

# chiciudean gabriela

## INCURSIUNE ÎN IMAGINAR 4 de la corpul imaginat la corpul reprezentat



istorie literară



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**Coordonare, revizie și cuvânt înainte:  
Gabriela CHICIUDEAN**

# **INCURSIUNI ÎN IMAGINAR**

## **4**

**De la corpul imaginat la corpul reprezentat**  
(Cu 7 lucrări plastice realizate de Ștefan ORTH)

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## CUVÎNT ÎNAINTE

Noul volum al Centrului de Cercetare a Imaginarului „Speculum” din Alba Iulia cuprinde comunicările prezentate la cea de-a patra sesiune științifică organizată în luna martie, 2010. După apariția primului volum (2007), intitulat simplu *Comentarii și interpretări*, am optat în anii următori pentru câte o tematică, specifică fiecărei sesiuni. Astfel, după *Sub semnul cronotopului* (2008) și *Imaginarul religios în literatură* (2009), iată-ne în 2010 ocupându-ne de tema: *De la corpul imaginat la corpul reprezentat în literatură*.

Pe parcursul celor patru ani de la înființarea Centrului „Speculum”, cum era de așteptat, lucrurile s-au „mișcat” înspre bine. A crescut interesul pentru acest tip de cercetare, a imaginarului, s-au înmulțit membrii Centrului – de la aproximativ 20 de oameni, cât cuprindea inițial, la 47 cadre universitare, cercetători, foști doctoranzi, actualmente doctori în științe filologice, rămași fideli activității Centrului, doctoranzi și masteranzi –, s-au publicat studii în reviste de specialitate, s-au scris cărți, s-a participat la numeroase sesiuni de comunicări în țară și străinătate, s-au obținut premii și distincții literare, unii dintre noi au devenit membri în Centre similare internaționale și, un lucru foarte important, Centrul „Speculum” a fost integrat în Asociația Internațională „Centres de Recherches sur l’Imaginaire” (Franța), condusă de prof. univ. dr. Jean-Jacques Wunenburger.

Și, pentru că, începând cu a doua conferință a Centrului, am avut în fiecare an participare internațională, în 2010, pe lângă nume importante ale literaturii românești, am invitat să-și prezinte lucrările în plen și conferențieri din străinătate. Astfel, ne-au onorat cu prezența Celia DE VILLIERS, Lector universitar la University of South Africa, Pretoria (*The Ontology Of Fetishism In Performance Art*), Ioana BOTH, profesor universitar dr., Universitatea Babeș-Bolyai din Cluj-Napoca și membră a Centrului de Cercetare a Imaginarului „Phantasma” („*Sfîșieri retorice*”: o lectură a reprezentărilor corpului în lirica eminesciană) și Mirela OCINIC, Conf. univ. dr., Universitatea „Lucian Blaga” din Sibiu (*Corpul – un partener fictiv*).

Nu în ultimul rînd, de data aceasta am avut plăcerea de a avea în mijlocul nostru un artist plastic, pe binecunoscutul deja Ștefan ORTH din Sibiu, ale cărui minunate lucrări, dedicate special acestui eveniment (sesiunea de comunicări a Centrului „Speculum”), le-am putut admira în expoziția organizată în sala de conferințe. O parte din lucrările domniei sale sînt reproduse în alb-negru în prezentul volum.

Gabriela CHICIUDEAN

# THE ONTOLOGY OF FETISHISM IN PERFORMANCE ART

**Celia DE VILLIERS**

*This research aims to consider and critically analyze the manipulation of various forms of fetishism, extremism and personal transformation by selected Performance artists. The premise of this research paper is that their fetishistic performances functions as part of a hermeneutic process in dealing with Dasein's vulnerability.*

*The tension between the technical fake and the authentic presence of the artist, as well as tension between what people fake as their beliefs and what they really believe, is an irony not lost on the selected artists. They engage and manipulate their viewers by using props consisting of a variety of fetishes, pain, bodily fluids and their own physical beings as commodities to challenge taboos and shock their audiences. There are, however, metaphysical and physiological links.*

*To invite pain as the performers do has a future goal. The hermeneuticals aspect of such acts serves the same function as a substitute, a fetish object. Violent and painful spectacles can be regarded as a quest for emotional equilibrium and reparation. This is confirmed by current research about the interconnectedness of subjective phenomenology and hermeneutics in relation to the objective cognitive sciences.*

**Key words:** contemporary performance art, fetishism, hermeneutics, masochism, phenomenology, cognitive science

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## **1. Fetish and contemporary culture**

Fetishes function as richly evocative symbols in visual art, in contemporary cultural codes, in music videos, science fiction films, advertisement and the fashion industry. These media are the common currency of Performance artists' audiences.

