

THE FUTURE PRESENT OF ART, BETWEEN ARTISTIC EXPERIMENT AND BLOOD DISCOURSE

Florina Codreanu, Assist. Prof., PhD, Technical University of Cluj-Napoca

Abstract: The present paper investigates a selected contemporary artistic experiments derived from a prevailing culture of blood. Among the artists interested in the exposure, usage and messages of the blood, there should be mentioned Pietro Costa, Andres Serrano, Marc Quinn, Marina Abramovič, Gina Pane, Chris Burden, Petr Štembera, Hermann Nitsch and all the other Viennese actionists. Nowadays blood does not only circulate, almost as a commodity (e.g. the increasing blood banks around the world), but it is also subjected to various metamorphoses. In the sphere of contemporary art, blood is not entitled to a clear dualistically oriented flow (in Modernist terms, i.e. expressing either health or disease, either life or infection). Outside the body, blood is a violent and perishable element, making its transition from life to art an absolute endeavour in which, along with the artist, are implicated the viewers, the space and time. Following the artistic tracks and establishing if there is or not a real and meaningful impact within these kinds of artistic struggles represents the main objective of this underway project.

Keywords: violence, contemporary art, performance, DNA, death, liquid body

General Considerations

It is a case of inaccuracy to approach contemporary art without a firm distinction between the generations of the seventies and the nineties, altogether visible in the field of art starting with the sixties, or between the American and European artistic productions.

As regards the seventies, action painters and early performers, still afflicted by the war experience, insisted on the cathartic quality of art by adopting extreme positions and inflicting injuries, by a permanent refusal to integrity and the messianic embracement of self-destruction. Along the process, blood is submitted to its body, whereas during the nineties blood has its own mysterious ways and the accent falls on the emerging genetic solutions. Like any other area of expression, art becomes overwhelmed with Aids, genetic engineering, health and life in the future wherein blood itself is the carrier of danger, of a fateful infection built upon the growing fear of destruction.

Geographically speaking, in the United States endurance tests, both physical and psychological, are very popular in a behaviourist fashion addressed to body works (based on human blood), while in Europe the mythological and psychological status of the blood produces a necessary catharsis (using mostly animal blood).

From the gender point of view, on the one hand, women artists profess in relation to men, moreover as reactions to the opposite sex, replying generically to the contemporary issues of *gender* by staged psychodramas, and on the other hand, men prefer a quite abstract art, rather culturally and aesthetically oriented, discharged of existential references and fostering *individuality*.

Blood Artists

As a starting point of reflection, we might suggest that the worldwide cultural enterprise can be regarded through the lens of a discourse on blood. For that matter symbolism of the blood is emphasized through different perspectives such as artistic, religious, philosophical, scientific, and so on. Under all certainty, we can state that the imaginary of the blood is changeable and its metaphor is developing continuously from one artist to another. Nevertheless, its power is emotional and social, cultural and scientific at the same time. Within the applied art sphere, its destiny met fine arts, technologies and scientific research. In particular, in contemporary art, except being a theme or a symbol, blood is unconventionally a medium.

Probably the most redoubtable artisan of the blood, the Italian **Pietro Costa** shows his viewers the instrument of his installations and “colours palette”: his own blood. His connotations are overall ritualistic and sacrificial, clinical and scientific. By being a liquid agent, blood points out three important constants: time, decay and gravity.

A proliferating obsession that haunted man, namely the fragility of his existence, is traceable in all the post-war creations. The end of the sixties launched under the large concept of “action art” a multitude of kindred trends: happening, performance, body art, fluxus etc. Thus the nineties, already glutted with this artistic inherited load, would give birth to independent artistic figures able to put forward a subjective understanding of the original moment.

Returning to Costa, on a weekly basis he used to withdraw into the solitude of his own studio from Brooklyn, wherein he practises phlebotomy for artistic purposes. Collected in advance in small bottles, the sanguineous content would be poured on vellum paper and covered with another piece of paper. By pressing the two sheets, the artwork arises, and the manner in which it works out and changes the blood colour and consistence, in short, its actual evolution, represents Costa’s core interest:

[...] he will explore the ways in which [blood pools or bubbles under the vellum buckling, or as it dries, the way the blood crystallizes into remarkable capillary patterns that seem to microscopically unravel the mystery of its status as the very thing (along with genes) that carry the lines of connection from father to son, person to person, people to people¹.

