

IDENTITY POLITICS AND THE BODY IN SELECTED CONTEMPORARY ARTWORKS

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

1.1 Problem statement

The sense of self is fragile. Steven Pinker¹ (1997:558) asks, “What or where is the unified centre of sentience that comes into and goes out of existence, that changes over time, but remains the same identity, and that has a supreme moral worth?” It is one of the challenges of contemporary Western secular society to accommodate the individual’s sense of identity under a welter of circumstances, in which people count for less than they feel they should. Systems of governance and control, which are often anathema to an individual, paradoxically emphasize the political rights of individuals while at the same time creating a sense of having to conform. They feel marginalised in a world where they cannot adapt to the norm is the experience of both young and mature adults.

Some Performance artists dramatise various states of marginalization. They seem to have a desire to resolve conflicts experienced between social and psychological identities in contemporary society. In doing so, they provide a barometer of the socio-cultural tensions of themselves and their contemporaries. This study investigates the manner in which carefully premeditated constructs of Performance artists play out in the public realm. This research aims to consider and critically analyze the personal transformation and extremism of the Performance artists Matthew Barney (American, born 1967), Steven Cohen (South African, born 1962) and Marina Abramović (Yugoslav, born 1946) as well as the American ‘Pop’ artist Madonna (born 1958). The premise of this study is that their performances are a form of self-preservation and self-therapy.

¹ Steven Pinker is Professor of Psychology and Director of the Centre for Cognitive Neuroscience at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

This investigation was prompted in part by the observation that the artists use aspects of shamanic techniques to achieve what appear to be heightened or altered states of consciousness. The dissertation is therefore focused on Performance artists who are articulating such trends by using their embodied being as a site for adornment, in ceremonies consisting of self-sacrificial physical modification, torture and humiliation.

It is argued that shamanic practices, which are an example of an ancient modality of healing, when appropriated by artists, reflect the urgent sense of Western individuals that their society has a need for 'healing'. The grim globalized world seems less receptive for healing than for entertainment, unable to revert back to practices from another worldview in which shamans² operated successfully.

1.2 Intentions and aims

The principal aim of this dissertation is to identify and assess selected performances of the above Performance artists against a socio-political backdrop. In their work they act out in ways, which are highly contrived, dramatic, shocking, extreme and haunting, reflecting the struggle of many people in contemporary Western society who are in circumstances in which they feel marginalized. The use of shamanic practices is a dominant feature in their performances, yet these practices belong to a profoundly different worldview. By closely examining the appropriation of shamanic props and the artists' exploitation of the effect of shamanic rituals, the differences between our contemporary mindset and that of people who are using pre-industrialised concepts of society become marked.

1.3 Socio-cultural background

² The Romanian historian and philosopher Mircea Eliade (1974:27) postulated that traditional shamans are above all persons who have 'cured' themselves. Winkelman (2002:72) Walsh (2002:55) and Krippner (2000:25) are Professors of Psychology, who have researched shamanism and found scientific proof to substantiate Eliade's definition.

Performance artists understand how dominant social structures and social effects interact. The psychological states of narcissism and abjection, which are revealed in much of the performative works of the artists, are closely allied with issues around persona and gender mutation. These are not be the same issues that the shaman develops in his or her performance, which is aimed at assuring the viewers of the power invested in the person and the performance so as to assist the community in one way or another. The Performance artists act out the unintegrated states of narcissism and abjection by means of which they can mirror their viewers' states back to them. The shaman's role is not a mirroring but a separation of him or herself from the community to take on the difficult tasks, which need to be performed. Nevertheless, the close relationship between identity and persona is a device used extensively in both types of performances as shamans and Performance artists purposefully manage their appearances.

Shamanism, narcissism and abjection will be discussed intermittently throughout this dissertation wherever applicable to particular performances as these phenomena are tightly interwoven with the artist's work and with the premise and cannot be discussed as totally separate entities.

Multiple personae enable Performance artists to reflect for their viewers' innumerable states of mind, imagination, feelings and desires. The act of dressing up and changing of personae intend to dazzle and fascinate. For a reflective audience they provide the opportunity to reconsider the contemporary *Lebenswelt* (lived environment). Their purposeful use of hybridised, transformed, adorned, masked or naked bodies is a way of marking strangeness, as there is no guarantee that in a secular viewing public shares a common idea about what would be strange/other. By making their bodies, as the cultural theorist Michel Foucault (1980:148) says, an "inscribed surface of events" rich in possible disruptions to the hegemonic minority, gender and class boundaries of contemporary culture, they can be sure to target as wide a section of viewers as possible.

Signification is created through appearances. Appearances are deceptive when the main component of the community has a particular style. The artists appropriate devices belonging to the theatre and the Opera of earlier periods, such as a number of stagecraft devices from the historical Gothic³ and Baroque⁴ aesthetic periods. These serve to enhance the carnivalesque atmosphere of their performances.⁵ The artists discussed in this dissertation are able to satirise the feelings of repugnance that such outrageous figures arouse in their viewers. Yet while satirising the fears and the fascination of their viewers through the appropriation of the Gothic and Baroque, the artists themselves are engaged in a reflection on the significance of their own being-in-the-world. The discussions on the neo-Baroque and neo-Gothic sensibilities as used by the artists will be referenced throughout as part of the discussions of their work and will not only be dealt with as a separate section. The technical devices of film, video and virtual reality reinforces the artist's dramatic strategies and link with the artist's work,

³ Medieval Gothic (around the twelfth century in Europe) cathedrals contain supernatural, grotesque hybrid gargoyle figures (they bear a marked resemblance to the costumes and masks of the contemporary artists discussed here). At the time they portrayed ideas about irrational understandings of the human subject as a re-sharpened entity for didactic, functional as well as decorative purposes. These hybrid figures were to serve as a reminder to the unfaithful of what awaits them in hell (Harding 1998:37). A 'Gothic sensibility' was also revived in the nineteenth century due to a renewed interest in human anxieties. A variety of representational strategies were devised to depict the human form and its subconscious feelings of alienation (Hurley 1996:4-6). Although the historical differences between medieval Gothic society and nineteenth century Gothic are huge, there are similarities such as rapid change and cultural backlashes. These were manifested in psychological fantasies such as apocalyptic 'ends' resulting in cultural anxieties and the notion of self-transformation. These points will be discussed as this chapter progresses.

⁴ The Roman Catholic Church made a decision at the council of Trent (1545-63) to establish the Counter-Reformation in response to the religious Reformation initiated by Martin Luther and John Calvin. As a result the Catholic Church encouraged the representational, theatrical and visceral Baroque style of art, architecture and music. The aim was to renew the emotional involvement of illiterate worshippers. This convention of 'populist ecclesiastical art' started in Rome and soon spread to the rest of Europe. It became fully developed by the seventeenth century. In most cases Baroque describes a formal quality that implies spectacle, in excess of the norm, exuberant motion and free flowing form, as seen in Bernini's sculpture *Saint Theresa in Ecstasy* in the Cornaro chapel in S. Maria della Vittoria, Rome (Taruskin 2005:12-15, 18).

⁵ Cultural theorist Angela Ndalanian, head of Cinema Studies at the University of Melbourne Australia, in her book *Neo Baroque aesthetics and contemporary entertainment* (2004:7) says, "Baroque implied an art or music of extravagance, impetuosity and virtuosity, all of which are concerned with stirring the affections and senses of the individual". Our attention is repeatedly drawn to the skillful execution and complexity of meaning in a number of Baroque artworks. The description quoted here is equally applicable to some performance artists' works, notably Barney's neo-Baroque *Cremaster cycle*.

but are not discussed in depth as it is not the focus of this research. The lyrics of Madonna's songs are also not discussed in depth, as this would need to form a complex analysis of its own.

1.4 Theoretical framework and methodology

The methodology of this research comprises a literature study of Performance art embedded in readings about phenomenology, hermeneutics and psychology, with ethnography as a minor theme. As the artists under discussion, in pursuit of their own truths, deal with the here and now within their lived environment, their personal perceptions are ordered historically according to individual experience and interpretation. By focussing on the way artists' bodies have become a conduit for making statements beyond the capacity of purely linguistic communication, their hermeneutic concerns are communicated in a direct way.

The history of Performance art shows that socio-cultural matters have played a significant role in its evolution. Performance art mirrors trends and developments in the socio cultural arena. The philosophical base afforded by the science of interpretation, namely hermeneutics has been a useful tool to contextualise the larger meaning of these trends and developments. This is supported by Dr Victoria Wynn Leonard (cited in Polifroni & Welch 1999:323) in her research at the School of Nursing, University of California. She has found that "Currently the hermeneutic approach is being taken up by researchers in diverse human science fields including nursing".

In a therapeutic quest for 'wholeness' most humans have an inner drive to go beyond literal truths to an infinite analytical extension to avoid 'thrown-ness' or *Geworfenheit*⁶ (Bullock et al 1988, Busch and Gallagher 1992, Heidegger 1977,

⁶ *Geworfenheit* literally means thrown into the world. Most humans have an inner drive to go beyond literal truths to an infinite analytical extension in order to avoid 'thrown-ness', known as *Geworfenheit* (Bullock et al 1988, Busch and Gallagher 1992, Heidegger 1977, MacQuarrie 1968. I believe that the performances described in this research are a constant quest to avoid feeling of *Geworfenheit*.