The elements of taboo are understood to be one of the primary features of non-European religious rites. Subsequent psychological descriptions of eroticism and sex from the late nineteenth century and particularly to the present make the fetish a powerful symbol for use in performances<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> George Bataille (1986:9), author of *Eroticism, Death and Sensuality* illuminates the religious dimension of eroticism,

Freud's (1959:147-157) now famous explanation of the male's recognition of sexual difference as a boy trying to understand why girls lack penises gives rise to the psychological discussion of fetish. A metaphorical substitute is found by adult fetish practitioners in order to obtain sexual pleasure. Jann Matlock from Harvard University (in Apter and Pietz 1993:58) gives a good generally understood definition of a 'fetish' as follows:

The fetish is traditionally seen as an object that allows its believer to maintain a fantasy of presence even when all signs point to absence. The fetish magically procures the illusion that nothing is amiss even when no power remains for belief.

Recent research by Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen shows that female fetishism does indeed exist and that it poses a challenge to the signifier of desire, but has been ignored because of phallogocentrism in psychoanalysis (Gamman and Makinen 1994:98,103). Fernbach (2000:34) points out that recent texts challenge the primacy of traditional psychoanalytical models because they exclude the pluralities of fetishism.

In the Marxist metaphorical sense in mass culture fetishism leads to use value being dislocated to become image value. The mixture of desire and fantasy, exploited by erotic codes in advertising and the cinema, has a large part to play in the work of the Performance artists<sup>2</sup>. The Marxian metaphor of commercial fetishism questions the relationship between labour, product, value and the enigmatic character of a commodity as an object of exchange. This metaphor becomes part of the strategy of the artists to market themselves. It is precisely because a commodity represents a perversion of an article of utility that it gains interest and becomes a fetish (Foster, in Apter and Pietz 1993:252, Miklitsch 1998: 66). The Performance artists under discussion frequently make use of multiple fetish practices with overt self-consciousness while transforming themselves into eroticized spectacles in the public domain to fascinate and challenge audiences. In this way the use value of the fetishized body ensures it is a commodity available for consumption by the viewers. The exchange implied in this relationship is sometimes financial but also reinforces the success of the encounter between the performer and the audience. The drama enacted is a forceful struggle by the performer to keep the viewers in a state in which they can be manipulated.

## **2. Fetishism and transgressions**

Since the 1950s, Western culture has gradually been filled with images of science fictional futuristic and Utopian fantasies. In contemporary society many things previously regarded as facts are being analysed and consequently contested, including notions of the body and the modification of nature by science and culture. This has resulted in calculated transgressions of socially acceptable codes of conduct for the 'proper' treatment of the body and person. One of these ideas is a modern prescriptive sense of self as an a-priori assumption, a notion considered natural and unquestionable. In public life, when certain unexpected acts and desires surface such as those of Abramovi , Madonna, Barney and Cohen it is labeled as an 'anti-social threat' or decadent.

Since the early 1990s fetish inspired clubs such as Torture Garden in London (Randall (2002:7-14) has increased the recreational use of pain and fear as a method of producing a sense of heightened sensation amongst people from varying ages and backgrounds. It has become a form of escaping the

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"Eroticism cannot be discussed unless man (sic) too is discussed in the process. In particular, it cannot be discussed independently of the history of religions".

<sup>2</sup> The film theorist Laura Mulvey's (1975:6-18) article Visual pleasure and Narrative Cinema, labels it 'scopophilia' and explains how the fantasy in cinema accommodates narcissistic relations of looking and identification. It is an undeniable fact that marketing experts regularly exploit this.

confines of the body into a different plane. Vergine (2000a:289) claims that our contemporary society is being presented with “the body as triumphant, immolated, diffused, and propagated dramatic and tragic. The political, social, and mystic body as a site of the extreme”.

