being instead of "abreaction." As a result the actions only provoke contemplation and submersion into the world of phenomena. The excessive, sado-masochistic "abreaction" is sublimated to the dispute with color (color reactions, colorgames, colorprojections). The concentrated aesthetic liturgy of the O.M. Theatre can expand over the entire human life and can transform the liturgy of the O.M. Theatre, can expand itself over a whole lifetime and transform the process of living into a positive, life-enjoying, aesthetic ritual.

MEAT	(LIGHT) COLOR
Meat	Color
anal sado-masochistic dispute with meat (actions of disembowelment and dilacerations) amorphous elemental comprehension. at first color is not extracted, it simply heightens the sensuous, elemental comprehension.	sublimating analysis of the color- and lightvalues of meat. abstracting of color values into color scales. meat = light rainbow LIGHTBOW nucleus of light, colorcircle, light- circle. Matthias Gruenewald.

The sado-masochistic excessive abreaction sublimates itself during the course of the play into the comprehension of color.

The Fall of Jerusalem (1971)

[...]

BLOOD CIRCULATION

an artificial blood circulation system (blood conduit) runs through all of the corridors of the subterranean city. arteries of various widths extend throughout all of the corridors and rooms. blood is pumped along rubber tubes, transparent plastic hoses, and copper, pewter, silver, gold and plastic pipes. dark, venous blood low in oxygen, as well as arterial blood replete with oxygen, is pumped through all of the rooms and corridors. the blood pumping station (it acts as an ARTIFICIAL HEART) with its heart chambers and blood pump chambers lies beneath room 24. the blood is infused with oxygen in the lung room. blood low in oxygen is sucked in and pumped back out, replete with oxygen. where blood taps are not provided, additional points for tapping blood are marked in almost every room and corridor by means of crosses of diamonds and platinum set in the floors, walls and ceilings.
room 1018 is filled with blood to a depth of 1m. floating on the blood are the bright red lungs of recently slaughtered cattle and pigs' bladders inflated with air. people lacerate the lungs and burst the inflated pigs' bladders.

smell of

blood

hundreds of white rabbits (albino rabbits with red eyes) are creeping about the floor of room 1020. a number of slaughtered rabbits are skinned, disemboweled (the moist bloody intestines are cast to the ground) and nailed as if crucified (head down) to the walls. the damp bloody skins are likewise nailed to the walls.

smell of

rabbit droppings
urine
straw

rabbit feed
raw flesh
blood
spirits of melissa

in room 1020a, white dogs that have been deliberately starved are fed with the fresh raw flesh and the bloody bright red lungs of recently slaughtered cattle and their most bloody and by now unpalatable entrails.

smell of

fresh raw flesh
lungs
intestines
rotting entrails

on the floor of room 1021, which is covered in leaf-mould, white tulips are growing.

on the floor of room 1024 lie the naked corpses of empress elisabeth, otto III, louis V of france, queen victoria of england and matilda of tuscany. wooden crosses are brought in, the corpses are nailed to the crosses lying on the ground (screams from a boys choir during each crucifixion). no.0 sticks his erect penis into the mouth of the crucified empress elisabeth. he thrusts his penis back and forth until his semen issues. the sperm fills the mouth of the corpse, raw wet flesh is stuffed into the damp slimy mouth.

orchestration

boys choir
(during the
ejaculation)
flutes
trumpets

the nails are extracted from the feet of empress elisabeth's corpse. her legs are pulled apart, her pubic is torn out, her sex is opened wide and incisions are made

above and below with a scalpel, the labia are lacerated. while the genitals are lacerated to the point of non-recognition, no.1 masturbates and smears his sperm on her face. no.2 licks her lacerated genitals, burrows into it with his mouth and teeth, and sticks his tongue deep into the slashed moist bloody flesh. he sucks blood from the lacerated genitals and bites the corpse's thighs. he licks the bare flesh from where the public hair has been torn. no.2 sticks his erect penis into the corpse's lacerated sex and copulates with her. he licks the sperm from the bloody wound of her genitals, smears and licks the bloody slime with his mouth and slaps the palm of his hand repeatedly on the bloody slimy sex. the corpse's thighs are repeatedly slashed with a razor blade. no.2 reaches deep into the corpse's sex and pulls out the bloody intestines, over which he pours urine and hot water.

