
MA MAJOR RESEARCH PAPER

RESURRECTING THE BODY:
AFFECT AND AGENCY IN ARTAUD'S *THEATRE OF CRUELTY*,
CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE AND
IMMERSIVE VIRTUAL SPACE

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The Major Research Paper is submitted
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

Joint Graduate Program in Communication & Culture
Ryerson University – York University
Toronto, Ontario, Canada

September 21, 2007

Energy is the only life, and is from the Body....Energy is Eternal Delight

~ William Blake

*'Cause when you don't have access to power
Poetry replaces science
And performance art becomes politics.*

~ Guillermo Gómez-Peña

The stage is set. It's 1967 and the house is packed. As the Eastern-influenced ethereal sounds of Robby Krieger's guitar begins to swell slowly, Jim Morrison demands, "Come on, turn the lights down. Turn them way down. Hey Mr. Lightman, you gotta turn those lights way down man. Hey I'm not kidding, you gotta turn the lights down. Aw come on." Someone yells from the audience "Turn the lights down!" Morrison responds with a soft "Oh what do we care...This is the end, beautiful friend...." Imagine for a moment that fifty years after this original electrifying performance, the opportunity might exist to see The Doors in what is known as an "immersive virtual space" or simply "virtual reality". Donning head mounted device (HMD) and body suit, the fantasy of attending a concert featuring The Doors can become a 'virtual' reality - reminiscent of Aldous Huxley's "feelies" in *A Brave New World* (1932). Although the chance to virtually experience a rock concert of one's choice is not yet available¹, artists like Char Davies are experimenting with virtual reality through the creation of immersive virtual art, which plays with sensation and perception by altering consciousness through technology.

The role of art in creating and changing consciousness is a running theme in the above scenario: both Jim Morrison's explosive stage performances and Char Davies' immersive virtual art are examples of art forms that directly involve and affect the body

¹ The closest example is the *Imax: Rolling Stones* (1991) documentary shot as large-format concert footage.

on a visceral level. Performance and virtual art appeals to a whole-body experience, where the importance of affect and agency are brought to the forefront. The body finds potential to become freed from repressions, or ‘resurrected’, on a psychic, physical and interactive level. This process of the liberation of the body involves a transgressing of psychic and physical boundaries, leading to an interactive relation of the mind to the body which symbolically achieves equilibrium or homeostasis through osmosis. In an age where the rational mind and reason prevails and the senses are compromised through over-stimulation, the task of unifying the mind and body leads to a crucial awareness of an embodied consciousness. This consciousness is extended from an individual level to a collective level through the social play, healing potential, or cathartic expression of art. By appealing to the senses and emphasizing a social and emotional connectivity through performance and immersive virtual art, the notion of an embodied collective consciousness is raised and the opportunity for social awareness, healing and unification is made salient. Using Susan Sontag’s *Against Interpretation* and Norman O. Brown’s *Life Against Death*, the possibility for social change and healing through the emotional and social appeals of art will be explored through the work of explicit body artists, The Doors and Jim Morrison, and Char Davies.

Life Against Death; or Resurrecting the Psychic, Physical, and Interactive Body

The resurrection of the body: on the agenda for psychoanalysis, mysticism, poetry, and the philosophical critique of modern science.

~ Norman O. Brown (1959)

I am interested in exploring Brown’s conception of a resurrection of the body through creative transgressions and Sontag’s notion of an erotics of art. Beginning with

Antonin Artaud's conceptualization of a "theatre of cruelty", I propose to examine artistic embodiments of transgression and erotics in the works of performance artists such as Karen Finley and Vito Acconci, as well as in the virtual art of Char Davies.

Transgression and erotics in popular culture will be explored through the performance style of Jim Morrison and The Doors. Using Nietzsche and Brown's discussions of the Apollonian and Dionysian conditions or states of artistic consciousness, I argue that a return to the senses or to the romanticist notion of the "deep interior" is required in order for the process of social healing and unification to begin.

Historically, we can trace the conceptualizations of consciousness in Western philosophical thought. During the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, beginning with such thinkers as Descartes, Hobbes, Spinoza and Newton, popular Western discourses have placed great emphasis on a dualistic approach to consciousness grounded in reason and observation. This Cartesian model of a mind/body split has dominated our notions of being and reality, where the mind and logic rule through rational thought. More specifically, during the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, central importance was placed on the individual's powers of reason. However, the romantic period of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries challenged the "the supremacy of reason and observation...and a new world was created – the world of the *deep interior*, lying beneath the veneer of conscious reason" (Gergen 20). This emphasis on the psychological "deep interior" placed emotional expression and the passionate soul at the forefront, and languished in the explorations of concepts such as love, imagination, genius and mysticism. Creativity and artistic expression were celebrated, and the unconscious revered. It comes as no surprise that Freudian theory, with its emphasis on unconscious

forces and drives and its empirical approach to human behaviour, would place Sigmund Freud as “a transitional figure between the romantic and modernist sensibilities” as “his significance is largely due to his ability to unify the opposing discourses” (27). Of course, the modernist project houses such notions as objective observation and empirical methodologies, placing science and mathematics at the forefront of “human progress”, and tends to devalue the importance of the workings of the “deep interior” so celebrated by the romantics.

In an attempt to revive a romanticist interest into the workings of the human psyche, I am interested in exploring the creative processes involved in art production and consumption. In particular, I would like to discover a link between creativity and coping with emotional excess, especially when this excess is affectively linked to trauma and traumatic experience. From a Freudian perspective, the experience of being born is inherently traumatic; thus originary trauma lies at the very foundations of our being. Perhaps a more pressing concern related to the realms of creativity and consciousness is found in the notions of repression and sublimation. As stated by Norman O. Brown in *Life Against Death*, “the question confronting mankind is the abolition of repression – in traditional Christian language, the resurrection of the body” (307). This repression is caused by the impending Freudian conflict between the pleasure-principle and the reality-principle, or by the repression of the life instinct. In order to liberate oneself from this repression, or as Brown suggests, in order to “resurrect the body”, we must return to Friedrich Nietzsche’s discussion of Dionysus and Apollo.

Creative and artistic states or forces were introduced by Friedrich Nietzsche as the “Dionysian” and “Apollonian” states of consciousness. Nietzsche describes these states

as “the compulsion to have visions and as a compulsion to an orgiastic state. Both conditions are rehearsed in ordinary life, too, but weaker: in dream and in intoxication” (420). Psychoanalytically, these states of being are intrinsically linked to the pleasure-principle or life (Eros) instinct, which is repressed by the reality-principle. This repression creates a psychic tension between these two principles or states of being. Moreover, Nietzsche states that “the same antithesis obtains between dream and intoxication: both release artistic powers in us, but different ones: the dream those of vision, association, poetry; intoxication those of gesture, passion, song, dance” (420). The Apollonian and Dionysian states of consciousness are linked to music and sculpture respectively, both of which elements can be found in theatre and performance. Nietzsche in *The Birth of Tragedy* makes mention of the “Apolline art of the image-maker or sculptor (*Bildner*) and the imageless art of music, which is that of Dionysos” (14). Both forces come together in the art of Morrison and Davies, and resonate with Antonin Artaud’s conceptualization of a “theatre of cruelty”. Artaud looked to theatre to wake us from our social paralysis, where he writes that “[a]t the point of deterioration which our sensibility has reached, it is certain that we need above all a theater that wakes us up: nerves and heart” (84). Furthermore, he claims that “[e]verything that acts is a cruelty. It is upon this idea of extreme action, pushed beyond all limits, that theater must be rebuilt.” (85). His emphasis on a deterioration of the senses is echoed in Sontag’s realization that interpretation and hermeneutics are dulling our sensibilities. She states that

[l]ike the fumes of the automobile and heavy industry which befoul the urban atmosphere, the effusion of interpretations of art today poisons our sensibilities.

