

**BEARING WITNESS: ON PAIN IN PERFORMANCE ART**

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**Thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of PhD**

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Declaration of Authorship I, **Jareh Das** hereby declare that this thesis and the work presented in it is entirely my own. Where I have consulted the work of others, this is always clearly stated.

Signed:

Date: 19<sup>th</sup> December 2016

## **Acknowledgments**

This thesis is the result of the generosity of the artists, Ron Athey, Martin O'Brien and Ulay. They, who all continue to create genre-bending and deeply moving works that allow for multiple readings of the body as it continues to evolve alongside all sort of cultural, technological, social, and political shifts. I have numerous friends, family (Das and Krys), colleagues and acquaintances to thank all at different stages but here, I will mention a few who have been instrumental to this process – Deniz Unal, Joanna Reynolds, Adia Sowho, Emmanuel Balogun, Cleo Joseph, Amanprit Sandhu, Irina Stark, Denise Kwan, Kirsty Buchanan, Samantha Astic, Samantha Sweeting, Ali McGlip, Nina Valjarevic, Sara Naim, Grace Morgan Pardo, Ana Francisca Amaral, Anna Maria Pinaka, Kim Cowans, Rebecca Bligh, Sebastian Kozak and Sabrina Grimwood. They helped me through the most difficult parts of this thesis, and some were instrumental in the editing of this text. (Jo, Emmanuel, Anna Maria, Grace, Deniz, Kirsty and Ali) and even encouraged my initial application (Sabrina and Rebecca). I must add that without the supervision and support of Professor Harriet Hawkins, this thesis would not have been completed. Thank you. I also thank Nicola Triscott, Claudia Lastra, and all past and present staff at The Arts Catalyst who supported my research, and in choosing me as their PhD Research student took a chance with a 'wild card'. My examiners Deborah Dixon and Mary Richards who probed, questioned and pushed for a more expanded and refined thesis. To Ed Luker, proof-reader and copy editor extraordinaire, thank you.

My thesis is dedicated to my late sister, Dr. Nene Gbegbaje-Das, who lived with Sickle Cell Disease until her untimely death seven years ago. Nene overcame the challenges imposed by living with chronic pain and gave me a perspective of openness and compassion for bodies that endure and transcend the limits of illness.

No Pain. No Gain.

## Abstract

This thesis examines pain in performance art and, as the subtitle suggests, it addresses notions of bearing witness by examining art practices that cross the boundaries of performance art, social practice, illness, activism, and other forms of confrontation with the male body. Bearing witness takes up ideas of witnessing as ‘a collective sensorial practice of listening to bodies’<sup>1</sup>, as well as concerns with ‘seeing how seeing takes place,’<sup>2</sup> which allows possibilities of moving beyond an audience’s role as witnesses and drawing attention to the very conditions of witnessing itself.

To explore these ideas, this thesis analyses the work of three artists - Ron Athey, Martin O’Brien and Ulay - exploring ideas of how witnessing pain operates through three different sites: audiencing, curating and documenting. This analysis demonstrates the creative and political potential that a range of sites and ways of witnessing pain offers audiences, artists, and curators. It explores how pain serves as a critical tool, whether functioning metaphorically, conceptually, or literally, to understand how the body of the artist tells of their most intimate experiences, thus requiring that we once again revisit the place and potency of the body in performance art and its intersections within a range of identities. By considering the work of these three cross-generational artists, and with the varying pain actions they deploy, this thesis extends and develops interdisciplinary work on performing bodies, pain, and witnessing.

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<sup>1</sup> Donna McCormack, *Queer Postcolonial Narratives and the Ethics of Witnessing* (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014), p. 20.

<sup>2</sup> Jane Blocker, *Seeing Witness: Visuality and the Ethics of Witnessing* (University of Minnesota Press, 2008) p. xx.

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## Chapter 1

### **Witnessing, Curating and Documenting Pain in Performance Art**

#### Introduction

The performance has become, say, a concentration of Athey's life i.e. that's what it embodies. Ron's work is about myths. The myths of his own autobiography, Egyptian mythology, religious myths and iconographies, rituals and the Pentecostal religion.

— *Sebastian Kozak on Ron, May 2014*

I see pain functioning as a metaphor, as well as actual physical pain. This is important, as both are acting together but usually, pain is talked about in terms of endurance – endurance as a metaphor. Painful activities that are functioning on two levels, literal and metaphoric, although communicated through repetition, endurance is still used a metaphoric act for other forms of pain. The history of Cystic Fibrosis is central to my work and it is important that audiences understand this context as some of the images make specific reference to CF. For example: the recurring use of a hood in my work is one that serves to restrict breathing. It sticks to my face when I am breathing in and expands into a bubble when I breath out i.e. it looks like mucus bubbles. I am interested in performance's compression of time. How that works in relation to chronic illness and bringing in medical cycles into it, bringing in things from medicine and those that relate to illness. Brought into the structure or the thing that causes the deterioration like for example in my work, *Mucus Factory*, 2013, the beating of the chest repeatedly, reddening...PHYSIO, hurting to heal, you go through this pain to heal yourself (starts beating on his chest to recreate the action) ... Beating my chest till its red and stinging when I rub the mucus on it but at the same time I'm bringing up mucus, which is positive in itself. It is helping me breathe better.

— *Martin O'Brien, April 2015*

I wrote 'generation *ultima ratio*', inserted a T between 'gene' and 'ration' and dotted either side of the E and T. Part of the phrases comes from a French anarchist slogan '*ultima ratio regum*' ['The Last Resort of Kings and Common Men']. It was tattooed onto my forearm, along with a crest. Shortly after getting the tattoo, I located a plastic surgeon, who worked in a hospital in Haarlem. I showed him the tattoo and asked him if he could remove it. He asked me why I had done it if I wanted it taken away – and I replied that I had done it *precisely* to remove it, and to preserve it. He thought it was a crazy idea but agreed to do the procedure. I made an appointment, and four weeks after the tattoo was made, the transplant took place. I bought a 4- by 5- inch Polaroid camera, which was placed on a tripod behind me. They gave me a local anaesthetic, just on the arm that was being operated on. A nurse assisted the surgeon, another nurse assisted me, changing the film for each shot....

— *Ulay interviewed by Dominic Johnson, March 2014*



This cross-disciplinary thesis considers the experiences of pain in performance art through a critical analysis of works by three artists – Ron Athey, Martin O’Brien and Frank Uwe Laysiepen, known as Ulay. I focus on both live events and documentation – video recordings, images, and texts – to explore experiences of pain in their works considered through the lens of witnessing. I employ three different forms of witnessing namely, *live witnessing*, *the curator as witness* and *witnessing pain through documentation* with a view to further understandings of viewers’ experiences of pain in performance art, alongside considering the role of artists and curators in experiencing these works. To bear witness to performances of pain raises important questions about the ethics of watching. It highlights the implicit and often invisible contractual agreements that occur between performers and their audiences.

To develop this perspective on pain, witnessing and performance art, I engage with the following research questions:

1. *How can idea of witnessing informs our understandings of pain in performance art?*
2. *What issues, ethical and otherwise does the curating of pain-performances raise in these artworks and what is the role of curator-as-witness in this context?*
3. *What is the role of documenting pain in bearing witness to performance art?*

In adopting witnessing as a critical lens, this thesis demonstrates how pain is witnessed by analysing various approaches used by three generations of performance artists, all of whom explore the creative and political potential that might be offered through pain’s presence in their works. Although these artworks are not entirely centred on pain, its effect serves as an entry point into the troubling entanglement of looking, knowing, and acting that these works ultimately perform. Reflecting on contemporary theories of curating, I explore what it means to occupy the position of curator-as-witness with respect to performance art and, finally, drawing on work on the documentation of performance art, I reflect on the problems and possibilities of witnessing pain through documentary sources. Pain serves as a critical tool here, whether functioning metaphorically or conceptually, with the body of the artist functioning as a medium for telling their most private experiences. As such, in my view, it decentralises normalised views on consent, ethics, governance and bodily self-ownership, all of which ultimately construct the basis of how one is expected to live at the present moment. These normative views refer to the socio-cultural and political codes of conduct that have been embedded through medical and religious discourses, which, in turn, have informed, governed, and regulated attitudes towards an individual’s right of bodily self-ownership, that is, what one is legally and morally allowed to do with and to their body. To put this differently, ethical codes derived from religion, philosophy, and culture affects how individuals make decisions about how to live their lives. In this thesis, I introduce witnessing

as a critical lens to consider how pain operates as a non-verbal form of communication through bodies that perform their personal histories. To 'bear witness', as the scholar Catherine Stoddard reminds us, is to suggest a kind of physicality in its connotations of endurance, suffering, and responsibility, and as such, implies the ethical embodiment of a reality that is beyond the visual'.<sup>3</sup> I also introduce the term 'pain-actions' to refer in this context to a set of actions including cutting, wounding, tattooing, piercing, bruising, and other forms of self-inflicted pain.

Pain is difficult to define and categorise due to the impossibility of arriving at a fixed or universal definition: its meaning changes across cultures as it evolves alongside the social, cultural, political and technological. Historically, pain's main definitions have come from religion and medicine. As I expand on in the literature review, these are the definitions that inform both cultural and scientific understandings of pain. In Western art history they have led to the prevalence of the idea of 'The Hurt Body', which was of particular interest in modern visual culture around the eighteenth century.<sup>4</sup> Whilst this thesis builds on the critical tradition of performance art since the late 1960s, as a discourse centred on destabilising normative bodily understandings, it also seeks to address the resistance and problems associated with curating, theorising, and witnessing pain. The body in performance presents diverse experiences ranging from intimacy and complicity to confrontation. It has the ability to offer audiences direct, unmediated encounters that destroys pretence, and creates sensory immersion, thus allowing for the opening up of different kinds of engagement with bodies.<sup>5</sup> Its potency as a 'live' form that disrupts the nature of contemporary art can be traced back to the origins of experimental theatre, beginning with Antoni Artaud's *Theatre of Cruelty* between 1931-1936, to Butoh, which began in Japan in 1959 and was founded by Hijikata Tatsumi and Ohno Kazuo. Martin Esslin's later coined the term 'Theatre of the Absurd' in 1960, all these movements contributing to influencing performance art forms that resist fixity.

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<sup>3</sup> Christine Stoddard, "Towards a Phenomenology of the Witness to Pain: Dis/identification and the Orlanian Other", *Performance Paradigm* 5, no.1 (May 2009), p. 3.

<http://www.performanceparadigm.net/index.php/journal/article/view/65>

<sup>4</sup> Barbara Maria Stafford, *Body Criticism: Imaging the Unseen in Enlightenment Art and Medicine* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1993), p. 14.

<sup>5</sup> The body as a site for performance art emerged as a post-War condition that allowed artists to use it as a medium for carrying out radical, experimental, and often challenging actions which alluded to wider social, political, and cultural conditions. Performance art scholars including but not limited to Kathy O'Dell's *Contract with the Skin* (1998), Amelia Jones's *Body Art/Performing The Subject* (1998) and *Body Art* (1999), Lea Vergine's *Body Art and Performance: The Body as Language* (2000), Francesca Alfano Miglietti's *Extreme Bodies: The Use and Abuse of the Body in Art* (2003), Jane Blocker's *What the Body Cost: Desire, History and Performance* (2004), Bernadette Wegenstein's *Getting under the Skin* (2006), Sally O'Reilly's *The Body in Contemporary Art* (2009) and Tracy Warr and Amelia Jones' *The Artist's Body* (2012),

The hurt body still continues to challenge expectations around who can make art, how they are making it, and for whom they are making it. It is a powerful site from which to break apart traditions of representation because it allows for the expression of new identities beyond the established distinctions of nationality, ethnicity, masculinity, and sexuality. The experience of pain is both highly subjective and also socialised, arising out of culturally-governed interactions, embodied consciousness, and theories of the body and mind, circulating within any particular period.

Witnessing, as a theoretical discourse, gained prominence post-World War II and developed as a means of allowing sufferers to speak for themselves. It extends to parts of the legal system – particularly in relation to the different forms that contribute to administering power and control over people. Behavioural studies, including psychology, cognitive sciences, and criminology utilise theories of witnessing to interpret human behaviour. The term witness, according to Stoddard, suggests not only the juridical meaning of eyewitness (testifying to something seen), but also to the function of authenticating an actual experience of something in the moment of its occurrence. This inhabiting of proof through one's bodily presence, and testifying to that which cannot be known she describes as 'beyond recognition.'<sup>6</sup> To witness, according to Stoddard is more than to see pain as an object of perception; It is also to see it as a representation in the field of the other and to attest the very otherness of someone else's pain as somehow beyond the reach of one's experience.<sup>7</sup> For Stoddard, witnessing involves opening oneself up to difference, exceeding more conventional boundaries of recognition to the point of de-centring the autonomous self, and moving towards a conception of ourselves that links us more intimately to one another.<sup>8</sup>

The terms 'self-inflicted', 'self-harm' and 'self-mutilation' feature widely in performance art histories. They are often used interchangeably to describe the various ways artists have opened their bodies intentionally. I argue, however, that the words harm and mutilation conjure a pathological association to these acts that limit the ways in which they can be read. Scholarship in this area, including Kathy O'Dell's *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art, and the 1970s* (1998), Frazer Ward's *No Innocent Bystanders* (2012), and Kim Hewitt's *Mutilating the Body: Identity in Blood and Ink* (1997) are important examples to reference here. They move beyond the fact of pain and readdress how artists voluntarily and consensually wound themselves and at times invite others to do so, to test limits of the implicit contract with an audience through

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<sup>6</sup> Stoddard, "Towards a Phenomenology of the Witness to Pain," p. 3.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Kelly Oliver, *Witnessing: Beyond Recognition. Minneapolis* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001), p. 251.

a wide range of actions. O'Dell and Ward analyse similar artists – Marina Abramović, Chris Burden, and Vito Acconci – but differ in their arguments. While O'Dell explores 'the institutionalised masochism of performance in the 1970s rooted in societal response to the Vietnam War and the changing nature of the social contract, Ward is cautious of reading such works as directly influenced by conflict and argues that such performances are intersubjective events that are not always necessarily influenced by such events as he believes that they are too readily and easily placed within these broader contexts. He argues, however, that artists working with their bodies in the period beginning in the late 1960s to early 1970s responded to the demise of a domain between the private life of the family, public life, commerce, and the state, where public discourse, supposedly free of social difference, can operate.'<sup>9</sup> One could further argue that conflicts and wars led to a dissolution of the barriers between public and private life which then further contributed to capitalism's abrasion of these once separate domains.

Important to discussions of pain and performance art is the research of the performance artist and writer Helge Meyer. Bringing together Husserl's notion of *Empfindnis*<sup>10</sup> and self-infliction, Meyer argues that 'performance art can use moving, living images of the body as tools to produce compassion.'<sup>11</sup> Meyer examines this through analysing artist Üdi Da's strategies for dealing with self-inflicted pain, which he documented through performance photographs. Through critically engaging with self-infliction within Da's practice, he raises important questions on the elusiveness of pain, with the fundamental difficulty being an inability to communicate through language, alongside highlighting the importance of performance art in developing a 'text beside or between language.'<sup>12</sup> Wounding can then be regarded as a form of self-inflicted pain, which throughout history has been prerequisite in some religions, and has also formed modes of expressions for personal taste (body modification and sexual practices, including BDSM for example). Opening the body is also framed by its relationship to medicine (such as surgery) and the use of wounding required to treat illness and disease.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Jennie Klein, "Review of *No Innocent Bystanders* by Frazer Ward," *CAA Reviews* (July 31, 2014), doi: 10.3202/caa.reviews.2014.86.

<sup>10</sup> For a detailed discussion of *Empfindnis*, which Husserl describes as an "event of the body" affected by an external thing, that is, "the quality of being influenced (worked upon)", see Anna-Teresa Tymieniecka, *Soul and Body in Husserlian Phenomenology: Man and Nature* (Holland: Springer, 1983), p. 82.

<sup>11</sup> Helge Meyer, 'Empfindnis and Self-Inflicted Pain in Performance Art' in Maria Pia Di Bella and James Elkins eds., *Representations of Pain in Art and Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 39.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

<sup>13</sup> In her book, *The Story of Pain from: Pain to Painkillers*, pain scholar Joanna Burke quotes several academic authorities to demonstrate that pain, while a universal phenomenon, is neither described nor evaluated in universals.

In separating ‘self-infliction’ from ‘self-mutilation’ in this thesis, I frame the former as a means of communication that expresses that there are not necessarily any underlying psychological problems related to self-injury, and rather that the performer is able to control injuring as an active form of agency and activism.<sup>14</sup> Self-mutilation, as an act, is often viewed as pathological. As Hewitt observes in her research into body modifications and tattooing, a self-mutilator declared: ‘These are my arms, I do with them what I please, whenever I please. If I choose to make them ugly, they will be ugly.’<sup>15</sup> I am not intending to simplify self-injury that is a result of trauma, abuse, and other pathologies.

However, I do argue that self-inflicted pain intended by the artists I consider is easily misunderstood and read as the performance of certain kinds of pathologies, which, in my view, is a reductive understanding of performance art that involves wounding. This separation of self-infliction and self-mutilation offers an important counter-critique in the understanding of challenging kinds of performance work. In using the term ‘self-inflicted’ throughout this thesis, I engage with actions where the body is opened up in controlled circumstances by the artist or by those acting under their directions. Throughout this thesis, I explore self-inflicted pain by adopting the term ‘pain-actions’ to elaborate on current scholarship by framing these actions within contemporary performance art and exploring the implications this has for witnessing and ethics. What is fundamental is that the decision to self-inflict is one that sees the artist embrace risk and, as Lynn MacRitchie observes:

Art is, to a certain degree, involved in a process of psychological risk-taking that tests the intuition, conceptualisation and strengthening of purpose against the demands of the work's material production and the public response it elicits.<sup>16</sup>

Curator and writer Tracey Warr further expands on these forms of artists’ risk-taking by arguing that all art is a risk in the sense that artists expose their deepest personal perceptions to public view. This, according to Warr, might make them liable to persecution, especially if their ideas are at odds with the dominant religious or political ideologies of the time. Warr goes on to argue that artists may also be at risk – of neglect and misunderstandings – if their vision is too radical for society to find a place for.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> See Kim Hewitt, *Mutilating the Body: Identity in Blood and Ink* (Ohio: Bowling Green State University Popular Press 1997), p. 104.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Lynn MacRitchie, “Marina Abramović: Exchanging Energies,” *Performance Research: On Risk*, Vol. 1, Issue 2: On Risk (1996), p. 27.

<sup>17</sup> Tracy Warr, “Sleeper,” *Performance Research: On Risk* 1, no. 2 (1996), p. 19.

I position these pain-actions as part of the discourse centred within an Anglo-American performance art history, when artists began using their bodies as sites of protest and activism, beginning in the period between the late 1960s and early 1970s. Artists including Marina Abramović, Stelarc, Gina Pane, Chris Burden, Vito Acconci, ORLAN, and the Viennese Actionists are familiar examples from performance art histories, but alongside this well-versed history is a consideration of personal accounts of illness that entered into this context, where, for example HIV+/AIDS and Cystic Fibrosis (CF) were considered in the practices of artists such as Ron Athey and Martin O'Brien.

My curatorial practice, together with my experience and knowledge of curating performance art, heavily informs this thesis. I use perspectives that combine both practical and scholarly knowledge in this area to look at key works by all three of the artists I discuss in the contexts of research, interpretation and exhibition (in the case of O'Brien). I am interested in the work of Athey, O'Brien, and Ulay as I consider them as artists who are occupied with matters and ideas beyond the formation of an official narrative about pain and wounding in performance, meaning that they all work outside the established mainstream or populist art narrative. O'Brien works at the intersection of art and medicine. His work introduces, introducing notions of the sick body and his personal experience of suffering from cystic fibrosis. His performance and video art are concerned with physical endurance, disgust, long duration and pain base practices that address a politics of the sick-queer body and examine what it means to be born with a life-threatening disease, both politically and also as a metaphor for wider ills of the world (expressed as a fear of contagion). Ron Athey is an influential performance artist who continues to confront preconceived ideas about the body in relation to masculinity, sexuality, illness, and religious iconography. From his earliest performances in the 1980s, to his influential and often cited blood works of the mid-1990s, as well as more recent works, Athey's deeply moving pieces have foreseen and precipitated the central place afforded sexuality, identity, and the body within visual art and critical thought. Lastly, Ulay, the oldest of the three artists, is a pioneer of the performance art movement beginning 1970s and polaroid photography. He has used photography as a conceptual and critical tool for self-exploration, experimentation, and social activism. He is most known for his ten-year collaboration with Marina Abramović and their performances are now regarded as iconic.

As I expand on in chapters dedicated to their work, in different ways Athey, O'Brien, and Ulay offer exceptional perspectives on the freedom of individual artistic performance practices, proving that in making challenging work and employing the use and presence of pain, such works can be liberated from the restrictive frameworks of art. Through this unique framework, these

artists hold a position through which they can propose different aesthetic, social, and political possibilities from the ones dictated by the current neoliberal realm. Such a position, curator, Niels Van Tomme suggests can allow artists present an alternative to ‘widespread states of passivity and the idea that nothing can be done to change the current status quo, be it in historically constructed modes of representation, broad socio-economic malaise, or deeper philosophical crises we are faced with today.’<sup>18</sup> He proposes artists are able to investigate, and act upon the potential to momentarily open up possibilities to transform reality, or seek to establish alternative modes of imagining it, before these opportunities firmly close down again.<sup>19</sup>

In this thesis and in my curatorial practice, I am interested in exploring what Van Tomme identifies as how artists through pain-performances ‘momentarily open up transformational possibilities,’ meaning that viewers are allowed direct and unmediated experiences of another’s pain. I propose this exploration through witnessing sites and positions as mentioned. However, in doing this work, particularly in the curation of O’Brien’s *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I’m Yours* (2015), the question of ‘Who exactly, and what kinds of transformations occur?’ prevails, thus revealing a sense of unknowing that always occurs in live experiences for artists, curators and audiences. Curating as a research method is also central to this thesis and in presenting a new commission by O’Brien – a live performance in a site-specific space – it is important to consider how curating creates an arena of exchange, and thus consider the expected, unexpected, and importantly, the roles of the curator, artist and audience in all of this. Furthermore, this research combines methods from the social sciences, arts, and humanities. It utilises auto-ethnography and includes curatorial research components. This methodology can best be described with the hybrid term ‘Curator-Autoethnographer’, one I borrow from curator, Rui Mateus Amaral. For Amaral, ‘Curator-Autoethnographer’ describes curatorial practices and ethnography brought together as a form of research and writing that combines the self-reflexivity inherent in curating with personal and collective experiences.<sup>20</sup> I have incorporated diverse material and, where possible, personal recollections, archival documents, recordings, and various texts to inform this thesis. I put forward a range of readings and interpretations to create visual and textual narratives that convey the evocative force of the works so that the reader of this thesis can take up roles as a further witness to these artists’ works. Similarly, to the works I analyse, I have searched for creative solutions to

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<sup>18</sup> Niels Van Tomme, “Essay by the Curator,” Parsons *2014 MFA exhibition*, 26 April – 3 May 2014, accessed 13 August 2017, <http://finearts.parsons.edu/2014mfathesis/essay-by-the-curator>.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Rui Amaral, *The Author-Curator as Autoethnographer* (MFA, OCAD University Toronto, Canada, 2015), p. 3, [http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/273/1/Amaral\\_Rui\\_2015\\_MFA\\_CRCP\\_THESIS.pdf](http://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/273/1/Amaral_Rui_2015_MFA_CRCP_THESIS.pdf).

emerging problems and engaged in the research process emotionally and through bodily experiences in adopting the role of curator-witness. In what follows, I want to discuss my methods in more depth, exploring in turn methods of witnessing live art, of curating pain, and of researching and analysing documentation of pain. The section will close with some reflections on writing about pain. Whilst the methods discussed here cut across the three artists' chapters, as will become clear, I wish to use the three key themes of live witnessing, curating, and documenting to organise my discussion. The remainder of this introduction proceeds into discussing research methods followed by an introduction the artists' and their works whilst giving an overview of their practices, before concluding with a synopsis of the thesis overall.

### **1.1 Collecting, Analysing and Creating Documentation**

The performance documentation considered in this thesis occupies a challenging position. It serves as both primary and secondary material. In the chapter on Ulay, I consider his performance documentation as a primary source material, whilst for Athey and O'Brien, it is very much secondary material, as a supplement to the live witnessing and curating of their works. For all three artists, the study of documentation of their live and performance works was crucial to the discussion. For both Athey and O'Brien, other methods were used in addition, but in all three cases, the analysing of documentation formed a starting point for this scholarship. I use a wide variety of sources, with documentation as a category covering official documentation made and sanctioned by the artist, sometimes as part of the work, as well as documentation that was an official recording of the event. Alongside this, I use more ephemeral and informal forms of documentation, such as archival material including letters, flyers, agendas, catalogues, papers, books, journals, newspapers, press releases, program proposals, radio and television program scripts, and various public records. More recent sources also include recorded symposium discussions, as well as YouTube videos, and photos uploaded to social media. In addition, the usual ephemera surrounding the art scene are used, such as reviews in the art and mainstream press. All of these documents are taken from libraries, archives, exhibitions, organisational or institutional files and in some cases made available by the artists.

Central to the research on all three artists are the review and analysis of documentation produced in official forms, especially for my interpretation of Ulay for whom the documentation is the work being analysed for this thesis. I began with reviewing documentation on the artists Ron Athey and Martin O'Brien held in the archive of Live Art Development Agency, London. I spent two weeks watching, re-watching videos of previously performed works and where



available, listening to sound recordings of interviews. I also engaged with material on Athey available from The British Library and Queen Mary University of London, both of which hold archival material on his work. I was also able to interview two previous audience members of Athey's performances and prepared a set of questionnaires, followed by a 30-minute interview. These interviews were later transcribed.

In the research I conducted on Ulay, my sources are varied. However, a visit on 3<sup>rd</sup> July 2015 to his London gallery at the time, MOT International, gave access to his works held by the gallery. This proved invaluable, as I was able to spend three hours discussing the work's resurgence with a gallery representative. I had a substantial amount of time to carefully look at the works and record this experience. I also visited several important and extensive solo exhibitions of Ulay's work in Europe. Firstly, *Ulay|Polaroids* at the Nederlands Fotomuseum (24 Jan – 1 May 2016) and more recently, *Ulay "Come On"* at MOT International Brussels (20 Jun – 17 Jul 2016). I was also able to engage with collaborative works between Ulay and Abramović to further understand Ulay's practice whilst visiting Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI) collection in New York (2 Nov 2016) which holds an extensive archive of video works made by the two artists. To coincide with the publishing of the launch of his first monograph, *Whispers: Ulay on Ulay* (2014), I attended a panel discussion *Culture Now: Ulay* (6 Mar 2015) with the artist present and in conversation with Catherine Wood, the Tate Performance Curator at the Institute of Contemporary Art, London (ICA). Furthermore, I engaged with recordings in the form of panel discussions focusing on Ulay's oeuvre to date as part of *Ulay & Amelia Jones* at the Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam (9 Jan 2015). I also engaged with several key texts on Ulay's work outside of *Whispers: Ulay on Ulay*, including interviews with the artist by performance scholar, Dominic Johnson in *The Art of Living: An Oral History of Performance Art* (2015), *Ulay with Andrea Cassin*, *The Brooklyn Rail* (2014), *Everything of value is vulnerable: An interview with Ulay* (2016) and, most recently, *Who are you Ulay?* *Schirn Mag* (2016). The exhibition catalogues *What is this thing called Polaroid? |Ulay* (2016) and *Ulay: Life-Sized* (2017) which are valuable texts for considering Ulay's rediscovery.

I employ analytical methods approach common to qualitative research practices in which document analysis requires that data is examined and interpreted in order to elicit meaning, gain understanding, and develop empirical knowledge. I use both visual and textual analysis for much of the archival material. This led to the development of the key themes for organising the literature and performance art reviews. I believe that it is essential for an understanding of the work of all three artists to explore the role of documentation and its relationship to the live performance event. To do this, I adopt an analytic approach based on Gillian Rose's threefold scheme for the analysis

of visual material: to theorise the interrelationship of materiality and visibility, to offer a series of empirical explorations of that interrelationship that pay particular attention to research praxis, and to address questions of ethics in relation to difference, identity, and power.<sup>21</sup> I apply this schema when thinking about visual, moving image as well as written documentation. This enabled me to remain sensitive to the different contexts of the works and its reception, both by placing myself at a distance from the original performance, and from various audience members at the time and in the period of time since I witnessed them. It also enabled me to disrupt the challenges faced when documentation is placed as secondary to an original live event. In addition to examining existing documentation, my role as a curator of O'Brien's work required a reflection on wider curatorial discourse by dealing with exhibition histories that consider the role of a curator, not just as an interpreter of documentation, but also as a creator of performance documentation. I reflect on this further in the section on curating live art in the literature review and in discussions in the chapter on O'Brien dedicated to his performance *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours*. Through this range of documentation, I construct and reconstruct accounts of live works of art and attempt to appreciate this documentation on its own terms as work in itself. I do this by holding onto the ways in which much of this documentation is simultaneously informal and ephemeral whilst also often audience-generated. The result is a collage effect that required critical and creative research methods to develop experiences of these works so that they could then be analysed and developed as a framework to write about them for the reader.

## 1.2 Ethnographies of Live Witnessing

To analyse both the live and documented performances of all three artists and to aid the process of reflection on my role as curator-witness, I attended performances by both Athey and O'Brien over the course of my research. Core to my methods for exploring live witnessing were methods that fall under the terms of ethnography, principally participant observation, visual ethnography, and auto-ethnography. As part of a wider suite of ethnographic methods, all three of these are core social science methods and are becoming increasingly prevalent within art history and theoretical research that engages with live and participatory art practices. I attended and participated in Athey's *Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains* (2014), in the conclusive part and fourth installation of the performance, part of Spill Festival that same year. Whilst photography was not allowed, I was able to fully participate in the work as a witness. I made notes

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<sup>21</sup> Gillian Rose and Divia P. Tolia-Kelly eds., *Visibility/Materiality: Images, Objects and Practices* (Oxford: Routledge, 2012), p. 3.

during the event and developed further annotations of the sequence of events, which I later wrote up and included sketches of the layout for the performance that I discuss further below. I was then able to view the documentation online in the form of a short video of the performance and photographs of the event taken by Manuel Vason, an artist and photographer who regularly documents the work of Athey and other live artists.

I curated, participated in, and engaged with Martin O'Brien's live performance *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours* in my role as curator, together with the artists and institutional support of The Arts Catalyst and the Trust Me I'm an Artist (TMIAA) steering group. The conversations that ensued in 2013 led to a new performance commission in 2015, which I will expand on in the section below on curating the live.

Performances that challenge their audience with extreme acts of self-infliction, hardship and suffering are too often readily dismissed as pathological and fetishistic, without a thorough engagement with the politics and socio-cultural contexts from which they have emerged.<sup>22</sup> Alongside this, such works are able to offer up alternative ways of seeing, living, and being, which extend well beyond the context of art and into daily life. This thesis also considers the ways certain performances have transferred from their points of emergence as an assimilation of differing subcultures and social types. A world of punk, hardcore, activist, queer, and transvestite identities appears in Ulay and Athey's works. In O'Brien's work the sick body and the medical subject enter into the framework of contemporary art. Ways of witnessing, from an individual (curatorial) and collective (audience) perspective, form part of the methods employed in this thesis which I will return to in the section that follows.

Witnessing is a complex, cross-disciplinary topic, whose theorisations have, over the years, drawn from a range of different sources. In this thesis, I draw a range of these together but focus specifically on those ideas that have most clearly informed performance and live art discussions. 'Bearing witness', according to the psychotherapist Shelley Galasso Bonanno, is a term that when used in psychology refers to the 'sharing of experiences with others, most notably in the communication of traumatic experiences.'<sup>23</sup> She furthers this notion by describing how it forms a

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<sup>22</sup> In *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion*, Jennifer Doyle explores the relationship between difficulty and emotion in contemporary art, treating emotion as an artist's medium. She encourages readers to examine the ways in which works of art challenge how we experience not only the artist's feelings, but also our own. Doyle's book invites readers to engage with artworks that at first might be challenging and off-putting and counters the discourse of controversy that shuts down any meaningful engagement with such works.

<sup>23</sup> Shelly Glass Bonanno, "The Power and Strength of Bearing Witness," *Psychology Today*, 3 Dec. 2013, accessed 6 Feb. 2016, <https://www.psychologytoday.com/blog/meaningful-you/201312/the-power-and-strength-bearing->

valuable way of sharing experiences and obtaining catharsis. In legal terms witness is derived from a root meaning ‘to bear in mind’, ‘to remember’, and ‘to be careful.’<sup>24</sup> Bonanno concludes by stating that a witness, in this light, could be defined as one who has knowledge of an experience and by recollection can retell it accurately. In this context the word ‘witness’ describes an engagement with artworks that are created with the intention to share intimate experiences such that they might allow for possibilities of social transformation. To bear witness interrogates the role of the person present and by extension, in the act of recounting the event that has been witnessed is extended. . In the judicial system, a witness is called upon to give accounts that transform an unjust situation to a just one. In its religious connotations, one bears witness to transform the hearts and minds of listeners. In the context of historical wars, conflicts, and subsequent traumas, one also bears witness in order to transform society, so that these events do not repeat themselves. The process of witnessing has critical, creative, and ethical dimensions, with the key difference between a witness and bystander being the intent to offer the possibility to transform. Augusto Boal’s work becomes useful to consider here in separating audience as bystander from audience as witness in that the barriers between ‘actor’ and ‘spectator’ are destroyed; all must act as protagonists in the necessary transformation of society.<sup>25</sup> Witnessing deployed here as a critical lens is intended to offer up potentially new ways for considering pain within performance art. These derive, I will argue, from the role of affect, transformational possibilities and the ethical implications that arise for both artists and viewers from works deemed too extreme to watch or witness.

In researching the aesthetics of queer postcolonial narratives, Donna McCormack examines how unspeakable traumas and violence are often communicated through the body. The act of ‘bearing witness’ she writes, can take a variety of forms including, cutting, burning, wounding and generally engaging the body in unexpected forms of communication.<sup>26</sup> McCormack calls for a listening to ‘the body that has been rendered silent through reiterative marginalising practices towards bodies that have no witness.’<sup>27</sup> She proposes a multi-sensory coming together as one possible way of listening to bodies and of avoiding the reiteration of institutional silencing and violence. She writes:

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witness.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> For a discussion on the empathic relationship between the performer (protagonist) and audience (spectator) where Augusto Boal examines empathy see Augusto Boal, “A Short Glossary of Simple Words” in *Theatre of the Oppressed* (New York: Theatre Communication Group, 1985), p. 34-5.

<sup>26</sup> McCormack, *Queer Postcolonial Narratives*, p. 20.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

The body's supposed silence is revealed as a visceral desire to communicate through a body constrained and violated by others. This sensory engagement is thus tentatively translated into fragmentary words, through a process of witnessing, where listeners are literally touched into verbal expression.<sup>28</sup>

I argue that this use of pain-actions continues McCormack's call to action for 'a sensorial listening to bodies' through practices that continue to be contested and viewed as harmful. Both performers and audiences continually contest the levels of pain present in the works when considered in terms of endurance and perception, whether real or imagined. All of the artists discussed acknowledge that some level of pain is present but have suggested that it is not central to their work. This means that each artist leaves it up to their audiences to negotiate the contractual and ethical complexities that exist when witnessing these works.

Witnessing can further be understood in terms of what Johanna Shapiro describes as the 'witnessing gaze.'<sup>29</sup> According to Shapiro, this gaze differs from, but is born out of a historical lineage of perception. It relates to theories that explore various ways of seeing i.e. philosophical and scientific takes on sight and perception. These theories of the gaze have been discussed extensively and most prominently in Michel Foucault's studies on patients and their treatments via the 'clinical gaze'. In visual and literary culture there are discussions of the *voyeuristic* and *avoidant gaze*, in science the *scientific, ordinary* and *technological gaze*.<sup>30</sup> Most of these ways of seeing can be readily applied to an audience's experience of live and mediated performance. Ideas around masculinity and strength are further explored in this thesis by considering a gendered possession of the gaze, proposed by Laura Mulvey as my gaze is one of a female reading and analysing these specific male bodies, which I address in my conclusion.

Jane Blocker argues that there are high political stakes in acts of witnessing and expands on how sworn testimonies are part of the production of reality. Accordingly, she explores the moral stakes at work in interpreting acts of witness in relation to the artistic stakes of representation. She raises the question, how should we examine and occupy the domain of witness?<sup>31</sup> Instead of asking *how* one witnesses, she proposes, and I adopt here, *who* in relation to the politics of the visual. Finally, witnessing is adopted as an active way of assuring stories are heard, contained, and transcend time through critical analysis of performance works that take up the body as it is entwined with

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

<sup>29</sup> Johanna, Shapiro, "(Re)Examining the Clinical Gaze Through the Prism of Literature." *Families, Systems, & Health* 20 (2002), p. 161  
doi:10.1037/h0089492.

<http://johannashapiro.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/08/Clinical-Gaze.pdf>

<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 164.

<sup>31</sup> Jane Blocker, *Seeing Witness: Visuality and the Ethics of Witnessing*, p. xx.

the historical, technological, scientific (medical), cultural, and political.

This thesis seeks to contribute to existing scholarship on witnessing, curating, pain and performance art, through understanding pain-actions as a way to offer a feminist examination of the male performing body. It does so through a particular focus on key works by Athey, O'Brien, and Ulay. While considering their practices overall, I am specifically concerned here with the ideas developed in the works Ron Athey and Juliana Snapper's *Judas Cradle* (2005), Martin O'Brien's *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours* (2015) and Ulay's Auto-Polaroids; *GEN-E-T-RATION/ULTIMA RATIO* (1972), *Diamond Plane*, and *Bene Agere (In Her Shoes)* both works created in 1974. The perspective I develop on these works is a feminist one, pertaining to both the epistemological and political differences that are particularly focused on moments of crisis in which models of masculinity falter. I explore how this allows for alternative concepts of masculinity that can be differentiated historically and culturally. Here, I turn to explorations of gender relations in visual culture through a thorough engagement with Judith Butler's concept of performativity. Butler's theory does not accept that gender identity is stable and coherent, but rather that it is viewed as 'a stylised repetition of acts [...] which are internally discontinuous [...] [so that] the appearance of substance is precisely that, a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief.'<sup>32</sup> For Butler to say that gender is performative is to argue that gender is 'real only to the extent that it is performed and the performativity of gender is a stylised repetition of acts, an imitation or miming of the dominant conventions of gender.'<sup>33</sup> She argues that 'the act that one does, the act that one performs is, in a sense, an act that's been going on before one arrived on the scene.'<sup>34</sup> She further states that 'Gender is an impersonation [...] becoming gendered involves impersonating an ideal that nobody actually inhabits.'<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4 (Dec. 1988), p. 519, [https://www.amherst.edu/system/files/media/1650/butler\\_performative\\_acts.pdf](https://www.amherst.edu/system/files/media/1650/butler_performative_acts.pdf).

<sup>33</sup> Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (Routledge: New York, 1990), p. 272.

<sup>34</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>35</sup> Liz Kotz, "The Body You Want: Liz Kotz interviews Judith Butler," *Artforum* 31, no. 3 (November 1992), p. 88.

### 1.3 Research Methods

There is a long history of methodological discussions in researching performance art and other so-called dematerialised practices where the focus falls on being there. In these approaches what is valued is viewing the original and authentic experience of the work. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this has raised a series of methodological issues that have been developed in a range of ways by scholars, including Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993), Philip Auslander's *The Performativity of Performance Documentation* (2006), Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield's *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History* (2012), all of which explore methods of researching performance, looking at how performing live presents methodological challenges. There are, broadly speaking, two different key perspectives here.

Some performance art theoreticians and scholars take up the position to situate performance art as that which must be experienced live, meaning that in not seeing or witnessing works in real time, the experience loses or lacks something. For these scholars, documentation is always secondary and in engaging with work in this manner, the multisensory experience of the live performance is lost. Most prominent in this approach is Phelan, who wrote in 1993 that:

Performance's only life is in the present; it cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations; once it does so it becomes something other than performance.<sup>36</sup>

For Phelan, performance art only exists during the exact duration of its staging. Repeat performances comprise entirely different works. Any documentation or translation into mediated forms can only retrospectively gesture toward that which once was and is no more. Phelan draws this ontological line in the sand because, as she observes the value of performance lies in its disappearance and 'without a copy, live performance plunges into visibility - in a maniacally charged present - and disappears into memory, the realm of invisibility, and the unconscious where it eludes regulation and control.'<sup>37</sup>

Contra Phelan, there are other performance art scholars who believe that engagements after the event, i.e. through documentaries, video recordings and re-enactments, are not just secondary material to be disregarded but contribute to the understanding of our experience of performance art. In these approaches, the audience is expanded through the circulation and multiple

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<sup>36</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), p. 146.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 148.

incarnations of the works, all of which are interesting in their own right as different sites for experiencing performance art. This is a position with which I am more inclined to align my thinking, as it is the way I have been able to engage with and build knowledge about historical works. These moments of record and documentation, together with live experience, all offer sites for and of witnessing the performance work. In offering different points of entry for witnessing, rather than creating a binary of one being better, and another worse, witnessing, as Jane Blocker reminds us ‘is not a stable site, but one in which various actors, institutions, contexts and texts interact in efforts “to authorise” one kind of witness over another.’<sup>38</sup> Witnessing, I argue, occurs in a variety of ways for different audiences.

In the theoretical reception of performance works there is a separation between primary and secondary audiences where the primary audience is those who were at an original performance at the secondary audience is those people who heard, read, or watched later. Fraser Ward describes these two types of audiences with the term ‘Doubleness of Experience.’<sup>39</sup> He views the relevance of both visible and invisible traces as important for the transformation that only limited groups who witness the performance might or might not be affected by. He also adds that ‘objects of the imagination and speculation as to how their experience is framed, shaped, and manipulated by an artist, might have implications for the role, and the very idea of the audience.’<sup>40</sup> Responding to the challenges raised in this thesis from a curatorial position, I have closely read, watched, imagined, discussed, thought, and written about pain in performance art from a past and present awareness of the limitations of experiencing works through documentation. In the instances where I was able to witness works live, I have reflected on the blurring of individual and collective engagement with performances that require active participation, such as in O’Brien’s work. This has meant that I have had to negotiate and think through the conditions that I set up as a curator for how audiences experience the work. In the case of O’Brien, the performance was exhibited in a semi-enclosed space for a duration of three hours and at times with the audience witnessing the artist’s self-inflicted pain. Over the course of the performance, I gradually became a witness and participated in the work leaving me with sets of questions on curatorial commissioning processes and responsibilities of care towards the artist and the audience, which I expand on further in the

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<sup>38</sup> Jane Blocker, “Seeing Witness” cited Liam Kennedy and Caitlin Patrick. eds., *The Violence of the Image: Photography and International Conflict* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), p. 203.

<sup>39</sup> Fraser Ward, “Introduction: Reimagining the Audience,” in *No Innocent Bystanders: Performance, Art and Audience* (Dartmouth College, University Press of New England: 2011), p. 14.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid.



chapter on O'Brien and the conclusion to this thesis.

Following RHUL's ethics approval process, I filled a 'self-certify', that is, The Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSS) REC self-assessment form online identifying the potential ethical issues associated with the practical elements of thesis, namely, O'Brien's performance *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours*. For this live performance, there was a potential risk of trauma for the participating audience due to the work's challenging nature as it involved scenes that would be difficult to watch/witness, alongside instances of blood-letting in some of the performance actions. Aside from this possible risk of trauma associated with witnessing difficulty, there was minimal risks to viewers of this work that would infringe on their emotional well-being, physical well-being, rights, dignity and personal values. To avoid this, participants were given information of the work in the press material describing the work and there was an age restriction of 18+ advertised alongside clearly stating audiences were allowed to leave at any time. This age restriction ensured no minors attended the event, further reducing trauma risks and a necessity as there were also brief instances of nudity. Furthermore, audience members were each given written information to consent the purpose, methods and end use of the performance, that is, how their experience would inform my research. They were provided with consent forms detailing the voluntary nature of the performance and asked to fill in open-ended questionnaires which I interpret as data further in these research methods. All of the other material that informed this thesis – archival, texts and images are already in the public domain and accessible, except in cases where stated, the artists gave permission. In discussions prior to the live event with O'Brien, it was agreed audience participation must be entirely voluntary, free from coercion and, that they had the right to withdraw at any time. The audience could leave or stay for the entire three-hour duration. This research was independent, and information provided by the participants in the open-ended interview was anonymised and confidential data.

In this thesis I turned to an interdisciplinary range of scholarly and at times non-scholarly material to critically consider pain as it relates to performance art alongside considerations in literature, cultural theory, theatre, gender studies, geography, philosophy, psychology, psychoanalysis, religious studies and sociology. At the foreground of this research are feminist theories on the body – specifically applied to how audiences bear witness and in turn, how witnessing takes place in performance art. Concurrently, I have had to look closely at the evolution of pain (psychological and sociological) as put forward by medical and religious histories as these disciplines contribute greatly to the changing role of the body which I discuss further in the literature review chapter.

The following three critical assertions underpin my research process. The first critical assertion is that a critical understanding and acceptance can be developed through live witnessing and readings of others' personal narratives of pain, where personal narratives can create new perspectives for understanding the nonverbal communication of the body through that pain. The second critical assertion is that valuable information about the cultural phenomenon of pain will be occluded if it is not understood alongside an account of the relation between pain and the politics of identity. This is a politics of identity that is understood as complex, relational, and in-flux; the composing and reading of texts and visuals is an activity that requires multiple subject positioning and demands listening to the body and emotions of the researcher (and reader). It is also a politics of identity into which my own identity as a Black-British (Nigerian) female curator and academic viewer, with her own cultural and socio-political understanding of pain, is positioned. The third critical assertion is that visual and artistic behaviour contain, fabricate, formulate, and carry information and knowledge that can greatly enrich our understanding of the meaning of pain for both the artists and viewers of such works. It is these concepts that have led to my mixed methods and writing strategies that I will outline below.

### 1.31 Live Witnessing

Developing ethnographies of these artists work and these specific events required developing particular methods of recording information, including using photographs and sketches (visual ethnography) as well as modes of note-taking (often using an iPhone). In the course of making visual and textual notes, I was interested in the following categories of information around the spaces and props; the content of the event and the artists' bodies and audiences' reactions as categories of information around the spaces and props used within performance. Different processes were used for each artist. In this section I outline the process used to interpret the work of Athey. I go on to explore O'Brien in relation to my experience of curating his work, which shaped my live engagement with it.

In Athey's performance I paid close attention to the atmosphere and aura of the performing space. This was done alongside participating collectively and watching as the event unfolded. In the imposing architecture of Ipswich town hall, and its similarities to religious-cum-concert-like experiences. The acoustics of the room and darkness of the enclosed space added to this effect as Athey's body was under a spotlight throughout the duration of the performance. I had spent the first two years of research formulating opinions about his work based on continually revisiting

texts, photographs, interviews, as well as informal conversations with Athey. I also followed his Facebook page closely as he regularly disseminated photographs and engaged actively in commentary on his life's work. At the time that I was studying Athey's oeuvre, there were no plans by the artist to perform in London, so stories, rumours, speculations, and documentation all played a part in shaping my understanding of Athey's work in relation to his art and autobiography. Alongside this was the inability to categorise his practice in the manner often accorded by performance art history. This was due to the fact that Athey's works have long resisted and challenged normative historicising of the performing body as they slip between and act against categorisations that often group artists in movements such as fluxus-performance, happening, action poetry, and intermedia. His practice is in a sense anti-institutional and outside of the formalised groupings of performance because he draws on such a wide and cross disciplinary set of references. This has meant that my research methods for Athey's work also had to consider witnessing his works live as there is little publicly accessible documentation readily available from which to study his work. I was able to engage with live work he performed at Spill Festival in 2014, which turned out to be his final and fourth iteration of the performance, *Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains*.

Although this particular performance is not one that I have chosen to analyse in the chapter on Athey, it contributed significantly to my understandings of bearing witness to his work as an audience member. The experience also raised new sets of questions on individual and collective engagements with performing bodies in pain. Here, I was entering into a dark hall with an audience of approximately two hundred people, and I was led into the performance space where I was directly confronted with Athey's spot-lit, naked, heavily tattooed body, stretched and bound to a metal stretcher fashioned out of scaffolding. He could not move any his body parts, including his face, as he was in a lying-in-state position with metal hooks piercing his eyelids and forcing his gaze to the ceiling whilst avoiding direct eye contact with the audience. A transparent helmet covered his head from his nose upwards, and an Egyptian-style plastic beard was attached to his chin. This transparent helmet also distorted Athey's face, making his expressions difficult to read.

Athey has described this work as a personification of a living corpse. The only encounter he had with his audience in this sequence was when those, who chose to, walked up to his body and rubbed it with luminous Vaseline, which offered a direct connection to an audience he could not see. His eyes communicated during this laying of hands, but his gaze was fixed upwards and away from us all. In reviewing photographic documentation of this work, images render the experience

of this work as nightmarish and unbearable experience, perhaps even frightening to some. My live encounter was the opposite of these gut-wrenching reactions. It was one of compassion, empathy and admiration that forced me to rethink what my personal encounter with a performing body in pain might be, alongside continually engaging with collective behaviours (group dynamics) that are present at such events. Why did some people not participate and engage with Ron's body? Was this participation (or lack of) closely aligned to group dynamics and shared experiences of witnessing pain? Might I have resisted in a different setting? Or did I feel, in some way compelled to connect with the artist's body as it went through visible discomforts?

In analysing the work of Athey and O'Brien, ethnographies of live witnessing arose from a collection of sources, which then formed the crucial inspiration for developing the creative-critical, auto-ethnographic narratives of my experiences that are central to the empirical discussions for this thesis. As with many auto-ethnographic accounts of art, this is a secondary creative process and an important part for the analysis and the subsequent recollection of events that extends to a form of critical writing. I used this as a strategy to formulate texts based on memory and reconfirm sequences of post-performance emotions and feelings.

### 1.32 Curating Pain-Performances

My role as Research Curator at Arts Catalyst, London, led to curating *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours*. I was a part of the organisation's curatorial team, which allowed me the experience of developing further critical-curatorial research, project management, grant-making and proposal writing skills. All of this practical work experience contributed, together with Martin O'Brien, The Arts Catalyst and project partners, Trust Me I'm An Artist (TMIAA), to the realising of a newly commissioned performance by O'Brien. The project was a result of an invitation from TMIAA in response to a call for proposals for new commissions supported by EU funding partnering with other European organisations. I proposed working with O'Brien, as his works in my opinion, represent an artist working at the intersections of art and science. In this case, with live performance work drawing from and influenced by medicine and medical histories. Whilst discussions of the evolution of this work forms an important part of the chapter itself, I would like to discuss the ways a curatorial practice informed this thesis overall. Fundamentally, curating pain-performance offered insights to the differential audience engagements and how to problematize pain within this context.

It is also worth thinking about the etymology of curating here, a word derived for the Latin word 'curare', meaning 'to take care' with origins that can be traced as far back to Roman times when

it meant to take care of the bath house. In the Medieval period it designated the work of the priest who cared for souls and later in the 18th century, the work of looking after collections of art and artefacts. This role of care towards the artist and audience unfolded in both surprising and unsurprising ways in curating this new live performance, which I will explore through an outline of discussions that occurred prior to the performance that also later informed the process of curating O'Brien's work.

### 1.32.1 Discussions for a performance: The Martin O'Brien interview

Initial conversations with O'Brien began in December 2013 via email, which then proceeded to a studio visit and initial interview in January 2014. During this interview O'Brien introduced me to his performance practice. We discussed his motivations, ambitions and the challenges faced in creating live, endurance-based performances at length. On his invitation, I attended a live event he curated, *NO-PAIN-NO-GAIN* held at The Flying Dutchman, Deptford, a London fetish club, which also hosts curated performances and exhibits artworks. O'Brien's curated series titled *DISCHARGE*, was a bi-monthly platform dedicated to performance that brought together scholars, academics, artists, and anyone interested or curious about performance art.

The format began with critical discussions by an invited panel followed by an evening of performances, dancing and late-night partying. O'Brien curated this series as 'events dedicated to exploring the intersections and histories of masochistic performance, and politics of pain within performance art'.<sup>41</sup> The event served as an example of curated pain-performances and a social event bringing together people with varying interests. I was especially interested in how pain-performances occur outside of the white cube and in a more social environment. In this case, a bar and fetish club.

Performance art's origins lie in the club and alternative scenes (happenings and events), which I discuss further in Chapter Two and in the chapter on Ron Athey, who began by performing in underground clubs in Los Angeles in the 1980s. In her book, *Live Art in LA: Performance Art in Southern California, 1970-1983*, Peggy Phelan documents and critically examines one of the most fertile periods in the history of performance art. She asks the question why have critics and scholars been slow to consider this extraordinarily fecund location in the history of art?<sup>42</sup> Phelan

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<sup>41</sup> My reflections on *Discharge: NO-PAIN-NO-GAIN* curated by Martin O'Brien which took place at The Flying Dutchman on 18-19 Jan. 2014.

<sup>42</sup> Peggy Phelan ed., *Live Art in LA: Performance in Southern California, 1970-1983*, (London: Routledge, 2012), p. 194.

also discusses the period as one that was “raw, innovative, and challenging to document and assess”, as it was marked by the structural violence expressed by institutions through gender inequality, racism and discriminatory laws all of which informed artists’ creative processes at the time.<sup>43</sup> This slowness to critically engage with performances that are raw, innovative and challenging, as Phelan identifies, and that also is a position I adopt throughout this thesis, is to consider performance art’s overlooked (outsider) histories, that are a result of the resistance by certain artist to both the commercialisation and institutionalisation of their privately informed, art-as-life practices that all three artists I write about strongly adhere to.

I want to explore meaningfully, artworks that defy categorisations. Having curated O’Brien’s work, I want to think about how one is to formalise a performance event from actual lived experiences which informed how I approached curating *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I’m Yours*. I examine the setting for this performance, a standard ‘white-cube’ transformed into a faux-quarantine room where a space has been recreated within a space. In doing so, this removed the sense of distance between the performer and audience. This was part of an intention on behalf of the artist to directly confront the viewer with their body, and in turn, interact with his enduring body-in-pain. The location of *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I’m Yours*, London’s White Building, was a space dedicated to open space for fearless experimentation at the intersection of art, technology and sustainability.

The three-hour performance forced those present to encounter and engage directly with O’Brien’s actions, similarly to what happens in a club where bodies are brought together for shared experiences within a confined space. As such, in developing and in discussing such elements with O’Brien, I was led to closely consider the spatialities and material cultures of performance whilst highlighting the complex relationships that exist between those to whom the body belongs and its wider governance. This bringing together of the medical, social, cultural, and political is not new within the genre of performance art, and whilst important work has been done historically –specifically, in disability arts – a readdressing of the invisibility of these artists within the theoretical discourse of performance studies is still ongoing.

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

### 1.32.2 Documenting, public display and discussions of Martin O'Brien's *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours*

In curating *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours*, I was able to inform my writing on the live experience through its display for public exposure, and through the critical discussions that arose as part of the ethics debate programmed after the performance. This materialized in particular through the panel discussion chaired by a medical ethicist, Professor Bobbie Farsides, the artist, and a committee of experts from performance art, law, social sciences, and medical ethics disciplines who debated on the ethical implications raised by *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours*.<sup>44</sup>

This panel discussed the risk, participation and ethics of *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours*, which took place over three hours in front of an audience of eighty half of which filled in questionnaires about their experience of performance. All panel members were present for O'Brien's performance and engaged with it afterwards in a two-and-a-half-hour conversation. This committee included Dr Karen Lowton (Department of Sociology, University of Sussex), Dr Gianna Bouchard (Department of Music and Performing Arts, Anglia Ruskin University), and Lois Keidan (co-founder and co-director of Live Art Development Agency). It was chaired by Prof Bobbie Farsides (Brighton and Sussex Medical School). The ethical discussion points were as follows:

- Who owns the body and what does it mean to claim ownership of the body through endurance art?
- The ways in which our understandings of bodies are informed by medical and cultural histories leading to a contestation of medical vs. individual rights of ownership.
- Disrupting a 'safe distance' between healthy and sick bodies and breaking down the physical and mental barriers which inform perceptions of 'healthy body' vs. 'diseased other' that arise due to fears of contamination (plagues) and also, quarantine procedures for containment to stop diseases spreading.
- Considering how *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours* visualises, provokes, questions, and contests the irrational and rational fears of contagion whilst also considering how O'Brien interacts with his audience through pain-actions.

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<sup>44</sup> For both mine and Martin O'Brien's critical reflections by the curator and artist on *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours*, see Jareh Das, "On Curating Pain: The Sick Body in Martin O'Brien's *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours*," and Martin O'Brien, "Flesh-eaters: Notes toward a Zombie Methodology: in *Leonardo* (June 2016) Vol. 49:3, pp. 264-267, doi:10.1162/LEON\_a\_01274.

- Exploring the psychological as opposed to the actual risks - choosing to watch and consent (informed consent).
- Issues around cystic fibrosis, such as cross infection, exclusion, isolation, visible and invisible audiences (this last point was more to do with past conversations with O'Brien who discussed the isolation experienced by an individual living with cystic fibrosis and how people with the disease who might be interested in seeing him perform cannot attend.
- The importance of mediation (film, photography, text etc.) as a way of getting this specific audience of people who suffer from cystic fibrosis to see his work.

In my curatorial role, conflicts arose as to how O'Brien's work operates within the framework of art-science, art-ethics, and even more problematically, in being readily dismissed as a form of self-harm. However, based on the criteria and expectations of quality set by the artist's commitment, intentionality and professionalism, this research contributes to furthering interpretations and understandings of the 'pain-body' in performance art. I have received feedback through recorded audio interviews and questionnaires that demonstrated most of those who attended were first-time viewers of O'Brien's work and they would not necessarily have otherwise encountered it. The questionnaires were open-ended and structured as below (they also included a consent form):

1. *Age - range, Gender*
2. *Familiar with Martin's work or not (have you seen him perform before)?*
3. *Do they regularly attend performance events or not?*
4. *What 5 words would you use to describe the performance?*
5. *How did you feel during Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours in terms of the sets of actions you witnessed (watching and atmosphere, other audience members present in the space)?*
6. *Were there any moments when witnessing some of the actions that you did not want to look, shudder, flinch or did it make you feel differently about the performance?*

A selection of these questions was also put forward to individuals who took part in audio interviews. Through consent forms, audience members were made aware that as they entered the performance, should they wish to participate, that their feedback would form part of my thesis research. In choosing this open-ended style, I wanted to collect live data of the viewer as soon as they had witnessed O'Brien's performance.



The practical and curatorial discussions preceding O'Brien performance were put through an ethics approval process by both Royal Holloway University of London (RHUL) and The Art Catalyst, London/Trust Me I'm an Artist (who were the co-commissioners of the work). Following RHUL's ethics approval process, I filled a 'self-certify' option on the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSS) REC self-assessment form. This was done to identify potential ethical issues including any risks towards the participating audience members in a live performance. It was determined that there were no actual risks to the emotional well-being, physical well-being, rights, dignity and personal values of the audience. However, to safeguard ethical issues, consent forms were distributed to the audience to make information readily available prior to attendance. During the event, cautionary measures were put in place for both the artist and audience, which I detail as follows:

1. *Consent forms*

Audience members were given written information to make clear the purpose, methods, and end use of the performance, relating to how it would inform my research. It was made clear what their participation involved and any risks (of which there were none) that were associated with the process. Furthermore, in prior discussions with the artist, Martin O'Brien, it was agreed participants must participate in a voluntary way, free from coercion. Participants were able to withdraw at any time and could leave or stay for the entire duration, as is commonplace in some durational performance art.

2. *Open-ended interviews*

This research is independent, and information provided by the participants in the open-ended interview for to O'Brien's *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours* was anonymised and confidential data. They were given these questionnaires for feedback on the performance and not obliged to respond if they did not wish to do so. By utilising open-ended interviews (questionnaires) given to the audience as they exited the space, I tried to avoid influencing their experience of the work

However, in my curatorial role and as a formulator of these open-ended interview questions, it was unavoidable that pre-existing ideas on pain in performance art did not inform some of my question choices. These questions were formulated based on my reflections on the following practical and theoretical issues:

### 1.32.3 Performance ideas/concepts and areas up for discussion

- Ownership of the body, whose body? informed by history (medical, cultural etc) medical vs individual rights of ownership.
- Cough, signal of possible contagion and wider ideas of disease and infection.
- Fear of disease, contagion and how this is perceived?
- Performance visualising contagion and reaction to it, using ideas around CF as non-contagious but high risk if in contact with fellow CF sufferers, alongside isolation in hospital wards when O'Brien goes for treatments – a form of quarantine.
- Dialectical tension (manifested in actual space) between performer and audience.
- Breaking down the barrier between containment of disease and the assumed signifiers of disease (coughing), through various actions, endured throughout the performance period i.e. 3hrs.
- Disrupting the 'safe distance' between healthy and ill bodies, thinking through distances imposed due to fear of contamination (plagues).
- A quarantine but one that allows movement and the use of the entire space.
- Exploring psychological as opposed to actual risks, choosing to watch, and questions of consent

The responses to these questions and my curatorial position led to expected and unexpected outcomes of both the audience's response and my personal experience of O'Brien's live work. This is further discussed in the chapter dedicated to this work. It is my understanding that the TMIAA context for showing O'Brien's work furthered his practice by introducing his work to a new audience, alongside introducing a live and performed work for critical review in the art-ethics initiative. In previous editions, artists presented works at proposal stage to the committee before its realisation. The feedback I have received to date has been less judgmental and more focused on collective sharing, partaking, and witnessing of O'Brien's personal narrative of illness where he uses performance to claim urgency for his sick body. One of the main goals I set for this project was to provide viewers with a way of relating to another individual's presentation of their pain and suffering to establish empathy and compassion by connecting them with another's painful bodily experience as part of how they watch and participate. In addition, I wanted to create an opportunity for the audience to recognise self-determination, discipline, and strength in a body that might fit into stereotypical ideas of being emasculated or weak due to suffering from CF.

The findings of this research have been disseminated through a published paper in MIT's *Leonardo* journal for which both O'Brien and I critically reflected on performing and curating of

this work. Alongside these reflections of both the artist and the curator on the work in an academic article, we also agreed on how the work would be documented in the form of recording the performance and panel discussions. These are available in their entirety on video and through photographs, which were then made available to the public on both TMIAA and the Arts Catalyst websites. We included these as supplementary materials for the Leonardo journal with the intention to further the audience of this work.

### 1.33 Writing Pain

Literary critic and theorist, Mieke Bal, defined the discipline of art writing, as a fresh mode of criticism, which aims to ‘put the art first and articulates the meaning of work in the present when seen in particular circumstances, by particular viewers.’<sup>45</sup> Following this definition, this thesis puts the performing pain-body and the curator’s engagement with art first. It is intended that this thesis identifies and cultivates processes where words generate mental images that have inspired the writing of this body of work. I have found this form of writing a useful way to recall and write with the aid of images as prompts, to remind oneself of how pain images extend beyond the live event and are documented, and also as a way to build a critical research methodology that is both visual and theoretical. In Italo Calvino’s *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (1988), he describes how ‘the word connects the visible trace with the invisible thing, the absent thing, the thing that is desired or feared, like a frail emergency bridge flung over an abyss’.<sup>46</sup> In this thesis, I engaged with using words to connect with the ephemerality of performance, as a way to retrace, experience, and re-embody past events through the critical lens of witnessing the body in pain. As such, I experiment with art writing as a method for interpreting and analysing anecdotal accounts of performances. I use this form of writing to interpret visuals (including documentation of live witnessing, curating the live and archival documentation of the live), alongside creative and academic essay writing. These combined writing methods frame my research methods as an auto-ethnography. Narrative arts-based researchers Karen Estrella and Michele Forinash explore how narrative inquiry and arts-based research methods are used for exploring the marginalised, controversial, and disruptive perspectives. They argue that they have often been lost in more traditional research methodologies.<sup>47</sup> I also look to Laurel Richardson and Elizabeth Adams St.

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<sup>45</sup> Mieke Bal in Chris Murray, *Key Writers on Art: The Twentieth Century*, Psychology Press (2003), p. 15.

<sup>46</sup> Italo Calvino, *Six Memos for the Next Millennium* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988), p. 77.

<sup>47</sup> See Karen Estrella and Michele Forinash, “Narrative Inquiry and Arts-Based Inquiry: Multinarrative Perspectives,” *Journal of Humanistic Psychology* (July 2007) Vol. 47:3, pp. 376-383.

Pierre's approach to "writing as a method of inquiry"<sup>48</sup>, one I adopt in approaching writing as a part of a creative curatorial practice used to make sense of lives and cultures, to theorise and produce new forms of knowledge. Richardson and St. Pierre write:

We are fortunate, now, to be working in a postmodernist climate, a time when a multitude of approaches to knowing and telling exist side by side the core of postmodernism is to doubt that any methods or theory, or any discourse or genre, or any tradition or novelty has a universal and general claim as "right" or privileged form of authoritative knowledge. Postmodernism suspects all truth claims of masking and serving particular interests in local, cultural, and political struggles. But conventional methods of knowing and telling are not automatically rejected as false or archaic. Rather, those standard methods are opened to an inquiry, new methods are introduced, and then they also are subject to critique.<sup>49</sup>

These methods are applied to all artist case studies. Firstly, in gathering archival and anecdotal accounts on Athey's work, my analysis used existing and available interviews on Athey, alongside interviewing previous audience members of his work (two artists I know) and several accounts on his work from archival records. Whilst this research is subjective and based on both mine and others personal encounters with Athey's performances, both live and documented, I make clear in the discussions that unfold in the chapter on Athey, how my perspective on his practice changed over the course of the research (see *Audiencing Pain "live": The Gospel according to Ron*). This led to the inclusion of other anecdotal accounts of Athey's work, including interviews with Sebastian Kozak and Samantha Sweeting, alongside reviews, a myriad of texts, and scholarship. This use of a wide number of sources allows, to allow for a multiplicity of voices commenting on intimate and individual experiences of witnessing Athey's live. O'Brien's work and the particularities of witnessing and curating a new performance inform the writing related to his chapter. As he is the youngest of the three, and an emerging artist, there is little in way of an extensive critical overview of his work.

Finally, in my research on Ulay, I analysed and examined the sensitivities and ethical concerns that arise when material collected from living subjects is disseminated and publicly available in archives and exhibitions. I looked online for a range of reflections and further information on all three artists' works. This means that meaning there is also a digital humanities approach informing these methods, including the endorsement of open access and approaches to utilising

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

<sup>49</sup> Laurel Richardson and Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre "Writing: A Method of Inquiry" in Norman K. Denzin and Yvonna S. Lincoln, eds., *The Sage Handbook of Qualitative Research* (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2005) p. 961, Thousand Oaks, CZ, Sage Publishing, <http://depthpsychotherapy.pbworks.com/f/Writing%2BA%2BMethod%2Bof%2BInquiry.pdf>.

publicly available information. Drawing on empirical data collected from digital practice, as Penny Johnston argues, it is important to eschew dogmatic and binary positions (curated versus open), and instead, adopt a reflective approach to material disseminated online. This ethical ethics debate in digital dissemination is not resolved or over, it is rather part of a cycle of engagement that is nuanced, ongoing, and relational.<sup>50</sup>

## 1.4 Artists' Introduction

I have centred my inquiry on key works by Ron Athey, Martin O'Brien, and Ulay to investigate the ways witnessing pain operates and is experienced in performance art. I chose these three artists for the cross-generational perspectives their work offers. I also want to consider the contrasting ways that their work deploys different 'pain actions' whether through live encounters or captured in documentation (as is the case with Ulay). In addition to thinking through and situating pain's place in performance art, it is intended that this thesis contributes to existing scholarship and encourages a wider analysis of the multiplicity of masculinities by creating a discursive space for the different kinds of male bodies that exist, and how this relates to (pain) performance art. Although I raise gender within this work (as bound to identity), in this thesis I focus on works by male artists who live and work in Europe and the United States. I acknowledge that there is a lack of diversity in the multiplicity of masculinities and bodies, as the thesis does not consider pain within a context that is non-White, non-Male, non-Western. However, I have chosen to focus on artists whose works disrupt the very notion of white male privilege due to the ways that they trouble the fixed image of their individual bodies through performance actions. This is a move towards destabilising the binaries that have led to inequalities. As the scholar Calvin Thomas observes, to "leave masculinity unstudied, to proceed as if it were somehow not a form of gender, is to leave it naturalised, and thus to render it less permeable to change".<sup>51</sup>

The critical theories I have applied are also from an Anglo-American context I focus my readings around key performances that occurred in the late 1970s (and some of which extend to the present). Overall, I also review the works of lesser-known performance artists that have been largely underrepresented within performance art histories. I do this to give an extensive critical framework to how artists use and continue to grapple with pain within their work. I am aware that

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<sup>50</sup> Penny Johnston abstract to "Understanding value in digital humanities: a case study from a community oral history archive," PhD Thesis (2018), University College Cork.