MacQuarrie 1968), to use the philosophical term. I argue that the artists selected for this study are involved in the aforementioned existential process of being-in-the-world in the phenomenological sense. Phenomenology, as used by the philosophers Edmund Husserl, Martin Heidegger, Maurice Merleau-Ponty, Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur is a description of their reflections on how we ‘dwell in the world’ – *Dasein*⁷. Phenomenologists differ somewhat in their arguments, but all assert that experience in the world entails a process of uncovering ambiguous, personal truths. This links to the notion of *Dasein*, which refers to human existence and self-awareness. They stress that mortality imposes a time limit on us and influences how we choose to understand our *Umwelt* (personal environment and the ‘world’).

Johnson (1993:8)⁸ considers Phenomenology as a “way of describing the meaning of human experience in the world” and further succinctly explains it in relation to Merleau-Ponty’s ideas as, “‘phenomena’ ... from the worldly standpoint of bodily incarnation and intersubjective, historical situation”. Hermeneutics, as a philosophical discourse about understanding, is best expressed by the German philosopher Hans Georg Gadamer’s explanation (cited by Polifroni and Welch 1999:339, 344) that, “Hermeneutics is a general doctrine of the art of understanding ... The real power of hermeneutical consciousness is our ability to see what is questionable”.⁹ The analysis of what is questionable happens on several levels of the human and social sciences, and culture (Bullock et al 1988:347, 380).

⁷ *Dasein* an almost untranslatable German term, it refers to human existence and self-awareness. It is about automatic grasp of a situation, which triggers a response embedded in the context of the situation, and is also based on referencing accumulated previous experience.

⁸ Johnson is specifically speaking of Edmund Husserl in relation to Maurice Merleau-Ponty here.

⁹ Hermeneutics, although originally a methodology used for interpreting theological texts, is currently applied to describe the way in which existential understanding takes place. Hermeneutics was introduced into Philosophy by Friedrich Schleiermacher and revived by Wilhelm Dilthey in the late nineteenth century and ‘somewhat modified’ in the twentieth century by theorists such as Ricoeur and Gadamer, amongst others (Klemm 1983:20), providing tools for categorising the philosophical process of analysis.

The Performance artists under discussion embed their social critique in a matrix of already established ideologies, manipulating their audiences so as to raise “what is questionable” to the consciousness of the audience. Although the performances are presented seductively through the use of familiar and innovative technology, media, costume and sound the content is satirical, often vicious in its invective and raises questions about prejudices, prevarications, power, gender and religious attitudes.

When the authors of *The Responsibility of Hermeneutics*, Lundin et al (1985:32) say of hermeneutics, that it is “ ... a process whereby we encounter ambiguity in texts and in all cultural products. We find in the very ambiguity new possibilities for thoughts and actions,” they remind us that it is possible to open up new discourses. Lundin (1985:32) continues:

Hermeneutics is about a retrospective search for latent meaning, a self-conscious interpretation and a justification of human existence beyond the superficial. It concerns the reappraisal of the individual’s situation and his/her sense of perception of daily routines and how this perception triggers a very personal response that facilitates understanding, however erroneous or ambivalent it may be.

Meaning can be assigned from this standpoint, which is highly individualized. It is this theoretical perspective which is used to make sense of the artists’ performances. Performance artists are actively engaged in a hermeneutical process in the way that they interpret, assign meaning, and justify their experiences through the agency of the self.¹⁰ Personal mythologies, constructed from the narratives they tell themselves about the world, are presented to an audience, which they assume is conventional in its belief systems and will respond in a predictable way. The performances do many things, including

¹⁰ In psychoanalytical thought the self or *id* impulses and experiences are kept in the unconscious, subjective level of the psyche by the defence mechanisms of the ego, as they are deemed unacceptable by the super-ego. Pathology is conceptualised as a function of the process of keeping the psychological truth, which is not tolerated in the social realm, hidden. Healing in this context occurs when psychological truth is brought to awareness and more functional ways of dealing with the inevitable reality of psychological conflict are found (Hergenhahn 1997:476, 477, Barlow and Durand 1999: Glossary G-10, 17).

manipulate the sense of alienation experienced by many human beings. When the performers adopt the role of persons who are beyond the pale of society and act out outrageous and fantastical scenes, they are taking up a political position vis-à-vis identities assigned to the marginalized by society. Kim Hewitt, (1997:23) the author of *Mutilating the body: identity in blood and ink*, concludes that “One has to explore these acts as possible expressions of social custom, individualism and resourcefulness ... these acts are often symptomatic of crisis in identity, religious faith and modern social structures and are acts that help resolve those crises”.

Through the ritual exercise of violence against and denigration of their own bodies, the performance artists often encounter disapproval from the very audience in front of whom they perform. So compelling is the performance that the viewers might not realise that the crisis enacted might refer to their own existential crises at the moment of viewing. Later, on reflection this might become clear. The rhetoric of theatricality, which is so fascinating in performance, is a close copy of a political persuasion. The stakes are not the party and a vote but an identity.

In the artists’ attempts at discovering levels of selfhood they appear to be engaged in a reintegration of elements of their experiences. These factors have compelled Abramović, Barney, Cohen and Madonna to fetishise¹¹ their sense of identity and physicality. Therapeutic understanding occurs as a delayed process during and after the articulation, transcendence and disclosure of personalised fragments. The selected artists apparently exploit the acts of uncovering and re-visiting archetypal, pagan and ancient meanings in ritual to come to a resolution of their own embodiment. Through the combined processes of re-arranging of existing social structures and the transformation of their bodies, a new presence enters the

¹¹ Freudian fetishism and cultural fetishism are popularly confused. Freudian Fetishism is about “male neurotic sexual formation”, cultural fetishism is one of the effects resulting from a “feeling of inadequacy, of relative impotence, provoked by the experience of the power emanating from the state” or the cultural environment (Stratton 1999:15).

world. The articulation of contemporary hierarchies is reliant on phenomenological and hermeneutic deconstruction and reconstruction.

Hermeneutical awareness of the self as constituted *through* the event of appropriation is awareness of the finitude of the self and its understanding of being a self in a world". As the artists disavow their anxious concern about the contemporary social, political and cultural crises in which we find ourselves, they use spectacle and entertainment to shock their viewers. They re-enact social and personal issues and especially exploit the rich possibilities which fetishism provides with its allusion to perverse sexuality. The inherent satire is aimed at a society in which sexuality is no longer a taboo topic although the taboo remains against perversion. More than anything else, it is about the finitude of the self - death.

1.5 Seminal sources and literature review

There are ample sources on Performance art, identity politics, fetishism and shamanism. There are however, very few direct sources available on the discourse between hermeneutic psychology and the therapeutic aspects of Performance art in combination with shamanic techniques as discussed in this paper. It is hoped that this research will make a contribution to this area of research.

I was fortunate to have conducted two audio taped interviews with Steven Cohen in Johannesburg, and had a brief meeting and discussion with Matthew Barney at the biennale in Sao Paulo in 2004. I managed to arrange a video recorded interview with Marina Abramović during her visit to South Africa in 2005. These interviews were supplemented by books such as *The Cremaster Cycle* by Nancy Spector (2002), which is a thorough documentation and analysis of the complexity of the narratives and visuals of the five *Cremaster Cycle* videos of Matthew Barney. Spector's book is a primary source for visuals and text on his work. *Artist body* (1998) is autobiographical documentation by Abramović and

includes essays by commentators on her work. The documentation covers performances with her former partner, Ulay, as well as her solo performances. I have concentrated on her solo career and this publication provided me with an authentic account of her work. In the field of cultural studies there is an unprecedented amount of scholarly writing on Madonna as she “is the quintessential commodity body sign” (Miklitsch 1998:67). Some of the primary information on Madonna was gleaned from her biographers: Taraborelli’s publication, *Madonna an Intimate Biography* (2001) as well as Clerk’s *Madonna Style* (2002) and *The Madonna connection, representational politics, subculture identities and cultural theory* (1993).

The inclusion of the South African artist Steven Cohen in this study contributes to the small amount of research done on his performative work up to this point. The only comprehensive book on Cohen was written by by Shaun De Waal and Robyn Sassen (2003) titled *Steven Cohen*. This research differs from theirs because it has been written from the perspective of a practicing artist whose own artworks has been influenced by the Performance art discussed in this study (Cf. Appendix). Furthermore this dissertation differs from that of De Waal and Sassen’s approach, in that it is situated within a phenomenological and hermeneutical discourse and is comparative.

Video recordings of their work, catalogues and newspaper clippings, exhibitions reviews from the Venice Biennale, American art journals and German publications supplemented these sources on the artists.