In a culture whose already classical dilemma is the hypertrophy of the intellect at

the expense of energy and sensual capability, interpretation is the revenge of the intellect upon art. Even more. It is the revenge of the intellect upon the world....The world, our world, is depleted, impoverished enough. Away with all duplicates of it, until we again experience more immediately what we have” (7).

We are collectively suffering from a depletion of our sensual experience of life. To recover this experience, we can turn to potentially liberating artistic practices that challenge the senses and evoke emotional extremes as experiential and informative states of being.

A Little More Eros and Less Strife; or Towards An Erotics of Art

Everything seen...

The vision gleams in every air.

Everything had...

*The far sound of cities, in the evening,
In sunlight, and always.*

Everything known...

O Tumult! O Visions! These are the stops of life.

Departure in affection and shining sounds.

~ Arthur Rimbaud, “Departure” (1875)

Responding to Susan Sontag’s call for an “erotics of art” as against hermeneutics, I propose to explore the impact and influence of Antonin Artaud’s writing on the “theatre of cruelty” through a case study of his life and an analysis of pertinent texts (1961, 14). Sontag herself was critical of hermeneutics, where she claims that interpretation “takes the sensory experience of the work of art for granted, and proceeds from there....Think of the sheer multiplication of works of art available to every one of us, superadded to the conflicting tastes and odors and sights of the urban environment that bombard our

senses” (13). She goes on to state that our culture is predominantly “based on excess, on overproduction; the result is a steady loss of sharpness in our sensory experience. All the conditions of modern life – its material plentitude, its sheer crowdedness – conjoin to dull our sensory faculties” (13). In order to recover our senses, she states that we

must learn to *see* more, to *hear* more, to *feel* more. Our task is not to find the maximum amount of content in a work of art, much less to squeeze more content out of the work than is already there. Our task is to cut back content so that we can see the thing at all. The aim of all commentary on art now should be to make works of art – and, by analogy, our own experience – more, rather than less, real to us. The function of criticism should be to show *how it is what it is, even that it is what it is*, rather than to show *what it means*. In place of a hermeneutics we need an erotics of art. (14)

This erotics of art is found in Artaud’s ideas about the liberating function and role of theatre in an age that encourages a repression of the senses and the emotional self.

Artaud’s notion of performance as cruelty is defined as “its authenticity as event, the visceral nature of the encounter between spectator and spectacle” (Gordon 277). This conceptualization of theatre emphasizes the affective relationship between the actor and the audience, and shifts the focus from merely an interpretation of the dramatic text or spoken word to the elicited emotional response. This shift is critical to an experiential and phenomenological reading of contemporary performance, most notably in terms of the effects of avant-garde and experimental practices such as performance art.

Furthermore, Artaud’s transgressive vision of theatre incites a conflation of art and life which is crucial to notions of intersubjectivity and cathartic healing (unity, ‘wholeness’)

in the aftermath of trauma and loss. Artaud's notion of a theater of cruelty assists in conceptualizing the body in art, and more specifically refers to a resurrection of the body through art. His ideas about theatre and the body are best aligned with the notion of a psychical resurrection because he is writing about the mind and consciousness, and about the body engaged in an alternative relationship with the mind. As stated by Sontag, what Artaud "advocates is an alternative relation to the mind", where the mind is produced through the body and the body through the mind (1980, 38). He states in his preface to *Theatre and Its Double* that a

civilized man judges and is judged according to his behavior, but even the term 'civilized' leads to confusion: a cultivated 'civilized' man is regarded as a person instructed in systems, a person who thinks in forms, signs, representations – a monster whose faculty of deriving thoughts from acts, instead of identifying acts with thoughts, is developed to an absurdity (8).

Artaud's search for a unified, non-dualistic consciousness lead him to theorize a theatre that addresses "itself neither to the spectators' minds nor to their senses but to their 'total existence'" (Sontag 36). This total-body experience highlights his quest for unity and wholeness and gestures towards the psychoanalytic concept of "polymorphous perversity", which describes the ability to derive erotic pleasure from any part of the body and is not simply concentrated in the genitals. Art that addresses the whole-body is exemplifying the polymorphous pleasure that has wrongly been compartmentalized to the genitals; this compartmentalization has further divided our mind from our body.

According to Arthur Janov, the psychiatrist who discovered Primal Scream therapy, the neurotic experiences eroticism as "localized sensations in the genitalia, rather than full

bodily sexual feelings which are felt from the head to the toes” (72). This fragmentation is a symptom of neurosis, as anything “that evokes feeling will cause it to be felt all over the body” in a healthy individual (72).

Artaud’s psychical influence is noted in the works of explicit body performers whose use of ritualistic ordeal and endurance art challenges bodily, psychical and social boundaries, such as Gina Pane and Marina Abramović’s “corporeal art” and Vito Acconci’s *Following Piece* (1969). Artaud’s work was also extremely influential to the works of Jim Morrison; this influence is noted especially in Morrison’s performance style and presence. He strove to shock his audience out of social paralysis and to wake up the senses, freeing the self from tensions between pleasure-principle and reality-principle. Linking Dionysian and Apollonian states to mysticism, Brown claims that

[m]ysticism, in the mind of the general public, is identified with that flight from the material world...which, from the psychoanalytical point of view, may be termed Apollonian or sublimation mysticism. But there is in the Western tradition another kind of mysticism, which can be called Dionysian or body mysticism, which stays with life, which is the body, and seeks to transform and perfect it. Western body mysticism – a tradition which urgently needs re-examination – contains three main strands: the Christina (Pauline) notion of the ‘spiritual body, the Jewish (cabalistic) notion of Adam’s perfect body before the Fall, and the alchemical notion of the subtle body. (310)

This “body mysticism” that is in need of reexamining is explored through a ‘physical’ resurrection of the body in Morrison’s performances, where the ritualistic, orgiastic, sacrificial, crucified, and visceral come to the forefront. Performance artist Allucquère

Roseanne (Sandy) Stone, as well as Morrison attempt to break the ‘fourth wall’ between themselves and their audiences by actively engaging their spectators in a bodily mystical way. In her performance piece entitled *Drive-By Theory* (1999), Stone facilitates a connection to her audience by having the audience participate verbally in her ‘polymorphously perverse orgasm’, whereas Morrison connects physically by crowd-surfing and shocking his audience aurally through pitch and experimentations with sound. Thus, the psychical and physical resurrections of the body wake us up to our sensual experience and purge us of the social illnesses caused by the fragmentation and compartmentalization of the (collective) self.

The interactive resurrection found in digital performance or new media arts combines both the psychic and the physical and manifests in digital immersive virtual space art, such as Davies’ works entitled *Osmose* (1995) and *Ephémère* (1998). These immersive, whole-body artworks involve the spatial and the corporeal, where the transformative experience of virtual space is manifest in what Davies describes as “a spatio-temporal arena in which mental constructs of the world can be given three-dimensional form and be kinaesthetically explored through full-body immersion and interaction” (qtd. in Dixon 2007, 372). These works evoke a ‘sublimation mysticism’ or the Apollonian state of consciousness or being, which emphasizes dreams, visions and the beautiful. Furthermore, Davies’ art draws the immersant into her technologically created virtual “sculptures”, where the participant can navigate through the environments depicting nature and the interior of the body using her breath and balance. Davies’ fascinating work will be further addressed and discussed at a later point. For now, the digital technology that Davies has employed in her immersive virtual art gestures towards

an interactive resurrection of the body by stimulating the whole-body sensorium through breath and movement.