Owed to the fact blood is not a clear flow, but a violent and perishable element, the artist would experience its transition from life to art by identifying and illustrating all its inherent metamorphoses. In the first place, blood becomes object and social target, which implies issues of identity and gender: AIDS nightmare, ethnic cleansing, DNA prints, cloning and bioenergy. Blood tends to disintegrate into space and intermingle with the world: *It gives us the sense of being in a world that is not limited by the fake sensations (and cynicism) of popular culture. It transmits a sense of being whole within the fragmentation that exists around us*². The primary contradictions, such as life and death, art and destruction, agent and chance, are visible in Costa’s works. In addition, the semantic load enriches from the moment Costa starts collaborating with the poet Denver Butson. The poem *Repeat after Me* is going to

¹ Robert Mahoney: *Between Art and History* (<http://www.pietrocosta.com/press/mahoney/mahoney.htm>)

² Robert C. Morgan: *The Significance of Blood* (<http://www.pietrocosta.com/press/morgan/morgan.htm>)

be imprinted on fifty lithography pieces conceived from blood spread on paper, altogether assembling a so-called *hand-made book* and published in a limited edition of one hundred copies. In 2003, the book is going to be awarded by New York Foundation for the Arts Individual Fellowship.

On the surface Pietro Costa's art seems physical and uniform, but in depth it presents varied tones and temperatures, the feeling and warm presence of the blood. On the other side, his scientific interest is socially-dependant on a quasi-medical context, on the dramatic nature of blood tests. During the eighties, with reverberations along the nineties – when Costa worked on the majority of his creations, there was a tremendous preoccupation with health and the point in which contaminated blood can come across the clean one. The clinical presence of blood turns any creation, which involves it, into an open eye towards the edge of death. Blood phobia considered within the fear of death launches a Culture of Blood meant to convert the general fear into the general hope that science of replication and cloning would renew the genetic map of the human being. Therefore, the sanguinity loads itself with life, optimism and solution.

By being personalized at biological level, the artistic work generates the feeling that the artist is present therein, inside his work, and his DNA and genetic code is preserved within the representation and blood experimentation. A lively artistic genre comes into view and different types of paternity emerge cause to that.

Costa succeeds to re-establish the figurative field of tension through the blood pressed towards the margins of the vellum sheets. His final round is led by the air effect: *The blood is so marginalized that one begins to think of life after one is gone, the time of one's absence, one thinks of states of decomposition, after the blood has evaporated and no longer exists*³. A sort of minimalist art in which shapes are obliterated by the hand, the signs of passion gone, only the pure process confirms the presence of a creation in which discoloration has completed its task: *Costa's understated claim that blood... is but another material, less mined, with peculiar properties, a <living material> which allows him to do something interesting and different*⁴. History pushes ahead creation through the loss of initial distinctions, through fossilization: *Costa surrounds his raw material in a world of concern over the whirlwind of time that runs from dust to dust and ashes to ashes. A more wistful mortality, overreaching eons and epochs, overlaps this suite of work*⁵. Subjected to the force of time, art affirms its materiality, containing within the changing force of decay and refuting its original quality. The main tendency appears to be of decomposition, when in reality the DNA is preserved as such.

Costa's greatest victory consists in overlapping time and its fundamentals. By manipulating the blood, he projects its repetitive actions and contradictory resources: *type of space that is both contained and open, a kind of interior galactic space... a cosmology of physical matter, both elusive and diffuse in its substance and reality*⁶. In the end, whatever is process and matter evolves towards certainty – relatively controlled by the creator. Blood follows its own track of transfiguration.

³ R. Mahoney: *Op. cit.*

⁴ *Ibidem*

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Robert C. Morgan: *Op. cit.*

Under these conditions, within the so-called *Drawings*, the artist only prepares the scene, launches his challenge, but in such a subtle and puzzling manner that his creation surpasses the setting. There is the magic play of the artistic work, which by evolving broadens the sphere of interpretations. Within a culture that sees in breakage a functional principle, only creation provides the suggestion of wholeness.

Through blood, man is able to leave his body and reveal its most hidden mechanism, so he opens to perception a forbidden semantic field and inaugurates a fight towards death between air and blood.

Picking up the threads of figurative art, some South-African artists ensure to landscape painting a new status, wherein blood assumes the role of the colour: **Merryn Singer** paints with blood traditional landscapes, and **Monica Madeira** seizes the intimate substance of the cells and DNA structures in ultra-dimensioned creations.