<sup>51</sup> Calvin Thomas cited in Judith Kegan Gardner ed. *Masculinity Studies and Feminist Theory: New Directions*, New York: Columbia University Press, 2002. p. 61.

I have not discussed the effect of digital technologies on witnessing pain. This is because the artists I have chosen to discuss do not primarily disseminate or present their performances digitally. The effects of digital technologies, social medial exchanges, and the implications this has had on how witnessing occurs is an area I hope to explore in future research.

Ron Athey

<p><b>Chronology of Performances</b> 1982–1999<sup>52</sup></p>	<p><i>Untitled performance</i>, 18 October 1981, Premature Ejaculation (Ron Athey and Rozz Williams), Arts Building, Pomona.</p> <p>Untitled performance for camera, 1982, Premature Ejaculation* (Ron Athey and Rozz Williams), Los Angeles. <i>(Ron Athey and Rozz Williams performed as “Premature Ejaculation,” staging actions in clubs and galleries and producing experimental recordings and performances for camera. Their work together was photographed by Karen Filter and published in the punk magazine No Mag in 1982.)</i></p> <p><i>The First Family of FUCK!</i> (Bobby Wildfire, Kristian White, Ron Athey, James Stone and Miguel Beristain), 1992, Los Angeles. <i>Ron Athey and Robert Woods (from Drance)</i>, 1992, Hollywood. <i>Untitled performance</i>, 1992, Ron Athey and Company, The Firehouse, Los Angeles</p> <p>Various collaborations and appearances at Club FUCK! 1990-1992, Los Angeles.</p> <p><i>Martyrs &amp; Saints</i>, 1993, Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions, Los Angeles.</p> <p><i>Martyrs &amp; Saints</i>, 1993, PS122, New York.</p>
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<sup>52</sup> Johnson, *Pleading in the Blood*.

	<p><i>4 Scenes in A Harsh Life</i>, 1994, Patrick's Cabaret under the aegis of Walker Arts Centre, Minneapolis, Minnesota.</p> <p><i>4 Scenes in A Harsh Life</i>, 1994, PS122, New York.</p> <p><i>4 Scenes in A Harsh Life</i>, 1994, The Faultline, Los Angeles.</p> <p><i>4 Scenes in A Harsh Life</i>, 1994, Los Angeles Theatre Centre, Los Angeles.</p> <p><i>Martyrs &amp; Saints</i>, 1993, PS122, New York.</p> <p><i>4 Scenes in A Harsh Life</i>, 1995, Museo Ex Teresa, Mexico City.</p> <p><i>Martyrs &amp; Saints</i>, 1995, Museo Ex Teresa, Mexico City.</p> <p><i>Deliverance</i>, 1995, Ron Athey and Company, Institute of Contemporary Arts, London.</p> <p><i>Deliverance</i>, 1995, Ron Athey and Company, Torture Garden, London.</p> <p><i>Trojan Whore</i>, 1995, Matthew Marks Gallery, New York.</p> <p><i>Trojan Whore</i>, 1996, ONA, San Francisco.</p> <p><i>Incorruptible Flesh (Work in Progress)</i> with Lawrence Steger, 1997, Cankarjev Dom, Slovenia.</p> <p><i>Deliverance</i>, 1998, Ron Athey and Company, Cinema Rex, Rotterdam International Film Festival, Rotterdam.</p>
2000–2008	<p><i>JOYCE</i>, 2002, Kampnagel, Hamburg.</p> <p><i>Judas Cradle</i> in collaboration with Juliana Snapper, 2005, 291 Gallery, London.</p> <p><i>Incorruptible Flesh (Dissociated Sparkle)</i>, 2006, Artist Space, New York.</p>

	<p><i>Solar Anus</i>, 2006, Hayward Gallery, London.</p> <p><i>Self-Obliteration I</i>, 2007, Donau Festival, Krems.</p> <p><i>Incorruptible Flesh (Perpetual Wound)</i> with Dominic Johnson, 2007, Chelsea Theatre, London</p> <p><i>Re/Visions of Excess</i> with Vaginal Davis and Lee Adams, 2003-2009, various locations.</p> <p><i>Visions of Excess</i> with Franko B, Julie Tolentino, Zackary Drucker, Nicole Blackman, Marisa Carnesky and Kira O'Reilly, 2004-2009, various locations.</p>
2009–present	<p><i>History of Ecstasy*</i>, 2009, MADRE Museo Contemporanea Donna Regina, Naples.</p> <p><i>(History of Ecstasy brought together a cast of performers under Athey's direction: Lee Adams, Vaginal Davis, Mouse, Othon, Pigpen, Julie Tolentino, Ernesto Tomasini. The hour-long performance in some ways revived the ensemble process of Ron Athey and Company (Tolentino and Pigpen originally performed with Athey).</i><sup>53</sup></p> <p><i>Self-Obliteration I: Ecstatic, Self-Obliteration II: Sustained Rapture and Self-Obliteration III</i>, 2010, all performed back to back as part of the National Review of Live Art's 20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary festival at the Centre for Contemporary Art, Glasgow.</p> <p><i>Resonate/Obliterate</i>, 2011, Los Angeles.</p> <p><i>Gifts of the Spirit: Automatic Writing</i> (2010-2013), various locations.</p> <p><i>Incorruptible Flesh (Messianic Remains)</i> with Sage Charles and Maria</p>

<sup>53</sup> See Amelia Jones, "How Ron Athey Makes Me Feel: The Political Potential of Upsetting Art," in Dominic Johnson ed., *Pleading in the Blood: The Art and Performances of Ron Athey* (London: Intellect Books, 2014), p. 178.



	<p>Sideri, 2014, Spill Festival, Ipswich.</p> <p><i>Sebastian</i> with Sage Charles, Jon John and Russell MacEwan, 2015, The Coronet, London.</p> <p><i>Sebastian</i> with Sage Charles, Jon John and Russell MacEwan, 2015, Giacomo Guidi Arte Contemporanea Bunker of Arts, Rome.</p> <p><i>Gifts of the Spirit: Prophecy, Automatism, and Discernment</i> collaboration with experimental composer Sean Griffin, 2018, The Broad, Los Angeles.</p>
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Ron Athey (b. 1961) has, for over three decades, used his ‘resistant’ and ‘resilient’ body *in extremis* to stage the highly personal. As an iconic figure in the development of contemporary art and performance, he frequently stages bloody portrayals of life, death, crisis, and fortitude at the time of the AIDS crisis. He continues to do so at the present (contentiously argued) post-AIDS moment. Athey’s extremely visceral performances demand that his viewers bear witness by calling to question the limits of artistic practice. These limits enable him to explore key themes including gender, sexuality, S&M, radical sex, queer activism, post-punk and industrial culture, tattooing, body modification, ritual, and religion. In the early 1990s he began staging what was to become a performance torture trilogy: *Martyrs & Saints* (1992), *4 Scenes In A Harsh Life* (1993-1996) and *Deliverance* (1995). Subsequent works in the new millennium include *Judas Cradle* (2004-2005), and, in collaboration with Juliana Snapper, *Self-Obliteration* (2008-2011), as well as *Gifts of the Spirit: Automatic Writing* (2010-2013), which has seen him explore his Pentecostal upbringing and the creation of ecstatic experiences. In staging his body publicly through live performance, Athey presents a seemingly conscious oppositional project wherein by performing pain he reanimates and invigorates the docile, normalised subject and citizen. He does so to attempt to stop society’s penetration and control through making visible his sick body’s physicality as a form of personal and political protest.

I focus on the works *Judas Cradle* (2005) and *Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains* (2014). *Judas Cradle* is a complex collaborative performance with Snapper where the body’s orifices are pushed to their limits. This is captured by the voice through being staged as an operatic duet. Snapper’s body is destabilised from its disciplined operatic norm such that its used specific oratory ideals are called into question. Athey’s body on the other hand, through the masochist enactments of pain, pushes his body out of its limits emphasising excess through his body’s

orifices. Firstly, with his operatic vocal failures, and later in mounting the Judas cradle. Of the body of the man, and the body of the woman, Amelia Jones writes:

Conventionally theatre, opera, film, television and other European art forms orchestrate them to come together in the end, whether in love or death. Here, however, the overall effect is of a tormented duet that mocks the very structures of the hetero: The tormented duet is between a “man” and a “woman” who completely queer the idea of heterosexual matrix both by their holiness and by their bizarre refusal to mesh in a conventional way as two sides of a “proper” couple. They collide and stroke each other, mewl and screech; they are in pain, they are funny; they will never “meet” or unite as one.<sup>54</sup>

In *Judas Cradle*, Athey also draws on the histories of torture and the devices used for harming people. Contemporary images of torture circulate widely today and have been legitimised in times of warfare. In drawing on and re-enacting actions based on torturous images, Athey’s intention is not to harm or hurt his body. Rather the body becomes a site of protest where it is offered sacrificially in performance to highlight and condemn what he views as an acceptance or passivity to using torturous methods in light of the global ‘war on terror’ and the propaganda surrounding it. These events also triggered feelings about the artist’s responsibility towards his identity as an American citizen. The work explores this collective shame of a nation that allows, such abuse to take place in its name.<sup>55</sup> Athey’s response through this work, although politically inclined, is more concerned with examining the boundaries of the human psyche. He is seeking to explore, through performance, the limits of the human psyche under torturous conditions. The work interrogates how much the body can suffer without breaking down completely.

*Incorruptible Flesh* (1996-2014) is an ongoing performance and Athey described it first part, *Incorruptible Flesh (Work in Progress)* (1996) as ‘sick-boys-do-AIDS-death-trip-cabaret.’<sup>56</sup> The first instalment of this work performed during the mid to late 1990s was done in collaboration with the late Lawrence Steger, who later died of complications due to AIDS in 1999. Athey and Steger conducted a lot of research into mythology as a starting point for the work. They were both drawn to ideas of the “incorruptible” bodies of saints and heroes. The work’s central image involved Athey lain across a bed-like structure (which was initially made out of wood and in later productions was made out of metal), with hooks attached stretching and contorting Athey’s face in an exaggerated, and at times, terrifying expression. The work continues Athey’s exploration of

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<sup>54</sup> Amelia J s, “Holy Body: Erotic Ethics in Ron Athey and Juliana Snapper’s Judas Cradle,” *TDR: The Drama Review* 50, no.1 (Spring 2006), pp. 156-169.

<sup>55</sup> My transcription of *The Judas Cradle*, video and documentary from the archive of Live Art Development Agency, accessed 16 July 2014.

<sup>56</sup> Johnson, *Pleasing in the Blood*, p. 33.

the continuation of his own post-AIDS body and in an account of this performance, he describes staying fixed in position for six hours whilst audience members are invited to comfort him by applying or massaging Vaseline on this body. Throughout the performance his collaborator repeatedly inserts eye drops into his eyes.<sup>57</sup> Both versions of this performance have been studied by scholars in relation to queer, gender, sexuality, and HIV/AIDS studies. I want to reconsider Athey's practice as it relates to pain and witnessing to offer up a new critical framework for considering the role of witness in pain-performances.

Martin O'Brien

<p><b>Chronology of Performances</b> 2011–2017<sup>58</sup></p>	<p><i>Mucus Factory</i> (2011) was based around a mixture of a durational physiotherapy session, a technique designed to clear the airways, and an artificial attempt to use mucus as a substance for vanity and pleasure. The performance space became one of discipline, abjection and monotony; presenting a transgressive image of the sick body and considered the relationship between pain and medicine</p>
	<p><i>Last(ing)</i> (2013) considered the nature of human existence, particularly within chronic illness, and the destruction that happen to the body over time. Moving away from his usual durational format, O'Brien explored time as destructive and the possibilities and ethos of survival within this destruction.</p> <p><i>Do With Me As You Will (Make Martin Suffer for Art)</i> (2013) was a 24-hour site specific performance in a professional BDSM dungeon in LA. This piece asked spectators to think of things they would like to do to O'Brien, see O'Brien do, or have Rose do to O'Brien. The piece was an exploration of time and how it is used. O'Brien was naked in a cage, formally owned by Rose and Bob Flanagan, in the centre of the room. On the hour, every hour Rose cut a singular line on O'Brien's arm and the two of them recorded a video diary.</p> <p><b>* collaboration with Sheree Rose</b></p>
	<p>In <i>Anatomy of a Bite</i> (2016), commissioned for Disrupted, O'Brien takes</p>

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., p. 28.

<sup>58</sup> All descriptions of performances and chronology are from Martin O'Brien website and available online at <https://www.martinobrienperformance.com/projects.html>.

	<p>the image of the corpse in the anatomy theatre as his starting point. In this performance for one audience member at a time he developed this work to explore the human orifice of the mouth. <i>Anatomy of a Bite</i> explored the mouth as the human orifice that allows things to enter into and be expelled from the body. O'Brien invited audience members to explore his sick, coughing, open mouth and the possibilities of their own.</p> <p><i>Sanctuary Ring</i> (2016) was commissioned by Spill Festival of Performance. A sanctuary ring is a metal knocker on the door of church. Until the 17th century fugitives could hold the ring and claim asylum for 40 days from the law. In this durational site-specific performance at St. Clement's Church, Ipswich, Rose and O'Brien created their own sanctuary of sickness.</p> <p><b>* collaboration with Sheree Rose</b></p>
	<p>In <i>If It Were The Apocalypse I'd Eat You To Stay Alive</i> (2017), O'Brien's work questions what it means to be born with a life-threatening disease. Working with figures of fear such as the zombie, <i>If It Were The Apocalypse</i> explores the omnipresent fear of death.</p>

Martin O'Brien's (b.1987) work is of interest to me due to his bringing together of ideas of pain and the 'sick' body, as 'pain actions' that are a result of both the actualities and aesthetics of his illness, Cystic Fibrosis (CF) in dialogue with live performance. As the youngest of the three artists, O'Brien's work has not received extensive critical commentary outside of his own thoroughly self-reflective writings on his works; there are various critical conversations on his practice in the form of interviews and his active engagement within academic and performance art criticism. At present, the artist is in the process of publishing an artist's book with various contributors from friends, academics, scholars, other artists, curators, commissioners and to which I have also contributed. The chapter I write here on O'Brien contributes to new critical work on the artist.

O'Brien brings tropes of CF into his performances by carrying out actions (cutting, coughing, piercing, bruising, wounding etc.) that have been adapted from medical procedures commonly used to produce samples. These actions are staged as part of durational performances occurring in front of an audience. His practice was brought to my attention by fellow performance artist, Ron Athey. As I had prior familiarity with the work of the seminal artist, Bob Flanagan, who also suffered from CF, I am particularly interested in how O'Brien negotiates working with

this same illness but in the context of medical histories, endurance, pain and using other forms of self-experimentation. By self-experimentation, I am referring to pain-actions that draw on the medical procedures used to treat CF, which serve as an aestheticisation of medical procedures presented as performance art. O'Brien also has experiences of collaboration with Flanagan's former life and work partner, the artist, Sheree Rose who continues to be an instrumental figure in preserving Flanagan's legacy and their joint archive. Rose and O'Brien's joint works raise questions about collaborative relationships in performance art and how both artists meditate on mortality. In Rose's case these questions relate to how she ages, and, for O'Brien, living with a debilitating illness.

In developing a body of work that explores illness through a combination of its semiotics – the study of signs and symbols as elements of communicative behaviour – O'Brien seeks to analyse the very systems of communicating illness through both language and gestures. He is engaged with how non-verbal communication is related to the ways sick bodies are treated, represented, and discussed. These explorations allow viewers of his performances to engage critically and examine wider societal attitudes, which inform the categorisation of 'sick'. The word sick, as Sylvia Plath reminds us, exists in a realm far away from the land of the healthy, in which the body inhabited by illness gives itself up to professionals that make it well again.<sup>59</sup>

The focus of my discussion of O'Brien's work is a new work curated (commissioned with the Arts Catalyst) titled *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours* (henceforth referred to as *Taste of Flesh*). In this three-hour performance O'Brien considers the performing sick body and its relation to illness, fears of contagion and infection, alongside an ethics of witnessing pain. He mediates on both medical and cultural representations of the body, drawing on his everyday experiences of CF. Through a cycle of repeated endurance acts, his illness is brought into the performative. His personal experiences of living with this illness are presented live in front of an audience, with the intention of redressing and contesting his body's sick status. In doing so, he exposes the ideologies that inform representations of the body, and, in turn, masculinity. The geographies of masculine configurations are contested and addressed through processes of social embodiment. It explores the psychosocial dynamics of the varieties of masculinity within the sick body as a body that is both able to resist pain, as well as explore sexual pleasure. *Taste of Flesh* presents actions adapted

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<sup>59</sup> In her poem, *Tulips*, Sylvia Plath describes being sick and the loss of an individual's sense of self in exchange for the medical practitioner's expertise into making them well again as: '...I have given my name and my day-clothes up to the nurses, And my history to the anaesthetist and my body to surgeons...'. *Collected Poems*, Harper Collins Publishers Inc., 1992, available at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems-and-poets/poems/detail/49013>

from medical procedures used to produce samples and draws his audience into complex, and often troubling modes of engagement that require participation and in turn, challenge ideas around how one is to witness such work. In the chapter, *Curating Pain: The Sick Body in Martin O'Brien's Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours*, I focus on developing these ideas through my personal reflections on curating the work, my role as a curator-witness and audience-witness, which often intertwined and an ethics of care for both artist and audience that evolved. An important part of my reflections developed alongside the live work and the 'ethics' panel as a result of this.

### Ulay

<p><b>Chronology of works</b> <b>Solo Exhibitions,</b> <b>Performances,</b> <b>Actions, Projects</b> 1971–1997<sup>60</sup></p>	<p>1971 <i>Uwe's Polaroids of Five Cities</i>, Amsterdam, London, Paris, Rome, New York (book project)</p> <p>1972 <i>Metamorphosis of a Canal House</i>, Amsterdam (action)</p> <p>1972 – 1973 <i>A'dam Between</i>, Schiphol Airport, Amsterdam (exhibition project)</p> <p>1974 <i>Renai sense</i>, Auto-Polaroids, Galerie Seriaal, Amsterdam (exhibition)</p> <p><i>Red Venus</i>, Willem Breuker Kollektief, Vlissingen (performance)</p> <p>1975 <i>Exchange of Identity</i>, Galerie Het Venster, Rotterdam (performance)</p> <p>1976 <i>FOTOTOT I</i>, De Appel, Amsterdam (performance) <i>FOTOTOT II</i>, Bayer Kulturhaus, Wuppertal (performance) <i>There is a Criminal Touch to Artm</i>, Berlin (action)</p> <p>1977 <i>FOTOTOT I</i>, Gradska Galerija, Zagreb</p>
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<sup>60</sup> Matthias Ulrich, "Ulay: Life-Sized for Life" in Matthias Ulrich ed., *Ulay Life-Sized*, exhibition catalogue, Schrin Kunsthalle Frankfurt, Spector Books, 2017, p. 274.

<p>Ulay/Abramović</p> <p>Relation Works</p> <p>1976–1988</p>	<p>1976</p> <p><i>Relation in Space</i>, XXXVII. Biennale di Venezia, Venice</p> <p><i>Talking about Similarity</i>, Single 64, Amsterdam</p> <p>1977</p> <p><i>Interruption in Space</i>, Kunstsakademie Düsseldorf</p> <p><i>Expansion in Space</i>, documenta 6, Kassel</p> <p><i>Relation in Movement</i>, X<sup>e</sup> Biennale de Paris, Musée d'Art Moderne de La Ville de Paris</p> <p><i>Relation in Time</i>, Studio G7, Bologna</p> <p><i>Light/Dark</i>, Internationale Kunstmesse Köln</p> <p><i>Breathing Out/Breathing In</i>, second part, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam</p> <p><i>Breathing In/Breathing Out</i>, first part, April Meeting, Studenski Kulturni Centre, Belgrade</p> <p><i>Balance Proof</i>, Musée d'arte et d'histoire, Geneva</p> <p>1978</p> <p><i>AAA-AAA</i>, Radio Télévision, Liège, Belgium</p> <p><i>Charged Space</i>, European Performance Series, Brooklyn Museum, New York</p> <p><i>Kaiserschnitt</i>, International Performance Symposium, Vienna</p> <p><i>Incision</i>, Galerie H-Humanic, Graz</p> <p><i>Relation Work</i>, Theater aan de Rijn, Arnheim; Palazzo del Diamanti, Ferrara; Badischer Kunstverein, Karlsruhe</p> <p><i>Three Harlekin Art</i>, Wiesbaden</p> <p>1979</p> <p><i>Communist Body/Fascist Body</i>, Amsterdam</p> <p><i>Go... Stop... Back... Stop...</i>, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne</p> <p><i>The Brink</i>, 3<sup>rd</sup> Biennale of Sydney, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney</p> <p>1980</p> <p><i>Point of Contact</i>, De Appel, Amsterdam</p> <p><i>Rest Energy</i>, Rosc '80, Dublin</p> <p>1981</p> <p><i>Gold Found by the Artists</i>, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney</p>
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	<p><i>Witnessing</i>, ANZART, The Arts Centre, Christchurch</p> <p><i>No Tango</i>, Sculpture Triennale, Melbourne</p> <p><i>A Similar Illusion</i>, Sculpture Triennale, Melbourne, National Gallery of Victoria, Melbourne</p> <p><i>GWF</i>, The Art Gallery of Western Australia, Perth</p> <p>1983-1984</p> <p><i>Positive Zero. La zattera di Babele</i>, Stadsschouwburg, Eindhoven; Holland Festival, Carré, Amsterdam</p> <p>1983-1985</p> <p><i>Modus Vivendi</i>, Saskia Theater, Arnhem; Stadtheater Bern; Kunstmuseum Bern; Progetto Genazzano, Zattera di Babele, Genazzano</p> <p>1986</p> <p><i>Fragilissimo. &gt;&gt;As Far as Amsterdam Goes ...&lt;&lt;</i>, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam</p> <p>1986-1987</p> <p><i>Modus Vivendi. Tuesday – Saturday</i>, Contemporary Art Centre Cincinnati; Long Beach Museum of Art; San Francisco Art Institute; University of Maryland, Baltimore; Massachusetts Institute of Technology</p> <p>1981-1987</p> <p><i>Nightsea Crossing</i> (different place, different locations, different duration of performance, different colours), New Museum, New York; Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation, Lisbon; Museum Fodor, Amsterdam; A Space/City Hall, Toronto, Art Gallery of New South Wales, Sydney</p> <p>1988</p> <p><i>The Great Wall Walk</i>, China 90 days, 4,2000 kilometers)</p>
Ulay Solo Exhibitions 1989–2017 (selection)	<p>1989</p> <p><i>L'orchestre de femme</i>, Burnett Miller Gallery, Los Angeles</p> <p>1992</p> <p><i>Can't Beat the Feeling – Long Playing Record. The Homeless Project</i>, Vrej Bagoomian Gallery, New York</p> <p>1993</p>



	<p><i>Bred and Butteri, Stichting W139</i>, Amsterdam; Galerie Carine Campo, Antwerp; Fotogalerie Spectrum, Amsterdam 1994</p> <p><i>High &amp; Low &amp; Pro &amp; Contra (The First Act)</i>, KulturBrauerei, Berlin 1995</p> <p><i>Soliloquy</i>, Serieuze Zaken, Amsterdam 1996</p> <p><i>Photogene. Berlin Afterimages</i>, Galerie im Marstall/Galerie Max Hetzler, Berlin 1997</p> <p><i>Ulay. Portraits 1970 – 1993</i>, Galerie Break Point, Amsterdam <i>Berlin Photogene</i>, Yamaguchi Prefectural Museum of Art <i>Luxemburger Porträts 1972/1997</i>, Galerie Clairefontaine, Luxembourg</p> <p><i>Ulay in Photography</i>, Galerie Fotomania, Rotterdam 1998</p> <p><i>Made in India</i>, Art Affairs, Amsterdam <i>Ulay. Photographs 1970 – 1997</i>, Il Ponte Projects, Rome <i>Ulay. Polaroid Photography</i>, Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam 2000</p> <p><i>What Is That Thing Called Photography</i>, Museum Het Domein, Sittard</p> <p><i>Performing Light, Photographic Works 1997-2000</i>, in collaboration with Saskia Bos and Cees de Boer, guest curators; Thomas McEvelley, Maaretta Jaukkuri, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Judy Annear, De Appel, Amsterdam</p> <p><i>Cursives &amp; Radicals</i>, Art Affairs Amsterdam 2003-2004</p> <p><i>We</i>, AoRTa Art Centre, Chişinău, Moldova; <i>We Emerge</i>, Amsterdam 2004</p> <p><i>Johnny – The Ontological in the Photographic Image</i>, Art Affairs, Amsterdam, Galerie Clairefontaine, Luxembourg 2005</p> <p><i>GEN. E. T. RATION ULTIMA RATIO</i>, Polaroids 1970 – 1975, Centro</p>
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	Párraga, Murcia 2007 <i>Performing Light</i> , National Centre for Contemporary Arts, Jekaterinburg; National Centre for Contemporary Art, Moscow <i>Can't Beat the Feeling – Long Play Record</i> , Art Affairs, Amsterdam 2008 <i>Performing Light. On Photography and Performance</i> with Thomas McEvelley, Booze Cooperation, Athens 2009 <i>Become</i> , Galerija Skuc, Ljubljana <i>Ulay. Preview of Historical Works</i> , MB Art Agency, Amsterdam 2010 <i>Ulay in Patagonia</i> , Outline Foundation, Amsterdam 2011 <i>The Great Walk Talk</i> , C-Space, Beijing 2013 <i>Ulay</i> , MOT International, London <i>Ich bin Ich. Ulay on Ulay</i> , Salon Dahlmann, Berlin 2015 <i>Disidentification and Metamorphosis. Early Works of Ulay</i> , Şekerbank Açıkçekran New Media Arts Gallery, Istanbul 2016 <i>Ulay. Come on</i> , MOT International, Brussels <i>Ulay   Polaroids</i> , Nederlands Fotomuseum, Rotterdam 2017 <i>Ulay Life Sized</i> , Schrin Kunsthalle, Frankfurt
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Ulay (b.1943) is renowned for an oeuvre that includes performances, text, and photography. Until recently, little has been known of his solo practice outside of smaller artistic circles. He is best known for his ten-year collaborative performances with Marina Abramović. This thesis contributes to the current rediscovery of Ulay's solo practice. I focus on his subversive use of Polaroid photography, which he directed at his own body in the 1970s. I develop a new framework to interpret his Auto-Polaroids by using the concept of witnessing to further contribute to the recent development of scholarly work on Ulay. My argument expands the understanding of Ulay

by recognising his unique and radical bodily explorations of identity, sexuality, gender and activism, whilst also using the *Auto-Polaroids* as a lens to think about witnessing through photographic documentation.

I have chosen to focus on three works by Ulay. Each of these works was made between 1972-1974. They form part of his extensive *Renias sense* series. The first work, *GEN. E.T RATION ULTMA RATIO* (1972), is a set of seven polaroids that capture the artist undertaking a series of processes of body modification. Firstly, the artist tattoos the letters 'GEN. E.T RATION ULTMA RATIO' on his arm, then he cuts off a piece of skin surrounding these letters. After that there is a photo of the arm of the artist with an open wound, a bandaged arm, and a piece of isolated skin. The final image is of white thread on a black ground, said to be a thread of the artist's DNA. In *Diamond Plane* and *Bene Agere (In Her Shoes)* both from 1974, Ulay documents in these intimate polaroids, his loss, grief, and heartbreak related to the break-up and sudden departure of his muse, collaborator and lover at the time, Paula Françoise-Piso. In these works, he documents intimate moments of the break-up and the end of this collaborative working relationship. Ulay has always given himself over as 'an equal to his collaborators' as demonstrated in the joint works he created with Françoise-Piso and Jürgen Klauke, both of whom he made collaborative works with long before the now well-known Ulay/Abramović period.

In turning the camera onto his own body (self) Ulay has amassed a staggering collection of images taken over four decades. He subverts the original social-gift-sharing function of the polaroid, transforming it for use as a tool for documenting private, intimate acts of self-exploration and self-experimentation. These works have been largely overlooked because Ulay has controlled their dissemination and distribution. He has resisted the commodification of his works because he strongly objects to the commercialisation and institutionalisation of his private life as depicted in these works. Polaroids have been central to Ulay's practice due to his role as a representative for the camera brand which. This meant that the medium was readily available to him. It also allowed him to capture his experimentation and questioning of his body's status whilst also producing photographs that serve as both documentation and a site for witnessing. These works are evidence-based materials of performances, and serve as proof that certain events have occurred, although it is important to note that what is captured is undoubtedly fragmentary and never a like-for-like of the live event.<sup>61</sup> Photographs, alongside other forms of documentation, such as video and publications, are also of importance for disseminating performance art and

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<sup>61</sup> See Peggy Phelan, "The Ontology of Performance: Representation Without Reproduction" in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993), pp. 146-166.

allowing for the work to reach a wider audience in the future.

Interestingly, Ulay's radical use of polaroids predates the now familiar theorisation of performativity, which began a decade later in the 1980s with seminal work in this area by the feminist scholar Judith Butler. Ulay continues to work at the intersectionality of photography and performance; as art historian Maria Rus Bojan observes, he adopts 'conceptually-oriented approaches' to image-making, which have resulted in a staggering collection of personal and archival photographic images.<sup>62</sup> To consider Ulay's *Auto-Polaroids* over forty years after they were first produced allows not only for new interpretations of his work but also contributes to theoretical understandings about private performance documentation made public. It is my intention that through an analysis of these works, my research contributes to exploring the roles of witness as experience via documentation.

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<sup>62</sup> Maria Rus Bojan and Alessandro Cassin, *Whispers: Ulay on Ulay* (Amsterdam: Valiz Foundation, 2014) p. 16.

## 1.5 THESIS STRUCTURE

In exploring concerns related to witnessing, pain, and performance art my arguments unfold across five chapters. The following chapter develops a literature and practice review around performance art and pain, considering literature on performance and witnessing studies. I engage with cross-disciplinary theories of pain including scholarship on performance art and visual culture. A key contribution to this area is Elaine Scarry's *The Body in Pain* (1987), an in-depth survey of pain and the human body through literary, political, philosophical, medical and religious interpretations. Theories on visual culture, performance art and pain also inform this thesis including key texts such as James Elkins' *Pictures of the Body: Pain and Metamorphosis* (1999), Marla Carlson's *Performing Bodies in Pain: Medieval and Post-Modern Martyrs, Mystics, and Artists* (2011), Helge Meyer *Pain and Performance Art* (2013) and David Morris *The Culture of Pain* (1993). I also engage with ideas of the audience and of witnessing in performance art, including key feminist and cultural theories of Judith Butler, Dominic Johnson, Jane Blocker, Jonathan Sawday, Peggy Phelan, Erika Fischer-Lichte, Jennifer Doyle and Amelia Jones, whose texts focus on problems of performativity and ephemerality Judith Butler *Gender Trouble* (1993), Peggy Phelan *Unmasked* (1993), and Dominic Johnson *Perverse Martyrologies* (2008), *Pleading in the Blood* (2014), *The Art of Living* (2015) of body presence Tracy Warr and Amelia Jones *The Artist's Body* (1998), Phelan *Unmasked* (1993) and the spectator's participative witnessing Jane Blocker *Seeing Witness* (2008) and intervention Jennifer Doyle *Hold It Against Me* (2013).

As well as looking at theories of pain in performance art, this chapter also considers art theories relating to the body. It surveys key thinkers in this field by considering theoretical debates on the body in performance art and the body in relation to 'flesh'. In performance art, flesh, as scholar Falk Heinrich writes, is presented as an absolute presence. However, it can only be perceived through a reflective bearing.<sup>63</sup> Furthermore, theories of the body in performance art and the use of dramatised pain, where pain is performed in a controlled environment, as Marla Carlson suggests, 'serves to transcend the consciousness of the person who inhabits the body, thereby also serving as a call to action of the spectator'.<sup>64</sup> The use of self-inflicted pain is central to this thesis because the body has been subjectively identified and categorised by culture, and continues to go through metamorphosis due to the technological advancements that, in turn, change cultural presentations of the self. I consider within this context, images of the male body,

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<sup>63</sup> Falk Heinrich, "Flesh as communication: Body art and body theory," *Contemporary Aesthetics* 10 (2012),

<http://www.contempaesthetics.org/newvolume/pages/article.php?articleID=633>.

<sup>64</sup> Marla Carlson, *Performing bodies in pain* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010), p. 6.

its representation, and the discourses that frame these representations of ‘masculinity’, as viewed through visual images from performance art.

A review of pain in performance art follows this literature review and thematically examines a range of works where pain is visibly present. It and surveys key performances from artists including Marina Abramović, Gina Pane, Viennese Actionists, ORLAN, and Chris Burden. I include artists operating at the same time as the aforementioned artists, often referred to as underground or transgressive including Bob Flanagan, Rocio Boliver, Ron Athey, Franko B and Fakir Musafar, some of whom are influenced by modern primitivist movements and have extensively used pain within their practices through radical acts of self-experimentation. In doing so, I want to highlight that whilst performances that use extreme actions have been framed within the context of global conflict important contributions have also been made by artists from subcultural movements underground practices such as BDSM, tattooing and other forms of body modification.<sup>65</sup> This raises important questions about codes of social and political conduct that dictate who is celebrated or rendered invisible within the art historical canon.

Following the first two contextual chapters, I move to exploring the three artists case studies.<sup>66</sup> The first case study explores witnessing live pain in the works of Ron Athey. I consider what it means to bear witness to Athey’s performances where viewers observe him pierce, scar and cut his body, providing a voluntary demonstration of the power he has over his body and its sick status. Athey has lived with the HIV virus for over three decades since 1986 and the illness not only represents the politics of his health and sexual status, but it has informed commemorative performance work for personal loss and suffering. I analyse a collaborative performance, *Judas Cradle*, by Athey and Juliana Snapper that resulted in creating an operatic melodramatic performance using the body and voice to explore the histories of torture and individual suffering. Athey’s work, as Dominic Johnson argues, is often commented upon in terms of National Endowment for the Art (NEA) controversies, or fleetingly in the context of historical surveys on performance art, without much room for an in-depth engagement with

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<sup>65</sup> The post-war period of the late 1960s to early 1970s is widely cited as the beginnings of contemporary performance art movement. The following publications are a selection for their broad overviews of performance art throughout the world; RoseLee, Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (London and New York: Thames & Hudson, 2011); John, Gray, *Action Art: A Bibliography of Artists’ Performance from Futurism to Fluxus and Beyond* (Westport, CT: Greenwood, 1993); Huxley, Michael, and Noel Witts, eds., *The Twentieth Century Performance Reader* (London and New York: Routledge, 1996); Lucy, Lippard, ed., *Six Years: The Dematerialization of the Art Object from 1966 to 1972* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997) and Amelia Jones’s “Body” in Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff’s *Critical Terms for Art History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003).

<sup>66</sup> The term ‘case study’ in this context refers to the in-depth, context-specific description, analysis of live and documentation of the artwork, including in some cases (Athey and O’Brien) the reactions of the collaborating professionals and the public.

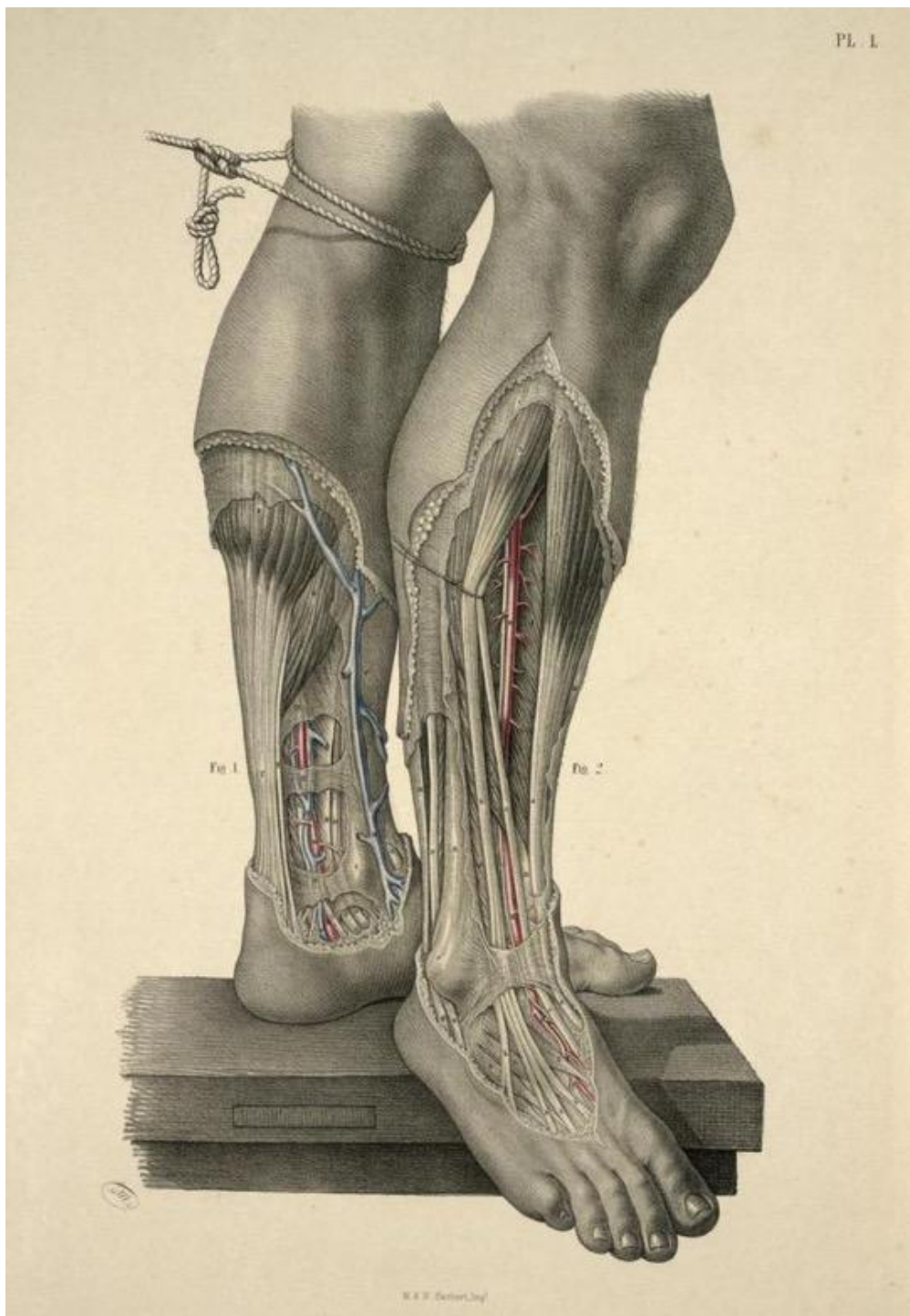
Athey's historical contributions to the discipline. I take up Johnson's calls for more critical appraisals of Athey's work on its own terms in this chapter by considering how witnessing offers the possibility of experiencing a varied array of emotional responses, which are incorporated in his works. Importantly, this chapter also addresses how witness accounts can be misrepresented and misconstrued, leading to serious implications for the person who is giving testimony.

In the second of my three chapters, I reflect on curating pain in Martin O'Brien's *Taste of Flesh*. This chapter centres on the experiences of curating in relation to pain and illness and the ethical elements of such curatorial work. It draws on findings from a newly commissioned performance *Taste of Flesh*, which was part of 'Trust Me I'm an Artist', a European Union funded/WAAG society programme, offered with The Arts Catalyst as one of its key partners. Research here is based on interviews and ongoing conversations that I conducted with Martin O'Brien, and post-performance research conducted through an ethics committee comprising of performance scholars, medical ethicists, and scientists considering this work alongside O'Brien's wider artistic practice. O'Brien uses performance art to counteract the everyday experiences of living with a severe chronic illness. As an artist who suffers from CF, his practice uses physical endurance, hardship, and pain-based practices to challenge normative representations and stereotypes of the sick body. His performances are acts of resistance to his illness, thus serving as an attempt to claim agency and celebrate his sick body as strong and sexually desirable.

My last chapter turns to the importance of documenting pain in performance art through a study of Ulay's *Auto-Polaroids*. This chapter explores how pain is experienced through performance documentation. These polaroids are one of the most significant and expansive personal photographic archives documenting bodily transformations of loss and grief; Ulay has preserved and controlled their dissemination since creating them in early 1970s. He continues to this day to revisit questions surrounding the performative as it relates to the photographic medium and subverts the usual gift-exchange immediacy that the polaroid was intended to facilitate. This results in the constant provocation of his audience. Ulay's polaroids explore intimacy with this medium through the radical and experimental gesture of turning the camera on to his body. This is used as a standpoint from which to explore gender constructs, identity, personal loss and grief, as well as using it as a form of activism. Although he is renowned for his ten-year collaborations with Marina Abramović, until recently, there has been little dissemination and scholarly work on his heavily documented solo practice. The conclusion of this thesis reflects the problematics of curating pain, the merits and limitations of using witnessing as a critical tool, and how pain-performance art is situated both within and outside of art institutions.

**Chapter 2**

**Cultures of Pain and Performance: Literature and Performance Art Review**



**Fig.1 – Dissection of the lower leg from ‘Surgical Anatomy’ by Joseph Maclise, 1857, ©Project Gutenberg**



## Introduction

Pain is elusive. It defies a singular universal definition. It can be characterised through its physical, emotional, social, and cultural aspects. Furthermore, pain theorists debate how one communicates and writes about pain as it continually eludes language. For the bearer of pain its presence is undeniable. The viewer, on the other hand, relates it back to his or her own embodied reflective bearing. This challenge of pains' communicability and legibility can be traced back to religious representations in texts and paintings but visual images belonging to medical (surgical) dissections of the human body in the nineteenth century signalled the point at which the opening up of bodies by the physician's hand became a normalised and authoritative standpoint for the understanding of the human. In this thesis, I approach pain from varied disciplines to offer a multi-perspectival view that can be applied to the performance of pain. Pain is discussed here through its cultures and histories, drawing mostly on medical, religious and literary sources which are then applied to a reading of performances that incorporate the use of blood, endurance, masochism and ritual.

With this view, I continue important work in this area and I am influenced by the works of feminist and pain-performance scholars including Joanna Burke, Jennifer Doyle, Amelia Jones, and Kathy O'Dell. These scholars and academics raise important critical discussions about ethics, and the appreciation of artworks that use pain to test the limits of taste, taboo and permissibility. Their work in my view, also furthers and challenges more traditional understandings of pain, for example, Descartes' model in the eighteenth century. In Descartes philosophical dualism, the dualistic nature of pain is understood to be primarily a sensory phenomenon separated from higher order (neocortical) influences.<sup>67</sup> Pain here is a binary. It is either physical or it is of psychic origin.

The new theoretical positionings of pain demonstrate that it is complex and that there are a range of emotions associated with it, thus, as non-verbal communication is often presented through performance art, it can become a fecund area from which to consider the complexities and varieties of pain. Finally, in putting forward this interdisciplinary approach, I want to contribute further in offering a critical framework for self-inflicted pain in performance art as the body continues to undergo cultural, technological and socio-political transformations.

Alongside the aforementioned contributions, recent scholarship by Joanna Burke, Marla Carlson, Jennifer Doyle, Dominic Johnson, Andrea Juno, and Maggie Nelson contribute to an overarching theoretical framework for this thesis that seeks to establish the importance of pain-based actions within a performance art.

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<sup>67</sup> Antonio, Damasio, *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain*, Putnam; New York, 1994, p. 249.

This review falls into three main parts. Firstly, I offer a more general review on pain theories, before moving more specifically into discussions of performance art, performativity, and pain. This latter section intertwines both literatures on pain, performativity and performance art histories, alongside offering an art review of sorts to situate the three artistic case studies I go on to explore in this thesis. In the third and final section the attention is turned towards literature on curating, documentation, and witnessing performance art. It also addresses whilst addressing some of the concerns on pain's inexpressibility, which I develop further in the chapters that follow this literature review.

## 2.1 The Cultures of Pain

Pain studies are prominent in cultural studies, the, sciences, visual culture, and art history. Common across this literature is a sense, firstly that pain is elusive, and, secondly, that there is no consensual, singular and universal definition. This means that it is always bound to tensions between the social, cultural, physiological, psychological, and political. In the West, one of the earliest records of the description of pain appears in Homer's epics, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*. From around the 8th century BC in ancient Greece, the term also appears in the literature of Occidental medicine in the Hippocratic period (5th century BC).<sup>68</sup> Later on, during the Renaissance, the brain came to be considered as 'the seat of pain sensations [...] when systematic autopsies were carried out by Andreas Vesalius (1514–1564), the founder of modern human anatomy, who published the classical book on the subject, *On the Fabric of the Human Body* (1543).'<sup>69</sup> This historical review mainly focuses on some of the developments in theories of pain. Historical events associated with pain therapies and remedies are beyond the scope of this thesis.

This review and discussion of theories of pain falls into three parts. Firstly, I consider defining pain and its challenges. I then contextualize these discussions further through a short review of the histories of pain. I conclude with reflections on representations of pain in art and literature more broadly. This will provide the bridge into the following section that focuses specifically on pain and performance art.

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<sup>68</sup> Roselyne Rey, *History of Pain*, trans. by L. Wallace, J. A Cadden, and S.W. Cadden (Paris: Éditions la Découverte, 1993), p. 6.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

## 2.12 Defining Pain and its challenges

The challenges of defining, communicating and writing pain can be traced as far back as humans have existed. An analysis of pain can be used to explore changes across cultures and between geographies. As Jun Chen writes:

Since 1800, due to the development of experimental sciences, different theories of pain have emerged and become central topics of debate. However, the existing theories of pain may be appropriate for the interpretation of some aspects of pain but are not yet comprehensive. The history of pain problems is as long as that of human beings; however, the understanding of pain mechanisms is still far from sufficient.<sup>70</sup>

For the bearer of pain, its presence is undeniable, the viewer, on the other hand, relates it back to his or her own embodied reflective bearing. An explanation for this dichotomy as Edward R. Perl observes, can be found in ‘the convoluted history of ideas about pain.’<sup>71</sup> He continues ‘whether pain is an independent sensation and the product of dedicated neural mechanisms continues to be a topic of debate regarding pain that has emerged since 1800.’<sup>72</sup> Ancient Greek scholars held very different theories about the perception of pain to our modern scientific understanding. The etymology of the modern word ‘pain’ comes from the Ancient Greek *poine*, meaning punishment. Aristotle (384-322 BCE) considered the heart as the point of origin for pain. This was based on his observations of animals. Galen (130-200 CE) amended Aristotle’s theory by supplanting the heart with the brain as the central organ in pain perception.<sup>73</sup> Galen also suggested that nerve tissue is the transfer route of pain to the brain through the invisible psychic pneuma. In his opinion, this pneuma travelled within the hidden hollows of the nerves.<sup>74</sup>

In the Middle Ages, around the 11<sup>th</sup> century, the Persian polymath Avicenna theorised a number of feeling senses including touch, pain and titillation. Pain-related writings within his authored *The Canon of Medicine*, identified, analysed, and challenged Galen’s amended view on Aristotle’s theory of pain. Avicenna lists fifteen types pain centring on physical discomfort whilst

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<sup>70</sup> Jun Chen, “History of pain theories,” *Neurosci Bull* 27, no. 5 (29 Sep. 2011), p. 343, doi: 10.1007/s12264-011-0139-0.

<sup>71</sup> Edward Perl, “Ideas about pain, a historical view,” *Nature Reviews Neuroscience* 8, no. 71 (1 Jan. 2007), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1038/nrn2042>, abstract.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Mojtaba Heydari, Shams Mesbah et al, *The origin of the concept of neuropathic pain in early medieval Persia (9th-12th century CE)*, 2015, p. 9.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

omitting emotional hurt in his account. However, but his classification of pain as a sensory modality helped establish pain as a sensation.<sup>75</sup>

Prior to the scientific renaissance in Europe, pain had largely been theorised as existing outside of the body. It was and understood as a punishment from God. This view is most evident in religious iconographic imagery, in texts and paintings depicting pain and suffering for divine purposes. This is most pervasive in Catholic and Protestant versions of Christianity.<sup>76</sup> In 1664, René Descartes' *Treatise of Man*, published after his death, describes in detail his extensive studies of physiology and anatomy. His findings are based on reports of his frequent visits to butcher shops (almost on a daily basis) to study specific animal organs. Descartes carried out dissections and vivisections to explore the workings of major organ systems and in 1630, he assisted in the dissection of human cadavers. He undertook these activities to satisfy his intense curiosity about how the bodies of animals and humans work. Descartes' understanding compared bodily functions to those of a machine. In the *Treatise of Man*, he declares:

I make the supposition that the body is nothing else but a statue or earthen machine, that God has willed to form entire, in order to make it as similar to us as is possible. Thus, he not only would have given it the external colour and shape of our members, but also, he put in the interior all the parts which are required to make it walk, eat, respire, and that it imitate, in the end, all of our functions which can be imagined to proceed from matter alone, and depend only on the disposition of the organs.<sup>77</sup>

He was the first to describe the reflex arc, anticipating behavioural theories by almost three hundred years. He put forward an internalised view of the body as a kind of animal-machine that functions according to physical laws. Descartes view on the body's inner workings advanced previous scholastic notions. It is important to consider due his fundamental contributions to the history of science. Significantly, his research contributed to a visual culture of anatomy that developed and informed representations of the medical body (**Fig.1**).

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<sup>75</sup> Stanley Finger, "Limiting the Definition of Pain," in *Origins of Neuroscience: A History of Explorations into Brain Function* (Oxford University Press, 1994), p. 50.

<sup>76</sup> Joanna Burke discusses at length the significance of pain and suffering as means for getting closer to God, and a view most prominently adopted by Christianity as opposed to other religions groups in America and Europe including Buddhism, Hinduism and Muslims. For further discussions on pain and religion see Joanna Burke, "Religion" in *The Story of Pain: From Prayer to Painkillers*.

<sup>77</sup> Descartes, *Treatise of Man*, selection translated from *De l'homme et de la formation du foetus*, edited by Claude Clerselier and translated by P. R. Sloan (Paris, 1664), <http://www.coretexts.org/wp-content/uploads/2010/08/DescartesTreatiseMnfin.pdf>.

From the nineteenth century onwards, images of medical dissections of the human body signalled a point at which an expertly informed curiosity on the inner workings of the human body that began with Descartes extended to medicine. The development of surgery legislated who was allowed to open up bodies. It leads to the notion of ‘The Physician’s Hand’ as an authority authoritative in treating pain. From the nineteenth century onwards, physiology contributed greatly to dominant theories on pain. This was due to advances in experimental research on the structure and function of primary organs and their role in pain. It was in the early nineteenth century that physicians began pursuing the study of the symptoms of pain alongside medical texts. What started to be elaborated was the links between the physical and mental aspects of pain.<sup>78</sup>

Theorising pain, as these examples demonstrate, alludes to an arrival at a universal definition that should consider both emotional and neurological interpretations. To address this, and for the purpose of this research, the definition of pain I apply here is from medical research. In his definition of pain, researcher Allan Basabaum, the former Editor-in-Chief of *Pain*, the journal of the International Association for the Study of Pain, encompasses the complexities associated with communicating pain. He defines it as ‘an irritation that gets sent in different ways, but a complex emotion whose character is not only based on the ‘intensity’ of the irritation, but also on the situation in which it is felt, and most importantly, on the affective and emotional situation of the individual.’<sup>79</sup> Other key contributions on pain scholarship include Elaine Scarry’s *The Body in Pain* (1985), David Morris’s *The Culture of Pain* (1993) and Susan Sontag’s *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003). They all identify pains’ entanglement with corporeal certainty and radical interpersonal doubt, focusing on how it eludes verbal language. In her influential book *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*, first published in 1985, Elaine Scarry analysed pain and physical suffering in relation to the numerous vocabularies and cultural forces (literary, political, philosophical, medical, religious) that confront pain.<sup>80</sup> Scarry’s central argument centres on how the injured body, in times of warfare, signifies the reality of the conqueror’s position, and

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<sup>78</sup> Perl Rey, “The History of Pain “cited in Olson, K. A., “History of Pain: A Brief Overview of the 19th and 20th Centuries,” *Practical Pain Management* (2013),  
<https://www.practicalpainmanagement.com/treatments/history-pain-brief-overview-19th-20th-centuries>.

<sup>79</sup> Alan Basabaum definition of pain in Helge Meyer, *Pain and Performance Art*  
[http://www.performance-art-research.de/text/pain\\_and\\_performance\\_art.html](http://www.performance-art-research.de/text/pain_and_performance_art.html).

<sup>80</sup> Pain scholar, Elaine Scarry has contributed significantly to understandings and representations for pain throughout key historical moments. She presents a canonical account for pain following a timeline of wars, conflict and events that have impacted the culture of pain. For a historical overview of pain see Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (USA: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 27.

as such, maimed and wounded bodies become the absolute definer of reality. This bodily representation has been used overtly throughout history for political means, which, she argues is the ‘reality-producing quality of pain’.<sup>81</sup> This argument can be found in a range of references from Judeo-Christian scriptures to Marxist thinking, and even in human relationships with inanimate objects. In the chapter ‘The Structure of Torture: The Conversion of Real Pain into the Fiction of Power’, Scarry addresses how the body can be made to speak by investigating the power torture has in transmuting pain into power. This develops out of the fact that pain is an incontestably real experience. What is fundamental is that the capacity to generate pain is the capacity to shape reality.<sup>82</sup> Scarry frames this as a three-part process. Firstly, by considering how pain is created. Secondly, by exploring how it is amplified through its objectification, and finally, by articulating how it is the experience of power. Scarry also frames torture in relation to spaces and boundaries by suggesting that intense pain “destroys the world.”<sup>83</sup> It removes everything else from the victim’s mind. She notes that this paradoxically removes the threat of betrayal, whilst also creating the discursive context in which such betrayal occurs.<sup>84</sup>

According to Scarry, pain and death serve as examples that create their own boundaries as receptors of pain. She illustrates this point with the example of religious self-flagellation. Rather than the dismissal of the body, these self-inflicted acts expand the body so that the rest of the world is diminished. Pain reduces the size of the world. The theme of blurring boundaries between pain experiences and worldly presence is further complicated in the remainder of the chapter as she works through how the idea of “the torture room” replicates the body by substantiating what is known, and, in imitating the tortured body, this can be turned against the victim either environmentally or through the reproduction of suffering.<sup>85</sup> She suggests that the ability to control the liminal space of the torture room creates the sense of power and that this is one of the key purposes of torture. Through motions that cite the existence of “the rest of the world,” the torturer is able to sustain the claim that they have power over that reduced world.<sup>86</sup> In times of warfare, “nowhere is the sadistic potential of a language built on agency so visible as in torture”<sup>87</sup>, she writes, and when it is used and justified, the one experiencing it is reduced to being wholly consumed by pain, whilst the person administering remains fully present in the

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid, p. 30.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid., p. 38.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid., p. 45.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid., p. 27.

world. Torture's legitimacy is most prominent when it is justified as a means for safeguarding national interest and fighting external threats, as observed in the recent US-Iraq war. With the establishment of Guantanamo Bay and the severe physical abuse of prisoners that occurred in Abu Ghraib prison (these sites are explored in part by Athey-Snapper's *Judas Cradle*).<sup>88</sup> Scarry then proceeds to discuss how war makes use of pain by pitting one side against another, whilst injured bodies materialise as a justification for conflict, thus reconnecting a belief system to the material world through the destruction of bodies in the process. She states:

Because the justification of the destruction of creation takes a specifically political form (torture, war), it might seem most appropriate to trace the outlines of the opposite event in specifically political form, such as the moment when a new country is being conceived and constructed (made up, made real) or when an already existing country haven been partially destroyed, is being reimagined and (remade-up).<sup>89</sup>

The language of pain for Scarry is ultimately one that uses it to secure 'the truth' of a subjective, cultural and political position. Thus, pain, in her view, focuses on the idea of substantiating ideological truths in times of warfare and conflict, through producing maimed bodies that create a material reality that justifies pain and suffering.<sup>90</sup>

In contrast to Scarry, David Morris's *The Culture of Pain* (1991) describes how experiences of pain are decisively shaped by individual human minds, and by specific cultures which constitute historical, psychological and cultural constructions of pain.<sup>91</sup> The invention of ether in 1846 altered the meaning of pain but it did not eradicate it. He argues that to medical science most pain remains a mystery. For example, it still does not have a conclusive understanding of chronic pain, hysteria, numbness, or religious pain. For Morris, pain is not a sensation but a perception. It is something that exists only as we register and interpret it. His book surveys the creative uses of pain by artists, the instructive uses of pain by satirists, the erotic uses of pain by sadomasochists, the political uses of pain as torture, and the aesthetic uses of pain in the sentimental, melancholy, and sublime styles of Romantic writers who associated beauty with loss, suffering, and death. He argues that, contemporary Western culture 'strives to define pain as part of disease, so it is regarded a medical problem. Pain in his view, is more than medical and should be treated as culturally specific. He writes:

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<sup>88</sup> See Athey/Snapper, *The Judas Cradle* in Audiencing Pain "live": The Gospel according to Ron.

<sup>89</sup> Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, p. 177.

<sup>90</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 132.

<sup>91</sup> David Morris, *The Culture of Pain* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), p. 342.

The vast cultural shift that gives us the story of pain, its hidden plot centres on the eradication of meaning by late nineteenth century science. The great breakthroughs in anatomy and physiology by Bell, Magendie, Miiler, Weber, Von Frey, Shiff and other nineteenth-century researchers, created the scientific basis for believing pain was owing simply to specific nerve pathways. We are the heirs of the transformation in medical thought.<sup>92</sup>

Morris' text explores pain through wide-range of voices and images from the past to reveal the limitations of medical explanations on pain. He established the connections between pain and meaning through an unfolding discussion demonstrating the varied uses of pain. He examines violent pain in *The Iliad*, pious pain in Pascal's *Prayer to Ask God for the Good Use of Sickness*, comic pain in *Don Quixote and the Decameron*, gender-biased pain in Charcot's accounts of hysteria, and religious pain in paintings of St. Sebastian's martyrdom by Pollaiolo and by Reni.<sup>93</sup> He goes on to discuss the impenetrable mystery of pain in Job, the pain of political exploitation in the liberation theology of Gutierrez, pain dominated by mind in the Stoic writings of Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus, existentially meaningful pain in the logotherapy of Viktor Frank, and the practical usefulness of pain in Kafka's *In the Penal Colony*. Morris also touches on noble pain found in the late Hellenistic statue depicting the suffering of Laocoon in Virgil's *Aeneid*, the sexual pleasure of pain in the pornographic novels of de Sade, tragic pain in Sophocles' *Philoctetes* and in Joyce Carol Oates's analysis of boxing, and a Christian understanding of pain in Piero della Francesca's enigmatic fifteenth century painting *The Flagellation*.<sup>94</sup> Literature and art considered, Morris turns his attention to a pain clinic where pain is not symptomatic, but pathological and he listens to patients' stories and learns from them. In this pain clinic, and others, medicine is learning to repudiate its narrow view of pain with physicians now acknowledging the psychosocial and cultural meanings of pain.<sup>95</sup>

Morris embraces a plurality of paradoxical attitudes toward pain to deconstruct the modern, one-dimensional, organic model of pain to make way for a multidimensional model embracing emotional, cognitive, and social aspects. He seeks a perspective where pain has many meanings—for the postmodern future and writes

A multiplicity of understandings, of course, implies that your pain and my pain might have totally different explanations and meanings. Postmodern pain could still be meaningless, for example, but only if an individual chose or came to understand it is so (in which case, paradoxically, meaningless would count as a kind of meaning—not just a blindly suffered condition). For someone else, affliction might contain several different

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<sup>92</sup> Ibid., p. 4

<sup>93</sup> Morris, *The Culture of Pain*, p. 342.

<sup>94</sup> Ibid.

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.



meanings—even meanings that threatened to contradict or to cancel each other out. We would be living amid a multitude of alternative explanations for pain. The resulting uncertainty may bring its own discomforts. The most important compensation for an inevitable uncertainty, however, is that pain would have re-established the link with meaning that ties it to culture, history and individual lives. It will be a more human pain.<sup>96</sup>

Pain in this context is developed across historical, literary, and cultural examples, concluding with an American perspective of an anesthetised and painless ethos of the now that poorly addresses and generalises pain overall.

In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag begins her inquiry by considering whether or not images of maimed war-torn bodies, starving children and piled-up corpses change us, alongside considering the ethical position of the photographers of such imagery. Sontag posits whether or not painful images further understandings of suffering bodies, or if they further contribute to numbing the viewer by causing to shut one's eyes in the face of horrors. She urges viewers to think about secondary ways of experiencing pain imagery by presenting a brief history of photo-journalism beginning with early war photography and ending with contemporary images. These images from the civil wars of Crimea, Iraq, the Spanish Civil War, and World War I and II, are for Sontag photographs that make real. What matters is that “the privileged, and the merely safe, might prefer to ignore,” asking when we look at the painful image, how we should also ask ourselves what atrocities are not being shown.<sup>97</sup> Sontag observes that whilst war time and conflict images attest to a sense of ‘what it’s *really* like to be there’, she reminds us that ‘War tears, rends. War rips open, eviscerates. War Sorties. War dismembers. War *ruins*.’<sup>98</sup>

Sontag points out that many important anti-war collections of photographs published between World War I and II sent waves through society by proving the horror of war, and spurred agreements between countries to outlaw such conflicts. Responses to these images could not ultimately overcome the forces of history that produce continues warfare until this present day. As the politics of an era change, so does the meaning of photographs. Accordingly, thus Sontag concludes that “the current political mood, the friendliest to the militarization in decades, and the pictures of wretched hollow-eyed GIs that once seemed subversive of militarism and imperialism, may now seem inspirational to some, that is, as their revised subject – ordinary American young men doing their unpleasant and ennobling duty.”<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> Ibid., p. 283.

<sup>97</sup> Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux; 2004), p. 7.

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid., p. 78.

Sontag retells familiar stories of photographs that sanitise or falsify the conflicts they were supposedly documenting. For example, in the Crimea in 1845, British photographer, Roger Fenton represented war as a ‘dignified all-male outing’ and he avoided making pictures of dead, injured or mutilated soldiers.<sup>100</sup> All evidence of carnage was erased and instead his focus was on the landscape, some of which he supervised the strategic placing of cannonballs on roads to create a specific atmosphere of war images. A hundred years later in 1945, Russian victors, hoisting the Red Flag over the Reichstag in Berlin, took direction from a Soviet war photographer who had dreamt up this iconic moment. Sontag’s book examines the human fascination with suffering, morbidity, and pain. She asks why it exists but notes that interest does not necessarily equal compassion. Viewers are naturally inclined to feel sympathy for those of their own race and creed, whilst the role of spectator makes viewers feel hopeless and helpless to enact change of any kind. This powerlessness is one thing, Sontag argues, but it is also important to remember what humankind is capable of producing images that constitute a larger, more complicated issue, and are collectively symbolic representations of the large-scale issues of humankind.<sup>101</sup> Having consumed fantasies and outright lies of wars and conflict, how can we then properly respond to the remote, exotic miseries on which photographic journalists’ reports are based? In our ‘culture of spectatorship’, have we lost the power to be shocked? The pain of others titillates us, so long we are kept at a safe distance from the situation from which that pain emerges. Many will never truly understand the suffering of war. However, but we must understand that such nightmares exist.

Contemporary pain scholarship by Joanna Burke and Marla Carson are recent examples that challenge Scarry’s position on pain. Both argue that pain must be situated beyond the limits of verbal language. Burke and Carlson propose non-verbal, connective, and transformative possibilities that are a result of pain. They and call for an even more expansive approach, whilst positing the problems of trying to establish a universal language for pain, which for them Morris and Scarry identify but leave largely unexplored. I expand on Burke and Carlson’s perspectives on pain in the sections that follow. I look at pain and its histories, the body in pain, and, specifically, pain in performance art.

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid.

<sup>101</sup> Ibid., p. 81.

### 2.13 Pain and its histories

Understandings of pain are tied to belief systems that are continually shifting how it is experienced and perceived. This history of pain centres its inexpressibility specifically in relation to language, and as Scarry observes ‘the acceptance of its existence is undeniable to anyone who has experienced it and even for the imaginer, its image is less real than his or her perceptions, and for anyone outside the imaginer, it has no reality at all’.<sup>102</sup> This inexpressibility, Scarry states is due to pains’ remote character. It which belongs to an invisible geography as it has no reality, no, and manifestation in ‘the visible’.<sup>103</sup> In other words, pain has no voice and any attempts to voice it led to this inexpressibility. Scarry also identifies three key areas for considering bodies in pain, firstly she identifies the difficulties associated with expressing physical pain, the political and perceptual complications that arise as a result of this difficulty, and finally, the nature of both the material and verbal expressivity. She reminds us that pain ‘is made visible in multiple and elaborate processes that evolve in producing it [...] This internal physical experience is, in torture, accompanied by its external political equivalent, such as the presence in the space outside the body.’ Pain’s presence is undeniably aversive and present in all bodies that inhabit the world. It has the ability to split one’s sense of reality and the reality of others, through possessing a subjective certainty for the person who experiences pain, and an objective response for the witness for pain. Western medical readings contribute to this limited understanding of pain where it is deemed no more than a problem in biochemistry. Media representations, the bombardment of images of pain on the news, documentary film, the internet, and social media all allow for a failure to notice the ways in which pain continual confronts us with pressing questions of everyday ethical conduct.

Medicine, as Morris observes contributes greatly to the notion that pain is merely another complex issue we must leave to specialists and experts and, as such, he investigates the changing place of pain in human life and culture by using satire to explore the social use of pain.<sup>104</sup> He further argues that beyond medicine, pain serves complex ethical and personal purposes. Images of the infliction of pain within visual culture, he also observes, reproduce social cultures of ritual and violence and work to uphold cultures of masculinity, such as tests of courage and masochism. In cinema, for example, action films often depict a heroic masculinity, as images of men who must be tough, and able to withstand pain. This differs hugely to the social images of females into pain. It is the gendered protagonist that must learn to ‘take it like a man’.<sup>105</sup> Pain continues to

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<sup>102</sup> Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, p. 4.

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 147.

<sup>104</sup> Morris, *The Culture of Pain*, p. 174.

<sup>105</sup> See O’Brien and Flanagan section in this thesis.

serve specific social and ethical purposes within distinct recurring structures of formal and informal rites or ritual practice. One way of understanding this distinction in the social purpose of pain would be to compare the antiquated gladiatorial combat of Ancient Rome, or martyrlic religious ceremony from the Medieval period, to the modern social understanding of painful medical procedure, where pain is private and incubated with the clinical space of the operating room. At the present time, there is a detachment to pain, in part due to mass media distribution of images through photography, most predominately shared digitally. Morris makes his argument with reference to works of literature, notably, Franz Kafka's *In the Penal Colony* (1919), where the author explores the creation of intolerable pain that is justified by the 'pretence of enlightened punishment'.<sup>106</sup> Importantly, Morris sets out to unmask the relation between pain and force. He articulates how force uses pain in order to get its own way, as observed for example, in the legitimisation of torture to secure national interests.

Pain is described by Petra Tait as a human emotion that is 'not culturally neutral or natural.'<sup>107</sup> June Crawford et al also argue that pain is also 'gendered' in memory.<sup>108</sup> Both children and women, as Nicholas Lezard observes, have, historically, had their pain dismissed. He writes:

A 2003 study showed that men suffering post-operative pain were significantly more likely to be prescribed optimal pain management. In a 1990 study at the UCLA Emergency Medicine Centre, Hispanics were twice as likely as non-Hispanic whites to receive no medication for pain. And most of us who have endured current hospital conditions will know that pain relief is all too often supplied only according to a timetable and not in response to expressed need.<sup>109</sup>

Although theorists have argued emotions are established as meaningful in language, whilst bodily feelings such as pain are unstable, unpredictable, and unknowable to others, I consider pain both emotional and sensory because it encompasses dual states of being when experienced within this context of performance art.<sup>110</sup> Trying to articulate pain points firmly to its elusive nature when it can be situated across the biological, cultural and social. What is apparent in reviewing varied

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<sup>106</sup> Morris, *The Culture of Pain*, p. 184.