Apart from the biographies and documentation of the artists’ work, the main sources for theories concerning performance art have been: *The artist’s body* edited by Tracy Warr (2000) which has been referenced throughout this dissertation. It covers the history and discourse concerning Performance art since the era of Antonin Artaud (1896-1948) and Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968), up to and including early twenty first century video Performance artists such as Pipilotti Rist and Stelarc. The essays in *The artist’s body* are by prominent Performance

art theorists. Lea Vergine, RoseLee Goldberg, Peggy Phelan, Thomas McEvilley and Amelia Jones were essential in contextualizing my research. In addition the publication edited by Efrat Tseëlon's (2001) provided insight into the variables between truth and of deception in relation to performance in an exploration of masquerade.

Since there are various types of fetishisms relevant to the selected artists' work, a number of sources have been consulted on the conjunction between fetishism, pain, eroticism and catharsis. *Fetishism visualising power and desire* by Anthony Shelton (1995) was useful for tracing the origins of fetishism and its manifestation in contemporary art. The research by Lorraine Gamman and Merja Makinen (1995) on female fetishism has confirmed my notion that the contemporary fixation on 'meaning' and disavowal are part of both the male and female postmodern conditions. *The desirable body* by Jon Stratton (1999) follows on the collection of interdisciplinary essays titled *Fetishism as cultural discourse*, edited by Emily Apter and William Pietz (1993). They follow similar arguments as Michel Foucault, in his publications *The archaeology of knowledge* (1972), *The discipline and punish: the birth of the prison* (1979), *The use of pleasure* (1985), *The will to know* (1976). These authors examine the feelings of inadequacy provoked by the power of the state. Their focus is on the whim of the Other in relation to cultural fetishism as is discussed in Chapter Two of this paper. A further argument by these authors regarding commodity fetishism as a phallic substitute is relevant to my discussions on the contemporary social discourse around which these Performance artists participate, and underscores my premise about the exploitation of the artists' bodies as commodities.

It is inevitable when researching sexuality to refer to the works of George Bataille, specifically *Eroticism, sexuality and death* (1986). His close alignment of these phenomena has direct relevance to the nature of the Performance art discussed in this paper. Camille Paglia's publications *Sexual personae* (1990), *Sex, art and American culture* (1992), *Vamps and tramps* (1995) proved to be useful particularly in regard to Madonna's skill in manipulating and plundering

her own feminine attributes while mocking conventional social constructs as a brand of identity politics. In addition, Paglia's opinion on queer theory is equally insightful because the selected artists constantly address gender issues.

Fantasies of Fetishism by Amanda Fernbach (2002) was an invaluable source as this dissertation highlights the connection with Kelly Hurley's *The Gothic Body* (1996). Hurley discusses the cyclic re-emergence of Gothic aesthetics and the defamiliarisation of the human body. Her research on the collapse of traditional constructs of human identity against the backdrop of Victorian fears at the turn of the last century was of particular interest to this dissertation.¹² Hurley's research on the neo-Gothic led me to uncover remarkable points of comparison to our own *fin de siècle*. Traditional constructs of human identity have been similarly disrupted by the latest scientific discoveries relating to the body as is discussed in the chapters that follow.

Presently, we are constantly confronted by gross Gothic corporeality and the trans-human in texts, TV news, science fiction films, computer games and even children's toys. *Neo Baroque Aesthetics and contemporary entertainment* by Angela Ndaliansis, the head of cinema studies at Melbourne University, Australia, has drawn attention to the links between the seventeenth century Baroque combination of visual, auditory and textual spectacle and contemporary entertainment media. The implementation of neo-Baroque and neo-Gothic aesthetic devices in Performance art is a sub-theme in this dissertation. Ndaliansis, Fernbach and Hurley's research substantiates my thoughts about Abramović, Barney, Cohen and Madonna's millennial mythologies, which can be seen as a response to these phenomena.

Fernbach postulates that the contemporary influx of alternate sexual practices and its psycho-sociological origins is a symptom of the complexities of our culture.

¹² Victorian fears were informed by Darwinism and Freudian psychology at the time, which resonated in Victorian literature as discussed later in this research.

This links to the theories of Roy Baumeister, in his book *Escaping the self: alcoholism, spirituality, masochism and other flights from the burden of selfhood* (1991) as well as Christopher Lasch's *Culture of narcissism* (1979, 1991). These authors comment on contemporary American socio-cultural issues and the devices implemented by individuals as coping mechanisms. I have analysed and compared these in order to validate my research premise especially in regard to the American artists Barney and Madonna.

Kim Hewitt's *Mutilating the body: Identity in Blood and ink* (1997) explains the relationship between social imposition and the individual. Her authentic investigation on self-transformation and the human body as a territory for establishing personal, social and spiritual identity provided an understanding of personal identity politics and narcissism. The academic account of her own suffering was pivotal for my discussions on the significant influence popular culture has on individual action in both creating and reflecting meaning. Hewitt does not address the role of these phenomena in relation to Performance art practice, but her research has provided a springboard for me to explore the topic. The essay of David Graver, *Violent theatricality, supplemented Hewitt's information: displayed enactments of aggression and pain* (1995). Graver discusses this extreme category of performance art, which clarifies some of the more complex combinations of signification, metaphor and the use of pain in Performance art.

Hewitt and Graver's publications are supported by Julia Kristeva's theories on the human conditions of abjection and catharsis. Kristeva expounds on the inherent threat experienced during destabilization and one's incomprehensibility during the disruption of regular frames of reference, which supports my premise concerning the undercurrent of therapy in the performances under discussion. Kristeva's analysis was particularly helpful in providing understanding of some of the existential constraints, which have given rise to the artists' so called 'immortality projects'. The selected artists attempt to magnify conditions of marginalization, suffering, sorrow, loss, ageing and death, which in turn reflect the

phenomenological philosophies of Heidegger, Merleau-Ponty, Ricoeur and Gadamer.

The following philosophical sources were most influential in my contextualization of the phenomenological and hermeneutic aspects in this dissertation. Gadamer's *Warheit und Methode* (1960) translated by J Weinsheimer and D Marshall in 1975 and titled *Truth and method* as well as *The enigma of health – the art of healing in a scientific age* (1996). Gadamer recognizes the therapeutic value of addressing epistemological issues based on ontological hermeneutics, which is an essential component of this research. Paul Ricoeur's *Time and narrative* (1984) and his essay on the unity and rupture of existence in *Traces of understanding: A profile of Heidegger's and Ricoeur's hermeneutics* by Patrick Bourgeois, and Frank Schalow (1990) explores circumstantial reality and contributed to my application of hermeneutics as reflected in the Performance art discussed in this study. *The Hermeneutical theory of Paul Ricoeur* (1989) by David Klemm is a constructive analysis of Ricoeur's hermeneutic philosophy. This publication articulated some of my suppositions about appropriation and creative re-interpretation regarding symbols and myths as an expression of philosophy and theology to facilitate therapeutic relationship and transformation of the self and others.

The selected contemporary artists reify archaic myths, symbols and rituals while subordinating their bodies and pushing them to physical limits to enhance their self-knowledge and sense of identity. These acts have ritualistic implications indicating the co-existence of advanced technology and archaic spirituality. The behavioural scientist Michael Winkelman's neurotheology investigates such shamanistic activities in *Neural ecology of consciousness and healing* (2000) and *Shamanism as neurotheology and psychology* (2007), which contributed extensively to the research contained in the last chapter of this paper. Stanley Krippner's *Evolutionary psychology* (2002), *The epistemology and technologies of shamanic states of consciousness* (2000) and *Humanities first healers: psychological and psychiatric stances on shamans and shamanism* (2007) added

to Winkelman's dynamic interpretations and serve as effective templates for measuring the artist's attempts at transcendence to innovative identities. I regard this as part of their hermeneutic circle of self-management and understanding of their given cultural environment. The sources by Winkelman and Krippner provide an insight into the correlation between neurophenomenological experiences, brain activity and the adaptive fitness of people. This dissertation draws a direct relationship between these facts and the premise of this research about procedures for understanding and the resolution of the conflicts experienced between social and individual psychological identities against the backdrop of contemporary society.

1.6 Overview of Chapters

Chapter Two, entitled *Performance*, is an investigation of how the body is used in the theatre of performance for Othering. It is argued that Abramović, Barney, Cohen and Madonna use narcissistic and resourceful inversions of Otherness and sexual ambiguity to suggest that this is a means to give individuals a measure of control over social rejection. As a counterpoint, inter-subjective shamanic activity is cited. Various strategies are applied by engaging in exaggerated carnivalesque masquerade, neo-Baroque sensory dialogue and shocking neo-Gothic constructs to elicit emotional and aesthetic responses from their audience. The phenomena of simultaneous aversion and attraction, parody and the ironic deconstruction of alienation, become dramatic devices, calling for a re-consideration of current socio-political myths, hegemonic prohibitions and sexual binaries in society. The artists' subjective performances become paradigmatic signifiers, negotiating and mediating between the realm of personal politics and contemporary culture.