Within the overall artistic approaches, not only the hand or brush takes action, but also the video or photo camera. However, priority is given to the former and to autonomous action. **Andres Serrano** is an American photograph of Cuban origin, whose art has as main themes the taboos referring to acute social issues: homeless people, violence, sexuality, religion, power and alterity. His abstract compositions make use of urine, blood (sometimes menstrual), sperm and maternal milk. The implications are preponderantly religious. The artist is interested in the way bodily fluids can be manipulated to recreate life.

Exhibited next to life, art produces more and more viable reduplicates. An illustrative example is brought in by the British artist **Marc Quinn**'s cryogenic sculpture. In 1991 he exhibited the work *Self* – a self-portrait conceived from his own blood (four and a half liters), which is kept in an impeccable state within a specially designed frigorific unit. Electricity is the navel string, emphasizing once again the fragile balance between life and death. At each five years, Quinn remakes the sculpture in order to keep the impression of perfect identification with the model. *It was an idea frozen into its own life support system* – stated the artist in an interview. From the same range it resulted the self-portrait of his recently born child – a sculpture made from liquid placenta, wherein Quinn sought the preservation of an ephemeral image within a raw material of the same ephemeral quality. The tradition of death masks is the chief reference, thus *Self* being an extraordinary meditation upon mortality.

The objectives settled by the art of the second half of the twentieth century highlighted increasingly the body and transformed it into a medium (a participant), but at the same time into a material. Attention is drawn especially to the skin as a fragile boundary between text and meaning, exterior and interior, self and other. Body Art is a sign of bodily affirmation through skin – a covering exposed to various explorations and involvements, from tattoo and piercing to highly complex surgical interventions of corporal reshaping (cf. the French female artist **Orlan**). The extreme form of body art is represented by actual mutilation, pulling the body towards and beyond the limits of its resistance. The functions of bodily fluids are reset and resemantised. The Serbian artist **Marina Abramović**, within one of her actions, danced to exhaustion and fainted. From the series of performance, actions named “Rhythms”, possibly the most dangerous one is *Rhythm 0* in which she let herself at the hand of the spectators:

[...] she permitted a roomful of spectators in a Naples gallery to abuse her at their will for six hours, using instruments of pain and pleasure that had been placed on a table for their convenience. By the third hour, her clothes had been cut from her body with razor blades, her skin slashed; a loaded gun held to her head finally caused a fight between her tormentors, bringing the proceeding to an unnerving halt⁷.

Abramovič treats her body as a simple door to an altered consciousness, and the risk-taking pushes her mind to concentrate. Inundated with the energetic and meditative Oriental trends, America of the seventies carries through capitalism harsh fights against the newborn non-profit art.

Preoccupied with the nature of suffering and culpability, Marina Abramovič sees art as a product belonging to a “higher self”, to a higher state of consciousness. Therefore, the body is in general a medium brought on the edge of self-control and revelations due to exhaustion, pain and repetition. Once the body gets surpassed, mind is a large surface of possibilities. Through experimentation, Marina Abramovič searches for answers. Self-mortification is just one way, and the exhibition of her own blood represents a means of working with human mind so that it grows stronger. Victimization is suggested not so at religious level (sacrificial), as at social level (repressive), too.

In another action, entitled *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful*, Abramovič combs her hair painfully with a brush and, thus, she shows a troubling imagine, opposed to beauty. In Marina’s opinion, art has to bewilder its audience, implying predictions and interrogations. In contrast with the directness of the body along the seventies, during the nineties the means of expression is metaphorical from ornamental and ceremonial point of view, and in the twenty-one century the mind can be found at greater and greater distances from the body.

Willing to transform the body into a linguistic code, the French **Gina Pane** created the language of the wounds by making attempts on her own tissues: *In the end it wasn’t the amount of pain which concerned me but the language of these signs. My real problem was constructing a language through this wound, which became sign*⁸. Self-violence is not satisfying and efficient as long as the audience does not decode it. The cognitive and social effects that Pane aimed at in her experiments have ceased at a projective level.

In 1974, *Psyche* by title implies the human soul and the genuinely beautiful daughter of the Cretan king, portrayed with butterfly wings and cherished by Eros. Gina Pane’s representation begins with an inspection and interrogative attitude towards the mirror on which she drew with make-up a picture of herself. By using a blade, she cut herself below the eyebrows and sat in front of a latticework with a feathers bouquet in her hands. In the same way, she made a cross around her belly. Between the two acts of disfiguration, she played tennis and caressed her body with the feathers. The ritualistic self-torture prevails during the purifying ceremony and the artist proved herself to be as vulnerable as the heroine of the Greek mythology. The liquid body flaunts its existence.

