About looking and looking away: Performance art, visuality and the vision of excess

Irene Gerogianni

Despite the centrality of looking to the experience of performance art, relatively little has been published on the visual as a condition of the production of meaning in this particular art form. Tracing the theoretical roots of performance art's vocabulary to linguistics, anthropology and theories of poststructuralism, it comes as no surprise that the concepts of 'theatricality' and 'performativity' have increasingly gained ground in the history of performance art. However, the act of looking, or looking away, should also be accounted for through an understanding of 'visuality', a third term that highlights the contingency of meaning making. For this, this essay affirms the anthropological paradigm, by focusing on situations of visual extremity in both ritual contexts and performance art, as a series of instances where the problems of vision are thrown into particular relief. However, it shall also strive to underline the differences between the two, just as Bataille has, especially on the ground of the creation and undermining of social orders.

Still, one can doubt that even the most furious of those who have ever torn and mutilated themselves amid screams and to the beat of a drum have abused *this marvelous freedom to the same extent as Vincent Van Gogh […] The monstrous ear sent in its envelope, abruptly leaves the magic circle where the rites of liberation stupidly aborted.*

Georges Bataille, 'Sacrificial Mutilation and Severed Ear of Vincent Van Gogh'

1. Performance Art, Performativity and Theatricality

The term 'performativity' first appeared in the theory of *speech acts* by British linguist and professor at Oxford University John Austin. In 1955, through a series of lectures at Harvard University, Austin challenged the prevailing linguistic axiom of the time that meaning is exhausted in the descriptive ability of language and underlined the interpersonal and social role that language plays in communication. He argued that, alongside descriptive utterances, which describe a state of affairs, there are also performative utterances, through which the speaker is performing speech acts, such as promises, requests, orders, thanks, apologies. The category of performative utterances is often associated with a social contract, in which case the utterance is contractual in nature, as it requires specific conditions

for it to be valid (Austin 1975). Although Austin later abandoned his distinction between descriptive and performative utterances, the recognition of the latter was a breakthrough for contemporary philosophy of language, often significantly influencing disciplines outside of linguistics.

Just like performativity, theatricality can also be located in theoretical contexts aside from theater studies. Still, even when discussed at the periphery of the theatrical field, recognition of theatricality is based on the pursuit of recurring conventions and codes of theatrical communication, as well as their conscious reading by the viewer as such. For Josette Féral,

> Theatricality can be seen as composed of two different parts: one highlights performance and is made up of the *realities of the imaginary*; and the other highlights the theatrical and is made up of *specific symbolic structures*. The former originates within the subject and allows his flows of desire to speak; the latter inscribes the subject in the law and in theatrical codes, which is to say, in the symbolic. Theatricality arises from the play between these two realities. (Féral 1982: 178)

Indeed, the two concepts seem to share some of their structural characteristics. Both performativity and theatricality are characterized by their capacity to question the illusion of a transparent or direct representation, through the pronouncement of every representation as theatrical by convention. After all, according to Janelle Reinelt, the distinction between the notions of 'performativity' and 'theatricality' is neither clear nor purely theoretical, but often simply geographical. As she writes, 'while recently Anglo-American theorists have embraced performance and performativity as central organizing concepts, European theorists have stressed theatricality, thus opening up a contemporary question concerning the variability of these terms' (Reinelt 2002: 207).

As becomes apparent, the performative turn in the visual arts –that is, the departure of art practices from the object-centered trends of modernist painting and sculpture and their direction towards a space-time oriented perception of the artwork as an event– as early as the 1950s and the 1960s, has been simultaneous and relative to the theoretical turn towards performativity and theatricality. These practices were characterized by their inclination towards the two concepts and led, by all means, to the formation of performance art as a medium. However, one of the major players in this evolution, apart from linguistics and any postdramatic developments in theater, was the new, performance-centered face of anthropology.