Chapter Three, entitled *Fetishism*, is an analysis of fetishism and its variants as a significant tool for cultural mediation in the work of Abramović, Barney, Cohen and Madonna. In its most basic form, the concept of fetishism is associated with personal feelings of lack resulting in fantasy and the fixation on surrogate objects,

which has at times been associated with pathological sexual perversion. The artists' particular conflation of religion and eroticism with fetishism is explored, as is the relationship between commodification, physical pain, hermeneutics and fetishism. Easing the conflict between the social and psychological beings becomes an ambiguous game between the artists and their audience as an attempt to initiate introspection and the deconstruction of hegemonic hierarchies.

Chapter Four, entitled *Ritual and transcendence*, includes a brief investigation of liminality, which is a state common to Performance artists and shamans. The differences between shamans who by their use of liminal states and the props and mechanisms of dramatic theatrical acts heal their community and the Performance artists' use of liminal states is compared and contrasted. The research into threshold rituals by the anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1960) and the behavioural scientist Michael Winkelman's Neurotheology¹³ (2002) underpin this chapter.

Chapter Five, entitled *Conclusion*, draws together the results of the analysis of the Performance artists' performances in the context of a phenomenological and hermeneutic framework.

¹³ Neuropsychology is the study of changes in behaviour that result from alterations in the physical state of the brain. (Bullock et al 1988:575). Neurotheology comprises the contemporary manifestation of the universals of shamanism as reflected in innate brain processes. These involve psycho physiological dynamics of heightened mental states of consciousness. It concerns the stimulation of neurotransmitters and their responses to spirit concepts and how they influence and manipulate individual and group psycho-dynamics according to Winkelman (2005:1875).

CHAPTER TWO: PERFORMANCE STRATEGIES

Postmodern subjects have been conditioned to define and measure the effectiveness of their sense of self within dominant socio-cultural myths. Since one's identity is closely linked to the body Performance artists face up to the challenge of using the body as art-making material. The principal aim of this chapter is to explore the hermeneutic strategies of self-initiated Othering by the Performance artists Abramović, Barney, Cohen and Madonna. It will be argued that the selected artist's inter-subjective performances become a metaphoric vocabulary of paradigmatic signifiers. These consist of shamanic, symbols, rituals, myths, adornment and props used as an ironic deconstruction of alienation and a species of postmodern signification politics.

2.1 Introduction to performance mediation

The abovementioned artists seem to set themselves up as scapegoats, shamans, mediators and mirrors of society. Ricoeur (cited by Bourgeois and Schalow 1990:4) reminds us that an engagement with and critique of ethics, whether it is within the norms and values of society in terms of creativity and free expression, require the indirect presentation in symbols, parables and myths. He points out that the task of hermeneutics is to "disentangle and articulate current discourse in the 'world' in order to attain new modes of authentic being".

The artists seem to focus attention on the particular cultural anxieties, which give rise to hegemonic prohibitions, prejudice and marginalization in contemporary society. The performances unfold as a negotiation and mediation between the realm of personal politics and contemporary culture. To this end the artists engage in exaggerated carnivalesque fantasies, the phenomena of simultaneous aversion and attraction, neo-Baroque sensory dialogue and shocking hybrid neo-Gothic constructs designed to elicit emotional and aesthetic responses from their audience.

This research attempts to offer an insight into these deconstructive and reconstructive strategies as used by the selected performance artists. Catherine

Elwes (2005:192) the director of the UK/Canadian film and video exchange suggests that artists' "political awareness is not seen as an alternative to aesthetic consideration but as intrinsic to the business of speaking out". Performance artists closely analyse how audiences receive and use the messages contained in their visual imaging. The devices of masquerade and adornment are fundamental elements in identity formation, but also serve as a tool in the artist's critical and political function. They alert us to the fact that identity construction is ambivalent as we mostly assume that behind a crafted facade or mask there is an authentic identity and this in itself might be a misleading assumption.

2.2 Appearance management

The personae of the contemporary Performance artists Abramović, Barney, Cohen and Madonna are used in a complex style exploiting amplified dramatic devices, and theatrical spectacles. In this *mise en scène* the Performance artists enjoy their position at the centre of the stage, using Otherness as a camouflage. Napier (1992:164) suggests that "re-figuring the self in physical terms is co-extensive with a belief about efficacy that is culturally structured". For an audience accustomed to an endless cycle of new fashions, makeovers and ideas about personal exterior transformation, the refiguring of the self as exemplified by the dressing up or undressing of Barney, Cohen and Madonna, which is aimed at the audience's underlying assumption about identity formation. These beliefs are subverted by the fantasy, artifice and exaggerated, display of the satirical dramas enacted.

Many individuals have an idealised, unrealistic and mythical desire to exist within a situation of predictable unity and stability. Making sense of the contemporary value systems and ideological environment is contained in the signification created through appearances. To the performing-self, contemporary appearance management might include conventional clothing. However the recent awareness of physical modifications and temporary or permanent alterations and attachments to the body have resulted in a consumer market that provides for these stylistic

demands. Plastic surgery, tattoos, piercing and fetish-inspired attire are freely available and have become part of fashion trends and 'street culture'.

Within this current cultural climate many artists are attempting to find a synthesis between the conceptual and sensory in their work. To this end Performance artists Abramović, Barney, Cohen and Madonna have articulated appearance management trends and taken them to the extreme to become barometers of this era of the late twentieth and early twenty first century. Unlike, classic body - the static, and idealistic - the adorned and exaggerated living bodies of Abramović, Barney, Cohen and Madonna are objects of their own making that are sometimes vulgar and exuberant and do not follow the norm. The attitudes exhibited towards the 'strange' or the 'odd' in contemporary society is a measure of the extent to which the Other can be accommodated into that society.

To the performing self, the only reality is the identity that is constructed from personal frames of reference for the performance. These frames of reference include clothing and adornment, which are suggestive of personality and are often an expression and measure of social relations and status. In the contemporary 'world', identity politics is shaped by how qualities are perceived in a particular context. Susan Kaiser (1985:186,188), the author of *A Social psychology of clothing*, explains this process as follows: "a process of representation consists of selecting, presenting, structuring and shaping elements of reality by reinforcing the status quo or creating new meanings". Appearance perception is a component of identity formation and includes evaluations of other people's appearance, which usually consists of messages derived from environmental triggers and cultural conventions. A part of this 'self in context' is the search for aesthetic stimulation, diversity and novelty in one's situation in Western society. One could speak of a semiotics of clothing or how meaning and signification is produced and conveyed through

tangible artifacts and products including clothing, adornment and masquerade.⁶ Appearance imagery becomes a silent communication through which cues are encoded and decoded; structuring elements of reality and manipulating these in an imaginative way. Consequently this perpetuates cultural beliefs and values. It becomes a hermeneutical process of mediation and interpretation, giving a sense of order and control to the individual self. Paradoxically this type of self-knowledge may also result in categorization, which often serves as a vehicle for distinguishing between self and 'other'. This is particularly the case for the shaman whose clothing during performance is a cultural marker.

The appearance management, costumes and disguises of the selected artists have a dual function. They are basic to their display for the viewers of what might constitute one element of identity formation and persona, but they also serve a critical function. By means of bizarre costumes and provocative behaviour they flaunt Otherness in order to irk conservative and prejudiced viewers. Magnifying the stigmatisation of the Other is a strategy to questioning social hierarchies. I concur with David Napier (1992:141), the author of *Foreign bodies, Performance art and symbolic anthropology*, which considers the concept of the stranger "the central metaphor for - any discussions of the body".

2.3 Inscribing the body

The selected artists each have specific historical symbols that they have 'serialised' as performance adornment and these have become synonymous with their Othering

⁶ The theory of semiotics was introduced by the American philosopher CS Pierce and the Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure to philosophy of linguistics. Their interest was in the structural relationship between signs, people and objects. They interpreted language as dislocated and flexible, in the Cartesian sense, not arising from an embodied linguistics. Further, their theory divides the sign in two halves: the signifier and the signified (Mirzoeff 1999:13, Bullock et al 1988:769). The philosophical *opus* on semiotics was not actually written by Saussure, but was posthumously conceived by two of his colleagues and was a compilation of his students' notes. The actual theory of linguistics was published in 1916 (Kirbey 1997: 7-9). Originally the theory focussed primarily on text but has been extended to non-verbal ways in which humans transmit meaning such as through gestures, advertising, food, clothes and music. It is a theory about the codes and systems developed to meet the needs of societies or cultures in their endeavours to communicate. The French theorist Roland Barthes elaborated on these concepts.

as personal politics.⁷ The act of tattooing their bodies as a species of neo-Gothic “archeodermatology” reflects a new awareness of the exploration of the body beyond previously established social and cultural guidelines (Kaube and von Arburg 2003:72).⁸ For instance, on the day he completed his compulsory military training in 1997, Cohen participated in this cultural form of symbolism by having history tattooed onto his hip as a rite of passage. His motif of choice was the Voortrekker monument. Similarly, rather than opting for a merely decorative motif, Abramović selected a political symbol when she cut (scarified) the pentagram into her stomach on two occasions. The symbol is associated with the tyrannical reign of Tito in Yugoslavia during her youth.