Moreover, Artaud's prescient and intriguing mention of the "*virtual reality* of theatre" anticipates and incites questions pertaining to the present use of this term and to the digitization of performance and to immersive virtual art (49). His works and ideas are crucial in today's world where we suffer a loss (or to use Frederic Jameson's term, a 'waning') of affect, our senses numbed by an overwhelming barrage of media images and advertising. Artaud's claim that "[w]e cannot go on prostituting the idea of theater whose only value is in its excruciating, magical relation to reality and danger" (89) conjures a stripping away of commodity fetishisms and ideological mystification to get at the root of ontology, and to discover that existence which we experience as cruel. Because of Artaud's personal struggle with mental illness, drug addiction, electroconvulsive therapy (ECT), and nine years of confinement in asylums, an examination of his life will prove useful in deconstructing his theories of performance in relation to both originary and lived trauma, and to suggest how and in what way trauma, creativity, and art might be closely linked. Artaud's quest for a new and transgressive theatre that engages the whole-body is related to a rejection of hermeneutics through its appeal to the sensorium and the repressed romantic sensibilities, thus exemplifying an erotics of art and a resurrection of the body. Artaud's relationship to and influence on transgressive art practices will be explored in more detail in the next section. Linking transgression to the evolution of art and the body leads to a discussion on the emergence of such boundary-crossing and experimental practices as performance art.

Transgressing Artaud, or This Is the End, My Beautiful Friend

That's what art is about – its shock value.

~ Karen Finley (1990)

Transgression is generally defined as stepping or transgressing across boundaries. In the context of art-making practices, transgression usually involves artistic acts that challenge socially prescribed norms and values and are thus found offensive and/or shocking. Conceptually, controversial or subversive art may depict a mixing and hybridization of elements signifying both the sacred and the profane (Dubin 5). When examining images containing transgressive signifiers, such as the “transcendent” photography of Andre Serrano’s “Piss Christ” (a sculptural representation of Christ doused in Serrano’s urine), and “Milk, Blood” (painted with bodily fluids), the sacred and profane elements are revealed by each piece’s respective title. “Milk, Blood” in particular “suggests a visual breach of sacrosanct cultural boundaries, with the discomfiture that may attend any such violation” (5). These visual elements challenge socially implemented boundaries and evoke a sort of visceral response that may or may not be interpreted as disgust. Because Dubin focuses on still images in this conceptualization, there tends to be an emphasis on the content as opposed to the form of these pieces.

In terms of examining the formal elements of transgressive art, it becomes apparent that performance art transgresses the boundary between the content and form; that is, because performance art uses the body as *both* the subject and the object of its work, the line between content and form becomes blurred. By definition, the notion of live performance art defies categorization, as stated by Adrian George: “An all-

encompassing definition is almost impossible, but to put it at its simplest, live art contains a living element, a human presence – a body (or bodies) in space and at a specific moment, or for a definite period” (10). In both form and content, this art practice is subversive and potentially counter-hegemonic by nature due to the sheer “difficult[y] to name” this medium (11). The most important elements of performance art include time, space, the body of performer, and the body’s relationship to the audience. As transient, temporary, spontaneous and open texts, performance art uses one’s body as a canvas where the form is literally embodied in an individual.

Traditionally however, visual art-making practices have been primarily used to document, through portraiture and landscape painting, the lives and experiences of those affluent individuals who could afford to commission an artist’s services. The oil-painting tradition, which began roughly in the 16th century and ended around 1900 (Berger 84), illustrates the notions of upper-class ownership that aided in the creation of the culture of the elite. This perspective or “traditional way of seeing was undermined by Impressionism and overthrown by Cubism” (84), where art began to be used to manipulate perspective and encourage multiple subjectivities. Contemporary and conceptual art thus became a way to communicate multiple perspectives, subjective experiences, and emotional affect through expression and reception.

At the turn of the 20th century, with the rise of the avant-garde, Surrealist and Dadaist traditions, artistic expression was used as a method of questioning and challenging the dominant discourses of oppression and repression, particularly those pertaining to the body. With the beginning of WWI, the violences and trauma associated with war and conscription in the western world inspired a political movement in the arts

to reject and resist the domination and control of bodies. The inherent threat of extinction posed by war and what Schivelbusch has dubbed “the culture of defeat” (5) created a sort of “trauma culture”, which we also appear to be experiencing today in post-9/11 North America (Kaplan). Psychoanalytic notions of an originary trauma and existential questions of suffering also lend support to the desire for an artistic release through expression. As stated by Brown, “[t]his is the truth contained in Freud’s formula of art as substitute-gratification. Compare Nietzsche’s doctrine of the necessary connection between suffering and art: ‘What must this people have suffered, that they might become thus beautiful’” (58).

The rise of industry and technology during the early 20th century coupled with the trauma of war prompted artists such as Marcel Duchamp and the Baroness Else von Freytag-Loringhoven to question traditional art forms and processes by using their bodies as central to their artworks. This questioning arose as a response to the horrors of reality as produced and constructed by both violence and technology. Thus, avant-garde artists began experimenting with alternative forms of art to critique the condition of the body at that time, and to reconstruct notions of the impact of industrialization on society more generally. Readymades and spontaneous street performances typified the work of Duchamp and the Baroness, exemplified by the Baroness who “systematically applied mass-produced technological objects (taillights, cables) and consumer objects (tomato cans) to her body” in an attempt to render unfamiliar the familiar through found art (Gammel 185). This notion of found art was made famous by Duchamp’s rendering of a urinal into his renowned “Fountain”, signed under one of his many pseudonyms “R. Mutt”. These historic avant-gardes attempted to transgress formal elements of art

practices in order to deconstruct rigid boundaries between art and life, and to suggest new ways of being in the dying era of Victorian repression. Perhaps the most transgressive art form to arise out of this repression is that of performative body art, which saw a resurgence in the Euro-American art scene in the 1960s and early 1970s (Jones 18).

Artaud was also influenced by the Victorian era of repression and the atrocities of the First World War. Because most of his writing on the theatre was produced during the 1930s and 40s, Artaud's impact and influence is predominantly on contemporary performance artists of the 60s until the present.

Art Thou Artaud?, or Impact and Influences

*I turned silences and nights into words.
What was unutterable, I wrote down.
I made the whirling world stand still.*

*I wrote silences, I wrote the night.
I recorded the inexpressible.
I fixed frenzies in their flight.*

~ Arthur Rimbaud, *A Season in Hell* (1873)

The impact and influence of Artaud's work is extremely far-reaching, vast and pervasive, particularly on the theory and practice of theatre and on rock performances in popular culture. In particular, his profound impact on theatre in the Western world has divided the theatre world into two periods: "before Artaud and after Artaud. No one who works in the theatre now is untouched by the impact of Artaud's specific ideas about the actor's body and voice, the use of music, the role of the written text, the interplay between the space occupied by the spectacle and the audience's space" (Sontag 1980,

42). Artaud claims that the emphasis on language and text in the theatre is in dire need of reexamination, as he states in *The Theatre and Its Double* that the

theater, which is in *no thing*, but makes use of everything – gestures, sounds, words, screams, light, darkness – rediscovers itself at precisely the point where the mind requires a language to express its manifestations. And the fixation of the theater in one language – written words, music, lights, noises – betokens its imminent ruin, the choice of any one language betraying a taste for the special effects of that language; and the dessication of the language accompanies its limitations (12).

Artaud's writing on the theatre has profoundly influenced playwrights such as Jean Genet, Eugene Ionesco, Arthur Adamov, Harold Pinter, Gunter Grass, and Peter Weiss (Knapp xiii). Jane Goodall writes in *Artaud and the Gnostic Drama* that

[t]he Artaud myth as we have received it is largely a product of the 1960s, which made known to us two Artauds. One was taken up by some of the best-known gurus of the counter-culture as the prophet of a theatre at once lost and yet to come, where holy and violent passions were to be unleashed. This was the Artaud in whose name actors explored physical and psychological extremes, and in the name of whose Theatre of Cruelty they set out to stage a visionary revolt against the dark forces of civilization. The other Artaud appeared in the work of French critical theorists and philosophers.... (1 - 2)

The French critical theorists and philosophers she is referring to are none other than such profoundly influential critical figures as Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Derrida,

and Gilles Deleuze (2). An examination of these playwrights, theorists, and philosophers is beyond the scope of this study; however, his influence on performance artists and rock music performance is indeed relevant. Artaud's influence can be seen in the works of such contemporary and postmodern performance artists as Karen Finley, Vito Acconci, Gina Pane, Chris Burden, Marina Abramovic and Franko B, all of whom experiment with psychical and bodily boundaries between the performer and the spectators in shocking and extreme ways. Their artworks will be expanded upon in a later section describing Artaud's theatre of cruelty in more detail.