<sup>107</sup> Petra Tait, "Toni Dove's Artificial Changelings, Collapsing Time and Feeling e/Motional Spaces," *Art and Pain, Double Dialogues*, Issue 4, Winter 2003, (first published June 2003), accessed 19 Oct. 2014, <http://www.doubledialogues.com/article/toni-doves-artificial-changelings-collapsing-time-and-feeling-emotional-spaces>.

<sup>108</sup> Catherine Lutz, "The Unnatural Emotions" cited in Petra Tait, "*Toni Dove's Artificial Changelings*."

<sup>109</sup> Nicholas Lezard, "The Story of Pain by Joanna Bourke review – from prayer to painkillers," book review in *Science and Nature, The Guardian*, 14 February 2017, accessed 10 August 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/feb/14/story-pain-joanna-bourke-review-prayer-painkillers>.

<sup>110</sup> Robert Solomon, "The Passions," cited in *ibid*.

approaches to situating and articulating pain is its changing relationship to human beings, which in turn, is affected by changing belief systems and contexts. The French historian, Roselyne Rey, makes explicit the ‘historical contradiction between the philosopher’s search for meaning in pain and the physician’s commitment to healing’ in her book, *History of Pain*.<sup>111</sup> Her study further emphasizes the significant contributions to understandings of pain by its main authors, from medicine and religion, across from classical antiquity to the twentieth century. Contrasting the different cultural perceptions of pain in each period, as well as how medical theories advanced to explain its mechanisms, Rey explores how our relationship to pain is largely constructed within these shifting histories, whilst demonstrating the paradox of trying to establish meaningful ways of engaging with pain alongside a quest for its eradication.<sup>112</sup> For Rey, dualistic queries about the subjective, public, historical, and political dimensions of pain cover another layer of questions posed by scientists, philosophers, psychologists, and many others regarding the way in which pain is categorised. In studying a specific discourse on pain, one might ask ‘whether it is a study of the physicality of pain or of its mental and emotional expression?’<sup>113</sup> As Rey notes, such a question itself presumes a dualistic thinking about the relation between mind and body that typically underlies our way of thinking about pain.

The dominant theoretical debates about pain have been a struggle between two poles of thought. The first is that pain is situated in a body part, as in a naturalist approach. The second is that pain is a form of consciousness. What is widely accepted across both fields, however, is that pain is a fundamental part of being human. What is distinct is how it is understood, interpreted, and perceived continually shifts in accordance with these opposing belief systems. In the twentieth century, theories including psychoanalysis and psychotherapy contributed significantly to pain being considered as the very condition of being human. Psychoanalytic approaches define morality in relation to illness, death, loss and mourning.<sup>114</sup> Religious interpretations of pain vary and are further complicated by how they relate to suffering bodies. In Christianity, for example, pain is regarded as an external punishment for sinning against God. The redemption of such suffering is wholly through God’s forgiveness for sins. This relationship with pain, sin, and the divine alleviation of suffering is epitomized in *The Book of Job*, which gives a descriptive and detailed account of Job’s plight against illness and suffering through his faith in God, who

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<sup>111</sup> Roselyne Rey, *History of Pain*, p. 6.

<sup>112</sup> See Scarry, *The Body in Pain*, p. 34.

<sup>113</sup> Robin May Schott, “Pain, Abjection, and Political Emotion,” *Passion in Passions in Context; International Journal for the History and Theory of Emotions*, no. 2 (2011), p. 10.

<sup>114</sup> See Jeanine M. Vivona, “Nothing gold can stay?” in Adele Tutter and Léon Wurmser ed., *Grief and Its Transcendence: Memory, Identity, Creativity*, p. 123.

eventually relieves him of all of his suffering and misfortunes due to his renewed commitment to the Christian faith.<sup>115</sup> Job is described as:

The best man of his day and probably lived during the time of Abraham.  
This book records his story of loss as he suffers crushing personal tragedies.  
The entire book deals with the question, “Why?”, but as the story ends, God blesses and restores Job’s life.<sup>116</sup>

He is a martyr who takes all inflicted pain and suffering and is redeemed through his committed faith. This very process of commitment is characterised through his ability to take pain and endure. Other religious accounts of pain describe flagellation as an invocation for the forgiveness of sins and a way to alleviate collective suffering. To provide a counter example of religious understandings of pain, in Buddhism suffering is viewed as a natural human condition. It is not viewed in ‘sinful’ terms. There is no punishment, because there is no god to punish and forgive people.<sup>117</sup>

The development of anaesthetics revolutionised pain treatments by shifting the focus to pain’s internal existence, because it proved that certain kinds of pain are treatable.<sup>118</sup> While more complex in reality, medical science situates pain as a signal or a warning sign.<sup>119</sup> A consensus for a universal definition for pain has been put forward by the IASP which defines pain as ‘an unpleasant sensory and emotional experience associated with actual or potential tissue damage or described in terms of such damage.’<sup>120</sup> This definition signals the shifts that have occurred in trying to establish a universally agreeable language for pain. Although from an epistemological viewpoint pain might be understood as a physical phenomenon, the emotional state of a person, context or situation associated with it also impacts on the perception of pain’s presence within an event. Pain has previously been spoken of in binary terms, as external or internal, emotional or

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<sup>115</sup> See “Job: 1:1” in the Book of Job in Keith Leroy, *Summarised Bible: Complete Summary of the New Testament* (Los Angeles: Bible Institute of Los Angeles) p. 123, <https://archive.org/details/summarizedbiblec00broorich>.

<sup>116</sup> Ibid.

<sup>117</sup> See David Y. F. Ho, “Selfhood and Identity in Confucianism, Taoism, Buddhism, and Hinduism: Contrasts with the West,” *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour*, no. 25, (1995), pp. 115-139. doi:10.1111/j.1468-5914.1995.tb00269.x.

<sup>118</sup> In his essay *Sacred and Secular Reactions to Pain*, David Canton summarises the conquest of pain which occurred on October 16, 1848, when a young dentist named William Thomas Green Morton uses diethyl ether to anesthetize Gilbert Abbott. He charts how this discovery spread across the world and how this discovery leads to changing attitudes towards pain that subsequently follows.

<sup>119</sup> See Fernando Cervero’s “One Pain, or Many Pains,” where he discusses at length pains complexities through its warning and corrective functions in *Understanding Pain: Exploring the perception of Pain* (MIT Press, Cambridge, MA and London, 2012), pp. 12-15.

<sup>120</sup> Definition as proposed by International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP) in 1975.

sensory. In order to consider pain currently, a multi-perspectival and interdisciplinary position should be taken into account and bringing together pain's situation within the neurological, physiological and the environmental conditions of its experience.

In her book *Perceptions of Pain* (2003), Deborah Padfield highlights the difficulties in communicating pain and proposes visual language as an alternative to unravel the subjectivity of embodiment. It can provide a way to consider the enmeshment of bodily and mental states.<sup>121</sup> Padfield examines whether bodily sensations such as pain are indexical psychological states or whether they are better understood as sensory perceptions relaying information from within rather than outside of the body. In their contributions to Padfield's photo-essay, Nigel Spivey and Oliver Sacks write:

Depiction of physical and mental pain in Western art reflects its pervasiveness and association with moral retribution. Over more than two millennia, pictorial and sculptural depictions of screams, sighs, and tears have surmounted bodily contortions of all sorts: bending, writhing, twisting, and bleeding, often in the context of flagellation, flaying, attack, injury, damnation, and crucifixion. Pain as a state of 'as if'—as if punishment, compression, burning, stabbing, bruising, and tearing—has been a dominant theme in its visualization. Yet few images of pain have been produced by sufferers themselves or have focused on the actual sensations experienced. These images begin to correct this deficit.<sup>122</sup>

#### 2.14 The distinction between psychical and psychic pain

In the first part of the twenty first century, there was a rapid development of neuroscience and associated technologies due to advances in molecular biology, electrophysiology, and computational neuroscience. Neuroscience as the scientific study of the workings of the central nervous system, extends beyond neural circuits and into cognitive and behavioural studies. Cognitive neuroscience addresses questions relating to the neural basis of physiological functions and these neural activities have been made visible through measures techniques such as EEG, fMRI, PET, SCR and SPECT. These powerful measuring methods allow scientists to map cognition and emotions to specific neurons. This move towards visual proof of the body's inner workings promote the now popular view that 'the brain cannot lie' as we can now look at closely and understand how it works.<sup>123</sup> This promotes a view of neuro-reasoning, which means that

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<sup>121</sup> Deborah Padfield, *Perceptions of Pain* (Stockport, UK: Dewi Lewis Publishing, 2003), pp. 7-13.

<sup>122</sup> Nigel Spivey, *Enduring Creation* in Deborah Padfield and Brian Hurwitz, "as if ... visualizing pain," *International Journal of Epidemiology* 32, no. 5 (1 Oct. 2003), p. 704, accessed June 2015, doi: 10.1093/ije/dyg283.

<sup>123</sup> Barbara J. Sahakian and Julia Gottwald, *Sex, Lies, and Brain Scans: How fMRI reveals what really goes on in our minds*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017, pp. 13-23.

seeing is believing, unless you don't believe in seeing. Before the recent advancements within neuroscience that have created the possibility of neuronal mapping networks, the brain has historically been understood using technological metaphors. As Catherine Malabou argues, the brain's inner workings were often described in mechanistic terms as an apparatus for doing.<sup>124</sup> The brain was believed to relay precise mirror-like actions, and as Malabou observes, it was viewed as 'a central communication system with a computer-like mechanism for running its programmes,' which she further describes in detail to situate how these metaphors are born out of a centralised concept of the brain that sees it as a machine, operating through a top-down processing system.<sup>125</sup> These metaphors have been used for centuries as a means of understanding the ways in which the body and its bodily functions work and extend into understandings of the body in pain to make it into something that makes sense.

Bodily pain is explored extensively in literature, as scholar Jeremy Davies illustrates using examples from the Romantic period and pre-surgical anaesthesia, including Marquis de Sade, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, and P. B. Shelley. Davies describes bodily pain as 'an experience that calls attention to our background sense of embodied existence, and hence as a reflexive feeling of our capacity for feeling'.<sup>126</sup> Pain according to Davies is 'both extraordinarily intimate and extraordinarily, irreducibly alien because it draws our attention to the most elementary level of our perceptual power yet gets in the way of that perception'.<sup>127</sup> He calls for a re-learning of how both the mind and body relate to pain. He wants to situate, it as a sensation (rather than an emotion) that is inextricably bound to either the physical or mental. Davies' work on pain draws on a variety of cultural histories of pain looking within and beyond the medical humanities. In a project titled *The Birkbeck Pain Project* carried out by a team of researchers between January 2011 to December 2013, at Birkbeck University of London, situates a twentieth century view of pain, through exploring the tensions between looking at, seeing, and observing pain. Funded by the Wellcome Trust, it attempted to advance understandings of corporeality and culture by exploring the complex biomedical, neurological, psychological, cognitive, and sensory aspects of 'the body in pain'.<sup>128</sup> The scale of pain is immeasurable. Visualisations of pain have to consider the context within which pain is situated as it is largely mediated through a non-verbal scale, encompassing feelings of discomfort. What *the Birkbeck Pain Project* established is that although

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<sup>124</sup> Catherine Malabou, *What Shall We Do with Our Brains?* trans. Sebastian Rand (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008), p. 7.

<sup>125</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 4.

<sup>126</sup> Jeremy Davies, *Bodily Pain in Romantic Literature* (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), p. 2.

<sup>127</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 24.

<sup>128</sup> Introduction to *The Birkbeck Pain project*, online, <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/history/our-research/birkbeckpainproject>.



pain is immeasurable, it is observable across localised topographies, such as facial expressions and human actions. Even though these expressions of pain are an incomplete picture of pain, they can be read to show that they are governed by cultural rules defining the ways in which expressions of pain are acceptable. Furthermore, at the core of the project is the understanding that physical and psychic pain offer different models for interpreting the levels of meaning of pain.

Central to this thesis are medical and religious histories contributing to understandings of pain. Joanna Bourke's, *The Story of Pain from Prayer to Painkillers* (2014), is a book written after extensive research at Birkbeck looking at pain in the Anglo-American world from the 1760s to the present. Burke considers a profusion of testimonies expressive of pain and discomfort that is both bodily and mental. This was achieved through readings of memoirs, letters, poems, songs, prayers, stories, images framing pain through philosophical and scientific investigations. Burke develops a historical account informed by ways in which pain has been articulated, endured and comprehended over centuries. Bourke works within the approaches of Scarry, contesting and also furthering the Scarryian view on pain. Her approach demonstrates a wide engagement across different disciplines. She not only uses the research of doctors and scientists in her inquiry, but also writers and poets, who give a vivid account of what it is to be in pain. Furthermore, she quotes several academic authorities, such as Scarry, Sontag, Morris, Rey, to demonstrate that pain, while a universal phenomenon, is neither adequately described nor evaluated by universal positions. Bourke's study in universals is divided into thematic chapters, including diagnosis, relief, sympathy, estrangement, diagnosis, gesture, religion. My focus has been on estrangement, metaphor and religion for this thesis as applied to performance art. I now give a summary of each of these sections to establish their relevance to my argument.

In the section of the book that explores estrangement, Bourke analyses surgery and surgeons. She begins in the late nineteenth century, when medical professionals treated patients without anaesthetics or analgesics. She writes about the mastectomy performed without anaesthetic on the novelist Fanny Burney, who, in writing a letter to her sister, describes the procedure as "the most torturing pain," to which she needed no injunctions to restrain her cries.<sup>129</sup> Bourke reveals that throughout history, surgeons have been notable for their lack of sympathy, even exhibiting sentiments of cruelty towards their patients, which she describes using William Nolan's *An Essay on Humanity; Or a View of Abuses in Hospitals* (1780), where Nolan castigates nurses and doctors for their lack of 'sensibility' and 'compassionate attention,' meaning large

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<sup>129</sup> Bourke, "The Distress of Pain-Narrative" in *The Story of Pain*, p. 34.

sections of the medical profession remained thoughtless in their treatment of people-in-pain.<sup>130</sup>

In the section of the book on gestures Bourke argues that they move pain beyond language and into non-verbal communication. She defines gestures as inarticulate utterances, facial expressions, postures, and other non-linguistic movements of the body.<sup>131</sup> She views physiology as “profoundly affected by culture and metaphors,” for example, the theory dominant pre-19th century, gave rise to Thomas Gray’s description of pain’s ‘wandering throughout his “constitution” until they fix into the Gout.’<sup>132</sup> Furthermore, the temperament of the individual, food, weather and personal relationships, are all affected by the experience of pain, which arise(s) in the context of complex interactions within the environment, including interactions with objects and other people. War, for example, has a long history as a useful metaphor for pain. These metaphors exist long before technological advances led to mechanical imagery supplanting it. Bourke cites John Donne’s book *Devotions upon Emergent Occasions* (1624), where illness is represented as a physical conflict between kingdoms.<sup>133</sup> Bourke explores how the poet George Herbert also used the metaphor of violent battle to describe psychological pain.

Bourke explores how religion’s long history of conscripting pain into its orthodoxy gives it a role which teaches submission to the powerful, both in this life and the afterlife. She illustrates this with biblical verses and considers the relationship between the church and the clinic. She recalls the story of Joseph Townsend, a child labourer in Lancashire in the nineteenth century. Townsend’s right arm was stuck to his body due to a serious childhood burn and she retells of how he came to terms with a series of ‘brutal “medical” interventions by reflecting on his “past wickedness” in resisting the Holy Spirit, and by weeping, singing hymns, reading the Scriptures and looking forward to the time when his feet would again stand within the gates of Zion.’<sup>134</sup> Other examples that Bourke explores include that of the philanthropist John Brown who in 1777, after being hit by a runaway horse wrote ““Do me good, oh God! By this painful affliction may I see the great uncertainty of health ease and comfort that all my Springs are in Thee,” whilst, William Nolan, writing in 1786, exhorts the clergy to visit patients in charitable hospitals in order to admonish them from a repetition of those irregularities, which perhaps laid the foundation of their present sickness.’<sup>135</sup> As Bourke demonstrates, these accounts show how little sympathy is present in both religious and medical understandings of pain. In turn, I argue that they have

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<sup>130</sup> Ibid., p. 235.

<sup>131</sup> Ibid., p. 159.

<sup>132</sup> Ibid., p. 72.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., p. 74.

<sup>134</sup> Bourke, *The Story of Pain*, p. 89.

<sup>135</sup> Ibid.

contributed to the willing suppression of expressions of pain. Against this history of the religious restriction of the public expression of pain, in performing pain art can then act as a platform to communicate suppressed pain. The performing body in pain becomes representative of expressing its complexities that cannot always be represented through language alone. With self-inflicted pain and actions, artists are able to protest and make the case for a non-anaesthetised view of the body, thus problematizing its discourse as it relates to memory, trauma, and gender.

In her book, *Translating Pain: Overcoming the Ineffability of Pain* (2011), the literary scholar Lucy Bending explores pain from an audience's perspective. She states that pain is both as elusive as it is commonplace. She holds, like Scarry, that pain escapes language, as it leaves the sufferer bemused at the brute fact of its inexpressibility.<sup>136</sup> Bending supports Scarry's arguments on pain's complexity and curiosity, but she disagrees with the view that language is destroyed by pain. She raises the question, are words any use in describing 'the moment'? Words, according to Bending, only refer to memory, which is characterised as the moment when the immediate experience of pain has finished.<sup>137</sup> Arguing that there is no real translation of the brute bodily experience (unless through metaphors), she is more interested in exploring the possibilities and limitations of language that is beyond metaphors as a means for testing the limitations of Scarry's text through the coalescence of sufferers and theorists' words. In contrast to both Bending and Scarry, the author Virginia Woolf speaks of pain's inexpressibility and resistance to language. She writes of how love is readily expressed through the words of poets like Shakespeare and Keats but trying to describe pain causes conflicting views as to what it is.<sup>138</sup> The discussion that follows and closes this section on the cultures of pain looks towards some of the interdisciplinary explorations and practices of pain, specifically through the lens of representing pain.

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<sup>136</sup> Lucy Bending, *Translating Pain: Overcoming the Ineffability of Pain*, Rhetorics of Pain: Historical Reflections podcast (University of Reading, 21 May 2011), <http://www.bbk.ac.uk/history/our-research/birkbeckpainproject/events>.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.

<sup>138</sup> Consider Virginia Woolf's description of pain from *The Waves* she writes "For pain words are lacking. There should be cries, cracks, fissures, whiteness passing over chintz covers, interference with the sense of time, of space; the sense also of extreme fixity in passing objects; and sounds very remote and then very close; flesh being gashed and blood spurting, a joint suddenly twisted - beneath all of which appears something very important, yet remote, to be just held in solitude." in Virginia Woolf, *Selected Works of Virginia Woolf* (Wordsworth Editions Ltd, 2005), p. 763.

### 2.15 Representing Pain and its challenges

The development of photography, particularly within the context of reportage, has contributed greatly to providing imagistic evidence of conflicts and acts of genocide across the globe. This, in turn has informed theories of witnessing and studies of trauma, as theoretical disciplines that provide ways for victims to speak. As Sontag, McCormack and others have proposed, to speak from the position of a victim, is to bear witness from a first-hand experience of pain and suffering. Situating and reframing this affective and emotional situation of the individual, who witnesses pain-performances within the sphere of art frames them not just as viewer, but by taking part they are also as witness-participant. From the perspective of the witness-participant, pain is framed within a wider social, cultural, political and historical context.

In past centuries, pictures of the living, conscious body consisted of the opening of skin to reveal what is inside. As the art historian James Elkins observes, after the development of these anatomical images of dissected body parts and bodily functions, more recently it is developments in medical technology and nanotechnology that has presented us with live bodily images.<sup>139</sup> He argues that images revealing the insides of bodies act as a powerful sign of death, and there are particularities when looking into places where the insides become visible in bodily orifices, such as nostrils, ears, vaginas, anuses, and mouths. The inside is by definition not seen, which is why performance art becomes useful for critical discussions on the body as an inner space where thoughts are enacted and given visibility. Elkin's concludes that performance allows for the extremes of the body to be given new kinds of visibility. The history of western performance art (beginning in the late 1960s to early 1970s) was a period where artists deconstructed an anaesthetised worldly image of the body through using the body as an artistic medium<sup>140</sup>. The body became an object or surface for projecting emotions and I now focus on *The Art of Cruelty* by Maggie Nelson, a key text and important contribution for moving towards a multi-perspectival inquiry on pain and its representations across disciplines.

The writer and cultural critic, Maggie Nelson's recent work on the representations and aesthetics of violence explores representations of cruelty and violence in art from literature to performance art across an artistic landscape. It offers a model for thinking through how one might balance ethical considerations with a strong appreciation for works that test the limits of taste and

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<sup>139</sup> James Elkins, *Pictures of the Body: Pain and Metamorphosis* (Stanford California: Stanford University Press, 1999), p. 102.

<sup>140</sup> RoseLee Goldberg's *Performance Art; From Futurism to the Present*, first published in 1979, was the first publication to establish an Avant Garde, historical precedence for performance art. Artist Linda M. Montano wrote "A Performance at Timeline" as a response to Goldberg's publication. See "A Performance Art Timeline (Roselee Goldberg): Thoughts on performance art (Linda M. Montano)," in Linda Montano, *Letters from Linda M. Montano* (Routledge: New York, 20015), p. 136.

taboo, whilst also making sense of the present time of the ‘image flow’ via the internet which serves as a platform for an array of social causes as well as an entertainment source. By reframing the history of the avant-garde in terms of cruelty, Nelson takes on modernism, and later postmodernism’s most cherished systems of belief - religion and law to set grounding for a post-avant-garde aesthetics where cruelty poses the challenge of being cruel to oneself versus cruelty directed at another. Nelson argues that within this restaging the issue becomes one of consent.<sup>141</sup> She writes in relation to Burden’s *Shoot*:

In my book, I do a lot of work to try and think harder about certain kinds of issues of what we might call shooting as an act of self-harm. There are a lot of different forms of self-harm in art, and otherwise, and if the person is wanting it to be done to them, there are a lot of questions that get raised about who, why and when would it be appropriate to step in to not do to a body what it would want done to it.<sup>142</sup>

Nelson and Burke (discussed above in relation to *The Birkbeck Pain Project*) raise important questions on the balance of ethics and appreciation of works that test the limits of tastes, taboo and permissibility. Self-inflicted pain used in performance art is central of to my research because it questions the body’s subjective identification and categorisation as fixed. The body is in continual metamorphosis due to social, political and technological changes, which in turn informs cultural presentations of self. My research considers art theories relating to the body surveyed by key thinkers in this field but inevitably looks to historical, philosophical, and theoretical debates on the body in performance art and the body in relation to ‘flesh’. In performance art, flesh is presented as absolute presence, but it can only be perceived through a reflective bearing.<sup>143</sup> Furthermore, theories on the body in performance art and the use of dramatized pain, as Carlson argues, serve as a means to get at the consciousness of the person who inhabits the body. It thereby acts as a call to action aimed at the spectator. This is central to works by pain-performance artists. I am further narrowing narrow this scope by looking at pain-based performances borne out of underground movements and marginalised groups that have now been transferred into the realm of contemporary art.<sup>144</sup> These performance works have contributed greatly to the ongoing and

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<sup>141</sup> Maggie Nelson, *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning* (W.W. Norton: New York, 2011), p. 108-10.

<sup>142</sup> Maggie Nelson on “*The Art of Cruelty*” transcript from Maggie Nelson talks to Steve Paulson about her new book, *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning*, The Best of Knowledge radio (30 Oct. 2011), <http://www.ttbook.org/book/maggie-nelson-art-cruelty>.

<sup>143</sup> See Falk Heinrich discussions on the non-semiotic intertwinement of ‘flesh’ in art perception and theory based on communication theory in performance art (body art) in his essay “Flesh as Communication – Body Art and Body Theory,” *Contemporary Aesthetics* 10 (2012), <http://hdl.handle.net/2027/spo.7523862.0010.012>.

<sup>144</sup> The word ‘marginalised’ one can argue, simplifies a wide range of range of art practices and artists existing outside of or separate from the heteronormative positions of privilege. The term flattens out the

evolving theoretical discourse on the body in performance art due to (but not limited to) their focus on gender, race, illness and sexuality. This research focuses on works of performance art where pain is readily observed by the viewer but is further complicated by the subjective nature of trying to theorise pain and situating a framing in introducing the term ‘pain-based performance’ and the problems associated with trying to single out an all-encompassing definition for pain. To expand on this further, in the consequent section I explore the specific relations between pain and performance art.

## 2.2 Curating Live Art

Curating largely falls under the history of exhibition where the single figure curator or uber-curator appears in positions of authorship where he or she speaks of and for the object (in a museum-gallery context) produced. Today, the curatorial voice is one that constructs a form of authority and in turn legitimises the curator as author of an exhibition. Writers including David Blazer have queried this rise of “curatorial-authoritarianism” as an expanding commodification of presented and pre-scripted experiences and sensations. Michael Archer, on the other hand, writing about the history of art and exhibition-making observes that ‘art today finds itself in a radically altered environment which is fluid and keeps changing.’<sup>145</sup> This fluidity raises questions on what to produce and how to display. Questions artists and curators continually have to answer. In my role as a curator of performance, I continually think through ways of interpreting art moving beyond the traditional art object or art and into the space of the exhibition for which live art embodies, transforms and in some cases, alters the perception of space itself. As curators are primarily responsible for the space on an exhibition, we have to answer these questions related to space and the dynamics created, in my case, in the performance space.

The history of curating since the 1960s has seen a shift in the role of curator from ‘anonymous back stage,’ to the ‘role of production,’<sup>146</sup> and several authors, notably scholar, Paul O’Neil, observe that the 1960s marked the period of significant shift in the role of curators; firstly, their beginnings in the white cube, and secondly, how curators took on a more artistic or creator-like

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complexities and variations of individual bodies based on gender, race, health status, sexuality which within contemporary art categorisations places works outside of the canon.

<sup>145</sup> Michael Archer, *Art Since 1960* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2006), p. 9.

<sup>146</sup> Karen Gaskill, “Curatorial Cultures – Considering Dynamic Curatorial Practice,” *ISEA - The 17th International Symposium on Electronic Art*, Istanbul, Turkey, 14- 21 Sep. 2011 (Unpublished), p. 14, <http://shura.shu.ac.uk/4441/1/KGaskill.pdf>.

role and became the now familiar figure at the forefront of contemporary exhibitions.<sup>147</sup> Towards the end of this period, new types of formats outside of the white-cube proliferated meaning the activities curators increased exponentially. In 1972, curator Daniel Buren wrote *Exhibition of an Exhibition*, in which he claimed ‘that the subject of an exhibition tends not to be the display of artworks, but rather, the exhibition of the exhibition as a work of art.’<sup>148</sup> One can argue that the role of the curator evolves alongside developments in Western Art beginning with curator as conservator to the current role of both subject and producer of the discourse of art.

As contemporary art moved towards performance, the verb ‘to curate’ now takes on a performative definition linked to the performativity of the exhibition itself as I describe later in chapter dedicated to O’Brien’s life and work. Martin O’Brien’s performance, *Taste of Flesh*, continues this lineage of exhibition within and exhibition that began in the 1960s, and in my curatorial capacity, I observed that the work unfolded expected and unexpected ways with instances where both artists and audience members performed the exhibition, which, as it progressed, it tuned into a space existing between a participatory performance and an installation. This signals at a process-oriented performance-specific space particularly pertaining to the durational and participatory aspect of *Taste of Flesh* that demanded a new format (quarantine-like space) specific to this work.

In curating the performance, alongside organising video and photographic documentation; and collating the audience responses, I wanted to actively engage with the voice of the audience as a way to introduce to this writing the audience’s ability to speak for themselves, not just as a listener or watcher but to strengthen their position as enabling and completing the work. This meant I actively engaged with the pragmatic sides of realising this new commission, including finding a suitable space for this encounter to occur which ended up taking place in London’s White Building, alongside facilitating the construction of a purpose-built performance space as requested by the artist. Further responsibilities included, together with The Arts Catalyst and TMIAA, organising a post-performance panel discussion with an ethics committee debating with the artist and audience, the ethical issues raised by O’Brien’s work, specifically the implications witnessing pain has on the viewers, and the level of care towards both artist and audience. Curating in my opinion provides a platform for a multiplicity of voices and in *Taste of Flesh*, particularly in the ethics discussion following the performance, my intention was to facilitate a conversation enabling a full breadth of meaning of the work without one voice being more

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<sup>147</sup> Paul O’Neil, “The curatorial turn: from practice to discourse,” in Judith Rugg and Michele Sedgwick eds., *Issues in Curating Contemporary Art and Performance* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co. Ltd), p. 243.

<sup>148</sup> Daniel Buren, *Where are the Artists?* E-flux/Revolver (2004).

authoritative than another. In recognising the audience's voice and in putting myself in the role of curator-as-witness, this revealed the complexity of O'Brien's live work and a need to avoid pre-empting fixed outcomes which leads to a monologue on the meaning of live art experience.

### 2.3 Pain and Performance Art

The present time demands a self-standing history of the hurt(ful) body, illustrated through staging practices as well as material images (paintings, sculptures, prints), and addressing practices of making, acting and viewing; censorship and divulgation; collecting, directing and interpreting. Through a cross/interdisciplinary focus, contemporary performance art practice addresses imaginaries of the hurt body recovered through stage praxis, visual representation and dramatic text. An exploration of archival sources documenting (theatrical) communication between audiences and 'hurt bodies', or exploring public and elite spaces of performance, urban events and exhibition sites where Diderot and Ancient Régime audiences experienced such encounters.<sup>149</sup>

Pain-performance art, through understanding pain-actions in this thesis seeks to offer a feminist examination of the male performing body demonstrating through vulnerability and generosity of these artists works, new perspectives on the body can occur. Pain's presence in performance art is contested due to the different forms of opening up the body through violent means, such as cutting, wounding, scarring and bruising. All of which raise questions centred on, as Nelson observes, who, why, and when, with the latter alluding to appropriateness of preventing a body from doing what it would want done to it. The art historical framing I am working with here includes understandings of pain in the context of consensual actions that occur in a controlled setting, where artists are able to use their bodies to convey and contest issues concerning bodily governance and socio-cultural and political issues of the times. This discussion falls into two parts. The first considers the body in art, a huge topic and the subject of many book-length survey including Kathy O'Dell's *Contract with the Skin* (1998), Amelia Jones's two books *Body Art/Performing The Subject* (1998) and *Body Art* (1999), Lea Vergine's *Body Art and Performance: The Body as Language* (2000), Francesca Alfano Miglietti's *Extreme Bodies: The Use and Abuse of the Body in Art* (2003), Jane Blocker's *What the Body Cost: Desire, History and Performance* (2004), Bernadette Wegenstein's *Getting under the Skin* (2006), Sally O'Reilly's *The Body in Contemporary Art* (2009) and Tracy Warr and Amelia Jones' *The Artist's Body* (2012), grounded here in perspectives relevant to discussions of pain and performance art

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<sup>149</sup> Abstract for conference *The Hurt(ful) Body Before Diderot. Pain and Suffering in Early Modern Performance and the Visual Arts (c. 1600-1790)*, Event Date: 21– 22 Nov. 2013 at Brussels, Royal Flemish Academy of Belgium for Science and the Arts, available at <http://www.hurtfulbody.ugent.be/programme>.



that ensue. The following section addresses the performing body in pain. It offers a general overview of the existing literatures on pain and performance art before taking up a series of specific themes including the body in pain, visualising pain, discussions of self-inflicted pain, and overlooked bodies in pain, exploring these through a combination of literature and artworks.

### 2.31 The body in art

The period between the late 1960s and early 1970s presented a moment of rupture for artists in America and Europe, the aftermath of which saw the pre-War European avant-garde art movement Dada, call for both the metaphorical and actual destruction of art. Dada was not a definable style of art but was a form of art anarchy that emerged from contempt at the dominant social, cultural, and political values at the time. Geography scholar, Alistair Bonnet observes that Dada had limitations:

Dada failed to break out the physical and temporal limitations of the hall-based or gallery-based performance which was symptomatic of their inability to fully emancipate themselves from the terrain of art as their main media of expression, such as the poem, the painting, or the recital, remained unashamedly arts based, moreover, many Dadaists carried out their revolt in the name of art.<sup>150</sup>

The body has always been a central focus in performance art. The term ‘Body Art’ was coined by the curator and art critic Lea Vergine in 1974 to connote practices where an artist posits themselves as object, allowing for a critical process whereby the individual ‘faces up to death, through life, whilst rummaging around in its under and seamy sides, bringing to light the secret and the hidden.’<sup>151</sup> The body is viewed here as porous. It has an interior and exterior materiality and elements of private and public that can be made visible and performed. Whilst important work has been done within performance art theory to further the discourse on the performing body as demonstrated in the texts as I have mentioned, more recent scholarship in the last decade readdresses the exclusions of certain artists within the canon through engaging with works by artists who use their bodies in radical ways either as a part of subcultural movements including body modification, scarification and tattooing, alongside bringing their health status, such as bringing illness and disability into the discourse on performing bodies as observed in Victoria Pitts’ *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification* (2001), Petra Kupperts’ *Disability and Contemporary Performance: Bodies on Edge* (2003), and her more recent study *The Scar of Visibility: Medical Performances and Contemporary Art* (2007).

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<sup>150</sup> Alastair Bonnett, “Art, ideology, and everyday space: subversive tendencies from Dada to post modernism,” *Environment and Planning: Society and Space* 10 (1992), p. 73, <http://epd.sagepub.com/content/10/1/69.abstract?id=d100069>.

<sup>151</sup> Lea Vergine, *Body art and performance* (Milano: Skira 2000), p. 9.

The body is continually caught up in discussions at the intersection of art, technology and culture (body and identity politics), with familiar categorisations and labels including ‘technological’, ‘gendered’, ‘historicised’, ‘politicised’, ‘aestheticised’, ‘performing’, ‘fragmented’, ‘hurt’ and ‘objectified’ all being examples that signal, as scholar Elena Chrysochou observes ‘the inescapable historical discursivity of the body from a phenomenological, Western metaphysics of presence to a de-subjectify semiotics, to a postmodern revision of notions of embodiment, where the body (as well as identity) is relegated to fictive, dialogical or constantly emerging shifting positions.’<sup>152</sup> Some performances where pain features as a theme are indicative of works commenting upon cultural issues that deal with gender, sexuality, identity and conflict which I will discuss in detail through specific case studies later in this review.

Body Art, according to scholar Amelia Jones, emerged from performance art practices. She defines the term as ‘a set of performative practices that, through intersubjective engagement, instantiates the dislocation or decentring of the Cartesian subject of modernism.’<sup>153</sup> This definition by Jones highlights the shift and separation of Body Art practices from modernist thought that had emphasized on engaging with art predominately and solely through visual perception where the eyes are a validation of and for what they see. By contrast within Body Art, the whole body is a communicative tool. The term signals a move towards art forms that affect both the sensory and emotional, alongside engaging bodies existing in space and time. In this way, Body Art might be viewed as a destruction or rebellion against modernist thinking and concerned with embodied experiences of the performer and viewer.<sup>154</sup> Flesh and the material take precedence and the body in this context, becomes a communicative vector. One that is transmitted and exists in the world.

Body Art is used to communicate and destroy bodily understandings, meanings and categorisations, as well as preconceived notions of the body. In this context the body is no longer as historically perceived as a sacred object for the containment and protection of flesh. It is rather an active political site where the personal is political.<sup>155</sup>

This section of my thesis begins with this moment of rupture, at the turning point where

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<sup>152</sup> Panayiota Chrysochou, “At the Cutting Edge Between Semiology and Phenomenology: Performances of ORLAN and Franko B,” *Leitura Flutuante: Journal at the Centre for Studies in Semiotics and Psychoanalysis* 4, no. 2 (2012), pp. 41-74.

available online at <http://revistas.pucsp.br/index.php/leituraflutuante/article/view/11383/10052>

<sup>153</sup> Amelia Jones, *Body Art/performing the Subject*, (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press 1998), p.11.

<sup>154</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, Routledge, 1993, pp. 147-160.

<sup>155</sup> ‘The Personal is Political’ is a now familiar and often cited phrase in reference to the use of ‘the body’ in performance. It was first introduced by the feminist Carol Hanisch, appearing in New York Radical Women’s *Notes from the Second Year* in February of 1969. This essay addressed a primary issue that hovered over the feminist movement: is consciousness-raising a form of political action? Hanisch argued for the importance of recognising the need for fighting male supremacy rather than blaming the individual woman for her oppression and to understand that such oppressive situations are not her fault.

shifting perspectives and artistic concerns moved into an identity politics centred on making visible racial injustices, sexual differences, disease, stigmatisation, and gender wars. I begin with works that were materialized in the period between the late 1960s to early 1970s, a period recognised and used as a reference point by Western performance art historians, theoreticians and scholars (Jones, O'Reilly and Vergine) as 'the breakaway point' from traditional artistic modes of practice that brought the body to the foreground as subject-object. During this period, artists used and responded through their bodies to wider political issues that were of concern to them. The body became viewed, as scholar Andrew Quick argues, as the 'ground where the real may be encountered and felt in the late Western capitalist, mediated culture of the unreal.'<sup>156</sup> By including examples of artists who use pain and also sit outside of the familiar performance art histories, this thesis demonstrates, frames and grapples with the difficulties inherent in trying to establish a universal definition and understanding of pain as it correlates with pain-performances that are manifested through self-inflicted actions on the body. The difficulties and challenges of defining and classifying pain, reveals that the fixity of pain as impossible due to its continually shifting and changing social, cultural, and political status. In the common analysis of performance artworks where pain is present, a variety of common terms are used to describe the work, such as 'endurance', 'durational', 'masochistic', 'hardship', 'hurt', 'extreme' art. These terms are used when pain can be readily identifiable as being present and validated through the witnessing of such works. This notion is further complicated by actions that allude to and instigate images of pain, most observable in artworks where cutting, wounding, piercing, or bloodletting are present. Elkins' inquiry into pain and its perception is useful to consider again here as reminds us that in the past, few pictures outside of anatomical drawings showed us the living conscious body, through 'opening the skin to reveal what was inside.'<sup>157</sup> Elkins further argues that whilst there are medical videos showing insides, news footage of torn-maimed bodies, alongside fake wounds within cinema, and some performance art practices, all form examples of images that are too painful to watch due to the simple fact that 'showing the inside of a body, is a powerful sign of death.'<sup>158</sup>

### 2.32 The body in pain- pain in performance art

Scholarship on pain-performance is beginning to emerge with recent interdisciplinary contributions pain, disability and cultural theory in texts including Nelson's *The Art of Cruelty*:

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<sup>156</sup> Andrew J. Quick, 'Taking Place: Encountering the Live', in *Live: Art and Performance* (London: Tate Publishing 2004).

<sup>157</sup> James Elkins, "Cut Flesh" in *Pictures of the Body*, p. 109.

<sup>158</sup> Ibid.

*A Reckoning* [year] and Carlson's *Performing Bodies in Pain: Medieval and Post-modern Martyrs, Mystics, and Artists* [year] all of which are important examples of furthering pain-cultural theory. In *Performing Bodies in Pain*, Carlson takes the reader on a journeying through pain's histories, its causes and effects, and the ways that pain (both real and imitated) can be used in performance art. She considers how the art of Ron Athey fits within the framework of publicly displaying pain. In the chapter, 'Whipping Up Community', masculinity and the formations of group identity formed by pain are discussed in Giovanni del Biondo's triptych *The Martyrdom of St Sebastian and Scenes From His Life* (c.1370), alongside Ron Athey and Juliana Snapper's *Judas Cradle*, 2004. Carlson reads Athey's work as contributing to a politics of outrage, as opposed to empathy, even though his works operate within the framework of community and in opposition to homophobia. In *Judas Cradle*, Athey responds to legitimization of torture for political use and Carlson reads his eroticised performance of pain against the heterosexual mainstream.

Whilst this thesis is grounded in theories that examine the birth and development of performance art in relation to gender, the body, language, and expressions of the self, it also considers origins of (extreme) pain-based actions across the body, as a specific type of communicative tool, one that creates a non-verbal language between the artist and viewer. Throughout this thesis I move between the terms 'self-inflicted pain' to speak of instances where painful actions are carried out on the body and result in visible traces on the skin, to 'self-inflicted actions' as reference to the act of cutting, wounding and bruising within live works witnessed by an audience. Some performance artists have mediated on pain by subjecting their bodies and minds to the most extreme actions, continually testing its limits by actions often perceived by audiences as painful to watch. These actions can be seen as extreme manifestations of rebellion and read as attempts destabilize the normative body image. We still continue to observe artists pushing their bodies to extremes through painful actions such as cutting, bloodletting, and physical force destroying that body which has been historically placed as sacred and fragile. The presence of the hurt body is one that accommodates diverse and perspectival shifting approaches of the early modern body, as a body in withdrawal, a communicative body in flux, or a body split in its desire to escape alterity, and the body as a corporeal prison. There is an observable divide between artists who acknowledge the use and relevance of pain in their performances and others who are adamant pain is not a consideration for them. Regardless of an artist's intentionality, the viewer is invited to subjectively engage with painful acts relating to their own bodily understanding of what this might feel like. Watching pain is an unavoidable embodied and self-reflective experience for audiences.

Physical pain has been used throughout the history of performance art with its beginnings rooted in experimental theatre practices associated with Antonin Artaud and Bertolt Brecht. Artaudian theatre favoured experiences that literally moved or shocked the viewer. In his 1932 manifesto for *Theatre of Cruelty* (1932), he discussed how the shocked body transforms the viewer into an awareness of the uncanny, which in turn opens up a space in the midst of reassuringly familiar forms. I am cautious of this Artaudian notion of ‘shock to transform’, as this might only provide a singular perspective on the varied and at times complex negotiation of experiences viewers have of works that are extreme in nature. Furthermore, shock often sensationalises an artwork leading to a turning away from close readings and engagements. Arguably, the shared concepts between experimental theatre and performance art cannot be denied, but theatrical tropes pertinent to performance practices, including duration and endurance provide useful and informative frameworks in furthering understandings of pain-based performances. In distinction to Artaud, Brecht is renowned for his commitment to ‘making strange’ normative experiences to enable a questioning and reflecting on what might otherwise appear normal in the dominant culture. He argues that the continuity of the ego is a myth and that a man is an atom that perpetually breaks up and forms anew. He coined the phrase ‘we have to show things as they are’ throughout his career and strongly adhered to the notion that it is not the responsibility of the actor to objectify what is human. What is objectified, according to his thinking are the relations between human beings that are made manifest in the *gestus*. One should not conceive of the *gestus* as a unified or pure act, it is rather that Brecht desires that every act contain the conditions of possibility for alternative action.<sup>159</sup> In focusing on these origins and the continual use of self-inflicted pain, its use is further problematized by the visible divide occurring between artists who recognise and celebrate pain within their work and others who do not. Artists including Ron Athey, Bob Flanagan, Gina Pane, and Marina Abramović, all mediate on pain’s presence. On the other hand, ORLAN, Franko B, and Stelarc completely reject it. This is further complicated by groups of artists who represent pain as an aesthetic through representations that draw heavily on theatre, as observed in the works of the Viennese Actionists, Carolee Schneemann, and Ana Mendieta where there is an emphasis on immersive environments and site-specific interventions that visually manifest pain and recreate it through durational, ritualistic use of paint, animal blood, or bodily fluids. Self-inflicted actions continue to elicit a range of visceral and visually recognisable responses including flinching, shuddering, gasping, shrieking, and the shutting of eyes when performed in front of an audience. Even when mediated via photography

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<sup>159</sup> Bertolt Brecht, “Brecht on Theatre” cited in Jon Erickson, “The Body as the Object of Modern Performance,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 5, no. 1 (Fall 1990), p. 233.

and film, some of these reactions still occur, making the viewer ponder why? In such acts of representation, the viewer takes on the role of reflective bearer of these corporeal experiences.

I focus on a critical overview of the ways self-inflicted pain have featured in art practices and continue to bear relevance to a younger generation of artists, alongside acknowledging what the implications of witnessing such works might have for the viewer. I also ask how one might engage with pain at the present, at a time of a highly digitized and technocratic culture where we observe the ready circulation of images of suffering. This raises important questions about how visceral-durational-endurance and pain-based performances operate, such as how might their relevance serve as a return to more tangible forms of the real? I look at the real human experiences of shock, affect, and empathy as reactions to performances of an extreme nature, which continue to be contested, validated and refuted by viewers of both the live and documented experiences of such works. I explore some of these elements in more depth through a concern with visualizing the body; a discussion of self-infliction, reflections on pain and overlooked bodies, as well as queries around pain, the body and aging in performance art.

## **2.4 Visualising pain: Opening up the body, feeling and seeing pain**

From a historical viewpoint, the body has been established as a site for exploration in both medicine and art practices. It has been displayed, examined, dissected and studied in various forms – as subject, object, or abject entity through ossuaries, medical collections, museums of pathology, and freak shows. Paintings of crucifixions, martyrdoms, and practices of flagellation have glorified the tortured body of Christians as physical reminders of extreme piety. The abnormal or monstrous body has been a trope in art since the medieval period, often identified with ideas of evil or sin. Anatomical bodies have been referenced and explored by artists since the Renaissance. With the popular explosion of performance art from the late the 1960s where bodily practices have been incorporated into site specific art, both inside and out of museums and galleries. Artists' bodies are offered up for our gaze, and sometimes for interaction. Although performance art originates in the early twentieth century, it was its exponents during the late 1960s that firmly aligned this practice with the site of the artist's body. At this time, the body became a new focus of culture, with the rise in sexual freedom and the accepted use of nudity in performances and art happenings. The cut in performance art became a signifier for the deconstruction of the body in art, alongside serving as a means of purification through a form of ritualistic bloodletting. One can trace the history of the staging of risk, suffering and death throughout the history of western art, but it was with Performance that live bodies tested their

limits in the most visceral and confrontational ways. The breaking of the skin through wounding, piercing, and cutting also serve as evidence of the writing stories onto skin, where traces are formed and contribute to making pain's invisibility visible through wounds, scars, and marks on the body's surface. This embracing of the bodily trace making through performance works has contributed to the historicisation of self-inflicted pain by artists including Gina Pane, ORLAN, Marina Abramović, Bob Flanagan, Chris Burden, Stelarc, Ron Athey, Franko B, and the Viennese Actionists with their *Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries* first performed in 1962. All these artists left behind a legacy of sexual, violent, or abject performances that have resulted in the creation of provocative and disturbing contemporary pieces that confront viewers with the vulnerabilities and limits of the living body.

Today, contemporary culture is suffused with images of the body. Idealised bodies are found throughout advertising and music videos, and the grotesque, transgressive and transfigured bodies can be found in contemporary art. As the scholar Catherine Spooner identifies:

Contemporary Gothic is more obsessed with bodies than in any of its previous phases: bodies become spectacle, provoking disgust, modified, reconstructed and artificially augmented" Today, culture's preoccupation with the body runs the gamut from horror films obsessed with the penetrated body, to subcultural style and body manipulation, and the increasing popularity of plastic surgery makeovers on mainstream television.<sup>160</sup>

In her analysis of a range of contemporary artists who utilise their own bodies as transgressive sites for performance, Spooner identifies that performances of Bob Flanagan, Ron Athey, Franko B, and the collaborations of Abramović and Ulay as challenges to the accepted tastes that break the boundaries of identity. She also explores other implications of using the body as the site of art, such as tropes of torture, pain, and body modifications. These are employed as ways for contesting the parameters of what the bodily limits are and of what is acceptable in contemporary art practice and extending into life. The testing of bodily limits as a process of undoing by performance artists is aptly articulated by Judith Butler when she states:

Let's face it, we are undone by each other. And if we're not, we're missing something. One does not always stay intact. One may want to, or manage for a while, but despite one's best efforts, one is undone in the face of the other by the scent, the feel, by the prospect of touch, by the memory of the feel.<sup>161</sup>

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<sup>160</sup> Catherine Spooner, "Contemporary Gothic," cited in Tracey Fahey, *A Taste for the Transgressive: Pushing Body Limits in Contemporary Performance Art*, M/C Journal 17, no.1 (2014), p.781, <http://journal.media-culture.org.au/index.php/mcjournal/article/view/781>.

<sup>161</sup> Judith Butler, "Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence" cited in McCormack, *Queer Postcolonial Narrative* (London: Bloomsbury 2014), p. 1.

Butler's quote sets a precedent for critically engaging with how pain has and continues to be used by performance artists alongside considerations for how performing pain is witnessed by the viewer slipping across boundaries of physical art actions and an ethics of witnessing, where I argue, the viewer is left to contemplate at times complex negotiations of the effect (and affect) of such works. Self-inflicting pain through actions that included wounding, cutting, bruising, or modifying the body in a variety of ways, raises important questions on the ethics of witnessing and wider socially constructed meanings (protest, activism, medical care, self-harm and mutilation etc.) that might be associated with these actions, which, in a sense meaning are transferred from life and framed within an art context. Self-inflicted pain has been theorised in the context of body orifices and the wound, discussed and theorised within art and visual culture from historical (religious) paintings – with the iconography of Christian suffering beginning with the image of the wounded Christ to flagellants. Wounding has also been discussed in non-western ritualistic culture, alongside body modification practices that include tattooing, suspension, contorting, etc. as observed in works by artists including Fakir Musafar, Ron Athey, Franko B, Bob Flanagan, and Stelarc.<sup>162</sup> Performance scholar Amelia Jones has analysed several key pain performances as central to the artist's desire to establish a connection with the audience during performances. She argues:

While pain cannot be shared, its effects can be projected onto others such that *they* become the site of suffering [...] and the original sufferer can attain some semblance of self-containment (paradoxically, through the very penetration and violation of the body).<sup>163</sup>

Artists who use pain in their work, as scholar Tracey Fahey identifies, particularly when it is self-inflicted, raise several ethical questions centring on whether this form of pain amounts to self-harm? Is this ethical? And, importantly, is it within the boundaries of good and bad taste? The answer, it would seem, lies in a complex nexus of issues around agency, consent, and control and, of course, in the separation of art from life that occurs due to the act of performing itself. Fahey, drawing on artist Amanda Coogan, observes that '[t]he performance frame is contingent and temporary, holding the performer in a liminal, provisional and suspended place.'<sup>164</sup>

While performance artists readily mediate on bodily endurance and the performative limits, other artists who produce autobiographical, body-based performance can be located within the world of medical discourse and performed disability. One artist who subverts the boundaries

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<sup>162</sup> Amelia Jones, "Dispersed Subject" cited Fahey, 2014.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid., Fahey, "A Taste for the Transgressive: Pushing Body Limits in Contemporary Performance Art."

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.



of the body, and taste alike, is Ron Athey, the HIV-positive artist who makes performance work based on blood rituals, torture, and cutting whose work forms the focus of my first empirical chapter. His use of blood is central to his practice, and the fact that this blood, which is let through performances, contains the HIV virus, gives it a doubly abject aspect. Bob Flanagan's oeuvre also locates him in this tradition of artists who perform their disability on a public stage. Critics such as Koppers consider Athey and Flanagan as artists who subvert the medical gaze by refusing to accept the passive role of patient, and defiantly flaunting their abnormal bodies in the public arena. These bodies can also be considered as modified bodies. Sandahl has contextualised Athey's performance as going beyond the parameters of the human body. She states 'Athey's radical cyborg identity is a temporary mode of survival, an alternative way of being in there here and now.'<sup>165</sup> A body not interested solely in cure nor submissive to medical interventions. In *The Scar of Visibility: Medical Performances and Contemporary Art*, Koppers reflects on Flanagan and Athey's careers as disabled artists through examining how Flanagan constructs his identity as a chronically ill artist. Koppers recounts how Flanagan's pain-performances allowed him to avoid attracting the sentimental pity associated with illness, by replacing audience empathy with shock and revulsion. He highlights Flanagan's use of dark humour in his performances, such as through the use of songs in performances such as *Fun to be Dead (1997)*. This works to subvert the dominance of his illness. In fact, Flanagan's work often asserts his central belief that his relative longevity, i.e. the fact that he lived to the age of forty-three, a decade longer than most CF sufferers can be attributed to his ability to counter the pain of his chronic condition with his masochistic suffering.

There is an observable divide between artists who acknowledge that pain is a fundamental part of their practice, whilst others reject this or see the phenomenon more as a by-product or point of entry into complex social and political work. In any case, the effect of these actions is self-inflicted pain that produces a variety of visceral responses in audiences. The pain scholar Helge Meyer examines the relationship between pain and performance art in performances by Gina Pane, ORLAN, Kira O'Reilly, and Andre Stitt. He considers the perception and response to pain by asking the question: What is the image of pain in the arts? He tries to answer this question by considering the history of pain as one that has led to multiple definitions but is largely seen as an important essential experience, used to correct or signal. Meyer's account of pain accords with earlier pain theorists such as Scarry by stating that it has brought the personal to the public. Its history, tied to religion and other belief systems has led to an abrasion of an anaesthetised, worldly

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<sup>165</sup> Carrie Sandahl, "Performing Metaphors: Aids, Disability and Technology," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 11.3, no. 4 (2001), p. 59.

image of the body. In performing pain, performance artists bring to the foreground the individuality of the experience of pain. Individual pain is staged for public viewing. Pain and suffering from a historical-religious perspective is associated with being a direct result of disobedience against God, where its infliction is seen as a test or means toward redemption.

The artist Gina Pane's use of pain was predominantly for the destruction of an idealised image of the female body. Wounding herself with a razor, Pane saw this act as a maker or memorial of the body. Scars become visible testimony to the body's fragility. ORLAN, on the other hand, practices what we now classify as carnal art. For ORLAN, the body is presented as a modified readymade whose image is dictated by masculine views on female beauty. Through plastic surgery, i.e. the medical, cosmetic technology to transform the body, she manifests male projections of female beauty on herself. Kira O'Reilly explores the body as porous by exploring the distinctions between inside and outside as well as private and public, with the artist approaching the body as socio-political site, whilst for Andrea Still, autobiographical pain is performed as catharsis. When thinking about pain's presence in performances, several images circulate and reside in our memory. Burden being shot, Pane eating glass, Flanagan's sick bed, and Athey's printing press from *4 Scenes In A Harsh Life* (1994). All of these works by the artists described produce an image of something that is also simultaneously invisible as the pain in itself is not visible but in performing that which cannot be seen, they create moments of connectedness to another's pain.

## **2.5 Self-infliction in Performance Art**

The political function of wounding within the context of live and documented performances remains central to considering pain's metaphoric or conceptual function. The metaphoric presence of pain might be understood through a socio-cultural history dating back to the Middle Ages, a time when religious authorship of pain prevailed, which was then transferred into medicine due to the scientific revolutions of the nineteenth century. This section focuses on the historical and continual use of self-inflicted, physical pain by performance artists. I specifically focus on the act of self-inflicting pain onto the skin and actively engage with the breaking of the barrier separating inside from outside, as manifested through a cut, bruise or wound. These actions contribute to a form of bodily trace-making that elicits a variety of responses from the viewers of such performances, which in turn serves as a form of the unmaking and destabilizing of normal and

accepted representations of the body, i.e. one that favours the dominant masculine, heteronormative position (typically one of the white, heterosexual, and healthy male body).

I begin with a continuation of the consideration of the inability of language to fix and categorise it, and progress into discussions of a selection of key pain-performances past and present to explore the ways pain is visualized in performance art. I do so to reframe and avoid repeating the well-versed timeline of key pain-performances by highlighting works where ‘self-infliction’ is prominent. Key examples here include Marina Abramović, Chris Burden, ORLAN, Gina Pane, Ive Tabar, and Stelarc when there is a transference of responsibility to self-inflict from artist to the viewer (Kira O’Reilly). I query what are the images of pain within performance art and what kinds of pain are used. I critically consider key pain-performances spanning the last four decades that form recognisable (and not so recognisable) images of pain by artists. I then proceed to provide a specific critical overview of performing extreme actions in relation to the body as it ages, looking at Ron Athey, alongside the work of Rocio Boliver /La Congelada de Uva. Alongside this, I consider the continual presence and use of pain in works by younger generation of artists, including Regina Galindo, Carlos Martiel, Martin O’Brien, and Petr Pavlensky, all of whom are demonstrating its relevance within contemporary practices. Performance Art is somewhat bound to age, with the staging of the body favouring youth and virility. I explore this further through the works of Boliver and Athey, who I argue, challenge this position as they continue to work well into old age, thus making visible the stigmatisation and fears associated with presenting the body as it ages compounded by wider societal attitudes towards the body and its representations in terms of morality, taboo, and moral conduct in general. Exploring pain’s relevance at a time when visual culture is overloaded with easily-distributable images of the body in pain raises central questions including, are we now at a point of desensitization to such image-based representations, due to over-exposure to such images? What place does real performed pain have in this oversaturated environment where the real, digital, and re-enacted collide?

Painful acts on the body elicit a variety of responses that can range from shock or disgust, to distress or empathy. Reactions to self-inflicted pain are embodied and place the artist’s body as a central figure within the artwork. This emphasis on a return to embodied and visceral engagement with bodies is a direct reaction to and confrontation of prevalent injustices pertaining to the socio-cultural and political. Across the twentieth century, the horrors of two World Wars, nuclear threats, and overall feelings of malaise within exacerbated levels of suffering led many mid-twentieth century artists to the idea of destroying both metaphorically and physically, ideologies of the past and in a sense striving for new beginnings in art and life. Artists sought to remake society from new principles and destroying what had gone before. Destruction was seen

as a potent way of bringing attention to potent ideas and as capitalist consumerism promoted an ever-increasing level of producing goods, artists looked at ways to subvert the market and comment on the wasteful nature of mainstream ideals. Gustav Metzger proposed Auto-Destructive Art in the late 1950s as a creative possibility of disintegration and destruction. A notable event at the time was the *Destruction in Art Symposium*, which took place in London in 1966 and brought together artists, scientists, poets and performance. Artists that participated included the Viennese Actionists, John Latham, and Jeff Keen.

Reactions to self-infliction are continually contested as both live actions and documented images still possess the ability to force viewers into shutting their eyes, as these images are often very visible and visceral reminders of death and mortality through the ways they highlight the fragile physicality of the body. Through performances incorporating high levels of self-inflicted pain, artists used their bodies as communicative-protest tools to break down societal ideologies related to taboos and the challenging of public policies related to an individual's rights regarding their bodily self-ownership. These actions still form how pain is engaged with in performance art through documentation in video, texts and pictures that also serve as evidence for their occurrence and continue to serve as important ways for contemporary audiences to experiencing past performance work.<sup>166</sup> In their short-lived collaborative and collective career, the Viennese Actionists created some of the most drastic and literal performances of the body's violation which, as art and architecture historian Philip Ursprung argues, saw them radicalize and reinforce a post-war Austrian, Catholic male subject.<sup>167</sup> Their performances centred on quasi-religious references and aesthetic (and often controversial) rituals of rape, slaughter, and self-castration. Faeces, blood, food, and dead animal carcasses featured regularly in their live immersive works. The Viennese Actionists followed on from the violence passed down from the Dada movement and late modernist action painting. Their work is often discussed in terms of ancient mythology, shamanistic rituals, and an Artaudian approach to making. Hermann Nitsch describes their art as 'a total work where reality is staged, and all five senses of the participants and audience are claimed.'<sup>168</sup> Although, one could critique their work around ethical issues relating to consent that

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<sup>166</sup> I highlight the use of documentation as mediation to acknowledge that this survey relates to an analysis works through secondary sources, in other words I am aware of my position of reviewing performances that I have not experienced first-hand.

<sup>167</sup> See Philip Ursprung, "Catholic tastes: hurting and healing the body in Viennese Actionism in the 1960s" in Amelia Jones, *Body Art/performing the Subject* (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), pp. 138-152.

<sup>168</sup> As explained by Austrian artist Hermann Nitsch on founding *Das Orgien Mysterien Theatre* (*Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries*) in the 1950s.

arises in the act of how their work claims its audience. The group regarded performance as primal and life-affirming, and as a way to break down barriers regarding sex, death, and violence, with many of their acts remaining shocking and distressing even for today's standards.

In contrast to the Viennese Actionists, the artists Ron Athey and Bobby Flanagan use pain to draw attention to the personal experiences of living with illness and being marginalised through disability. Athey uses bloodletting as a means of confronting societal stigmatisation towards the body that carries AIDS through drawing referencing a history of plagues.<sup>169</sup> In comparison, Flanagan's work draws attention to the everyday experiences of living with Cystic Fibrosis (CF), a life-limiting disease, through counteracting the physical pain of the illness with his chosen adoption of a life-long engagement with BDSM.<sup>170</sup> Marina Abramović is now regarded as the godmother of performance art, but here early solo work dealt heavily with extreme acts of self-infliction through intentionally wounding her body. It is widely discussed in relation to how it demands the responsibility of her audience (**Fig.2**). In *Rhythm 0* (1974), Abramović performed a series of actions for 6 hours in Galleria Studio Morra, Naples. This performance saw Abramović allow the audience to do whatever they pleased to her body as she stood still the entire time. A selection of objects which included a rose, feather, perfume, honey, bread, grapes, wine, scissors, a scalpel, nails, a metal bar, and a gun loaded with one bullet were laid on a table in front of her for their use. As the documentation shows, the performance evolved into one of constructed trauma, ending with the artist holding a loaded gun against her own head, with tears in her eyes, her blouse pulled open to expose her breasts, and bleeding from a head wound. Abramović later commented that the performance 'was the heaviest piece I ever did because I wasn't in control. The audience was in control,' and she describes the responsibility of carrying on self-inflicted pain that relies solely on the audience being present by stating:

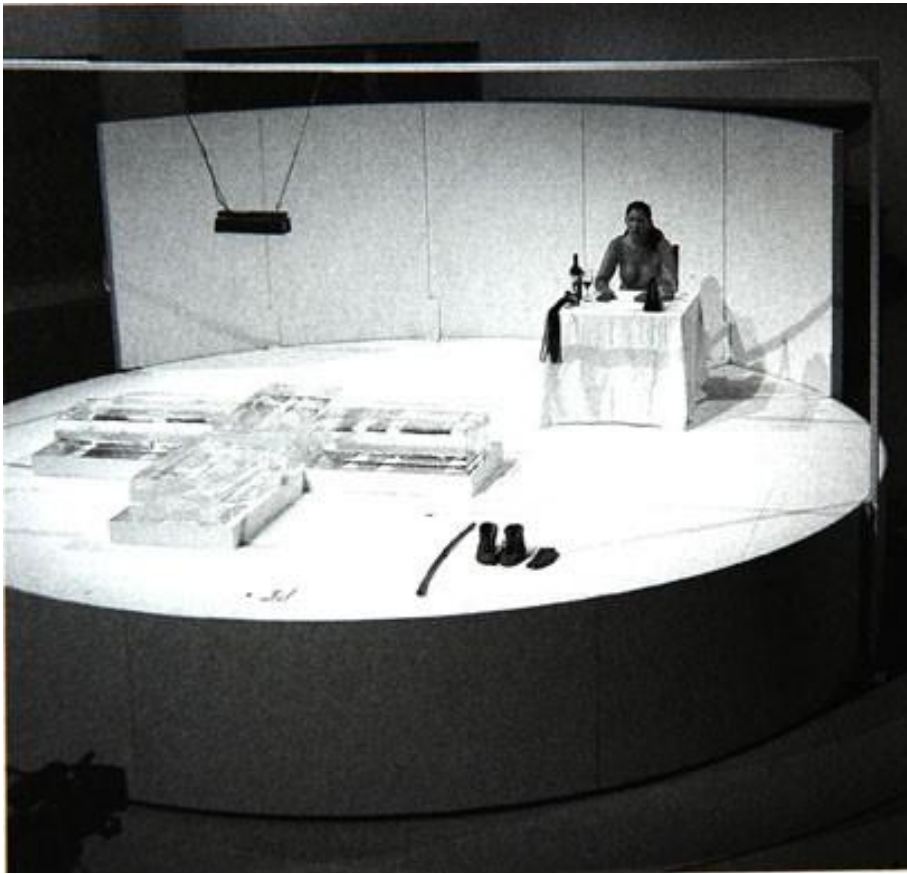
What I learned was that... if you leave it up to the audience, they can kill you." ... "I felt really violated: they cut up my clothes, stuck rose thorns in my stomach, one person aimed the gun at my head, and another took it away. It created an aggressive atmosphere. After

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<sup>169</sup> In her essay "Whipping Up Community," Marla Carlson analyses the oration of men's group identity through voluntary suffering which negotiates specific power structures. Carlson believes that Ron Athey embraces pain to form bonds in opposition to homophobia with his works first appearing during a period of AIDS hysteria. See Marla Carlson, *Performing Bodies in Pain: Medieval and Post-Modern Martyrs, Mystics, and Artists* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2011), pp. 77-101.

<sup>170</sup> For a chronicle of Bob Flanagan's final year by Flanagan see Bob Flanagan, *The Pain Journal* (MIT Press, 2000).

exactly six hours, as planned, I stood up and started walking toward the audience. Everyone ran away, to escape an actual confrontation.”<sup>171</sup>



**Fig.2 – Marina Abramović, *Lips of Thomas*, 1975, A two-hour durational performance at Galerie Krinzinger, Innsbruck, Courtesy of the artist.**

Another example of a work where the act of inflicting pain is passed on to an individual other than the artist, includes Chris Burden's *Shoot* (1971) which gained infamy for the artist as he photographed being shot in his left arm by a friend. Burden's *Shoot* instantly saw him labelled as a masochist, social therapist, hero, and a victim.<sup>172</sup> Regardless of the works he produced afterwards, he has become known as “the artist who shot himself, so although this performance may have involved him getting shot (we only know of it through documentation and anecdotal accounts), the title of “artist who shot himself” has far outlived the initial physical wound (**Fig. 3**). Thus, despite orchestrating the action, Chris Burden is not in control of how he or his art is

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<sup>171</sup> Marina Abramović speaking post-performance in Anna Daneri, Giacinto Di Pietrantonio et al. (eds), “Body Art,” *Marina Abramović* (Milan: Charta/Fondazione Antonio Ratti, 2002), pp. 27-39.

<sup>172</sup> Chris Burden's original description of his performance: “At 7:45 p.m. I was shot in the left arm by a friend. The bullet was a copper jacket 22 long rifle. My friend was standing about fifteen feet from me,” in Fraser Ward, “Gray Zone: Watching Shoot,” *October*, vol. 95 (Winter 2001), p. 114.

perceived. It is ultimately up to the viewer to determine the meaning of the work. *Shoot* and other acts of self-inflicted pain see Burden continually referred to as “quasi-masochistic” and “quasi-sadistic,”<sup>173</sup> this is despite his own explanations for his art suggesting otherwise. In a response to *The New York Times* article about *Shoot*, Burden suggests that ‘the masochist intends to hurt himself, that’s not my intent’.<sup>173</sup>



**Fig.3 – Chris Burden, *Shoot*, 1971, F Space, Santa Ana, California, Courtesy Electronic Arts Intermix (EAI), New York.**

As I have discussed previously, several artists acknowledge the presence of pain within their work (Flanagan, Viennese Abramović, Actionist, Athey, Boliver, Burden et, al.), whilst others (Franko B, Ulay, Stelarc, O’Reilly and ORLAN) refute its presence, stating that their works are not about pain and that it is not a central focus. Stelarc for example, refuses such framing of his works, even though like Burden’s *Shoot*, his ability to take pain has been immortalized through his *Street Suspension* (1984) piece performed above E11<sup>th</sup> Street, New York, where he was strung mid-air

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<sup>173</sup> Kathy O’Dell, “He Got Shot” in *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art, and the 1970s* (University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p. 4.

by sixteen shark hooks in various configurations. Stelarc described this performance as ‘*an escape of the bodies terra firma.*’<sup>174</sup> It formed part of two public performances which attracted large audiences. He describes it as such ‘after being hoisted up thirty meters all that could be heard was the whooshing of the wind, the whirring of the crane motors and the creaking of the skin.’<sup>175</sup> Whilst Stelarc acknowledges that the work might be viewed as painful, for him to perform is to collapse the distinction between mind and body. He furthers his argument by explaining that when a person is overwhelmed with pain their experiences resides in just the physical nature of their own bodies.<sup>176</sup> Stelarc continues to work with various advanced technologies, both mechanical and biological that serve as a way to exceed natural bodily limits. However, through documentation, his suspension works remain the most visible and prominent, situating his work within the context of performance history. ORLAN’s body modification, through use of plastic as opposed to cosmetic surgery, confronted idealised views of the female beauty. It is widely known that throughout her medical procedures she vehemently denies pain’s presence. When discussing her work, ORLAN’s emphasis is on her intention to disrupt standards of beauty, rather than to focus on the pain associated with the process. Whilst pain is absent from the surgical act, she refuses to engage with any actions that might make the audience or viewer of the work aware of the pains of post-surgery recovery, or the pain associated with healing. The absence of pain, or rather its refutation, as literary scholar Susannah B. Mintz observes, invites pain right back into the scenario.<sup>177</sup>

In *Untitled Action* (2003) Kira O’Reilly sat alone in a room and audiences were given instructions to enter and leave one at a time. Before entering, each participant was given a sheet of paper, scalpel and plastic gloves. The paper had a message written by O’Reilly stating that the visitor would be asked to do something with the artist but can refuse if they wish. The visitor entered the room where the artist sat naked in front of a huge television facing a camera that projected the filmed image on the television. O’Reilly invited the audience member to sit next to her and use

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<sup>174</sup> Ashley Crawford, “Still hooked after all those years, Stelarc suspends pain threshold,” *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 Mar. 2012, <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/art-and-design/still-hooked-after-all-those-years-stelarc-suspends-pain-threshold-20120313-1uyia.html>.