For Barney the idea of ordeal associated with piercing is not negative. He believes that by mastering corporeal limitations and “withstanding physical stress”, a system grows (Spector 2002:4). In fact, Barney’s whole *Cremaster* series, which consists of serialised fragments, a drama in five acts, is focussed on the idea that “resistance equals growth” (Saltz 1996:90, Spector 2002:4). Barney’s scrotum was adorned with piercings and strung with colourful surgical threads in *Cremaster 4*⁹. At the end of this film the artist’s adorned scrotum becomes a living symbol of the capsule-shaped emblem that has appeared in his work since 1988 (Saltz 1996:96). Barney’s type of body piercing and the physical endurance in his performances

⁷ In seventeenth century Baroque design, iconographic serialised motifs and emblems were popular and used as adornment, décor and strategic tools by King Louis XIV in many of his projects. The symbolic associations of the sun god, Apollo and the king appeared as a decorative schema throughout the royal residences in Versailles (Ndalianis 2004:49-54). The selected Performance artists frequently use seriality of emblems as a device for personalised branding, as for instance Madonna’s cross and rosary beads, Cohen and Barney’s adorned genitals and the repetitive juxtaposition of red and white by Abramović.

⁸ Julian Robinson (1998:66-97) the author of *The Quest for Human Beauty*, points out that in the Gothic era there was intense aesthetic experimentation where there was no division between fine and more decorative forms of expression. He states, “A form of aesthetic conceit has evolved in our western culture which has created artificial barriers separating our styles of body art from mainstream arts and regarding them as lesser forms of aesthetic expression. Such barriers do not exist in other cultural groups of the world who like our ancestors regarded body art as an essential manifestation of normal aesthetic expression central to culture”. In the work of the artists discussed here art/craft/decorative barriers are being removed as their work is interdisciplinary. Therefore it can be regarded as neo-Gothic and neo-Baroque.

⁹ Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 4*, (1994). Performance Art, UK, Isle of Man (Illustration: Spector, 2002:401).

exceeds the gimmick of ‘postmodern tribalism’ because his piercings are functional within his particular concept, transcending the merely fashionable and decorative marks of the defiant or exotic Other in contemporary popular culture.

Similarly, the shaman will use strange or odd masks, adornments and props to deliberately mark the performance as belonging to an order of activity other than the everyday. This is not the same as making an entertainment or a spectacle, either by means of the media or in a staged performance. As a result, the Performance artist chooses to use his body in a purposeful manner as a way of marking strangeness. The devices they use include to hybridise, transform, adorn and either reveal or mask their bodies. There is no guarantee that a completely secular viewing public holds a collective idea as to what they would consider strange or other. By making their bodies, as Foucault (1980:148) says, an “inscribed surface of events” rich in possible disruptions to the hegemonic minority, gender and class boundaries of contemporary culture. The artists can be sure to target as wide a section of viewers as possible.

The body has become a site of subjection, subjectivity and agency, and one of the primary concerns of postmodern politics. The selected artists have exploited their own bodies by creating multiple expressions of personae achieved through the use of masquerade, performance props, serialised signs, external and physically invasive adornment, synthetic prosthesis and silicone implants. The exploitation of the body is intended as a satirical critique on the particular society of their viewers. Cohen, for instance, displays his circumcised genitals adorned with the Star of David, as a cultural site in *How to receive a cheque*.¹⁰ De Waal and Sassen (2004: 20), point out that:

In Jewish ethics circumcision is meant to quell lust. Cohen’s performances flout that law ... if Circumcision is the salutary infliction of pain in the place of pleasure, what better way to describe Cohen’s view of the

¹⁰ Steven Cohen, *How to receive a cheque* (1998). Performance Art, Sandton, South Africa (De Waal, & Sassen 2003:43).

oppressive regulation of sexualities than a performance of pain in the place of pleasure.

Cohen's hermeneutic re-interpretation highlights and simultaneously mocks the ideological character of the emblem. By revision and transference of the prior understanding of this symbol, he stimulates critical reflection and challenges the validity of the everyday attitudes, beliefs and prejudices of his audience. In the process of *Dasein's* everyday self-comprehension, Marina Abramović also utilises postmodern intertextual referencing.

Abramović has used both specific personal symbols such as the Greek/Balkan pentagram and the crucifix as well as archetypal images such as a Minoan mother-goddess and Medusa in performances. These express the multiple belief systems that she experienced during her youth.¹¹ Barney frequently borrows Jewish cultural and religious imagery, such as the tabernacle and scapegoat, the icon of the American founders of the new Zion, as well as the symbol of Mormonism and Free Masonry; the honeybee. Barney also makes use of the Manx triskelion, three armoured legs revolving around a central axis, which is the medieval coat of arms of the Isle of Man, the place of his ancestral heritage. It appears in *Cremaster 4* Barney's which is a satire with multiple allusions to mythological figures such as Dionysus and Pan.¹²

¹¹ Marina Abramović, *The Biography* (1997), Performance Art, Vienna (Abramović 1998:397). Marina Abramović, *Anima Mundi* (1983). Performance Art, Amsterdam (Illustration: Abramović *Artist body* 1998:265). Marina Abramović, *Dragon heads* (1992). Performance Art, Media hallen, Deichdorhallen, Hamburg (Illustration: Abramović 1998: 326, 327).

¹² Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 4, The Loughton candidate* (1994). Performance Art, UK, Isle of Man (Illustration: Spector 2003:349). Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2* (1999). Storyboard sketches, USA, New York (Illustration: Spector 2003:231). Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 4* (1994). Pen, pencil and Vaseline drawings, UK, Isle of Man (Illustration: Spector, *The Cremaster Cycle* 2003:393-394). Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 3* (2002). Performance Art, USA, New York (Illustration: Spector 2003:311). For additional aspects of symbols and emblems used in the artists' work, Cf. Chapter Four, page 98 of this dissertation.

2.4. Markers of Othering



Fig 1. Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 5* (1997).

2.4.1 Masquerading as Other

Napier (1992:154) argues that our radical isolation of the ‘strange’, and the fleeing from it that our favourite cultural myths promote, encourages in us an ignorance of just how much we rely upon the ‘strange’ for self-definition. In the few published photographs of Barney, Cohen or Madonna as ‘real’ persons. They are virtually unrecognisable in their natural unadorned state. Barthes (1984:10, 12) points out that “the photograph is the advent of myself as other: a cunning disassociation of

consciousness from identity ... to become the observed subject and the subject observing ... 'posing' I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image”.

When compared, the principles of masquerade and photography share similarities with Baroque aesthetics. They both have the ability to turn the visible into spectacle and become a simulation with multiple formations. In reality they are both physically inaccessible and yet at the same time artefacts. The contrived and calculated photographic documentation of these artists submerges their identity even further into a combination of irrational illusions drawn from old and new mythologies. “To project to the camera one needs to have autonomy, a sharp-self conceptualisation, even fetishistic perversity” (Paglia1992:12). The “fetishistic perversity” Paglia refers to can be equated to the above disavowal or estrangement that both Napier and Barthes refer to.

The selected artists construct their photographic and cinematic poses in the manner of creating another body or becoming the Other. Tseëlon (2001:2, 3) suggests that masquerade is an “overstatement by the wearer [artist]. It is pleasurable excessive, sometimes subversive. It aims to signpost a specific facet, making an argument or offering reflective observations”. Transformation via adornment offers a respite, and escape from the inner self and reality - at least for a short while, directing attention towards the sensuality of the façade - for the viewer and the wearer.

Implementing an alternate strategy by electing to ‘unmask’ the body and appearing nude on many occasions, Abramović subverts the artificiality associated with costumes and masks. Stripping the body is in itself a form of overstatement and postmodern deconstruction because women have traditionally been linked to the notion of artifice, deception and masquerade since the creation myth of Eve. However, even though Abramović does not use elaborate costumes to mask herself, she veils herself with trance states using elevated neo-Baroque stage sets and chiaroscuro lighting such as in *Dragon Heads* (fig 2) and *The Biography* (fig 3).



Fig 2. Marina Abramović, *Dragon Heads* in Santa Fe, New Mexico (1994).



Marina Abramović, *Dragon Heads* in Hamburg, Germany (1992).

In *Dragon Heads*, performed several times between 1990 – 1994, Abramović used four live pythons and a boa constrictor as props. The reptiles move according to magnetic energy lines. By placing blocks of ice on the floor underneath her she contrived that the snakes would remain on the energy lines of her body. There were technical differences between the various performances. In Glasgow for example the stage was dramatically lit and in Santa Fe Abramović was ‘framed’ by a doorway and window through which the performance was visible. Conceptually and symbolically her works (fig 2, 3) allude to the mythology of Eve and Medusa and lethal seduction. The artist’s unadorned, naked body and the impression of reality of the dangerous nature of the performances, subvert the notion of artifice.

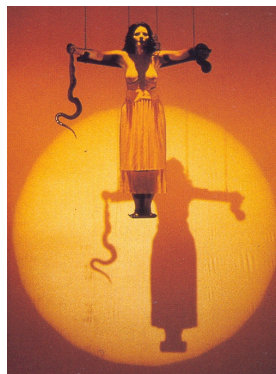


Fig 3. Marina Abramović, *The biography* in Berlin and Antwerp (1992–1995).