2. The anthropological roots of performance art's vocabulary

The emergence of performance art as a visual arts medium in the 1960s is not only concurrent, but also symptomatic, of the developments in the discipline of anthropology. Here, the work of anthropologist Victor Turner and his 'performative anthropological method' is seen as the one which most contributed to the establishment of a new model of understanding different cultures and marked the performative turn in cultural studies. According to Elizabeth Bell, Turner promoted a dramatic view of social relations, seeking 'to humanize the study of culture as performance by conceiving of humans as performers' (Bell 2008: 133). For Turner,

> If man is a sapient animal, a tool-making animal, a self-making animal, a symbol-using animal, he is, no less, a performing animal, *Homo performans*, not in the sense, perhaps that a circus animal may be a performing animal, but in the sense that man is a self-performing animal –his performances are, in a way, reflexive, in performing he reveals himself to himself. (Turner 1988: 81)

Other than the theoretical connections between Turner's theory and theater –which link the transformational effects of ceremonial performances with the study of performative art forms– there is also a direct one, when, in the early 1970s, Turner collaborated with Richard Schechner, professor of Performance Studies at New York University. Following Schechner's invitation to work with anthropology and theater students in a series of summer workshops, Turner and his team had the opportunity to use ideas and techniques of Western theatrical tradition in ritual representations of the Central African tribe of Ndembu. Their objective was to produce a dramatized version of the lived experience of the 'Other', by means of translating and understanding Ndembu's indigenous culture.

A notable fact is that the workshops were centered on Turner's ritual theory (Turner 1969). Indeed, ritual theory is an intersection between religion and anthropology. Ritual theories have made key contributions to the study of religions and of human cultures generally, as they call attention to behaviors rather than beliefs, and especially to repeated practices shaped by social custom and religious mandate. As a theory, it raises questions about how such practices should be interpreted, while it argues for the similarities between theater and religion (Turner 1982; Bell 1992).

However, the relationship between theater and anthropology, in terms of methodology, could not, in any case, be described as one-way. In seeking the root of the concept of 'theatricality' in a variety of academic disciplines, Marvin Carlson has underlined the cross-fertilization of the field of study with the social sciences and noted that: 'While traditionally theater theorists have most commonly looked to the work of literary theorists or philosophers for inspiration, concepts, and analytic strategies, today they are much more likely to look to such cultural analysts as anthropologists, ethnographers, psychologists and sociologists' (Carlson 1996: 238). The same is true for art historians who seek a new vocabulary for performance art.

3. Shamans, Saints and Artists: Rituals and Performance Art

Thomas McEvilley has been one the most notable art historians to trace the roots of performance art in pre-modern societies. McEvilley locates the difference between conceptual and performance art in the chronological distance one has to cover to assign its beginnings: for the former, these can be associated with Duchamp's work and Dada, while for the latter, Paleolithic shamanism and Neolithic rituals (McEvilley 2005: 221). While McEvilley describes this performance art practice as 'neo-pro-Modernism' (McEvilley 2005: 218), he goes on to take a leap, in his associations, from the Neolithic to the Renaissance and the Baroque era –given his consideration of the Greco-Roman period as too secular. McEvilley also focuses on popular theatrical happenings of the latest periods, as well as on metaphysical spectacles what mimicked the natural elements, but also on performative works by the old masters, such as Leonardo and Bernini (McEvilley 2005: 218, 220-221). As far as performance art is concerned, McEvilley locates these 'neo-pro-Modernist' tendencies in the work of Chris Burden, Paul McCarthy and Herman Nitsch, among others (McEvilley 2005: 218, 219).