<sup>175</sup> For images and text by Stelarc on his *Suspensions* series, see <http://stelarc.org>.

<sup>176</sup> Kirstie Beaven, “Performance Art 101: Rebellion, destruction, ritual and taboo,” part of *The Tanks: Art in Action at Tate Modern*, published 16 Jul. 2012, <http://www.tate.org.uk/context-comment/blogs/performance-art-101-rebellion-destruction-ritual-and-taboo>.

<sup>177</sup> Susannah B. Mintz, S.B. *Hurt and Pain: Literature and the Suffering Body* (A&C Black, 2013), pp. 122-5.



the scalpel to cut her body. Some cut her, others caressed or closed her wounds with plasters. The performance ended with the artist being held in the arms of her audience's arms, as in Pietà.<sup>178</sup>

Within all of the above examples we observe a dichotomy between the intentionality of the artist in describing their work in relation to pain and how that pain is perceived by audiences. Painful actions whether intentional or unintentional through witnessing or mediation in performance seems to reside more in the memories of the viewer than performer, and how performance artist transcended, or seemed to transcend normative pain thresholds when carrying out such acts. What does denying pain demonstrate? To deny pain surely acknowledges its existence and in denying it, is it not the case that what is reinforced is its presence? Even if that presence is the dispersed, delayed or deferred pain of elsewhere.

Since the late 1960s, we have observed how performance artists have brought heightened moments of extreme personal experience into the public sphere through self-inflicted pain. As demonstrated here the use of physical pain in Western traditions performance art is tied to belief systems that could be social, political, or cultural. Normalised views of the body presented as an object can become the surface for protection of the internal. A disruption of this outer space to reveal or expose the inner, sees body artists project their body as a modified readymade (ORLAN, Stelarc), shows the porosity of the body by wounding (Chris Burden, Marina Abramović), and in more extreme situations painful actions on the body are used as a means of protest against gender (Gina Pane, Valie Export), or exposing what it means to live within a sick and diseased body (Bob Flanagan, Ron Athey).

Phelan suggests how performance artists, through self-inflicted pain and the staging of their bodies, bring to the fore issues around how and why certain bodies and their visibility continue to be constrained by powers that are beyond the individual's control:

For some bodies are more secure than others due to the institutionalized forces of misogyny, racism and economic injustice (to rehearse just the shortlist) that register real effects across different bodies. The means of propping up and recognizing the corpo-Real are unequally distributed. So, some bodies become apparently more valuable legally, physically "healthier," aesthetically more appealing, and seemingly more Real than other bodies. The particular bodies which appear to matter more

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<sup>178</sup> For further analysis on O'Reilly performance see "Emfindnis and Self-inflicted Pain," by Helge Meyer in Maria Pia di Bella and James Elkins, *Representations of Pain in Art and Visual Culture* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 43.

change across history, class, race, age, aesthetics, and gender (again, a short list of variables).<sup>179</sup>

The use of pain within performance goes through a process of abandonment by several artists due to physical certainties of carrying out extreme actions as the body ages. Although one must also acknowledge that other factors, such as changes in artistic interest and direction. This is the case with artists including Burden, Acconci, Abramović, Ulay, ORLAN, or the Viennese Actionist, who all stopped performing after a period of time. For example, some members of the Viennese Actionists group returned to more traditional practices as a result of their incarceration for carrying out extreme acts. Artists including Abramović, ORLAN, Ulay all continue to work in performance but not in such an extreme manner to their work prior.

Presently, artists such as Ron Athey, Rocio Boliver/La Congelada de Uva, Carlos Martiel and Martin O'Brien all create powerful visual images in their performances and all self-inflict pain in different ways. Boliver and Athey, as veterans of more underground practices refuse to draw limits on the kinds of works they make as their bodies age. O'Brien, on the other hand, lives with cystic fibrosis, which imposes a specific set of limits on his body, whilst Martiel draws on his Cuban heritage to project personal pain and suffering onto his body. In relation to the viewer's experience of pain in performances, Carlson suggests that in order for us to understand what we see, we must first inflect it, i.e. through bringing our own memories of painful experiences together with culturally disseminated images of pain.<sup>180</sup> Carlson's observation corresponds with Peggy Phelan's description of 'the believable image, which she refers to as "an image constantly negotiating between the real and the unverifiable real," because representations of the real are always partially phantasmatic.'<sup>181</sup>

## 2.6 Overlooked bodies

Alongside some of these well-known artists, I am also interested to include artworks that have been developed within outsider subcultures, minority and political movements, where performance and live art serves as means of protesting totalitarian regimes, as observed in the works of Regina José Galindo and Petr Pavlensky, alongside modern primitivists, body modifiers, BDSM and punk/Hardcore enthusiasts, as observed in works including Fakir Musafar and Bob Flanagan. Flanagan is important within this context as he was one of the first performance artists

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<sup>179</sup> Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 173.

<sup>180</sup> Carlson, *Performing Bodies*, p. 161.

<sup>181</sup> Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 1.

to bring illness and sex alongside one another, specifically from the perspective of someone interested in BDSM practices into the framework of contemporary art in a radical way. He brought his private interest in practicing BDSM with his partner and collaborator, Sheree Rose, into public consciousness. His performances raised questions about an individual's rights towards their bodily self-ownership, which were developed through ideas pertaining to good and bad taste and value judgments of morality, alongside testing the limits of an ethics pertaining to witnessing the sick body. In doing so, Flanagan-Rose's collaborations highlighted the ethical implications such works have for the viewer. All of these artists bring private practices into the public realm through live works that disturb, trouble, and further blur the boundaries demarcating what is private and public. Although the very notion of the public is one that one can argue is complicated and continually shifts with distinct applications of the term, especially when considered in relation to specifically artistic audiences are more broader notions of the general public. I want to reframe self-inflicted pain through considering these acts as multi-faceted when explored from a witness position. This latter position offers a range of experiences that could connect, transform, or alienate elements of its audience. Pain as we all know, means different things in different contexts, especially in relation to cultures, race, and places, but ultimately it serves as disrupter, troubler, and corrector. It is therefore an important tool for raising critical dialogues on individual bodily rights towards owning and becoming.

The furthering of the range of bodies present in performance art allows for a more diverse scope of inclusivity, alongside revealing the impossibility of discussing the body as something that can be fixed in the heteronormative. However, one could also argue that such exclusions signal the continually contested status of extreme performance artworks especially when the public display of certain bodies occurs. As Quick reminds us, the body exists as a ground where 'the real' may be encountered and felt in our present late capitalist mediated culture of the unreal.<sup>182</sup> In this regard, I am concerned with how such bodily encounters of the real situate the performing body and the spaces of its encounter as test-sites that allows for the transformations of meanings, alongside considering the ways that it continually contests the societal governance imposed on it.

Alongside some of the work of more well-known performance artists, I also include discussions of artists whose works incorporate body modification, such as can be observed in the works of Fakir Musafar, and also the late Bob Flanagan, whose work brought together themes of illness alongside BDSM. These are important examples of artists who incorporate the controlled use of

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<sup>182</sup> Andrew Quick, "Taking Place: Encountering the Live" in Adrian Heathfield, *Live: Art and Performance* (Tate Publishing 2004), p. 83.

pain in their daily lives. Musafar practices suspension and Flanagan's BDSM lifestyle sees such works framed as erotic or fetishistic, as opposed to being considered as pain-based practices where there is a direct control and confrontation of the body's ability to take pain. Both of these artists raise important questions about the rights an individual has around what they do with their body and forms of self-ownership. This reveals complex sets ideas of what is deemed permissible and acceptable within wider implications for the framing of pain-performances. As Carlson observes, the alienation from a sensory politics of the modern condition has transformed us into viewers who take pleasure in viewing our own destruction.<sup>183</sup> Overlooked bodies, in their piercing of flesh and heroic sacrifices of the self, offer the chance to undo this alienation of the corporeal sensorium. They can do so by returning our attention to the social injustices around us and aiding us to move towards forming communities of sentiment and empathy.

## 2.7 Age, Pain and the Body

Simone de Beauvoir writes that 'It is old age, rather than death, that is to be contrasted with life. Old age is life's parody, whereas death transforms life into a destiny: in a way it preserves it by giving it the absolute dimension. Death does away with time'.<sup>184</sup> Following de Beauvoir, one can argue that it is old age, rather than death, in performance that proves more detrimental to how the body is perceived. The fetishisation of youth and beauty is something that presents itself across many different elements of culture. However, there are artists whose practices constantly resist such fetishisation of the young, healthy body. Of particular interest here is the art of Ron Athey. For over three decades he has continued to carry out painful actions on his body. He often describes himself as 'a living corpse' due to his HIV+ status. His continual use of pain challenges societal attitudes towards aging or as he describes it "putting it away" at a certain age. He continues to use pain in his works in an unapologetic manner, regardless of the noticeable absence of self-inflicted pain in the performances of his peers. For Athey, it is not an option to adhere to the notion of putting it away after a certain age, as age to him is somewhat paradoxical seeing as he has outlived the original death sentence that came with his original diagnosis of having HIV+. In continuing to challenge the limits of his body, Athey resists and confronts the marginalization of ageing bodies in performance art, alongside wider societal concerns on taboos and permissibility of bodies and their visibilities.

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<sup>183</sup> Carlson, *Performing Bodies*, p. 126.

<sup>184</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, unknown, online.

Much like Athey, Boliver is an artist who explores her aging body through violent acts of self-inflicted pain. These performances of pain are often intercepted with humour. She draws attention to the effects and attitudes of the aging 'female' performing body and shares some of Athey's questioning of the imposed ideological, and culturally constructed age-based restrictions that have been imposed on certain performing bodies. This pertains to discussions on taste and the social dictation of how certain bodies are rendered invisible. Specifically, in this context it revolves around exclusions related to the sight of older bodies. Boliver's performances display with confidence and defiance the wrinkly, saggy skin of her hands, legs, breasts and tummy, alongside age-related spots and wrinkles so that there is no baring or censoring of a body that might bring embarrassment to certain viewers. The arousal produced by the sight of 'aged skin' is perhaps deeply rooted in our collective contemplation of bodily transformations that are unavoidable as we get older. Boliver's ongoing project, *Between Menopause and Old Age* (2012),

questions attitudes towards the female body as it ages, whilst heavily criticising the commodification of youth by capitalism (Fig.4).



**Fig.4 – Rocío Boliver, *Between Menopause and Old Age*, 2012, performed as part of the Brooklyn International Performance Art Festival, 2012. photo by Laura Blüer, image courtesy of Grace Exhibition Space, New York.**

For a recent re-presentation in of her work in 2012, Boliver strutted up and down a runway naked except for the magazine advertisements attached with staple-ties puncturing through her skin and across the front of her body. Photoshopped body parts from these pages were paired in a collage style across her actual belly, eyes, lips breasts, legs and hands. She then proceeded in violently ripping these pages from her skin, slowly revealing the real body that was underneath. Shiny layers of paper piece-by-piece fell to the ground thus revealing her bare and honest body with all of its imperfections. The intention of the artist is not to bring the viewer into close proximity. It was rather that she sought to revoke and subvert the witnessing gaze by pushing away and keeping the viewer as spectator so as to allow for the critical examination of an individual's role as spectator. This is done by exposing the dangers and physical injury caused by a particular kind of everyday celebration of the body. The female body as it is depicted in mass media, from advertisements to music videos. This is the smoothed over, commodified version of life, all sleek and glimmering, free from imperfection and any marks of suffering or imperfection. She seeks to

rip this notion apart for what it is, a fabrication, and replace it with a real un-altered body. It could be said that both Boliver and ORLAN, in corresponding ways, explore a version of life and the female body that is projected onto women that covers up female suffering. Whilst ORLAN ridicules this through a morphology of patriarchal projections of beauty onto women, Boliver challenges the ideological framing of the female body, specifically examining views that favour youth and beauty thus rendering old naked bodies as taboo subjects. Boliver's works exposes, critiques, and subverts how her ageing female body is excluded and dominated by the male body through acts of painful repetition and excess. The scholar Kathleen Woodward describes this process as 'the youthful structure of the look, and one that exhorts women to pass for younger once they are of a "certain" age.'<sup>185</sup> Boliver further describes this project as a 'performance of gender referencing to her age and the effects ageism has had on her practise. In her words, she speaks veraciously and unapologetically about her practice. She states that:

I devote myself to transgress limits. I dig into human behaviour. I disrupt accepted reality, absurd as the one I situate. I am a human reaction voracious hunter, consumer and provocateur. The human beings want to feel. I make them feel deeply. I show the horrors of hidden lies. My field is any space: the street, public places, wherever there are people with no references of 'La Congelada de Uva'. I practice a constant situation that disrupts daily routine. When facing the inability of thinking how to react, the most authentic truth is revealed. I take on sex topics because the world still shivers to them. Sex is good bait for my hunt.<sup>186</sup>

Borne out of an underground cultural performance scene in Mexico City, Boliver's practice focuses on criticizing the repressive ideologies that women from her native country have to live within. It does so through drawing on beauty ideals as portrayed in television (soap operas and novellas) and Mexican theatre. Her works raises important critical questions about beauty and misogyny as harmful cultural practices that may be specific to her native Mexico but continue to affect women globally. Alongside other artists who perform late into their lives, her works grounds lessons that can be understood as being similar to approaches from Japanese Butoh performance practices which sees every body as a perfect body. Within Butoh however, the mature body brings as much to the performance as the youthful body does.<sup>187</sup> One might consider

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<sup>185</sup> Kathleen Woodward ed. "*Figuring Age: Women, Bodies, Generations*," cited in Toni M. Calasanti, Kathleen F. Slevin and Neal King "Ageism and Feminism: From "Et Cetera" to Centre," *NWSA Journal* 18, no. 1 (Spring), 2006, p. 14.

<sup>186</sup> Artists statement available at <http://bgmdifusion.wix.com/congeladadeuva#!principios>.

<sup>187</sup> Don McLeod, *History of Butoh* (2002), <http://www.zenbutoh.com/history.htm>.

the work of Boliver to similarly be challenging the standards we place upon the ageing female body.

## **2.8 Skin and the fetish of youth in the performances of Carlos Martiel and Martin O'Brien**

At the present time, age and gender structure each other in a complex set of reverberating feedback loops that conspires to render invisible old bodies, especially female bodies, which operate paradoxically as both hyper visible and invisible (Woodward, 2006).<sup>188</sup> Youthful bodies however are celebrated, and their images circulate to continually feed the desire for eternal youth, which has long been a human obsession. The life expectancy for Cystic Fibrosis sufferers varies but it is often put somewhere around thirty-one years. For, Martin O'Brien youth is suspended as his illness dictates his life span. In *Breath for Me* (2012-), O'Brien, considers the nature of the regulated chronically ill body through acts that re-embody and take pleasure in the excessive performance of an already embodied lived experience. Illness is revealed through the body in extremis, in this case his body is turning against itself, relentlessly enduring as a form of resistance to illness. During the performance *Breathe for Me* (**Fig.5**), O'Brien is beaten, bruised, cut,

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<sup>188</sup> Woodward, "Figuring Age," p. 163.



penetrated, exhausted, suffocated, examined, and treated in a regime of suffering in the name of survival.



**Fig.5 – Martin O’Brien, *Breathe for me*, 2012-2013, image courtesy of the artist.**

In her book, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance*, scholar Peggy Phelan identifies skin as the visible marker of race that also serves as a form of feminising it.<sup>189</sup> Race and memory are at the core of Carlos Martiel’s performances (**Fig.6**) where he projects an autobiographical personal history embedded in the ways past events determines experiences of the present. *Vanishing Point*, 2009 relates to the development of perspective as an expression of the desire to give the world a unified geometric order. This is due to a Western episteme that tries to rationalize via the logical and mathematical, both of which belong to systems of thought based on an anthropocentric conception of man as the measure of the world. This is best represented by Leonardo da Vinci’s ‘L’Uomo Vitruviano,’ which is indicative of the extreme manifestation of Platonic

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<sup>189</sup> Phelan, *Unmarked*, p. 10.

correspondence between macrocosm and microcosm. Based on these considerations and a confrontation with bodily representations as they have been presented in the art historical canon, Martiel invests in creating images that are iconic and deviate from the Platonic essence that aspires to a pure male heteronormative position. A position that is rooted in the classical tradition but here restores and presents a controversially multicultural and (re)mixed version. The artist's body becomes a landscape to traverse and explore, with skin serving as a canvas for the customisation and penetration of the body's auxiliary branches, hung with occasional signs of belonging – as the meeting place for different, multiple codes, and symbols. These actions become an effort in conjunction, drawing together a geometrically performed tension, suffering, and ecstasy, to form almost a mantra of a body considered in its irreducible otherness.



**Fig.6 – Carlos Martiel, *Vanishing Point*, 2013, Nitsch Museum, Naples, Italy, ©Amedeo Benestante.**

Pain in performance is more familiar to audiences today than it was in the past, although these actions still continue to elicit extreme reactions. There is nothing like revealing flesh that causes us to return back to a consciousness of our bodies and the bodies we observe carrying out these actions. Communicating pain through language highlights the challenges that exist, and we might posit, as the rest of this thesis will go onto explore that performance art that incorporates pain, helps us build a visual language for pain. Trying to communicate pain also highlights the subjectivity of embodiment and the meshing of body and mental states. It is still unclear whether bodily sensations such as pain are better understood as psychological or sensory states, but it

seems promising to consider an approach to pain that explores both the relaying information from within alongside other pre-existent external factors.

In considering the advances in scientific interest in how emotional and cognitive processes affect the physiological dimension of pain, neuroscience explores this process of inflection via our sensory systems. Neuroscientific research suggests that the meanings we make of pain affect the pain itself. In 2013, a performance video installation *Flickering Quivering, Pulsing, Sharp* by A Frontier Fellows brought spectators at The Wisconsin Institute for Discovery (WID) into relation with the invisible and qualities of pain. The live art event comprised of two distinct but overlapping companion pieces. A video work responded to accumulating neuroscientific research that suggests that the meanings we make of pain affect the pain itself. At the same time, live performance work fleshed out the relationship between pain and representation. Three simultaneous and looping performance lectures responded to assumptions that pain resists representation. An original text by Erin Hood was in a dialogue with Leo Tolstoy's *The Death of Ivan Ilyich*, alongside Scarry's *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World*. This set up an investigation into the structures for interpretations of our own and the pains of others. This project is an example bringing together art and neuroscience. It raises provocative and interesting ideas on the evolution of the performance art experience. The real time experience of performance continues to raise questions around how experience is tied to time, and how these encounters affect our sensory systems. Art-neuroscience collaborations could be expanded further to include an exploration of behavioural functions that are involved when experiencing art. As Steve Brown and Ellen Dissanayake observe, aesthetic emotions are unquestionably an integral part of the arts, but they are neither necessary nor sufficient enough to characterise them, as the arts provide a marriage of four emotional loci: object, outcome, agency, and social interaction.<sup>190</sup> There is not the scope for this thesis to engage with longer work on art and neuroscience with respect to pain and performance, but as my conclusion will suggest in more detail this might be a fruitful avenue for further exploring pain in performance art.

### 2.81 Audiencing, Witnessing and Documenting Pain in Performance art

To conclude this literature review, I want to reflect on one of the central questions running throughout this chapter, and across these bodies of literature about pain, and that is the communicability and representation, or non-representation of pain. For this is an issue that is

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<sup>190</sup> Ellen Dissanayake and Steve Brown, "The arts are more than aesthetics: Neuroaesthetics as narrow aesthetics," in Martin Sko and Oshin Vartanian eds., *Neuroaesthetics* (Amityville, New York: Baywood, 2009), pp. 43-57.

central to my reflections on the witnessing, curating, and documenting of performance art about pain. In other words, if one of the ongoing issues surrounding the thinking and writing about pain is its resistance to expression and representation, then this issue comes to a head in studying and writing about performance art and its concerns with the relations between witnessing the live act, documenting the act and witnessing the act through mediated ways (i.e. accounts or videos). Given that much of this literature is discussed throughout the thesis, a comprehensive review will not be offered here, rather what I want to do is draw out some of the key thoughts around these ideas. The first of these concerns the experience of live art that I will reflect on here through the idea of witnessing. The second concerns issues of the curation of difficult ideas. The third explores issues of documentation. The liveness of live art has, as I note in the introduction, long been a central to concerns with the experience of these works and the effects of these encounters on their many ‘primary’ audiences. Here I want to add to these discussions of liveness and audiencing through the lens of ideas of witnessing. Amidst the rich range of accounts of witnessing that I draw on in the chapters, important to highlight at this stage are accounts of trauma and witnessing that reflect on artistic relations to World War II, both in terms of the mobilization of eye witness accounts as well as the development of secondary accounts. Trauma and witnessing theories important here include Dora Apel’s *Memory Effects: The Holocaust and the Art of Secondary Witnessing*, which identifies a post-war generation of contemporary artists who bear witness to trauma they did not experience first-hand. Whilst Apel considers the implications of this kind of trauma for art at the present and the future, other scholars including Doris Laub<sup>191</sup> use psychoanalytical readings to explore how the effects of trauma manifest in eyewitness accounts of surviving the Holocaust. Laub engages with multiple voices exploring pain, its memory and representation considering how it transforms into art. Scholar Dana Milstein, on the other hand, argues in her essay, ‘Pain as Preposition’ that ‘the simulation of pain by way of art, is required to re-form identity and re-establish authority over one’s own life, whether reduplicated to inspire compassion, empathy or engage the audience, pain is a vehicle for the production of art.’<sup>192</sup>

The concept of witnessing can help us reflect on the role and value of eyewitness accounts of live art. Furthermore, it but can also offer us leverage into ways to think about concerns with both curation and documentation. The curation of performance art is often understood to be difficult. As many acknowledge, the curation of live art is itself a complex process that involves reflections not only on the curation of the live experience, with all that that entails for both the

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<sup>191</sup> See Dora Laub, *Testimony: Crises of Witnessing in Literature, Psychoanalysis and History* (Routledge: New York, 1992), pp. 45-68.

<sup>192</sup> Dana Milstein, “Pain as Preposition” in Pascual Nieves ed., *Witness to Pain: Essays on the Translation of Pain into Art* (Bern: Peter Lang, 2005), p. 9.

artist and the audience, but also consideration of the documentation and record of the event itself. To curate live art can often involve an appreciation for the unplanned possibilities that might occur during the event. These include interactions that are unforeseen between artist and audience, deliberate improvisations, as well as simply the unpredictability of the ‘liveness’ of the performance. Given this, and the centrality of experience to much live art, reflecting on the form and nature of documentation has often been a crucial part of curatorial discussions in this field. For many, documenting live work is no longer secondary to the work produced but essential to the kinds of aesthetic decisions being made about the work. Of course, there is also a host of unplanned, informal documentation being produced by the audience during these events, especially with the rise of social media and the enhanced photo, video, and audio capturing capabilities of smartphones. It is also worth reflecting, as my discussion later on does, on the challenges of curating difficult ideas, an emerging topic that is relevant to my thoughts here on curating pain. As scholars Erica Leher, Cynthia E. Milton, and Monica Eileen Patterson explore, curating difficult knowledge requires careful reflections on how a piece of work is presented, how in this presentation it might provoke thought and action.<sup>193</sup> This is to recognize the function of exhibitions as tracing lives and forming part of the force of history, engaging us with complex and difficult issues that might be hard to face in other contexts.

Theories centred on photographic and film documentation are continually referenced in histories of performance art, with feminist and cultural theories including Susan Sontag’s *On Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Peggy Phelan’s *Live Art in L.A.* (2013), *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993), Jennifer Doyle’s *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (2013), Amelia Jones’s *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (1998), Lea Vergine’s *Body Art and Performance* (2000), *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (1990) and *Judith Butler’s Bodies That Matter: On the Discursive Limits of “sex”* (1993), and *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (1997), all Judith Butler as examples of theoretical frameworks applied to readings of these artworks. I adopt Phelan’s approach towards engaging with performance documentation as secondary material, as something that exists separately from original event but forms an important extension of the time of performance whilst serving as a potent way of encountering previous events. Importantly however, unlike Phelan I do not view these documents as secondary in value, with the latter meaning somehow lesser and lacking, rather I see them as being of significant value in the analysis of the work. Similar to views by other performance art scholars, notably Amelia Jones and Sarah

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<sup>193</sup> Erica Leher, Cynthia E. Milton and Monica Eileen Patterson M. eds., *Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Past in Public Places*, Palgrave Macmillan UK, p. 201.

Happersberger, I consider the documentation of live art as a significant source in its own right, and also often as an extension of, rather than a lesser supplement to the work in question. Furthermore, work originally performed in front of the camera and in private can now be observed and entering into the public domain, leading to a reconsidering of how mediation has shaped the experience of performances. Debates centred on how performance documentation is accessed and distributed – filming, photographing and sharing via mobile phones, social media and the internet for example, is often out of control by the artist leading to a complex entanglement of intention, perception and reception of works. Such discussions on documentation are made all the more interesting, as I will explore through the three chapters here, when core to the work itself is the audience experience and reaction. In this particular case in response to the experience of pain within performance art, as something in and of itself recognized as a singular experience and often considered un-representable. This, as I will explore, poses some interesting questions around what it means to document pain performances as an artist and as a curator and what it means to approach this documentation as a researcher and analyst. In the three empirical chapters that follow, these three ideas of live witnessing, of documentation, and of curation run throughout. However, each chapter takes one as its specific focus, beginning firstly with an exploration of live witnessing in the context of the work of Ron Athey.

### Chapter 3

#### **Curating Pain: The Sick Body in Martin O'Brien's *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours***



**Fig.7 – Martin O'Brien, *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours*, 2015, commissioned by The Arts Catalyst, London © Martin O'Brien/The Arts Catalyst, London.**

The audience [are?] gathered in a partly lit 'quarantine' room and are confronted with a semi-naked male figure, lying flat on his back in a state of stupor. The body's arms are strapped in with a strait jacket, which immediately exudes the feeling of restraint in a medical context. The straightjacket is attached by a heavy industrial chain attached to a centrally positioned scaffold pole. The pole is securely fixed from floor to ceiling, but as you enter, the setting is medical although this pole suggests something sexual might occur (stripping?). We can't see any facial details of the figure as there are concealed by a green rubber (hooded) mask. The only thing visible is an opening for his mouth, to breathe.

This green mask, with its mouth gap, as we will soon find out, serves as both breathing and vocal orifice, as the performance commences through its endurance and pain-based actions that last for three hours. There are four points of reference in all four corners of this rectangular, clinical looking space. A heap of cotton wool, a white plastic trough filled with green liquid, a metal trolley with a range of apparatuses including a bowl of green paint, hypodermic needles, a butt plug, medication, a pot of green gunk, white sheets, a tape recorder etc. The chain and pole make up the final reference point, which is also serves as the focal point of this performance as the performer is chained to it throughout. It is from this position – i.e. whilst still attached to the pole – that the artist carries out a series of ritualistic and repeated actions that pushed his body to its limits. There is no stage to separate the performer from his audience and through the course of this piece, they move with and away from him or join in. Always being able to make the choice to enter and leave the space as they wish, with no impositions put in place on staying throughout the duration.

The performer begins by rising slowly from his stupor position but doesn't stand up fully remaining on all fours. From the centre of the space, where he has been positioned from the start, with the chain attached to his neck, he begins to dip his head into a bowl of green paint, making a continuous spiral on the floor, which eventually marks then entire floor space and later, extends to the polythene walls of the space. He is using his head to paint and begins at a distance from the audience, but gradually edges closer to them and into the walls of the space. At certain points during this action, they are forced to move out of his way, walk over the chain and decide whether or not to intervene. To intervene by helping to move the paint bowl closer as his breathing becomes more difficult and the action puts a strain on the artist; at certain points, it becomes unbearable to just stand there watching.

His knees become bruised and bleed. His breathing gets heavier... His neck is turning into even deeper shades of pinkish-red. We are all aware that he cannot see and hasn't got use of his hands for spatial guidance...They are strapped up, but no one intervenes...

— *Reflections I: Taste of Flesh Bite Me I'm Yours, Jareh Das, June 2015*



## Etymology of SICK

### Medical definition of *SICK*

1

*a: affected with disease or ill health*

*b: of, relating to, or intended for use in sickness <a sick ward>*

*c: affected with nausea: inclined to vomit or being in the act of vomiting <sick to one's stomach><was sick in the car>*

2

*mentally or emotionally unsound or disordered.*

The word *sick* derives from the Greek *sickhos* (weak, sick, unwell, having nausea, being detestable; *σικχός*).

## Introduction: 'The Sick Body'

And comes from a country far away as health  
I have given my name and day-clothes to the nurses  
And my history to the anaesthetist, and my body to surgeons.<sup>194</sup>  
— *Sylvia Plath, Tulips, 1960*

Being sick changes your relation to your body and how you inhabit it. As an experience, it is stubbornly theoretical, even though it oozes theory, infecting concepts of cleanliness, system, and body with its disorder. Mutated understandings proliferate from sickness that lance falsely clear categories, revealing the orderliness of the world to be a form of disease. What is clear is that clinically treating biological pathogens as the sole source of corporeal trouble is an efficient way to wipe clean the structures that weigh on our lives.<sup>195</sup>

— *Editor's Notes, New Inquiry Magazine, 2014*

The word sick is indicative of bodies inhabited by illness and disease, with the label framing the individual as weak, vulnerable and lacking; 'being sick' is regarded as that which strips its subject of their strength. Representations of the sick body within visual culture contribute to wider understandings of pain and suffering and, as such, are continually referenced throughout pain, religious, literary, and cultural histories, particularly cinema. These, in turn, contribute to debates centred on 'the artist's body' within performance art histories, particularly when the body in question carries out self-inflicted pain, as I have discussed in detail in this thesis's performance art review<sup>196</sup>. This chapter examines curating the pain of the sick body in the performance, *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours* (2015). *Taste of Flesh* was a three-hour performance by London-based artist Martin O'Brien. It considers the performing body as it relates to illness and the ethics of witnessing to explore the central question: Who is allowed to open up the body and in what context? This question recurs in discussions on performances where, in taking control of their bodies, artists engage in various acts that open up the body that draw on or resemble medical procedures, such as cutting in particular. Artists' continue to subject their bodies to controlled acts of violence and, as such, reveal complex sets of negotiations for the viewers and curators of such work.

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<sup>194</sup> Sylvia Plath, *Tulips*, from *Collected Poems*, the Estate of Sylvia Plath, copyright © 1960, 1965, 1971, 1981.

<sup>195</sup> Editor's notes, Sick Issue, *The New Inquiry Magazine* vol. 35 (2014), p. 4.

<sup>196</sup> See Performance Art review for examples of debates on the performing body, its emergence and some famous examples illustrating this use in performance art.

In curating *Taste of Flesh*, I made use of my ongoing research into the evolution of the body in performance art, particularly in relation to my interest in the changing status of the role of performance art as it evolves with scientific and technological advances. This, in turn informs the socio-cultural and political understanding and attitudes towards the body, its definition, and categorisation. I was also interested in exploring how performing pain and illness disrupts the fixity of bodily categorisations, and in doing so, reveals how bodies are governed legally, managed medically and controlled culturally. This raises questions about ethics and how participatory performances can succeed in claiming body ownership. In curating *Taste of Flesh* (Fig.7), such explorations of bodily ownership became manifest in a performance that reimaged the day to day experience of living with the congenital disease cystic fibrosis (CF), bringing both the sick body and illness together with the actions within a creative performance. O'Brien included tropes of CF in his performances by carrying out actions (cutting, coughing, piercing, bruising, wounding, etc.) adapted from medical procedures that are used to produce samples for clinical investigation and in some cases treatment for his illness. With previous performances, these actions were enacted in front of an audience. In a departure from this, *Taste of Flesh* required an active involvement from the audience.

The audience bear witness to a version of reality that occurs in a controlled setting, which nevertheless undergoes a process whereby an ethical decision is governed by both the individual and collective responses to the actions that they experience as an audience. This is further complicated when active participation is required. It became evident that there were no innocent bystanders, despite varied levels of participation from the audience members. Witnessing, in this context meant that all present are implicated through their presence and by actively observing the work. This notion of a non-innocent bystander is central to the analysis of *Taste of Flesh*, to my role as the curator and also in my own negotiations with the ethics of bearing witness. At the forefront in my mind in curating this performance was the constant slippages between duration and endurance in realising this commission. Endurance utilises duration, whilst certain durational work, including this piece, takes up endurance as their key message. What was most prevalent in *Taste of Flesh* were the ways in which, as Ward argues, duration operates as 'the unfolding of time to which the embodiment of subjectivity is emphasised and extended through hearsay, memory, rumour'.<sup>197</sup> The interplay of hearsay, memory and rumour operate as reflective bearings in the recalling of events that have occurred. A process that relies heavily on memory and documentation, alongside audio recordings and questionnaire responses by those who were

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<sup>197</sup> Fraser Ward, *No Innocent Bystanders: Performance, Art and Audience*, (Dartmouth College: University Press of New England, 2011), p. 13.

present. The roles adopted by various members of the audience (including myself) are important to consider, alongside how the specially constructed performance space, to a certain degree, forced us all into participation. The implications of the curator and audience as witnesses of *Taste of Flesh* becomes a useful way to consider ethical implications of extreme performances because it related artistic intentionality and viewer consent during this performance. The curator-audience-witness positions are complicated by the shifting, and at times complex positioning that witnessing a live event inhabits, which in turn is further complicated by a reliance on memory to reflect on what has occurred. Documentation in the form of films and photographs contribute to a retelling, although exist as a different and separate form of experience. This chapter falls into three main sections. In the first of these, I introduce O'Brien's work as the sick body in pain, through a discussion of the work itself and its relationship to the work of Bob Flanagan, an artist who was the first to bring CF into dialogue with contemporary art. Secondly, I reflect on curating pain in performance art with O'Brien's works and my discussion of this falls into two key sections: the first addresses the commissioning and curation of this new work through a discussion of the curator as witness. The second part considers pain from engaging with audience participation, a central aspect of this work. I focus on participation element as a new development in O'Brien's work as this raises ethical issues as to how an audience engages in the administering and receiving of pain (which in this context was at a minimum and non-harmful to all present).

### 3.1 Performing illness: Martin O'Brien and Bob Flanagan

Pain functions as a metaphor of and as well as actual physical pain. Both metaphor and actuality are of importance when acting together. I usually talk about my works in terms of endurance and even that in itself can be deemed as metaphor. Activities that are functioning on two levels i.e. literal and metaphoric, although communicated through endurance, it is still used a metaphoric act for other forms of endurance and pain. The history of CF is important, and it is essential that audience understand this context. Whilst some of the images make specific reference to CF, for example, the use of a hood that restricts breathing, it sticks to face when breathing in and expands into a bubble when breathes out, mimicking mucus bubbles...<sup>198</sup>

— *Martin O'Brien, 2015*

O'Brien's performances are characterised by aesthetics which draws on pain, endurance and the medicinal. The pain O'Brien describes is a means to counteract illness and is entwined with, but

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<sup>198</sup> Recording of an interview between Jareh Das and Martin O'Brien at his studio in Deptford, London, 14<sup>th</sup> April 2014, 5:36".

also sits outside, medically informed understandings of pain management. At the core of O'Brien's works are the everyday realities of living with Cystic Fibrosis, an illness that imposes a strict and regulated regime of pain management, characterised by the excessive production of mucus filling up the lungs. A predominant characteristic of CF is the persistent coughing and expelling of mucus. This mucus has to be expelled or broken down through routine physiotherapy i.e. beating the chest repeatedly to loosen this, alongside drug treatments, and strict quarantine management isolating CF sufferers in order to prevent cross infections.<sup>199</sup>

By focusing on curating the sick body I was led to draw from literature about pain and feminist studies and to consider the ways this status contests the ideologies that inform how the male body is represented. To do so, I use the status 'sick' to consider and engage with the performing body of O'Brien so as to explore the relationship to the word's etymology to illness and wellbeing. I also explore through the linguistic (as verbal) and physical (as non-verbal) associations imposed by such labelling. Alongside this, body politics (gender, sexuality, race) will be applied to consider the implications of how overlooking such bodies contributes to rendering them invisible. If the sick body is widely viewed as weak, lacking strength, and emasculated, what changes in perspective might be achieved through challenging this position through performing illness? This section explores this question by beginning with a discussion of the relationship between O'Brien and Flanagan before drawing out specific themes from this work to explore the politics of visibility of the sick body and the concerns with duration, endurance and masculinity, themes that continue to be important later in the chapter.

### 3.12 Martin and Bob: enduring pain and CF

The work of Los Angeles poet, performance/installation artist, self-proclaimed "Supermasochist" (**Fig.8**) and lifelong cystic fibrosis (CF) sufferer, Bob Flanagan, is crucial to mention here as his life's work forms an important contribution to discussions on performing and living with illness, and how this serves to test and contest the boundaries demarcating an individual's right of bodily self-ownership. Flanagan brought together performance, CF and an interest in BDSM practices, which he realised in collaboration with Sheree Rose, his life partner and BDSM mistress. This is a lifestyle that, for some, deviates from what is an acceptable sexual behaviour and expression. Sandahl writes that in Flanagan's live performances, videos and installations:

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<sup>199</sup> Isolation of CF sufferers began in the early nineties, prior to this communities of CF sufferers existed forming support networks for families and people with the diseases. The discovery of possible mitigating circumstances for cross-infection led medical and disease professionals imposing a ban to limit health risk of cross infections, thereby normalising the isolating medical practices of the care that is given to individuals living with CF.

Flanagan challenged impotent disability imagery through the use of explicit S/M sexual play, bloody body mortifications, and references to a not-so-innocent childhood—all done with a wicked sense of humour. Flanagan made use of his disability in his art not as an obstacle to be overcome, but as a condition to revel in.<sup>200</sup>

Although O'Brien is directly influenced by and exists in the wake of Bob Flanagan, it is important to recognise the influence and importance of the work of the late Bob Flanagan in relation to O'Brien. Indeed, O'Brien has acknowledged as much in writing on his first encounters of the work of Flanagan:

My heart stopped when I read the description: '[a] lifelong sufferer from cystic fibrosis, Flanagan began to make art in order both explore and express his masochistic sexual desires, and to combat his physical pain.' I couldn't believe it. Here was an artist making performance about my disease. This moment completely changed the way in which I thought about my own identity and the relationship between performance and illness.<sup>201</sup>



**Fig.8 – Bob Flanagan, *Supermasochist* performance, Berlin, 1995 © Sheree Rose and Bob Flanagan papers and photographs, Coll2016-012, ONE National Gay and Lesbian Archives, USC Libraries, University of Southern California.**

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<sup>200</sup> Carrie Sandahl, "Bob Flanagan: Taking it like a man," *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*, vol. XV, no. 1 (Fall 2000), p. 97.

<sup>201</sup> Tracy Warr, and Amelia Jones, "The Artist's Body" cited in Gianna Bouchard and Martin O'Brien eds., *On Medicine, Performance Research* 19, no.4 (2014), p. 54.

The work of Flanagan brings to the foreground the sick and ill body within the dialogue of contemporary art, but I also want to argue that through ‘performing illness.’ Furthermore, his highly-charged and political performance centred around the body raised important questions about consensual and ethical attitudes towards the body by asking the question: who owns our bodies and what governs what we can do and not do to them? His work further raises debates around the choices an individual's makes for their lifestyle. As a lifelong practitioner of BDSM, questions are raised about how this behaviour contradicts the expectations of how a ‘sick’ person should live their life, and simultaneously how it might have contributed to his health and the longevity of his life. Flanagan lived to the age of forty-three, which for the time was a remarkably late age to live for an individual living with CF. I want to use a discussion of the comparison between Flanagan and O’Brien to draw out the particular elements of O’Brien’s performance of pain. It is important, as I want to explore below in more detail, to differentiate the practice of both artists as whilst there are some similarities, there are also marked differences. Flanagan’s work was particularly informed by the action of seeking pleasure-pain related activities through BDSM, which he and his collaborator and former life partner Sheree Rose documented obsessively. In Flanagan’s work, he portrays his disability and the endurance of pain as something that was gave him strength rather than being emasculating. In turn he embraced an identity as a masochist. That having control over the source of infliction increases his power over the illness that he cannot control. In contrast O’Brien fully addresses the specific details of CF and uses it as a medium within the performance. He also addresses it with a great tolerance for and understanding of the pain which is not self-imposed, pain that comes as an unavoidable consequence of CF, which is embraced through the endurance of performance. The condition of his body is an important departure point when making work.

Considering performances that use pain directly or reference it as a metaphor (such as when it is used as a form of transgression against illness), it is important to highlight how the disease CF first entered into a dialogue with performance art, through the work of Bob Flanagan, whilst considering how the operation of this illness is integral to O’Brien’s practice. Both O’Brien and Flanagan use tropes from their disease in their works but do so in significantly different ways. Flanagan combated illness by adopting a life-long BDSM practice, which served as an alternative to the medical management of his sick body. This BDSM practice also provided ways of asserting his sexuality against normative positions that govern or dictate accepted sexual behaviours and conducts. Flanagan is recognised as an instrumental figure in bringing his illness and an

alternative BDSM lifestyle into contemporary art.<sup>202</sup> He brought the sick body to the foreground, through his highly charged and political works that performed real experiences of illness whilst exploring the ways his non-normative body, offered up an alternative to normative ideas of masculinity and bodily self-ownership.<sup>203</sup> The sick body is framed here as one that is not lacking strength but strengthened through acts of masochism, transgression, and endurance. Illness for Flanagan served as a source of strength due to the difficult demands it puts on the body on a daily basis which serves as motivation towards self-imposing a regime of endurance. Flanagan remains an important figure in performance art history because his work continues to raise important questions around informed consent and the ethical implications that arise when one considers how the body continues to be governed today. By bringing to the foreground these questions of bodily self-ownership and governance that extend beyond the context of contemporary art and into life. Flanagan's BDSM practice, within the context of performing pain, is used to counteract an illness. This sits outside of a medically informed view on pain management. However, it is also one that is problematic for cultural norms governing attitudes towards fetish, voyeurism, seduction, disgust, and good and bad taste when such work is performed in front of audiences. Pierre Bourdieu is useful to consider here as identifies taste as the sociological endeavours to establish the conditions in which the consumers of cultural goods and their taste for them are produced. At the same time, taste is used to describe the different ways of appropriating these objects as works of art, and the social conditions of the constitution of the mode of appropriation that is considered legitimate.<sup>204</sup>

In distinction to Flanagan, O'Brien disturbs normalised views of the male body through regimes of rigorous endurance-based acts, through which he subverts the everyday medical regimes used to manage the pain and discomforts brought on by living with this illness. This use of medical aesthetics in O'Brien's works directly relate to actual CF management, including collecting mucus into sample dishes, making chest incisions with a scalpel, piercing lips with hypodermic needles, or chest clapping (adopted from chest physical therapy also known as CPT).

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<sup>202</sup> For Martin O'Brien's account of his first encounter with the works of Bob Flanagan, see "Performing Chronic: Chronic illness and endurance art" in Bouchard and O'Brien, *On Medicine*, pp. 54-5.

<sup>203</sup> Staking a claim for bodily self-ownership by taking up the position of an individual's right to what they are allowed to do with their bodies has long been of concern within subcultural movements. The subculture, according to Victoria Pitts, refers to 'groups sharing and interest in non-mainstream body alterations' through shared meanings of body modification and the body's capacity for illicit pleasures, self-expression through the body, and new possibilities for identity. For further discussions on subculture and bodily self-ownership see Pitts discussion on new deviant bodies in "Crime and Embodiment: in Susan E. Hatty and Martin D. Schwartz eds., *Controversies in Critical Criminology* (Cincinnati, OH: Anderson, 2003), pp. 125-9.

<sup>204</sup> Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice, (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Routledge, 1984), p. 5.



More recently, he began collaborating with Sheree Rose, which has led to the realisation of some of Flanagan's unfinished works. These collaborations between O'Brien and Rose have given new meaning to Flanagan's performances, some of which were unrealised at the time of his death in 1996. Aside from the merging of CF with BDSM, these collaborative performances are centred on a contractual relationship based on trust, whilst mediating on mortality and ageing. These are explored through the performing sick body of O'Brien whose age is limited by illness, and Rose's transformations as she ages. O'Brien and Rose's collaborations frame the body through both of their interests and varied experiences of the effects of living with a life-limiting illness. In his prose poem, *Why?* which ostensibly answers the question of why he practices BDSM, Flanagan suggests that his disability and his ability to take pain defines his manhood, he writes:

Because I learned to take my medicine; because I was a big boy for taking it; because I can take it like a man; because, as somebody once said, HE'S GOT MORE BALLS THAN I DO; because it is an act of courage; because it does take guts; because I'm proud of it; because I can't climb mountains; because I'm terrible at sports; because NO PAIN, NO GAIN [...] (emphasis in original)

– *Bob Flanagan, Why? 1997*

O'Brien, similar to Flanagan, uses performance as a way of taking control and gaining a form of bodily self-ownership over his medically regulated body. This continues a lineage of performance work dealing with illness, which was introduced into contemporary art, by Flanagan. Flanagan adopted an attitude of taking pain. He famously described this as 'fighting sickness with sickness.'<sup>205</sup> He did so to contest his body's limitations brought on by CF. Both Flanagan and O'Brien's bodies can be viewed as administering self-agency and assertiveness, through rigorous durational regimes that use endurance and pain-based actions, which are then performed in front of audiences, although there are marked differences in both of their practices.<sup>206</sup> In achieving a sense of bodily self-ownership through performances, O'Brien makes visible the ways in which the body has been historically spoken about, represented, and defined in relation to its masculinity and health. O'Brien's practice continues in a lineage of performance art that tests bodily limits through carrying out endurance acts over a duration of time. Alongside this, is a contestation of the status of the sick body and its invisibility within contemporary art. Ethics, or an ethical framework for art, takes precedence here, specifically when considering works that are performed

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<sup>205</sup> See Andrea Juno and V. Vale eds., *Bob Flanagan: Supermasochist* (San Francisco: RE/Search Publications, 1993), p. 36.

<sup>206</sup> Bob Flanagan lived and collaborated with his partner and mistress, Sheree Rose who he was also in a mistress-slave, life-long BDSM relationship. Rose and Flanagan were interested in furthering discussions on illness and endurance both in art and life. For Rose's account of their relationship and work see "Slave to Love: An Interview with Sheree Rose" in Johnson, *The Art of Living*, pp. 29-151 and O'Brien, "Performing Chronic," p. 63.

in the public sphere, i.e. in front of an audience. These ethical concerns include a responsibility of care towards the artist, as the limits of what is considered watchable and bearable, as well as administering informed consent with regards to how much information should be made available to an audience prior, especially when work is of an extreme nature. More importantly, testing the limits of what is watchable or bearable raises important questions about the opening up of the body and asking, who is allowed to do so and in what context? Performance then becomes a useful critical space for examining individual's rights towards such opening up of bodies, particularly when this sits outside a medical context. Body art practices that interact with medicine in a variety of ways serve as acts of both personal and political empowerment, whilst at the same time inverting the medical gaze.

### **3.2 Sick bodies and a politics of visibility**

McCormack's call for a 'multi-sensory coming together and listening to silenced bodies' seems appropriate when considering *Taste of Flesh*, a performance that has at its core a body that is communicating the realities of living with this life-threatening illness. Whilst living with this illness differs from the bodily traumas of war that McCormack mostly discusses, her proposal calling for visibility of such bodies is useful for considering the ways in which O'Brien's work makes visible the often-silenced sick bodies which are subjected to harsh medical practices that are imposed on them in order to preserve, manage, and, in this case, keep alive. Medical practices that have historically violated and subjected the body to often brutal care practices that are justified for the purposes of curing and healing, the paradox here being that CF is life-ending and there is no possibility of it being cured. Through using tropes from his everyday experience of living with CF, O'Brien makes visible some of these practices that have contributed to wider social attitudes towards sick bodies. These are bodies that are often depicted in culture as weak and lacking, alongside the hysteria that surrounds the contagious nature of infectious disease.<sup>207</sup> In doing so, normative body definitions and categorisations are contested, allowing for an opening

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<sup>207</sup> The HIV and AIDS epidemic of the 1980s, and more recently the Ebola outbreak are two prominent examples of how groups of people, gay men in the former and Black-Africans in the latter are marginalised and subjected to medically imposed codes of conducts that restrict treatment and movements of people but more problematically stigmatisation associate with diseases and its spread. Whilst it is not the focus of this chapter to discuss in detail the perils of infectious disease and the injustices associate with it. I mention these two diseases as to contextualise the atmosphere of what disease have been topical and perhaps are in the mind of the artist when making this work. *SARS* is another prominent example of how the media creates and fuels such hysteria.

up the possibilities for rethinking preconceived ideas about how one speaks about ‘the body’.

As the literature review explored in relation to O’Brien and Athey’s practices, one of the defining relationships between the sick body and performance art history has been one of making it visible and, hence, the negotiation of these otherwise marginalised and actively excluded not just overlooked bodies. As such, Flanagan’s work was a precursor for and O’Brien’s a follower of the role of arts and activism in bringing the HIV/AIDS crisis to visibility in the late 1980s and early 1990s in the United States. As such, art became a means to challenge what became one of the most politicised, feared and controversial diseases in the history of modern medical science, challenging the stigmatisation, prejudice and marginalisation that was being fuelled by right-wing politics and religious conservatism.<sup>208</sup> What was clearly recognised about this crisis was that the stigmatisation directed at specific groups based on their sexual difference, race, and social class and the ways that the US government hindered access to the treatment, as well as side-lining HIV/AIDS education. The politics that surrounded this disease contributed to the silencing minority of groups including the LGBT community, blacks, Latino people, sex workers, and other individuals from poor and marginalised communities, leading to avoidable deaths. It is, of course, beyond the scope of this chapter and thesis to map out the history of pain and its relationship to representations of diseased, disabled, and sick bodies within performance art. It is however, important to acknowledge the traditions within which the performance of sick bodies sits, especially given the importance of the themes of masculinity and emasculation due to illness in O’Brien’s work. It also enables the evolution of the understanding of O’Brien’s work in the tradition of arts practices that develop a politics of visibility around marginalised figures and that serve to bring to the light the complexities inherent in categorising bodies.

O’Brien’s work further develops these complex visual politics, in that whilst medically categorised disabled, the markers for his disability and his illness are invisible; his is a sick body that looks well, but whose illness and pain is made explicit through performing this very illness. He reframes the sick body through performing illness with the intention of allowing for new interrogations of the label of ‘sick’, through a process that reveals nuances of masculinity and how these, in turn, inform visual representations. Finally, this status of sick extends beyond its

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<sup>208</sup> On a research trip to New York between 2-7 Nov. 2015, I visited and viewed material from organisations including ACT UP, Group Material and Keith Haring Foundation forming part of *The Downtown Collection* at The Fales Library, Columbia University, New York, <http://www.nyu.edu/library/bobst/research/fales/downtown.html>.

I also engaged with archival material from the Felix Gonzalez-Torres archives at the Felix Gonzalez-Torres archives focusing on his works related to his HIV/AIDS activism as part of the collective Group Material. For a historical timeline of the HIV/AIDS crisis. See *History of HIV & AIDS in the U.S.A.* | *AVERT*. Avert.org (2015), <http://www.avert.org/professionals/history-hiv-aids/overview>.

labelling into disability studies where the doubling of the ‘disabled-sick’ body is further complicated by the performances of O’Brien, who is able to test his body’s limits, its strengths, weaknesses, power, and athleticism. These are tests that ultimately end in failure because by putting his body through extended repeated regimes, the difficulty of keeping the body in order is revealed by its visible breakdown through sweating, bruising, expelling mucus, and bleeding. In doing so, he reveals the complexities present in the nuanced demarcations that inform ideas of masculinity. In other words, wider considerations that further instil normalised heteronormative ideas of male bodies that have been defined framed largely by medicine and religious histories. As such, he reveals the ideologies that inform representations of the body, and, in turn, masculinity. Masculinity here describes a set of attributes and behaviours, but is more concerned with the roles associated with men that speak of them in terms of strength, power, athleticism and importantly, their health status, to quote Norman Mailer, masculinity should be viewed as ‘not something that is given to you, but something you gain [...] And you gain it through winning small battles with honour.’<sup>209</sup> If we consider the description of the sick body as one that is weak, emasculated and striving to be healthy, when it is measured against the normative/heteronormative, this position as scholar Victoria Pitt argues, is a result of historically positioning the healthy self against a diseased other, creating oppositions that involve race, gender and sexuality.<sup>210</sup>

By disturbing representations through performing illness, O’Brien’s performances reveal the nuances of bodily categorisations, labels, and stereotypes, which, in turn, reveals the power relations that constitute its governance. These power relations have been specifically contextualised, due to their relationship with the body and are instrumental as to which specific cultural meanings of power are inscribed onto them. The socio-cultural and political spoken of here refers to discussions about the performing body that have been historicised predominantly through religion, culture and medicine. These histories have contributed to visual representations of the body and have shaped the perceptions and understandings of what constitutes being healthy. This, in turn, informs both the legal and ethical governance surrounding what individuals are able to do and not do with their bodies. Performance Art becomes an arena for the undoing of and

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<sup>209</sup> Norman Mailer, “Cannibals and Christians” cited in Peter Schwenger, “*The Language of Men, Phallic Critiques: Masculinity and Twentieth Century Literature*,” (Oxon: Routledge, 2014), p. 17.

<sup>210</sup> In her book, *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification*, Victoria Pitts-Taylor examines queer bodies as sites for investigating the possibilities and limitations of agency in body practices, alongside considering how artists use old and new body modification technologies as resistance against Westernized efforts to categorise, which ultimately, in her view, pathologies individual bodies and their desires. See “Visibly Queer: Body Technologies and Sexual Politics” in Victoria Pitts-Taylor, *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), p. 81.

contestation against such social (patriarchal and heteronormative) governing of the body. It has historically provided and continues to operate as a platform where opposing, and at times, contradictory positions about the status of the body meet, and where they continue to be exposed, challenged and questioned. Through representations of the male body image we have become accustomed to see it as a site of power, strength, virility, athleticism, and competitiveness. All of which are present in historical accounts beginning in Ancient Greece and into the Renaissance period, which in turn informed the modern era through its anatomical drawings. The Ancient Greek's attitude towards masculine beauty utilised nudity that celebrated the musculature and grace of the male form. The role this occupied in Greek culture and aesthetics, particularly in sculptures, contributed to an idealised image of male strength which was made popular by the birth of the Olympics, and the cultural capital this placed on athleticism and wellness that is still prevalent today.

In describing 'illness as a metaphor' in her book of the same name, Susan Sontag describes the disparities that exist between being healthy and sick by stating:

Illness is the night-side of life, a more onerous citizenship. Everyone who is born holds dual citizenship, in the kingdom of the well and in the kingdom of the sick. Although we all prefer to use the good passport, sooner or later each of us is obliged, at least for a spell, to identify ourselves as citizens of that other place.<sup>211</sup>

Sontag's observations reveal the victim blaming evident in the language used to describe diseases and illnesses. More recent scholarship furthering Sontag's analysis considers the ways in which the sick body is explored within contemporary art<sup>212</sup>, including Lucy Panthakay's inquiry into how diseases are used in artworks to express, mediate and analyse its societal relationship. Panthakay writes:

Artworks inspired by or reflecting upon disease are, in contrast to the solitary act of suffering, a social phenomenon – in their creation and consumption they are participatory beyond being straightforwardly empathetic as a factual account of disease might be. These pieces may also, through their descriptions or use of pain, explore dimensions of our current cultural conditions which we are unable to see fully when in good health.<sup>213</sup>

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<sup>211</sup> Susan Sontag, *Illness as Metaphor* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1978), p. 3.

<sup>212</sup> See Literature Review for Marla Carlson and Joanna Burke's rejection of Elaine Scarry's main thesis on pain and its inexpressibility in spoken language.

<sup>213</sup> Lucy Panthakay, "On the Evolving Cultural Relevance of the Sick Body in Contemporary Art Forms," *Academia.edu*, (date unknown), 1, accessed July 1, 2015, [https://www.academia.edu/7291458/On\\_the\\_Evolving\\_Cultural\\_Relevance\\_of\\_the\\_Sick\\_Body\\_in\\_ContemporaryArtForms](https://www.academia.edu/7291458/On_the_Evolving_Cultural_Relevance_of_the_Sick_Body_in_ContemporaryArtForms).

In her analysis on disability, masculinity and performance, Carrie Sandahl reveals how disabilities association with powerlessness, asexuality, masochism, medicalisation and infantilisation, makes it incompatible with full, adult, American manhood, especially, when disability is a permanent state. Sandahl identifies how pop and wider culture commonly portray disabled people as needing to overcome pain, in order to restore their masculinity. She writes:

In mainstream literature, film, and theatre, disability often serves as a metonym for emasculation. On the one hand, this association signals a male character's loss of power and masculinity. Fred Pfeil, on the other hand, calls "sensitive guy" films, a macho man's empathetic encounter with 'disabled characters', or his own experience of temporary disability transforms the hero into a more benevolent patriarch. Kenneth MacKinnon makes a similar point about action genre film, in which spectators take pleasure in "the suffering" of the wounded or broken body of the male hero with whom the spectator is invited to identify, but the masochism must be temporary. David Savran goes so far as to argue that a temporary descent into masochism (often through disability) and a triumph over victimhood characterises contemporary masculinity. Savran further argues that in many mainstream dramatizations of male masochism assuage "the anxious white male subject only by magically restoring his imaginary wholeness and integrity, by convincing him that he is not castrated, that he does not love pain, and that he can triumph over his victimization."<sup>214</sup>

Sandahl's observations presents the too often portrayal in popular culture of disability equating to emasculation and lack of strength.

More recently, Dodie Bellamy's new narrative satirical manifesto, *When the Sick Rule the World*, critiques cultures of the healthy through a romanticisation and mockery of illness' symptoms. Bellamy writes:

When the sick rule the world mortality will be sexy. When the sick rule the world, all writing will be short and succinct, no paragraphs will be longer than two sentences, so we can comprehend them through the brain fog the well bring to us daily.<sup>215</sup>

These critical perspectives mentioned, describe the ways the sick body has been treated (Sontag and Bellamy), presented (Panthakay), represented (Sandahl) and thus rendered invisible by society's determination to free mankind from illness, disease, pain and suffering. It is against this context that O'Brien's particular forms of rendering visible and sensible the sick body take place. O'Brien's *Taste of Flesh* sets up considerations for the responsibility and ethics present in encounters that encourage intimacy and encourage certain levels of risk taking. Understanding these power dynamics, such as when intimacy occurs in public space, is essential because it is widely regarded that to be emotionally vulnerable or opening one's 'self' to others is an un-

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<sup>214</sup> Sandahl, "Bob Flanagan: Taking it like a man," p. 97.

<sup>215</sup> Dodie Bellamy, *When the Sick rule the World* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e)/Active Agents 2015), p. 36.

masculine behaviour and a form of cultural weakness. O'Brien turns his vulnerability into a position of strength and empowerment, whereby the medically and socially categorised sick body is presented as strong through its ability to endure and withstand pain. Through the staging via performing as a process of turning oneself into the subject. A subject that asks in the Kantian sense: 'What are we in our actuality? What are we today? that is the field of the historical reflection of ourselves.'<sup>216</sup> In order to take up these questions in more depth in relation to the work, I want to now turn to the discussion of the practices of curation and commission the work.

### 3.3 Curating Pain

*Taste of Flesh* began with Martin chained to a central pole with his arms secured in a strait jacket, and his breathing restricted with a mask that doubled as a hood covering his entire head. He began a gruelling action which saw him crawl on his knees in slow circular movements, from the centre of the space to its outer edges, whilst dipping his head repeatedly in a bowl of green nontoxic paint. His breathing difficulties became apparent early into the performance and was further restricted by the fact that he crawled on all fours throughout this action. O'Brien used his head as a paintbrush to create a circular spiral on the linen lined the floor as if it were his canvas. Throughout this sequence, no one intervened, but we all stayed as far back as we could to allow him to carry out his task. As he got closer to the edges of the space, it became more difficult to watch him as his breathing got louder and we were able to see the visible strain of this action had on his body i.e., his neck had turned bright red, and his knees began to bleed as he came closer towards us. Other actions included piercing his mouth with hypodermic needles, coughing up mucus into Petri dishes, dunking his head into a shallow bath-trough filled with green liquid, covering himself with cotton wool, blowing mucus bubbles at the audience and a biting sequence, as it became known post event. This action involved O'Brien initiating biting and being bitten back by the audience. Audience members were allowed to enter and leave the room as they pleased, whilst O'Brien carried out a series of actions directly informed by medical procedures that are used in the treatment of his CF. Other actions carried out included sealing his mouth with hypodermic needles, plunging his whole body repeatedly into a makeshift bath, sticking cotton wool to his wet body and concluding with in and blowing mucus bubbles at his audience.

— Reflections II: *Taste of Flesh Bite Me I'm Yours*, Jareh Das, June 2015

To watch someone, suffer in this way, raises the question of intervention. Questions also arise about complicity, control, manipulation, affect, and empathy. Such works test the limits of comfort and discomfort and cause a rethinking of the familiar. In this case, how bodies are entwined within wider socio-political frameworks that dictate what can be done to them. These are questions that artworks with pain have long posed to artists and curators, as was discussed in

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<sup>216</sup> Immanuel Kant, "Was heist Aufklärung?" Berliner Monatschrift, 1784, afterword cited in Michel Foucault and Luther H. Martin et al., *Technologies of the Self: A Seminar with Michel Foucault* (Amherst, Massachusetts: University of Massachusetts Press 1988), p. 1.

Chapter Two. These questions were posed in particular with this work due to the framework within which it was commissioned. *Taste of Flesh* was commissioned as part of Trust me, I'm an Artist, a European initiative exploring ethical issues in art practices that engage with biotechnology and medicine, including medical self-experimentation, extreme performance art, and artworks incorporating living materials and scientific processes. Trust Me I'm an Artist is an EU wide collaborative initiative where art-science confluences are presented to an audience and ethics committee to the ethical (and other) implications of works produced within this context. A core of this initiative's work centres on bio-art projects that have included artists such as Neal White, Kira O'Reilly, Špela Petrič, Adam Zaretsky, Anna Dumitriu, and Art Orienté Objet. Previously, works would normally be in their proposal stage and presented to an ethics committee, who would then most likely veto the project based on the ethical implications it raises. The ethics committee, artist and audience, would reconvene and discuss these ethical implications. For this project, Martin performed *Taste of Flesh* live, prior to the ethical discussions, so as to present a new way of thinking about witnessing performance works within an ethical framework after an actual event. Questions were mostly raised about levels of informed consent, responsibility of care to the artist and audience. Crucial to the discussion was whether or not certain the performance actions, such as biting, were ethical within this context or not? For this project, the committee consisted of professionals from the disciplines of performance art, ethics, and sociology, who all discussed the performance's ethical implications. *Taste of Flesh* was a departure from the usual format as it was live, realised and performed in front of an audience, including the ethics committee. This specially convened ethics committee was selected in discussions with O'Brien to bring together existing and new perspectives on his work, in relation to ethics, participation, and witnessing pain. The committee was made up of experts in the fields of performance, live art, medical ethics, art-science collaborations, drama, sociology, and medical humanities. This post-performance discussion lasting two and a half hours included Dr. Karen Lowton (Department of Sociology, University of Sussex), Dr. Gianna Bouchard (Department of Music and Performing Arts, Anglia Ruskin University), and Lois Keidan (co-founder and co-director of Live Art Development Agency). It was chaired by Professor Bobbie Farsides (Brighton and Sussex Medical School).

O'Brien's performances manage to slip between categories of 'medical', 'disabled', 'endurance', 'pain', 'masochistic' and 'body-based', further problematizing attempts to define and categorise his works. As an individual living with CF, his works operate at the porous space between art and life. In order to discuss my experiences of curating pain, I want to address three key issues. Firstly, I want to explore the development and design of the 'containment space' we



created for the work, which, I argue, was central to the force of the piece and the ways in which it developed engagement with the audience. I then want to move onto reflections on the role and experience of the curator-witness, before finally turning to the ethical considerations of curating pain and my reflections on this.



**Fig.9 – Installation view, *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours*, 2015, © Martin O'Brien and The Arts Catalyst.**

### **3.4 Siting Pain**

*Taste of Flesh* took place in a purpose-built, semi-contained quarantine room at the White Building, London on 25 April 2015 (Fig.9). It was a space where there was no physical separation between the performer's actions and his audience. O'Brien's disruption of this usually existing separation between audience and artist can be interpreted as form of queering space. Queering space, as Anthony Graham identifies, is one of the ways performance art creates agency to actively transform the significance or meaning of a space and its architecture. In doing so, he further argues, queer spaces define an active process of challenging the heteronormative

relationships between individuals and architecture.<sup>217</sup> In previous performances, O'Brien is usually fully visible but at a distance from his audience. Although he is mostly in close proximity to his audience and generally he abandons traditional staging, he usually performs in situations where the audience do not actively participate in his work. For a visual representation of themes of the zombie figure, represented here as a symbolic representation of fears of contagion, O'Brien does away with this separated distance to test and challenge his audience's direct engagement with this work and its ensuing actions. One had to either confront his body or avoid it as the performance unravelled, choosing either or dictating how one engaged with the work within this semi-confined space. Following the work of Deleuze and Guattari, such 'queering' might be understood as a deterritorialisation, allowing for tolerance, the articulation of difference and the acceptance of ambiguity. I want to argue how the space we designed was intended to influence the spatial and group dynamics and the behaviours of an audience, and thus shape the contractual engagement between artist and audience. In doing so, I intend to argue that the performance space, particularly when pain is present, renders visible complex ideas around intervention and complicity. It also reveals the ways in which art practices have to adhere, to a certain degree, to an ethics of care to all who are present. As I will explore, here and in the later section, viewers are invited by the artist to participate in his reorganisation of space through performance acts. O'Brien affirms a claim for his sick body to be here, in this space, at that particular moment, so as to not to live in fear of illness. He uses practices of queering to explore and create a new self through acknowledging both the physical and sexual status of his body. As the discussion will consider, O'Brien plays with the norms of interior space, through creating environments of stagecraft and celebration where his body is defined without fear. I argue that this serves to further challenge notions of gendered hierarchies. Hence, the geographies of masculine configurations are contested and addressed through processes of social embodiments, and the psychosocial dynamics of the varieties of masculinities in this presenting of the sick body as both being able to resist pain and explore pleasure and sex.

O'Brien's performances have occurred in a variety spaces, including BDSM clubs, dungeons, historic operating theatres, and warehouses. An emphasis on this variation of spaces relates to how these works still operate under the framework of art, even though in using certain actions perceived as painful, unwatchable, unbearable, and delivered through acts of endurance, they still operate and are legitimised as performance art due to their context. In his book, *No*

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<sup>217</sup> See Anthony Graham, "Queering Space: Challenging Heteronormative Practices/Performances in Architecture," *Academia.edu* (10 Dec. 2012), accessed 18 Oct. 2015, p.2.