Artaud's influence is also noted in the experimental art practice deemed "Happenings", which "merely follows Artaud's prescription for a spectacle which will eliminate the stage, that is, the distance between the spectators and performers, and 'will physically envelope the spectator'" (Sontag 1961, 274). In the realm of popular culture and rock music, Artaud's influence is apparent in the performances by Iggy Pop and the Three Stooges, Alice Cooper, Bauhaus, Nine Inch Nails, Marilyn Manson, The Sex Pistols, Nirvana, and the punk and goth rock scenes more generally. Preceding any of these artists however, Artaud's influence is perhaps most notable in the Dionysian performances by The Doors and Jim Morrison during the late 1960s. As the celebrated "Lizard King" of rock music, the self-professed "Mr. Mojo Risin" Morrison was highly influenced by Artaud's ideas about bridging the gap between the performer and the audience; this bridge was manifested first through experimentations with music and sound. On a more literal level, Morrison sought to physically connect to his audience by being the first music performer to engage bodily with his spectators through crowd-surfing and performing from amidst the audience.

Me, Artaud; or Come on Baby Light My Fire

*For magic to enter into Artaud,
it's magic to croak in Artaud,
and that's the way that Antonin Artaud took his enemies prisoners,
for I, Antonin Artaud, for nine years convicted of delirium and madness,
I now performed magic.*

~ Artaud, "The Current Plan" (1947)

Artaud's notion of a 'theatre of cruelty' was born as a reaction against the decadence of bourgeois theatre in the early twentieth century. Like most modern intellectuals, Artaud sought to reject and resist the bourgeois indulgence in the "high arts" and aimed to bring art closer to life; in fact, Artaud lived his art as he lived his life, and recommended that his readers do the same:

We need to live first of all; to believe in what makes us live and that something *makes* us live – to believe that whatever is produced from the mysterious depths of ourselves need not forever haunt us as an exclusively digestive concern. I mean that if it is important for us to eat first of all, it is even more important for us not to waste in the sole concern for eating our simple power of being hungry. (7)

He goes on to write that art and life, and in effect the mind and the body, must insist on a culture-in-action, of a "culture growing within us like a new organ, a sort of second breath; and on civilization as an applied culture controlling even our subtlest actions, a *presence of mind*; the distinction between culture and civilization is an artificial one, providing two words to signify an identical function" (8). Most importantly, Artaud states in his preface that "we can begin in the form an idea of culture, an idea which is first of all a protest....A protest against the idea of culture as distinct from life – as if

there were culture on one side and life on the other, as if true culture were not a refined means of understanding and *exercising* life” (10). Artaud’s disdain for decadence is paralleled in Nietzsche’s *The Will To Power*, where he states that “[o]ur religion, morality, and philosophy are decadence forms of man. The *countermovement*: art” (419). Artaud’s countermovement is his theatre of cruelty, a theatre that, like life, does not refer to “life as we know it from its surface of fact, but to that fragile, fluctuating center which forms never reach. And if there is still one hellish, truly accursed thing in our time, it is our artistic dallying with forms, instead of being like victims burnt at the stake, signaling through the flames” (13). A look into the life of the poet, playwright, and actor Artaud will shed light on his dissatisfaction with the bourgeois theatre and his search for an artistic expression that changes consciousness. Suffering from nervous disorders and depression for most of his life, Artaud struggled with expressing his emotional pain through words and looked to relieve his inner anguish through an art form that would purge the collective self of emotional and social illness. Artaud’s quest to “wake up the life instinct” lead him to inhabit the status of a sort of moral surgeon of the collective body, purging us of our social ills. Sontag succinctly writes that Artaud’s

imagery implies a medical rather than a historical view of society: society is ailing. Like Nietzsche, Artaud conceived of himself as a physician to culture – as well as its most painfully ill patient. The theatre he planned is a commando action against the established culture, an assault on the bourgeois public; it would both show people that they are dead and wake them up from their stupor. The man who was to be devastated by repeated electric-shock treatments during the last three of nine consecutive years in mental hospitals proposed that theatre administer to

culture a kind of shock therapy. Artaud, who often complained of feeling paralyzed, wanted theatre to renew ‘the sense of life’. (1980, 42-43)

The Resurrection of Artaud

*Now for me! The story of one of my follies.
For a long time I boasted of possessing every
possible landscape and held in derision the
celebrities of modern painting and poetry.*

~ Arthur Rimbaud (1873)

Antonin Artaud was born Antoine-Marie-Joseph in Marseilles on September 4, 1896 to Antoine-Roi, a sea captain, and Euphrasie Nalpas, who was of Greek origin. In 1901 Artaud was afflicted with a near-fatal attack of meningitis, beginning his life-long struggle with “nervous disorders” that manifested as stuttering, facial ticks, intense headaches, pains, and depression. As a sensitive and rather frail child, Artaud’s emotional health also suffered as his relationship with his mother was strained and stormy, while he saw very little of his father. Artaud’s animosity towards his father grew in early adulthood when the pressure to take over his father’s prosperous ship-building business became overwhelming. Years later Artaud wrote that “until I was 27 I lived with an obscure hatred of fathers, of my own father – until the day I saw him die. Then, this inhuman severity which I felt he had always exerted against me gave way. Another being came out of this body. And, for the first time in my life, this father held out his arms to me” (qtd. in Greene 16).

Prompted by a burning desire to write, the sensitive teenaged Artaud started a little magazine at the age of fourteen under the romantic pseudonym “Louise des Attides”, which lasted until he was nineteen, when plagued by intense headaches and

depression his parents decided to admit him to the first of a long series of nursing homes. At the age of twenty, after having seemingly regained his health, Artaud was drafted by the Army; however, his influential father was able to have him released after serving for less than a year. After his release, plagued with worsening headaches and pains, Artaud's parents sent him to a Swiss nursing home that specialized in treating nervous disorders where he remained for nearly two years. In 1920 Artaud's health appeared greatly improved and he ventured off to Paris to further develop his love for writing. Placed in the care of Dr. Edouard Toulouse, the chief of a clinic in suburban Paris who was also the literary editor of *Demain*, Artaud was able to contribute articles and poetry to the modest periodical while working with Toulouse to recover his health. Once in Paris, however, Artaud found himself fascinated by the theatre.

Naomi Greene in *Poet Without Words* writes that “in the 1920's, nowhere was there more experimentation and excitement than in the theater. Here, a number of important directors were rebelling against naturalistic theatrical conventions which favored plays offering a ‘slice of life’ – more often than not involving the most sordid aspects of contemporary life ” (18). Under the direction of the avant-garde director Lugné-Poe, Artaud began his acting career in a small role in a play by symbolist poet Henri de Régnier; two years later after being introduced to Charles Dullin, whose theatrical work rejected naturalism and placed special emphasis on breath and diction, Artaud began working with the Théâtre de l'Atelier (which Dullin had founded) as a student and later as a member of the troupe. Even while acting Artaud continued to work on his writing which grappled with “an examination of the nature of literary creation, and, indeed, of the process of thought itself. Artaud was tortured unceasingly by an

inability to capture and express his thoughts” (21). Convinced of a suffering separate from other poets to the degree that he felt that he was “not in the world” (21), Artaud’s mental and physical anguish furthered his sense of alienation from others, including his rather unconventional artist friends, prompting painter André Masson to claim in 1958 that “he [Artaud] was already different from us, he was particularly disturbed, there was something burning in him” (21).