In his 1983 article 'Art in the Dark', McEvilley makes special reference to works that carry a most shocking element, the practice of self-injury and self-mutilation, as well as female imitation. As he sees it, this has been a standard feature of shamanic performances and primitive initiation rites around the world. McEvilley cites anthropological research on shamanism to present the cases of ritual practices, self-violence and ecstatic states brought about by drugs, drumming and dancing, while he associates these rituals with performance art works by the following artists: Chris Burden crawled through broken glass with his hands tied behind his back in *Through the Night, Softly,* 1973. Dennis Oppenheim did a performance in which rocks were dropped upon him from overhead for half an hour. The work was called *Rocked Circle/Fear*, 1971. Linda Montano inserted acupuncture needles around her eyes in *Mitchell's Death*, 1978. Gina Pane walked barefoot on fire in *Nourriture, actualités*

télévisée, feu, 1971. Stelarc has had himself suspended in various positions in the air by means of hooks embedded in his flesh. McEvilley sees these works as public performance of taboo acts, also present in ancient religious custom with roots in shamanism and primitive magic (McEvilley 2005).

Since McEvilley does not consider the Middle Ages as a source from which he can draw affinities between the treatment of the body in ritual and ceremonial practices and the body of the performance artist, it is to be expected that his religious examples do not include the sacrificial Christian body of the believer, the Martyr, or the Saint. As Jacques Le Goff and Nicolas Truong state in their treatise on the body in the Middle Ages, 'the cult of the body in Antiquity gives its place to the annihilation of the body within the social life of the Middle Ages' (Le Goff and Truong [2003] 2009: 44). As they write, alongside the cultivation of the ascetic ideal that comes to dominate Christianity and becomes the foundation of a culture of monasticism, deprivation and contempt of worldly pleasures, the 12th century also sees the introduction of practices reminiscent of the passion of Christ. Notable, according to the authors, is the example of Louis IX, King of France, Saint Louis, who was known for his religious zeal and aimed to suffer as his God has suffered before him (Le Goff and Truong [2003] 2009: 45).

However, even though performance art has frequently been seen as a continuation of shamanistic rituals, it has only been associated with Christian sacrificial rituals in terms of its 'blasphemy' of them. A notable example is Orlan, the performance artist who has a lifelong project of transforming her face through plastic surgery, with her 'Reincarnation of Saint-Orlan' project carrying obvious religious connotations. Theologian Alyda Faber, in her 'Saint Orlan Ritual As Violent Spectacle and Cultural Criticism' essay, uses anthropological methods to interpret Orlan's self-designated saintliness through attention to the creation of religious meanings and the significance of the body for religious ritual and imaginative acts. As she argues, Orlan 'deliberately creates and embodies visual parodies of Christian martyrdom by assuming cruciform positions on the operating table' (Faber 2002: 86-87).

Nonetheless, one cannot deny the common ground between the two foundational practices, shamanism and Christianity, when it comes to performance art. As becomes apparent, sacrifice, ritual and bodily transgression can be seen as either cathartic or as a source of defiance, without changing the way violent performance art acts are read, i.e. as transgressive acts of symbolism, that aim to communicate a particular, often political, meaning.

4. Performance art theory, Violence and Meaning

For Antonin Artaud and his 'Theater of Cruelty', the image of a violent act portrayed in the theater was infinitely more powerful than an actual act of violence carried out elsewhere. As performance theorist John Freeman argues, the injection of reality in theater and art does not amount to the neutralization of the context. As he writes, 'it is precisely the framing aspect of art that makes the things we see so often difficult to bear', while he calls 1960s performance artists 'post-Artaudians' (Freeman 2007: 110).

Accordingly, one of the most prominent researchers of violent performance art of the 1960s and '70s, art historian Kathy O'Dell, does psychoanalytic readings of performances where the artist causes intentional self-harm. In her book *Contract with the Skin*, O'Dell records these 'masochistic' practices as a means of creating a social contract between the artist and the viewer. Underlining the economy of power that brings the desire to watch the suffering of the Other, O'Dell presents these performance works as sociopolitical commentary on the historical events of the time and especially the Vietnam War. For O'Dell, the imbalance brought to international relations by the Vietnam War, political turmoil and the resulting divisions both within and outside the United States, was the main point of reference of performance artists of the period. The 'masochistic' practices presented by

O'Dell aimed to bring the war home, next to the viewer and participant, with the body of the artist and his self-harming actions serving metaphorical roles (O'Dell 1998).