The artists discussed here are at the forefront of these phenomena. The artists appear to have set up a commodity body image as an artifact for consumption, or as a simulacrum of use value. This is due to a feeling of inadequacy or lack of existential synthesis by both the artist and spectator. Their sense of self becomes defined by both differences and similarities to others in the immediate environment. As set out in all its definitions, a fetish is based on anxiety about a sense of lack. David Loy (1996:57). Professor, at the Faculty of International Studies at Bunkyo University, Japan, suggests that “the sense of lack is the other pole of the sense of self - tails to its head but one coin”.

### 3. Madonna and Fetishism

A major cultural fetish of our time is Madonna. The best example of the connection between religion and fetishism in Performance art is illustrated by Madonna’s controversial music video *Like a prayer* (fig 1). In it there are allusions to the “spiritual/religious and the carnal ... double entendres and ironies abound” (Taraborelli 2001:169). Against a backdrop of heavenly voices, she receives the stigmata in a simulated sacred environment while seducing an animated sculpture of a dark-skinned saint. With this video she simultaneously deconstructs and challenges religious, feminist and racist traditions. Madonna’s repeated use of religious fetish symbols, such as the crucifix, is well known (in this particular video she dances in front of a row of burning crosses). It is not intended to be sacrilegious. The narrative context of this video references the universally understood symbol of the racist Ku Klux Klan and signifies her subtext of social and political discrimination. The video’s director Mary Lambert said, “It was a song about sexual ecstasy and how it relates to religious ecstasy” (Taraborelli 2001:173).



**Fig 1. Madonna Like a Payer (1998)** (Clerk C, 2002:80).

Pastiche, in the postmodern sense, uses retrograde appropriation and multiculturalism to create novel associations. For Madonna, it becomes a tool to address the plural realities that define postmodern society. Madonna assumes the role of a temple courtesan, acknowledges her audience as voyeurs with a sexualized gaze, while she libidinizes the saint and turns a sacred, unattainable and desirable object into the ultimate fetish. On a commercial level her intercultural communication will have wider audience appeal, but she is also subverting power roles and deconstructing hegemonic binaries.

Madonna exploits other fetishisms in the video, negrophilia (the fetish of otherness or beyondness by hyper-valourising dark skin colour), which is the forbidden colonial fantasy, signifying intense sexual activity. Kobena Mercer (Apter and Pietz 1993:316) in her essay on racial fetishism describes the functioning of this type of fetishism:

The simulation of the spectacular brilliance of black skin ... can be seen as the central notion of the fetish as metaphorical substitute for the absent phallus. It enables understanding of the psychic structure of disavowal or the splitting of levels of conscious and unconscious belief relevant to the ambiguous axis on which negrophilia and negrophobia intertwine.

*Necromancy* (rites pertaining to the conjuring up of souls) and *necrophilia* (erotic attraction to corpses, also associated with the medieval religious practice of venerating preserved body parts of mystics) are further fetishizations, which provoke the prejudices and stereotypes of the viewers. The saintly or 'Christ-like' statue, which becomes an idealized aesthetic object - a Eurocentric ju-ju doll - functions as an anthropological fetish. Madonna exploits several types of fetishism, challenging the establishment in terms of hegemonic power relations of gender, race and religious identities. In this persona she becomes a cultural barometer. She has orchestrated the persona of a libidinous, simulacral artefact, so that the exchange of objects and bodies as commodities is effected.

#### **4. Sado-masochism - (S/M)**

Cultural changes since the late twentieth century have caused a psychological crisis, which shows itself as a loss of meaning and a challenge to established beliefs for thousands of people. There seems to be a need for the re-negotiation of boundaries between technology, culture and identity. Fernbach (2002:190) suggests that:

Masochistic fetishism is due to the re-synthesising of the social identity via props and role-play in order to disavow cultural lack. To some extent increasing popularity of domination culture might be read as a social barometer that signifies new attitudes to sex that are less centred on genital intercourse and more on role-play.