Cohen, Barney and Madonna frequently reify larger-than-life personalities for masquerade. They use the carnivalesque to point to social Otherness hereby underlining differences. Cohen's work, *Ugly girl at the rugby* (fig 4) shows examples of his use of these devices. The performance refers to the festival of Purim, which traditionally signals an inversion of order, as does the notion of the carnivalesque. In addition, Cohen has often adopted the exaggerated persona of a Jewish socialite, as well as numerous contemporary renditions of the medieval Gothic gargoyle or Jewish *golem*.¹³

De Waal and Sassen (2003:13) draw attention to the fact that in Cohen's case, "drag or cross dressing is indeed an undermining of stricture and its more radical edge also questions itself by refusing to pretend to be a woman. Cohen's form of drag is confusing and threatening: it is monster drag". *Ugly girl at the rugby* addresses inequities and the comfort of social, moral, ethnic, religious and sexual certainties.

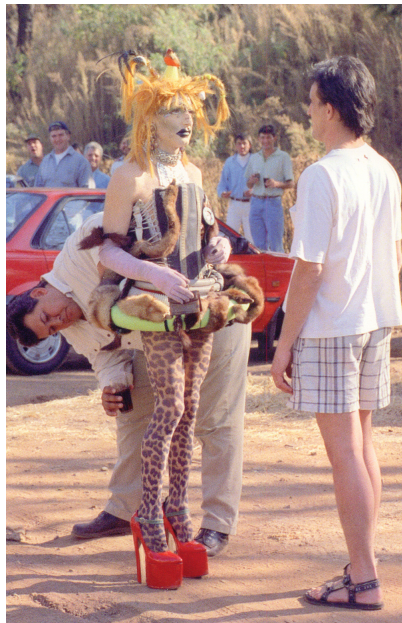


Fig 4. Steven Cohen, *Ugly girl at the Rugby* (1998).

¹³ The golem is a legendary Jewish folklore creature believed to be made from earth and blasphemy given life via magic spells and misuse of holy laws (De Waal and Sassen 2003:13), (Webster's Dictionary 1981. Sv golem). It has no practical purpose. The danger lies in the golem maker becoming autonomous and developing overwhelming powers that deny the holy Name (Goulsh cited in Heathfield 2004:186). In a certain sense the golem is comparable to the Christian gargoyle which was supposed to intimate hell and serve as a warning to sinners.

The work of a shaman in a traditional community often involves emotional arousal, the manipulation of symbolic rituals and the mediation and restructuring of intra-group conflict (Krippner 2007:5, 9). Cohen's site-specific public intervention at Loftus Versveld Rugby stadium (fig. 4) appropriates and subverts these shamanistic functions. Instead of intra group cohesion and therapeutic outcomes for the community his act is an offensive intrusion into a space, which can be regarded as almost hallowed ground for South African *machismo* rugby supporters. The artist states¹⁴ that his intention was to hold up a mirror to men who are prejudiced against his sexual orientation. He believes their reaction to his performance portrayed more about themselves than about him. His parody can be interpreted as a form of exposure therapy as Cohen has suffered much ridicule at the hands of heterosexual males especially during his national military service as a young man.¹⁵

By masking or making their bodily conditions 'strange' and uncanny,¹⁶ the selected artists are drawing attention to and questioning the notion of bounded or cohesive culture and to what extent it affirms our self-definition. The uncanny may be defined as otherworldly or supranatural and unsettling. It is not the spiritual in the sense a shaman approaches a spirit world. Rather, it has the feeling of something familiar and unfamiliar simultaneously, for example a centaur, the Minotaur or a satyr, the half man, half beast creatures of classical mythology. It may also refer to something, which challenges comfortable social understandings such as the threat to rigid sexual constructs as perceived in contemporary Western society such as the concept of androgyny or 'gender bending'. Kaiser (Tseëlon 2001:XV) suggests that, "Masquerade challenges hegemonic containment of others and unpicks the concept of authentic identity by suggesting a possible becoming rather than merely delineating the other".

¹⁴ Personal interview with the artist 2002.

¹⁵ This links up with counterphobia, exposure therapy or desensitization, when a person seeks repeated confrontation with a fearful situation in order to "extinguish the fear" (Barlow and Durand 1999: Glossary G-20).

¹⁶ In this study the use of the term 'uncanny' includes the concept of the 'stranger' within a community. It does not refer to the immigrant, but rather to individuals who seem at odds with community values.

When the strategies of masquerade are appropriated by the selected artists, they accentuate the idea of ‘becoming’, not just ‘being’ as they are. Part of their synthesising metaphoric vocabulary to create flexible myths about the personae they are masquerading as, is the language of ‘becoming’. Some of dramatization can be interpreted as a focusing of attention on cultural anxieties, which give rise to prejudice and marginalisation in contemporary society.

Madonna’s body morphing and modification is legendary. Judging by her penchant for an exaggerated exterior and novel identity there is always the suspicion that she incorporated these modifications temporarily to appeal to the upsurge of her audience’s interest in neo-paganism and sub-cultural ‘tribalism’ during the late 1990s. She intensified her appropriation of decorative and ritualistic trends from various world cultures from 1997 to 2000. Madonna started wearing saris, had henna motifs painted onto her hands and had piercings inserted into her navel and nose (Clerk 2002:128,141,146) (fig 5). However, Madonna is known for representing sub-cultural groups and embedding political as well as socio-cultural contexts into her videos (Schwichtenberg 1993:2, 3, 130, Scott 1993.73, Miklitch 1998:100-109).



Fig 5 Madonna, *MTV awards* (1998).

In 1998 worldwide xenophobia was on the increase. There had been a bombing at the World Trade centre in New York and the war in Serbia was taking its toll. For

her appearance at the 1998 *MTV Awards* in Los Angeles, while singing the song *Shanti/Ashtangi* (a chant for peace) she reworked the theme of the multiple-armed Hindu god Vishnu, who is known as the preserver. I propose that the examples such as the ones discussed here are part of the artist's contemporary hermeneutic construction, and a search for possible meaning by the process of creating narratives to assist in configuring the contemporary multicultural *Lebenswelt*.

Hewitt (1997:39) argues that "marking the body as a culmination of culturally sanctioned initiation rituals and is a signature of socialisation". Decorative patterning and invasive physical adornment, such as, metal body modifications and piercing, adds to the proliferation of identities available in the post-millennium era. Part of this interest in artifice and the implosion of the unmarked and 'natural' self-concept are reflected by the prevalent contemporary urge to design and re-design new identities.

The masquerade of the Performance artist alerts us to the fact that identity construction is ambivalent. Tseñlon (2001:6) an expert in Media and Social Psychology at University College, Dublin refers to this flux when she suggests that,

The mask shares some troubling features with the stranger in modernity; both defy order, introduce ambiguity and suggest lack of commitment and the questionability of belonging and not belonging.

An instance, of whether someone can belong or not belong to the world of the chic, powerful and erotically alluring is shown in the way Barney's *Cremaster 3* (fig 6) repeatedly portrays the amputee athlete, Aimee Mullins, as beautiful woman. This is a contradiction to our society's marginalisation of the amputee as usually considered helpless and disfigured. This celebration of difference, such as initiated by Barney has subsequently infiltrated into prominent cultural events and resulted in Mullin's appearance in fashion shows by Alexander Mc Queen, where she wore beautifully sculpted transparent legs and a coiled metal torso. She has also been the 'cover girl' of the German *Die Zeit* magazine (Fernbach 2002:1) (fig 7). In his work

with Mullins Barney alerts us to fact that identity construction is inter-subjective and a socialised process.



Fig 6. Matthew Barney, Aimee Mullins in *Cremaster 3* (2002).



Fig 7. Aimee Mullins

Some individuals feel estranged from institutionalised culture. Performance artists attempt to reveal the struggle these individuals experience to find a niche in life where they can maintain a cohesive self. The investigation of this attempt is a central premise in this dissertation and may be interpreted as a hermeneutic and phenomenological interface. The artists address such psycho-social issues with the use of their own bodies, theatrical devices such as satire, parody irony and masquerade. Kaiser (Tseëlon 2001:XV) states: “masking provides a means of both delineating the self from other and interrogating the Other within the self ... masquerade appears to be truth in the shape of deception.” Richard Schechner (1994: 121,122) the author of *Performance theory*, proffers a view on this type of efficacy:

In a period when authenticity was and is increasingly difficult to define, when public life is theatricalized, the performer is asked to take off her traditional mask and to tell the truth in some absolute sense ... perhaps in a way to educate the public to the theatricalized deceptions daily practiced on them by political leaders and the media bosses. Instead of mirroring the age, performers are asked to remedy it.

Schechner’s comments are applicable to the relationship between personal politics and contemporary culture. The individual must find a way to restructure internal values based on self-management, self-healing and discovering meaningful truths within the contemporary social order. His comments refer to the type of phenomenological therapy as discussed throughout this research.