O'Dell's two main examples are the work of Chris Burden and Vito Acconci. In his performance piece *Shoot* of 1971, Burden was shot in the arm by a friend with a shotgun. The performance took place in a gallery in Santa Ana, California, in front of a handful of viewers. As O'Dell suggests, Burden's performance could not have taken place if at least one of the three parties did not honor its part of the –unwritten, but still there– agreement, the contract that determined the three-way relationship. Acconci's performance *Trademarks,* which took place in 1970, on the other hand, did not have an immediate audience; the whole process, however, was documented in photographs and traces of marks on the body of the artist. Naked, Acconci posed for the camera lens by turning his body and biting his hands, legs, and shoulders. Then his teeth marks were filled with ink and were used to seal painting surfaces. Even though the artist was not physically present at the viewing of the project, since his photos and fillings were presented in a two-page spread of Avalanche magazine in the fall of 1972, the evidence of pain spoke eloquently about his experience. As O'Dell points out, at a time when events were replaced by 'representational events' by the US government and the media that supported it, artists like Burden and Acconci used masochism as a metaphor and drew attention to the distance between truth and representation (O'Dell 1998).

Theorist Linda Kauffman similarly focuses on the political while using the stereotypical classifica-tions of the gendered body in order to deconstruct them. In her book, *Bad Girls and Sick Boys,* Kau-ffman examines both earlier and more recent performance art practices in which artists attempt to overturn the predefined roles of their gender (Kauffman 1998). Kauffman devotes part of the book to two artists who 'go inside their own bodies', Bob Flanagan and Orlan. Flanagan, a performance artist who suffered from cystic fibrosis, is known for his masochistic performances where 'the pathology of CF is juxtaposed with the "pathology" of masochism' and 'medicine is fused with sadomasochism to problematize the relationships between the social and the psychic, between disease and desire' (Kauffman 1998: 21, 31). In *Visiting Hours,* a site-specific installation exhibited at Santa Monica in 1992-1993, New York in 1994, and Boston in 1995, Flanagan displayed his 'sick' body in a construct-ed hospital-like environment, as both a patient and a male heterosexual submissive. Along the same medical lines, Kauffman discusses the work of Orlan within a context of radical body artists who expose the culture's deepest psychic investments in beauty and femininity. Orlan is anything but a passive patient, directing the filming of these operations, while performing her persona. For the the-orist, Orlan is no less than a comedian who 'dissects male medical, scientific, and aesthetic ideologies with surgical precision' (Kauffman 1998: 2). As Kauffman suggests, just as Bob Flanagan dismantles masculinity, Orlan deconstructs femininity (Kauffman 1998: 61).

On the other hand, François Pluchart, in his 'Risk as the Practice of Thought' essay, claims that the body is one the most persistent taboos which is manipulated and mutilated by all ideologies, to the point that 'the staging of suffering and of death cannot be dissociated from the history of Western art'. Pluchart continues by saying that generally 'risk remains theoretical, a kind of by-product of the masochism inherent in every creative act', and it is peculiar that one had to wait for the end of the 1960s and the beginning of the 1970s 'to see the artists endanger their bodies and inflict on them-selves a violent physical suffering in order to produce thought' (Pluchart [1978] 2000: 219). Pluchart gives various examples of performance artists that used risk as a statement, namely Dennis Oppen-heim, Acconci, Michel Journiac, Gina Pane and Burden.

To demonstrate two European examples, Pluchart talks about Michel Journiac and Gina Pane's work. Pluchart writes about Journiac's *Messe pour un corps* of 1969, an event where the artist served a pudding made with his own blood and *Rituel pour un mort* of 1976, in which the artist inflicted cigarette burns on himself, as well as Pane's *Escalade non-anesthésiée* of 1971, a video-performance project where Pane climbs a ladder-like structure made of sharp objects. For Pluchart, Pane 'ill-treats

herself in order to make one feel that violence is a daily fact, a way of denying both man and life, just as it is proved by torture, war, deportation etc.' (Pluchart [1978] 2000: 221). Indeed, the blood and pain caused by her actions not only do not stop the artist from performing, but also seem to constitute the very center of the project. However, Pluchart's constant mention of archetypes, metaphysics and the cathartic in such art, shows the reader the way towards an interconnection between the ritual and political roles of violent performance art.