The four Performance artists under discussion confront us with their apparent personal anxiety and 'thrown-ness', their desire for identity. I concur with O'Dell (1998:13) who argues, that, "if there is any pleasure whatsoever attainable in masochism it has to do with alienation". In making the point that alienation is the only legitimate complement to pain, these artists seek to deconstruct alienation, to use it towards critical ends. In their autobiographical role-play and extremism, the artists are constantly evaluating, challenging and confronting their particular notions of being human by using pain. They use pain and its signifiers (endurance, blood and body fluids) as methods of hermeneutic analytical interpretation and self-disclosure. The artist's fetishism and masochistic acts serve as a device for opening themselves up to latent experiences that resonate with the ontological understanding.

In remarking on contemporary culture's overriding fascination with selfhood and identity, Baumeister (1991:120) concludes that the cost of sustaining a modern identity is a stressful form of egotism - burdensome and highly problematic. He says it leads to the paradox of 'self-aggrandizement and self-annihilation'. In his research on the relationship between the self and the increasing popularity of masochism he (1991:21) states that:

The increase in the appetite for erotic masochism coincides with our culture's shift towards greater emphasis on individuality and the cultivation of a unique, autonomous, individually responsible and authentic identity ... people who are the most vulnerable to the stressful burden of self have the highest rates of masochism.

## 5. Masochism and identity

The illusion created by Performance artists is one of the stock in trade for drama. Madonna's costumes and mis-en-scène form a fetish, an object which fixes the desire of the viewer who becomes transported to an imaginary erotic world. The Blonde Ambition World Tour in 1990, (fig 2) was notorious for its provocative vintage corsets, sado-masochistic bondage gear, gender blurring and explicitly sexual choreography (Clerk 2002:84 – 91).



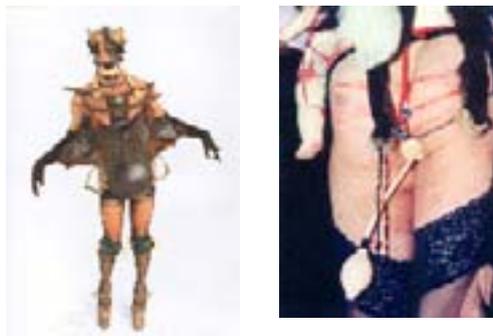
**Fig 2. Madonna, Blonde Ambition Tour, Japan (1990)**

(Clerk C, 2002:88).

Cohen, (fig 3) on the other hand, provides physical evidence of his actual participation in masochism, revealing painfully inflicted wounds, marks, bruises and bloodied skin and wears masks of anonymity to disrupt events in public and draw attention to conventions other than the conservative norm.

Whereas Madonna stages her performance so that it is risk free, Cohen exposes himself to further attack than he has already experienced during past performances. These two styles of expressing alienation, 'thrown-ness', are different in their use of the props, pertinent to their ideas. However, the desired end result of both performances is that their bodies can be fetishized by the audience, and in that way the audience is held in thrall. The relationship of witness and fetish practitioner enables the viewer of Performance art to be a complicit partner in the game even though the viewer neither inflicts nor receives pain, nor has the erotic satisfaction of direct contact. Hewitt (1997:36) reminds us that:

In sadomasochistic interaction inflicting pain and receiving pain are simultaneously private experiences and experiences that are witnessed and recognised by another ... he or she is assured of her sex appeal, self worth, and self mastery. The subordinate participant functions as a crucial witness or self object who confirms the dominator's self control and power.



**Fig 3. Steven Cohen, Fashion Mule & I was fucked,up my art (1999)**

(De Waal, A & Sassen, R Steven Cohen 2003:41).

In a similar way to fetish practitioners the viewers and the performers are engaged in a powerful dialogue with each other. Physical metaphors for alienation, psychological pain and estrangement are paraded publicly.

## 6. Eroticism and death

Death and eroticism both deal with mortality, the abolition of limits, and some form of transcendence or rite of passage, which may at least result in a feeling of harmony and at most hold a promise of immortality. Such ritualistic behaviour activates receptors throughout the body to release opioids that enhance positive mood states and are capable of alleviating stress. Fetish practitioners and Performance artists have learned how to utilise such endorphin induced pleasure-pain thresholds as a tool to alter consciousness. It serves as a simultaneous confirmation and escape from the self (Hewitt 1997:32, Baumeister 1991:115,135, Winkelman 2007:8, Krippner 2007:9).