	orchestration
	boys choir trombones tubas
deep cuts are inflicted on the naked corpse of otto III with a razor blade.	
	orchestration
	flutes pea-whistles

the testicles of the naked corpse of louis V of france are smeared with egg yolk, stabbed with a needle and lacerated. no.0 licks the slimy egg yolk and blood from the lacerated testicles.
the grey hair of a 60 year-old woman, which has been immersed in hot vinegar solution, is stuffed into the sex of the naked corpse of queen victoria.
the nails of the naked corpse of matilda of tuscany are extracted from her toes. the corpse is turned over so that its belly lies on the wood of the cross. hands and feed are now nailed to it in the reversed position. the corpse's buttocks are lacerated with

scalpels and sliced open. hot tallow, hot sheep fat and goat's milk are poured into her anal orifice, the fluids flow over the bloody mutilated buttocks. no.3 rubs his erect member over the bloody flesh of the buttocks until semen issues from his member. the sperm is rinsed from the mutilated buttocks with hydrogen peroxide. no.4 introduces his erect member into the lacerated anal orifice and copulates with the corpse of matilda of tuscany. sperm flows over the mutilated buttocks. while no.4 copulates with the corps, he bites her back and tears out her hair in bunches.

smell of	orchestration
blood	choir
unwashed female genitals	rattles
intestines (excrement)	trombones
egg yolk	tubas
hot tallow	
hot sheep fat	
goat's milk	
hydrogen peroxide	
hashish	
a disinfectant	
lilies of the valley	
camphor	
vinegar	
incense	

in room 1027 the bodies of 4 church servers have been nailed as if crucified to the wall (the boy's feet are 20 cm above the ground). the server's robes, which have been sprayed with eau de cologne, are slit open and torn from their corpses, leaving them naked.
the testicles and sex of one server's corpses are lacerated with a scalpel; a scalpel is used to bore a deep hole-like wound in the flesh where the sex had been. nos. 5, 6, 7, 8 thrust their erect members repeatedly into the damp wound until their semen issues. blood and sperm flow from the wound on to the feet of the dead boy. the wound is rinsed with hydrogen peroxide, and covered with cotton wool dusted with strong-scented pollen of white cyclamens. the wound is bound with bandages.
the testicles and sex of server 2's corpse are lacerated with a scalpel; a scalpel is

used to bore a deep hole-like wound in the flesh where the sex had been. a hand is thrust deep into the blood flesh of the wound. the moist bloody intestines are torn out. no.9 presses the moist body-warm intestines against his erect member until semen issues. the wound is rinsed with body-warm urine and water. no.8 urinates on the wound.

the testicles and sex of server 3's corpse are lacerated with a scalpel; a scalpel is used to bore a deep hole-like wound in the flesh where the sex had been. the naked corpse of princess theophano is brought into the room. the sex, complete with pubic hair, is cut out of the corpse. hands are thrust deep into the intestines through the wind. body-warm blood from recently slaughtered goats or hares and putrefying blood from hinds is poured into the funnel-like wound. the cut-out sex is placed in the wound in the 1st server's corpse and sewn in place. no.10 inserts his erect member into the sewn-on female genitals and copulates with the server's corpse. no.10 licks the warm sperm from the (female) genitals and tugs at the pubic hair until the genitals burst their seams. no.10 presses his face into the moist bloody flesh of the boy's wound. the wound is rinsed with hot water. no.11 urinates on the wound of the dead princess theophano. no.12 thrusts his erect penis into the wound of the dead theophano and copulates with her. he licks the body-warm sperm, blood and putrefying blood from the wound. no.11 kicks the wound and stamps on the soft intestines, the tramples the corpse's belly until the intestines bulge out of the wound. no.11 kicks the wound and stamps on the soft intestines, then tramples the corpse's belly until the intestines bulge out of the wound, and then stamps on the protruding intestines until their membranes break and excrement spews out. a she-goat is driven into the room, slaughtered, bled, disemboweled, flayed and crucified. the goat's udder is slashed with a scalpel; body-warm milk spurts and spills out. no.12 covers his head with the bloody goatskin and forces his wrapped head into theophano's wound. the rib-cage of server 4's corpse is slit open. bright red body-warm human excrement, body-warm bloody excrement from the intestines of recently slaughtered cattle and body-warm urine are poured into the open rib-cage. a goat is driven into the room. it is slaughtered, bled, flayed and nailed as if crucified to the floor. no.13 copulates with the goat and then lacerates its sex and udder with a scalpel. milk spurts and spills from the udder.