On the same note, art historian Tracy Warr describes Marina Abramovic's 1997 *Balkan Baroque* performance at the Venice Biennale as 'a gesture of mourning and healing for the civil wars in the Balkans', 'a metaphoric rite of passage in order to shed the pain of her internal conflicts of character and the more generalized tragedy of war' (Warr 2000: 112). During the performance, Abramovic sat on an enormous pile of beef bones, which she had the task of cleaning and scrubbing one by one, for six hours every day over five days. As she did so, she sung fragments of folksongs she could recall from her childhood. Behind her, three projections on the wall displayed the artist and her parents. The performance was, no doubt, a mixture of primitivist ritual, local folk and political commentary.

Conversely, art historian Amelia Jones sees the body in pain as an adequate demonstration of the personal being political. For Jones, 'violence and personal pain have been played out differently by artists who are not aligned with normative (straight, white, masculine) subjectivity' (Jones 2000: 33). Through the pairing of contrasting examples, Jones reads the work of Chris Burden as a reinforcement of his masculine subjectivity, while Gina Pane's pieces speak for the Other, as they 'seem to collapse the flesh of the self into the flesh of the world' (Jones 2000: 32). In her essay 'Dis/playing the phallus', Jones goes as far as to suggest that the 'masochism' of male artists, as described by O'Dell, is inextricably linked to the exhibitionist suffering associated with Christian martyrdom. Indeed, in his *Trans-fixed* of 1974, Burden had his palms nailed onto the roof of a Volkswagen, which was then pushed out of his garage in Venice, California. Jones cites Theodor Reik's psychoanalytical research on masochism to suggest that Christian masochism is the most extravagantly exhibitionist of all masochistic perversions (Reik in Jones 1994: 570). As she underlines, masochism requires a witness (Jones 1994: 570).

What follows is that the absence of a discussion on the visuality of the above described practices seems like a peculiar affair. Furthermore, this appears to be not an accidental but a deliberate strategy, initiated by Peggy Phelan and her book *Unmarked: The politics of performance*. As Phelan suggests, there is a fraught relation between political and representational visibility in contemporary art and culture. Her feminist psychoanalytic examination of performance rethinks and attacks visibility politics, with Phelan placing the (feminist) subject within the sphere of the non-representational to be studied through the ideology of the visible. For her, subjectivity is not –and can never be– visually representable. This does not mean, however, that feminism's objective should be to acquire greater visibility, since, according to Phelan, the relationship between representational visibility and political power is misunderstood, as it is based on the confusion between reality and representation. Following the path of Lacanian psychoanalysis and Derridian deconstruction, Phelan, despite being a feminist, condemns the idea of 'identity politics' as inadequate and underlines the limitations imposed by the quest for visual representation as a political objective (Phelan 1993).

As a result, performance art theory, and especially theory that analyses work that places the body of the artist in harm's way as an intention rather than a consequence, tends to focus on meaning, and not the meaning-making process. Despite theater theorist Dominic Johnson writing, in his book *Theatre & The Visual*, that 'images in the theatre *do* more than they *mean*' (Johnson 2012: 17), in the case of performance art theory, all effort appears to go into the recording of the latter.

5. Visuality as a meaning-making process

Violent performance art seems to be the privileged ground where one can negotiate a theoretical place for visuality. Indeed, as I intend to show, the act of looking in performance art must be accounted for through an understanding of both performativity and visuality, two concepts that highlight the contingency of making meaning. After all, all meaning produced relies on the contingency of vision, with our practices of seeing conditioned by various determinants. For Hal Foster, in his preface to *Vision and Visuality*, the difference between a theory of seeing and a theory of visuality suggests 'a difference within the visual –between the mechanism of sight and its historical techniques' (Foster 1988: ix). Foster here abandons the idea of vision as a biological activity and investigates the historical construction of visuality as a politically invested act.