Immersion in intense experiences of fear and fascination are symptoms of lack, motivated by something that is impossible to satisfy in the conventional manner. This is demonstrated in Cohen's *I was fucked up my art* (fig 3), *I wouldn't be seen dead in that* (fig 10), Abramovi's *Dragon Heads* (fig 4) and *Barney emulating Houdini's death defying acts in Cremaster 5* (fig 5)<sup>3</sup>.



**Fig 4. Marina Abramovi, Dragon Heads in Hamburg, Germany (1992)**  
(Abramovi M, 1998:330-331).

Each performance functions like a fetish; instead of repressing the desire to know death it is granted a “safe expression through the mechanism of disavowal without taking on the full threat” (Gamman and Makinen 1994:214). The hermeneutics aspect of such acts serves the same function as a substitute, a fetish object. It provides feeling of mastery over life and death – as if embracing one's own finitude. Loy (1996:52) points out that “the best we can hope for is to integrate a little more of death into our lives to learn to cope a little more with anxiety, and in that way become a little more aware of our transferences, so we choose less dangerous illusions. Then the issue becomes: How is it possible to die before you die? ”

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<sup>3</sup> The loss of the androgynous state during gestation is dramatically ritualised and echoes Barney's leitmotif of overcoming the “strictures of the self” (Spector 2002:81) to embrace some form of metamorphosis or even death as in *Cremaster 5*. This film resonates with the function of a fetish as it is about desire, lack, sublimation and disavowal as a means to an end.



**Fig.5. Matthew Barney, Cremaster 5 (1997)**

(Spector, N, 2003:440-441).

Bataille (1986:11) summarises one of the twentieth century maxims that the fear of death and fear of erotic urges go hand in hand and that desire and erotic activity celebrate life and therefore acknowledge death. He (1986:24) suggests that:

In essence the domain of eroticism is the domain of violence, of violation ... the whole business of eroticism is to destroy the self-contained character of the participators as they are in their normal lives ... we achieve the power to look death in the face and to perceive in death the pathway into unknowable and incomprehensible continuity - that path is the secret of eroticism and eroticism alone can reveal it.

The visceral body participating in various states of ecstasy defines phenomenological anatomy. During states of sensory intensification, such as pain, orgasm or ecstasy, there is a temporary loss of self and a blurring of identity. In contemplation of death, Abramovi (1995:100) wrote in her visual diary:

During our lifetime we have to die both literally and metaphorically and in this way we can be released from the fear of dying. When I went to Tibet and the Aborigines I was also introduced to some Sufi rituals. I saw that all these cultures push the body to the physical extreme in order to make a mental jump to eliminate the fear of death, the fear of pain and of all bodily limitations we live with. We in Western society are so afraid.

It would seem that one main purpose of the eroticism in her work and the extreme rituals to which she subjects herself, is to lose the fear of death (refer to *Dragon Heads*, 1990-1994, fig 4, and *Spirit House* fig 7). Eroticism and the closeness of death is used by the selected artists as an effective combination of themes for a dialogue between performers and viewers.

## **7. Psychological view of self-inflicted pain**

Throughout the history of mysticism there has been evidence of human participation in rituals of self-sacrifice and self-injury to stimulate the release of endorphins that induce euphoria<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Euphoria is the result of the release of endorphins. These are substances that occur naturally in the body and function as neurotransmitters to shut down pain sensations even in the presence of marked tissue damage (Barlow and Durand 1999: Glossary G 8). Certain ritualistic acts and shamanic procedures have been proven to effect altered states of consciousness that affect the slow wave discharges in the frontal cortex of the brain releasing endogenous opiates (Krippner 2007:9, Winkelman, 2000:99). In the Middle ages roving groups of flagellants lashed themselves with small

in the system. David Graver (1995:53) has interviewed several performers who participate in staged pain and he has deduced that:

Pain allows for a silent, invisible material drama within the body, a dialogue between awareness and sensation. The pain lights up an interior scene in which the mind meets the body as protagonist meets antagonist in a play. Each has its own agenda and they must adjust to one another within the dramatic conflict of the ordeal.