*Innocent Bystander: Performance, Art and Audience*, Frazer Ward describes experiences and behaviour that might otherwise be viewed as free of context, such as mundane acts violence or pathological behaviours, which have been legitimised due to their framing as art.<sup>218</sup> Ward furthers this ‘framing as art by calling into question the ways in which, and by the fact of this framing, extreme performances, due to their sheer unapologetic and seeming disregard for ethics and the audience, are readily attacked as playing out pathologies or deemed to be more fetishistic.’<sup>219</sup> To read these works literally and dismissing them as either fetishistic or pathological, based on an aesthetic evaluation that might view them as psychosexual (i.e. in this particular work's biting sequence, which might be seen as fetish or cannibalistic, as opposed to say a shared emotional experience of pain), limits the possibilities of regarding the emotion of pain as having the ability to connect and transform artists and their audiences. More importantly, this can lead to a dismissal, a lack of acknowledgement and critical engagement with the political origins that tell of how these works entered into the discourse of contemporary art<sup>220</sup>. In this context, what this work creates is a politics that challenges and redefines attitudes and perceptions of the sick body, and in turn, how bodily categorisations are established and normalised. Performance art has always been bound to culture, and as artist and writer, Andrea Pagnes observes, this art form is always related to the ‘specificity of a particular context, situation and circumstance’.<sup>221</sup> Pagnes argues in his essay that live artworks are not just intended as mere ‘corpus of actions’ but mainly act as possible instruments of expression and communication, aimed to create or decipher particular experiences.<sup>222</sup> Both Ward and Pagne’s observations pertain to the works of O’Brien as they highlight their ideas on the ‘particularities of experience’, alongside the ethical implications that become apparent when one witnesses and participates in a performance like *Taste of Flesh*.

In O’Brien’s performance however, the aesthetics he uses drawn on and are informed by medical practices used in treating CF and *Taste of Flesh* starts off in a clinical and sterile space which in the course of the performance descends into a cacophonous display of bodily fluids, involving sweat, blood, and mucus, alongside homemade gunk and green (dyed) liquid, used as a symbolic and exaggerated representation of mucus, the most prominent by-product of CF, which

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<sup>218</sup> Ward, *No Innocent Bystanders*, p. 15.

<sup>219</sup> Ward’s main argument centres on the implications of audience, publics and counter-publics, through charting artworks by Marina Abramović, Chris Burden, Vito Acconci and Tehching Hsieh, which he sees as contributing to the shifts in meanings associated with public and private space, thus concretises such audiences as less defined as a public but more akin to identifying as an art community. See Ibid.

<sup>220</sup> See Literature Review for an overview on the beginnings of Performance Art.

<sup>221</sup> Andrea Pagnes, “Body Issues in Performance Art: Between Theory and Praxis,” *Art & Education* (2011), <http://www.artandeducation.net/paper/body-issues-in-performance-art-between-theory-and-praxis>.

<sup>222</sup> Ibid.

fills the lungs and is manifested through persistent coughing. This mucus fills the lungs causing infections and breathing complications, which are prevented through a combination of CPT and various prescription medication. CPT is also referred to as chest clapping or percussion, involves pounding the chest and back over and over again with the hands to loosen mucus in order for it to be coughed up. Alongside this form of physiotherapy, a strict quarantine management of the disease is employed which means that individuals with CF are to avoid others with the disease (both in hospital treatments and IRL what is this), to prevent a risk of cross-infection.<sup>223</sup> It is not just the actions but also the design of the space that reflects O'Brien's everyday realities of living with CF.

In this performance, a visible stage and separation from the audience was abandoned through constructing a semi-enclosed quarantine room that allowed a choreography of movement between the artist and his audience. The audience directly engaged with O'Brien's performing body, albeit he was fixed via a chain to a central pole. This pole also gave the feeling of watching a stripper performing on a pole (raising ideas of sexual pleasure) or that of a Christ-like figure of suffering nailed to the cross, conjuring themes of martyrdom. O'Brien was still able to move around the space in a circular motion which pushed viewers to the edges of the enclosure for the entire duration of the performance. This created a direct engagement with his body, one of either avoidance or confrontation, alongside negotiating with the other bodies present in the space. This was further complicated by the fact that some of these actions involved using messy fluids including paint and mucus, which immediately instigated behaviours of fleeing and avoidance.<sup>224</sup> What became apparent as the performance progressed was that in choosing to remain in the space, this meant that there was nowhere to hide as O'Brien continued in his occupation of the space through actions that were a visualisation of the fears of contagion, manifested through the zombie figure he adopted throughout. What began as a sterile and clinical setting was transformed into a critical space for negotiating how one responds to the removal of distance, with the negotiation between intervention and participation arising constantly. As such, the medical-surgical space of witness is subverted into an active participatory space where one cannot avoid encountering and

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<sup>223</sup> This isolation of CF sufferers began in the early nineties, prior to this communities of CF suffer existed forming support networks for families and people with the diseases. The somewhat open-to-debate discovery of possible mitigating circumstances of cross-infection led medical and disease professionals imposing a ban to limit health risk of cross infections, thereby giving birth to the now normal isolated medicalised practice of care given to people with this illness.

<sup>224</sup> Audience members continually negotiated with these fluids throughout the performance mostly avoiding paint staining their clothing and dodging mucus bubbles blown at them at the artist which immediately conjured feelings of disgust due to its sight and smell.

actively engaging with the performing sick body that is on view.

Through using tropes from CF, O'Brien makes visible some of these practices that have largely contributed to wider societal attitudes towards sick bodies that are often readily depicted as weak and lacking, alongside the hysteria that surrounds contagion of infectious diseases.<sup>225</sup> In doing so, normative body definitions and categorisations are contested, allowing for an opening up the possibilities for rethinking preconceived ideas about how one speaks about the body.

It is important to state here that whilst CF is not an infectious disease, a prominent characteristic of the disease, is, however, 'the cough', which also serves as signifier to a variety of actually infectious diseases. O'Brien plays on this trope of cough as signifier, i.e. his persistent coughing symptom and the sound it triggers in leading to reactions that might include repulsion, disgust, recoiling and, in more extreme cases, fleeing. Coughing causes behavioural changes that include moving away and avoidance of the infected (coughing) individual, for fear of catching something as commonplace as a cold or other more serious air-borne diseases—after all, we keep hearing in the media, for example, about the rise of previously eradicated diseases, such as Tuberculosis, which is spread via public transport and brought back into the UK by immigrants. As one populist xenophobic narrative, one only has to look back to the confusion and stigmatisation surrounding the spread of Ebola and the racial prejudices towards the outbreak and individuals from countries where the disease was never present misreported in the media. The cough when considered psychoanalytical terms, still finds a way to signify even though it lacks linguistic features.<sup>226</sup> O'Brien's use of this semiotic function of the cough-as-signifier' is indicative of the wider fears of infection, while also serving as a constant reminder of his illness. The management of this illness follows strict medical codes and quarantine procedures that prevent individuals with CF from coming into contact with each other, in order to limit cross-infection. Hospital treatment occurs in isolation; in quarantine, which O'Brien directly draws on as a spatial reference for the custom-built space for *Taste of Flesh*.

O'Brien increasingly moves beyond using a white cube-gallery format as a primary experience of his work to more actively explore spaces, places, and times that are outside the

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<sup>225</sup> The HIV and AIDS epidemic of the 1980s and more recently disease outbreaks including SARS, Ebola and most recently the Zika virus as examples of marginalisation practices subjected to individuals by medically imposed codes of conducts that pertain to contacting an outbreak which also influences movements of people, but more problematically stigmatisation associate with diseases and its spread. Whilst it is not the focus of this chapter to discuss in detail the political implications of such containment approaches, I have mentioned these diseases as to further comment upon and contextualise the media fuelled paranoia that often accompanies infectious disease outbreaks.

<sup>226</sup> For an exploration on the potential of the voice as an analytical tool to approach text see Jorge Sacido-Romero and Sylvia Mieszkowski eds., "Revoicing Writing: An Introduction to Theorizing Vocality" in *Sound Effects: The Object Voice in Fiction* (Leiden: BRILL, 2015), p. 1-18.

limits of the traditional exhibition circuits. Much of this artistic activity is concerned with events, actions, relationships or processes rather than the exhibition of discrete distributable objects. In doing so, they challenge the very experiences of exhibiting within a white-cube and thus, viewing and evaluating art located elsewhere in space and time in these non-traditional art spaces by presenting an expanded and dynamic exhibition format, blurring the boundaries between art and life, and, in this case, medical and non-medical spaces. How then, do we find an appropriate language and evaluative criteria for discussing projects that often straddle art and other discourses? In adopting a pseudo-medical space, *Taste of Flesh* gives a voice to artistic interventions located outside and elsewhere in space and time, in a new kind of intimate space for performance.

In *Taste of Flesh*, O'Brien is able to recreate the feeling of confinement found in medical spaces, i.e. to prevent contagion both literally in the confined re-purposed space, and metaphorically through securing himself by chain throughout the performance's duration. The performance space, in merging art with non-art, is clinical and sterile. It is ordered with signatory medical aesthetics at the beginning, and later descends into a messy, unclean, unsettling and chaotic space filled with bodily and other fluids. The space, through a series of actions involving paint and bodily fluids – mucus, blood and sweat – is transformed from a sterile space to chaos and can also be interpreted as a physical and manifestation of and resistance to illness, in that the sick body breaks away from its normative containment and expels visibly all of the signs that are usually kept hidden. A failure to contain contagion is now visualised here, with somewhat apocalyptic undertones, i.e. the manifestation of ultimate fear, but also one can conjure images of the apocalyptic, with blood splattered from wall to ceiling. We are left here with an explosion of green in the form of paint, homemade gunge, and all sorts liquids, where there is an ambiguity as to what some substances even are (**Fig.10**). Further elements allude to an influence of underground aesthetics by drawing parallels between the sick body, reminiscent of Christ-like suffering on the cross, with the image of O'Brien fixed to the pole. The presence of a single pole also conjures the sexual imagery of pole dancing. The artist's male body replaces one that would normally be inhabited by a feminine figure for pleasure. The sick body replaces this, parodying and subverting the norm.



**Fig.10 – Post-performance debris in the space, *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours*, 2015, commissioned by The Arts Catalyst, London © Martin O'Brien/The Arts Catalyst/London**

After spending a year in the lead up to the curating and realising of this performance commission together with the artist, the ‘curator-witness’ enters into this framework as an active participant. The curator-witness is one who is well-informed whilst also establishing critical distance due to the very nature of this position. It is entwined with a role of care towards the artist and their audience, alongside allowing for the intended and unintended to occur. Curating this performance forced me to reflect on the paradoxical position of inhabiting both the roles of viewer-witness and curator as witness. At certain moments in the performance, these two seemingly differential positions collapsed into one another and at times there were no clear separations or distinctions. This is a process of identification through differentiation that psychologist Alex Gillespie identifies as ‘the positive differentiation of Self from Other that collapses in a moment of identification’.<sup>227</sup> This collapse was a result of the shifting roles I experienced as a member of the audience (as part of a collective) and curator-witness (as a lone individual), both of which raise important ethical questions on the wider implications about what the act of witnessing serves within the realm of performance art. In this particular context, through silent speech acts that were communicated non-verbally in bodily actions, the artist’s intentions became a point of focus as this live work required active audience participation. The performance raises questions from the

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<sup>227</sup> Alex Gillespie, “Collapsing self/other positions: identification through differentiation,” *British Journal of Social Psychology* 46, no. 3 (2007), pp. 579-95, <http://eprints.lse.ac.uk/38688>.

viewer such as, ‘Why does he want us to bite him?’, ‘Are we expected to proceed to bite each other?’, ‘Do I participate, or do I walk away?’. In analysing *Taste of Flesh*, through adopting the role of curator-witness, I watched and engaged with the responses to participatory actions that O’Brien set up. In doing so I developed a critical framework for considering intention, unintentional, participation, and importantly, the ethical implications of the witness position offered up by this performance.

Prior to the performance, I imagined that my role as curator and my engagement with this performance meant that I would exist on the outside, and that my participation would remain distanced throughout. Having an insider knowledge of the sequence of events, and a strong idea as to how things might unravel contributed to this distanced position, although like the majority of audience present, this was also my first experience of an O’Brien performance. I had previously experienced his works only through texts and documentation. This need to exist outside of the performance was driven by a curatorial responsibility of care directed towards the artist and audience, specifically towards making sure nothing went wrong and that the artist was able to realise his work in its entirety without interruptions. Logistical constraints, including time-keeping, crowd control, monitoring audience questionnaire feedback (keeping track of whether these were being filled in), including ensuring the artist’s well-being in what was about to manifest as a durational work pushing O’Brien’s body to its limits. As the performance commenced, negotiations involving ethical subjectivity, participation, and the role of the not-so-innocent bystander collapsed into each other and everyone present became complicit in our varied roles as witness.

The curator-witness perspective I introduce in curating of *Taste of Flesh* raises the paradoxical position of active participant and passive bystander and, unlike other members of the audience, prior knowledge of the actions that were to ensue over the three hours gave some preparation. However, in allowing for artistic freedom and delivery of the artists intended work, I, like audience members, would also witness the unintentional due to the dynamics between artist and audience. This occurred alongside reactions to certain actions if they were deemed to be too extreme by the audience. By legitimising extremity within performances through framing them as art, complexities arise. This is especially the case with a work like *Taste of Flesh* that is intimate and where immediacy, agency, and vulnerability all operate for those who experience the work first hand. Bearing witness to these vulnerabilities, I argue, allows the potential for the possibilities of transformation, that is, the exchange can provide a change in perspective through the transference and experiencing of the pain of others, that has less to do with being pathological or fetishistic impulses, but rather raise questions on consent, intentionality and ethics.



The recurring question that arose from curating O'Brien's performance was: What constitutes ethical witnessing and how does informed consent operate within pain-performances? One's basic understanding of ethics arises from moral conduct and the relation of oneself to others. In my role as curator and witness, I was highly aware of the ethical considerations that relate to how one is to administer informed consent with regards to how much information should be made available to an audience prior to a performance, especially when it is of an extreme nature. In *Taste of Flesh*, this was addressed by handing over the decision to both participate and witness the performance to the audience meaning that they could enter and leave the space at any time during the three-hour duration. To consider the ethical implications of O'Brien's artwork is to engage further with the ethical role of the curator as it relates to both artist and audience. A role negating letting the unintentional happen, whilst consciously of artist and audience who make up the work, in this case. During post-performance discussions and in analysing audience feedback in open-ended questionnaires, the main contestation of the work centred on how much information about the elements of participatory biting within the performance should have been made known to the audience prior, and whether or not such actions communicated a transference of power dynamics between O'Brien and the audience. In this curator-witness role however, I reflect on this work somewhat speculatively, as one who neither questions the artist's intentions, nor sets out fixed moral codes of conduct, regarding what is watchable, bearable, and acceptable. I considered instead the observable shift in power dynamics through a notion of collective gazing, which might have brought about an inner experience of the gazed-at object, here, the sick body of O'Brien. In perceiving, another's gaze and following this line of regard to the gazed-at object allowed for the possibility of a meeting of minds; at one level, individuals were sharing a similar visual experience of one aspect of the world, regardless of their ethical positions.

To curate, translated from the Latin word *curare* means to attend to something and thus also to take responsibility – for an exhibition, for the participating artists, for the works and within the context of this performance, for an audience.<sup>228</sup> The curator has a duality of roles in live extreme performances. Firstly, there is a responsibility of care towards artistic freedom so that artist's intentions are realised, and secondly, a care towards the audience who witness the unexpected. O'Brien's intention here was to manipulate and create a space of encounter for infecting his audience both physically and metaphorically, thus forcing them to engage and interact. In preparing for the realisation of *Taste of Flesh*, together with O'Brien, firstly logistical and organisational considerations had to be managed. This, from a practical point of view, began

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<sup>228</sup> From the Latin Dictionary, available at <http://latin-dictionary.net>.

with thinking through how we were to realise a durational performance that, by taking contagion as its departure point, unravelled into a sequence of events. These were pain-related activities that would not only test the artist's bodily limits but also the audience, which the artist described briefly leaving me, as the curator, to negotiate with the ethical limits of what was safe or unsafe, comfortable or uncomfortable, necessary or unnecessary, and acceptable or unacceptable.

The architecture of the space, I would argue, allowed for the transfer of some of the power over to the audience through creating a temporary space that explored contagion both metaphorically and physically. This was manifested in the quarantine-fashioned room that completely took over the rectangular exhibition space of the White Building. The purpose-built space within a space had a narrow corridor as entry and exit leading to O'Brien's performance. In all promotional material related to the performance, audiences decided whether or not to stay or to leave for the entire duration of three hours as they wished. This created, as discussed in the conversations afterwards, and through personal observations on the day, a progression from challenging non-intervening bystanders to active, participating audiences with a sizeable number of fifty individuals who stayed for the entire duration, driven perhaps by a curiosity as to what would unfold as time progressed, and indeed becoming part of this shared collective experience. Whilst there was a preconceived notion that the audience would be largely made up of individuals, who were interested in art, science, performance art, ethics, illness, and medical humanities, all of which the performance touched on, it became apparent evaluating the performance and ethics discussion afterwards that the overarching ethical question from *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours* was how much can be expected of an audience? What is responsible? And what are the ethical considerations in encounters that encourage intimacy? These questions pertain, in particular, to a set of actions that occurred half-way through the performance. O'Brien moved around the room and bit members of his audience. He encouraged people to bite him back through non-verbal gestures as he was fixed to a pole in the centre of the space.

One key question that I took from the performance was how does intimacy and generosity in socially engaged practice, shift our perception of ourselves and each other? To answer this, it was revealed in the audience questionnaires that the elements of the performance involving the biting-sequence for those who were present led to their active participation after a period of time into the performance as a way of connecting to O'Brien's enduring body. The initially threatening space that had facilitated the somewhat ritualistic, fetishistic action of biting became a playful and safe space for all.<sup>229</sup> In my personal reflections of the performance, being bitten really hurt, but

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<sup>229</sup> In summarising the responses of the audience members who filled in the questionnaires, responses varied

also served as a way of sharing, connection to and becoming part of *Taste of Flesh*, which then established a way to get closer to experiencing the (sick) body of O'Brien whose everyday experiences of living with chronic pain, is one that will remain unknown, but in this temporary moment, we were all able to connect with his body as it went through imposed acts of sufferance. O'Brien's action of biting draws parallels to another work performed by the Russian artist, Oleg Kulik. In his performance *Dog House*, which took place on 2 March 1996 at Fargfabriken, Stockholm, Kulik assumed the role of a dog with a warning for audiences 'not to cross the boundaries set out for the dog (the artist). Kulik ended up biting a curator who decided to pet 'the dog' and in turn crossed the boundary set in in place.<sup>230</sup> This raises the point of artist-audience contractual agreements and the curatorial care towards afforded to works of an extreme nature.

An animalistic behaviour, biting another person and inviting being bitten explores a range of socio-cultural implications, including cannibalism, fear of contamination, and the spread of contagious diseases. This also blurs the boundaries of human and animal, as well as uncontrolled sexual and religious aggression. The biting sequence in *Taste of Flesh* contrasts with an earlier part at the start of the performance where O'Brien crawled around the space using his head to paint the floor, whilst his arms were restrained in a straight-jacket. This 'painting with head' sequence on the other hand, has religious connotations of inflicting pain, akin to saint-like suffering and martyrdom used to appease sins. In both of these actions, I see a blurring of the boundaries between human and non-human bodies that might allude to a more animalistic, spiritual or mythical body. These actions reveal a body that opposes one that is controlled and medically categorised due to its health status. A body like O'Brien's that is continually regulated in order to keep alive due to its CF status.<sup>231</sup> The performing body of O'Brien becomes a body

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but there was a shared notion of getting closer to O'Brien's body in extremis as long as an admiration for his ability to take and withstand pain. Most who were present were first time viewers of O'Brien's work.

<sup>230</sup> Oleg Kulik in collaboration with Mila Bredikhina, extracts from the Artist's Notes on Performances in the *Zoophrenia Programme* at Live Art Development Agency described events as follows:

It was suggested that Kulik produce his *Dog House* project within *Interpol*, an exhibition devoted to the problem of communication. The artist was invited as a sort of ready-made to stay in a specially built house. The audience was warned that any communication with the artist, who denounced the language of culture, was dangerous and that no one should cross the borders of his territory. Following the logic of this action Kulik bit a Mr. Lindquist who had neglected the warning. Kulik was arrested by the Swedish police. This performance and the exhibition as a whole aroused scandalous response from the media. *Interpol* was called an event that divided the art world into East and West. Kulik published an explanation of his action in response to demands made by the exhibition's curators. (See his letter entitled *Why I Have Bitten a Man*), 2003,

<http://www.thisisliveart.co.uk/projects/oleg-kulik>.

<sup>231</sup> O'Brien writes extensively about historical and modern treatment of living with chronic illness. He discusses the violence in treatments justified to 'cure,' In his case, it is paradoxical as CF has no cure and these repeated medical regimes are for preservation the body that has no cure. See Martin O'Brien, "Performing Chronic: Chronic Illness and endurance art" in Gianna Bouchard and Martin O'Brien eds., "On Medicine", *Performance Research* 19, no. 44 (2014), p.55.

that scares us, and one that does not allow the possibility of ‘a witnessing gaze’ but rather it invites the audience into a paradoxical complicity.

### 3.5 Audience-Witness and performing illness

Ritualistic and meditative. Martin, crawling on his knees uses his head to paint spirals on the floor of the performance, whilst strapped into a strait jacket. This was the most difficult part, flipping between sexualised image, fetish, on his knees and at our feet. On knees, discomfort, hard to deal by the end of that hour. Flip between playful, to threatening. Coming closer and closer he is intimidating but it was a game between trying to avoid Martin and what he was going to do. By the time that the bite sequence happened, I was exhausted by moving about but more relaxed, what’s the worse that he can do? He’s going to bite us! Is he really biting people? How hard? Expectations... At 5 O’clock, I left the space and watched from outside in, from the cloudy sheeting through the walkway. The was a choreography of the piece... Avoid green paint and avoid Martin, but there were others who wanted to be in his space a bit more, block him and collective movements, ripples across the space where everyone moved together. After a while this seemed to be a change, trust comes into this after a certain duration i.e. we are going to be ok and seemed to have a real sense of what is going to happen? The performance seemed to give permission to take a risk.

— Giana Bouchard on *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I’m Yours* discussion 29 April 2015

It was really intense; I came halfway through the performance thinking “what’s going to happen?” It was like a rollercoaster.

— Audience response on *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I’m Yours* discussion 29 April 2015

I really connected to what was going on even though I wanted to leave but I decided against it. I was trying to help him. Yes, I wanted to help him through participating, through biting and placing cotton balls on his body as he requested.

— Audience response on *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I’m Yours* discussion 29 April 2015

It seemed friendly, he was chained and quite harmless, that was what was probably connecting you to him, doing things that aren’t very nice. I bit him but didn’t want to make it painful.

— Audience response on *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I’m Yours* discussion 29 April 2015

Can look away, can shut your eye? I chose to be there. Performance is about taking things a step further, anything can happen, it’s about acting something out

— Audience response on *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I’m Yours* discussion 29 April 2015

I wanted to join in, relation to coughing, it’s coming from what is happening with his body, it’s a part of this whole process, it was something that was going to happen. His expressing himself as he is, his truth, his own truths. First time. When people show their truth.

— Audience response on *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I’m Yours* discussion 29 April 2015

I only saw one person try to help and intervene

— Audience response on *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I’m Yours* discussion 29 April 2015

The responses above by audience members alongside my experience of *Taste of Flesh*, convey a sense of what it felt like to participate in the three-hour duration of this performance that tested both the artist, in the sense that it was gruelling and difficult to carry out, and also the demands for those present as an actively engaging audience member. All who were present came to a consensus that the performance had two distinct effects, which began with a more difficult sequence of watching without intervening as O'Brien painted circular marks on the floor with his head whilst restrained. He was unable to see and on all fours. Later on, half-way through the performance, he began biting his audience and, in turn, invited them to bite him back. The latter set of actions interestingly changed the dynamics of what had initially begun as a difficult-to-watch performance with an atmosphere of a lack of control, i.e. a gruelling sequence that he alone would carry out whilst we all watched. This proceeded into a participative performance where a transformation occurred due to the audience entering a non-contractual agreement having watched O'Brien push his body to its extreme and then being invited to partake in the work. Witnessing the difficulty undergone by the artist prior led to the biting and being bitten sequence, which became an opportunity to engage and to do something. An analysis of the relationship between ethics and aesthetics within this piece is an active prerequisite to an understanding of the performance. As is the ethical concern raised by the artist-audience relationship (such as are raised by biting actions). There is a difference between, on the one hand, the ethical relationship between artist and audience during an artistic performance (a relationship marked by power and control on the side of the performer), and, on the other hand the relationship between ethics and aesthetics as active in the performance, as something that regulates, dominates, or navigates the relationship between artist and audience, without it being a cause-effect relationship.

A pivotal moment in the performance, the biting sequence represented the point at which the performance took a more participatory and playful turn, whilst at the same time creating a pseudo-game like atmosphere. A transformation occurs from serious to playful in participating collectively with others, we participate in shattering boundaries. This shattering is defined by Jacques Rancière as 'heterology', which he describes as 'the way in which the meaningful fabric of the sensible is disturbed: a spectacle does not fit within the sensible framework defined by a network of meanings, an expression does not find its place in the system of the visible coordinates where it appears.'<sup>232</sup> Highlighting this action and its ethics is neither intended to serve as a means of simplifying this complex work, nor is it intended to reduce its overall impact to a series of extreme (and at times uncomfortable) actions that occurred here; rather, it serves to highlight how

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<sup>232</sup> Jacques Rancière, "Politicized Art" in *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 63.

such pain-actions raise important questions around how people participate, who participates, and why they participate, alongside considerations around informed consent. The varied responses to such actions are perhaps indicative of wider concerns around the dissonance that exists within performance art, which often alludes more to wider culturally informed and regulated codes of conduct that constitutes what is in good and bad taste. This exists alongside ethical codes of conduct around what individuals are allowed to do with their bodies within the visual art context and beyond. *Taste of Flesh* ultimately challenges normative ideas about the safe distance between the performer and audience, by considering behavioural changes that occur when these boundaries are broken down or challenged.

*Taste of Flesh* introduces participation into O'Brien's performance practice. The work demands that his audience actively participate. To be present as a witness meant that taking part was unavoidable. Throughout the course of its duration, it explored fears of contagion through actions that included blowing mucus bubbles (**Fig.11**) at the audience. These physical manifestations served as a point of departure for visualising such fears, merged with an aesthetics that draws on the medical treating and management of his illness. The actions, as demonstrated in audience responses, provoked a range of emotions including shock, disgust, nervous laughter and wincing.<sup>233</sup> Overall, from discussions and audience feedback, there was a sense of an empathic connection towards O'Brien's body one that endures beyond the art context within which it was framed and witnessed.

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<sup>233</sup> Appendix summary of audience questionnaires?



**Fig.11 Martin O'Brien Blowing mucus bubbles at his audience during *Taste of Flesh Bite Me I'm Yours*, 2015, © Martin O'Brien/The Arts Catalyst/London.**

In ethical discussions of performance art, a central concern is that of consent. With a performance such as *Taste of Flesh*, whose responsibility is it to provide informed consent to the audience? Is it that of the artist, the curator, the institution, or all of them? In my role as curator-witness, in an immersive space between public and private created by O'Brien, not to inform the audience prior of the actions carried out was a way of allowing the unknown to happen but raises the question: does care (towards the artist and the audience) in this context operates as a form of disrupting O'Brien's body and his intentionality? To answer this, the set-up of the performing space becomes a laboratory for exploring and testing the limits of permissibility, control and consent revealed in the course of the events as they unfold live before an audience. The performance and the site it occupies allows for the possibility of the unpredictable to happen. Whilst the role of the curator is one that affords a level of care to artists and their audience, it is also one that does not censor an artist's intentions. As panel member and medical sociologist, Karen Lowton observed, 'of all the works I have seen by Martin, this was more representative than real as there were less bodily fluids than in previous works, which featured more piercing, breaking of skin, and even more

medical imagery present.<sup>234</sup> Lowton continues ‘this work was more about ideas and anxieties, contamination, fear and the direct lived embodied experiences of those emotions.’<sup>235</sup> These comments deconstruct the aesthetics and actuality of experiencing O’Brien’s performance from someone familiar with his work and the kinds of endurance-based actions that are present in them. For Lowton, there was a distinct separation between representation and the real experiences of illness framed by her position as a sociologist and a former nurse specialising in intensive and palliative adult care. As such her experience consider the ethical considerations related to how illness might be experienced when it takes a performative turn, one which O’Brien also uses to queer his sick bodily status and further question bodily categorisations based on health, masculinity and sexuality.

In her research on the aesthetics of queer postcolonial narratives, Donna McCormack examines how unspeakable traumas and violence are communicated through the body and calls for a listening to ‘bodies that have been rendered silent through reiterative marginalizing practices of bodies that have no witness.’<sup>236</sup> McCormack concludes her analysis by proposing for a multi-sensory coming together as one of the possible way of listening to bodies, and thus as a way to avoid the repetitive reiteration of institutional silencing and violence. The body’s supposed silence is revealed as a visceral desire to communicate through a body constrained and violated by others.<sup>237</sup> This sensory engagement is tentatively translated into fragmentary words, through a process of witnessing where listeners are literally touched into verbal expression.<sup>238</sup> In the rest of this section, I will examine how the performance created a ‘multi-sensory’ coming together for its audiences, in which the experience of the audience was developed as one that became a witness to the body that usually has no witness. This discussion will unfold through sections that explore how it is that the audience came to be witnesses, their reactions to that, and the role of ethics within this. The discussion will commence with an exploration of how O’Brien’s performances demonstrate, test, and confront the boundaries between seeing and perceiving. It will then move to consider how the performance directly confronted the audience members with ideas of contagion, before exploring more directly the idea of taking part on the part of the audience. The chapter closes with reflections on questions of taste and boundaries.

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<sup>234</sup> Prof. Karen Lowton in conversation as part of the panel discussion of *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I’m Yours*, White Building, London, 25 April 2015, 7-8.30pm, <https://vimeo.com/146020199>

<sup>235</sup> Ibid.

<sup>236</sup> McCormack, *Queer Postcolonial Narratives*, p. 20.

<sup>237</sup> Ibid., p. 21.

<sup>238</sup> Ibid., p. 22.



### 3.6 Seeing: Perceiving

O'Brien's performances challenge normative notions on the gaze, or, rather, traditional positioning that situates the gaze as scientific, voyeuristic, avoidant and at times, passive. His works call on the audience as witness, and introduces ideas that form a witnessing gaze, which, within medicine, has been described as the 'ability to accept and honour, rather than diminish a patient's anguish.'<sup>239</sup> This particular performance began with the artist using his head as a paintbrush to create circular marks proceeding from the centre out into the corners of the space whilst his audience watched his slow and, at times, nauseatingly difficult movements without intervening. This action bears similarity and resonates with a work performed in the early nineties by Janine Antoni titled *Loving Care, Lick and Lather* (1993). Antoni also used her head to paint across the floors of a London gallery over several hours. She soaked her hair in a bucket filled with hair dye and proceeded to mop the entire floor of the Anthony d'Offay Gallery, London with it. Her work served as a claim to a piece of territory, action painting, that has historically been occupied by male artists such as Jackson Pollock and Yves Klein. Both Antoni and O'Brien share an interest in repetition, discipline, and what changes occur psychologically when the body is taken to places of extremity. Whilst Antoni's piece challenged the male-dominated territory of action painting through putting the female body literally and physically into the painting, O'Brien contests the limitation of his body's sick status. Both artists, however, engage with and disrupt the separation or distance that exists between artists and audiences, so that viewers can actively engage with the work as it is occurring through the movements that are constantly evolving within the performance space. This facilitates the audience's response. It sets up an ethical positioning for the viewer, regarding intervening or resisting as direct responses, determined and influenced by the performer's actions. By intervening, I am referring here to the choice an audience member makes when they experience challenging work, a response that might mean intervening in difficult tasks, or resisting the urge to do so. A member of the audience, in this context, is faced with making choices that might mean restraining from interrupting or interfering with an artist's intentions, leading to ethical considerations regarding intervention, especially when the unintentional happens and in extreme circumstances where an action could go wrong.

O'Brien's mark-making action saw him continually dip his hood-covered head into a bowl of paint and then, with gradual spiralling gestures, he moved outwards marking the floor

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<sup>239</sup> According to Johanna Shapiro, the clinical gaze strips people of their wholeness and leaves them feeling as if who they are is defined by their illness, the witnessing gaze creates an empathic witness and is one that advocates the value of the patient's voice in the medical practice. See Johanna Shapiro, "Illness narratives: reliability, authenticity and the empathic witness," *Medical Humanities* 37 (2011) p. 68, <http://www.epocrates.com/dacc/1205/illnessnarrativesBMJ1205.pdf>.

from the centre to the corners of the space, where his audience stood watching. This movement was made more difficult by his being chained to a metal pole for the entire duration of the performance. The hood also doubled as a mask with a single opening at the mouth, which restricted his vision but allowed breathing. It also served as a powerful sonic reminder of the difficulty he faced as he carried out this task whilst crawling on all fours. O'Brien's movements were further restricted by being strapped into a strait jacket and chained to a fixed point. He had to use his head for navigation as his vision was completely restricted by the hood. O'Brien puts his body through what he describes as 'regimes of hardships.'<sup>240</sup> In repeating certain actions, he is able to test the limits of what he is able to bear and in turn, what his audience are willing to watch and partake in. In *Taste of Flesh*, these actions disturbed the familiar imagery of sick bodies through incorporating endurance-based actions that allowed for his body to undergo transformations as it was pushed to its limits. He portrays the messy nature of bodies, one that usually indicates infection, illness, or disease by confronting the audience with their irrational fears. The use of biting within the performance (**Fig.12**) formed a central discussion point in the ethics debate that ensued afterwards. Questions about complicity, control, manipulation, affect and empathy were raised by those who were present.

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<sup>240</sup> Martin O'Brien was Artist in Residence at ]performance space [ between January and June 2012. He used the residency period to realise the project *Regimes of Hardship: Illness & The Enduring Body* (2012), <http://www.performancespace.org/martin-obrien-regimes-of-har>.



Fig.12 – Martin biting an audience member, *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours*, 2015, © Martin O'Brien/The Arts Catalyst/London.

Audience members debated the group dynamics present and spoke of collective acts of witnessing, as the negation of what was deemed acceptable. We were confronted with questions including: ‘Was it OK to bite an artist if they have given consent to do so?’, ‘Was participating in biting a result of an obligation to others who had already taken part?’ and ‘Is participation through biting and being bitten a form of nonverbal communication that performance facilitates?’<sup>241</sup> These questions align with what Jennifer Doyle identifies in her book, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (2013) as to how certain artworks challenge how we experience artist’s feelings, and in doing so encourage an acceptance of emotional intensity in order to learn from them. If we are to learn from *Taste of Flesh*, where fears associated with contagion, infection, risk, and trust are laid bare through performance, the presentation of difficult experiences in performance art offers the possibility to expose us to a range of emotional responses, as the work brings together challenging personal and political subject matter.

### 3.61 Contagion



**Fig.13 – Martin’s mask-hood (close-up), Martin O’Brien performing *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I’m Yours*, 2015, commissioned by The Arts Catalyst, London © Martin O’Brien and The Arts Catalyst.**

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<sup>241</sup> This material is available in audience recordings and questionnaire report I provided to Arts Catalyst on *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I’m Yours* in a debrief of the performance in May 2015.

In my reflections on *Taste of Flesh*, the iconic and most memorable image of the performance was that of O'Brien, with his head concealed in a green-hooded mask that only allowed for him to breathe and disrupted his other sense (Fig.13). This image not only stands for a literal interpretation of CF – namely, the inability to breathe properly – but it also crosses over to the figure of that which must be contained, masked, hidden, and locked away. This can be interpreted as symbolic of the fears we all have for being infected by contagious diseases. The zombie is also a trope used by O'Brien to demonstrate the intermingling of the diseased other, the sick body, and the contagious figure, as one that should be avoided both in the performance space and in real life. However, contagion in this context does not only allude to its literal meaning of the spreading of something harmful or diseased from body to body. It also signals to contagion that can cross cultural as well as individual somatic divides, enabling an 'intersubjective sharing of pain between individuals' through which humanity can be brought together.<sup>242</sup> O'Brien presents his sick-body as a way to explore how an atavistic fear of the nondescript might manifest through adopting tropes of the zombie, and thus serving for the possibility of a critique (through opening up) of the attitudes and thinking that inform the fears of infection and contagion. The zombie figure O'Brien adopts is useful for considering these fearful attitudes towards illness and infection, as the body in this context is one that enables the shattering of spatial dynamics. The zombie embodies that which cannot be destroyed and is devoid of any human emotion and will surely rise again when attempts are made to eradicate or fight against its infective, primitive, savage impulses.

The popularity of the zombie figure continues to prevail within popular culture, more specifically within films, television series, books, and graphic novels. Portrayals of this recurring and popular trope can be traced back to mainstream of popular culture beginning sometime in the 1960s. The zombie is a relatively modern when compared with monsters like Frankenstein and Dracula, which are found in literary sources dating as far back as 1818, as depicted in Mary Shelley's well-known Gothic-Horror-Science Fiction novel. In *Raising the Dead* (2006), Kyle Bishop, asserts that 'zombies have no direct antecedent from the monsters' essentially visual nature; zombies do not think or speak—they simply act.'<sup>243</sup> He further argues how this might be considered as an embodiment of horror, recalling Freud's concept of the uncanny, which comes alive in the filmic as opposed to prose interpretations. To understand this literary root of the zombie, Bishop turns to anthropology, seeking to shed light on the term's etymology. Zombie most likely derives from the Kimbundu term *nzúmbe*, which means ghost or spirit of a dead

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<sup>242</sup> Anna Dumitriu, "The Normal Floral Project" in Maria Chatzichristodoulou and Rachel Zerihan eds., *Intimacy Across Visceral and Digital Performance* (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), p. 79.

<sup>243</sup> Kyle Bishop, "Raising the Dead," *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, vol. 33, no. 4 (2006), p. 196, <http://dx.doi.org/10.3200/JPFT.33.4>.

person. It is a concept brought from Africa to Haiti with the slave trade and subsequently translated into Creole, *zōbi*, which was later modernized into zombie. If we take the zombie figure to represent mindless bodily automations that are fuelled purely by animalistic passions, what might this reveal when applied to *Taste of Flesh*, a performance piece where, at certain times, we observe the blurring of the boundaries between the limits of pleasure and pain. In the performance, these limits are progressed from sombre into a playful sequence, in part due to the collective actions of biting and being bitten, which form a way of communicating and connecting non-verbally. They allow for the possibility of transformative thinking and a re-evaluation of normative attitudes towards the sick body.

The figure of the zombie, I argue, is used within this context as a metaphor for reclaiming public space. In using familiar characteristics of the zombie figures to contaminate and invade the space, O'Brien created a temporary space where his body transgresses its usual medically managed and contained existence. This demonstrates an observable imperative to close the meaning of performances, a need so potent, as scholars, Iñaki Martínez de Albéniz and Gabriel Villota Toyos remind us:

[It] drags the artists into the pragmatic contradiction of trying to explain the inexplicable. It seems as if, when faced the crypticism, lack of clarity and univocally of what is “acted”, one has to fall back onto the firm ground of commentary in order for things to acquire meaning. But does the lack of clarity of performative action not emanate from its very inscrutability, from that kind of irreducible ambivalence that characterises all performative action?<sup>244</sup>

Freud, contra to de Albéniz and Toyos remind in his book, *The Uncanny* (1919), identifies this fear of the once familiar as the *unheimlich*, a complex term meaning ‘un-homely’ but is usually translated as ‘the uncanny.’<sup>245</sup> This concept is key to understanding the ability of the zombie to instil fear: those who should be dead and safely laid to rest have overcome the natural order of things in confronting us all with their visceral presence. Because zombies do not speak, all of their intentions and activities are manifested solely through physical action. In other words, because of this sensual limitation, zombies must be carefully watched. Similarly, in this direct

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<sup>244</sup> Villota Toyos, G. and Martínez de Albéniz, I. *Metaphorical Zombies and Functional Activists: For Interpretative Sophistication at the Intersection between Social and Aesthetic Practices*, <http://www.parallelports.org/text/metaphorical-zombies-and-functional-activists-for-interpretative-sophistication-at-the>.

<sup>245</sup> Freud defines the abstract concept of the uncanny as ‘that species of the frightening that goes back to what was once well known and had long been familiar.’ He further points out how ‘this uncanny element is actually nothing new or strange, but something estranged from [the psyche] only through being repressed.’ The true manifestation of this fear occurs, therefore, when a repressed familiarity (such as death) returns in a disturbing, physical way (such as a corpse); the familiar (*heimlich*) becomes the unfamiliar or uncanny (*unheimlich*). Sigmund Freud’s *Uncanny* cited in Bishop, “Raising the Dead,” p. 200.

confrontation of fears of contagion, O'Brien's body must also be watched, and listened to.

### 3.7 Taking part: Audience Participation

The participation of audiences features extensively in performance art histories, with artists long incorporating an audience into the creation of works, whilst at the same time breaking down the barriers of separation from live actions. As chapter two outlines, there are countless examples of performances featuring self-inflicted pain. Equally common are works where the act and responsibility for infliction (on self or artist) is passed on to the audience members. Both Marina Abramović's *Rhythm O* (1974) and Kira O'Reilly's *Untitled Action* (2003) are useful to consider here, as these two performances push the ethics of participatory engagement further and form important examples of the transference of acts of self-inflicted pain to the viewer. With consent, the audience were given entire control over the artist's body.

The role of the audience is further complicated by works that ask them to participate in the creation of pain-actions. As performance scholar Lea Vergine argues, a public audience is essential for the completion of certain kinds of performance events. Vergine furthers this argument by suggesting that 'the success of such events is dependent on whether or not this public is receptive to the artist, or if indeed they actually give a reaction.'<sup>246</sup> For Vergine, the audience's reaction, whether good or bad, becomes part of the piece and extends its meaning. The artist, in her opinion, needs to feel a receptive connection with his or her spectators. Vergine terms this a projection, which she describes as:

Behaviours of the spectator are gratifying for artists and vice-versa. When the public reacts and allows itself to be 'used' in a sense, then the artist has found the affirmation he/she was looking for. The spectator connecting with the artist causes the artist and their actions to feel legitimatised, connects this to the idea of love because of how vulnerable the artist can become in such works where the artist bears himself or herself, or puts down their guard, in a way as though they were doing it for a lover. There becomes a shared connection, or an understanding, between artist and spectator.<sup>247</sup>

This completion of the work through audience that Vergine speaks of is not just limited to witnessing the live works as present in O'Brien's performances. It extends into a sharing and exchange community that exists in viewing performance documentation, which I expand on further in Chapter 5 - *Crisis: Ulay's Auto-Polaroids and the Ethics of Reflecting and Witnessing*

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<sup>246</sup> Lea Vergine, *Body Art: The Body as Language* (Milano: Skira, 2000), p. 906.

<sup>247</sup> *Ibid.*

*Pain* by exploring how performance documentation can be used to consider other ways of witnessing. *Taste of Flesh* cannot exist without audience participation as it demands witnesses for its public performance of illness.

In *Taste of Flesh*, all those who were present spent an afternoon confronted with a variety of situations and at certain moments, the atmosphere was challenging, scary, moving and at times, humorous. Some of the audience left with bite marks. However, as chair of the ethics board, Bobbie Farsides highlighted: 'we needed to keep hold of the idea that art is very privileged and does not always have to go through a formal ethical governance process and can take over a space to allow for things that in other contexts, would be very challenging and need special permissions to occur.'<sup>248</sup> The privileged position she suggests allows the discipline to erode some of the more formally regulated ethics process that artists often challenge. Throughout the duration of the performance, the audience encountered moments of uncertainty, alongside elements of comfort and discomfort. However, there were no instances where an intervention seemed likely to occur. The performance progressed from being almost unbearable in the first hour to a more playful situation, making it even more difficult to ethically govern the range of reactions that occurred within the space. O'Brien began the performance bound to a pole, strapped in a straightjacket and crawling on all fours, whilst simultaneously using his head to make circular marks on the floor. For the duration of this action, he appeared most vulnerable and, by the end, the dynamics switched, as he was more in control. I found that at this point I was transfixed, having reached a moment of extreme admiration for the body we had all just witnessed go through a gruelling regime of hardship. I recall feeling that this experience was shared amongst other audience members. Within the first hour there was a tension and uncertainty on most people's faces but at this point the audience and performer seemed more at ease. Another way to consider this performance from an ethical standpoint would be to view the ways different members of the audience chose to respond to O'Brien's performing body. In the first and most difficult part, no one intervened, whereas as the performance progressed, he had succeeded in building the trust of the audience and the dynamics changed. There was a sense of ethical responsibility amongst the audience, even when it was being pushed and tested.

The performance of intimacy, as noted by curator, Lois Keidan 'tests questions about responsibility and agency, but these are tested in a safe way, in that they occur in controlled

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<sup>248</sup> Prof. Bobbie Farsides discussion as part of the panel discussion of *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours*, White Building, London 25 April 2015, 7-8.30pm, <https://vimeo.com/146020199>.



situations within the performance space and are a test of the individual, rather than collective agency.’ For the artist, his actions were carried out in order to manipulate the space, to infect it literally through its descent from clean to messy and metaphorically to force spectators to engage with the space and with his body.

### 3.71 Taste and Breaking Down boundaries

To consider and analyse audience responses is to ask ethical questions governed by moral boundaries, some of which are crossed when engaging with O’Brien’s endurance-based works. It is to ask, principally, what does it mean participate as part of this collectively? How does the act of biting strangers transform from possible discomfort into participation? In this section I answer these questions. In the introduction to his book, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, social psychologist, Leon Festinger observes how ‘the individual strives toward consistency within himself and our opinions and attitudes tend to exist in clusters that are internally consistent, but when inconsistencies are found to exist i.e. by the presence of dissonance, this inherently leads to actions that reduce it and a move towards greater avoidance of situations that would increase the dissonance.’<sup>249</sup> He further expands on how dissonance arises as ‘a result of cultural modes, existing simply because culture defines what is consonant and what is not.’<sup>250</sup> The removal of sick bodies from view and the fear of contagion, one can argue, has contributed to the normalising of certain behaviours and attitudes towards a body that presents symptoms of illness. A body that deviates from this position (i.e. one that displays its bodily excess or incompleteness) is viewed as being symptomatic of an impending disease or illness, which might set off reactions of disgust, revolt, and the imperative to flee from the perceived infected bodies. In laying out his body and the abject symptoms of his illness for public viewing, O’Brien resists measures that would normally render sick bodies invisible by leaving it up to his audience to contend and contemplate the overarching ideologies that inform perspectives pertaining to how bodies ought to behave, in order to reflect a normalised body image. This is further complicated by presenting his body with its recognisable trait of being ill, made evident through a persistent cough. This doubles as both a symptom of his non-contagious illness, CF, but extends to be a wider signifier, a recognisable indicator of ill-health.

*Taste of Flesh* challenges normative ideas about the safe-distance between the performer and audience by considering behavioural changes that occur when these boundaries are broken

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<sup>249</sup> Leon Festinger, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), p. 2.

<sup>250</sup> Ibid.

down. At the same time, it raises questions about taste. These questions can be observed in the responses of the audience. Is it distasteful to bite and be bitten by an artist? This shattering of the separation distance between audience and performer can be understood through what Rancière describes as ‘heterology’, which is ‘the way in which the meaningful fabric of the sensible is disturbed. A spectacle does not fit within the sensible framework defined by a network of meanings, and an expression does not find its place in the system of the visible coordinates where it appears.’<sup>251</sup> In *Use Value of De Sade: An Open Letter to my Current Comrades* (1919), Georges Bataille conceived of heterology as an emancipatory process. He outlines it as having two phases. The first is in the shape of an anti-religious and asocial organisation, having as its goal an orgiastic participation in different forms of destruction, this practical heterology was to be unleashed to create a maximally free cultural zone. In the second phase, in the here and now, there would be a strategy of delirious movement towards sacrifice and apotheosis as an intended symbolic move. This move in turn, it was hoped, would trigger others, summoning up the energies deemed necessary to shatter the capitalist state.<sup>252</sup> Actions such as the ones carried out in performance by O’Brien, are not unfamiliar within the narrative of performance art. However, bringing illness (i.e. performing one’s illness) in dialogue with such actions is less commonplace; in carrying out these medically informed actions, which subvert and mimic modes of well-being and care, inherently enters into an ethical framework of behaviours and conducts. The varied responses to the interruption of these codes of care indicates wider concerns around the dissonance that exists within performance art’s reception, especially when it is of an extreme nature and signals the wider cultural concerns informing the codes of conduct constituting what is viewed as in good or bad taste; what is morally acceptable, in other words, an ethical code of conduct governing what individuals are allowed to do with their bodies, within context of art and beyond.

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<sup>251</sup> Jacques Rancière, “Politicized Art” in *The Politics of Aesthetics* (London: Continuum, 2004), p. 63.

<sup>252</sup> George Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings 1927-1939*, ed. & trans. By Allan Stoekl (Manchester: Manchester University Press 1985).

## Conclusion: Towards an Ethics of Witnessing

[T]he body is the fundamental ground. Pleasure, suffering, illness and death inscribe themselves on it and shape the individual in the course of its biological evolution.<sup>253</sup>

— Pluchart, F. *L'Art Corporeal*

The aftermath of *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours* presented an image of complete chaos. In the three hours that ensued, this previously pristine quarantine room has its entire surface covered in green paint and other bodily fluids that are now splattered across every surface. Residual waste including mucus, sweat, spots of blood, paint, cotton wool, green coloured liquid etc. littered the space, all of which are direct results of the actions carried out earlier by Martin O'Brien; and are also all that remains. The chaotic scene alludes to an invasion, or rather, failures to contain an outbreak. All hell had broken loose and we are left with a messy aftermath, which presents messy relics of sorts.

— *Reflections III on curating Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours (2015)*

In analysing *Taste of Flesh*, I explored questions related to witnessing and an ethics directed at the response of the viewer. In my role as curator, the tensions that arose between engaging actively as part of the audience and as an observer. This slippage between the roles of active viewer as well as a curator and observer, demonstrates the interchangeability of the witness role in participatory events; the individual's decision-making is affected and influenced by the group dynamics in operation. An ethics of witnessing comes to the fore when varying levels of acceptability, comfort, and discomfort are tested in performances of an extreme nature. This reveals the culturally enforced limits of self-expression and self-exposure. O'Brien mediates between both medical and cultural representations of the body, drawing on his everyday experiences of CF, which he brings into the performative. Through a cycle of repeated endurance acts, personal experiences of living with this life-limiting illness are presented live in front of an audience, with the intention to readdress and contest his body's sick status.

Through the two interrelated actions – of the artist biting members of the audience and then inviting being bitten by the audience, and painting with the head – *Taste of Flesh* offers up new considerations for how pain operates within the framework of performance. They enable us to consider how these actions affected this particular audience, further complicated here through my own interchangeable roles as both curator-witness (as an individual) and audience-witness (as part of a collective). This curator-witness and audience-witness roles come with ethical implications, as the participatory demands of this performance unravelled. As curator of the

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<sup>253</sup> Pluchart, F. *L'Art Corporeal*. It is excerpted in an English translation that can be found in *The Artist's Body*, ed. by Tracey Warr (London: Phaidon, 2000) cited in O'Brien "Treating the Body," *Contemporary Theatre Review* 22, no. 1 (2012), p. 146.

performance, I found myself in a paradoxical position of, on the one hand, wanting to stay outside of participation and, on the other, to take part actively; regardless of my position within the space, I was just another audience member there to witness and actively engage with the artist's actions with others who were present. Furthermore, the two roles of the individual witness and the collective witness became complicated through engagement with this performance, revealing the issues of administering informed actions on the part of the artist and allowing for the work to manifest as the artist intends. Witnessing, as critical lens, allows for multiple interpretations about how one might experience, understand or be confused by pain-based performances. By bringing together the medical, cultural and social, *Taste of Flesh* continues in a lineage of performance art history, which sees the body used to challenge, contest, disturb, and question notions of masculinity that have often celebrated, validated and marked against the normative, white, heterosexual, healthy, male body, a body that, by definition, has been historically developed to exemplify perfection.

Similarly, to other previous works by O'Brien, *Taste of Flesh* operates as a way to explore groupings of thematics such as the masochistic and pain-based, endurance and duration, as well as medical and disability related performance. While these groupings have been defined, theorised, and readily discussed in relation to performance as a means of neatly categorising works, they end up revealing the impossible task of succinctly separating a wide-range of body-based performance work. Practices such as O'Brien's intersect across these groupings. This analysis of *Taste of Flesh* reveals the somewhat complex relationship between artist and audience, alongside codes of conduct that dictate what is acceptable, or rather allowed to occur in front of an audience, thus raising the question of how one engages with difficulty in the context of contemporary performance art. O'Brien's work contributes to creating a thematic dialogue between pain, witnessing, and ethics.

Furthermore, his performances introduce the potential for new ways of seeing through a witnessing gaze for viewers. This gaze, Johanna Shapiro states, has been described within medicine as that which possesses the ability to accept and honour, rather than diminish a patient's anguish.<sup>254</sup> Shapiro's foundation is grounded in the work of Foucault and alongside literary examples. It questions the how clinicians look at patients, but, more importantly, how they consider the returning gaze of patients. Applying this to O'Brien's performance, can be used to understand the importance of 'training the gaze to include "transformative" modes of seeing, such

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<sup>254</sup> Johanna Shapiro, "(Re)Examining the Clinical Gaze Through the Prism of Literature," *Families, Systems & Health* 20 (2002), p. 162.

as empathically witnessing the suffering of and recognizing commonalities shared, in order to restore a humanizing dimension to professional perception.<sup>255</sup> In other words, pain becomes a useful critical tool for analysing the systems, political, cultural and social governing our behaviours.

Taste, used to imply that which is both in good and bad within this context, correlates to feelings of shock, fear, disgust. When audiences are provoked by live works, there is a call to action to the viewer's attention. The rebellious act of inflicting pain on the body serves to destroy a stable image of the body, which, in turn, disrupts foundational knowledge on male bodies, where pain serves as a connective force for compassion and shifting perspectives on what care towards the body should entail. In performing the abject symptoms of his illness, O'Brien points the audience's attention to the limits of the decimation of masculine traits through a process of failures wherein the performing body becomes the image of a 'fallen male'. Within performance art, this serves as an arena for the undoing of, and contestation of, such societal governance of the body, through staging the sick body and its limitations through the illness inscribed on it. Endurance, for O'Brien, serves as a powerful force, an assertion of strength and a form of autonomy, although he is more concerned with making 'body-based' performance work with a chronic illness such as CF, means that endurance and hardship hold within them a different set of possibilities. He argues that:

Endurance can work to reveal illness through the way the body reacts to hardship, and the presentation of this opens a dialogue between concepts of 'the body' within a medical discipline and wider forms of cultural body politics. Diagnosis and location of illness within contemporary medical practices presents the body as a biological object.<sup>256</sup>

O'Brien's practice is focused on exploring, and finding new ways for the expression of, an illness, by bringing it into the sphere of the performative, so that possible truths and realities can intertwine. By making manifest these thematics within the sphere of aesthetic representation, there is the possibility for a transformation of these unseen everyday sufferings into something simultaneously uncanny but now visible and graspable within an affective register. As the artist and writer Andrea Pagnes observes 'art is a constant, continuous research on Man, and to perform arises from the need to reflect on Man's problems and human relationships.'<sup>257</sup> These relationships are rigorously explored in the performances of O'Brien, where his body is framed

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<sup>255</sup> Ibid., p. 161.

<sup>256</sup> Martin O'Brien, "Treating the Body" *Contemporary Theatre Review* 22, no. 1 (2012), p. 146.

<sup>257</sup> Agnes Pagnes, "Body Issues in Performance Art: Between Theory and Praxis," *Art & Education*, 2015,

<http://www.artandeducation.net/paper/body-issues-in-performance-art-between-theory-and-praxis>.

within the context of illness, suffering, and endurance. Viewers of his works are implicated by taking up the role of the witness. What moral boundaries are crossed with O'Brien's pain-endurance based works? We observe him cut, bite, being bitten, pierced, and partially asphyxiate himself over the course of three hours in a process that makes visible illness, the body that it inhabits and the aestheticisation of the medical practices used to preserve his 'sick' body.

How then do I make sense of the experience of curating *Taste of Flesh*? I want to end this chapter by arguing that O'Brien's work makes visible what scholars Erica Lehrer, Cynthia E. Milton, and Monica Eileen Patterson describe as a process of curating difficulty, on that not only involves the presentation of images to be interrogated but also considerations of their status as evidence supporting the truth value of particular narratives.<sup>258</sup> Curating difficult knowledge, they suggest, requires judgements that establish a *mis-en-scène*, within which images and artefacts act as elocutionary signs of entreaty, embodying an affective force that provokes thought and action. In other words, curating difficulty must above all consider the question of how a piece of work must be presented and serve a *transitive* function. This can then open up an intermediate reconsideration of the force of history in social life and the function of exhibitions to trace the lives of those who have lived in places other than our own and question our felt responsibilities.

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<sup>258</sup> Cynthia E. Milton, Erica Lehrer, Monica Patterson eds., *Curating Difficult Knowledge: Violent Past in Public Places* (Palgrave Macmillan Memory Studies, 2011), p. 201.

## **Chapter 4**

### **The Gospel according to Ron**

#### *Prologue*

If thou gaze long into an abyss, the abyss will also gaze into thee.

— Nietzsche, *Beyond Good and Evil*



**Fig.14 – Ron Athey with Divinity P. Fudge performing *4 Scenes In A Harsh Life*, 1994, image courtesy the artist.**

Ron Athey's *4 Scenes In A Harsh Life* (1994) performed at the Walker Arts Centre, Minneapolis, opened with a scene where an African-American man, Divinity P. Fudge (aka Darryl Carlton) danced in a camp burlesque fashion, covered in balloons that Athey then proceeded to burst, one by one, with a lit cigar. It starts out quite humorous and light in tone, progressing to the now infamous scene, 'The Human Printing Press' (**Fig.14**). In this scene, Athey marks Carlton's back with small incisions, that can be likened to ritualistic tribal marking or early tattooing practices. Athey follows this act by pressing surgical papers onto the incisions, and with quick successive slaps on Carlton's back, blood prints were created. These were then attached to a washing-line, with a pulley system rising above the heads of the audience. In another scene, Athey inserted several hypodermic needles into his arm, donning a Christ-like crown of thorns that pierced his scalp and caused him to bleed. The event, according to the curator, John Killacky, was well received and post-show discussions suggested that it was a thoughtful and engaging event for all who were present. Yet, the actions mentioned above, involving cutting and bloodletting that occurred in front of an audience, led to it being constructed as a sensational event in performance art history, centred on the politics of blood, (as well as the use of bloodletting in relation to

HIV/AIDS), public funding and the ethical responsibilities artists and institutions have towards their audiences.<sup>259</sup>

The aftermath resulted in an unprecedented hysteric reaction and the subsequent censorship of Ron Athey, which led to him not performing in the USA in the years that ensued. The fears of HIV/AIDS – its infection and contagion – played out publicly in the mainstream media. This was fuelled by a false account of events that were published at the time in the *Minneapolis Star Tribune*. This falsified version claimed that during Athey's performance, members of the audience had been put at risk and exposed to the HIV+ virus due to the bloodletting carried out by the artist. A televised report claimed that '*buckets of AIDS-tainted blood were 'thrown intentionally' at the audience and that they ran for their lives.*'<sup>260</sup> At this point, Athey had lived with the HIV+ virus for twenty years and his collaborator, Divinity Fudge was not infected by the virus. The fact that \$150 of National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) government money had been used by the Walker Art Centre towards staging this performance further fuelled this hysteria, with various voices commenting on the use of public funds to put the public at risk.<sup>261</sup> What emerged from this very public backlash against Athey and his work, was an entanglement with the prevailing culture of AIDS-phobia and homophobia in the late 1980s-1990s, which was driven by right-wing Republicanism and was part of a general stigma that allowed for the virus to kill nearly 20,000 Americans.<sup>262</sup>

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<sup>259</sup> For the curator's account of Athey's performance *4 Scenes In A Harsh Life* (1994) at Patrick's Cabaret, supported by The Walker Art Centre and on the culture war that ensued via the media and the US Congress see Killacky, J. 'Blood Sacrifice', *Flynn Centre Blog*, 2014, [Blog], <http://www.flynncenter.org/blog/2014/01/blood-sacrifice>.

<sup>260</sup> Ibid.

<sup>261</sup> Athey's performance *4 Scene of a Harsh Life* (1994), performed at Patrick's Cabaret, Minneapolis, drew national attention after it was misappropriated by conservative Republican Jesse Helms in his attacks on federal funding for the arts. For a detailed historical account on the aftermath of the performance and politics that ensued see Dominic Johnson, "Does a bloody towel represent the ideals of the American people? Ron Athey and the Culture Wars" in *Pleading in the Blood: The Life and Works of Ron Athey* (London: Intellect live, 2013), pp. 66-93.

<sup>262</sup> Homophobia in America, according to Gallup polling, reached its peak between 1986-7. Ronald Reagan was on his second term as president of the USA and AIDS treatment did not get approved until mid-1987. The Supreme Court at the time, had recently upheld state laws making gay sex a crime in June 1986, public opinion mostly supported making gay and lesbian relations illegal. Several states were actively considering quarantine measures for people with AIDS, which is to say, tearing some of the most marginalized and citizens away from the only people who loved them, and locking them up with strangers who considered them freaks and pariahs, until they died. ACT UP, the *AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power*, was born out of individuals call to action, as the government had abandoned and tried to ignore and resist dealing with the AIDS crisis available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/entertainment/archive/2013/02/the-plague-years-in-film-and-memory/273449>.



## Introduction

Why the fucking bloodbath? The shit? The vomit? All performed on a well-lit stage so that, hopefully, no details will be missed. To take a stab at it, using these bodily functions, assisted by the voice, words and sound, I'm testifying. I'm wanting people to endure these real experiences and grasp the ideas behind them. I'm sure it's because I'm damaged, but I want it to be heard.<sup>263</sup>

— Ron Athey, 1997

This chapter begins with *4 Scenes In a Harsh Life*, a now infamous work widely referenced in relation to Ron Athey's oeuvre but, in highlighting this work, it is not my intention to further contribute to the sensationalist status or scandal-mongering that the piece has provoked, but rather, to serve as a point of entry to consider how witnessing functions, through the act of 'bearing witness', and the sites that performances inhabit when they occur in front of an audience. To bear witness has important social, political and ethical consequences for both the performer and their audience. In this retelling of *4 Scenes In A Harsh Life*, it is intended to explore witnessing in both live events in their documentation and to explore concerns with representation and misrepresentation in witness accounts, through highlighting both the absent and present voices in the recounting and retelling of events. Furthermore, I introduce several witnessing positions, including eyewitness and hearsay witness through two performances by Ron Athey, beginning with *4 Scenes In A Harsh Life* (1994) and *Judas Cradle* (2005). These two performances, made a decade apart and in different contexts, allow for interchangeable witness roles inhabited by both viewer and performer. I explore how they raise important questions about the implications and subjectivity of the witness position.

As a result of the scandal, Athey's work has been largely ignored and left out of the central narrative of performance art histories. As performance scholar, Dominic Johnson notes in an interview with the artist, there has been critical marginalisation of Athey's work, mentioned fleetingly in thematic and serial categorisations of performance art. Discussions of his long career have been dominated by the aforementioned NEA controversy.<sup>264</sup> Johnson goes on to address how, in doing so, this means that Athey's complex and varied works are mostly discussed in terms of

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<sup>263</sup> See "Ron Athey: Voices from the Front," Josh Oppenheimer and Helena Reckitt eds., *Acting on AIDS: sex, drugs* cited in Mary Richards, "Ron Athey, AIDS and The Politics of Pain" *people.brunel.ac.uk*, last modified 2014, p. 432,

<http://people.brunel.ac.uk/bst/3no2/Papers/mary%20richards.htm>.

<sup>264</sup> For an overview on the performance art scholarship's exclusion of Athey's life and work, see Dominic Johnson, "Perverse Martyrologies: An Interview with Ron Athey," *Contemporary Theatre Review*, vol. 18, no. 4 (2008): 503-513. An updated version of this interview also appears in the recently published in Dominic Johnson, *The Art of Living: An Oral History of Performance Art* (London: Palgrave, 2015), pp. 195-218.

scandal and extremity rather than more critical engagements with the artist's oeuvre, which is expansive and staggering in the breadth of theoretical references drawn from diverse sources, including literature, religious iconography, music, counterculture, medical and art histories. His knowledge, awareness and situation of the works he makes as they relate to visual, literary, music, religion and other contextual references is staggering. His knowledge is both encyclopaedic and interdisciplinary. I seek to further existing scholarship on Athey's work, not only as a response for Johnson's call for critical attention, but also because his extensive performance outings are crucial for considering pain, performance, and witnessing as a theoretical discourse. At present, there is little scholarship exploring the tensions that exists in considering these areas in relation to Athey's work. I have chosen to discuss Athey's work in terms of pain and witnessing because his works rely so heavily on the audience to experience them live. Further to this and as the prologue to this chapter demonstrates, there are various shifting witnessing positions in Athey performances that lead to a complex narrative of how and who witnesses these works. As the quote opening this section boldly announces, Athey is a strong advocate of experiencing his works live. He wants audiences to bear witness to his truths that draw on his autobiography (a childhood of religious fundamentalism and abuse and an adulthood of drug addiction and excess). The quote also makes evident the importance of performing live to Athey, emphasizing the physical experience and presence of the viewer. This works alongside his call for visibility in the staging of works that emphasise the real, where there is no softening of this reality. His work draws on both the masochistic and hedonistic impulses, including body modification, tattooing, bloodletting and borrowed techniques from non-procreative sex and BDSM practices, all performed in front of an audience.

Through analysing two seminal Athey performances over a ten-year period, this chapter explores these witness positions by considering experiences of these works through live encounters of *Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains* (2014) and via performance mediation – photographs and film/video recordings of *The Judas Cradle* (2004). As Martin Patrick reminds us:

Performance Art history is built upon foundation co-mingling of hearsay and urban legends, second-hand rumours and at times blurred documentation. One might argue, on the whole, entirely inconclusive evidence acts as a supporting mechanism. Can the notion of accurately recording and analysing the fleeting, the instantaneous, and the evanescent really make much sense? Thus, instead of attempting to construct full-fledged critical and/or scholarly arguments in this space, I'd for the moment prefer to offer the following handful of purely anecdotal and speculative digressions.<sup>265</sup>

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<sup>265</sup> Martin Patrick, "Unreliable witness" in Jeremy Booth and Hannah Edmunds eds., *Workshopping*

I follow this suggestion in my development of accounts of my experiences of these two works, mobilizing literature and documentation analysis of Athey's work, alongside my own experiences of his work, anecdotal accounts from interviews with audiences that include both secondary data sourced through archives as well as some interviews carried out for this research, so as to expand on varied witness positions. To consider how witnessing operates within Athey's performance works, questions surrounding evidence immediately come to mind, more specifically, the way documentation – videos, texts, and photographs including oral accounts of the work serve as evidence of live events. They are a material account demonstrating that acts have occurred. The documentation of Athey's performances are not widely circulated outside of specialist libraries and archives, with a limited number available on social media channels and the Internet. Athey manages his own Facebook account as a platform for sharing his work but he does so in a controlled and limited manner. This resistance to the readily available distribution of documentation of his work is telling of his desire for audiences to witness his works live. As I recreate my experiences of these performances in each of this chapter's two core sections, I will explore and reflect on ideas of eyewitness and hearsay witness as a means to explore the tensions between witnessing these painful works live and through their documentation.

Several forms witnessing are defined and put forward by law. Eyewitness and hearsay are the most applicable for considering the ways audiences engage with live performance works. This is due to the mirroring function that occurs in the perceiving, memorising, and narrating of live works. An eyewitness, as the name implies, represents the 'presentness' at an event, one that sees an act occur and who is able to give first-hand accounts of what they have seen. Hearsay witness, on the other hand, relies on accounts based on reports from those that were present, i.e. from an eyewitness. This form of witnessing contributes to furthering experiences of a performance that either serves productively or counter-productively to the artist's intentions as we observe in the prologue opening this chapter describing Athey's *4 Scenes In A Harsh Life*. These two roles of eyewitness and hearsay function interchangeably when applied to the performance *Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains*, a performance I had only engaged with initially through its documentation, in the form of videos, text, and retellings of events by eyewitnesses. Viewers of the live works participate actively as eyewitnesses to the live encounter, which later extends into hearsay through their accounts that is furthered by what those absent who hear. For *Judas Cradle*, I experienced this work through its documentation, piecing together

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*Performance*, Wellington, New Zealand: Enjoy Public Art Gallery (2010), p. 6,  
<https://static1.squarespace.com/static/52cc672ee4b04aa882b64ab1/t/52d75004e4b09614df366561/1389842436024/EnjoyPerformancetextMP.pdf>.

fragments that build up an imagined experience through video documentation, photographs and texts of the work. In analysing *Judas Cradle*, I take on the role of hearsay (secondary) witness.