2.4.2. Jesting

The court jester, a resourceful tool for political critique in Western and Oriental courts, embodies the stranger within by exposing royal court intrigue. The jester was often a socially and physically challenged Other, costumed in brightly coloured patches and a bizarre hat. He was verbally gifted and amusing, indulged by the king in giving subversive political advice, by deconstructing meaning, expressing critique and commenting on social issues.

Suzanne de Villiers Human (2003:6) of the Department of Visual Culture at the University of the Free State, in an article entitled *Gender, Ideology and Display*, concludes that “Debunking and resistance take place by playing the fool; through improvisation and parody or through mischievous juxtapositions and inversions”. As mentioned before, Madonna is known for her ‘mischievous inversions’, appropriation and deconstruction of ‘synthetic’ and famous characters. For example, her portrayals of Marie Antoinette, Marilyn Monroe and Dame Edna Everage (fig 8), play on the shifting of gender and identities as does Cohen and Barney’s work.

The artists also take on the role of the court jester. Madonna’s self-parody in impersonating the grotesque character of Dame Edna (fig 8) addresses the sequential inversion of gender and represents a deviation from the norm, reiterating the neo-Baroque aesthetic of “multiple originals” (Ndalianis 2004:80). Examples are Madonna as Dame Edna, Evita or Marlene Dietrich, Barney as Pan, satyr, magician and Cohen as a princess, a flying fairy, and chandelier. These examples are flamboyant, unruly, excessive and ‘clownish’, violating the image of the classical body - a quest of the neo-Baroque.



Fig 8. Madonna, as *Dame Edna Everage* (1987).

The act of masking defies passive acceptance because it accommodates the transgression of socially accepted behaviour by the disguised wearer. From the point of view of the masked person, it embodies a paradox: it invites the viewer to look, but may also repel. Masking signifies an undercurrent of disorder or *Geworfenheit*. This ‘thrown-ness’ can point to special initiative on the individual’s (wearer’s) behalf to become a haven for “otherness” (Bourgeois and Schalow 1990:166). The notion of self and the imposition of culture and society on the person cause the feelings of ‘*Geworfenheit*’. We become aware that “our cultural acts are always made ambivalent by the evidence of their origins that are usually not culture bound” (Lundin et al 1985:38). The dilemma of negotiating encounters with seemingly incompatible realms leads to hermeneutic analysis and an attempt at understanding and interpreting present historical culture. *Geworfenheit*¹⁷. Some of the artists investigated in this research may be considered deconstructionist¹⁸ in their inquiry of and critique on the discontinuity and conflict within their respective cultures. However, the viewer may find this ambivalence de-stabilising because it represents deception and the uncanny ‘stranger’ within.

In her research during the past decade, Tseëlon (2001:153, 169) explored the similarity between the ‘discursive’ political ‘strategy’ of some contemporary “Western women with regard to voice and dress and the carnival fool”. She concludes that the jester and a woman, for example Madonna as Dame Edna Everage, have much in common:

¹⁷ *Geworfenheit* literally means thrown into the world. Most humans have an inner drive to go beyond literal truths to an infinite analytical extension in order to avoid ‘thrown-ness’, known as *Geworfenheit* (Bullock et al 1988, Busch and Gallagher 1992, Heidegger 1977, MacQuarrie 1968). I believe that the performances described in this research are a constant quest to avoid feeling of *Geworfenheit*.

¹⁸ Deconstruction entails techniques and strategies that are mostly associated with French philosopher Jacques Derrida who inaugurated theme in *On Grammatology* (1976). Derrida attempted to dislocate meaning and demonstrate that texts have many facets and are open to interpretations other than the original meanings or intentions of the author, thus being co-extensive (Bullock et al 1988:205, 206).

Both are hideously attractive: they induce horror and fascination, approach and avoidance. Their intermediary position between order and chaos (like that of a monster's or mermaid's, etc) - nonsense and wisdom – expressed in the woman in the dynamic oscillation between contrasting modes of appearance and voice. ... What is so threatening about them is that we all recognise ourselves in them.

The jester represents anarchy. Such a parody of the 'powerful by the powerless' in a disguised identity dislocates direct responsibility and offers the masked person a position of immunity as well as a conduit to power. At the same time it becomes an instrument for the phenomenological subjective agency of the self.

Not only Madonna, but all the selected artists adopt multiple formations of self-presentation, assuming the mediating role of trickster, court jester or buffoon during their works. This strategy is not so much about the persuasiveness or ideological behaviour of these artists as the social origins of the objectification of their own bodies. They are interested in the "potential political core at the heart of play" (Miklitsch 1998:114). Their central desire is to 'present the unrepresentable' and show how this signification mirrors our present-day social constructs. The artists in this study have pursued post-modern aesthetics actively as defined by Lyotard (cited by Harrison and Wood 1992: 1014).

Presenting the unrepresentable; that which denies itself the solace of good forms, the consensus of taste which would make it possible to share collectively the nostalgia for the unattainable; that which searches for new presentations; not in order to enjoy them but in order to impart a stronger sense of the unrepresentable.

The Performance artists reference atrocities and hegemonies that remind the audience of the difficulty in representing the unspeakable. The role of the jester provides Performance artists with agency and they find ample opportunities for the presentation and re-figuration of social and cultural metaphors. Tseïlon (2001:169) says:

They take on the role of the outsider within whose observation, by their very being, offer insight and a discomfort. In this, they share some fundamental features with the mask whose otherness is part of its unending charm ... the

woman [the Performance artist] and the fool threaten to reveal the secrets of social performance: to reveal that the Emperor actually wears no clothes.

Barney's *Cremaster cycle 1-5* (1994 – 2002) is a case in point. Subverting hierarchies in a similar vein, Barney uses the comic persona of the jester/stranger, or 'outsider within'. He superimposes fragments of prominent personalities into mythical 'politically powerful' figures who play bizarre and amusing operatic roles in his films. In a typical neo-Baroque mode, there are pliable interaction and intricate connections between characters from different narrative worlds, and a convergence of media and intertextual references. Paloma Picasso appears as a Baroque countess and Ursula Andress as an "underwater Piéta" in *Cremaster 5* (Siegrist 1998:26) (fig 9). In these roles these two women are directed by Barney to deconstruct the conventional boundaries between nobility, popular sex-goddesses and religious icons. Through his reconstruction Barney incites the viewers to critically re-assess conventional assumptions of identity categorisation.



Fig 9. Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 5* (1997). Ursula Andress as the Queen of Chain.

The sculptor Richard Serra was cast both as himself in the film and also as Hiram Abiff who was the Master Mason of the biblical Solomon's temple (fig10). This is an intended pun orchestrated by Barney, in reference to the Solomon R. Guggenheim museum, the location of *Cremaster 3*.



Fig 10. Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 3* (1999). The sculptor Richard Serra as Hiram Abiff.

In *Cremaster 2*, the author Norman Mailer can be seen as an archetypal Jungian hero¹⁹ in the form of Harry Houdini. Barney draws on the Jungian concepts such as the persona, the anima (female component of male personality) and the animus (the male component of the female personality). Others include Jungian archetypes: the shadow, in the form of the hero; the child; the trickster; God; the demon; the wise old man; the earth mother and the giant (Jung 1961:41, Hergenhahn 1997:493). Although these archetypes form separate structures within the collective unconscious they can form combinations. For example, the hero archetype can become the ruthless leader when combined with the demon archetype (as in

¹⁹ The *collective unconscious and archetypes* were Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung's most controversial concept. He believed that the ancestral collective unconscious is a powerful component of identity formation. The contents of Jung's collective unconscious are called 'archetypes'.

Barney's *Cremaster 4, 5*). Barney's parody of featuring well-known achievers as archetypes is a whimsical but sharp comment on the flexibility between reality and myth in our contemporary media-driven society.

Barney's playful mythological hubris possesses pastiches of history, folklore and myth. It includes Baroque-inspired stage sets, costume, and imagery such as knights in armour, demigods, satyrs, giants and uncanny fairies alluding to a variety of Jungian archetypes.²⁰ Barney's 'new-millennium mythology' has been described as layered and inaccessible partly because it consists of fragments and the order is difficult to ascertain (Spector 2002:7).²¹ All the performances discussed here are focused on the re-creation of significant personal phenomenological mythologies as a tool for social intervention and therapeutic self-mastery.

John Thompson (1990:23) the author of *Ideology and modern culture*, argues that a hermeneutical framework (such as Barney's autobiographical works) is the creative construction of possible meaning that is built upon social historical analysis and formal 'discursive analysis', but moves beyond them. He says: "We are re-interpreting a pre-interpreted domain and thus engaging in processes which by its very nature, give rise to conflict of interpretations". The process of self-reflexivity and recognisable allegory is a key to the complexity in Barney's artworks. The traditional linear narrative has been masked, as Ndalianis (2004:69) says, with "an aesthetic of repetition and it is precisely this aesthetic that underlies the logic of the

²⁰ Fairies are mythical, minor supernatural beings. They are mischievous meddlers and determiners of fate. In old French, the word 'faerie' is linked to the Latin word *fatum*, meaning "fate or destiny". Another definition is a markedly effeminate man suspected of homosexual tendencies (Webster's Dictionary 1981. Sv Fairy). In *Cremaster 4* "the faeries are as wonderful as they are bewitching" (Saltz 1996:86-96). Barney features these subverted creatures (female body builders) as symbols of ambiguity and indeterminate sexuality. Cohen has enacted this as well (in *Nobody loves a fairy when she's forty*, performed at the Goodman Gallery 1999. De Waal and Sassen 2003:61).