It was in 1924 when Artaud’s father died that his participation in the Surrealist movement began, after befriending André Breton, Robert Desnos, and Roger Vitrac. It was in these poets and artists that “Artaud recognized kindred spirits who, like himself, wanted to destroy traditional modes of European thought and culture in order to prepare the way for a rebirth of man’s dormant inner life”; however, Artaud’s rejection of love and life, and his assertion that no political doctrine “could resolve the spiritual problems destroying man” and that “politics could only distract men from confronting fundamental dilemmas” prompted his departure from Surrealism (22-23). In collaboration with Roger Vitrac, who had also been “excommunicated” from the Surrealist group, and Robert Aron, Artaud founded the experimental Théâtre Alfred Jerry (named after the controversial author of the shocking play *Ubu Roi*) in 1926. Hailing its theatre as “capable of profoundly affecting its audience”, Artaud declared theatrical illusion as not “concerned with the apparent truth or untruth of action, but with its communicative force and its reality....We do not address ourselves to the mind or senses of the spectators, but to their whole existence” (qtd. in Greene 26).

Artaud’s love of acting and the theatre lead him to become involved in the burgeoning film industry, landing his first modest cinematic roles in Claude Autant-

Lara's *Fait divers* (1922) and René Clair's *Entr'acte* (1924). Artaud was also cast in supporting roles in *Napoléon* (1926), *Lucrece Borgia* (1935) and Carl Dreyer's *La passion de Jeanne d'Arc* (1928). Not limiting his film career only to acting, Artaud also wished to write and produce films: in 1927 Germaine Dulac produced Artaud's screenplay entitled *La coquille et le clergyman* (*The Seashell and the Clergyman*). Although the film was

highly praised and called the first true Surrealist film (antedating [Salvador Dali's] *Un chien andalou*), Artaud himself was bitterly disappointed with it. He accused Germaine Dulac of an artistic betrayal in filming certain scenes as dreamlike whereas for him they had been utterly real. She had thereby defeated his attempt to show that the illogic existed in the midst of what is normally considered reality....Conventional logic had to be banished from the film in order to reveal the underlying, profound reasons for our thoughts and emotions. Films, said Artaud, should allow us to perceive the occult and hidden aspects of life. (31)

Artaud's quest to reveal the "hidden aspects of life" continued in the work that he is perhaps most famous for, *Le theater et son double* (*The Theater and Its Double*), which was published in 1938. Included in this work is his literary manifesto entitled "*Le theater de la cruaute*" ("*The Theatre of Cruelty*"), which was first published in *la Nouvelle Revue Française*. In 1933 Artaud established a theatre company by the same name, where only one play written by Artaud himself, *Le Cenci*, was produced on May 6, 1935. Infused with scenes of sex and sadism, *Le Cenci* received great criticism which, coupled with financial difficulties, caused the Théâtre de la Cruauté to fold after only seventeen performances. Finding himself bitter and disappointed with the decadence and sterility of

European theatre, Artaud ventured out to Mexico on January 10, 1936 in search of ancient beliefs, paganism, and magic. His quest for magic and aura also lead him to Ireland in 1937, where, finding himself broke and in an extremely agitated state of mind, he was imprisoned for six days after causing a disturbance at a Jesuit college. Shortly thereafter Artaud was ordered back to France where he was certified as 'mad' by the French authorities and sent to a series of mental institutions to treat his worsening nervous disorders and his addiction to opium; on January 22, 1943 he arrived at Rodez where he was placed under the care of Dr. Ferdière until 1946. It was at this institution where Artaud underwent electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) which, coupled with art therapy, appeared to have revitalized Artaud's interests in creative writing and drawing. While institutionalized, Artaud health progressed only until he was allowed to venture outside of the hospital alone; however, this did not deter him from publishing *Le Voyage au pays des Tarahumaras (Journey to the Land of the Tarahumaras)*, which was based on his year in Mexico; recording the radio program *Les Malades et les médecins (Patients and Doctors)* and *Aliénation et magie noire (Madness and Black Magic)*; and writing *Van Gogh et le suicide de la société (Van Gogh: The Man Suicided by Society)*, which won the coveted Sainte-Beuve literary prize in 1948. His most controversial radio piece entitled *Pour en finir avec le jugement de dieu (To Put an End to the Judgement of God)* was banned only twenty-four hours before its scheduled broadcast on February 1st of the same year. Shortly thereafter Artaud was diagnosed with a fatally inoperable rectal cancer, prompting the doctor to administer as much opium to Artaud as he requested. On the morning of March 4th, 1948 Artaud was found dead by the gardener bringing him his breakfast, curled at the foot of his bed.

Theatre of Cruelty: A Balancing Act

Ideas don't come without limbs, and so these are no longer ideas but limbs, limbs fighting among themselves.

~ Artaud, "Wednesday 27 November 1946"

Art seduces us into the struggle against repression.

~ Norman O. Brown (1959)

As stated by Sontag, Artaud's theatre of cruelty is best

characterized by an absence of any fixed spatial positioning of the actors vis-à-vis each other and of the actor's in relation to the audience; by a fluidity of motion and soul; by the mutilation of language and the transcendence of language in the actor's scream; by the carnality of the spectacle; by its obsessively violent tone....Being a kind of emotional and moral surgery upon consciousness, it must of necessity, according to Artaud, be cruel. (1980, 39-40)

Cruelty, in the sense that it is used by Artaud, is meant to wake us up from our collective complacency. Taken from Artaud's letters on cruelty, which are included in *The Theatre and Its Double*, cruelty is classified as an effort, rigor or struggle where effort "is a cruelty, existence through effort is a cruelty" (103). This "[c]ruelty is a matter of neither sadism nor bloodshed, at least not in any exclusive way" (101). Artaud is not necessarily referring to a physical type of cruelty involving violence and bodily harm. Instead, the word "'cruelty' must be taken in a broad sense, and not in the rapacious physical sense that it is customarily given....One can very well imagine a pure cruelty, without bodily laceration....From the point of view of the mind, cruelty signifies rigor, implacable

intention and decision, irreversible and absolute determinism” (101). Artaud goes on to write that

[c]ruelty is not synonymous with bloodshed, martyred flesh, crucified enemies.

This identification of cruelty with tortured victims is a very minor aspect of the question. In the practice of cruelty there is a kind of higher determinism, to which the executioner-tormenter himself is subjected and which he must be *determined* to endure when the time comes. Cruelty is above all lucid, a kind of rigid control and submission to necessity. There is no cruelty without consciousness and without the application of consciousness. It is consciousness that gives to the exercise of every act of life its blood-red color, its cruel nuance, since it is understood that life is always someone’s death. (102)

It is because we are conscious beings that we can comprehend the truth of being born and of dying. In the face of this realization we must persist in a state of “rigid control and submission to the necessity” of survival. When Artaud is referring to ‘cruelty’ he is referring to a sort of lust or appetite for life, where authenticity and a quest for the real help to keep us alive and motivated. This “cruel consciousness” is paramount in the aesthetics of theatre and art if they are to revive our sense of life, or more aptly, if they are to revive our “life instinct”. Artaud believed that “the real” could be recovered through the implementation of a “total art form” that engaged all of the senses and made use of words, images, gestures, signs and sounds. Artaud’s quest for a total art form lead him to “assimilate all art to the dramatic performance” (Sontag 29). Art and thought become “an action – one that, to be authentic, must be brutal – and also an experience suffered, and charged with extreme emotions” (29).

To uncover the real, one must address the problem with civilization, which is that of a confusion between the authentic and the representation:

As Artaud opposes the separation between art and life, he opposes all theatrical forms that imply a difference between reality and representation. He does not deny the existence of such a difference. But this difference can be vaulted...if the spectacle is sufficiently – that is excessively – violent. The ‘cruelty’ of the work of art has not only a directly moral function but a cognitive one. According to Artaud’s moralistic criterion for knowledge, an image is true insofar as it is violent. (37)

This confusion between the authentic and the real is addressed by Artaud in the preface to *Theatre and its Double* entitled “The Theater and Culture”, where he claims that “[i]f confusion is the sign of the times, I see at the root of this confusion a rupture between things and words, between things and the ideas and signs that are their representation” (7). Attempting to rid the theatre of representations and symbolic meaning, Artaud is rallying for the use of sensory stimulation and experience in the place of symbolic representations.