Witnessing, most prominently eyewitness testimony, forms a significant area of research into cognitive psychology and human memory. In the legal profession, it provides evidence accounts of events, although studies, including those by Elizabeth Loftus and John Palmer, show the inaccuracies and problems associated with eyewitness accounts.<sup>266</sup> Athey's work, as art historian, Jennifer Doyle observes 'provokes intense anxiety in people who have heard about, a lot of what people have heard is based on rumour, if not outright lies.'<sup>267</sup> In examining these two works and considering how their retelling has occurred over time, I want to explore aspects centred on how seeing is framed in these two Athey performances, which might provoke anxieties that lead to misrepresentation. The term witness, Catherine Stoddard reminds us, suggests the juridical meaning of eyewitness, but also the function of authenticating an actual experience at its moment of occurrence. This is further compounded by the proof inhabited by one's bodily presence and testifying to that which cannot be known – what is 'beyond recognition.'<sup>268</sup> Stoddard expands on this by proposing that 'to witness, is more than to see pain as an object of perception, but also as a representation in the field of the other; it is to attest to the very otherness of someone else's pain as somehow beyond the reach of one's experience.'<sup>269</sup>

This chapter builds on Stoddard's position on pain and witnessing to demonstrate how performances of pain are witnessed when they draw on personal histories. Athey's life and work are inseparable. As such, his work blurs fact and fiction, the real and the imagined, and lays bare before an audience, portrayals of battles with illness, his HIV+ status, heroin addiction, and loss through the deaths of friends and loved one due to HIV/AIDS. Through critically analysing selected performances by the artist, I intend to offer an account of witnessing that falls into two core sections. The first explores eyewitness testimonies (my own and others) of *Incorruptible Flesh Messianic Remains*. The second focuses on exploring the mediated or hearsay witness in

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<sup>266</sup> In his account of Loftus and Palmer's 1974 study, *Reconstruction of Automobile Destruction*, Saul McLeod summarises this classic psychology study revealing the unreliability of eyewitness testimony. Loftus' findings seem to indicate that the memory for an event that has been witnessed is a highly flexible one. If someone is exposed to new information during the interval between witnessing the event and recalling it, this new information may have marked effects on what they recall. The original memory can be modified, changed or supplemented. See Saul, McLeod, "Loftus and Palmer," *Simply Psychology*, <http://www.simplypsychology.org/loftus-palmer.html>.

<sup>267</sup> Jennifer Doyle, *Blood Work & 'Art Criminals*, Art21.Org, last modified 2014, <http://www.art21.org/texts/the-culture-wars-redux/essay-blood-work-art-criminals>.

<sup>268</sup> Christine Stoddard, *Towards a Phenomenology of the Witness to Pain: Dis/Identification and the Orphan Other*, available at <http://www.performanceparadigm.net/wp-content/uploads/2009/07/2-stoddard-final.pdf>.

<sup>269</sup> *Ibid.*

*Judas Cradle*, thinking, in particular, about witnessing torture in these circumstances. Ahead of this, I will explore Athey's works through an account of his painful autobiography, as well as beginning to develop ideas around how a focus on sites of witnessing enables a new critical framework for his performances.

#### 4.1 Exploring Painful Autobiography in Ron Athey performances

Athey's in an intimate crisis of the historical and personal that are affective changes of his "own" tortured body. A volatile place for scores on the skin, spilled blood, ritual pain and sensate orifices of his body. To watch Athey perform is to watch him turn his body inside out in the performative.<sup>270</sup>

—Dominic Johnson, *Introduction to Pleading in the Blood*, 2014

Ron Athey forces the body to transcend its confines. His brilliance manifests as exorcism not only of, and for, the cauterizing of his own pain, but by pushing the boundaries of endurance through artistic expression, he shares his compassionate epiphany: We all need to break free from the shackles placed upon the individual by society, family, religion and gender. And possibly through the catharsis of performance, and ritual, we might finally be able to lay to rest the demons who've sent us in search of the respite only a knife or needle could at one time provide.<sup>271</sup>

— *Biography of Ron Athey*, date unknown

Athey is self-taught and his practice is not linked to a particular gallery or institution. His non-formal art background heralds a practice that draws on his real and lived experiences beginning with performing as part of Los Angeles' punk, death rock, and industrial music scenes of the 1980s. Alongside the influences of music and performing in countercultural spaces, Athey continues to be part of a scene in LA and other countries he has lived in, notably his time in England where he has been integrated in a performance art scene with diverse collective interests in industrial/Hardcore music, body modification (tattooing, suspension etc.), BDSM and queer influences. His involvement in counter-culture began in LA as part rebellion and part escapism from his childhood. He grew up in a very religious family, surrounded by Pentecostal fanaticism, where mental illness and violence presided. Athey was born in Groton, Connecticut, and raised in a Pentecostal household in the Inland Empire, Southern California. Young Ronnie Lee Athey was declared a minister who was to prepare for the second coming of Christ by both his grandmother and aunt. Athey writes of their declaration:

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<sup>270</sup> Dominic Johnson ed., "Towards a moral and just Psychopathology" in *Pleading in the Blood: The Art and Performances of Ron Athey* (London: Intellect Books, 2014), p. 10.

<sup>271</sup> via ronathey.com.

You've been born with a calling on your life Ronnie Lee', my grandma and Aunt Vena repeatedly informed me from the time I was a baby. I was just becoming aware of what that prophecy meant – how being chosen for a ministry made me different from everyone else. According to this message from the holiest of holies, I was to sacrifice the playthings of the world in order to fulfil the plans of God.<sup>272</sup>

He further describes in detail how the prophecy on his future led to all kinds of fantastical prophecies, rituals and proclamations of his future ministerial existence and states:

I was born under a prophecy that I was going to be a minister, that my aunt was going to bear the second coming of Christ, so I was going to have this kind of like John the Baptist ministry. I have trouble living on earth. My brain wants to live in this psychic mumbo jumbo, that was how I was raised. It's strange that I mostly use performance as an outlet of my work part of this frenzy I have with living with AIDS is oh my God, I am going to die in a few years and I have to leave my mark. What's my mark? How did Ron Athey change the world? How did Ron Athey shake things up and subvert things, what did I leave behind. Was I just some stupid fag who died of AIDS? Was I just this damaged boy who was never a minister who rebelled and lashed out at his self between drugs and promiscuous sex he contracted a disease and died, do you know what I mean...It's like this frenzy to make it bigger, to make it mean something.<sup>273</sup>

— Ron Athey, 1997

By the age of ten he proselytised in tongues, and his tears were coveted by the congregation. He rebelled and escaped from what he describes as 'a manic childhood' and began performing at underground galleries with Rozz Williams in 1981 in a collaboration known as Premature Ejaculation. The club scenes of LA, mostly notably, *Club Fuck!* provided one of the safe places where Athey could develop his performance work. He was involved in inclusive spaces existing outside of the mainstreams of culture.<sup>274</sup> From 1992, he developed his torture trilogy namely: *Martyrs & Saints* (1992), *4 Scenes in A Harsh Life* (1992-6), and *Deliverance* (1995), more recently he has produced *Judas Cradle* (2004-5), *Gifts of the Spirit: Automatic Writing* (2010), *Self-Obliteration* (2008-11), the *Incorruptible Flesh* series, (1996-2014), and *Sebastiane* (2014). He has presented major solo, ensemble, and collaborative works internationally.

The intersections of sexuality, religion and the politics of HIV/AIDS, are important, if not integral to Athey's work and have recurred extensively as themes throughout his oeuvre. He continues till this day to consider what it means to live at the edge of existence; contemplating and mediating

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<sup>272</sup> Ron Athey, "Gifts of the Spirit," in Johnson, *Pleading in the Blood*, 2014, p. 42.

<sup>273</sup> Ron Athey speaking in the opening for the trailer of *Hallelujah!* 1997, directed by Catherine Gund Saalfield, 90min.

<sup>274</sup> See Andrew J. Henkes, "A Party for the "Freaks": Performance, Deviance and Communitas at Club Fuck! 1989-1993," *The Journal of American Culture* 36, no. 4 (December 2013), pp. 284-295, doi: 10.1111/jacc.12050.

on his mortality has long been a persistent theme in his works. He reflects upon this liminal existence by stating that:

At the tender age of 15, I had a huge awakening: that all the prophecies and miracles and dramas that happened within my Pentecostal household were not only absolutely delusional, they were also perverted and illegal. It came on like a wave, and suddenly I realized there was no line to God. No Christ. No Bible. And, as until then I was living under a prophecy to become a minister, no future. I was empty and without hope. I planned my death carefully, waiting until one afternoon when no one would be home. I bathed and fixed my feathered hair, put on a tight suit and light makeup. I took 25 Valiums, 5 Seconals, and a few Phenobarbitals, and lied back like a perfect corpse as the pills entered my system. Then it got real and survival instinct crept in. I managed to walk out the door and stumble down the road to a payphone and call my girlfriend, who helped me through the endless vomiting. Since then, death has been a constant companion, even more so in the three decades after 1985, the year I tested positive for HIV. Until it wasn't. It's been 30 years since I was diagnosed, and I feel healthy and have rarely been sick. I've come to consider this my "post-AIDS" life, a term that inevitably draws criticism when I use it. Yet, here I will.<sup>275</sup>

Much of Athey's work draws on his biography, meaning that it is also deeply influenced by his everyday lived experiences. Scholar Dominic Johnson, a major commentator on Athey's life and work, describes this as a 'radicalising of the everyday into the artistic by scarring oneself along the way.'<sup>276</sup> This scarring of the self is most evident in works that use and present pain both physically, as observed in blood works including *4 Scenes in a Harsh Life* (1992) and *Self-Obliteration* (2018-11) but also its metaphorical presence in Athey's writings and video works, namely, *Ronnie Lee* (2001). Athey carries out blood-letting as part of 'controlled experiences, rather than a theatrical display where representation of the real occurs [...] In Athey's works, it is a presentation of realness'.<sup>277</sup>

Biographical details regarding Athey's life heavily inform a lot that has been written about his work. However, scholars including Amelia Jones's in *Performing the Wounded Body: Pain, Affect and the Radical Relationality of Meaning*, 2009, argue that Athey both enacts or represents the highly theatricalized and mediated medium of his body as a body in pain. Dominic Johnson in 'Perverse Martyrologies: An Interview with Ron Athey', published in *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 2008/2015, and *Pleading in the Blood: The Art and Performances of Ron Athey*, 2014, delves into the wealth of influences on Athey's life work by presenting his vast and extensive influences crossing disciplines including gender studies, science, art and cultural

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<sup>275</sup> Athey, "Polemic of Blood: Ron Athey on the "Post-AIDS" Body," *Walker Magazine*, <http://www.walkerart.org/magazine/2015/ron-athey-blood-polemic-post-aids-body>, p. 12.

<sup>276</sup> Johnson, *Pleading in the Blood*, p. 14.

<sup>277</sup> Athey, "Polemic of Blood: Ron Athey on the "Post-AIDS" Body," *Ibid.*, p. 15.

histories. While clearly the punk and queer cultures of the 1980s and 1990s are crucial to gaining insights into Athey's works, so too are the influence of other artists alongside his astute understandings of his illness. Athey cites Johanna Went, Bob Flanagan, Lawrence Steger, Reza Abdoh and David Wojnarowicz as artists who were dealing with subject matters similar to the kind of performances he creates. He also acknowledges familiarity with the works of the Viennese Actionist group, specifically Hermann Nitsch, whose works addressed the excessive beauty and intensification of human existence. Literature also influenced much of Athey's work, with writers like George Bataille, Jean Genet, and William Burroughs providing a formative influence on his performances.

In *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art*, Jennifer Doyle frames Athey's works through their emotive qualities, stating that they force the viewer to consider their own assumptions about the political agency of the body. In *Performing Bodies in Pain: Medieval and Post-Modern Martyrs, Mystics, and Artists*, Marla Carlson contextualises Athey's work in relation to the histories of pain from the medieval period to the present engaging with the relations between masculinity and masochism, thus situating the thematics of martyrdom present in Athey's work as both in contestation with his body's health and also testing its physical limits through performance. As these scholars have demonstrated, Athey's work is complex and has an expansive scope reaching across various disciplines. It extends beyond the autobiographical, although is deeply informed by it. This, Athey admits to when he states that in his performance material he is 'guilty of enhancing my history, situation and surroundings into a perfectly depicted apocalypse, or at least a more visual atrocity.'<sup>278</sup>

Doyle's critical writings are integral to the inquiry into pain, witnessing and how they operate within Athey's performances. In her text, she confronts not just the challenging nature of Athey's works, but importantly, the challenges of writing about difficult works of art. Doyle demonstrates how Athey and the other artists included in her inquiry—Aliza Shvarts, Thomas Eakins, James Luna, Carrie Mae Weems, and David Wojnarowicz, all work with feelings as a means for questioning assumptions on identity, intimacy, and expression. As such, 'they deploy the complexity of emotion to measure the weight of history, and to deepen our sense of where and how politics happens within contemporary art.'<sup>279</sup> Doyle's exploration on the ideologies of emotions, and how they circulate within and around art is a useful critical tool to apply when considering Athey's works. His works centre on emotion as an exchange that is able to offer

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<sup>278</sup> Joshua Oppenheimer and Helena Reckitt eds., "Ron Athey: Deliverance: Introduction, Foreword, Description and Selected Text," in *Acting on AIDS: Sex, Drugs & Politics*, (London and New York: Serpent's Tail, 1997) cited in Johnson, "Perverse Martyrologies," pp. 503-513.

<sup>279</sup> See Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (2013), pp. 1-4.



possibilities for the transformation of viewers, while also expressing the complexities of emotions of loss, grief, love and pain. Doyle's writing is important because it allows for accessible points of entry into artworks that, at first, might be off-putting or confrontational. She offers new insights into how the discourse of controversy serves to shut down meaningful discussions on this side of contemporary art practice, and counters this with a critical language that allows the reader to accept complex emotional intensity in order to learn from it. Emotion, as Chris Kraus observes "is just so terrifying, the world refuses to believe that it can be pursued as discipline, as form." Her argument is that analysing vulnerability is not the same as enacting it. Describing positions of pain and longing is not an admission of powerlessness but an act of assertion, a way of saying, this female consciousness can hold these states of pain and longing as well.<sup>280</sup> [It is not clear how the Kraus relates to Athey, make it clearer. Especially as Kraus is probably talking about female experience?] Athey's work is indeed assertive in its approach and delivery of the live experience as the works represents a strong refusal of censorship all kinds His performances have been considered through various critical perspectives that draw on both medical (HIV/AIDS) and cultural (queer, masochistic, and gender) theories.<sup>281</sup> The recently published monograph, *Pleading in the Blood: The Art and Performances of Ron Athey*, edited by Johnson, however, is the first monograph on Athey to date to provide an extensive critical and contextual overview on his life and work with varied contributions from scholars, academics, friends, collaborators, which are placed alongside the artists' writings on his works.<sup>282</sup>

At the beginnings of Western performance art in late 1960s to 1970s, several artists used forms of masochism, incorporating bodily actions within their art practices to draw attention to both individual and collective injustices. Artists including Chris Burden, Gina Pane, Marina Abramović, ORLAN, Vito Acconci and The Viennese Actionists were using these methods. These artists continue to reside in contemporary consciousness. They are often written about and recognised in major art institutions, collections, and exhibitions, as well as having commercial success in the art market. More transgressive artists like Athey sit somewhat outside of this commercial art world due to censorship by institutions, and the artist's own avoidance of a more

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<sup>280</sup> Chris Kraus cited in Leslie Jamison, "This Female Consciousness: On Chris Kraus," *The New Yorker*, 9 Apr. 2015, accessed 10 Jun. 2016, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/this-female-consciousness-on-chris-kraus>.

<sup>281</sup> Mary Richards, *Ron Athey, AIDS and The Politics of Pain*, last modified 2014, accessed 1 January 2014, <http://people.brunel.ac.uk/bst/3no2/Papers/mary%20richards.htm>.

<sup>282</sup> Edited by performance scholar, Dominic Johnson and published in 2014, *Pleading in the Blood: The Art and Performances of Ron Athey* presented the first comprehensive critical overview of Athey's life and works in this important overview of this career to date. The publication is also a resource for (first-time) published images of Athey's art and performances since the early 1980s to the present.

commercially driven practice. In Athey's case, he favours live witnessing of his performances as opposed to an experience through documentation. This means it is difficult to access the work and few art institutions support the staging of confrontational live works, especially as they are often bound by the obligations and requirements of attaining institutional funding, as well as maintaining responsibilities of care towards the audience that comes with this.<sup>283</sup>

In my view, Athey's work can be characterised in a wide variety of ways, including moving, shocking, obscene, traumatic, painful, and 'sensational. However, to move beyond these initial reactions is to encounter the work as offering a critique of the heteronormative position that perpetuates definitions, categorisations, and levels of visibility of certain kinds of bodies (based on their race, sexual health status, and gender in socio-political-cultural-historical terms). Athey's work confronts and challenges these positions of the body that allow for the visibility of some to the exclusion of others, based largely on prejudices, favouring and systematically categorising bodies by their gender, race, sexual and health status. The visibility of celebrated bodies favours the privileged position of the white heterosexual male, which the influential philosopher and gender theorist, Judith Butler describes as 'a heterosexual privilege naturalising and rendering itself as the original and the norm'.<sup>284</sup> Athey's works, as Johnson has observed, seek to unsettle this historically informed image of the body, one that has historicised as the norm. It could, however, be argued that a white gay man who looks able-bodied and healthy, still has certain levels of visibility and privilege over gay non-white and female bodies.<sup>285</sup> These privileges however do not apply to gay men who are marginalised in other ways, such as through race, disability, and the stigma of those who are afflicted with HIV/AIDS. In presenting his body so boldly and celebratory through performance work, Athey is both refusing and rejecting a presentation of the body as wholesome and sanitised. Furthermore, performance allows him to

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<sup>283</sup> During the culture wars of the early '90s, the work of four solo performers, funded in part by the US government, came under attack for the frank treatment of themes of gender, sexuality, subjugation, and personal trauma. In 1990, the work of Karen Finley, John Fleck, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller (aka the NEA 4) was defunded by the National Endowment for the Arts after Congress amended the statute governing federal funding for the arts to include considerations of "general standards of decency and respect for the diverse beliefs of the American public." Subsequently, the NEA ceased funding for individual artists altogether. These four residencies reconsider the impact of these events while engaging with each artist on the terms of their current practices. In May-June 2013 at the New Museum, New York the four artists part of the NEA controversy case took part in a residency titled *NEA 4 in Residence* to reconsider the impact of these events while engaging with each artist on the terms of their current practices. *NEA 4 in Residence*, <https://www.newmuseum.org/pages/view/residence-2>

<sup>284</sup> Judith Butler, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, Theatre Journal, vol. 40, no. 4 (Dec. 1988), pp. 519-531

<sup>285</sup> Whilst it is undeniable that gay white men are oppressed in many ways and most prominently by homophobia, they can also operate in a system that privileges men, including gay white men, over other non-white minority individuals and women.

present his body as an unstable and shifting site, one from which to explore death, destruction, and survival. His practice relies on audience involvement, and collaborations with other artists and performers.<sup>286</sup>

*4 Scenes In A Harsh Life* was performed at a pivotal period in Athey's life, at a time when he had recently returned to performing after a decade of heroin addiction. This performance formed an amalgamation of his experiences of addiction, which were transformed into rituals of extreme corporeality. This was driven by a personal loss of friends, lovers, and the impact of this on the wider communities affected by the HIV/AIDS epidemic. Athey was also coming to terms with his body's HIV+ status, its categorisation as sick, which he reflected upon in highly personal and deeply moving performances. During the height of the AIDS crisis in the U.S.A, curator John Killacky observes how:

The naked body and bodily fluids were scary but necessary for some artists to witness, as a tactic to survive overwhelming sadness, anger and despair. Athey aspired to create "a perfectly depicted apocalypse" by breaking taboos and confronting people's fear "of the body...diseases...mortifications of the flesh."<sup>287</sup>

The display of naked male bodies was problematized in an era rife with homophobia further fuelled by an ignorance on the transmission, infection, and spread of the disease, during the period referred to as the AIDS plague years. This extreme reaction mirrored wider social censoring of individual bodies, suffering from the disease, further complicated by the irresponsible handling of the crisis by religious leaders, politicians, and the US government. Under the guise of a fear of contagion that was fuelled by right-wing conservatism, sex workers, LGBT, minority and poor communities were deeply affected by the disease, as access to preventive and educative measures was restricted. This led to a staggering loss of lives that could have otherwise been saved. All of these revelations lead to an exposing discrimination based on sexual, racial, class, and gender differences.<sup>288</sup>

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<sup>286</sup> Performance scholar, Dominic Johnson has written extensively on Ron Athey's life and work alongside collaborating on the performance. For an overview on Athey's life and work see Dominic Johnson, "Towards A Moral and Just Psychopathology" in *Pleading in the Blood: The Art and Performances of Ron Athey* (London: Intellect Books, 2014), and the recently republished "Perverse Martyrologies: An Interview with Ron Athey" in Dominic Johnson, *The Art of Living: An Oral History* (London: Palgrave, 2015).

<sup>287</sup> John Killacky, "Blood Sacrifice," *Flynn Center Blog*, 2014, <http://www.flynncenter.org/blog/2014/01/blood-sacrifice/>. This article first appeared in the January 2014 issue of *American Theatre* magazine.

<sup>288</sup> The activism produced by the mishandling of the AIDS crisis was spearheaded by organisations including ACT UP, General Idea, and Group Material who all form important examples of how activist public art and artist's collectives contested the ignorance and lack of governmental support during the crisis. Representations of HIV/AIDS in contemporary have been represented in several exhibitions including

The performance also contributed to Athey being viewed and described as the *enfant terrible* of performance art, leading to a censorship, both by himself and others leading to a substantial period of time performing outside of the US and adopting the approach of ‘touring performance artist’, with his 2014 performance of *Sebastiane* at the Hammer Museum in Los Angeles his first inside an American museum. This amounts then to an account of how inaccuracies in the witnessing of an event, has, as scholars including Jennifer Doyle, Dominic Johnson and Lauren DeLand all contributed to the lack of institutional support and the steering of critical attention away from the significance of Athey’s life and works.<sup>289</sup> Such contributions are important not only to performance art history, but as they also extend into discussions around gender and queer studies, sexology, cultural theory, the politics of HIV/AIDS, and as I will demonstrate throughout, to pain scholarship and curation.

Athey continues to inhabit and display a body that outwardly has the appearance of being physically fit and healthy. This is stark in comparison to propaganda images of individuals with HIV/AIDS that have fuelled a hysteria and stigmatization of sufferers. This contributed to a singular perspective of the individuals living with HIV/AIDS as weak and disease-ridden victims, considered dangerous to contaminating the population at large.<sup>290</sup> In bringing visibility to the diseased body, and alongside this, creating deeply moving works at a time of crisis that embraced an unapologetic, assertive, bold, daring, baffling, humorous, and extremely visceral approach. Athey not only addresses and contests his body’s HIV+ status, he also memorialises and celebrates friends and lovers who died from the disease. Furthermore, his performances reflect and draw on a resistance against illness that is entwined with a personal history of violence and religious fanaticism, which came together as he explored these themes in adult life when he began

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‘From Media to Metaphor: Art About AIDS’ (1991), ‘NOT OVER: 25 Years of Visual AIDS’ (2013), at La Mama La Galleria, New York, ‘AIDS in New York: The First Five Years’ (2013), and ‘Why We Fight: Remembering AIDS Activism’ (2014) at The New York Public Library and more recently: ‘positive/negative: HIV/AIDS’ at Fales Library, New York University, and ‘Art AIDS America’ (2016) at the Tacoma Museum of Art Washington, although this exhibition has received much criticism for the invisibility of representing the Black community, a group affected by the disease who have been largely marginalised in the readdressing and re-presentation of AIDS and contemporary art.

<sup>289</sup> See Jennifer Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art, 2013*, pp. 15-26, 60; for a discussion on the NEA controversies and Athey’s work see, Dominic Johnson, “Does a bloody towel represent the ideals of the American people? Ron Athey and the culture wars” in *Pleading in the Blood: The Art and Performances of Ron Athey*, 2014, pp. 64-94 and Lauren DeLand, *Culture Wars and Culture Gaps*, 25 March 2015,

<http://www.mnartists.org/article/culture-wars-and-culture-gaps>

<sup>290</sup> In his thought-provoking book, *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic*, first published in 1987, Randy Shilts revealed why AIDS was allowed to spread unchecked during the early 1980s while the most trusted institutions ignored or denied the threat. See Randy Shilts, “Battle Lines/January-June 1983” in *And the Band Played On: Politics, People, and the AIDS Epidemic*, St. Martin's Griffin; Revised edition (November 27, 2007), pp. 219-324.

performing at LA clubs in the early 1980s. Athey's performances are deeply rooted in the autobiographical and in particular his religious upbringing. It is important to highlight this to understand that, for Athey, performing in front of a public comes from this context, from his relationship with church, having been put in front of a congregation at a young age. This was a church that was not stoic, formal, and ritualistic, but rather a Pentecostal congregation where Athey recalls witnessing around forty to fifty people gathered around for more intimate forms of congregating where they would chant loudly and speak wildly in tongues, so that those present received prophecies. It was loud and raucous church experience and a grandiose, heightened one for the young Athey. It was believed within his congregation that he was the messiah, as the second coming of Christ. He was lifted up in front of the congregation, encouraged to cry with his tears wiped with a bit of cloth that was later torn and shared with everyone present. This was followed by a period of heroin addiction and an eventual HIV+ diagnosis. The politics of HIV/AIDS is pivotal to Athey's performances. He simultaneously seeks to regain control over the virus inside his body through performance, whilst also presenting visual tableaux memorialising those he has lost, and a wider community of individuals who lost their fight against the disease.

It is impossible to witness a performance by Athey and not experience the affective associations of his work. This is heightened by the ways his works are mediated between the thresholds of horror, desire, fear, curiosity, pleasure, and pain. They simultaneously present the paradoxical aspects of his life, a childhood of religious fundamentalism alongside transgression and addiction in adulthood. In presenting his autobiography, he reveals the paradoxical elements of human nature, as it is related to pain, trauma and pleasure. Performance serves as a way for Athey to act upon and represent his life story and is rooted in a motivation to stage the highly personal.<sup>291</sup> These portrayals invite viewers into an experience that might allow for the possibility for transformation. It asks for a reflection on the indicators that inform identities and their governance. Athey's works can be considered in terms of what Augusto Boal describes as removing 'the barrier between performance and spectatorship calling on viewers to act as protagonists in the necessary transformation of society.'<sup>292</sup> In *Experiments with the People's Theatre in Peru* (1973), Augusto Boal describes the need for a destruction of the barriers created by the ruling class in Latin America, where he states:

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<sup>291</sup> See Ron Athey "Body Art," South Bank Show, ITV, Sunday 5 April 1998, 11.25pm, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rBc1vul9JUI>

<sup>292</sup> Augusto Boal, cited in Charles A. McBride, Maria-Odilia Leal McBride and Emily Fryer trans., *Theatre of the Oppressed*, London, UK: Pluto Press; 2008, p. xxiv.

What was lacking to complete the cycle was what is happening at present in Latin America – the destruction of the barriers created by the ruling classes. First, the barrier between actors and spectators is destroyed: all must act, all must be protagonists in the necessary transformations of society. This is the process I describe in ‘Experiments with the People’s Theatre in Peru.’ Then the barrier between protagonists and choruses is destroyed: all must be simultaneously chorus and protagonist – this is the ‘Joker’ system. Thus, we arrive at the poetics of the oppressed, the conquest of the means of theatrical production.<sup>293</sup>

Boal’s call for the disruption of spectatorship, I apply to the notion of bearing witness that is central to considerations for Athey’s works, as his audience are presented with a reality drawn from his autobiography that is in contrast to the reality represented by an actor. His works advocate a witnessing of an enmeshment of fact, fiction, the real, and imagined, which are further compounded by mythologies pertaining to his childhood experience of being revered as the messiah.

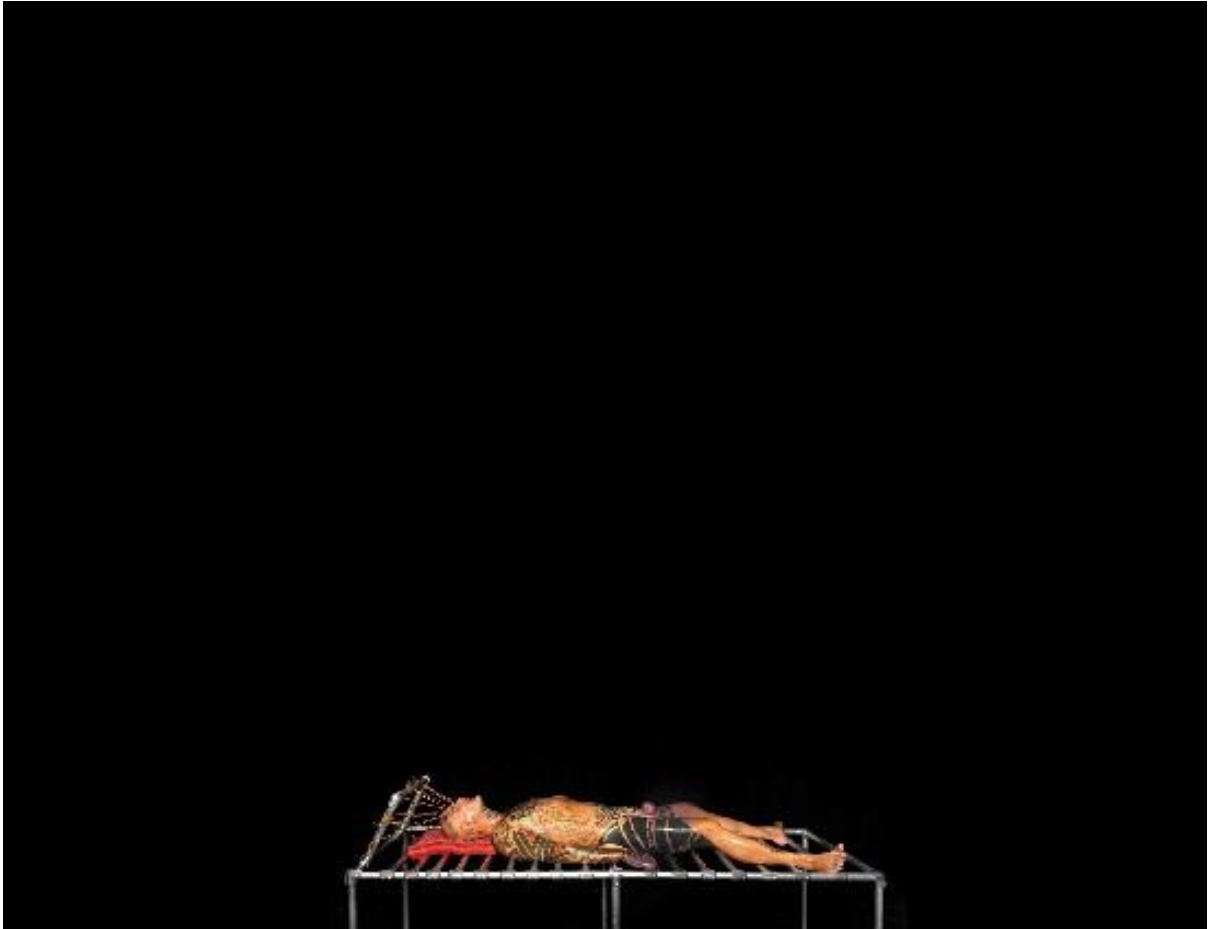
The ideas outlined above have a direct relationship with his discarded religious faith and masochism, which centre on sexuality, gender, queerness, oppression, and his views on the clinical approaches to treating sick bodies. The visceral nature of his performances invites audiences to bear witness to a live event as it is evolving in front them. The effects of an Athey performance vary: one might shudder, gasp, flinch, or shriek, as they do not just manifest through visuals and sounds, but also resonate through the objects and spaces that they are presented in. The sensational and controversial offer an entry into Athey’s oeuvre, but importantly they highlight some of the problems and complexities implicit in how the witnessing of performances might occur. Some of these complexities arise as a direct result of the retelling that might lead to misrepresenting events, the most inaccurate being through hearsay, but more prominently witnessing theories further compounded through a collective remembering and forgetting of events that rely heavily on memory, as explored in the following section on encountering Athey’s works through eyewitness testimonies. Athey’s works, as Doyle observes ‘provoke intense anxiety in people who have heard about but not seen it, a lot of what people have heard is based on rumour, if not outright lies.’<sup>294</sup> I want to demonstrate how the eyewitness can allow possibilities for furthering live experiences, and in turn, dispel rumours surrounding Athey’s performances

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<sup>293</sup> Ibid.

<sup>294</sup> Jennifer Doyle, *Blood Work & Art Criminals*, first published 10 Dec. 2008, <http://magazine.art21.org/2008/12/10/blood-work-art-criminals/#.WuLnhdNuaT8>

#### 4.2 On eyewitness testimony: *Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains*



**Fig.15** – Ron Athey, *Incorruptible Flesh: Dissociative Sparkle*, 2006, Glasgow, ©Manuel Vason.

This is no laying-out of the dead, but more a ritualised form of resurrection, created by Ron Athey, a man who has turned his body into an ongoing piece of art. Athey was raised in a Pentecostal family: you can take the boy out of church, but you can't take the church out of the boy. His work is imbued with spirit, rite and an ecstatic magic. Here, he rises shaman-like from the dead and, in a magic circle, invokes those already gone – in particular, the drag queen Divine from John Waters' films *Pink Flamingo* and *Hairspray*, who becomes identified with Jean Genet's outcast character from his prison novel *Our Lady of the Flowers*. Whether you are alert to the references hardly matters, as with all Athey's work, it is the ritual that matters. He grapples physically with grief and death; he makes us stare our own mortality in the face.<sup>295</sup>

— Lyn Gardner on Ron Athey, *The Guardian*, June 2014

Ron Athey forces the body to transcend its confines. His brilliance manifests as exorcism

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<sup>295</sup> Lyn Gardner, "Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains Review – A Theatrical Resurrection," *The Guardian*, 2014, <http://www.theguardian.com/stage/2014/jun/02/ron-athey-incorruptible-flesh-messianic-remains-review>.

not only of, and for, the cauterizing of his own pain, but by pushing the boundaries of endurance through artistic expression, he shares his compassionate epiphany: We all need to break free from the shackles placed upon the individual by society, family, religion and gender. And possibly through the catharsis of performance, and ritual, we might finally be able to lay to rest the demons who've sent us in search of the respite only a knife or needle could at one time provide.<sup>296</sup>

— Lydia Lunch, 2014

In his bloody self-obliterations, Ron Athey reveals the profound enigma of the body as a location of SELF. His flesh is a source of Life and a source of Death. Athey creates vital images drenched with human violence; his blood is spilled to placate our fear of the unknown and of mortality. Yet his performances are also implicit celebrations.<sup>297</sup>

— Genesis BREYER P-ORRIDGE, 2014

On the evening of 1<sup>st</sup> November 2014, I took the train from to Ipswich to attend the penultimate performance of *Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains* (2014) by Ron Athey. This rare opportunity to see Athey perform in the U.K. and it was coincidental that within the space of a week, I had seen two contrasting Athey performances. I had seen him perform *Xanolalia* (2014) at London's Horse Hospital by chance and by invitation to a group of around eighty. The piece forms part of Athey's more recent works that move away from his blood works and mediate on his religious upbringing within the Pentecostal faith, and the ecstatic experiences that were part of his childhood. *Xanolalia* is a collaborative piece exploring automatic writing and *glossolalia* (speaking-in-tongues), and it also draws on cut-up text/language pioneered by the late William Burroughs. In this new iteration of the work, Athey performed with three other artists and collaborators. I have known Ron Athey for a few years having met by chance through a mutual friend and artist, Samantha Sweeting in Los Angeles in 2011. I instantly took to his warm with a booming voice and energetic laugh, one of the best I've ever heard, which reverberates and fills the room. Athey is infectious, larger than life and draws very few in I hear, I guess I was one of the lucky few.

— *Reflections on Ron Athey's Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains*, Jareh Das,

2014

The anecdote above that explores my personal reflections on two Athey performances, *Xanolalia* and *Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains*, marks the beginnings of my initial encounters with Ron Athey's live work and an interest that began through ongoing conversations I have had with the artist starting in 2011 in Los Angeles, California. I met Athey by chance on my visit to LA, through a mutual friend who took me to his clearance sale and leaving-for-London party. I was interested in a book Athey had for sale chronicling Darger's life as an outsider artist, which I did not buy, but Athey and I stayed in touch after his move and began to meet up and converse online about 'the outsider' and its ambiguities, alongside conversations about live art, music, hypnosis,

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<sup>296</sup> Lydia Lunch, *Pleading in the Blood: The Life and Works of Ron Athey*, Intellect live, London, 2013, p. 66.

<sup>297</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 250



fitness, religion, and childhood. A mutual appreciation for Diana Ross sealed the deal. Athey's continuous generosity in sharing his encyclopedic knowledge meant that he took time to meet up informally over coffee to have conversations with me about his life and work in person, or via email or social media etc. He talks candidly about his life and what has been written about his extraordinary biography and 'that performance' at the Walker Arts Centre. His life story is compelling because his performances are testimonies of both personal and direct experience of people and places, and of time and particular spaces. They are bound to the Los Angeles of the 1980s, although not of the kinds confined to art-education or institutions, but of counter cultures and lived experiences. His artworks are accounts of his life experiences as portrayed in live performance works, weaving personal autobiography, myth, fact, and fiction; with pain, endurance, sufferance and ecstatic pleasures.

As I awaited entry into Ipswich's Old Town Hall, the varied crowd – students, artists, musicians, fans and art professionals all waited patiently for the doors to open. I was one of the first to enter the grand hall, with its spectacular architecture and dimly lit all with a slightly smoky effect emanating from the centre of the hall. There was music being played was a cacophony of industrial sounding creating a soundscape enveloping everyone present as it built up into more booming sounds at various intervals.

I had not expected to see *Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains* performed in the UK again as I was aware of Athey's move back to LA and I had always missed the chance to see him perform in London, having missed another instance in April 2014 when he performed at performance space. As my thesis is on witnessing through documentation and the shifting role of the witness gaze, I engaged with the works of Athey through the texts, interviewing audience members of past performances and considering performance documentation for selected work through archival holdings. I grew familiar with the work through secondary sources, which led to building up an idea of what the performance would be like, based on these varied sources. In encountering one of the works live, I was interested in how my perception would shift now that I would inhabit the role of eyewitness. I knew the performance through documentation and carefully considered the descriptions of how it would occur. Audience members would be invited to engage Athey's body stretched out and in pain, with their laying of hands as a way to communicate, to get closer, to touch (both metaphorically and literally) in order to feel something connecting. They would lay their hands on his naked body for as long as they choose. He gives his body over to the audience as he is restrained to the scaffold bed. He has no control.

The performance I witnessed began as soon as you walked into the grandiose Ipswich Town Hall, dating back to 1868. Athey was on stage akin to the images I had seen with two assistants Sage Charles and Maria Sideri, in this case, and both of who collaborated on the Xanolalia performance I had seen a week earlier. One assistant (Sideri) who doesn't speak to you but motions you over to the stage where Athey takes prime position under a spotlight. You then encounter another assistant (Charles) who is holding a tub that contain a white aqueous substance, which radiates in UV light, the only other source of light in this darkened room. The entire hall is so dimly lit and is scored with booming

industrial music. When you were up on stage it was impossible to make out who else was in the room. I was given a glove to put on without any instructions and no one directed me with words, but gestures and expression were used to invite me on stage towards the artist's body. Athey lies strewn and bound to scaffold-bed akin to a medical stretcher, with his eyelids stretched with large hooks but there is no bleeding. His face is covered with a clear plastic mask which distorts his expression even more and suspends it. He cannot blink to shut his eyes, nor is it possible for him to return the gaze of the people laying their hands on him. He looks straight up to a point somewhere on the ceiling and only responds through being touched. When it was my turn to lay hands in this collective ritual directed at his body, I felt as if he held my hand slightly. This gesture is perhaps an acknowledgement of my presence as he slips in and out of the moment. Touching returns him to this space and as you descend the stage, you get a glimpse of a baseball bat sticking out of his butt. Ouch! I am not sure how many people notice this at the time, as it is not entirely visible when you approach him on stage. Even from below, my fixation was more on the expressions of people about encounter his body and experience what I had just been through. A mix of emotions; for me, it was an admiration for the body that is able to endure.

The lights on stage go down after everyone has participated in the laying of hands sequence. Athey's body is the illuminated with UV light so that his greased-up body glows white in and our hand marks are now clearly visible as markings across his body. Athey is then unstrapped from the stretcher and then you realise fully where the baseball bat was lodged this entire time. Baseball bat is removed or falls down during his gradual descent from the stage to join his audience. As Athey walks down the stairs his assistants clap and begin to dance around him and chant. Athey begins slow rhythmic dancing gently and also joins in the chanting and clapping, at this point most of the audience have joined in. Athey moves out of view but one can see that he is now removing the hooks around his eyelids as one of his assistant's hands him a towel to dab on his now slightly bleeding face. His two assistants beckon to the crowd to move back a little bit, whilst one fixed at the centre supports the other through rope pulley system (that swings around) whilst a circle is drawn with white chalk. After the circle is drawn, Athey steps into it and begins narrating in Burroughs cut up style, an account the death of the infamous John Waters muse, Divine juxtaposed with texts by Jean Genet and other writers. Athey's recites:

*"Divine died yesterday in pool of her vomited blood which was so red that, as she expired, she had the supreme illusion that this blood was the visible equivalent of the black hole which a gutted violin, seen in a judge's office in the midst of a hodgepodge of pieces of evidence, revealed with dramatic insistence, as does a Jesus the gilded chancre where gleams his Flaming Sacred Heart. So much for the divine aspect of her death. The other aspect, ours, because of those streams of blood that had been shed on her nightshirt and sheets (for the sun, poignant on the bloody sheets, had set, not nastily, in her bed, makes her death tantamount to a murder.... Divine died holy and murdered - by consumption."*<sup>298</sup>

The whole performance was over in an hour; with previous iterations lasting several hours.

— *Recollections of Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains*, Jareh Das, 2014

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<sup>298</sup> Jean Genet, "Our Lady of Flowers," cited in eds. Clare Finburgh, Carl Lavery and, Maria Shevtsova, *Jean Genet: Performance and Politics* (UK: Palgrave Macmillan), p. 125.

Athey's *Incorruptible Flesh* series began in 1996 and has had several iterations for over two decades. The most recent version was performed by Athey and two collaborators, Maria Sideri and Sage Charles, as part of the SPILL Festival of Performance on 1 November 2014 in Ipswich, England. This performance was the fourth installation of this work. It originated as *Incorruptible Flesh* (1996) in a collaboration between Athey and the late Lawrence Steger, performed at CCA Glasgow. Steger was a prolific performance artist based in Chicago in the late 1980s and 1990s, who later died of complications due to AIDS in 1999. Athey and Steger researched heavily into mythology as a starting point for the work and were both drawn to ideas of the "incorruptible" bodies of saints and heroes.<sup>299</sup> In the new millennium, it was performed with Dominic Johnson as *Incorruptible Flesh: Perpetual Wound* (2007), at the Chelsea Theatre London and the Fierce Festival in Birmingham. Between 1996 and 2007, the performance toured to international venues including at the funerals of Leigh Bowery in New York and Amsterdam.

The work's central image involved Athey lain across a stretcher-like structure, initially made out of wood (later metal), with hooks attached, stretching and contorting Athey's face in an exaggerated and at times, terrifying looking expression. In an account of this performance, Athey describes how he stays in this position for six hours and audience members were invited to comfort him by applying or massaging Vaseline on this body whilst his collaborator repeatedly inserted eye drops into his eyes.<sup>300</sup> The later iteration of the work, *Incorruptible Flesh: Perpetual Wound*, in collaboration with Johnson, took its inspiration from the story *Philoctetes*, a Greek hero, exiled because he had a terrible wound that would not heal. In Bertolt Brecht's essay *The Street Scene*, he describes the eyewitness as one who stands on the street corner giving an account of how a traffic accident occurred. Brecht's suggests that:

Epic theatre can be seen at any street corner: an eyewitness demonstrating to a collection of people how a traffic accident took place. The bystander may not have observed what happened, or they may simply not agree with him, may 'see things a different way'; the point is that the demonstrator acts the behaviour of driver or victim or both in such a way that bystanders are able to form an opinion about the accident.<sup>301</sup>

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<sup>299</sup> Dominic Johnson, "Perverse Martyrologies," pp. 503-513.

<sup>300</sup> Johnson, *Pleading in the Blood*, p. 28.

<sup>301</sup> Bertolt Brecht, "The Street Scene," cited in Caroline Wake, "The Accident and the Account: Towards a Taxonomy of Spectatorial Witness in Theatre and Performance Studies," *Performance Paradigm* 5.1 (May 2009), p. 1.

A witness, according to common law, is someone who has, claims to have, or is thought by someone with authority to give testimony.<sup>302</sup> This testimony relies on the assumption that the witness is the only person deemed worthy by law to give an account of events that were not witnessed by others. A witness usually declares before giving testimony; ‘I swear by [substitute Almighty God/Name of God (such as Allah) or the name of the holy scripture] that the evidence I shall give shall be the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.’<sup>303</sup>

This statement, one of several iterations depending on court and country, emphasizes the weight given to witnesses, someone who is compelled to give an account of the truth swearing before God and man before their account is given. Other forms of witnessing, namely the ‘Pentecostal witness’, can be applied to Athey’s work, as they are drawn from his upbringing. In Pentecostal denominations, witnesses are called upon to spread the word of God after possessing “fullness” of the Spirit. This results in the formation of ‘a called and spiritually-gifted community that functions as a witness before the world, of the coming Kingdom of God’.<sup>304</sup>

In *Trauma Tragedy: Symptoms of Contemporary Performance*, 2012, theatre and performance scholar, Patrick Duggan explores performance texts as sites of witnessing, describing them as:

Actively being present in some fundamentally ethical way, to feel the weight of things and one’s own place in them even if that place is simple for the moment as an onlooker [...] The artwork that turns us into witnesses, leaves us above all unable to stop thinking and reporting what we have seen.<sup>305</sup>

This observation by Duggan is important for drawing parallels with how, in asking his audiences to witness, both viewers and Athey are drawn into contractual and ethical negotiations, whether they like it or not, by being present. This highlights the implications of responsibility (and further testimony) that arises from engaging with these live performances, suggesting that witnessing cannot be a passive act but one that requires an active engagement driven by a desire to comment upon what has been witnessed. This desire for commenting on events is of a recurring concern

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<sup>302</sup> A witness, as defined by common Law, is a person who has knowledge that is relevant to an event or other matters of interest. A witness is someone who, either voluntarily or under compulsion, provides testimonial evidence, either oral or written, of what he or she knows or claims to know about the matter before some official authorised to take such testimony.

<sup>303</sup> Oath commonly used by witnesses in English and Welsh courts.

<sup>304</sup> Frank D. Macchia, D.Theol., ‘Filled with the Spirit: Exploring the Pentecostal Protestant Witness’, *The Reformation: Ecumenical Responses*, Ecumenical Institute, University of Strassburg (Jul. 2012), p.9, <http://www.ecumenical-institute.org/wp-content/uploads/2012/11/Macchia-Pentecostal-Witness.pdf>.

<sup>305</sup> Patrick Duggan, *Trauma-Tragedy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2012), pp. 88-97.

for Athey, as he continues to explore in his works, the displacement of normalising ideologies about the body, challenging the binary oppositions of healthy body and. diseased other (that also always involves taking into account the distinctions of race, gender and sexuality). Witnessing, as critical lens, serves as a useful tool for reconsidering how pain operates within performance art in that it allows for, as I mentioned in the introduction, a consideration beyond the role of witness and asks viewers to “see how seeing takes place,” allowing for possibilities to move beyond the role of a witness, and to draw attention to the very conditions of witnessing itself.<sup>306</sup> Jane Blocker’s contributions to theories of witnessing are useful to consider here. She explores in her book, *Seeing Witness: Visuality and the Ethics of Testimony*, how witnessing operates as an awareness of the pain of others. She explores in various artist’s works, including Marina Abramović & Ulay, Felix Gonzalez-Torres and James Luna.

Blocker’s intention is to understand ‘the witness’ as a privileged subject position, while contemplating how this role operates within the politics of the visual (by way of ethics, history and technology). Her thesis is concerned with the disturbing possibilities and ethical challenges of a future, wherein technology becomes a neutral, image capturing “superwitness”, which she views will endanger the enriched human subjective memory.<sup>307</sup> She focuses on a varied selection of artworks that take ‘witness’ as their subject. She looks at those artworks that make us think about historical, scientific, technological, religious, and ultimately political testimony.<sup>308</sup> Blocker’s writings are not only from the viewpoint of understanding witnessing based on specific events, she is more interested in ‘the unwavering certitude about one’s knowledge of a truth/the positioning of oneself as that truth’s authoritative witness.’<sup>309</sup> Her proposition for an ‘authoritative witness’, one that is unwavering, is particularly pertinent to Athey’s approach to performance, as this form of witness is committed to telling the truth, even if doing so presents uglier aspects of the human experience.

The phrase ‘one eye-witness is worth more than ten ear-witnesses’ highlights the precedence often given to eyewitness accounts, particularly due to the fact that without them the

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<sup>306</sup> Jane Blocker, “Seeing Witness: Visuality and the Ethics of Testimony,” cited in J. A. Cayer, review of *Seeing Witness: Visuality and the Ethics of Testimony* by Jane Blocker, <http://hemisphericinstitute.org/hemi/en/e-misferica-71/cayer>.

<sup>307</sup> Ibid., p. 63.

<sup>308</sup> For further analysis of these artworks by Blocker that include Ulay/Abramović’s *The Lovers*, 1988, Felix Gonzalez-Torres’s *Bloodworks*, 1989, Alfredo Jaar’s *Real Pictures*, 1995 etc. see Ibid., pp.3-11, pp. 29-50 and pp. 51-88.

<sup>309</sup> Ibid., p. xxii.

judicial system as a whole would be unsustainable.<sup>310</sup> Witnesses reconstruct events through testimony, by the telling of something that has happened from a unique subjective position. This subjective position of the ‘eyewitness’ is questionable, as it is often not without inaccuracies. The public is compelled to listen to whatever an eyewitness conveys through a testimony, which is usually a retelling of an event, from which the public is absent. The difficulty of trying to capture such an intense visceral encounter through text is evident when looking at images or reading through reviews of Athey’s work. The works are described, firstly, for the visceral reactions they elicit, and it is obvious when watching a video or viewing a photograph that these forms of documentation cannot capture a sense of what it was like to be there. The audience’s gaze and interaction are completely removed from framing in this way, in the sense that one observes collective bodies viewing the work i.e. in the case of videos but a sense of individual reaction or engagement is completely lost. Photographs of the work completely eliminate the gaze of the audience, framing single moments, or in some way presenting one image that becomes representative of a durational performance, a selection that is in itself a subjective gaze. The industrial musical scores that often accompany the work in a loud and imposing manner, the sight of blood, bloodletting and the dynamics between the crowd and performer, is lost in the singularity of framing offered by documentation. One can only imagine what it was like to be present, with the reality of that specific experience only available to those who were present. The transference of underground club aesthetics to performing space also transforms the whole experience.

Reviews and photographs of Athey’s performance *Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains* (**Fig.15**) presents the viewer with an image depicting the opening scene of the performance. The viewer is left to ponder how they arrive at this image, the image of a heavily tattooed, naked man, lying as if he were on his deathbed (or close to death) and certainly mimicking or resembling a corpse. This image unsettles. It is as far as you can get from the conventional burial rituals, which see the deceased lying peacefully in a coffin, as if asleep. The coffin has been replaced by a makeshift scaffold structure and Athey is very much alive. He lies strewn across this lattice of steel with a baseball bat inserted in his anus. His face is pulled by hooks into exaggerated and contorted gaze with his eyes wide open. The viewer is presented with an arresting yet frightening sight, a face that both startles and terrifies. Athey is unable to return the gaze due to the hooks pulling his eyelids tautly away from his face; his gaze in this image is out of reach (**Fig.16**). The image depicts a living body in a state of suspense, in a frightful facial

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<sup>310</sup> In Book 4 of Justinian’s Institutes published in about 533AD, the Latin description of the worth of eyewitness testimony over is summed up with the phrase: ‘*Testis oculatus unus plus valet quam auriti dece*’ which translates in English to ‘*One eye-witness is worth more than ten ear-witnesses.*’

expression that is frozen in time by the framing of this particular photograph. Viewing photographs of *Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains*, a performance Athey describes as ‘sick-boys-do-AIDS-death-trip-cabaret’<sup>311</sup>, the viewer is presented with multiple ways of interpreting such an image. These perspectives are based on a singular image, capturing a fragment of a durational and visceral event, an event that when viewed through such imagery elicits reactions ranging from horror to empathy. The image asks the viewer to imagine Athey’s pain and consider what it must feel like to endure these painful actions over a prolonged period of time. This image cannot escape questions of pain, as it represents material evidence of painful actions the artist chooses to stage, such as metal hooks pulling on his eyelids, while being restrained across a makeshift bed made out of metal scaffolding and, finally, there is also baseball bat inserted in his anus. To view this image solely for the visible and obvious pain captured is limiting as it is a complex work that draws on religious rituals based on Athey’s biography, and rights of bodily self-ownership. He stages the highly personal to claim agency on his body that in turn comments on wider social, cultural, and political governance of the body, namely who owns the body and what one does to it. Images of *Incorruptible Flesh* represent a fragment of a performance, based on a thorough and rigorously researched influence, which sees Athey re-stage Sophocles’ classical tragedy *Philoctetes* (409 BCE), referencing Ron Vawter’s final performance in collaboration with John Jesurun, *Philoctetes-Variations* (1994), James Bidgood’s *Pink Narcissus* (1971), and Wagner’s *Parsifal* (1882).<sup>312</sup> Although this image of *Incorruptible Flesh* might be likened to the sight of dead bodies lying-in-state one is accustomed to seeing as part of burial rituals, it also recalls medical images related to embalment and the forensic preservation of corpses. Athey’s body, however, is alive and presented as tortured. It serves as a symbolic representation of a state of being alive, while also seeming dead. This is a way to comment on his HIV+ status as a death sentence. Athey is presenting his body as a living corpse and one that has outlived the sentence brought on by carrying the HIV/ AIDS virus.

As Catherine Wagley writes in her review for *LA Weekly* on Athey’s 2013 iteration of this performance at Human Resources, LA:

Unless you were one of the very first to enter Ron Athey’s performance, *Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains*, when the doors at Human Resources opened Wednesday night, you probably didn’t see Athey right away. Instead, you saw the faces of the people who had gathered closely around the performance artist, some of them looking tenderly down and others looking less certain of how to feel. You also saw two barefoot figures, one

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<sup>311</sup> Johnson, *Pleading in the Blood*, p. 33.

<sup>312</sup> Johnson, *Perverse Mythologies*, p. 505.

woman and one man, with dark hair and in black robes carrying gold-coloured buckets of Vaseline above their heads. Other assistants handed out rubber gloves. This was so that audience members, who wanted to squeeze their way to the front of the crowd, could pull on a glove, dip their hand in a gold bucket and gently rub Athey's exposed skin.<sup>313</sup>

— Caroline Wagley, *LA Weekly*, July 2013

The review immediately draws attention to the presentness of Athey's performances, illustrating the attention the work commands when it is being witnessed live. She speaks of on the collective experience, mentioning how faces gather closely around Athey's body, and of the divide between those who approach it with a tenderness, and others who are perplexed as to how to respond to it. From her account, Athey's work seems to split this particular audience into the compassionate and empathic against the apprehensive. She presents a glimpse of the range of reactions to his works. Her account also highlights touch as an alternative way of communicating with the body, which usually requires negotiation through reciprocal gazing. The gentleness of touch allows for an intimate and emotive interaction between performer and audience, whilst simultaneously allowing audience members to watch closely at how one interacts with human flesh laid bare. For those who chose to encounter Athey's body close up through rubbing with Vaseline, there is a set of complex negotiations taking place about how and where to touch, some of which I will discuss later.

In another review of *Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains*, theatre critic Mary Brennan writes of Athey's work:

Death has been shadowing American performance artist Ron Athey since he tested HIV positive in his mid-twenties. He's now into his fifties, his ornately tattooed body - which we see naked, here - looks more than healthy: toned and fit. Death, however, still triggers Athey's creative impulses and in the works, he has tagged *Incorruptible Flesh*, it shadows his explorations into religious mysticism, ritual and belief, and the sanctity of saints, whose bodies remain untainted by decay, as if embalmed by their own purity. In *Messianic Remains*, Athey is laid out, naked, on a raised metal grid, reminiscent of the ones used to barbecue martyrs in centuries past. He is, however, accoutred like a pharaoh, with a Perspex head-dress gripping his brow and cheeks, and the ceremonial phallic-like beard on his chin echoed by the shape of the baseball bat protruding downwards from his rectum. Pain, imposed and endured, is never out of the picture with Athey.

We are invited to anoint him. To don white rubber gloves and slather his immobile limbs with Vaseline until they glisten. In itself, it's a potent image that questions what—and how—we reverence totemic forms in art as well as in religion but when Athey rises and then speaks, he becomes more an ancient priest than enshrined ruler. Donning a black cape,

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<sup>313</sup> Caroline Wagley, "Performance Artist Ron Athey Debuts *Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains*," *LA Weekly*, 2013, <http://www.laweekly.com/publicspectacle/2013/07/13/performance-artist-ron-athey-debuts-incorruptible-flesh-messianic-remains>.



and a cross between pharaonic crown and bishop's mitre, Athey swirls amid smoke while intoning Poetic-Pentecostal lines about the nature of divinity and of the late Divine who remains, as it were, alive in the annals of performance. No blood was shed on this occasion, but Athey - performing as part of Glasgay! - still cuts deep into the fleshy observances of voyeurism.<sup>314</sup>

— Mary Brennan, *Herald Scotland*, 13 Nov 2014

These accounts emphasise how Athey shatters the image of the self to offer up a range of possibilities where gender transgresses the normative binaries of gender, health, and other categorisations of the body passed down by medical and religious histories. How we perceive the piercing of his body (where the breaking of the skins barrier through performative actions have been largely informed by early eighteenth-century surgical procedures) dictates how we respond to public forms of bloodletting and violence towards the body, as exemplified in Athey's works. This perception or gaze is one formed through a history of the use of needles. The piercing of the skin can be interpreted in terms of either intravenous healing or the use of needles as a tool for drug addiction. Cutting is largely viewed as an abuse on the body closely associated with pathologies of self-harm. In her analysis of *The Birth of the Clinic* by Michel Foucault, Lois Shawver teases out Foucault's challenging of the myth of modernity by observing that, as Foucault states:

The years preceding and immediately following the Revolution saw the birth of two great myths with opposing themes and polarities: the myth of a nationalized medical profession, organized like the clergy, and invested, at the level of man's bodily health, with powers similar to those exercised by the clergy over men's souls; and the myth of a total disappearance of disease in an untroubled / dispassionate society restored to its original state of health.<sup>315</sup>

Shawver further comments on how Foucault tells of myths that have to do with the wisdom instilled by doctors. According to the myths of modernity, doctors were amazingly wise. They could see past distractions and into the truth of things. We could tell them our problems and their wisdom would lead us to a better life. The relationship between a good life and good health blurred, and the doctors became the carriers of cultural wisdom.<sup>316</sup>

In my view, Athey seeks to challenge the social valorisation of the wholesome body. It

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<sup>314</sup> Mary Brennan *Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains* review of performance at Glasgay! Festival, The Arches, Glasgow, *Herald Scotland*, 13<sup>th</sup> November 2014, [http://www.heraldscotland.com/arts\\_ents/13189178.Performance\\_review/](http://www.heraldscotland.com/arts_ents/13189178.Performance_review/)

<sup>315</sup> Michel Foucault cited in Lois Shawver, *Notes on reading the Birth of the Clinic*, 16<sup>th</sup> May 1998, <http://postmoderntherapies.com/foucabc.htm>.

<sup>316</sup> *Ibid.*

does so by disrupting established truths on wider governance and the regulation of bodies. These truths, in relation to his work can be understood as either medical or as religious. Both in turn inform moral, ethical and cultural codes of conduct. Athey has long fought against the marginalisation directed at his body. I am referring here to a male body whose first identification was that of a god-like status due to his Pentecostal upbringing, and later, an identification brought on by what was viewed as the death-sentence of living with an HIV+ status and its stigmas. Athey wants witnesses. He wants viewers of his works to share in his visions of the here and now, of his autobiography, alongside dealing with his body's status as sick and living with HIV for over two decades. He wants these witnesses of his works to become part of an experience that is uncensored, real, visceral, excessive, vulnerable and open. This is an experience that produces haunting and deeply moving visual images for performance work that actively seeks to control and experience pain. Further, as scholar Mary Richards suggests, pain in Athey's work serves as a way to alleviate the anxieties that have been created by the suspense of living with a life-threatening illness. It allows for what is experienced as pleasurable as not the pain inflicted but the power of control administered by the artist through the masochistic recalling of the self. This brings the self back to the body in a cathartic manner that prevents greater acts of self-harm. For Richards, carrying out controlled self-inflicted pain serves as a form of psychological protection and adaption to the notion of the artist's potential for dealing future suffering and death.<sup>317</sup>

Analysing eyewitness accounts of *Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains* performed on 30 May 2014 at *[performance space]* London enables us to begin to explore these ideas in more depth.<sup>318</sup> Interviewee and artist, Sebastian Kozak described his initial encounter with Athey's work, during his teenage years when he watched a video of the artist's work on *Human Canvas*, broadcasted on Channel 4 in 2006.<sup>319</sup> Kozak speaks of this encounter as an act of rebellion in itself in that he stayed up late at night to watch this video after his father forbade him to do so. The television series, *Art Shock*, considered the works of artists who used cutting and bleeding in their performance works, alongside exploring the history and practices of marking the human

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<sup>317</sup> See, Mary Richards, "Making a Mark" for a detailed account of mark making in the works of Ron Athey in *Ron Athey, AIDS and The Politics of Pain*, last modified 2014, <http://people.brunel.ac.uk/bst/3no2/Papers/mary%20richards.htm>.

<sup>318</sup> I conducted an interview with London based artist, Sebastian Kozak, who was familiar with the work of Ron Athey but had never seen a live performance until Athey performed in London on 30 May 2014 at *[performance space]* London. I interviewed Kozak for the role of eyewitness prior to my encountering the same work recently on 1<sup>st</sup> November 2014 as part of Spill Festival 2014.

<sup>319</sup> 'Human Canvas' was an episode that featured Ron Athey on the late-night documentary series, produced and directed by Andy Lee for Channel 4's *Art Shock* series. Episode: Human Canvas, C4, first broadcast on Tuesday 14th March 2006, 11:05pm, Redback films, available online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fEmL2JkYU0k>

body by means of tattooing, piercing, branding, cutting, and scarring. Rebelling against his father's restriction, Kozak watched this series and began developing an interest in body art and countercultural movements, associated with the works of Athey, ORLAN, and Psycho Cyborg. He also described this discovery of Athey's as coincidental and a result of a chance meeting in Whitechapel with Athey collaborator and friend, the artist Franko B., Kozak recalls this encounter stating that:

I got to know him by chance. I was 18 and, on my way, to buy art materials in Whitechapel. I took the wrong turn and came across a van, offloading paintings which I recognised as Franko's. I saw him by the van and went up to him and asked him where his show was going to be? He gave me an invite to the show and then told me about this salon he does where he invited artists to come and present their work in a very relaxed setting.

I went to one of these and Ron was there, we got talking and then and we partied. He still parties hard...*Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains* at ]performance space[ on 30th May 2014 was the first of Ron's performances I had seen. Ron doesn't really document his work, you see, so it's quite difficult to get hold of material without seeing it live. I guess it keeps it really pure because it's very cult i.e. cult-like. He sort of turns himself into a myth in that way. But I don't think he has the need to do that. If you an outsider or purist, I guess you'll Google him, but I don't think he controls that. At the same time, I think maybe he sees the art world as being really clean, clinical, sterile.<sup>320</sup>

He then proceeds to describe his introduction to the underground club scene, specifically to K.A.O.S, a club night in London that Athey also regularly attends, bringing together diverse individuals including musicians, artists, fashion designers and writers, but more in the ethos of welcoming anyone interested in an alternative and non-commercial arts scene. He draws on the industrial sound, dark basements, exuberance, and the excess that occurs here and relates this to Athey's live performance. In his description of witnessing his first Athey performance, Kozak speaks of Athey's adherence to embodying the underground industrial scene, which began three decades ago in Los Angeles and is present in his work today in London. Kozak views Athey's works as a meeting of art and life where there are intersections of punk, queer, industrial and alternative subcultures. He speaks of Athey's allegiance to a punk ethos, where he resists fitting into art historical categorisations and the commercial dictates of the art market. For him, this resistance to a highly commercialised money-driven performance practice, currently utilised by a range of performance artists of the 1960s and 1970s, keeps the performance pure and gives it a cult-like status. Kozak also suggests that through this resistance Athey turns himself into a myth, fighting against the often-sterile ethos of the art world, where walls remain white, metaphorically

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<sup>320</sup> Interview with Sebastian Kozak, 4 August 2014.

and literally speaking. One can liken this resistance to literary references that draw on ‘the suffering artist’ where an artist commits wholly to their craft regardless of monetary rewards. Franz Kafka’s *A Hunger Artist* comes to mind here where the main character forsakes comfort, companionship, and food, all of which are necessary to survival.<sup>321</sup> The hunger artist’s devotion to his art constitutes a thinly masked death wish. Whilst Athey does not forsake his everyday needs for survival, one could argue that in his performances he stages the boundaries of life and death by presenting his body. This is a body that continues to outlive its disease status, presenting an uncensored reflection on valid experiences, even if these result in framing aspects of life that are ugly and uncomfortable<sup>322</sup>. Unwilling to respond to the needs he has as a human being, let alone as a living thing, the hunger artist makes death the culmination of his life’s work.

The artist, Samantha Sweeting’s accounts of Athey’s performance offer another perspective as her eyewitness role includes collaborations with Athey, having originally met him during her time studying at Dartington College of Arts in 2007. This initial encounter was through artist Lisa Newman from *2gyrlz*, who had invited Athey to present his work and carry out critical sessions and tutorials with students. A friendship ensued that led to both artists exhibiting together in 2008 in North America. Sweeting also performed as part of Athey and Lee Adam’s curated twelve-hour performance event at The Shunt Vaults in 2009. Sweeting shared her recollections of Athey’s performances that she has seen over the years in North America and Europe in an email interview below:

Arnolfini 2007

People standing very close, entranced. Tension.

NB. fire alarm going off half way.

Audience’s anger at the spell being broken.

At the end, feeling that audience members wanted to touch the blood. Holy relics.

2Gyrlz event, Portland Oregon and Open Space Canada 2008

A lot of blood. Like a waterfall. More than usual. Shock. Oxygen and paramedic care at end.

Berlin, 2008

*Part I*

He is naked on all fours surrounded by panes of glass. On his head he wears a wig of fairy-tale

blonde hair. Like a taxidermy animal in its vitrine, with a touch of Hollywood glamour.

The hyper feminine. He stares into the looking glass and begins brushing his golden tresses.

A loud continuous noise unsettles the room. He pulls out needles piercing his forehead and removes the wig. Blood drips down his face. Slides glass panes over his bloody

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<sup>321</sup> See Franz Kafka, *A Hunger Artist* (Cambridge: ProQuest Information and Learning, 2002).

<sup>322</sup> Johnson, *Pleading in the Blood*, 2013, p. 29.

wounded body, putting himself in a mausoleum.  
Living dead.