There is often a richness and beauty revealed in these performances, despite being frequently classified as violent theatricality due to the ecstasy derived from aggression, suffering and self-inflicted pain. There are, however, metaphysical and physiological links. Pain can be a means of creating a sense of harmony or 'mediacy'. This entails the negotiation of emotions between urge and attainment, and embodies immediately lived sensations. Hewitt says, (1997:34), "The submission to pain highlights the private nature of self-awareness, while also providing a way to feel a connection with an external cause of sensation."

Pain is usually an unwanted invasion into our bodies. To invite pain as the performers do, has a future goal. The author of *The Absent Body*, Hugh Leder (1990:74, 78) draws our attention to the fact that, "When in pain, the body becomes the object of an ongoing interpretive quest marked by an interiority that another cannot share. Sensations of well-being rarely induce such corporeal hermeneutics". After extensive research on the topic of deliberate self-harm, Baumeister (1991:64) concludes that, in order to relieve stress and get rid of the modern demands of selfhood and the internal spectator, the self-harmer wants immediate relief and will accept risks and costs to obtain it. He (1991:40) explains that, "Mental narrowing such as masochistic sexual activity, drunkenness or preparation for suicide all focus the mind superficially on the here and now ... shutting out past and future". But Hewitt (1997:36), who experienced violent self-destructive behaviour in her youth, entitles one of her chapters Pain as a pathway to social and spiritual identity. She (1997:28) says that self-flagellatio promotes the release of histamines and adrenaline into the bloodstream, leading to a sense of euphoria and physiologically based mystical experiences (refer to Abramovi in fig 7).

## **8. Pain as a fetish**

The process of fetishizing pain can be rationalized as an attempt to establish identity, and it is a form of self-disclosure about the precariousness of human existence. The libidinal investment of self-love and aggression, merged to annul anxiety caused by society's impositions on the individual, is evident in many acts other than self-inflicted pain. In the performances the viewers fulfill the role of a sadistic partner. The artists' pain becomes fetishized, and their notion of being becomes an exploration of the body's presence and absence in situations of discomfort. Pain indicates an explicit awareness of embodiment; it serves as a tool, alien presences or fetish objects.

Abramovi chooses theatricality and its combination of visible and invisible worlds as a vehicle to re-orientate and restrict her 'being-in-the-world' through painful pursuits as a fetishistic disavowal of death. Abramovic's exhibition *Spirit House* illustrates this (fig 7).



**Fig 7. Marina Abramović , Spirit House (1997)**

(Abramović M, *Artist body* 1998:385).

The type of disavowal as seen above involves projection, repression, and self-deception. It fetishizes some of our ‘highest yearnings’ into the narrow range of particular objects or acts. Loy (1996:13, 14) suggests that such a transference-object [act] creates the impression that we are “taming the terror of death ... organising the chaos of life by finding a meaning-system.”

Barney’s *Cremaster* series of artworks primarily deals with gender indeterminacy during the labioscrotal phase of development during gestation. Unlike Abramović , Cohen and Madonna, there is no indication of overt personal S/M activity in Barney’s work. However, *Cremaster 2* (fig 8) is set in the late nineteenth century – “the age of the corset” (Mascia-Lees 1992:83). Barney has featured his mother, Fay and two other role players (Frank and Bessie) in *Cremaster 2* (7) dressed in ‘waist nippers,’ worn under their turn of the century attire. In a contemporary context, tight lacing is usually associated with fetishism and masochistic attire and can effect excitement and heightened states of consciousness physically and bio-chemically. For some individuals a corset holds an erotic charge due to the visual accentuation of the female form, the play between desirability and restraint, inaccessibility, bondage and the association of pleasure obtained from constriction and release. Evidenced by the rest of his oeuvre this echoes Barney’s belief in self-denial: by withstanding physical strain he can effect future gratification (Saltz 1996:90, Spector 2002:4).



**Fig 8. Matthew Barney, the characters Fay and Bessie in Cremaster 2 (1999)**

(Spector, N, *The Cremaster Cycle* 2003:183, 203).

## 10. De-sensitization and ‘stress immunization’

The traditional boundaries of the body have been shifted to accommodate fetishism in some performances of Cohen, Madonna and Abramovi. Aggressive dramatisation and the implied violence and pain inflicted (on their own bodies) – create devices to authenticate their personae. Graver (1995:44) states that “Theatre ceases to be Performance art (while remaining, a performance) when it commits itself overwhelmingly to representing a particular world rather than performing before a particular audience”.