As Maaike Bleeker, theater theorist and author of the only monograph on theater and the visual, suggests, the particularities of vision are complex, as they not only depend on one's position as a subject but are also culturally and historically specific. Her concern is with how visuality in the theater 'takes place', as well as allows for the inscription of modes of looking. For Bleeker, images are volatile and unstable phenomena, for the study of which one should employ tools from more visually oriented disciplines, such as art history, visual studies or the philosophical sub-discipline of aesthetics (Bleeker 2008).

It is interesting that Bleeker refers to the aesthetic side of vision, a quality that has been excluded from the discussion of violent performance art. Indeed, one rarely reads about visual pleasure offered by this kind of work. A notable exception is Patrick Campbell and Helen Spackman's analysis of Franko B.' s work, which is based on the bloody and ritualized violation of his own body. As they write, in their essay 'With/out An-Aesthetic: The Terrible Beauty of Franko B.', 'Franko B. resists interpretation, in fact the absence of program notes or of verbal texts is significant –words are denotative, they close down meaning; images remain open to multiple interpretations' (Campbell and Spackman 1998: 60). For the writers, Franko B.'s work does not make overt political statements, he opens his body as he closes his mouth. His images are described as stunning, the visual part of his work emphasized over physical pain, anguish and/or pleasure.

As becomes clear, the need to push spectatorship to reassess the conventions of visual pleasure, and to consider the necessarily painful or disturbing experiences of looking at –or looking away from– suffering bodies, forms a good example of how performance art has been used to expose and critique the objectifying tendencies of vision. Thus, also writing about Franko B., Johnson claims that performance art has the ability to highlight its own mediated condition, and hence invite us to reflect upon the experience of being the subject of vision, both in art and everyday life. For example, in *I Miss You*, which the artist performed in the Turbine Hall of Tate Modern, Franko B. assumed the likeness of a catwalk show, with his body naked, monochromatic and bleeding. In this and other works by the artist, 'the scene of looking opens onto political possibilities that may not be available in the traditionally more tightly constrained theatrical setup' (Johnson 2012 : 41, 45).

Another instance where the artwork resisted the vehemence of hermeneutic aesthetics is found in Marina Abramovic's 1975 performance *Lips of Thomas*. During the performance, the artist, naked, ate and drank excessive amounts of honey and wine respectively, cut her abdomen in the shape of a five-pointed star with a razor blade, and flagellated her back with a whip, bleeding profoundly. She then lay down on a cross made of blocks of ice and stayed motionless, until some members of the audience removed her and carried her away, putting an end to the performance. For Erika Fischer-Lichte, Abramovic's performance exhibited elements of ritual as well as spectacle. As she writes, the work did not call for interpretation, as 'understanding the artist's actions was less important than the experiences that she had carrying them out'. That is, 'the materiality of her actions dominated their semiotic attributes' (Fischer-Lichte 2008: 16, 18).

What follows is that the indeterminacy of meaning allows the reality of violence to emerge in the performance artwork, with the emergence of the reality of violence depending on the interruption rather than the stimulation of the construction of meaning. As has been shown, in addition to passing on information, communicating ideas and expressing opinions about violence, performance art also appeals to and enhances a different kind of knowledge, which comes into existence outside what Fischer-Lichte calls the order of representation. This way, the spectator encounters the violence before the mechanisms of naming, categorizing and making sense set in. After all, this is the only way the reality of violence in performance art is allowed to emerge, without meaning annihilating its aesthetic framework.