*Part II: Self-fisting*

The animal carnal object life/Eros over Thanatos.  
I was there to keep audience from getting too close.  
Blood lust vs 80's fear and aversion.<sup>323</sup>

Kozak and Sweeting's experiences reflect on how Athey's performances work to bring together myth-making, personal histories and pain. The works manifest the notion of living-dead body and draws on Athey's body's sick status to counteract illness, stigma, and marginalisation. Performing in front of an audience allows for a presentation of Athey's body as dynamic and alive, as a matter of celebration. In doing so, his works and their documentation resonate with what Susan Sontag describes in a statement about photographs of suffering as 'a means of making 'real' (or 'more real') matters that the privileged and the merely safe might prefer to ignore.'<sup>324</sup>

Theories within performance art that discuss the artist's body often discuss its position as self-evident and self-reflexive. This is often argued to be due to a sentient presence and a consciousness that must be part of the body being received by the viewer. As Philip Auslander in his exploration of performance's phenomenological capacity observes:

The interaction of looks between the viewer and the viewed, phenomenological theory shows how the subject, being in the world, is both destabilized and destabilizing. Indeed, the descriptions Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Jean-Paul Sartre, and Jacques Lacan give to the relation of the subject to the world and the viewer to viewed can be interpreted as a performance trope which breaks down the notion of spectator mastery.

To Merleau-Ponty, the see-er does not appropriate the world she sees, but in looking, opens herself to it, lives in it from the inside, and becomes immersed in it. A potentiality exists in the space between viewer and viewed, the exchange of an object for a subject, in the space of the spectacle that looks back, which might be termed Sartre's possibility of 'being-seen-by-the-Other' or Lacan's gaze.<sup>325</sup>

For Auslander, the work of phenomenologists is important for theorising media culture due to their un-mastering of the privilege of viewing the world as representation through the visual arts. Phenomenological thinking also exposes the relations between the viewer and the viewed, in a performative modality. The returned gaze seeks to administer agency through a destabilising of the spectator's subjectivity and fragmentary identification with the viewed subject. Subjectivity,

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<sup>323</sup> Jareh Das, *Interview with Samantha Sweeting* via email, 3<sup>rd</sup> September 2014.

<sup>324</sup> Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, p. 7.

<sup>325</sup> Philip Auslander, "The spectator and performative modality" in *Performance: Visual art and performance art*, (London: Taylor and Francis, 2003), pp. 285-291.

however, as writer Teresa de Lauretis reminds us, is more complex than a simple division of subject and object. She argues that ‘the subject ought to be recognised as inhabiting multiple positions rather than one that is unified, thus moving towards a perspective that allows more freedom of identification for the viewer within the plurality of media culture.’<sup>326</sup>



**Fig.16 – Ron Athey, *Incorruptible Flesh: Messianic Remains* (detail), Thessaloniki, 2013, ©Manuel Vason.**

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<sup>326</sup> Ibid, p. 288.

### 4.3 Mediated Witness: Hearsay and ‘Judas Cradle’



Fig.17 – Found web image of a Judas Cradle, date unknown, alongside Ron Athey performing *Judas Cradle*, 2004, an operatic duo drama with Juliana Snapper in the chapel of Castle Codelli, Ljubljana, Slovenia (Visions of Excess, produced by Aksioma and Kapelica), ©Manuel Vason.

As I and other commentators on Athey’s work agree, all of his performances are entangled within both myths and realities. I have discussed accounts falsely attesting to ‘bucket loads of blood thrown at audiences’, alongside images depicting actions of ‘extreme pain’, particularly when photography captures fragmentary moments of durational work, and the meanings that might be drawing from documentation. In analysing *Judas Cradle* from the hearsay witness position, understandings of this particularly performance are established through recollections from witnesses of the work and through documentation – videos of interviews with the artist and Juliana Snapper, his collaborator, texts and publicly available photographs of the work.<sup>327</sup> I watched a

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<sup>327</sup> I viewed archival material in the form a video recording and interviews of *on The Judas Cradle*, 2004, with both Ron Athey and Juliana Snapper at the Live Art Development Agency, London. This archive holds a substantial amount of performance documentation on Ron Athey and I was able to watch a full-length video of the work as well as accompanying interviews on several visits between 5, 6, 7 & 8-Sep. 2014 and 5, 7, 9 & 10 Mar. 2015.

video documenting the entire durational performance, and its accompanying interview with Ron Athey and Juliana Snapper relating to their joint performance, *The Judas Cradle*, held at the archive of the Live Art Development Agency, London.

This archive holds a significant amount of performance documentation on Athey, which he has made available to the organisation and the only UK holding I was able to access for the documentation of this piece. I was able to book several visiting sessions to the archive and watch a full recording of the performance and accompanying interview with Athey and Snapper, describing their collaboration in detail. The process of reviewing this documentation of *Judas Cradle* made evident my partial and fragmentary experience of a performance that occurred over a decade ago. In this section I want to explore and develop this idea of the mediated gaze, as the act of witnessing through documentation that in turn mediates the gaze of witness. These ideas will unfold throughout the following section.

Experiencing performance and other live works through mediation (films and photographs) is often said to divide the understanding of the experience of the audience on the basis of understandings of authenticity. As mentioned in the first two chapters, performance documentation can be viewed as a form of experience separate to the live work, or it can provide contextual information (especially when considered as part of an archive or textual contribution to an artist's work).<sup>328</sup> The complexity of documentation also arises when personal archival material becomes available to the public, either when an artist decides to do so, or posthumously when works enter the public domain in this manner. In introducing the notion of 'the mediated gaze' to analyse Athey's work *Judas Cradle*, this serves as a way for considering how a hearsay witness contributes to accounts through secondary means, in this case via film, photographs, and texts. The idea of the mediated gaze is an approach to looking at performance art through its mediation. In other words, performance documentation enables us to explore the various sites for the witness position that begin to emerge from looking and in turn, experiencing live works. Performance via mediation sets up intimate one-on-one encounters with work; the viewer sits by his or herself in a quiet space, watching and listening to a recording, temporarily detached from their immediate surroundings, entering into a temporary screen world.

Several artists have performed for the camera lens and documentation forms the core experience of their works (see discussion in Chapter 2 – Literature and Performance Art Review).<sup>329</sup> Athey documents his work to preserve, defend and disseminate representations of his

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<sup>328</sup> See Lit review in this thesis.

<sup>329</sup> Several examples can be found in Performance Art of intimate performances documented in private that have now made their way into the public domain. Artists including Ulay, Stuart Brisley, Gina Pane, Carolee



life and works. He reflected upon these acts recently in an interview. He states that:

I think the world has changed,” he said. “The opposition may be loud, but they’re not as great in number.” On the other hand, “so much of our lives is represented online now. If I don’t self-censor at all someone will erase my Facebook page and I end up in a Triple-X Tumblr ghetto. Art that addresses issues beyond commerce should be as important as the news of the day. Sometimes art should be about more than art’s sake. Do we want to live in a cartoon world where everything is safe for 8-year-olds? That doesn’t evolve the culture.”<sup>330</sup>

— Ron Athey revisits the Culture Wars, 2015

Film and photography are the predominate mode for experiencing past performances that are specific to a time and place. We must, however, recognise and address that experiencing works in this manner presents a subjective view framed by editing. The viewer of documentation can never quite know what the actual experience of the original performance was like. This dictates how one experiences the work. This discussion unfolds in two key sections. Firstly, I offer my hearsay witness accounts of *Judas Cradle*. I then move onto explore these ideas in more depth through considering torture in the work in ‘Witnessing Torture’, before turning to reflect further on the shifting forms of witness in the section ‘Reflections on Hearsay.’

#### 4.31 On Judas Cradle

*Judas Cradle with Ron Athey and Juliana Snapper ACT I-VI*

- I. The Riddle (Monteverdian duet, singing Puccini’s Turandot [ca. 1920–25]);
- II. The Witness (from a Jean Genet text, Prisoner of Love [1983])
- III. Purse (an inquisitor makes demands)
- IV. Sextette (Maeterlinck libretto, Daddy coaxing Yniold to sit on his lap)
- V. Flat Thing (soliloquy on dissociation and love note to private Lynndie England)
- VI. Auto De Fe (Athey’s glossolalia; Snapper following) (*Judas Cradle*, 2005)<sup>331</sup>

I first encountered images of *Judas Cradle* (**Fig.17**) in *Performing Bodies in Pain: Medieval and Post-Modern Martyrs, Mystics and Artists*, where Carlson examines the cultural work of spectacular suffering. She does so through readings of recent dramatizations of torture and

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Schneemann, and Ana Mendieta have all photographed and filmed their works extensively this way throughout their career. Some more transgressive artists use documentation as a means of capturing body practices and bodies outside of the heteronormative position as observed in the works of Hudinilson Urban Jr. and Fakir Musafar.

<sup>330</sup> Kristin Tillotson, “Ron Athey Revisits the Culture Wars”, *Star Tribune*, 26<sup>th</sup> March 2015, <http://www.startribune.com/ron-athey-revisits-the-culture-wars/297607211>.

<sup>331</sup> The six acts for *Judas Cradle* from the programme accompanying the performance, reproduced in her critical overview of this work, “Holy Body: Erotic Ethics in Ron Athey and Juliana Snapper’s Judas Cradle” *The Drama Review* 50, no. 1 (2014) pp.159-169.

performances of self-mutilation within conceptual art, interpreting them against late-medieval saintly suffering.<sup>332</sup> She examines gendered readings of self-inflicted pain by beginning with performances of individual power. She considers Athey's work as one example of such readings. For Carlson, exploring the role of masochism and contractual relationships to the homoerotic in feeling pain is key to understanding pain performances. The image of Athey with his back to the viewer impaled onto a large wooden pyramid triggers the normative corporeal reactions of grimacing as the mind diverts to thinking about how much this action must have hurt him. It is almost incomprehensible to understand how to bear the painful act frozen in this image. This freezes this action in time and contributes to extending its lifespan beyond the short sequence in which it occurred when viewing the documentary video. *Judas Cradle* by Ron Athey and Juliana Snapper was first performed at 291 Gallery, London, as part of Fierce Festival 2005. In the video documentation of this work, Athey and his collaborator, Snapper, stand side by side in on stage. Athey is partially nude. wearing a gold torso styled bodice, leather leg strap (akin to cowboy chaps), resembling a sculptural figure form Grecian antiquity. The outfit is a somewhat hybridized clash between classical antiquity and S&M aesthetics, namely, leathers, bare buttocks, and a harness. In contrast, Snapper is exquisitely made up, exaggerated in drag and adorned in an elaborate red-brown velvet gown that belonged to the late Leigh Bowery, a recurring costume in Athey's performances (**Fig.18**). The setting for the performance, 291 Gallery (**Fig.19**), was a renovated Neo-Gothic, Victorian church that had been converted into a gallery, restaurant, bar, and club in 1998. The church was built in 1867 by the architect Henry Woodyer. In the 1960s it became the 'parish church' of a gang of Hell's Angels bikers. The dramatic architecture of the Main Gallery incorporates a 50ft. high ceiling and a cinema-sized projection screen showing film and video works.

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<sup>332</sup> The performance is based on real torture methods in the form of the 'Judas Cradle' which was invented in the European middle ages and used to extract confessions. Victims were impaled on this wooden pyramid and as the torture progressed, the were lowered further with the torturer controlling the level of pain by lifting and lowering or leaving impaled on the object for several days if necessary.



**Fig.18 – Athey and Snapper opening sequence, *Judas Cradle*, 291 Gallery, London, image still from video, 65:00”, courtesy of Live Art Development Agency (LADA), all images ©Jareh Das.**



**Fig.19 – Installation view, *Judas Cradle*, 2005, 291 Gallery, London, image still from video, 65:00”, courtesy of Live Art Development Agency (LADA), all images ©Jareh Das.**



**Fig.20 – Image still of Juliana Snapper and Ron Athey performing *Judas Cradle*, 2005, video, 65:00”, courtesy of Live Art Development Agency (LADA), all images ©Jareh Das.**



**Fig.21 – Image still of Juliana Snapper and Ron Athey performing *Judas Cradle*, 2005, video, 65:00”, courtesy of Live Art Development Agency (LADA), all images ©Jareh Das.**

All of the stills above I created through photographing whilst watching a video of the performance. The opening scene in the documentation begins with Athey and Snapper on a stage with various props surrounding them, the most prominent of which is a purpose-built Judas Cradle (Fig.20), raised and located at the right-side of the stage. There is also a circle of shiny beaded strings, similar to the curtains found on in doorways. Located behind them is a catwalk and the final prop is a pulpit in front of them. Athey and Snapper began singing an opera together for several minutes, at the end of which Athey stops and walks to the right-hand corner of the stage where the light now focuses on the construction of the Judas Cradle. He stands there in silence whilst Snapper descends from the stage singing whilst wearing a winged helmet (in Greek

mythology this helmet was worn by the god of messengers and thieves, Hermes).<sup>333</sup>

Once Snapper finishes singing, the spotlight returns to Athey who begins narrating the following statement:

After giving his name and age, a witness is meant to say something like: ‘I swear to tell the whole truth’. Before I started to write it, I had sworn to myself to tell the truth in this book. Legally speaking a witness neither opposes nor serves the judges. He takes an oath to the public, to the court and to the spectators. The witness is on his own. He speaks, the judges listen and say nothing. The witness does not answer the merely explicit question ‘how’ in order to show the ‘why’, he sheds light on the ‘how’. A light sometimes called artistic. The judges have never been to the places where acts they have to judge are performed, so the witness is indispensable; but he knows a realistic description won’t mean anything to anyone including the judges unless he adds some light and shade which only he perceived.<sup>334</sup>

After this recitation, Athey proceeds to place a large velvet cone on over his head which elicits laughter from some of the audience (**Fig.21**). Snapper, who is a few arms lengths away from him uses a long wooden staff to tip the velvet cone off his head and motions to him to come across to where she is now standing. She then begins to strike the staff while making short bursts of piercing sounds. At this point, Athey is at the end of the catwalk and begins to recite slowly the first few lines of the text he had just narrated while tap dancing slowly and rhythmically. At first, this begins subtly then it progressively gets louder as the tapping action progresses. He continues reciting and walking down the catwalk and gets off it.

By the time Snapper finishes this singing sequence, Athey is now at the base of the Judas Cradle, which has been completely lit up. Loud industrial music plays in the background and all of the stage is darkened. Athey begins to ascend the pyramid of the cradle (I am aware of what is coming having seen the images, but I wince, it looks so painful). As he lowers his backside onto the sharp tip of this pyramid like structure, he grimaces slightly and pants a little bit. He then begins to turn himself around (360 degrees) on the top of the cradle and his breathing gets heavier and the panting quicker. The camera pans into his movements around the cradle, almost as if to confirm by zooming in that this is really happening. It seems the moving round the cradle was really a gesture to demonstrate the harm this device inflicts on its users. After he completed this 360-degree movement he raises his palms to his back and starts chanting and howling. These lasts for several minutes. He descends the cradle reciting a Latin text and we do not see Ron for a while as the camera focuses directly on Snapper strewn across a velvet chaise lounge where she begins

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<sup>333</sup> For an expansive critical overview of this work see Amelia Jones, “Holy Body: Erotic Ethics in Ron Athey and Juliana Snapper’s Judas Cradle” *The Drama Review* 50, no. 1 (2014), p. 159.

<sup>334</sup> Video documentation of Ron Athey and Juliana Snapper’s *Judas Cradle*, 2:01” accessed on 13 December 2013 at the study room LADA London.

to climb out of the Leigh Bowery gown, wearing a black satin bodice-corset and matching tightly fitted skirt whilst making short pig noises. She then puts on a wide brimmed feather hat, lights a cigarette and smokes it with a cigarette holder, in between continuing to half-sing and half-grunt.

Whilst all of these actions were taking place, a green projected image of a moving doorway is superimposed intermittently across the stage. Athey joins her on the chaise lounge in a seductive pose, whilst they take turns in reciting lines from Genet's *Prisoner of Love*, 1983, and take turns in smoking her cigarette. He walks on the catwalk once again. However, this time with a towel wrapped around his head as he struts back and forth alongside Snapper, who has now joined him in the pageantry. A female trumpeter with big, wild red hair and wearing a massive blue tutu joins them on stage, mainly playing for Snapper, whilst Ron is off the catwalk getting ready for the next act. Snapper then exits the catwalk whilst Athey ferociously and intentionally begins to fall over, splattering his Vaseline covered bra as he does so, smearing the catwalk whilst lying face down and sliding off the catwalk gradually. The focus then moves to Snapper, who at this point is singing an operatic stanza whilst suspended upside down. She struggles to keep spit from dripping in large amounts and presumably is also battling to carry on whilst blood rushes into her head. We see the trumpeter on stage again for a bit and the closing sequence see the lights go up around the beaded sparkly circle where Athey begins to boldly speak in tongues as Snapper repeats after him with her operatic piercing voice. In a sense, she is magnifying his ecstatic chants with her voice. The background goes from pale pink to red and the lights go out at this visual and sonic crescendo concluding the forty-five-minute performance of *Judas Cradle*.

#### 4.32 On Collaboration

Athey describes his experience of working with Juliana Snapper as his first real collaboration.<sup>335</sup> He speaks of how the collaboration revealed to him how far sound could go and how in the process of being coaxed to sing he learnt a lot about singing. Bringing his work into the realm of sound took a bit of time, as he struggled to come to terms with his ability to contribute vocally to the work. Athey describes this process of vocal training as one that allowed him to recognise his imperfect voice, one that he describes as messy and vulnerable when projected. Snapper, on the other hand, speaks of knowing Athey for a few years and how she was immediately interested collaborating when Athey spoke of his initial ideas for the performance drawing on the history of the Judas Cradle. The cradle is a crude, stool-shaped political torture device that was used during

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<sup>335</sup> Ron Athey on *Judas Cradle* in the opening credits for the interview as part of the performance's documentation available at *Live Art Development Agency, London*, accessed on 13 Dec. 2013.

the Spanish Inquisition on prisoners. Athey and Snapper both wanted to use the operatic voice to illuminate the function of this instrument of torture. The DVD recording of *Judas Cradle* begins with an opening scene showing Athey and Snapper standing side by side in costume. Drawing from traditions in European opera, theatre, and elsewhere, we might see the work as following a traditional model, in that the male and female come together in the end, whether in love or death. However, the overall effect is of torment in a duet that mocks the very structures of the heteronormative. Athey and Snapper present a duet between a man and a woman who queer the idea of the heterosexual matrix with their bizarre refusal to mesh in a conventional way as two sides of a ‘proper’ couple. They collide with each other vocally, but never in competition. Instead they make up nonsensical language of mewls and screeching. They test the limits of their body (Athey on his purposely built Judas Cradle, Snapper trying to perfect a stanza whilst hanging upside down). They show us pain and lots of humour, but mostly they show that in this performance that they are equals, equals whose engagements never completely align but always intersect.

#### 4.33 Reflections by Hearsay

The artist (as a construct/persona) was present, but the person was not.

Can the artist be present?

And what does performance have to do with it?

Is it performance, or merely spectacle?

Can one teach presence?

Or: how to make a performance?

— *Franko B, I Was (Not) Present, 2014*

In encountering Athey’s work through its documentation, I had moments of flinching, shuddering, and wanting to shut my eyes. However, in engaging with this work repeatedly, on several visits to the LADA archives, my inquiry was directed towards how one is to bear witness in absence. To bear witness *in absentia* asks how one engages with the materiality of pain documentation, and how this in turn this witnessing informs a reading of another’s pain through secondary sources. In witnessing Athey’s works through hearsay – as the absent act of building up through fragmentary bits of documentation – this undeniably meant that the visceral impact of his live work, the sonic imposition in the voices of the performers, audience engagement, and general aura of the experience, was lost. This was lost even though I had an intimate encounter with the work’s documentation. Athey’s presence is central to his work, most notably when he speaks and, in this case, sings with a command that is confident in its delivery. The intensity of the voice explored by both Athey and Snapper as a sonic but concrete unfolding of events, articulated

through the sensing and sensed bodies of their audience, is the only one that I can imagine. However, in encountering the work through its documentation, the equality of Athey and Snapper resonates, as they meticulously progress from scene to scene, compelling the viewer into wondering what they were going to do next. What else are the performers going to show us in this tableau of great complexity? How do the references, spanning past and present socio-cultural, and political histories that have informed who we are, work to complicate our understanding of the boundaries of pleasure and pain, sex and sexuality? As Mary Richards observes, Athey 'deliberately blurs these boundaries of pleasure and pain as they are often viewed with such scepticism by (in this context) Western society generally orientated towards using technology, science and industry to provide increasingly complex ways of cushioning the body from experiences of discomfort or disease and their association with disorder.'<sup>336</sup> In blurring these binary distinctions, Athey calls for them to be scrutinised through the language of performance, offering a provocative means for contesting fixed representations of the male subject. In performing and making meaning of his life as Richard notes 'Athey seeks both recognition for his work, and recognition from observers who witness his physical and psychological pain in order to achieve confirmation of his own existence, and the significance of existence beyond the designations of identity as either sick or queer.'<sup>337</sup> Athey wants his witnesses to recognise his body beyond its identity markers, as a real body being tested to its limit so that pain, and in turn, an ability to withstand pain acts as a form of confirming his existence. I am thinking of how Athey performances use pain to demonstrate a more visceral understanding of suffering, one that arises from marginalization and the discrimination against certain bodies. His work raises questions regarding whose points of view are being left out or ignored.

#### 4.34 Understanding torture in *Judas Cradle*

In analysing and reflecting on *Judas Cradle*, a documentary by Athey and Snapper accompanying the performance was useful for contextualising the work. In it Athey describes his inspiration for the piece in detail. The idea for the performance was triggered when he viewed an image depicting torture. He expands on how several of his performances emerge from recurring hallucinatory images that lurk within his mental space. With this specific work he was navigating the bombardment of media reports on the abuse of prisoners at both Guantanamo Bay and Iraq. Athey specifically references the image of U.S. soldier, Lynndie England posing by an Iraqi prisoner

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<sup>336</sup> Bryan S. Turner, "The Body and Society" cited in Richards, M. *Ron Athey, AIDS and The Politics of Pain*, 2014, <http://people.brunel.ac.uk/bst/3no2/Papers/mary%20richards.htm>

<sup>337</sup> Ibid.



who was being tortured and hanging from his legs, above ground by her side, whilst she smiles, casually giving the thumbs up to the camera. This particular image relates to the revelations of over two thousand images later made public and documented the extent of prisoner abuse about carried out by U.S. soldiers in Abu Ghraib, and other Iraqi prisons. The report was published by tabloids and other newspapers in the UK. It appeared in *The Daily Mail*, where the front page used two images of the US soldier, with the headline *Images that Shocked the World: Soldier Lynndie England holding a leash attached to a prisoner, known to the guards as Gus at Abu Ghraib*. Another image of a prisoner being tortured was also placed on the cover of *The Economist* in 2004. As an aftermath of this scandal, a U.S. judge ruled that the U.S. government should release more pictures of alleged prisoner abuse in Iraq and at other sites.<sup>338</sup>

In the interview, Athey explains how torture seemed to be legitimated through these acts occurring at Abu Ghraib. He recalls how this affected him as an American. He states how he felt a certain level of guilt as his native country allowed these acts of torture to happen. As part of the research for the work, Athey read CIA and Human Rights reports, alongside torture manuals from various countries from around the world. He describes this focus as one that is concerned with the psychological, rather than the physical or political. In this context, he was interested to think of how far these actions are employed to drive prisoner's crazy, but without shutting them down completely. He was also interested in the language used in these reports. *Judas Cradle*, according to the artist, is a response to ideas informed by a history of and a return to using torture. By impaling himself, this act of deviance is a form of sacrificing his own body in a way that is more confrontational than going out on the streets to protest. The recurring use of bodily orifices in Athey's work includes using the anus, one he views as the homosexual's weapon. He believes that this bodily opening is at the root of homophobia. Sexuality for the artist is used and celebrated in this work as a weapon of resistance.

Despite Athey researching implements of torture and responding to the use of it in the present day to justify wars and conflicts, he does not re-enact these acts to harm or hurt his body. Rather, these self-inflicted pain actions occur in the controlled framework of performance art that allows a space for individual protest.<sup>339</sup> Athey uses performance to work against what he views as an acceptance or passivity towards the use of torture methods to justify the so-called war on

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<sup>338</sup> Two thousand photos of abuse at Abu Ghraib were revealed as existing in news reports on 24<sup>th</sup> August in '2,000 Photos of abuse at Abu Ghraib and other prisons to be released,' *Mail Online*, last modified 2014, <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-2736654/Two-thousand-photos-abuse-Abu-Ghraib-prisons-set-released.html#ixzz3D7UbZodZ>

<sup>339</sup> Ron Athey Interview, *The Judas Cradle and Documentary Ron Athey and Juliana Snapper*, 2005.

terror. His response through this work is concerned with examining the boundaries of the human psyche; he is seeking to explore the limits of the human psyche when under the duress of torturous actions, without breaking down.<sup>340</sup> He chooses to explore the slippages that exist as one moves between conscious and hallucinatory states when undergoing extreme pain. His response is one that he describes as ‘seeing the perverseness in everything’, which brought him to an image of himself impaled on a Judas Cradle as a means of sacrificing his own body in a way that is confrontational and more visceral than an ordinary protest march.<sup>341</sup> With this image in mind, Athey began to think about his previous performance being akin to an opera, not least because of their enduring lengths and vivid imagery. He began to think of how he could move this kind of performance into a more sonic sphere, where the work is embodied through the voice and felt compelled to push the visual live performative into the realm of opera, in which sounds, and visuals are pushed to their extreme limits.

A reading of emotions as experienced through documentation that serves as material evidence of performances that are difficult to watch due to their confrontation with the very subject of what it means to take up the witness position. Difficulty and emotion are still experienced through images, videos and in texts. They still have the power to move the viewer into changing and disrupting the normative. Athey’s views on mediation correspond with Peggy Phelan’s argument against mediation. She declares:

Performance honours the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have an experience of value which leaves no visible trace afterward. Writing about it necessarily cancels the “tracelessness” inaugurated within this performative promise. Performance’s independence from mass reproduction, technologically, economically, and linguistically, is its greatest strength.<sup>342</sup>

This presents a dilemma, for we too easily risk ending up with significant silences and absences in our accounts of performance history, which are troubling and often serve to further marginalise the already overlooked. Performance works including Athey’s have been left out of historical narratives of performance art, so there is an urgency, I argue, for the dissemination of such works through their documentation (which is often controlled by the artists themselves). In some cases, documentation is only accessible through archives, exhibitions and when they enter museum collections. Performance does not exist independently from technological advancements. The digital world provides a platform for exchange that broadens the audience of live performance. In

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<sup>340</sup> Ibid.

<sup>341</sup> Ibid.

<sup>342</sup> Peggy Phelan, “The Ontology of Performance” in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), p. 149.

turn, it transforms the role of the witness into a myriad of shifting positions. Athey still resists from making the documentation of his works widely available online, although he shares the documentation of his early works via his Facebook and Instagram pages. This is because he wants to present the works on his terms and in his own words. It is evident that documentation forms an important part of Athey's oeuvre and serves as a way to reclaiming his work against the exclusionary narratives of canon construction within art history. Documentation also contributes to exposing the flaws in historical narratives, the systems that include and exclude, alongside first-hand accounts on how performances were initially experienced as live and are now further disseminated through mediated exchanges.

### Conclusion

In this chapter, I have considered Athey's performances from a variety of perspectives, proposing multiple entries into his work adhering to his call for live witnessing. Alongside this, I have considered how intimate encounters through archival and digital forms of documentation might provide an alternative experience and create the possibility of the work reaching a broader audience. Athey's work heavily relies on the audience as witnesses. His performances are concerned with his intention to leave viewers transfixed and affected by what they have experienced. To witness an event, as Richards observes is to 'be present at it in some fundamentally ethical way, to feel the weight of things and one's own place in them.'<sup>343</sup> Athey's performances are portrayals of his personal experiences of loss during the AIDS crisis, where they are bound to a specific time and space. However, they are also a retelling of lived experiences. The artist speaks of and for a community no longer present, and of an individual's plight during and after the devastation brought on by the AIDS crisis. Athey's performances give both voice and visibility to those who are no longer present. He continues to outlive his original death-sentence brought on by his own HIV+ status. He does so by creating performances that are larger than life and celebratory, whilst deeply imbued in contemplating his own mortality.

There are complex economic and political relations between mainstream institutional histories of performance and marginal-subcultural practices, especially in the context of subcultural autobiography, poetic disobedience, and rumour. Athey's life and work is one that is as extraordinary as it is important for histories of performance art. From his childhood spent in training to become a Pentecostal minister, to drug addiction, to making performance art, which in a way saved him. Whilst making art initially served as rebellion against his upbringing, it became

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<sup>343</sup> Richards, *Ron Athey, AIDS and The Politics of Pain*.

a way of overcoming drug addiction and the sentence of an HIV+ status. It also served as a way of making his mark, by subverting his fighting for his life in significant ways. Work such as Athey's attempts to accomplish change on the artist's own terms, never allowing himself or his history story to be hidden, undervalued, or stepped over. In trying to build a picture of *Judas Cradle* through a mediated witness lens, I have brought together archival material, interviews, and text on the work with documentary sources. In trying to produce an interpretation of a performance experience that is in itself larger-than-life, through its documentation, the sensory and sonic qualities of being there were not available. I had to work through the problems of interpreting an intimate performance with my experience of observing it through a computer screen. A loss of the congregational gathering Athey's performances usually command, this is not the ideal way to experience this kind of work. Athey's work demands your physical presence. Not least in this work, the sonic element that Athey talked so passionately about developing here (especially the charisma and imploding voice of the artist resonating through performance space) becomes significantly subdued in recordings of the works. All of these powerful elements that enhance his ritualistic and often drawn out processes are contravened through the documented experiences. However, through considering the interchangeable witness roles presented by eyewitness and hearsay witness positions, I have to demonstrate the intersubjective communication at play in witnessing. To put it differently, while the sensory experience is important, the documentation still enables an exploration of witnessing these works, that serves as a model for intersubjectivity directed towards understandings. Works such as these, and their second or first-hand reception, can be utilised to raise questions about how people come to be. In this case how Athey has evolved into the role he now occupies as performer that requires his audience to bear witness (whether as eye witness or as hearsay witness) to his painful truths.

**Chapter 5**

**Crisis: Ulay's *Auto-Polaroids* and the Ethics of Reflecting and Witnessing Pain**



**Fig.22 – Ulay, *GEN. E.T. RATION ULTIMA RATIO*, 1972, Polaroid type 107, 10.8 x 8.5cm, courtesy of the artist and MOT International, London and Brussels.**

## Etymology of CRISIS

From Ancient Greek *κρίσις*

From Webster's unabridged dictionary: *To separate to see*

**a.** *The point of time when it is to be decided whether any affair or course of action must go on or be modified or terminate; the decisive moment; the turning point.*

*A crucial or decisive point or situation; a turning point.*

*An unstable situation, in political, social, economic or military affairs, especially one involving an impending abrupt change.*

**(psychology)** *A traumatic or stressful change in a person's life.*

**(drama)** *A point in a drama at which a conflict reaches a peak before being resolved.*

## Introduction

Photographs state the innocence, the vulnerability of lives heading towards their own destruction, and the link between photography and death haunts all photographs of people.

— Susan Sontag, *On Photography*

I wrote ‘generation *ultima ratio*’ inserted a T between ‘gene’ and ‘ration’ and dotted either side of the E and T. Part of the phrases comes from a French anarchist slogan ‘*ultima ratio regum*’ [‘The Last Resort of Kings and Common Men’]. It was tattooed onto my forearm, along with a crest. Shortly after getting the tattoo, I located a plastic surgeon, who worked in a hospital in Haarlem. I showed him the tattoo and asked him if he could remove it. He asked me why I had done it if I wanted it taken away –and I replied that I had done it *precisely* to remove it, and to preserve it. He thought it was a crazy idea but agreed to do the procedure. I made an appointment, and four weeks after the tattoo was made, the transplant took place. I bought a 4- by 5-inch Polaroid camera, which was placed on a tripod behind me. They gave me a local anaesthetic, just on the arm that was being operated on. A nurse assisted the surgeon, another nurse assisted me, changing the film for each shot....

— Ulay interviewed by Dominic Johnson, *The Art of Living: An Oral History of Performance Art*, 2015

Photography is a second skin for me. Analog photography was an extension of my body. With Polaroid in particular, the seduction was its extremely social nature. It was a tool for social interaction. The magic of processing in sixty or ninety seconds allows you to show the photo right away or give it to someone, which becomes an opening to something further. Usually with analog photography, and more so today with digital photography, you take something away. Polaroid is the opposite: Polaroid is about sharing. It transforms the relationship between photographer and subject.

— Ulay, *ULAY with Alessandro Cassin interview, Brooklyn Rail Magazine*, 2011

My first encounter with Ulay’s work GEN. E.T RATION ULTIMA RATIO was a result of a lecture presentation given by the performance scholar, Dominic Johnson, which presented a rare occasion to see these images. The presentation precedes the publication *The Art of Living*, which Johnson interviewed Ulay in Amsterdam some time before the event at which I was present. I was struck by this particular image due to the radical use of tattooing, its removal and the subsequent preservation of skin graft as a relic. As an individual who has tattoos, I recalled my first encounter of getting one at the age eighteen, as an act of rebellion and adamant way to boldly announce that I too could brandish my body with words – a very commonplace typical approach by teenagers and young adults, void of any political meaning in my case, but perhaps a small act of rebellion and what I believed was individual expression, a painful one at that. Whilst tattoos can now be removed through costly laser removal techniques, Ulay’s work was created over four decades ago, at time when mark-making with tattoos meant permanence. Ulay’s gesture subverts this permanence and comments on the negative history of tattoos, that were historically used for separation and marginalisation. This brings to mind tattooing of Jewish prisoners by Nazis, the branding of slaves moved across the Black Atlantic giving privilege to certain racist ideologies and inherently gendered discriminations, which usually go side by side. Importantly, this work is representative of the intersections of ethics, aesthetics and activism, in so far as in depicting so vividly the opening up of the body through the action of cutting, which, in

turn, accompanies the perception and feeling of physical pain, manifested as a transferable experience of pain. Scholar, Veena Das appropriates Wittgenstein's example of how it is conceivable that 'one person should have pain in another person's body'<sup>344</sup>, to postulate that 'the experience of pain cries out for this response of the possibility that my pain could reside in your body and that the philosophical grammar of pain is an answer to that call.'<sup>345</sup>

— Jareh Das, reflections on Ulay, 2015-16

In this chapter, *Crisis: Ulay's Auto-Polaroids and the Ethics of Reflecting and Witnessing Pain*, I establish a relationship between ethics and the experiences of witnessing that arises from engaging with pain-performances documented through polaroids. The subtitle also includes the phrase 'Ethics of Seeing', a phrase coined by the art historian, Tímea Andrea Lelik, who uses it to describe Uwe Laysepien's (known as Ulay) oeuvre as one that is 'a lifelong commitment to bringing ethics into a conversation with his photographs'.<sup>346</sup> Ulay has repeatedly stated that 'aesthetics without ethics is cosmetic'<sup>347</sup>, which can be taken as an approach to art-making that is both critical of the role of an artist and the society in which he or she exists. His artworks affirm the role both art and artists inhabit in dealing with the ethical issues of the day that might include conflicts, wars, climate change, natural disasters, alongside the marginalisation of individuals that leads to racial, gender and class inequalities. Ulay deconstructs his own body into fragments only to recompose it to form a hybrid identity. Central to the role of the body in his works are explorations that deal with pain, love, and wisdom. As curator Maria Rus Bojan observes 'his works revolve around pain, love and the transgression of limits through actions, performances, and photographic work that articulate a radical semiotic whilst at the same time, asserts and re-asserts the body's infinite capacity to produce meanings; and he continues, 'Ulay sublimates the idea of self-transformation of the body in all its hypostasis of becoming.'<sup>348</sup>

Ulay's work contributes to my inquiry into how pain is communicated and historicised, thus witnessed and experienced as he used Polaroid photography to create evidence-based material images documenting intimate performances carried out in the 1970s.

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<sup>344</sup> Veena Das, "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain," cited in Yuchen Wu, Y. "Who is in Pain? The transforming of symbol in performances of Marina Abramović," *Performance Research*, (London: Routledge, 2009), doi: 10.1080/13528160903552972

<sup>345</sup> Veena Das, "Language and Body: Transactions in the Construction of Pain," 2009, doi: 10.1080/13528160903552972

<sup>346</sup> Tímea Andrea Lelik, "Face Forward: Ulay's Portraits" in *Whispers: Ulay on Ulay* (Amsterdam: Valiz Foundation, 2014), p.149.

<sup>347</sup> Dominic Johnson, "An Interview with Ulay" in *The Art of Living: An Oral History of Performance Art* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2015), p. 17.

<sup>348</sup> Maria Rus Bojan, *Ulay – Body of Pain, Body of Love, Body of Wisdom* press release <http://gnyppgallery.com/ulay/pressrelease.php>



The polaroid projects of Ulay often document private, self-inflicted acts and pain-performances. These photographs have recently been shown in several survey exhibitions of his oeuvre in Frankfurt, Rotterdam, and most recently Dundee. A major publication, *Whispers: Ulay on Ulay* (2014), has also reproduced these images, furthering engagements with the works. Central to this chapter is the role of the photographic medium in contributing to the continuation and historicisation of pain-performances enabled by documentation. I analyse three early *Auto-Polaroids* by Ulay; *GEN. E.T RATION ULTMA RATIO*, (1972, **Fig.22**), *Diamond Plane* and *Bene Agere (In Her Shoes)* (1974). All demonstrate how one might both bear witness and further the experience of pain-performances. By using the term ‘evidence-based’ here I mean that these very images substantiate actions that have pushed the body to its limits and they are physical evidence that extreme actions have occurred. They also serve as proof for the expressions of personal truths. They can be read as non-verbal communicative tools, which have the potential to connect the performing body to its present and future audience. These polaroids provide an insight into Ulay’s private world. Within this world he exposes the vulnerabilities of the male subject in instances of loss, grief, and conflict. I argue that he presents a body in crisis, following the etymology of the word as meaning ‘to separate to see’.<sup>349</sup> I explore how Ulay’s *Auto-Polaroids* act as forms of witness, as material objects that allow viewers of his work bear witness to intimate acts of loss, grief, and protest. I am interested in the role of technology here and argue that *Auto-Polaroids* expresses immediacy and an anti-aesthetic nature. Ulay’s use of analogue photography in the early 1970s, signals the beginnings of technological transformations in photography at a time when images were first capable of being captured, produced, and shared instantly. Ulay however, subverts this sharing quality of the polaroid by turning the camera lens to himself, and controlling the exchange and dissemination of these highly personal images, a point I will expand on later.

Ulay’s lifelong commitment to ethical issues began with his explorations into his identity using his body as subject, and later extended into ethics concerning others. This meeting of ethics and aesthetics is framed within and borne from the aftermath of the Second World War. The post-war period was a time when artists were unified in acknowledging what John Armitage identifies as ‘the resounding lack of empathy or innate “pity” regarding humanity, positing the notion that contemporary art instead, offered a figurative and metaphorical analogue to literal terror’.<sup>350</sup>

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<sup>349</sup> The etymology of crisis defines it as the point of time when it is to be decided whether any affair or course of action must go on or be modified or terminate; the decisive moment; the turning point. A crucial or decisive point or situation; a turning point. An unstable situation, in political, social, economic or military affairs, especially one involving an impending abrupt change. To separate to see.

<sup>350</sup> John Armitage, “Art and Fear: an introduction,” *Art and Fear*, 2003, Continuum, London, p. 22.

Armitage, in reading, Paul Virilio, goes on to expand how contemporary art offers more evidence of the gaping wound left by experiences of the Second World War.<sup>351</sup> Thus a generation of Post-War artists reflected on its aftermaths and affect which they responded to by creating politically charged artworks.

Ulay is most renowned for his collaborative performances with Marina Abramović, who he met by chance in Amsterdam in 1976. They began working collaboratively together for over a decade. This culminated in their seminal final performance *The Great Wall Walk* (1988).<sup>352</sup> This marked the end of an intense professional and personal relationship. Abramović's status rose to celebrity-like level in the decades that followed, whilst Ulay largely remained out of public view, until recently. Critic and curator Maria Rus Bojan identifies this as a reaction to an inability to cope with the potential institutionalisation of his private life made possible through their collaborations. Ulay and Abramović's joint works form some of the most iconic examples of performance art at its challenging, due to their radical and equal commitment to the duration, hardship, and endurance of their collaborations. Their actions were unrehearsed, unscripted, and pushed their bodies to their limits. Ulay and Abramović shared everything during this period, blurring the boundaries between personal, private and public. Their work revealed the materiality of lived experiences, nomadic encounters, and, importantly, the immediacy of witnessing their works live. They were able to create concrete situations for liveness to be encountered, collapsing time through exaggerated and repetitive actions that contributed to making whatever space they performed and inhabited highly intimate. Their performing bodies fused into one. Their work collapsed gendered separations. They were able to domesticate the spaces they inhabited by creating a situation where the real, raw, confrontation between two bodies could be experienced and felt, in the context of a developing Western capitalist media, where new technological advancements were making it increasingly difficult to trust the veracity of representations of human encounters.

Ulay's solo practice prior to his collaborations with Abramović are not widely known. There has been little mention of this side of his practice in performance art scholarship. This largely due to his withdrawal from public view and his resistance to the commodification of his early works. *Whispers: Ulay on Ulay*, (2014) is the first monograph on his life-work. It contributes to readdresses this oversight. It is the most extensive critical overview of his life's work to date and brings together varied critical voices in the form of scholarly texts, interviews and accounts

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<sup>351</sup> Ibid.

<sup>352</sup> *The Great Wall Walk* by Ulay/Abramović began on March 30<sup>th</sup>, 1988 and ended on June 28<sup>th</sup> that same year. Ulay/Abramović began at opposite ends of the Great Wall of China, met at the middle and symbolised the end of their relationship as lovers and collaborators.

by Ulay, alongside other artists, academics, art historians and friends. His solo works are compelling examples of an individual's single-handed dedication and even obsessive desire to capture the body's nuanced existence. Check from above for repetition

Ulay's work has been written about extensively in relation to his collations with Marina Abramović. Thomas McEvilley discusses it in terms of art, love, and friendship in *Ulay: The First Act* (1994), and *Art, Love and Friendship: Marina Abramović and Ulay – Together and apart* (2010). Kathy O'Dell explores their collaborations in the essay "My Mirror," published in *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s* (1998). Their work is explored in relation to themes of gender and artistic collaboration in Candice M. Greathouse's *Gender and the Collaborative Artist Couple*.<sup>353</sup> Recently, Dominic Johnson's important publication, *The Art of Living: An Oral History of Performance* (2015), includes an interview with Ulay. However, there is little discussion of Ulay's solo works. Johnson cites Mechthild Fend's *Emblems of Durability: Tattoos, Preserves and Photographs* (2009) as the only scholarly article on Ulay.<sup>354</sup> Alongside these works, a recent publication edited by Maria Rus Bojan and Alessandro Cassin, entitled, *Whispers: Ulay on Ulay* (2014) explores the artist's oeuvre to date, and Amelia Jones's recent paper, 'Individual Mythologist': *Vulnerability, Generosity and Relationality in Ulay's Self-Imaging* (2016), considers Ulay's work in relation to his lifelong explorations of vulnerability and the self.

This chapter focuses on *Auto-Polaroids* created between 1972-4 and seeks to contribute to furthering recent scholarship on Ulay's solo practice, which I consider here in relation to witnessing through documentation, that is, through photography. I am interested in exploring Ulay's polaroids identified in what Amelia Jones describes as:

Performative and photographic work that engages later viewers as collaborators as well, by opening his body/image to the relationality of interpretation and identification. Ulay allows us later viewers—or, more accurately, given the physicality of his work, *experiencers*—to "complete" the meaning of his offering, opening him through the embodied image to the vicissitudes of our desires. Just as he is "ephemeral," so are we (we are never complete within ourselves).<sup>355</sup>

How do we, as belated viewers of Ulay's *Auto-Polaroids* engage in the collaborative completing

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<sup>353</sup> See Candice M. Greathouse, "Gender and the Collaborative Artist Couple," Thesis, Georgia State University, 2014, [http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/art\\_design\\_theses/168](http://scholarworks.gsu.edu/art_design_theses/168)

<sup>354</sup> see Johnson, *The Art of Living*, p. 291.

<sup>355</sup> Amelia Jones, "Individual Mythologist: Vulnerability, Generosity and Relationality in Ulay's Self-Imaging," in ed. Sophie Berrebi, and Hans Folkerts, *Stedelijk Studies issue #3 "The Place of Performance,"* 2016, <http://www.stedelijkstudies.com/journal/individual-mythologist-jones>.

of the works Jones speaks of? Does witnessing through photographs and at a distance still allow an intimate experience of Ulay's self-identity acts? I want to answer this by arguing that the absence of being able to physically touch these palm-sized images creates a different kind of affective and reflective bearing witness. I explore this through the discussions that unfold in 'Documenting the Live: Camera as Witness', *GEN.E.T. RATION ULTIMA RATIO*, and 'Performing Pain and the Camera' with *Diamond Plane and Bene Agere (In Her Shoes)*. I argue throughout this chapter is challenged by the artist as he subverts the notion of lens-gazing-outwards through the directing it on his body. I begin with a general discussion of Ulay's *Auto-Polaroids*, before focusing on the camera as witness in *GEN.E.T. RATION ULTIMA RATIO*, and then examining performing pain and the camera in the both *Diamond Plane* and *Bene Agere (In Her Shoes)*.

### 5.1 Ulay's *Auto-Polaroids*



**Fig.23 – Ulay, *S'he*, 1972, Auto-Polaroids from the series *Renias sense*, courtesy of the artist and MOT, London.**

The phenomenological theory of 'acts,' espoused by Edmund Husserl, Maurice Merleau-

Ponty and George Herbert Mead, among others, seeks to explain the mundane way in which social agents constitute social reality through language, gesture, and all manner of symbolic social signs. Though phenomenology sometimes appears to assume the existence of a choosing and constituting agent prior to language (who poses as the sole source of its constituting acts), there is also a more radical use of the doctrine of constitution that takes the social agent as an object rather than the subject of constitutive acts. When Simone de Beauvoir claims, “one is not born, but, rather, becomes a woman,” she is appropriating and reinterpreting this doctrine of constituting acts from the phenomenological tradition. In this sense, gender is in no way a stable identity or locus of agency from which various acts proceeds; rather, it is an identity tenuously constituted in time—an identity instituted through a stylized repetition of acts. Further, gender is instituted through the stylization of the body and, hence, must be understood as the mundane way in which bodily gestures, movements, and enactments of various kinds constitute the illusion of an abiding gendered self.’

—Judith Butler, *Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory*, 1988

*Auto-Polaroids* is a term coined by Ulay to describe turning the camera onto his own body to shoot images with a hand-held camera and without flash. In an interview for Brooklyn Rail, he states:

As I began using the Polaroid camera, mainly pointing it at myself—a practice I called auto-Polaroid—I immediately discovered its performative element. I performed in front of the camera, giving priority to the resulting still image. These were intimate actions, carried out in the absence of a live audience, ephemeral in nature, yet arrested in time. At one point I realized that I could have gone on doing this all my life.<sup>356</sup>

With *Auto-Polaroids*, Ulay illustrates a radical and experimental exploration into the concept of identity, its multiplication, dispersion, and disappearance. He transforms the concept of the split-self by taking on multiple identities in a quest for self-discovery. In doing so, he demonstrates the failures faced when trying to integrate aspects of the self and others into a unified whole. This self-facing and self-directing subject, in Jungian terms, creates an encounter that leads to the reevaluation of the ego.<sup>357</sup> Viewers of these works engage in an ethical dialogue with the body through the ways they reveal its hidden signifiers. They explore how identity formation occurs.

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<sup>356</sup> Alessandro Cassin, ULAY, *Brooklyn Rail*.

<sup>357</sup> In his book, *Man and His Symbols* (1964), Carl Jung describes the self and its relationship to the ego. He states we can look at the ego from the viewpoint of the self, such that we can gain an objective understanding of the nature of the ego. This includes its claim to be our identity, its sense of distinction and pre-eminence over the psyche’s other functions, its preferences and tastes, its quests for personal growth and mastery, and its self-centred perspective (which is not a bad thing but rather a vital standpoint for our focus and protection). See, Carl Jung, *Man and His Symbols* Turtleback Books; School & Library ed. edition (1964), p.18.

[https://monoskop.org/images/9/97/Von\\_Franz\\_Luise\\_Marie\\_Jung\\_Gustav\\_Carl\\_Man\\_and\\_His\\_Symbols\\_1988.pdf](https://monoskop.org/images/9/97/Von_Franz_Luise_Marie_Jung_Gustav_Carl_Man_and_His_Symbols_1988.pdf)

Alongside this, these works demonstrate the instabilities of fixed notions of identity as Ulay captures how easy it is to assume multiple identities, something that is demonstrated in *S'he* (1972), also from his *Renaissance* series (**Fig.23**). These themes were extensively explored through the transgressing, subverting, and queering of his gender. Furthermore, in his relationship to his own body (that he cites as the 'medium par excellence'), Ulay continues to question its status through distorting, self-shaping and self-mutilating, which is then documented, thus serving as a way for images to communicate about the body in a non-verbal way.

*Auto-Polaroids* explores intimacy within performance as the camera bears witness to private acts in a context that abandons staging. The capturing of the rawness and immediacy of acts presides over creating a beautiful image, although capturing the vulnerabilities of the male subject in this way might be viewed as possessing beauty through an emancipation of prescribed heteronormative images that hide weaknesses in the masculine subject. Ulay's images constitutes what feminist scholar Peggy Phelan identifies as 'that which is different from the act itself, serving as fragmentary bit of information that allows audience to build a framework that contextualises performance in general'.<sup>358</sup> These polaroids, which I view as palm-sized fragmentary utterances of Ulay's life, have the potential for connecting to the methodological and, at times, obsessive ripping apart that the artist undergoes to expose homogenised notions of the self. They reveal an unstable identity politics pertaining to wider concerns of belonging, becoming, and transformation through pain-performances.

Photography has played a fundamental role in contributing to performance documentation, which has led to theorisations about how photographs double as forms of witness. Sontag is useful to consider here in relation to Ulay's images as she reminds us 'how photographs alter and enlarge our notions of what is worth looking at and what we have a right to observe'. She adds, 'They are a grammar and, even more importantly, an ethics of seeing and are the most grandiose result of the photographic enterprise which give us the sense that we can hold the whole world in our heads - as an anthology of images.'<sup>359</sup> The medium has historically and continues to serve as a witnessing tool. It renders the materialisation of 'evidence-based' documents, capturing injustices against individuals that allow them to speak for themselves. This is a possibility that is increasingly unfolding through the increased possibilities of sharing through digital platforms.<sup>360</sup>

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<sup>358</sup> Susan Sontag, *On Photography*, Rosetta Books, LLC, First electronic edition, New York (2005), p. 1, <http://www.lab404.com/375/readings/sontag.pdf>.

<sup>359</sup> Ibid.

<sup>360</sup> See "A Discussion on the Subject of Intimacy in Performance, and an After forward," in Maria Chatzichristodoulou and Rachel Zerihan eds., *Intimacy Across Visceral and Digital Performance*, London: Palgrave MacMillan (2012), p. 144.

Debates centred on how performance documentation is accessed and distributed – filming, photographing, and sharing via mobile phones, social media and the internet, for example – is often out of the artist’s control, leading to a complex entanglement of intention, perception, and the reception of works.<sup>361</sup> Ulay performed in front of the camera and in private to create an intimate space of acts of self-experimentation, self-exploration, and self-expression. These intimate acts captured and experienced as palm-sized images operate at several levels. Paul Lowe observes in his essay *The Forensic Turn: Bearing Witness and the ‘Thingness’ of the Photograph*, that they ‘are both visual records of material things in the world, yet also a thing in themselves, with their own material qualities, thus possessing a dual ‘thingness’ with the material presence of the thing therefore amplified by the material presence of the photograph.’<sup>362</sup> These personal archives have now entered into the public sphere, through the distribution of these images by the artists, their estates, or through art institutions, commercial galleries and the art market.

As mentioned in the introduction to this chapter, Ulay began using polaroid photography during his time as a representative for the company. This gave him access to the medium and enabled the development of this highly personal photographic language. For Ulay, polaroids were both a tool for self-exploration and experimentation, and a way of getting underneath his skin as a way to ‘search for his true identity.’<sup>363</sup> Ulay’s works existed a decade before the discourse on performativity put forward by scholar, Judith Butler in *Gender Trouble* (1990). In an interview for Big Think she states:

When we say that gender is performed, we usually mean that we have taken on a role; we are acting in some way...To say that gender is performative is a little different...For something to be performative means that it produces a series of effects. We act and walk and speak and talk that consolidate an impression of being a man or being a woman...we act as if that being of a man or that being of a woman is actually an internal reality or simply something that is true about us. Actually, it is a phenomenon that is being produced all the time and reproduced all the time.<sup>364</sup>

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<sup>361</sup> See Wolfgang, U. *Der Kreative Mensch*, 2016, where Ulrich is interested in how the art historian, with his historical knowledge, traces the development of the claim to creativity from the privilege of an intellectual elite to Beuys and social-democracy, then to the constraints of the society. Somewhere between lyricism and expression, painting and music should be creative, but this imperative toward creativity is a challenge for many. The need for creative techniques is correspondingly high; inspiration is sought wherever it may come from, even commodities advertise it and from art you do not expect great masterpieces, but a creative atmosphere.

<sup>362</sup>Paul Lowe, “The Forensic Turn: Bearing Witness and the Thingness of the Photograph” cited in Liam Kennedy and Caitlin Patrick eds., *The Violence of the Image: Photography and International Conflict* (I. B. Tauris, 2014), p. 229.

<sup>363</sup> Ulay has discussed how turning the camera on himself allowed a ‘turn’ inwards, into his German identity, post-War upbringing and loss of his parents, lack of an extended family and siblings. See, Rus Bojan, *Whispers*, 23.

<sup>364</sup> See Judith Butler, *Your Behavior Creates Your Gender*, video, Big Think, YouTube, 6 Jun. 2011, 0:27”.

Butler's observations on the performativity of gender is one Ulay began to explore privately in the 1970s Ulay by taking these polaroids. He adopted a radical approach to thinking about constructions of the self, and the wider politics of such acts (pertaining to gender and the societal constructions that inform its separations). In introducing of the term *Auto-Polaroids* to his photographs, Ulay uses this title to encompass the immediacy of the action of turning the camera on himself which resulted in creation of thousands of images, now controlled by the artists as a personal archive. For Ulay, the polaroid camera's invention was a way to capture an unmediated image, one that was immediate and without prior preparation. This immediacy allowed him to seek, explore, challenge, and contest the overarching identity politics that began with him turning the camera on his body and later extended to groups that were on the fringes of society, such as transsexuals, anarchists, and other non-conformists. In using polaroids this way he sought to explore what he describes as a quest for introducing ethics into his practise. Other artists have used polaroid's immediacy as a tool for creatively subverting its technological qualities, manipulating the film surface, as we observe in the works of Lucas Samaras and mass everyday capturing and sharing in Andy Warhol's approach. Ansel Adams played with grandeur scale of the American West in its miniature frame, whilst the Great Depression documentarian Walker Evan used it in capturing the signs of the times. The curator, Rose Lee Goldberg introduced the term *performed photography* in her influential study on performance art since 1960 in relation to Cindy Sherman's self-portraits of the late 1970s, and observes how 'as viewers, we find ourselves in private performance, which is, however, only partially transmitted.'<sup>365</sup>

The popularity of polaroids comes from their convenience. They are so easily produced that they instantly capture a moment. Furthermore, they fit into the palm of a hand. They are to be shared, passed around, and touched. In Ulay's work, however, the sharing and touching characteristic of this medium is more metaphoric than literal, especially as these images have only been shared publicly many years after their creation. They offer up the potential to touch the viewer, beyond the visual, in visceral ways. They have an assertiveness which one can liken to how writer and film-maker, Chris Kraus describes emotion in relation to femininity:

Emotion is "just so terrifying," she writes, "the world refuses to believe that it can be pursued as discipline, as form. Analysing vulnerability is not the same as enacting it; describing positions of pain and longing isn't an admission of powerlessness but an act of assertion," a way of saying, this female consciousness can hold these states of pain and longing as well.<sup>366</sup>

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<sup>365</sup> RoseLee Goldberg, *Performance: Live Art 1909 to the Present* cited in Matthias Ulrich, ed., *Ulay Life-Sized*, exhibition catalogue (Schrin Kunsthalle Frankfurt: Spector Books, 2017), p. 75.

<sup>366</sup> Leslie Jamison, "This Female Consciousness: On Chris Kraus," *The New Yorker*, <http://www.newyorker.com/culture/cultural-comment/this-female-consciousness-on-chris-kraus>.



Photographs serve as material proof that certain events have occurred, although the events captured through this medium constitute fragmentary remains that can never (re)present the live experience. However, subsequent forms of dissemination can broaden the audience of a work. At a time when we share digital images continually, image sharing has become fleeting, immediate and easily experienceable. Digital sharing might be viewed as a less personal exchange and something that obliterates the need or use for physical photographs. One might argue, however, that this reproductive element achieved through digital dissemination is not entirely negative or detrimental to artists, as it has had led to the recognition, re-historicizing, and revisiting of experiences of past-performance work that might otherwise have been forgotten. The limitations of such exchanges, facilitated through the internet, has also led to audiences extending beyond initial sites of live performance, challenging notions of time and space and extending the live experience beyond the original sites of performance, furthering discourses around virtual behaviour and intimacy across digital platforms and how this might contribute to future of performance art. There is evidently a materiality in the live experience of being present to witness a performance that cannot be grasped in viewing documentation. Scholars including Peggy Phelan have argued that documentation cannot replicate the original experience. There are elements of performance such as smells, coughs, sounds, and collective gazing that create what Andrew Quick highlights as ‘a place of concrete situations, where it can be encountered’.<sup>367</sup> He reframes Heidegger’s notion of place, as something carved out of the wilderness and dwelled upon. He views place as a kind of domesticated space, and performance operating as ‘a disorientation process for making known non-place that is not yet recognised, and relies on memories, feelings and emotions.’<sup>368</sup> Quick lays out how concepts of liveness disturb cultural notions of place, and in turn, how actions within the theatrical site operate by means of displacement and finally, how these actions can be seen to transgress the boundaries through which place is constituted. He specifically interrogates how place is associated with domestic space, as a space that maintains its autonomy and security through a barely concealed violence. Space relies on the maintenance of absolute limits (such as outside and inside, and public and private). Quick argues that live performance, with its emphasis on movement, upsets domestic space. It does so because such domestic spaces rely on stasis as their controlling mechanism. Through a close reading of the performance work by *Forced Entertainment* and *Desperate Optimists*, he reflects on the ways in which the theatre and theatricality operate as mechanisms to expose the limits of place and counters certain claims that it is only through an escape from the theatrical space that a critique

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<sup>367</sup> Andrew Quick, “Taking Place,” p. 68.

<sup>368</sup> Ibid.

of place might be located. In short, Quick argues that live performance emphasises specific conceptualisations of temporality. It does so because movement offers a radical re-thinking of representation, one that critiques the drive for autonomy that the domestic space and the nation state creates in order to exist. In the rest of this chapter I want to look at three specific works to consider how these polaroids complicate ideas about witnessing.

5.2 Documenting the Live: Camera as Witness in *GEN.E.T. RATION ULTIMA RATIO*

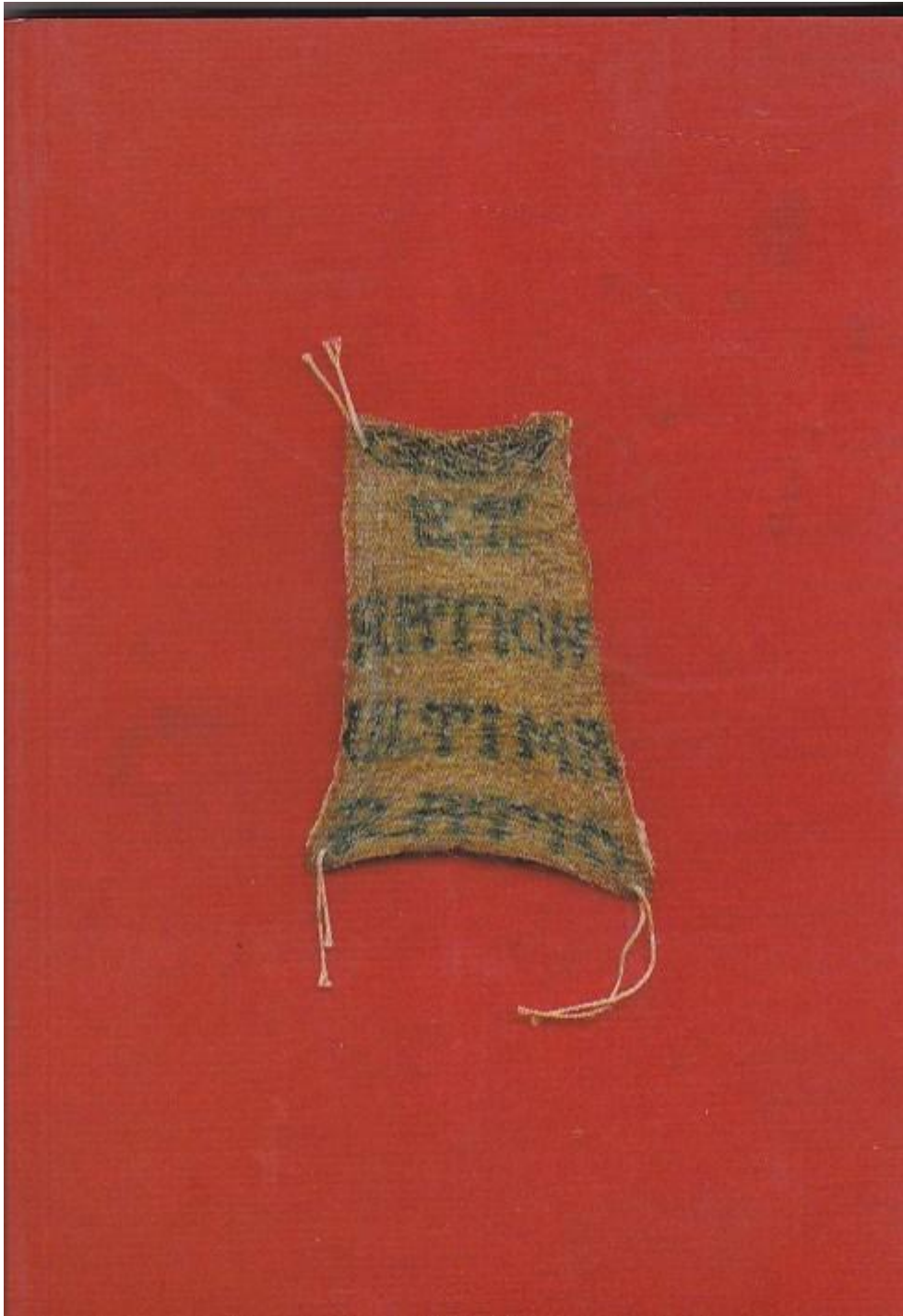


Fig.24 – *GEN. E.T. RATION ULTIMA RATIO*, 1972, detail of skin graft and removed tattoo, courtesy of the artist.

The letters 'GEN. E.T. RATION' are both the German and English word for gene as well as 'generation', a noun that can both signify procreation – as a process in which genetic information is transmitted – and an age group. It may thus allude to a generation of artists that turned the body into the material of their works and used it in radical ways in their performances. In 1970s Germany and for an artist who in other works explicitly dealt with the legacy of the Third Reich, the act of tattooing letters into a person certainly also resonated another 'ultima ratio', the national socialist final solution and the dehumanising practice of tattooing numbers into the underarms of concentration camp prisoners in order to permanently brand them. Seven polaroids recall the performance and were shown again as part of the exhibition *Fotogene/Nachbilder* (photogenes/afterimages) in Berlin in. They represent the act of tattooing, the cutting out of the piece of skin, the arm with the open wound that the severing of the dermis left, the bandaged arm, the piece of skin isolated and expanded, and finally a white thread on black ground, said to be a thread of the artist's DNA. But if this last photograph shows a thread meandering in the dark and densifying just off centre to what looks like a loose ball of wool, it could be any DNA or any thread. The fibre rather represents a fictional tie between the severed piece of tissue and the remainder of the artist's body. The photographs as such could themselves be called preserves, as they are stilled snapshots of life conserved by means of chemicals and narrate a process of inscription and transplantation in several stages, but they do not document any former presence of Ulay during the action. Focused on the limb where the tattoo was situated they come as fragments.

— *Mechthild Fend, Emblems of Durability: Tattoos, preserves and photographs, 2009*

Let the atrocious images haunt us [...] This is what human beings are capable of doing— may volunteer to do, enthusiastically, self-righteously. Don't forget.

— *Susan Sontag, On Regarding the Pain of Others, 2003*

I found it troublesome that photography would always stay on the surface of things, except its medical or microscopical variants, while I wanted to use the Polaroid photography was a means to investigate myself. So, I started to cut myself, to make piercings, transplanting. Once I even got a tattoo transplantation, which was a first-class surgery.

— *Ulay, Zoo Interview, 2012*

In contrast to many of the artists discussed in Chapter Two, the Literature and Performance Review that included Gina Pane and ORLAN, Ulay's work is unique. This is due, in part, to the fact that he was one of the first artists of the post-war generation to use self-taken polaroids as a personal-private approach for exploring and experimenting with his identity, outside of an art historical context. His work is often considered alongside a generation of artists who utilise acts of inflicting pain within their work although serving as a critical tool for exploring the body's limits as opposed to creating harmful consequences. As the art historian, Miguel Ángel Hernández Navarro observes:

To follow David Le Breton's conception of pain, we could compare pain in body art with what he calls 'laboratory pain'. For him, laboratory pain is a kind of 'society game', a simulation that leaves the individual free to retire from the scene at any moment, and to interrupt the experience without any harmful consequences. It would be pain without fear

and without suffering. So, in what way does suffering appear in these works? Or, as Le Breton asks: Is it possible, then, to speak of pain when anxiety, fear, surprise are eliminated?

Even though pain is a physical sensation, it is always accompanied by a mental reaction, suffering. In the real world there is no pain without suffering. Physical pain transforms the individual's self: painful information (sensory pain) implies personal perception (suffering pain). Like laboratory pain, body art eliminates the suffering associated with pain, as evident in the work of Chris Burden, Dennis Oppenheim, Marina Abramović or Ulay.<sup>369</sup>

In *GEN.E.T. RATION ULTIMA RATIO*, Ulay documents the process of tattooing the words 'generation ultima ratio' onto his lower left forearm and the process of having it surgically removed a month later. He does so by taking polaroids of him undertaking these processes and the removed skin graft was preserved and framed as both an artefact and as evidence of the performative action that occurred (**Fig.24**). These images depict the wounding of his flesh as a controlled form of pain comparable to Le Breton's laboratory pain described earlier Hernández Navarro. In cutting a piece of one's own flesh what is documented is 'a simulation that leaves the individual free to retire from the scene at any moment, and to interrupt the experience without any harmful consequences.'<sup>370</sup> These actions also correlate with Ulay's concerns around the hurts of the world, which he has explored extensively throughout his career. They stem from genetic modification to racism, to the hatred spawned by national socialism. They also extended to environmental devastation. All of these hurts are taken on as his own and manifested by his inscribed flesh.<sup>371</sup>

In Ulay's view, genetic modification can be used by racist and fascist agendas to categorise individuals based on their gene pool. A danger he felt needed to be confronted as a German national who was born in 1943. Ulay opens up his body through cutting as a way to directly represent the agony he felt when faced with this brutal history, rather than as remuneration for his German-ness. *GEN. E.T. RATION ULTIMA RATIO* is an early example of tattooing entering into a dialogue with art. He used this action as a radical response to his concerns at the time, which were the effects of advances in genetic sciences on the individual. He regarded these advances as threatening to the rights individuals had towards their bodies. For Ulay, gene manipulation posed a serious risk and threat that might contribute to discrimination and marginalization brought about when human rights and the genetic revolution collide. During this

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<sup>369</sup> Miguel A. Hernández Navarro, *(Re)Presenting pain in body art*, in *Pain: Passion, Compassion, Sensibility*, exhibition text (Science Museum London, 2004), p. 4.