smell of

-
- eau de cologne
 - sperm
 - blood
 - hydrogen peroxide
 - white cyclamen pollen
 - hot water
 - urine
 - goats
 - putrefying blood
 - body-warm human excrement
 - body-warm cattle excrement
 - goat's milk
 - incense

hanging as if crucified (head down) on the end wall of room 1028 are a large number of slaughtered, flayed oxen, a few of the animals have been disemboweled, the bodies of the rest have not been slit open. large pools of blood, piles of moist bloody entrails, of bloody, bright red lungs and damp bloody hides are strewn about on the concrete floor. tanks drive into the room and fire explosive charges at the animal bodies, entrails and piles of lungs. shells rip and mutilate the animals, entrails burst, blood and bloody excrement spurts all around, spurts over the floor and walls. tatters of flesh and lungs fly around the room. following the bombardment hot water is tipped over the torn and mutilated raw flesh. towards the back, by the right hand wall, are 17 approx. 20 year-old men who masturbate during the bombardment and smear their sperm over their faces.

smell of

orchestration

-
- | | |
|-----------|--------------|
| raw flesh | 18 trombones |
| blood | |
| excrement | |
| hot water | |
| sperm | |
| petrol | |
| jasmine | |

ROOM 1031 GOAT PEN

inside room 1031 are approx. 40 goats. buckets of leaf-mould and lukewarm blood serum are poured over the straw-covered floor.

smell of

goats (warm pen aroma)
grass
hay
goat's milk
leaf-mould
lukewarm blood serum

room 645a GOAT PEN (beneath corridor 645)

inside room 645a are approx. 55 goats. 3 goats are slaughtered, bled and flayed. the flayed carcasses are nailed as if crucified (head down) to one of the pen walls. the crucified goats are disemboweled. their rib-cages are opened wide. buckets of goat's milk, leaf-mould and lukewarm blood serum are poured over the straw-covered floor.

smell of

goats (warm pen aroma)
grass
hay
leaf-mould
lukewarm blood serum
goat's blood
raw goat's flesh
excrement
lilac
elder flowers
sweat
tea-roses (wilted)
ether

beneath corridor 1028 is room 1028a which is filled with the moist bloody entrails of goats.

smell of

moist bloody entrails (goat's)

on the floor of room 1029 lie great quantities of damp bloody goatskins from freshly slaughtered goats.

smell of

moist bloody entrails (goat's)

on the floor of room 1031 lie great quantities of damp bloody goatskins from goats slaughtered a number of days previously.

smell of

rotting goatskins

on the floor of room 1044 a white, freshly laundered linen cloth has been spread. lying on it is the naked corpse of emperor alexius of byzantium. his right testicle has been lacerated with a scalpel.

on the floor of room 1052 a white, freshly laundered linen cloth has been spread. lying on it is the naked corpse of pope dionysius, his right testicle has been lacerated with a scalpel. vinegar is poured over the mutilated testicle.

smell of

vinegar
white cyclamen

room 1045 contains flowering jasmine bushes, bees fly around the jasmine blossoms (the air in the room is sultry).