Medical metaphors abound in Artaud’s writing on the theatre, where the function that “Artaud gives the theatre is to heal the split between language and flesh....Artaud’s writings on the theatre may be read as a psychological manual on the reunification of mind and body. Theatre became his supreme metaphor for the self-correcting, spontaneous, carnal, intelligent life of the mind” (Sontag 38-39). Artaud is not simply reproducing his inner agony; instead he is “giving a systematized, positive version of it. Theatre is a projected image...of the dangerous, ‘inhuman’ inner life that possessed him,

that he struggled so heroically to transcend and to affirm. It is also a kind of homeopathic technique for the mangled, passionate inner life” (39-40). Functionally, a liberated and liberating theatre operates by “giving vent to extreme passions and cultural nightmares”, thus “exorcising” these cultural and societal terrors (40). Theatre, like consciousness, has the power to change “[f]or not only does consciousness resemble a theatre but...theatre resembles consciousness, and therefore lends itself to being turned into a theatre-laboratory in which to conduct research in changing consciousness” (40). Artaud’s discussion of “The Theater and the Plague” offers another medical metaphor, where the theatre is discussed in relation to the plague’s injury of the brain and the lungs and though its effects on the consciousness and the will. He explains that

the only two organs really affected and injured by the plague, the brain and the lungs, are both directly dependent upon the consciousness and the will. We can keep ourselves from breathing or from thinking, can speed up our respiration, give it any rhythm we choose, make it conscious or unconscious at will, introduce a balance between two kinds of breathing: the automatic, which is under the direct control of the sympathetic nervous system, and the other, which is subject to the reflexes of the brain which have once again become conscious. (21)

The brain, having “once again become conscious”, is awakened by the plague in the same way that theatre awakens consciousness. Moreover, in terms of healing and liberation, psychoanalysis and art also aim to make the unconscious conscious, as stated by Brown. However, unlike psychoanalysis which makes the unconscious conscious by *extending* the conscious, “art represents an irruption from the unconscious into the conscious” (62). This liberating rupture is precisely the aim of the theatre of cruelty.

Liberation from Repression; or Break on Through to the Other Side

An anti-metaphysical view of the world – yes, but an artistic one.

~ Friedrich Nietzsche (1885)

Artaud writes that to “break through language in order to touch life is to create or recreate the theater” which “leads to the rejection of the usual limitations of man and man’s powers, and infinitely extends the frontiers of what is called reality” (13). This extension of reality is a transgression of the bodily limitations that are explored through Apollonian and Dionysian states of consciousness, which involve sublimation and body mysticism. Transcendence through mystical experience allows for a feeling of unity with the world and with others; thus, Artaud is suggesting a need to search beyond words in order to truly connect with one another. In defence of an erotics of art, Artaud goes on to state that if “our life lacks brimstone, i.e., a constant magic, it is because we choose to observe our acts and lose ourselves in considerations of their imagined form instead of being impelled by their force” (8). This “force” comes in the form of sensory stimulation and in the consciousness-raising theatre of cruelty. Artaud goes on to explain that

[i]f the theater has been created as an outlet for our repressions, the agonized poetry expressed in its bizarre corruptions of the facts of life demonstrates that life’s intensity is still intact and asks only to be better directed. But no matter how loudly we clamor for magic in our lives, we are really afraid of pursuing an existence entirely under its influence and sign” (9).

This “magical existence” is what Jim Morrison aimed for through his Dionysian pursuit of life, and is also the goal of explicit body artists whose art is based in an exploration of

the intensity of emotion and a testing of bodily limitations. Artaud's profound influence on Morrison and on body artists is revealed in their emphasis and use of affect and emotion to socially connect with their spectators.

Performance artists Karen Finley, Vito Acconci, Gina Pane, Marina Abramovic, Chris Burden, Franko B., and Ana Mendieta strive to connect to their audience through appeals to the senses and emotions. These transgressive and ritualistic performers strive to break boundaries between the artist and the spectator, as well as test the limits of the body and of society. Provocateur Karen Finley addresses taboos such as domestic abuse, rape, suicide, homophobia, racial intolerance and AIDS. Her performances operate through impersonation that borders on possession in which she enacts both aggressor and victim, where she specializes in physical and emotional self-exposure. Often drawing her material straight from her life, her cathartic and redemptive performances use this personal material by adapting it into something more generic and metaphorical. Her socially active art is moralistic and is highly influenced by the *Living Theatre*, "Ubu", and Artaud. Her famous performance piece entitled *We Keep Our Victims Ready* (1989) was partly inspired by a case of a sixteen year old girl found in a trash bag smeared with her own feces, to which Finley responded by smearing herself with chocolate. Finley "has made performances using her own body as a visual field on which fear, desire and violence are projected in order to challenge prevailing attitudes towards women, sex and art" (Warr 108). More recently however, "her work has questioned notions of censorship and the rights of artists to speak out about issues such as sexual abuse, incest and the commodification of desire in Western capitalist societies" (108).

Vito Acconci began making performance pieces in the 1960s in which he explored voyeurism and fantasy, and deconstructed the persona of the heroic male artist. His artwork *Following Piece* (1969) was performed for one month as part of the “Street Works IV” program organized by New York’s Architectural League, where everyday he picked out a person at random and followed them wherever they went until they entered a private place such as their home or office. Attempting to break the barriers between strangers and to highlight a need for connection, Acconci photographed the individuals he followed as documentation of his journeys. Perhaps his most famous piece entitled *Seedbed* (1972) was performed at Sonnabend Gallery, New York. Under a constructed wooden ramp, Acconci masturbated in response to the viewer’s footsteps and spoke his fantasies about the unknown bodies moving above him into a microphone, implicating the viewer as part of his work. For example, he would say that “[y]ou can reinforce my excitement, serve as my medium (the seed planted on the floor is the joint result of my presence and yours)” (qtd. in Warr 117).

Another well-known artist, Gina Pane, began by making actions in nature before shifting her focus more exclusively to actions on her body. Her work *Le Lait Chaud* (*Warm Milk*) (1972) was performed in her Paris apartment, where she created an installation under the theme of “White Doesn’t Exist”. Dressed all in white, she stood with her back to audience while cutting her back using a razor blade, allowing blood to gush onto her shirt. She then interrupted the action by playing with a tennis ball to contrast the game with the violence of cutting. Turning to suddenly face her audience, she began cutting her cheeks, which prompted the audience to explode in protest: “No not the face!” She stated that she had “touched an essential problem – the aestheticism in

every person. The face is taboo, it's the core of human aesthetics, the only place which retains a narcissistic power" (qtd. in Warr, 121). After cutting her face, Pane turned on video camera to record the audience in order to allow spectators to witness their emotional responses and to communicate with themselves.

Marina Abramovic began using her body in performance in 1972 to explore the themes of pain and physical resistance. From 1976 to 1988 she collaborated with East German artist Uwe Laysiepan (Ulay) to make works which tested the relationships between bodies. In her piece entitled *Freeing the Voice* (1975), she lay on the floor with her head tilted backwards and screamed until she lost her voice. Another piece entitled *Rhythm O* (1974) was a performance exploring the dynamics of passive aggression, where she stood by a table and offered self passively to the spectators, who were free to do whatever they wanted with a range of objects and her body. By the end of the performance all of her clothes had been sliced off her body with razor blades and she had been cut, painted, cleaned, decorated, crowned with thorns and had had a loaded gun pressed to her head. After six hours the performance was halted by concerned spectators, and not surprisingly she described this piece as the conclusion of her research on the body.