Cohen, in an interview with me in 2001 stated that he is acutely aware of these differences and so makes himself vulnerable off-stage in the public arena. Through the created tension, he initiates a dialogue that challenges prevailing norms and thus completes his artworks. He imposes his view on serious controversial issues that the traditional media would avoid and he exploits our fascination with marginality, as a self-styled and highly visible Other (carnavalesque, Jewish, gay fetish practitioner).

Further, he provides us the opportunity to see ourselves mirrored in him: we have the chance to define our cultural identities through him. This often magnifies our ‘lack’ or prejudices.

Performance artists who practice fetishism in public create a cultural space where they command attention and remind us of the prohibitions, temptations and conflicts encountered in our contemporary society. Their seemingly pagan hedonism and exhibitionism have been carefully constructed to present themselves as personae. By implication the performers anticipate that the viewers will assist them to extend their projections of fetishizing and fetishized personae by adding their own fetishism. The performance exploits the power of voyeurism, draws attention to contentious matters. At the same time the performers use the fact that the viewers regard them and their bodies as commodities as a species of satire.

When artists transcend conventional boundaries by presenting their bodies as primal material to engage in fetishistic, violent and painful spectacles, the result can be described using psychological terms. Marks (1987:460-463), author of *Fears Phobias and Rituals*, argues that therapeutic exposure is an accepted treatment for anxiety as it brings about de-sensitization and a form of stress immunization. It has been shown that self-exposure to fear cues and painful situations are almost as helpful as therapist-aided exposure. If this is true, the artists might be said to be acting out a version of what we believe is a ‘stress immunisation’, on a larger scale than ordinary people are able to do. Resorting to surrogate or fetish devices amulets, erotic codes and technological fantasies are management disciplines that assist in making the ‘life-world’ more endurable.

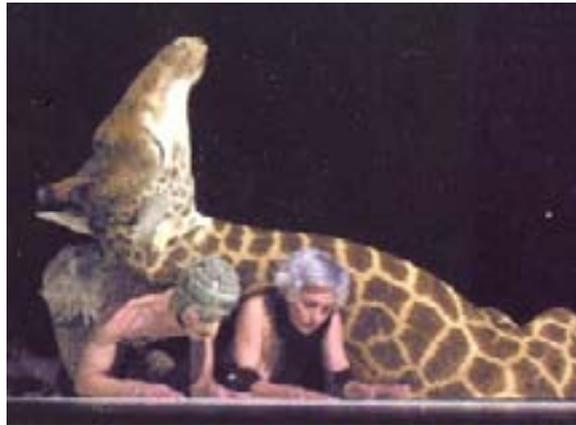
In contemporary society the idea of pain has almost become unnatural, a taboo subject. People find it embarrassing to be in the presence of someone in pain. Modern medical science and its contribution to the alleviation of pain are partially responsible for this. However, a good deal of this unease is due to the anxiety about chemical warfare, natural disasters, criminal violence and HIV. The trans-human fantasy of our body as a painless technological hybrid or cyborg compounds the issue.

All four artists under discussion articulate these fears by appropriating the ritualistic implementation of mental and physical risk and pain as seen in Pagan, Islamic, Buddhist, Hindu, Aboriginal and Judaeo-Christian rituals. Using pain as a compulsive means to an end is in itself a fetish and is mainly about the drive to establish the truth as ‘adequation’ (making a symbolic or metaphoric equation to the real lived experience).

Abramovi is known for her 25 years of public self-castigation as catharsis. This includes explicit autobiographical self-analysis and allegories of her personal and political relationships, and the mental and physical masochism in which references are made to religious martyrdom such as

in Spirit House (fig 7). Kristeva (1982:31) points out that “the deject never stops demarcating his universe. ... He has a sense of the danger, of the loss that the pseudo object attracting him represents for him, but he cannot help taking the risk at the very moment he sets himself apart. And the more he strays the more he is saved.”

For these artists, meaning is embedded in discomfort both for the viewer and the self. In *I wouldn't be seen dead in that* (fig 10) Cohen physically encumbers the dancers and himself with fetish shoes, harnesses and the weight of dead animals as a metaphor for the emotional pain he feels he has suffered as a marginalized and persecuted person.