ROOM 641 GOAT PEN

room 641 contains approx. 42 goats. one is slaughtered, bled, flayed and nailed as if crucified (head down) to a wall. the crucified goat is disemboweled, its rib-cage is slit wide open. buckets full of lukewarm blood serum, urine, leaf-mould and garden peat are tipped on to the room's straw-covered floor. the animal's udder is stabbed, goat's milk spurts and spills on the floor. a goat is driven into the room, bled, flayed and nailed as if crucified to the floor. no. 14 cuts a hole-shaped wound in the goat's belly and inserts his erect penis deep inside. his penis makes contact with the body-warm entrails and penetrates deep within until his semen issues and the body cavity is filled with warm sperm. no.14 tramples on the animal's belly, slits open its belly and rib-cage, pulls out the body-warm intestines with both hands, and lacerates the animal's udder. goat's milk spurts and spills out. no.14 tramples on the bloody milk-bespattered entrails until the membranes of the intestines burst and warm excrement spews out.

no.14 presses his face into the burst body-warm intestines and smears himself repeatedly with the warm bloody excrement.

smell of

goats
straw
blood
excrement
lukewarm water
sperm
blood serum

leaf-mould
urine
peat compost
goat's milk
excrement

throughout the drama a procession moves along the following corridors and rooms: corridor 67, corridor 65, room 62, corridor 64, corridor 72, corridor 74, corridor 104, room 103, corridor 102, room 100, corridor 99, corridor 121, room 62, corridor 67. the procession consists of 15 boys dressed as servers. they bear candlesticks with burning candles and a monstrance. several of the servers carry a dead 12 year-old boy (the boy's corpse had been crucified and then lowered from the cross). there are damp bloody wounds on the corpse's hands and feet and beneath its right nipple. behind the servers a large noise orchestra follows consisting of:

15 rattles
10 flutes
7 clarinets
7 harmonicas
3 ocarinas
3 oboes
10 horns
10 trumpets
15 trombones
10 tubas
10 cymbalons
10 cymbals
7 drums
5 kettle drums

behind the noise orchestra marches a military band playing marches. behind the two orchestras follow (at walking pace) tanks dragging bloody naked corpses on ropes. sitting atop the 4th tank is a server holding a monstrance aloft. lying on the floor of the corridors and rooms through which the procession moves are large heaps of moist bloody intestines and flowers (white roses, white peonies, white tulips, white lilacs). the intestines are crushed by the tanks so that they burst and excrement

spews out. the tanks, the server holding the monstrance aloft, and the intestines and flowers on the floor are doused by means of rubber hoses with bright red fresh arterial blood replete with oxygen, hot water and warm urine (the monstrance is spattered with blood and urine). during the procession, a number of goats (slaughtered) are bled, flayed, crucified on the walls and disembowelled. the goats' udders are slit open, milk spurts and spills out. several of the corpses dragging behind the tanks are slit open. the intestines protrude, are wrenched out, and drag along behind the corpses. beaten egg yolks are poured over the intestines hanging from the corpses. the procession halts at several points. on the these occasions naked menstruating women lie down on the bloodied tanks. performers lick the blood from the women's genitals and copulate with them. the body-warm sperm and menstrual blood is licked from their genitals. men copulate with the female corpses that are being dragged behind the tanks, the male corpses being dragged are mounted by homosexuals. body-warm sperm is licked from genitals and anal orifices.

[...]

11:30pm whistles are blown for 30 secs.

11:38pm boys ring cow bells for 5 mins.

11:50pm water bird whistles are blown for 3 mins.

0:00 all church-bells within a radius of 10 km. ring for 5 minutes.

0:46am children scream whilst playing tag for 14 mins.

GAZE AT THE CLEAR, STARRY SKY, (PERCEIVE THE MOVEMENT OF THE STARS).

the following is passed out, on a sheet of paper, and read when it becomes light:

according to the evolution theory our present universe is only a heart-beat of the cosmos, which was preceded by innumerable beats and can be followed by countless more. at present, 10 thousand million years have elapsed since the last explosion long ago - after 30 thousand million years there will be the reversal, and after 70 thousand million years the death of the old and the birth of a new universe will take place. according to this our universe has barely 13% of it's life behind it.

dead bees are buried

4:00am in the woods all the birds begin to sing.

a hole is dug, tepid water is poured in.

listening to the noise of the birds (till 4:15am).

people go to chapel 6. everyone who meets in front of the chapel embraces and kisses each other.

in the morning all participants can wear long, white (shirt-like) chasubles (waller objects).

the chapel's altar table is covered with a white, freshly laundered cloth. the altar, like the rest of the chapel, is luxuriantly decorated and brimming over with fresh white flowers, mostly heavily perfumed and sprayed with water (white lilac, white tulips, jasmine, lilies of the valley, white lilies, white fruit blossom, white roses).