⁷ Rose Lee Goldberg: *Performance Art from Futurism to the Present*. Thames & Hudson, New York, 1988, p. 165

⁸ Gina Pane, in Marla Carlson, *Mediating Gina Pane: Body Art Documentation*, American Society for Theatre Research, Durham, 2003

One year later, Pane is the performer of a material called *Le corps pressenti* wherein she made cuts between her toes so as the blood stains permanently a plaster casting on which she rested her foot. This type of art that involves absorption or blood taint is purely feminist, transgressing the taboo of menstrual blood.

A kind of representative of the world of modern primitives, the American **Chris Burden** is the cause of his own shooting with a 22 rifle. The piece of performance called *Shoot* was considered one of the most challenging and controversial experience of the seventies. The proven masochism of these years can be explained psychologically through the mechanism of alienation that covered both art and life. Human being experiencing the sensation of being at the same time subject and object brings evidence for the socio-political dysfunction. The protest and crisis have materialised in the self-abuse, in the disorder created by blood. In such a dispute, Gina Pane engages herself in *Discours mou et mat* – which culminates with the breaking of a mirror with her barren hands, on which she previously drew a mouth and the word “alienation”. The cutting of her lip is symbolic and illustrates the power object from whose monopoly the human body struggle to make loose by means of its blood.

Art is at the heart of a cultural war (converted in time into sacrificial culture), and its attack addresses the materialistic values of the Western world. Owing to performance – *art here and now* – the artist attempts to break the global appearance at existential, political and religious levels. A sort of religious protest is staged by the Czech **Petr Štembera** in *Narcissus I*: staring at his own picture set on an altar among candles, while blood is drawn out with a hypodermic needle, the artist proceeds to mix up his blood with his urine, hair and nails, at the end drinking the mixture in front of the altar.

Blood estrangement from the canvas or screen towards spectator is more and more offensive. The Orgies Mysteries Theatre of the Austrian **Hermann Nitsch** brings the blood on the streets. Belonging to the group of Viennese actionists that were active between 1960 and 1971, Nitsch is the leading figure of a series of representations based on the Dionysian cult, the rituals of the Catholic Church and the theories of the psychoanalysts:

[...] Nitsch’s belief that humankind’s aggressive instincts had been repressed and muted through the media. Even the ritual of killing animals, so natural to primitive man, had been removed from modern day experience. These ritualized acts were a means of releasing that repressed energy as well as an act of purification and redemption through suffering⁹.

Orgies Mysteries Theatre is a six days-event that took place annually at Prinzenhof, in Austria, and made use of animal dismemberment and massacres, huge quantities of blood and the traditional symbolism of the sacrifice.

The other actionists are **Günter Brus**, **Otto Muehl** and **Rudolf Schvartzkogler**. Their happenings differ from the American ones through their surrealist source of inspiration, which turns violence and blood into dominant elements. Their sacrificial staging has as final goal human liberation. The art of the blood, though, fails due to the lack of mimetic relation

⁹ Rose Lee Goldberg, *Op. cit.*, p. 164

between the one that proposes the sacrifice and the audience, lack of balance between pure and impure violence and the lack of conscious acceptance of the rite by the audience¹⁰.

All above considered, the artist that experiments bloody possibilities of signification remains an eccentric and psychologically suspected outsider.

Bibliographical References

Abramovič, Marina: <http://www.marinaabramovicinstitute.org/noqt>

Carlson, Marla: *Mediating Gina Pane: Body Art Documentation*. American Society for Theatre Research, Durham, 2003

Costa, Pietro: www.pietrocosta.com

Goldberg, Rose Lee: *Performance Art from Futurism to the Present*. Thames & Hudson, New York, 1988

Nitsch, Hermann: <http://www.museonitsch.org/>

Nitsch, Hermann: <http://www.nitsch.org/index-en.html>

Quinn, Marc: <http://www.marcquinn.com/>

Girard, René: *Violența și sacrul*. Traducere de Mona Antohi. Ed. Nemira, 1995

The Body Within: Art, Medicine and Visualization. Edited by Renée Van de Vall, Robert Zwijnenberg. Brill, Leiden • Boston, 2009

Women, Art, and Technology. Edited by Judy Malloy. The MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts • London England, 2003

¹⁰ See René Girard: *Violența și sacrul*. Ed. Nemira, 1995