Consequently, attracted to the production of compelling and difficult images in their performance practice, artists often suggest that seeking pleasure or pain in the act of looking, or looking away, can open onto political possibilities for the work that do not necessarily rely on the quest for meaning. Hence, it is not in the act of finding meaning, but in the thinking about how performed images work –what they *do* rather than what they *mean*–, that as spectators we attend to the politics of pleasure, or of pain. It is through an analysis of visuality, even, or especially in the form of visual extremity, that we can start to look to the ways in which powerful images mark their viewers. As Johnson puts it, 'the ways we look at performed images reminds us to ask questions about the meaning of images, but also the meaning of looking' (Johnson 2012: 74).

6. Vincent van Gogh's ear and social order

As is also true in the context of shamanistic and religious rituals of self-harm and bodily punishment, the performance artists that have been discussed here always run several risks, such as infection, poisoning of a bad wound, even death. As Pluchart writes, one might even question whether the game is worth it. However, for him, 'a number of authors, like Georges Bataille in his search for the sacred, and Antonin Artaud in his desperate attempt to give back the theatre its primary cathartic function, show us the way' (Pluchart [1978] 2000: 221).

Undoubtedly, the artist that has come closer to exploring Bataille's writing in exquisite detail in Ron Athey. As Johnson acknowledges, in his essay 'Ron Athey's Vision of Excess: Performance After George Bataille', *The Solar Anus,* first performed in 1998, was Athey's first loving homage to Bataille. His performance begins with the extraction of a long string of pearls from the center of a black sun tattooed around the artist's anus. Having removed the pearls, Athey inserted hooks into his face, hitching them with cords to a golden crown. The performance ends with the artist clasping sex horns to his stilettos, which he repeatedly forces into his rectum. Beyond his solo works, Athey has also organized various events that celebrate the legacies of Bataille's writings. As Johnson reminds us, Bataille urged his readers to acknowledge the persistence of sacrificial elements at the centre of culture, to seek out and savor this force that threatens to consume. And he goes on the suggest that both Athey's performances and curated events 'are exemplary in their pursuit of such solicitations, and give body to Bataille's mythic incitement, his call for a vertiginous fall into the depths of human possibility' (Johnson 2010: 6-7).

Of course, Bataille himself did not have a chance to write about the performance artists presented above; he did, however, leave a roadmap for the treatment of their violent, self-harming work, which he seems to have anticipated, foreshadowed and projected onto the person of Vincent van Gogh. Be that as it may, strictly speaking, Vincent Van Gogh was not a performance artist. As a painter, he was involved in the making of pictures, intended to be experienced by subjects through the act of viewing. Indeed, the severing of his own ear, which was then presented to a prostitute, did not form part of his art practice. However, the materiality of his violence and his predetermination to

produce a visual end result appears to be the connecting thread between his late-nineteenth-century practice and performance art from the 1960s and 1970s to the present day.

On this ground, Bataille's discussion of Van Gogh's act of violence alongside religious or spiritual rituals of sacrifice brings to the surface a clarifying distinction between the two contexts, one that is also pronounced by anthropologist and art historian Nicholas Thomas, in his investigation on *Body Art*. As Thomas writes, in the contemporary art world, 'the careful staging of violence to the body has been a subversive gambit, or at least one that aspired to subversive effect. But through the world, and throughout human history, ritual violence has not undermined social orders but created them' (Thomas 2014: 95).

On the same note, by drawing a distinct division between the two, ritual and art, Bataille illustrates how, while the one who takes part in the sacrifice stages a theatrical rendering of freedom –as rejection– in a path to sanctity, Van Gogh produced a bodily spectacle that is contingent to a receiving end. For Bataille, the painter 'carried his severed ear to the place that most offends polite society' (Bataille 1986: 70) in order for it to be seen, as if the process of its mutilation was not complete until his loved one has looked at –or looked away from– its terrible sight. What Van Gogh had produced, setting the stage for violent performance art, was clearly a *vision of excess*.

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Irene Gerogianni, MA (University of Glasgow) MA (City University London & Southampton University): Art historian and critic. She is a PhD student at the Department of Architecture,Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Greece.

Email: i_gerogianni@hotmail.com