Chris Burden's early performances using his own body as material were shocking for their realism and danger. In his best known performance entitled *Shoot* (1971), he had a friend shoot him in the arm with a .22 calibre rifle. He claimed that his experiments with extreme and dangerous activities provided a means to gain "knowledge that other people don't have, some kind of wisdom" through direct experience (qtd in Warr, 122). This staging of a real shooting in the L.A. gallery space provided a shocking

contrast to the artificiality and make-believe of the local film industry (Hollywood) by replacing props and acting with real blood and pain. Franko B.'s sadomasochistic performances also use the body metaphorically to provoke a visceral, emotional response from his audience. Through "the ritual opening-out of his abused and leaking body in degrading, violent activities, there is hope for healing, as the body becomes a metaphor for the violence done by the social body to those who challenge taboos" (Warr 110).

Finally, Ana Mendieta's work was informed by her youthful exile from her home and culture. She recorded private rituals of reconnection with the earth by carving, sculpting, immersing and burning her silhouette into natural settings in Iowa and Mexico.² These artists represent the extremes that performers have gone to in order to revive a sense of life and connection with others. The emotional extremes explored by these artists are indeed exemplary of Artaud's call for a theatre of cruelty to change consciousness.

Perhaps a less explicit (and yet still extreme) example is found in the life and works of singer, songwriter and poet Jim Morrison. James Douglas Morrison was born in Melbourne, Florida on December 8, 1943 to parents George Stephen Morrison and Clara Clark Morrison, both of whom were employed by the United States Navy. His father was a strict military officer who also served as an admiral. Although raised by conservative parents, Morrison grew to express drastically different views than those taught to him by his parents. Interested in exploring new sensations and experiences, Morrison led a bohemian lifestyle in California, where he attended film school at UCLA. Upon graduation, Morrison and his friend from university Ray Manzarek decided to start a rock

² For a more detailed and comprehensive discussion of art and the body, please see Tracey Warr and Amelia Jones' *The Artist's Body* (2000).

band. Two more members by the names of Robbie Krieger and John Densmore also joined the group. The name “The Doors” comes from the Aldous Huxley book entitled *The Doors of Perception*, which in turn was borrowed from a line of poetry by William Blake. Through his involvement with The Doors Morrison developed a unique singing voice and a style of poetry that was heavily influenced by mysticism. Morrison died in Paris, France on July 3, 1971, in his bathtub at the age of 27, possibly from a drug overdose.

Morrison’s performance style with The Doors exemplified a Dionysian state of consciousness, where through his performances and persona he experimented with the Dionysian propensity to orgiastic state. Often lulling his audience into a trance-like state only to shock them awake by erupting into screams, Morrison played with the spectators’ states of consciousness through music and sound. The Door’s experimentations with unique tuning and genre-mashing (as in combining elements of rock, soul, Motown, and the blues) offered a transgression from the more traditional music-making of the times. Breaking the boundary between his audience and himself, Morrison would jump into the crowd and perform from amidst the spectators. Frequently under the influence of drugs and alcohol, Morrison’s shamanistic performances broke through the boundary between performer and audience through his stance as a sacrificial man of music, where he proclaims in Oliver Stone’s depiction of his life that his audience doesn’t want him, that they want his death.

Another example of a Dionysian performer is the transgendered performer Allucqu re Rosanne (Sandy) Stone, whose performance entitled *Drive-By Theory* (1999) is a literally “explosive” union between herself and the audience. Claiming that she can

bring herself to orgasm by stimulating her “clitoris” (which she mentally places in the palm of her hand), she asks the audience to assist her in reaching climax by cheering as loudly as they can. She ends her performance by stating that her orgasm is like life, where it is sometimes real and sometimes fake. Her performance literalizes the psychoanalytic concept of the polymorphously perverse body and bridges the gap between performer and audience by having the spectators actively participate in her orgasm. In a sense, her performance typifies the Dionysiac by literalizing an orgiastic state through a communal connection with her audience. Her work is important because she is breaking boundaries between performer and audience, and because she exemplifies the polymorphously perverse body that is desperate need of resurrection.

Affect and Agency; or the Art of Feeling Emotion and Movement

Sensation is the beginning of freedom.

~ Henri Bergson (1888)

*How do I love thee? Let me count the ways.
I love thee to the depth and breadth and height
My soul can reach, when feeling out of sight
For the ends of Being and ideal Grace.*

~ Elizabeth Barrett Browning (1904)

The defining characteristic of the artists described in the above section is their use of affect to connect with their audiences. It is important to highlight the differences between the conceptualizations of affect, feeling, and emotion. Feeling is the internal experience of sensation whereas emotion is the outward manifestation of sensation. Affect, on the other hand, refers to the body as a site of expression. Brian Massumi describes emotion as

a subjective content, the sociolinguistic fixing of the quality of an experience which is from that point onward defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual point of insertion of intensity into semantically and semiotically formed progressions, into narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized. It is crucial to theorize the difference between affect and emotion. If some have the impression that affect has waned, it is because affect is unqualified. As such, it is not ownable or recognizable and is thus resistant to critique. (28)

Emotion can be described as captured or qualified affect, where sensations are identified and labeled through our understanding of what is it that we are feeling. This understanding is informed through the social construction of emotion; that is, we can determine what an emotion is by our experiences and observations of social cues and socially agreed upon interpretations of emotional response and expression. Affect can be equated to the intensity of a feeling or sensation. The above examples of artistic performances elicit an intensity of feeling that generally eludes qualification as emotion. Sensations such as the ecstatic elation of Dionysian conditions or the peaceful submission of the Apollonian defy categorization in a traditional sense. These sensations signify *states of being* more than they signify qualified emotions, unless one can determine “ecstasy” or “peace” as emotions. The psychological literature on emotion tends to refer exclusively to five predominant emotions, which are anger, happiness, sadness, fear, and disgust (Rashid et al, 2006). What becomes of such extreme sensations as pleasure or pain? Henri Bergson makes the claim that these sensations are in fact the beginning of freedom. Bergson argues that “pleasure and pain are felt in higher organisms because

they authorize resistance to a programmed automatic response. By interrupting the automatic reaction to a given stimulus, they enable us to choose a different response” (Guerlac 53). In contrast to automatism, which “implies a necessary mechanical response to external stimuli”, the experiences of pleasure and pain enable the free will of the organism, and are referred to by Bergson as “affective sensations” (53).

Massumi states that affects “are *virtual synesthetic perspectives* anchored in (functionally limited by) the actually existing, particular things that embody them. The autonomy of affect is its participation in the virtual. *Its autonomy is its openness*” (35, italics in the original). He goes on to explain that

[a]ffect is autonomous to the degree to which it escapes confinement in the particular body whose vitality, or potential for interaction, it is. Formed, qualified, situated perceptions and cognitions fulfilling functions of actual connection or blockage are the capture and closure of affect. Emotion is the most intense (most contracted) expression of that *capture* – and of the fact that something has always and again escaped....If there was no escape, no excess or remainder, no fade-out to infinity, the universe would be without potential, pure entropy, death. Actually existing, structured things live in and through that which escapes them. Their autonomy is the autonomy of affect. (35)

This conceptualization of affect is conducive to an exploration of altered states of consciousness as these states defy qualification and are best discussed in philosophical and psychoanalytic terms. Furthermore, the important break from automatism that experiences of pain and pleasure allow for signifies freedom and agency, as Bergson “attributes metaphysical importance to affect and affirms free agency” through his

conceptualization of affective sensations (Guelac 5). Agency is defined by Massumi as “the expression of intelligence in a needful or useful action” (128). As a manifestation of free will and choice, agency is experienced when an executed action produces an expected result. The concept of agency is crucial to an informed discussion of new media such as Char Davies’ work in immersive virtual art.