[...]

FINALE

the participants are led into room 19a (slaughterhouse) at least 12 to 20 slaughtered skinned oxen are hanging head down as if crucified on the walls of the slaughterhouse under most animals are wide beds covered with white (linen) sheets white quilts and white pillows and some of the beds are noise orchestra of 20 men and a boy's choir group of 40 are at the back wall in the middle of the slaughterhouse are many wide beds covered with white sheets pushed together to make one enormous bed there are also white quilts and pillows on the assembled beds a large amount of raw meat and entrails are brought into the slaughterhouse and thrown on the cement floor in front of the group of beds in the middle of the room performers begin to trample around on them and they pour and spatter light red blood beat to a froth with hot water hot serum and egg yolks onto the entrails and draw meat lying around the cement floor the walls and each other some performers spray water from hoses on the blood spattered entrails and on the bloody raw meat at the same time the oxen hanging on the wall are hacked open by butchers and partly disembowelled light red blood beat to a froth body temperature warms and lukewarm serum is poured out of pails onto the dangling intestines and into the hacked open bulls' bodies the participants dip entrails in blood egg yolk hot serum and hot water slap them on the walls and trample about on them on the floor they kick them about in front of them and kick them to each other they throw them to each other and at the bulls and the group of beds standing in the middle of the slaughterhouse at the same time they dip pieces of raw meat in blood egg yolk hot serum and hot water and besmear walls and floor with them blood is poured into the innards of the hacked open bull carcasses and blood soaked cotton swabs and tear roses dipped in hot water are crammed in and then torn out again blood and violet pink aniline dye is poured over the falling tear roses the participants rip pieces of raw meat out of the hacked open animal carcasses with their bare hands and drummage about in the body temperature lukewarm intestines some performers climb into the hacked open bodies of the cadavers lying on the floor and trample about large amounts of intestines other entrails and pieces of raw meat are dragged onto the group of beds standing in the middle of the slaughterhouse and while participants ecstatically trample about on them blood egg yolk hot serum and hot water are poured over them the intestines skin bursts frequently through the trampling about and the excrement streaming out mixes with the blood and egg yolk the white bed clothes are sprayed with blood some participants roll around on the smeared beds on the bloody quilts and pillows and on the moist bloody entrails lying on them several slaughtered skinned oxen are dragged onto the grouped beds blood and hot water are continually poured over them their cadavers have already been hacked open and they are disembowelled the body temperature entrails and the rest of the innards are torn out with the bare hand tear roses dipped in ether and smelling of the tear roses dipped in hot water tear roses sprinkled with powder tear roses

sprinkled with pink perfumed talcumpowder cotton swabs sprinkled with pink perfumed talcumpowder and moist bloody intestines are stuffed into the open oxen bodies while cotton swabs and tear roses are being gripped out again they and the oxen's broken open bodies are soaked with light red frothy beaten blood warm from the slaughter hot serum hot greasy dishwater egg yolks sweetened during and hot water spectators and performers tread about on the cadavers an ox is hauled to the end wall and affixed there head down as if crucified the actions state dare repeated again with the hanging oxen EVERYTHING becomes a general orgy EVERY BODY is sprayed and covered with blood ALL PARTICIPANTS throw moist entrails and draw meat to each other the blood and egg yolk besmeared performers and participants swallow bouts screaming with the cadavers and entrails on the floor and beds and the animals are ripped to pieces climax of the orgy a naked dead boy with a wreath of freshly picked tear roses wound around his head is carried into the slaughterhouse and is nailed as if crucified to a free wall space a circular bloody wound is cut in the boy with a scalpel somewhat to the right of the navel the boy's entrails are pulled out through the hole and are laid on a white cloth beneath his feet garish aniline dye flows out of the boy's mouth and out of his wound during the whole action the boy's choir shouts ecstatically the noise orchestra generates ecstatic noise the tumult of both groups increases up to the climax of the action during the continuing development of the action all the participants begin to scream ecstatically clap their hands and stamp their feet on the floor throughout the duration of the entire action one hears hitlers speeches church bells and brass bands (schupplattler) from the most powerful loudspeakers