**Fig 10. Steven Cohen, *I wouldn't be seen dead in that* (2003)**

(De Waal, A & Sassen, 2003:74).

In this work he makes extensive use of phenomenologically charged associated meanings. For example, Yiddish songs and images of German persecutions during the Holocaust are juxtaposed with hunting scenes. The French philosopher Amélie Pailla (2003:3) wrote in the 2003 FNB Dance Umbrella catalogue that this performance piece is:

A gesture of self assertion deriving less from a desire to provoke than to make a statement on account of ones self to issue testimony to what and as one actually is ... as if mankind is simply unable to make of all social, sexual and even artistic life anything else but a hunting exercise wherein mankind itself is the prey.

Barney's post-Oedipal<sup>5</sup> myths of re-birth, candidacy and rites of passage entwine hermeneutics, fetishism and abjection as seen in *Cremaster 4* (fig11). His works contain ample references in their iconography of physical orifices, and includes the use of body fluids (blood, sperm, excrement and its counterpart Vaseline) as art-making materials<sup>6</sup>. These natural expulsions from the body are metaphorical in the artworks of Barney and Cohen and signify the disintegration or permeability of

<sup>5</sup> Oedipus complex: Sigmund Freud believed that young males love their mothers and hate their fathers. He named this tendency after the Greek play *Oedipus Rex* by Sophocles. In the play, Oedipus kills his father and marries his mother (Hergenhahn 1997:473). In psycho-analysis this intra-psychic struggle of a young boy between his lust for his mother and his fear of castration is eventually resolved, resulting in the development of the superego or conscience (Barlow and Durand 1999 Glossary G-14). Barney's work constantly deals with an array of physical and psychological struggles to promote development and re-birth.

<sup>6</sup> Sensationalist artworks such as described in this research paper probably address the most objectionable taboo manipulated by all ideologies: the body. Abhorrent slimy matter and body fluids are considered to reference the orifices of the body (food, waste and sexuality). Hewitt (1997:17) points out that “our visceral reactions to body fluids betray our fear of destroying the unity of the human body”. “Gothicity of matter is” where the self dissolves, meaning collapses and the need develops for body boundaries to be restructured. This resonates with the psychoanalytic philosophies of Kristeva 1982:9), who refers to “a victim, but a fascinated victim”.

boundaries set by social custom. They are the symbols of our disavowal to gain a stable identity and harness the physically 'impure'.

Elizabeth Gross (in Fletcher and Benjamin 1990:92) argues that "abjection is the expression of both a division (between the subject and its body) and a merging (of self and Other, the social)". The acknowledgement of this corporeal relationship between the outside and the inside is employed as a signifier of creative and functional violence in Barney's work. The references to Oedipus and Dionysus in *Cremaster 5* revolve around the binaries of lack and desire and the disruption of the dominant social narratives. The Vaseline tunnel is a metaphor (like a fetish) for the elasticity of meaning and perpetual collapse of hegemonic social order. Spector (2002:82) suggests that it indicates the "slippage between".



**Fig 11. Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 4* (1994)** (Spector, N, 2003:2).

## **10. Conclusion**

In analysis of the visual texts it became clear that, the cultural changes since the late twentieth century have caused a social crisis. Due to the loss of meaning and the challenge to established beliefs, there is a renegotiation of boundaries between technology, culture and the reconfiguration of identity. The personalised over-evaluation of, and the displacement the artists attach to, the body with its fluids, physical pain and humiliation goes beyond their regular status. It undercuts its collective social value as signifier. Like a fetish, these artists use pain and abjection as a means to an end. They convert their violent theatricality into a type of ecstasy derived from aggression, suffering and self-inflicted pain.

A metaphysical discourse occurs when artists transcend boundaries by presenting their bodies as primal material in order to engage in violent and painful spectacles. The bodies of the performers become themselves fetishes that retain the audience's interest. However for the selected Performance artists there is a drive to establish personal 'truths'. The quest for emotional equilibrium and reparation occurs through nerve cells that release endogenous opioids and endorphins which play a role in the brain's pleasure pathway controlling the experience of reward. This is confirmed by the latest research about the interconnectedness of subjective phenomenology and hermeneutics in

relation to the objective cognitive sciences.

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