Turning to an important theorization of the digital, a neo-Bergsonian conceptualization of the body places it in the privileged position of an acting agent that filters information in order to create images. The digital image is no longer conceived as merely visual; instead, this image is argued to encompass the entire process through which information is made perceivable. Bergson argues that affection and memory render images impure in that we select only those images relevant to “our singular embodiment....What is more, Bergson places his emphasis on the body as a source of action; it is the action of the body that subtracts the relevant image from the universal flux of images” (Hansen 2004, 5). Thus, the digitized image is not a fixed representation of reality; instead, the digital image is defined by its flexibility and accessibility. Moreover, Hansen claims that it is not simply the interactivity of new media that turns its viewers into users but it is the image itself that has become the body’s active process of perceiving it. Agency in digital art is thus experienced in a two-fold manner: first through the body’s active selection of images through perception, and secondly through the experience of the interactivity of digital and new media.

Agency is also experienced through the relatively new concept of “cyberdrama”, which “appears to tell the story of our lives now, much as the novel emerged to tell the story of a previous culture and time” (Wardrip-Fruin and Harrigan 1). The term

emphasizes “the enactment of the story in the particular fictional space of the computer. Inevitably the term also turns our attention toward those (‘dramatic’) new media artifacts that resemble theater, cinema, or television” (1). Janet Murray discusses the goals of agency, immersion, and transformation which are inherent in cyberdrama. She explains that agency “is the term I use to distinguish the pleasure of interactivity, which arises from the two properties of the procedural and the participatory. When the world responds expressively and coherently to our engagement with it, then we experience agency” (10). Davies’ immersive virtual environments induce both affect and agency through her use of computer technologies and imagery.

Immersive Virtual Art; or Waiting for the Sun

*Howling underneath the leaves
The wolf spits out the lovely plumes
Of his feat of fowls:
Like him I am consumed.*

~ Arthur Rimbaud (1873)

By changing space, by leaving the space of one's usual sensibilities, one enters into communication with a space that is psychically innovating...For we do not change place, we change our nature.

~ Gaston Bachelard (1964)

Canadian-born artist Char Davies began her career as a painter, where she developed her own symbolic language and a blurred aesthetics of transience that manifested in her paintings. During the 1980s she began experimenting with the 3D virtual space of computer technologies. It was at this time that she became involved in the company Softimage, becoming one of the founding directors in 1987. This company became one of the world’s leading developers of 3D animation software, which has been

used for the special effects in such Hollywood blockbusters as *Jurassic Park* and *The Matrix* (McRobert 7). Working with a small team, Davies conceived and developed her first immersive virtual artwork entitled *Osmose*, which premiered at the Musée d'art contemporain de Montréal in 1995. Her second virtual environment *Ephémère* premiered at the National Gallery of Canada in 1998. These consciousness-changing environments were inspired by Davies' love of scuba-diving, where she translated the immersive experience of being submerged underwater into her virtual artworks. Davies' art is both a collective experience "that happens in a theatre-like area and a private, individual experience that takes place in a small chamber located behind the theatre audience...or in front of the theatre audience side by side with the screen", depending on where the work is exhibited (20). In order for a participant or "immersant" to experience these environments, they are first outfitted with a vest that responds to the immersant's breathing and a headmounted display (HMD) complete with stereoscopic images and sounds. Every image and sound is generated by the immersant's breathing and movement, contrary to the more tactile and joy-stick driven nature of "traditional" virtual reality. In the imagery of *Osmose*, the natural world predominates as "the worlds symbolize a journey through the different realms of forest, clearing, cloud, leaf, stream (not an actual realm but part of one), pond, abyss, lifeworld, lines of software code, and excerpts of philosophical texts" (21). This imagery remains constant in *Ephémère*, with the addition of an underground "under-earth" and a realm signifying the interior body. Davies' immersive art evokes a mystical transcendence and a sense of oneness with the environments. An Apollonian state of consciousness is induced through the dream-like experience of visions and imagery. Her poetic depictions of the natural worlds and

realms coupled with the more cerebral use of computer code and philosophical text leaves immersants with a feeling of transcendence and deep inner peace. The end result of “being immersed in Davies’ technological artistry is the confirmation that reason is grounded in nature, not nature in reason” (9). As an artist deeply inspired by such Romantic writers as Gaston Bachelard and Rainer Maria Rilke, Davies’ work is a return to the deep interior so revered by Romanticism. Her art allows immersants to consciously experience the unconscious and like all good art, defamiliarizes what we take for granted. In this case, it is the vast beauty of nature.

By allowing access to feelings of transcendence, Davies’ virtual art opens “the doors of perception” and has many implications for the emergence of a new consciousness, as well as for the treatment of depression and pain. The magnetism inherent in the HMD may mirror the effects of repetitive transcranial magnetic stimulation (rTMS), which is currently being used in place of electroconvulsive therapy (ECT) to treat depression (145). It has also been shown that feelings of pain are alleviated in burn victims when immersed in virtual reality. How this phenomenon occurs is still under study, but it is theorized that immersing “a patient into a different spatial arena appears to lock out intense feelings of pain because she has entered another level or dimension of consciousness where the processing of painful feelings does not occur at all” (147). The implications for psychic healing in the immersive work of virtual space are quite suggestive and promising, and take the healing potential of art to a new and fascinating level.

The Miracle of Mindfulness; or When the Music's Over

Breath is the bridge which connects life to consciousness, which unites your body to your thoughts.

~ Thich Nhat Hanh (1975)

The power of art in healing, in changing consciousness, and in promoting connections between individuals has been explored through the works of performance artists, Jim Morrison, Sandy Stone, and Char Davies. Although all of the works exemplify embodiment and elements of the Artaudian tradition of the theatre of cruelty, the explicit body performance artists implicate their audience predominantly through participation and emotional reaction, The Doors implicated their audience aurally through sound, Sandy Stone through voice and audience participation, and Davies through the user's whole-body, breath and movement. Replacing a hermeneutics of art with an erotics of art, the affect and agency of art that engages the whole-body is revered through the resurrection of the psychic, physical and interactive body. These resurrections or "liberations from repression" involve a jolt to our consciousness perpetrated by the liberating experience of emotional extremes. Waking us from our social paralysis, the resurrections are made salient by an appeal to the senses that have been dulled by the chaos and bombardment inherent in urban life. A liberation of the collective self is attainable through art, as Brown states that

[o]ur normal orderly responsible selves, dominated by the reality-principle, are sustained by a constant expenditure in psychic energy devoted to the maintenance of the repression of our fundamental desires. Art, by overcoming the inhibition and by activating the playful primary process, which is intrinsically easier and more enjoyable than the procedures of normal responsible thought, on both counts

effects a saving in psychic expenditure and provides relief from the pressures of reason. (63)

Art can and should lead us to a state of collective bliss. As Brown points out, the resurrection of the body is a “social project facing mankind as a whole, and it will become a practical political problem when the statesmen of the world are called upon to deliver happiness instead of power, when political economy becomes a science of use-values instead of exchange-values – a science of enjoyment instead of a science of accumulation” (317-318). Indeed, we must strive to change our collective consciousness to allow us to replace power with happiness, and neurotic tension with bliss³.

Meet Me at the Back of the Blue Bus

*This is the end, beautiful friend,
This is the end, my only friend,
The end,
 it hurts to set you free
 but you'll never follow me.
The end
 of laughter and soft lies,
The end
 of nights we tried to die.
This is the end.*

~ Jim Morrison (1967)

The lights are finally dimmed. Morrison's intense gaze is locked on his audience. He grabs the microphone and pulls it towards his mouth, his eyes rolling backwards into his head. As the final strains of Krieger's ethereal guitar drift through the crowd, Morrison softly prompts us to “come on baby take a chance with us, come on baby take a chance with us”....

³ I am deeply indebted to my supervisor, Dr. Edward Slopek, for his invaluable suggestions, gentle guidance, and great insights into this project, and to Dr. Steve Bailey for assistance in the final stages.

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