<sup>370</sup> Ibid.

<sup>371</sup> In *Whispers: Ulay on Ulay*, the artist describes in detail the motivations of his early works including his Auto-Polaroids See *Whispers*, p. 88.

period, there was an absence of legal and ethical frameworks governing such experiments. In carrying out this action Ulay transformed his body into a site for experimentation. He did so to make visible the conflicting nature of medical advances and interventions on the human body. The work both questions the commodification of art and the commodification of body modification practices. The ephemeral nature of the polaroids, as evidence of action, means that they become works of art in their own right. Is tattooing and the removal that happens here commodified by way of the resulting photographs? How can a tattoo relic disrupt commodification? This gesture boldly suggests that only the artist has the right to intervene and dispose of his own body. This set of work by Ulay boldly declares to the viewer “if science can, so can I!”.

Through his polaroids, Ulay’s intimate explorations centre on representing realities of time as he experiences it. He explored gender and a dismantling of its fixed categorisations in *S’He* (1973), racial profiling and genetic modification in *GEN.E.T. RATION ULTIMA RATIO* (1972), and loss/grief in both *Bene Agere (In Her Shoes)* and *Diamond Plane* (1974) from the *Renaissance* series. These works resonate with artists of his generation who were anti-art, anti-aesthetic, and anti-establishment.<sup>372</sup> In creating these works the subject is always self-facing and self-directing. This is what one might consider, in Jungian terms, an encounter leading to the reevaluation of the ego. Within this framework, polaroids are a form of performance documentation that operate separately and as an alternative experience from the actual event. Phelan identifies this as a fragmentary dissemination of the live experience that allows audiences to build up a framework for contextualising performance in general. She further expands on this by arguing that ‘performance honours the idea that a limited number of people in a specific time/space frame can have an experience of value which leaves no visible trace afterwards.’<sup>373</sup> These works, alongside Ulay’s *Auto-Polaroids*, counteract Phelan’s argument as they were performed privately and there were no witnesses. However, they are the visible traces of performance now made public. [It’s not clear whether you agree or disagree with Phelan?]

Ulay’s work further complicates Phelan’s theorisation on the disappearance of performance. Actions such as tattooing, and skin removal leave a visible trace. They produce a fragmentary nature through the resulting polaroid. The work calls into question the very authority and power of the image, the action, its permanence, and its disappearance. These actions represent

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<sup>372</sup> In Thomas McEvelley’s book, *The Triumph of Anti-Art*, he traces the history of anti-art in the twentieth century starting with the Dadaist through Neo-Dada, conceptualism and performance. McEvelley sets out the intention and agendas of these artists, alongside a consideration for their real-life contexts.

<sup>373</sup> Phelan, P. *Unmarked*, p.146.

a moment of conflict or crisis when an individual's right to their body contests medical authority entangled with the artist's personal biography.<sup>374</sup> Bearing witness through photographs and their legitimising power of substantiation, Ulay's images subvert the notion of a lens gazing-outwards by directing it at himself. He complicates how witnessing occurs to raise important questions about how intimacy occurs. Accordingly, the dissemination and sharing of his works has been carefully controlled and regulated by the artist. [Strange way to finish a section?]

### 5.3 Subverting Tattoo's permanence

3.1.9. "Body Art" means: 1) tattooing, 2) branding and/or 3) body piercing. This definition does not include practices that are considered medical procedures by the state medical board; medical procedures with medical instruments shall not be performed in a body facility.

3.1.10. "Body Art Facility" means the location at which an individual performs one or more of the following for 1) tattooing, 2) branding, and/or 3) body piercing.

3.1.11. "Body Art Technician" means an individual who performs: 1) tattooing, 2) branding, and/or 3) body piercing.

3.1.14. "Branding" means a permanent mark made on human tissue by burning with a hot iron or other instrument.

3.1.15. "Cleaning" means the removal of visible soil, organic material or inorganic material from objects or surfaces and is usually accomplished by manual or mechanical means through water with detergents or enzymatic products.

3.1.16. "Client" means a person undergoing: 1) tattooing, 2) branding, and/or 3) body piercing.

3.1.17. "Contaminated" means the presence or the reasonably anticipated presence of blood or other potentially infectious material (OPIM) on an item or surface

3.1.18. "Contaminated Sharps" means any contaminated object that can penetrate the skin including, but not limited to tattoo needles, body piercing needles, and disposable razors.

3.1.20. "Critical Violations" are those items that are a priority to correct and are likely to cause an imminent health danger to the public and/or practitioner.

3.1.41. "Scarification" means injury of the skin involving scratching, etching, or cutting of designs to produce a scar on a human being for ornamentation or decoration.

3.1.42. "Scarification implement" means any instrument which intentionally alters human skin for the purpose of scarification.

3.1.48. "Tattoo" means: 1) An indelible mark made upon the body of another individual by the insertion of a pigment under the skin, and/or 2) an indelible design made upon the body of another individual by production of scars other than by branding. This includes cosmetic tattooing and permanent make-up.

—*Michigan Department of Health & Human Services Requirements for Body Art Facilities 2010*

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<sup>374</sup> Nazi foreign policy was guided by the racist belief that Germany was biologically destined to expand eastward by military force and that an enlarged, racially superior German population should establish permanent rule in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union. The Third Reich's aggressive population policy encouraged "racially pure" women to bear as many "Aryan" children as possible. Within this framework, "racially inferior" peoples, such as Jews and Gypsies, would be eliminated from the region forcefully. See Burleigh, M. *The Third Reich: A New History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000).

Throughout history, tattoos have been used as a form of social identification by various cultures and groups of people across the world.<sup>375</sup> The earliest forms of tattooing involved adorning the surface of the skin for ceremonial, ritualistic, and commemorative use. Later on, inscribing deep beneath the skin's surface became more commonplace. The commonality across these varied tattooing practices through history is its permanence and, until perhaps recently with the development of laser technologies, its removal was something that involved surgical intervention and other unconventional interventions on the tattooed part of the body. Body markings serve as group rituals that address the affirmations of marginal subcultural groups. In these practices, the body is posited as never fixed. It is always in the process of becoming through affective symbolic and phenomenological experiences. Importantly, tattooing also forms part of a visual language that the scholar and sociologist Victoria Pitts-Taylor identifies in her paper, *Visibly Queer: Body Technologies of Sexual Politics as an Aesthetics of Difference* (2000). This is an understanding of body modification that situates the body in both a moral and political struggle over what is and what is not allowed to be done to it.<sup>376</sup> Tattoos serve as a tool for individuals to modify their bodies, marking it in ways that could offer identification as part of subcultural movements, or for personal expression.

How might a tattoo express the agency of the body's movement between unmarked, marked, queer, visible, and invisible? Tattooing usually takes place in private and in *GEN.E.T. RATION ULTIMA RATIO*? traditional analogue photographs can be understood following what the art historian Mechthild Fend explores as playing an authoritative role as evidence due to their indexical quality [reference?]. In other words, the fact that they are a trace of an object's shadow. The photographs, in the case of *Auto-Polaroids*, serve as a trace of the now extinct tattoo and rather than the tattooist or surgeon's hand, they capture and freeze the moment of the tattoo's semi-permanence and its subsequent removal with the consequent photograph. As such the photographs constitute the only form of tangible proof of an action shrouded by its own mythology as there were no witnesses, except for the lens and the artist. Body art, as Amelia Jones reminds us, needs the photograph to confirm it has happened. The photograph needs the body event as an ontological 'anchor of its indexicality.'<sup>377</sup> The materiality of the photograph is

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<sup>375</sup> The etymological origin of the word tattoo is believed to have 2 major derivations: the first is from the Polynesian word "ta" which means "striking something," and the second is the Tahitian word "tatau" which means "to mark something." This word was introduced in Europe by the English explorer James Cook, who described the Polynesian technique of "tattooing" in his narrative of the voyage. See Filippo Pesapane and Gianluca Nazzaro et al, "A Short History of Tattoo," *JAMA Dermatol* 150, no. 2 (2014), p. 145. doi:10.1001/jamadermatol.2013.8860

<sup>376</sup> Victoria Pitts-Taylor, "Visibly Queer: Body technologies of sexual politics," cited in *In the Flesh: The Cultural Politics of Body Modification*, Palgrave McMillian US, p. 87.

<sup>377</sup> Amelia Jones, *Whispers*, p. 82.



important to consider here. A rectangular square of paper, light and shadow, a grainy image of ink on skin and its removal capture. This palm-sized imprint in a sharable form now exists as work of art. It can be confined to the archive, exhibition, or even a tattoo parlour in Amsterdam, where a print hangs to commemorate the context of where the original occurred.

A tattoos' permanence is intended as a lifelong imprint on the skin. Its removability was unlikely at the time when Ulay conceived this work. There was a belief in the singularity of the tattoo, with its strong link to a single and identifiable person, which still works when the tattooed body part is isolated (as can be observed in forensics). What Ulay demonstrates in a radical way through this work, and in light of a history where tattoos were used politically to mark prisoners of war in Nazi Germany, is that this particular tattoo becomes symbolic act of protest. It is a protest against the selection of people based on difference and in turn, the governing of such bodies. Ulay juxtaposes the permanence, materiality, and duration involved in tattooing as a subversive act. This questions the very notion of the ephemerality of performance, as his material evidence remains in his private possession as well as the images of this act, which confirms and validate the action without a witness.

### 5.31 Medical Aesthetics: Surgical procedures, Medical Gaze and the Skin

And the glorification of this medical gaze was also fostered by the invention of new tests and signs, or the belief that these signs and tests were new. These new tests and signs allowed the physician to gaze upon the naked body, to place the hand upon the heart, to listen with an instrument, to examine the urine of the patient. These new doctors “...criticized ... ‘false modesty, ...[and] ‘excessive restraint’  
New rules were invented that allowed the patient to be touched and prodded in the name of our culture's belief in the physicians' diagnostic wisdom.<sup>378</sup>

The needle takes a central role in the iconography of art and medical histories in conveying a perceptible visual embodiment of pain, healing, danger, and at times, pleasure and sensuality. Needle culture is broadly visible, and many cultures have used it for forms of identification for centuries.<sup>379</sup> The bod as a canvas has been a highly politicised surface since the 1960s. Here I want to build a comparison between Ulay and the work of the French artist, ORLAN, to explore radical forms of self-experimentation, protest/activism against bodily governance and the subsequent circulation of the imagistic documentation. ORLAN's performance *The Reincarnation of Saint-Orlan* (1990), is an important example of an artist's undergoing surgical

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<sup>378</sup> Michel Foucault, “Birth of the Clinic, An Archaeology of Medical Perception” cited in Lois Shawver, *Dictionary for the Study of the Works of Michel Foucault*, 1998, <http://postmoderntherapies.com/foucabc.htm>

<sup>379</sup> As far back as ancient Egyptian times, the bodily marking of prisoners was, and we still live with the devastating effects of marking prisoners of the holocaust in this way.

procedures as a radical form of self-experimentation. Her feminist work, as I discussed in the literature review, questions the patriarchal governance of female beauty through surgical interventions that were transmitted live to an audience. This allows for her work to re-present her body as a minified readymade, as she describes it in a radical approach to bodily representations.<sup>380</sup> In carrying out this physical transformation, ORLAN's body is no longer an ideal. It is freed from dominant conventions.

Ulay and ORLAN both used medically-informed performance to free their bodies from social constraints (Ulay from the legal and ORLAN from the patriarchal) and both reject pain's presence within their works. This rejection can be read as a quest to transcend normative bodily limits. Their work demonstrates that although emotions can be established as meaningful in language, bodily feelings such as pain are unstable, unpredictable, and unknowable to others. Their works undoubtedly produce painful images, viewable in the photographs that capture the immediate temporality of the artist's opening of their bodies in controlled and experimental ways. This pain-performance documentation serves as proof of their use of the body a test-site for transforming meanings of its identity. The adoption of medical aesthetics within pain-performances can be viewed as a form of controlled body craftsmanship and, I argue, serves as a 'somatization'. In other works, it expresses the mental as physical by rendering vulnerabilities and fragilities of the subject through manifestations in their living flesh and blood.<sup>381</sup> The result is a making visible of the legislative and ethical issues that compound the body's social, political, and cultural status. In this sense, the now familiar notion of "the personal is political" can be recast as "the corporeal is political". These works have a direct and observable lineage, influencing a younger generation of artists who now all contribute to the genre in contemporary performance described as 'medical performances.' In varied ways, artists including Marin O'Brien, Jamie Lewis Hadley, Carlos Martiel, and Ivo Tabar, all transfer medical and surgical practices into their aesthetic, often exploring modification as part of performance actions. Lewis Hadley explores his experience of medical testing, Martiel's bodily mutilations embodying post-colonial suffering, and Tabar's bringing of his experiences as a nurse into the performative. All of these artists demonstrate the potency and continued influence of medical aesthetics on performance art to this day. Bob Flanagan, Ron Athey and Franko B are also notable examples of an older generation of artists who use tropes of medicine within their work. Athey and Franko B, for example, continue repeatedly to use hypodermic needles and blood-letting in their live works, whereas Flanagan uses BDSM practices and merges them with the everyday experience of living with and treating

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<sup>380</sup> Stoddard, "Towards a Phenomenology of the Witness to Pain."

<sup>381</sup> See *Whispers*, p. 26.

CF. O'Brien, in contrast to Flanagan's masochistic presentation of his cystic fibrosis inhabited body, considers how the treatment and management of this illness manifests through drawing on the medicalised management of his body in his performances (as observed in the previous chapter).

In Ulay's art the skin, as a protective layer of the body, is opened up to reveal the living flesh of the body. The use of controlled pain in these masochistic acts confront us with our own mortality. They also reveal our attraction to it; however ambivalent this might be. Kathy O'Dell argues in *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s*:

we need to move beyond the fact of pain and examine the ways in which these artists' masochistic strategies push the limits of an implicit contract between performer and audience, and in doing so, we might be called upon to alter the circumstances of a work in order, for example to terminate the danger it poses to the artist, for example, or we might be required to relinquish something of our own in order to become part of a performance, or we could be forced to acknowledge that our attraction to an image of pain implicates us in a larger economy of power.<sup>382</sup>

Those masochistic contracts, she argues, have economic and legal dimensions that bind art-making to the social meaning that pain performed either publicly or privately, still enters into a complex interaction for the performer and witness of pain.<sup>383</sup> The image of *GEN.E.T. RATION ULTIMA RATIO* is one that reflects pain through its capturing of pain on the skin. In his works, as the scholar Amelia Jones identifies that the exchange between artist and audience is never complete, since we never feel we "have" him as an object of our curiosity, aesthetic interest or desire.<sup>384</sup> What we experience with these images are his hurts: inscribed primarily on flesh and, later, extending to the skin of the image and polaroid's surface. This skin-like analogy for the polaroid demonstrates what art historian Moa Goysdotter identifies as 'the erosion between outer reality and image reality by manual manipulation of polaroids'.<sup>385</sup> Goysdotter analyses polaroids by Lucas Samaras and Les Krims. Both of these artists transformed the bodies in their work into violent and mutilated images. They manipulated their polaroid prints with of wet dyes, using polaroids to create painterly-like surfaces. This is exemplified in Krims series,

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<sup>382</sup> Coco Fusco, 'On Kathy O'Dell's Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art, and the 1970s,' in Art: Editor's Choice, *Bomb Magazine* 65 (Fall 1998), <http://bombmagazine.org/article/5278/kathy-o-dell-s-contract-with-the-skin-masochism-performance-art-and-the-1970s>

<sup>383</sup> Ibid.

<sup>384</sup> Jones, "Individual Mythologist", *Stedelijk Studies* issue #3.

<sup>385</sup> Moa Goysdotter, *Impure Vision: American Staged Art Photography of the 1970s*, Lund: Nordic Academic Press, 2013, 154.

*Fictocryptokrimsographs* (1975), in which he poked and prodded the surfaces of the images. Samaras created *Transformation Photos* (1974), a series of nude self-portraits that turn into swirling, melting, and fluid body parts. Goysdotter rightly identifies Krims and Samaras as ‘challenging the non-interventionist view of what photography was supposed to be and also as mechanically reproducible images that transformed the photographic surface from being a window/mirror into being a place as real as the real world’.<sup>386</sup> I would argue, however, that in capturing his hurts on the body in *GEN.E.T. RATION ULTIMA RATIO*, in a direct and unstaged manner (without manipulation of the inherent qualities of the polaroid surface), Ulay’s works present painful images that introduce a strong impulse to touch and share through looking. In these deeply personal works, we can never really feel, touch or get as close to the corporeal body of the artist as we might want to. The polaroid, through its emulsion, becomes a metaphor for the skin of an object and is a physical image that continues to live on through our witnessing, and in a sense, is a gift from the artist through his mediated gaze extending his private actions to a very public experience.

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<sup>386</sup> Ibid.

5.4 Performing pain and the Camera: *Diamond Plane* and *Bene Agere (In Her Shoes)*



Fig.25 – Ulay, *Ben Agere (In Her Shoes)*, 1974, Courtesy of the artist



Fig.26 – Ulay, *Diamond Plane*, 1974, Auto-polaroid, courtesy of the artist and MOT International, London and Brussels

Performance scholar Yu-Chien Wu identifies ‘making a cut on the body’ as fitting with the rhetoric of modification around the world. This might be understood as how in opening up the

body by cutting it (intentionally or accidentally), this act signals not only the body's fragility, but also the historical development of how such an action is located within the social, cultural and political. Wu cites Renata Salec's understanding of cutting in two ways. The first is as an attempt to find in the body a place of some stable identity, as is the case with clitoridectomies, which are carried out across Asia, the Middle East and West, North and East Africa. The second, is that it represents a challenge for contemporary artists. They must work with the idea that a body is no more than a basis for an identity. Cuts represent the dilemmas our personal identities face as we confront circumstances external to our bodies.<sup>387</sup> In exposing his identity, its construction and dilemmas in this way, Ulay's has been a lifelong project of expressing vulnerabilities with body parts expressing the interrelations of hands and flesh, the touch absent and present doubling in his works as performative actions and acts of representation.

Ulay's works resonate with the identification of cuts as representative of personal conflicts, as observed in two works from 1974, *Diamond Plane* and *Ben Agere (In Her Shoes)*. Made two years after *GEN. E.T RATION ULTIMA RATIO*, both works directly relate to his break-up with his muse, collaborator, and lover at the time, Paula Françoise-Piso. In this section, I want to explore these two works in order to look consider self-inflicted pain that is documented to cope with loss and grief manifested as *Auto-Polaroids*.

Ulay documents intimate moments of heartbreak and the grief from the end of his Françoise-Piso's personal and professional relationship. In his collaborative working practices Ulay has always given himself over as an equal to his collaborators. With Françoise-Piso, he shared an intense relationship that merged both of their individualities in the works that ensued. In *S'he*, both appear in the image and the work is signed with the hybrid name PA-ULA-Y, giving both equal authorship of the works. This egalitarianism is one that Art Historian and Ulay expert, Maria Rus Bojan identifies as 'an essential feature of Ulay's collaborative works with all of his partners Françoise-Piso, Jürgen Klauke and Marina Abramović'.<sup>388</sup> He chooses this position to give himself and his ego over to his collaborative partners. In giving up his identity, one can argue, he is able to achieve a symbiosis with his collaborative partner. Nowhere is this more evident than in the extremely moving and seminal joint works of Ulay and Abramović. Their collaboration ultimately revealed and ended by demonstrating the power-play that long existed in

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<sup>387</sup> Yu-Chien Wu uses Renata Salec's essay 'Cut in the Body: From clitoridectomy to body art' to critically analyse the early works of Marina Abramović. See "Who is in Pain? The transforming of symbol in performances of Marina Abramović," *Performance Research* 4, no.4 (2009), pp. 69-73, doi: 10.1080/13528160903552972

<sup>388</sup> See *Whispers*, 2014, p. 26.

their seemingly equal partnering. After working with her, Ulay has spoken of Abramović as a fame seeking careerist, Abramović has spoken of the devastation of his infidelities and the difficulties of ‘enduring’ more in joint work, and in turn the resentment that she felt towards him.<sup>389</sup>

In *Ben Agere (In Her Shoes)*, Ulay captures various elements of a series of premeditated actions in a series of images. Firstly, a black and white image shows a man’s torso in long-sleeved shirt and trousers, holding a scalpel in his right hand. The second image is of a pair of boots. The third image focuses on the hand of the artist hand cutting his feet with a scalpel in order to fit into the shoes of his ex-lover. The final image is of him wearing the boots. Ulay made a cut on his foot to symbolically represent fitting into Françoise-Piso’s shoes (**Fig.25**). It represented an attempt to get closer to his lost lover, one that he can never achieve physically or psychically. *Diamond Plane* (**Fig.26**), in contrast, is an image depicting the torso of the artist. We see the lower half of his face but not his full expression as he turns slightly away from the camera, averting his gaze. Scanning down the image, he is bare chested against the backdrop of a tiled wall, which is perhaps a bathroom. Pinned to the left side of his chest is a miniature airplane. It is somewhere between the right and left lungs, in the middle of his chest slightly towards the left of the breastbone. This position is intentional and anatomically symbolic, representing the position of the heart inside. This aeroplane-shaped brooch is facing downward. It is both physically and symbolically piercing Ulay’s heart. The artwork is described in his book *Whispers* as an ‘auto performance’.<sup>390</sup> It tells the story of his love departing, emphasizing the immense physical and mental pain. In making public and documenting such intimate moments of the grief, pain, and loss that accompanies heartbreak, Ulay exposes a vulnerable male subject with the documentation of painful actions serving as a direct representation for the psychological trauma associated with losing a lover.

Ulay explains his motivations for making such work as driven by the need to feel himself better and to act on these emotions by performing them. This drive is not centred on hurting his body but rather on negotiating complex emotions in a controlled situation, and then documenting this process. He performed for the camera using it as a reflective gaze similar to a mirror. However, it is different, in that by creating these photographs the viewer is confronted with the artist’s body as the chosen subject of his gaze. This body-as-subject operates in a field of vision

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<sup>389</sup> See Ben Quinn, “Marina Abramović ex-partner Ulay claims victory in case about joint works,” *The Guardian* first published 21 September 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2016/sep/21/ulay-claims-legal-victory-in-case-against-ex-partner-marina-abramovic>

<sup>390</sup> Artwork caption in *Whispers*, 2014, p. 108

chosen by the artist. He guides our eyes to his now gazed-at-body which, in these works centres on specific body parts and the direct actions that have been carried out on them, such as piercing an aeroplane-shaped pin next to his heart and cutting his foot to fit into female shoes. The photographic medium can, therefore, function as a break away from the cycle of trauma and tragedy. It can provide a way of giving the event a proper witness, a catharsis, perhaps, that allows a space for the artist's actions to become real, not only for the artist but also for others who enter into a process of becoming witnesses to the survivor/artist rather than the actual event. The catharsis spoken of is meant here in the Aristotelian sense. It is not intended to rid the bearer of their emotion completely. Catharsis, considered as scholar Patrick Duggan identifies it, is a 'coming to know that allows the bearer to feel more or feel differently in the right circumstances, in a laboratory of pain, an idea I will return to below.'<sup>391</sup> Duggan further elaborates this in his analysis of catharsis and trauma. He writes:

To pathologies such bodily manifestations is to always see the same symptoms of trauma in everyone. It is to fail to bear witness to what else might be occurring in this return to flesh. It is a failure to hear something that may force us to rethink our own assumed (and sometimes correct) knowledge. It is the possibility of another type of listening and thus another response. Another hearing, a different response may open up unknown paths of unpredictable survival with others if we are open to hearing something different from the ordinary. We have to start listening to what may sound fictional or what may easily be discounted as impossible. By beginning with an openness in listening, in order to hear that which makes and undoes us.

Ulay's works inscribe this relation of feelings into his flesh and into our skin's psyche in a relational loop. These shifting identities are where we enact ourselves as the flesh of the world. In admitting vulnerability, and the inability hide it, there is strength. Amelia Jones identifies this as a radical act for a white European male, and to enact such vulnerability through repetitive rupturing of flesh, openings to otherness, self-enactment across gender and class, moves beyond what the world could accommodate, until very recently<sup>392</sup> The hurt body, as Ulay presents it to us in these polaroid images, is a body subjected to the gaze of the other, albeit being mediated, confirming that bodies do not develop in a vacuum. In these works that attempt, and fail to transcend bodily confines, Ulay demonstrates that one cannot think of the body as outside of the cultural and political that governs us all. In opening up his body in this way, by exposing it, he shares his vulnerabilities as a form of individual activism. These images are not just images of pain but also possess a 'pain of images' and as such, the viewer is confronted with an ethical

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<sup>391</sup> Patrick Duggan, "Performance 'Texts' as sites of witness" in *Trauma, Tragedy* (2012), pp. 85-114.

<sup>392</sup> Amelia Jones, "Individual Mythologist," *Stedelijk Studies issue #3*.



division of object and experience, divided into representation and affect. As Mark Ledbetter observes, it is ‘the body violated and broken, and not the body healthy, that provides transformative moments of ethical importance.’<sup>393</sup>

In his discussion about performance documentation, Phillip Auslander makes an important distinction between documentation as documentary and as theatre. According to Auslander, performances in the documentary category, which I view Ulay’s works as existing within, work differently. He states:

At least, to an extent, because they generally have a dual existence: they are framed as performances by being presented in galleries or by other means and there is an initial audience to which the performer assumes responsibility as well as a second audience that experiences the performance only through its documentation. But this difference is much less substantial than it may appear. Consider the status of the initial audience with respect to documentation. Whereas sociologists and anthropologists who discuss performance stipulate, like Bauman, that the presence of the audience and the interaction of performers and audience is a crucial part of any performance, the tradition of performance art documentation is based on a different set of assumptions. It is very rare that the audience is documented at anything like the same level of detail as the art action. The purpose of most performance art documentation is to make the artist’s work available to a larger audience, not to capture the performance as an “interactional accomplishment” to which a specific audience and a specific set of performers coming together in specific circumstances make equally significant contributions. For the most part, scholars and critics use eyewitness accounts to ascertain the characteristics of the performance, not the audience’s contribution to the event, and discussions of how a particular audience perceived a particular performance at a particular time and place and what that performance meant to that audience are rare. In that sense, performance art documentation participates in the fine art tradition of the reproduction of works rather than the ethnographic tradition of capturing events.<sup>394</sup>

Ulay’s polaroids are somewhat ambivalent when considered in relation to Auslander’s claim that performance art documentation is made to make the artist’s work available to a larger audience. For over four decades, these works have been preserved as part of a personal archive. They have re-emerged in solo exhibitions and with the publication *Whispers: Ulay on Ulay*. These mark a new introduction of Ulay’s work in public consciousness which has allowed for a certain demystification of his solo work. They give insight into a lifelong dedication to photography and performance art. Ulay has always identified himself as a nomad; he rarely makes public appearances and is not on social media. He continues to build on this personal archive. Rather than becoming hyper visible as an artist in the public eye, he continues to make work privately

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<sup>393</sup> Mark Ledbetter, “Victims and the Postmodern Narrative, or, Doing Violence to the Body: An Ethic of Reading and Writing,” cited in Asbjørn Grønstad, Henrik Gustafsson eds., *Ethics and Images of Pain* (Routledge Advances in Art and Visual Studies, 2012), p. xv.

<sup>394</sup> Phillip Auslander, “The Performativity of Performance Documentation,” *PAJ* 84 (2006), p. 10.

with a strong resistance to a highly commercial practice heavily influenced by the art market. Amelia Jones identifies this manner of working as a generosity in his performances, one where he ‘opens the gap between himself as a speaking/articulating/and making subject and the images and modes of embodiment we connect to as his audience and in which we have room to move, discover our own boundaries and also discover our own boundaries (or lack thereof) and our own modes of gendered/sexed embodiment.’<sup>395</sup> [Your own comment to finish this section?]

#### Conclusion: Towards an ethics of seeing and an absent witness

Our images remain beyond us, not to mention the embodied memories of those we have ‘touched’, which holds us, like a skin holds a bruise...

—Amelia Jones, *Ulay & Amelia Jones with an introduction by Maria Rus Bojan*,  
*Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, Jan 2015*

The relationship between pain and photography in Ulay’s *Auto-Polaroids* challenges the ephemeral nature of performance. It also contributes to the etymological relationship between the score (as action) or script (as documentation), when retelling of the performance as a live event and its documentation as secondary in this scenario. This relationship between act and representation continually undergoes questioning and transformation, further complicated by works that resist fixed categorisations. As an autodidact, Ulay deploys the phrase ‘Identity through change’ to signify not only the transformations afforded through making his body endure but highlighting importantly that the ‘Auto’ or ‘Self’ he refers to, as Jones observes, ‘can only occur through change and is never ending even through death.’<sup>396</sup> It is always a continual process. For images remain beyond us, Jones contends, not to mention the embodied memories of those we have ‘touched’, which holds us, like a skin holds a bruise. Ulay is grappling with both technology and the self through photographs that present his body as hand-hold and heart-hold sized images.

Ulay’s *Auto-Polaroids* represent a journeying into the self to discover his identity and sexuality documented over a period of six years.<sup>397</sup> A radical and experimental period where the artist explored his identity through self-mutilation, shape-shifting and distorting the masculine and feminine sides of his personality. Rus Bojan regards this as ‘symbolic of the tragic impasse

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<sup>395</sup> Amelia Jones from the recording of Amelia Jones’s key note at *Whispers: Ulay on Ulay book launch*, Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, January 2015.

<sup>396</sup> Amelia Jones, Vulnerability as Strength in “Individual Mythologist”, *Stedelijk Studies issue #3 “The Place of Performance,”* 2016, /

<sup>397</sup> See Cassin, *Whispers*, 88.

between the self and other, of platonic or romantic relationships, but also, that within the self that we can never fully cohere to.<sup>398</sup> The passionate love and eternal distance between selves is represented in Ulay's works, demonstrating that momentary illusion of the self we inhabit in relation to those around us. The results of this are extensive intimate polaroids, where the vulnerability and the assertiveness of owning one's body are presented. The context of these works is that of personal loss at a young age, which led to a quest for self-discovery, alongside the backdrop of post-WWII politics where, for Ulay, leaving Germany presented his only viable option for survival. This six-year project of the artist's explorations into his identity is also a technological exploration of polaroid photography merged with his bodily existence. The polaroid symbolically represents an extension of the artist's skin, a quest to find out what lies beneath; to unravel the complex political weight of normative identity politics and wider governance of individual bodies.

In the achievement of this political aim Ulay's work is aligned to Sophie Anne Oliver's reading of performance art as a discourse which:

Encourages us to consider more self-consciously the role of spectator as one which is also always complicit in and with the representation, forcing us to acknowledge the unavoidable ethical ambivalence of seeing the suffering of others. In this sense, performance art encourages a revised formulation of a spectatorial ethics, one that is not based only in the imposition of ideal or 'appropriate' responses.<sup>399</sup>

Alongside film and text sources, photographs are entwined in the historicising (as well as commercialisation) and establishing of proof that certain events have occurred within a specific spatiotemporal condition that informs wider art historical narratives. In a sense, photographs serve as material evidence, which, in this context of performance art, operates as 'the material witness'. The material witness is an operative concept proposed by artist-researcher and writer, Susan Schuppli, by which she means an entity (object or unit) whose physical properties or technical configuration records evidence of passing events to which it can bear witness.<sup>400</sup> Whilst Schuppli's project grapples with media artefacts that have emerged out of 'contemporary conflict and historical violence' operating on a macro-level, this chapter applies some of her critical

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<sup>398</sup> Rus Bojan, *Whispers*, p. 25.

<sup>399</sup> Sophie Anne Oliver, *Trauma, Bodies, and Performance art: Towards an Embodied Ethics of Seeing*, *Continuum* 24, no.1 (2010) pp. 119-129, doi: 10.1080/10304310903362775

<sup>400</sup> Susan Schuppli, *Forensic Media & the Production of Evidence*, MIT Press (forthcoming monograph), <http://susanschuppli.com/writing/material-witness>.

thinking by considering ‘how objects, in this case polaroid photographs of Ulay, might become agents of contestation between different stakeholders and truth claims.’<sup>401</sup> As art historian Mechthild Fend argues, much like fingerprints, analogue photographs owe their authoritative role as evidence to their indexical quality. In other words, to the fact that they are a trace of an object’s shadow.<sup>402</sup> We then can consider Ulay’s *Auto-Polaroids* as utterances that constitute the capturing of the taking of stances, creating alignments and constructing personas. Through such distortions, the work presents the body as an ideological construct and calls on the need to pay close attention to its distribution and function in the ‘performance of social functions.’<sup>403</sup> We can also speak then of Ulay’s works in terms of the performative, a term put forward by feminist theorist and philosopher Judith Butler that situates ‘social reality not as a given, but continually presents an illusion through language, gesture and various forms of symbolic social signs.’<sup>404</sup>

However, one must acknowledge that Ulay’s work began before there was a theorisation of these kinds of actions that now constitute the performative. In describing these works, which existed in private and long before the theorisation of performance and performativity was central to these actions, Ulay’s form of personal activism served as a way to contest and come to terms with his body’s identity alongside the social, political and technological changes. He is an artist notorious for defining his work on its own terms.<sup>405</sup> To engage with these three works in their form as exhibitions – *Diamond Plane at Ulay: Come One*, MOT International, Brussels (13 May – 2 July 2016); *Bene Agere (In Her Shoes)*, and *‘GEN. E.T RATION ULTIMA RATIO’* at ‘Ulay | Polaroids’, Nederlands Fotomuseum (23 January – 1 May 2016) – one is forced to look more closely at the details. When one is in close proximity to these approximately 8.5 x 10.8 cm individually sized images, the small-scale of these photographs forces the viewer into taking a closer look. It allows for a more intimate engagement with photography, commanding the viewer to scan over and pay closer attention to details, especially as they are mainly in black and white. The site of blood trickling out of punctured skin is neutralised through this rendering without

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<sup>401</sup> Ibid.

<sup>402</sup> Mechthild Fend, “Emblems of Durability: Tattoos, preserves and photographs,” *Performance Research* 14, no. 4 (2009), pp. 45-52, doi: 10.1080/13528160903552923.

<sup>403</sup> In contributing to the furthering of an indexical theory of style, Social Linguist, Mary Bucholtz identifies the crucial way language informs how identities are constructed, altered and defended by demonstrating that the relationships between style, stance and identity is informed by both local interactions and by through workings of wider cultural ideologies. See Mary Bucholtz, “From Stance to Style: Gender, Interaction, and Indexicality in Mexican Immigrant Youth Slang,” in Alexandra Jaffe, *Stance: Sociolinguistic perspectives* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 2, <http://web.stanford.edu/~eckert/PDF/bucholtz2009.pdf>

<sup>404</sup> Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory,” *Theatre Journal*, vol. 40, no. 4 (Dec. 1988), p. 531.

<sup>405</sup> Cassin, *Whispers*, p. 88.

colour; lacerated flesh presents the viscerality of the cut on the skin surface captured poignantly through these images.

In the act of viewing these images, one is also engaging with the haptic quality of these images, especially as they often include fragments of the artist's body close up. This stimulates the tactile sense of the viewer. One is invited to imagine the materiality of flesh being cut. The viewer, in trying to get closer to the pain being depicted, may even take on the pain of the artist as their own. As Kathy O'Dell identifies, in the performance photographs of Gina Pane and Vito Acconci, even if there was physical contact with the images, through reproduction, we find this only renders the impossibility of identifying fully with the artist and experiencing a haptic sense of these images. Ulay has repeatedly described performance as his 'medium par excellence' and photography he sees 'as second skin'.<sup>406</sup> This symbiotic relationship between photography and performance might then be considered as double gesture of distancing and integrating the viewer. On the one hand there is a closeness brought on by exposing the subject's pain, whilst, on the other there is an act of distancing. Sarah Happersberger, in her investigations into German performance of the early 1960s, identifies this distancing as an essential characteristic in performance art: the fact that performance cannot be experienced immediately, and more precisely, that the reception of live performances underlies mediation as well.<sup>407</sup>

What is the viewer witnessing when encountering such intimate images? What happens when one considers the conditions and wider context within which they occurred? Images of self-mutilation and body modification practices are now normalised both within and outside of the medical context. They serve as ways of healing or transformation through making marks on the body. In the early 1970s, when Ulay began carrying out these actions in private, tattooing and modifications of one's gender were not widely used by artists, certainly not in the way that Ulay presented them in his work. He can be credited as one of the first artists to use tattooing in a radical way, perhaps leading the way for a furthering of these kinds of practices in performance art histories. Ulay's temporary tattoo is just as radical today as it was when he first carried out the initial action. Such radicalism crosses the boundaries of conventional medical procedures. At the time Ulay was born was still heavily associated with the concentration camps of the Second World

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<sup>406</sup> Johnson, *The Art of Living*, p. 18.

<sup>407</sup> Kathy O'Dell, "Displacing the Haptic: Performing Art, the Photographic Document and the 1970s" cited in Sarah Happersberger, "Icons of the Performance Still: Photographic Staging of Happenings by Heinrich Riebeshl and Ute Klophaus," *Stedelijk Studies issue #3*.

War. Camp guards kept grafts of tattoos of concentration camp victims as souvenirs. Even further back in history the branding of slaves with tattoos as a form of degradation.<sup>408</sup>

At the present, the easy sharing of digital photography has fuelled debates around the death of photography. These claims of photography's death have been particularly potent around analogue photography, which Ulay performs 'to get to know himself better' [reference]. As he states, 'it is not about hurting, if you are in such a mood you must and is was all controlled.'<sup>409</sup> His work *Auto-Polaroids* explores the concept of identity in a highly personal way. In turning the camera onto himself and, performing for the camera lens, he disrupts the very notion of the role photographer through a revealing of the body's multiplication, dispersion. and disappearance [I think you should say how it does each of these three acts]. These polaroids form part of an important auto-biographical accounts of Ulay's relationship with his body.

Owing to the limitations of this thesis, I do not delve into the artist's works that deal specifically with queering the body and complicating gender norms. However, it is worth mentioning that *Auto-Polaroids*, including *S/he*, served to explore his feminine identity, by means of transforming his image for the camera. This work makes a significant contribution to gender studies as he was producing radical works that now fit into a discourse on gender and performativity, even though these works preceded the theoretical discourses that have now contextualised such works (Butler, Phelan, Jones et al). This exploration of self-mutilation is a useful way to consider how, in Ulay's words, he was seeking to get beneath his skin, opening of the flesh, in other to get to grips with what it meant to be a German orphan. He was contesting his genetic and socio-cultural identity. I view Ulay's work as a contestation against the normative. It is anarchist in its ethos and methodologies. It proposes a course of resistance to which we all should adhere, including ethical considerations about the ways in which we engage with ourselves and others. These bodily explorations present the artist's body as a vehicle of and for communication. Considerations around ethics and aesthetics inform the core of Ulay's oeuvre. Throughout his career, Ulay has repeatedly stated that 'ethics without aesthetics is cosmetics', which I have interpreted here as an entwined relationship between art and ethics that allows here for a more critical engagement with an individual's rights towards their bodies. This occurs alongside considerations around the social governance and ownership of bodies, which is deeply regulated by the socio-cultural and socio-political.<sup>410</sup> When he created these *Auto-Polaroids* over four decades ago, Ulay had no intention for them to enter into a critical art context. They were

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<sup>408</sup> See "Mutilating the body" in Hewitt, *Mutilating the Body*, p. 70.

<sup>409</sup> Johnson, *The Art of Living*, p. 34.

<sup>410</sup> *Ibid*, p. 29.

made as a private archive, attesting perhaps to an individual's mythology and not for the exhibition framework which some of them have entered. Central to engaging with Ulay's work is the process of feeling and, if you don't understand, trying to feel. Shifting identities enact themselves as the flesh of the world. Because Ulay stages his vulnerabilities in these images, he cannot, and we cannot run away or hide. As his works demonstrates, in vulnerability there is a great strength. He ends in failure. The body collapses into itself through showing vulnerability made public. Affect is an intensity of feeling, a sensation, a passion, an urge, a mood, a drive. The affect that Ulay presents in the intensity of his photographs allows for the body to move and affect other people and other things.

What these works possess is an ontological connection to real pain that allows it to be treated as real. It perhaps even serves a substitute for pain. As it is shared, it transcends its time of realisation. We must also read these black and white images as possessing documentary-like qualities; we do not actually see blood running out of Ulay's veins but imagine it. To return to Jones "the body art event needs the photograph to confirm its having happened; the photograph needs the body art event as an ontological 'anchor' of its indexicality".<sup>411</sup> The connection between performance and documentation as Auslander reminds us, is ontological; Ulay's work, alongside most of those which were produced in the late 1960s to 1970s, belong to this category. The documentation of performances in these polaroids is a record for which events can be reconstructed by the viewer in their imagination but which will always be incomplete and fragmentary. They consider the instrumental role that the photographic medium has played in contributing to performance documentation, in which film and photography double as forms of witness, enabling the materialisation of evidence for performance actions. In other words, photographs serve as proof that certain events have occurred, although these events are captured in fragments that never quite capture the whole. Subsequently documentation forms a secondary mode of dissemination, so that other audiences can witness the fragmentary remnants of performance works. At the present moment, where information is continually shared through the internet, the sharing of images happens very quickly, in a less personalised way. Contributing to ongoing debates about the death of photography, it remains to be seen how these contemporary technologies might offer innovative and conceptually interesting ways for artists working with pain and performance to document and distribute their work.

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<sup>411</sup> Amelia Jones, "Presence in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation," cited in Philip Auslander, "The Performativity of Performance Documentation," *A Journal of Performance and Art*, MIT Press, vol. 28, no. 3 PAJ84 (September 2006), p. 1-10, doi:10.1162/pajj.2006.28.3.1.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Bearing Witness conclusion**

This thesis has examined pain in performance art. As the subtitle suggests, it has addressed the notion of bearing witness. This has been brought together with art practices that cross the boundaries of performance art, social practice, illness, activism, and other forms of confrontation directed at the male body. Bearing witness takes up ideas of witnessing as ‘a collective sensorial practice of listening to bodies.’<sup>412</sup> It is also concerned with ‘seeing how seeing takes place’.<sup>413</sup> This is considered as that which allows for the possibilities of moving beyond an audience's role as witnesses and draws attention to the very conditions of witnessing itself. To explore these ideas, I have analysed the work of three artists: Ron Athey, Martin O’Brien, and Ulay. These ideas around witnessing pain have worked through three different sites and actions in turn: curating, documenting, and audience response. The analysis has demonstrated the creative and political potential that a range of sites and ways of witnessing pain offers audiences, artists, and curators who are interested in pain and performance art. In these discussions, the thesis has explored the ways that pain serves as a critical tool, whether functioning metaphorically, conceptually, or literally. Artists’ bodies reveal their most private and intimate experiences. In doing so, what is required is that we once more revisit the place and potency of the body in performance art and its intersections with a range of identities. By considering the life and works of these three cross-generational artists, alongside considering the varying pain-actions they adopt, this thesis has sought to extend and develop interdisciplinary work about performing bodies, pain, and witnessing.

One of the aims of this thesis has been to develop new writing on the three artists under study, all of whom for various reasons have not been the subject of large volumes of critical engagement. Ulay, as the oldest of the three artists, is best known, as I have discussed, for his collaborative working. However, his solo work has only just begun to be explored. This thesis adds to this emerging critical discussion on his solo art making practice. Ron Athey is perhaps the most well studied of the three artists under discussion (aside from Ulay’s collaborations). I develop and extend this engagement with a once marginalised artist. Martin O’Brien is a relatively young practitioner (having only recently finished his PhD). He has only just begun to receive critical acclaim, including through a forthcoming edited collection on his work (to which I have contributed). Thus, my commission and curation of a new piece of work from this emerging artist,

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<sup>412</sup> McCormack, *Queer Postcolonial Narratives*, p. 20.

<sup>413</sup> Blocker, *Seeing Witness*, p. xx.



together with my subsequent discussion of that process offers one of the first extended critical analyses of his work (outside of that done by himself or his direct artistic collaborations). By way of a conclusion however, I return to the three core research questions posed in the introduction;

1. *How can idea of witnessing informs our understandings of pain in performance art?*
2. *What issues, ethical and otherwise does the curating of pain-performances raise in these artworks and what is the role of curator-as-witness in this context?*
3. *What is the role of documenting pain in bearing witness to performance art?*

Addressing each in turn across the three artist case studies, I reflect on what it is that this study has to offer about ideas of the witnessing of pain in performance art. While the focus here is on pain, some of these reflections might be relevant for other themes in performance and live art, such as the curation of difficult subject matter, and the witnessing, documenting, and curation of the un-representable and the elusive. I will end with some reflections on the experiments in research and writing that I have developed in order to engage with these works and to meet some of the challenges of studying these three modes of witnessing pain in performance art.

**Research Question One: *How can idea of witnessing informs our understandings of pain in performance art?***

This cross-disciplinary thesis has considered the experiences of pain in performance art through looking at three artists: Ron Athey, Martin O'Brien, and Frank Uwe Laysiepen, known as Ulay. I focused on both live events and documentation – video recordings, images, and texts – to explore the experiences of pain in these artists' works through the lens of witnessing. I have, through the three empirical chapters considered three different forms of witnessing: namely, *live witnessing*, *the curator as witness* and *witnessing pain through documentation*, with a view to a further understanding the viewer's experiences of pain in performance art. This was done alongside thinking about the artists and the role of curators in these works. To bear witness to performances of pain raises important questions about the ethics of watching, alongside highlighting the implicit and often invisible contractual agreements that occur between performers and their audiences.

As Professor Victoria Pitts observes:

body art, despite its interest in intervening with the physical flesh and creating blood and scars and so on, actually is not a violent practice. They're really taking a kind of libertarian or civil libertarian attitude towards their bodies. It's my body I should be able to do what I

want with it. [But watch me.]<sup>414</sup>

Witnessing is however rarely an individual act. Rather it enables the possibility of collective experiences of looking that forces attention towards the bodies being laid bare. To a certain extent you don't have a choice (except by walking away) to engage with the experience of pain you are confronted with. Questions are posed around what is the performance of such painful actions attempting to achieve? How does it inform what we think about pain? How does it relate to lived experiences of another's suffering? Such work also makes visible unfamiliar aspects of otherwise familiar emotional states. To expand on this, we all know and experience pain. However, when we witness it being taken on by someone else it forces an engagement between the known and unknown. One must watch, engage, and retell but this does not always happen in the ways that are expected. Witnessing still demands that what you see is in some way retold and most of these works demand that you watch and that you acknowledge them in some way.

When considering reactions to live events, as scholar Dawn Perlmutter argues, what we have to consider is:

In using the body as object, continues to be influenced by developing technologies, familial, psychological, social and cultural variables. Psychological factors, such as the situation one is in and emotional changes at play when we experience live art, can profoundly alter the strength of our perceptions of these events. Attention, understanding, control, expectations, significance and aversion all affect the ways in which audience perceive live events. Extreme performance practices that fore the body to transcend its confines manifest often as an exorcism not only of the cauterising the individual's pain, but by pushing the boundaries of endurance through artistic expression. The use of blood in performance art is often extremely violent and similar to another religious concept, mortification. In a wide variety of religious traditions mortification occurs in the context of initiation rituals. "The term mortification derives from the Latin *mortificare* (to put to death) . . . some practices of mortification seem intended symbolically to assimilate the initiate into a deathlike condition that is to precede an initiatory rebirth." The practices refer to specific forms of bodily discipline, ranging from sleep deprivation to ritual forms of abuse. Deprivations are ways of symbolizing death: the dead do not speak, eat, drink, or sleep. Violent rituals can be seen as endurance tests that serve as a rite of passage into adulthood. The significance is not the violent act but a symbolic death and rebirth.<sup>415</sup>

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<sup>414</sup> Professor Victoria Pitts, "Human Canvas," *Art Shock* series, C4, first broadcast on Tuesday 14th March 2006, 11.05pm, Redback films,

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fEmL2JkYU0k>

<sup>415</sup> Dawn Perlmutter, "The Sacrificial Aesthetic: Blood Rituals from Art to Murder," *Anthropoetics* 5, no. 2 (Fall 1999/Winter 2000),

<http://www.anthropoetics.ucla.edu/ap0502/blood.htm#n5>

Audiences, as witnesses, play an important role in constructing meaning about artworks through their responses with cases made for ‘audiences contributing to the completion’ of the artwork.<sup>416</sup> In analysing pain’s presence in the artworks of Athey, O’Brien and Ulay and trying to understand them, a search for answers has revealed only the difficulty of discussing pain in their works. This is not only because of its inherently slippery epistemology but also because none of these performance artists fit neatly into any fixed established discourse. In their actual and theoretical manifestations, they resist fixity. They fluctuate between discourses, this is crucial in establishing how important their contributions are in furthering performance art discourse.

As I discuss in Athey’s *4 Scenes In A Harsh Life* and Ulay’s *GEN.E.T. RATION.ULTIMA.RATO*, the disjuncture between truth and rumour can never be fully grasped. In Ulay there are no primary witnesses. The polaroids become material objects for the viewer who takes on the role as secondary witness. The work is offered to us in a mediated form. This is a gesture which Amelia Jones recognises as a gift that Ulay gives us, one that encourages us to embrace this condition of openness. In completion, the work can be read as a profoundly feminist gesture. This is surprising as it comes from a man who became most famous for his intense collaboration and love affair with a female artist.<sup>417</sup> Jones goes on to expand on the fact that Ulay proves to us that an astute critical politics sexual and gender difference – one that is generous and open rather than critical and admonishing – can attach to the body of a heterosexual male artists.<sup>418</sup>

In comparison to Ulay, Athey’s artworks are blur the boundaries of pleasure, pain, fact, fiction, and mythmaking. They do so whilst also parodying binary notions of the masculine and feminine. They take the viewer on a journey through presentations of what Mary Richards identifies as:

the unrepresentable effects of a socio-political agency of excess that falls outside of categories, in a way that draws attention to the limits of representation and is able to perform in a territory that is by definition largely unmapped, in public occupying this zone, he opens it up for definition and interpretation so that boundaries shift and the limit to be transgressed is relocated once more. In doing so, Richards suggests that Athey’s works offer up a number of provocative means of resisting traditional representations of masculinity, pain, and pleasure as well as people with HIV/AIDS infection.<sup>419</sup>

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<sup>416</sup> See Auslander, *Performance: Visual art and performance art* (New York: Taylor & Francis, 2003), p. 178.

<sup>417</sup> Amelia Jones, “Individual Mythologist” *Stedelijk Studies* issue #3.

<sup>418</sup> André Maralux, *Le Musée Imaginaire* (1947) in *Fotografie als Instrument der Kunstgeschichte*, ed. Constanze Caraffa (Berlin: Dt. Kunstverlag, 2009), pp. 77-89 and Graskamo, W. André, *Maralux und das Imaginaire Museum. Die Weltkunst im Salon* (Munich: Beck, 2014) cited in *Ibid*.

<sup>419</sup> See Mary Richards, “Ron Athey, AIDS and the Politics of Pain.”

I argue that out of all the three artists discussed, Athey is the most confrontational. His live blood works are too easily discussed in terms of shock, fear and disgust. However, when his work is thoroughly engaged with, it not only presents a critical insight into histories of pain – its societal use as a form of control – it is also deeply embedded in the complexities of an individual’s suffering and stigmatisation due to illness and sexuality. I would also further argue for its importance in both forming an important part of a culture of resistance, whilst also celebrating a body that continues to defy illness and at the same time paying homage to a generation affected and still continue to be affected by HIV/AIDS.

In varied ways, the works of Athey and Ulay call the very basis of identity into question with their provocative and critical practices. They do so in order to present the mutability of fixed positions of identity formations governed by societal power. Richards, in turning to Butler’s writings, states that such societal powers are informed by ‘acculturated mechanisms of power that structure our understandings of the gendered body’.<sup>420</sup> In other words, the doctrines that inform and govern bodies on gender, health status and so on, leading to how we view ourselves and others. Martin O’Brien engages us with his sick body. This is a site identified by the art critic Francois Pluchart for ‘pleasure, suffering, illness and death, all of which inscribe themselves on it and shape the individual in the course of their biological evolution.’<sup>421</sup> O’Brien uses endurance and pain-based actions to reveal how his body reacts to his illness. In doing so, he opens up discussions on the body and how it is considered within medical and wider cultural politics. To engage with CF in O’Brien’s work and his use of endurance which he describes as ‘how an artist living with illness exploits their slow death as art practice in an attempt to re-embody their life and perform it’, thus introduces a phenomenological experience of living with a life-limiting disease.<sup>422</sup> To perform, for O’Brien, is to take some form of ownership of his medically regulated body, one that constantly involves a level of submission in order for it to survive.

The ancient Greek word for skin was *Chros*. Self-inflicted wounding on the body’s surface was described using the word *enchroi*, meaning “close to skin”. It was importantly tied to the Aristotelian belief that the “skin cannot feel,” that contributed to general understandings of

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<sup>420</sup> Ibid.

<sup>421</sup> Francois Pluchart, *L’Art Corporeal* excerpted in an English translation in *The Artist’s Body*, ed. by Tracey Warr and Amelia Jones and cited in Martin O’Brien, “Treating the Body,” *Contemporary Theatre Review* 22, no. 1, 2012, pp. 146-151, doi: 10.1080/10486801.2011.645232.

<sup>422</sup> Martin O’Brien, “Performing Chronic: Chronic Illness and endurance art” in Gianna Bouchard. and Martin O’Brien eds. “On Medicine,” *Performance Research* 19, no. 44, pp. 54-63.

the skin as a “thin” as opposed to a “thick” surface, whose importance lay in its breach.<sup>423</sup> All three artists break the skin’s surface through painful actions that operate as metaphors for their individual suffering and pain. In doing so, the viewers witness these acts and engage with the artist’s body as a site of invisible geographies, by which I mean ‘spaces that evade or escape our awareness’ [ref?], in this context the spaces for contesting the heteronormative fixities of the male body. In all of their work, they develop radical ways of escaping the corporeal prison imposed on their bodies through thought-provoking performance. The audience, whether it is primary or secondary, take on the role of witness. Through the reading of the work in witness, the body as art object operates as a form of non-verbal communicative language that speaks about ideas and experiences. It does so through embodying the experience of watching and looking that is communicated to the viewer, either directly or by means of documentation.

If we believe that art offers the potential to change society by proposing spaces and approaches that encourage new ways of relating to the world, then the artworks of Athey, O’Brien and Ulay all prompt us to re-evaluate our value systems. They demand us to rethink how we relate to ourselves, each other, and our surroundings. They encourage an ongoing critique of received ideas about the body, constructed through history and society. Against these histories and social constructs, pain-performance embraces friction and difference. It offers a site where we can come together to experience something. We are all limited in our ability to really experience ourselves and be united through our different experiences and our discussions of the significance of that experience. We hold disagreement about the significance of that experience. To write about pain in body art, one would have to examine specific cases and the motivations of each artist. When this is not done, the work risks categorisations rendering as sensationalist and essentially frivolous. The fact is, only a deep study will truly reveal the point of this work, for a casual reading only reveals its shock value, never the true motivations. As Jose Gil describes:

the space of the body is the skin extending itself into space; it is skin becoming space—thus, the extreme proximity between things and the body. Bodies are routinely shaped and sculpted to adhere not only to standards of health and medicine but also, and perhaps more regularly, to sociocultural appearance norms.<sup>424</sup>

To understand a work of art, it is necessary to explore the things that the eye cannot see, the things that lie beyond the simple view.

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<sup>423</sup> Aristotle, “Historia Animalium” cited in Lesley Lokko, *In The Skin of A Lion, A Leopard...A Man*, e-flux Architecture, <http://www.e-flux.com/architecture/superhumanity/68669/in-the-skin-of-a-lion-a-leopard-a-man>.

<sup>424</sup> José Gil, “The Paradoxical Body” cited in “Bodies of Colour/Media Skin” in Chatzichristodoulou and Zerihan, *Intimacy Across Visceral*, p. 144.

Everywhere and at all times, bodies are actively inscribed with any one or more of the physical markers of powerful social institutions, including age, gender, race, ethnicity, sexuality, and religion. Bodies are stylised with piercings, tattoos, hairstyles, and procedures for tanning, bleaching, and painting. Bodies are perpetually on display, although, as we learn through the course of socialization, one must be cautious about whose bodies we gaze upon, where specifically we affix that gaze, for how long, and at what proximity. In all of these ways and a multitude of others, the body is clearly the site of enormous expressive and impressive appearance management, as well as a focal point for significant ritual activity. Since the early 1990s, experiences of embodiment have emerged as a significant substantive field for social analysis. On the heels of widespread social change, experiences of embodiment have emerged as a subject for analysis. From plastic surgery to tattooing, from fashion to fitness, from preoccupations with youthfulness to changing definitions of the aging body, from sexual to athletic performance, contemporary scholarly literatures reveal a steady flow of provocative social and cultural inquiries about experiences of embodiment. Pain, as Hernández-Navarro, reminds us, is a recurring theme for artists who use their own bodies in their art. Their motivations may be manifold, but collectively they have much to say about the body and its place in contemporary life.<sup>425</sup>

Amidst this rich and diverse flurry of scholarship on the body, the fact remains that the body will always be performed, thus serving raw material from which the ritual dramas of everyday life are reproduced. When people do not act as expected or follow rules of decorum that structure interaction, disruption results in not only efforts to realign action but also as potentially disruptive emotions (bringing about feelings such as frustration, anger, anxiety and so on). The performative body is enshrined in these sacred rituals and it is possible to identify certain forms of body-ritual, although we intend this list to be sensitising and not exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. This is a radical act for a white European male, to enact this vulnerability through repetitive rupturing of flesh, openings to otherness, self-enactment across gender and class, signifies perhaps beyond what the world could accommodate until very recently.

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<sup>425</sup> Miguel A. Hernández Navarro, *(Re)Presenting pain in body art*, p. 1.

**Research question two: *What issues, ethical and otherwise does the curating of pain-performances raise in these artworks and what is the role of curator-as-witness in this context?***

As part of my exploration of performance art and pain I not only analysed existing art works and their documentation, I also commissioned and curated a new piece of performance art. Interestingly the literature explicitly about curating pain is not extensive and tends to focus on the curation of difficult issues. It sometimes raises issues about the ethics of curating artists who carry out extreme actions, whether that be those artists who self-inflict their pain or those who ask their audiences to inflict it on them. One of the most important issues around the curation of pain turned out to be that around questions of the ethics of curating such work, and the responsibility I had as a curator both to the artist and the audience. It was also interesting to witness how audiences themselves dealt with and confronted these ethical dilemmas in works that required them to interact with the artists under study, whether this be biting or by smoothing Vaseline onto a performer's body.

To curate pain is about creating a space for engagement that works in ways beyond language. I feel it is about creating a space and a setting for feeling and acknowledging that pain is something that we all have to contend with. In my experience curating performances of pain is about creating a more emotive space for acknowledging things that may seem alienating and different. What can be revealed is that in reality these things are often not that far away from our imagination. While performance does create a space that is related to real life it is still a rarefied space. However, the separation is increasingly hard to maintain. The pain that many artists include in their work is clearly real and not acted out. It is also related, in the case of the three artists here, to situations in everyday life such as tattooing, illness, self-harm, and torture where pain is felt. These artists are undergoing this pain in a controlled situation. Nevertheless, it is one that relates to, and relates us as witnesses to, these wider experiences of pain. To curate pain-performance I believe is to reflect on ideas of consent. In my curatorial work it was absolutely necessary that the audience be allowed to leave as they wished, so that they could develop their own experiences free from coercion. I think curating pain allows the chance to think about consensual engagements with pain. This was not an experience forced on neither artist nor audience, rather it was more about creating shared experiences. Of course, audiences can, as we saw with O'Brien's work, fall under the spell of what is happening. This is due not only to the power of the work but also because of our own individual and collective desires to explore experiences beyond the normative. To curate pain performance is to raise questions around the ethics of what we find to be acceptable or not, or in good or bad taste. In my practices of curating, I was drawn to consider what the moral boundaries were, how far was I to let O'Brien and indeed the audiences go, and at what point

should I step in for the artist's or for the audience's sake? I suggest the power of pain-performance is that it poses these questions for curators, artists and audiences alike, and in doing so – through questioning, rather than answering – we are required to reflect on our own individual and collective moral boundaries.

**Research Question Three: *What is the role of documenting pain in bearing witness to performance art?***

In the different ways discussed throughout this thesis, in live works and in their documentation, artists Ron Athey, Martin O'Brien, and Ulay all bring viewers into their personal experiences of pain in ways that are richly multi-sensual. They escape text alone. What is created in such documentation is a record that provide loci for the histories of pain outside an official medical context. Building on the rich range of writings about the relationship between the liveness of performance and its documentation, this thesis has considered documentation in relation to the live event through the lens of the eyewitness and hearsay witness. It has considered the need to document from the perspective of the curator, with an eye towards the kinds of elements of the work that are overlooked when it comes documenting live work. Finally, in my discussion of Ulay the thesis focused on the document as material witness. Through these three discussions I have sought to trouble those scholarly ideas that see documentation as somehow a lack, as somehow secondary and therefore less than the original performance. In both my scholarship and my curatorial practice, I have sought to establish the value of a range of formal and informal documentation, for the kinds of witnessing it can enable. This is not to suggest that to witness pain-performance through documentation is somehow the same as witnessing it live. It is rather to value such mediated witnessing on its own terms for what it can make possible. Thinking about Ulay's work, we can see how the polaroid, considered as documentation, was 'touching' in its own way. It constructs an affective relation to the witness through the scale and content of the work, as well as the conceptual work done through this instantaneous format, and the sense of immediacy that is often attributed to the polaroid. Such immediacy and a simple format might offer some kind of access to the 'live' event that is different to the heavily edited, photo-shopped and framed documentation produced in other places and times. It would, of course, be naïve to think that the choice to develop polaroids by Ulay was unmediated. It was part of a carefully developed conceptual process in which the temporality and the materiality of this process of image making was central.

Throughout the thesis I have used the term 'evidence for performance actions' to refer to the changes in the currency and format of performance documentation that we observe during the



twentieth century and especially over the last few decades. Indeed, we could argue that these last twenty years have seen a significant change in the ways in which performance art is being re-historicised through developments in modes of documentation. This is especially true as documentation becomes itself a site for critical and conceptual reflection, not only by artists, but also by critics, scholars, and arts institutions. Art institutions, and particularly museums, continue to present performance art on a large scale. They are establishing entire performance art departments, that are now separate from the public or educational programming departments to which they are typically attached. We also observe how institutions are re-visiting and presenting the entire oeuvres of artists who began working within this context. Notable examples include Chris Burden's recent retrospective at The New Museum, NYC, Valie Export's *True Romance* at Kunsthaus Weiz, and Marina Abramović's *The Artist is Present* at MOMA. Furthermore, we have seen the growth of performance being considered alongside a range of traditional modes of making.

The institutional attention to performance art has, not unsurprisingly brought with it a growth of interest in the dilemmas of documenting the ephemeral and the experiential, especially where much of this work often adopts these methods precisely to resist institutional logics of collection and display. Former Rijksmuseum Public Programme Curator, Hendrik Folkerts echoes many when he states:

the ephemeral nature of performance is being challenged now; artists and museums alike are presenting their live works as objects of acquisitions, arguably against the grain of the anti-market premise of historical performance practice; moreover, the etymological relationship between the score or script, the performance as a live event and its documentation as a 3rd party in this scenario, continually undergoes questioning and transformation.<sup>426</sup>

At a recent conference at Tate Modern, London, the organisation's performance curator, Catherine Wood, also spoke of the institution's transformation into a 'performance collecting' museum.<sup>427</sup> With a resurgence of attention on performance art, what does it mean for a re-historicising of the discipline? This is especially pertinent with regards to the formats of documentation that I have explored across this this thesis, by artists who are still left out of this process. It seems that the institutionalisation and commercialisation of this discipline still only

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<sup>426</sup> Henrik Folkerts, Introduction to *Whispers: Ulay on Ulay* book launch a conversation between Ulay and Amelia Jones, with an introduction by Maria Rus Bojan at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, 9 Jan. 2015.

<sup>427</sup> Catherine Wood speaking as part of a series of curators and artists conversation examining the place of performance within the twenty-first-century museum, 'The Place of Performance in The Museum panel discussion', Tate Modern, 20 Jun. 2016, 17:30-20:00.

serves a few artists whilst others are excluded. This is especially the case, it seems, with live performances where blood is present.

### **The challenges of pain: some methodological reflections**

Common across the many accounts of pain that I have explored across this thesis, was a collective sense that pain was often an elusive, unrepresentable, or singular experience. Whilst it could be experienced collectively, pain was only really knowable to the individual in ways particular to their psychological and physiological state. This is not in the least because writing about pain is seen to be very hard to do. As such, pain's elusiveness and multisensory nature make it hard to study. Whilst it is a difficult topic to research, it is also one that is rich with interest and ripe for artistic practitioners and methodological experimentation. To turn to art to think about pain, is, as Chapter Two, explores common across history. Pain becomes both a good thing to think through and make work about. However, to make multisensory works about pain is to both engage with but also circumvent some of the challenges of representing pain throughout history. In this final section however, I am perhaps more interested in thinking about how pain offered me my own series of challenges as a researcher as I developed both my own research methods but also my own writing style that could face the challenges presented by pain-performance works. There are three points I want to make here. The first concerns the challenges of researching pain in performance art, the second concerns the issues with curating pain, whilst the third reflects on writing pain.

I would argue that to research pain-performance is to add a further, very interesting layer of discussion and nuance to the already extant discussions of the experiences and documents of live art. As such, I was left with a double layered challenge in writing and researching something already seen as ephemeral, where the documentation was itself contested and a site of research, that in turn took as its core focus something also understood to be un-representable, singular and elusive. My response was to embrace this and to make it a conceptual focus in the thesis, through the frame of witnessing, and to explore how it was that engaging with documentation might enable us to appreciate pain and performance art in a different way. My second point concerns the curation of pain in performance art. In order to explore the issues around the curation of pain, I decided to commission and curate a piece of work from scratch, this would enable me to develop a unique perspective on the discussions of witnessing that I was interested in. It also enabled me to appreciate the intersections of pain and performance art from a different vantage. In so doing, I was required to think in different ways about the relationship between the live performance and

the documentation than I might otherwise have been, I was also drawn to think about the aspects of curation and of pain-performance differently, especially in relation to ethics and consent. Finally, to research pain and to develop ideas of witnessing required that I reflect hard on what it meant to also write about pain, and how this written thesis contributes to creating a site where the works might be further witnessed. I considered this by learning from a series of art writers, including Bal, who experiment with what it means to develop styles of art writing that bring the reader closer to the work, an intimacy built on the terms of the work itself. I have tried to do this throughout the thesis. The result is that whether developed from eyewitness or hearsay witness accounts, the argument has also made you as a reader into a hearsay witness. As such, whilst much of the more auto-ethnographic writing might not be commonplace in scholarly texts, especially perhaps those of art history, I believe that thinking about writing pain is an integral part of responding as a researcher to what it means to witness these works live and through their documentation.

To conclude, in this thesis I have explored pain and performance art through the lens of the idea of witnessing. I have considered the eyewitness, the hearsay witness and the material witness. I have done so by considering the audience involvement, curation, and documentation of the work of three separate artists that all involve the performance of pain. The three artists were chosen for their more marginal place in the histories and accounts of performance art, even within discussions of performance art concerned with pain. The result has been a text that I believe makes a lasting contribution to the discussions of pain and performance art, and to the critical reception of these three artists, as well as perhaps to wider performance art discussions around the primary performance, its curation, and documentation. The possibilities for further research are considerable. As I have indicated throughout this thesis, there are many considerations to be made in relation to technological developments. Whether they be in social media and the internet or in the field of neuroscience, these advancements will ensure, just as medical advancements and shifts in camera technologies did for the artists explored here, that questions about how we experience, research, mediate, document, and write about pain-performance keep evolving.

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#### Audio Recordings

Recording of an interview between Jareh Das and Martin O'Brien at Martin's studio, Deptford, London, 14 Apr. 2014, 5:36."

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#### Video recordings

Prof. Bobbie Farsides's comments as chair discussion as part of the of the panel discussion of for *Taste of Flesh/Bite Me I'm Yours*, White Building, London, 25 Apr. 2015, 7-8.30pm.

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### Interviews

I conducted an interview with London based artist, Sebastian Kozak, who was familiar with the work of Ron Athey but had never seen a live performance until Athey performed in London on 30 May 2014 at ]performance space[ London. I interviewed Kozak for the role of eyewitness prior to my encountering the same work recently on 1 Nov. 2014 as part of Spill Festival 2014.

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