[...]

on the metaphysics of aggression

of all my works, *the fall of jerusalem* is the most bitter, fantastic and tragic. a temple-like labyrinth of magnificent cruelty bores down into a mythical subterranean realm. i have no feelings of sorrow when I survey this work. indeed i have no emotional attachments whatsoever to its mundane context; rather i view it all as aesthetically value-free; i am intoxicated by its beauty, its ebullient form, which is not bound by any human laws and which avails itself unreservedly of both death and the sexual sado-masochistic desire to rend apart. it lies before me like a luxuriant garden full of voluptuous drunken plants submerged in a confusion of scents. all the sense must be stirred to their roots, excited to the point of sensual agony, to the limits of the endurable. its beauty neutralizes and eliminates the question of morality, of responsibility. let this responsibility be borne by those who feel called to assume it. we have been lured into bottomless abysses by the beauty of catastrophes. for us the formal structure is a deeper metaphysical reality than morality. i have made every effort to humanize my theatre, to find explanations for the aggressive orgies involved in my plays, for the healthy desire to rage and destroy, to churn up the warm intestines of a slaughtered animal, and finally i found that i wanted to apologise for man's blatantly obvious desire to kill [...] yet already in my early conceptions i suspected that if one looked beyond the fact that vitality and life energies are repressed, and considered the ecstatic breakthroughs of inner drives, the outburst of suppressed energies, one was not simply witnessing the breakthrough of some restricted, suppressed inner region or other, but glimpsed instead chaotic abysses, inexhaustibility: the inexhaustible dionysian. an elemental power stirs us and causes us to shudder. behind all the rules and regulations of language, of the state and of civilization, is an irrational, seemingly chaotic web of energies ready to be summoned at any moment, to transgress and wash away our social order. the dionysian presents itself. a rational, politically enfeebled order pits itself against a stronger "divine" promethean force. social stability is not in accordance with the laws of nature, it is created by mediocrity seeking the illusion of shelter and protection, by the true evil of laxness and sloth. the metaphysical principle behind the creation of reality according to the laws of nature is transformation, dynamism, change – the dionysian revolutionary principle (changing the world so that a permanently changing reality can be apprehended, in order that life and existence may be grasped ever firmer). the panoply of creation proves to be more powerful than all of man's rationalisations concerning it. it is also necessary to stop viewing man as the crown of creation and the measure of all things. the creation goes over and beyond man

and hopefully is creating something better than man in order to increase its own level of consciousness and self-knowledge. in moments of happiness, in states of mystical experience, i forget that i am a member of the human race, i sense merely that i exist and am moving toward the central point of creation. the condition of intense self-experience – the measure of grasping existence and being – is the measure of reality: working one's way into a profound dimension which disallows rational description; the dissolution of regulations, of pettiness, of language, rationality, morals and of the antithesis between life and death. a broad intoxicating current becomes apparent, the power of existing, which keeps millions of galaxies in motion and has nothing to do with our sinful sloth that wishes to linger amidst humanity and the order of the state; it is the glorious anarchy of creation.

[...]

US/CAN \$30.00

Performance Art / Art History / Cultural Theory

A critical examination of pioneering work by Viennese Actionist Hermann Nitsch, with photo and video documentation of his ritualistic performances since 1962

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Front image: Hermann Nitsch, *Das Orgien Mysterien Theater: Die Aktionen 1962-2003* (DVD)
Back: Installation at Slought Foundation, 2005