²¹ Barney's work is always historically site-specific. One of his locations, the Isle of Man in the Irish Sea between Scotland, England, Wales and Ireland (*Cremaster 4*), is a "quintessentially in-between place. The site is rich in folklore myth and magic" and also has reference to his parents' origins (Saltz 1996:87). He uses the island as a metaphor of the body – 'the isle of man'. The Loughton sheep is indigenous to the island and unique as it possesses two pairs of horns which becomes a reference to male and female binary reproductive organs, which is the main topic of Barney's *Cremaster* series. In *Cremaster 4* one gets a sense of sexual ambivalence, a choice between "maleness, femaleness or Loughton-ness" (Saltz 1996:96).

serial whole and its relationship to the fragment ... neo-Baroque is concerned with the reconstruction of an order”.

As mentioned before, Barney’s *Cremaster cycle* consists of serialised fragments, a drama in five acts. They are epic and continuous although, each one is a collection of complete artworks in itself. Jerry Saltz (1996:85) reviewed Barney’s *Cremaster 4* in *Art in America* and states that “the work has an aesthetic wilfulness ... imaginative range and concentrated work in various mediums that are finely synchronised”. In Barney’s films there is a definite order, nothing is arbitrary, Saltz (1996:85) confirms that it is “a virtual lexicon of all artistic concerns and refutes the erroneous idea that the work is about nothing”.

An internal value based on self-management-self-mastery, self-healing and discovering one’s own truth within the contemporary social order, forms the nucleus of these artists’ work. This is often the case of discord between the *Innenwelt* and *Umwelt* of an individual. The artists’ reflexive narratives create gestures to stimulate the re-consideration of conventional hegemonic attitudes. The examples and discussion of the Performance artists’ work thus far demonstrates that it is about the ‘can be’ in their “hermeneutic move-toward-recognition” (Davey in Kemal and Gaskell 1999:77).

2.4.3. Gender mutation

The psychological states of narcissism and abjection, which are revealed in much of the performative works of the artists, are closely allied with issues around the concepts of persona and gender mutation (fig 11, 12, 13). The artists create a platform to express their personal disclosure of occasional radical social encounters that they have experienced pertaining to ambivalent gender orientation within the conventional ‘prescribed’ socio-cultural environment. The entertaining, but defiant parodies expressed in the subversion of gender through their costumes during performances, provides a “psychologically safe” (Rowe 2007:53) arena. I propose

that it is as a form of political, but also therapeutic mediation between themselves and the audience.



Fig 11. Matthew Barney, *Drawing restraint 7* (1993).



Fig 12. Steven Cohen, *I wouldn't be seen dead in that* (2003). The French dancer
Regine Chopinot.

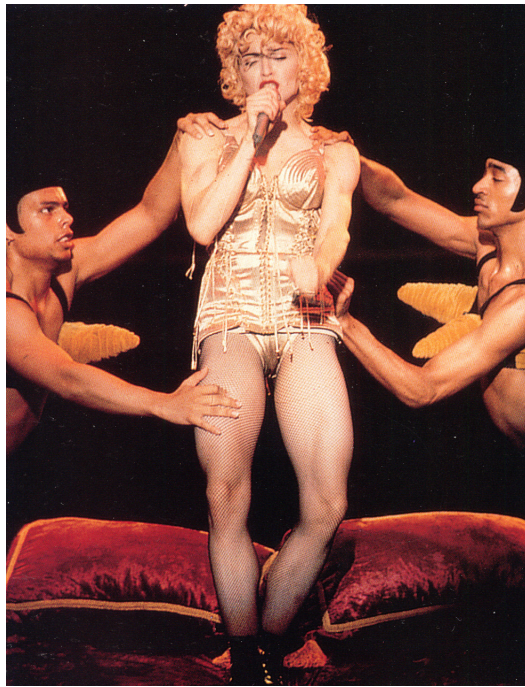


Fig 13. Madonna *Blonde Ambition Tour* (1990).

These are not the same issues that the shaman develops in his or her performance. The shaman's intention is to assure the viewers of the power invested in the person and the performance in order to assist the community. Whereas the Performance artists act out the unintegrated states of narcissism and abjection by means of which they can mirror their viewers' states back to them, the shaman's role is not a mirroring but separation of self from the community and to take on the difficult tasks which need to be performed. Nevertheless, the close relationship between identity and persona is significant in both kinds of performances. For the Performance artists, multiple personae enable them to reflect for their viewer's gender prejudices, innumerable states of mind, imagination, feelings and desires.

The acts of dressing up and changing of personae are intended to dazzle and fascinate. In doing so the artists manipulate the audience to contemplate values concerning sexually based subcultures in our contemporary *Lebenswelt*. The shaman does not expect that from his audience, but the adoption of changing personae and the use of a range of props is a feature of shamanic performances.

The re-figuring of the self in physical terms might be a rejection of society's expectations of the person as identity, and an attempt at discovering an authentic identity. It might also be a deliberate game in which the identity is never fixed. That would seem to be the case in contemporary Performers' artworks. Their construction of personal narratives and mythologies is one of the features of constructing a new identity. When that construction is performed in public with the aid of adornment, masquerade and props and documented, the identity becomes larger than life, publicly shared, and an item for consumers appropriation. The commodification of the identity of the performance is an essential part of the political manoeuvring. By contrast, the shaman's identity is not a consumer item. It is a genuine identity, authenticated by his position as a healer, a go-between among worlds, and a person of spiritual power.

Shamanic appearance management is not designed to shock or alarm for its own sake, but is aimed at assuming a well-recognised role in the community, and to signify the possibility of an otherworldly journey or interaction. That it might be a form of entertainment for the community is secondary to its primary purpose. The investment in the use of props to make strangeness and otherness part of the drama of otherworldliness as a spiritual activity is designed to mark the shaman off from the rest of the community.

2.4.4. Gothic and Baroque props as markers of Otherness

Referring back to the section 'inscribing the body' (Cf. page20), a number of stage craft devices from the historical Gothic and Baroque aesthetic periods serve their purposes to enhance a carnivalesque atmosphere in the artist's performances. The selected artists appropriate the devices belonging to the theatre and the opera of earlier periods.²² The cultural theorist Ndalianis (2004:4-6) focuses on cross-genre

²² The Roman Catholic Church made a decision at the council of Trent (1545-63) to establish the Counter-Reformation in response to the religious Reformation initiated by Martin Luther and John Calvin. As a result the representational, theatrical and visceral Baroque style of art, architecture and music was encouraged by the Catholic Church. The aim was to renew the emotional involvement of

and cross-historical neo-Baroque aesthetics containing spectacle, playful action and the modes of audience reception similar to those found in the work of the selected artists. *The Gothic body, sexuality materialism and degeneracy at the fin de Siècle* (1996) by Hurley of the University of Colorado, explores the revival of Gothic texts in nineteenth-century British literature. Her research throws light on the ab-human and trans-human, which is applicable to contemporary Performance art. Hurley (1996:5) says, “Gothic in particular has been theorised as an instrumental genre, re-emerging cyclically, at periods of cultural stress to negotiate the anxieties that accompany social and epistemological transformations and crises”. Whereas the crises of Europe in the twelfth and seventeenth centuries were religious, those of the late twentieth century and early twenty first century are economic, cultural and environmental - reflected in the politics of war.

The use of the neo-Gothic and neo-Baroque devices are extended and developed with the addition of new media. Contemporary artists are able to re-visit and enrich historical sensory experiences with a visual, auditory and textual dynamism that goes far beyond the possibilities of the past. The neo-Baroque, bizarre and modified configurations of the body abound in the works of Abramović, Barney, Cohen and Madonna (figs 14, 15, 16).

As illustrated, the traumatic spectacles found in the historical Gothic hybrids have been revived in the artmaking of the Performance artists. Abject Gothic bodies and demonic Baroque figures, which are in a constant process of transformation, can be manipulated through new technology and the illusionist flamboyance is challenging to conformist groups in society. For example, Christian fundamentalism has ensured that demonic figures and shapeshifting will deeply offend a certain group of

illiterate worshippers. This convention of ‘populist ecclesiastical art’ started in Rome and soon spread to the rest of Europe. Baroque aesthetics were fully established by the seventeenth century. In most cases Baroque describes a formal quality that implies spectacle, in excess of the norm, exuberant motion and free flowing form as seen in Bernini’s sculpture *Saint Theresa in Ecstasy* in the Cornaro chapel in S. Maria della Vittoria, Rome (Taruskin 2005:12-15, 18). Baroque theatrical aesthetics such as opulent costumes and stage sets, the rupture of boundaries not only of the body but also of the stage are evident in the artworks discussed in this research. The use of a proscenium jutting into the auditorium (fig 11) is a device used in Baroque opera; all four of these artists make frequent use of this device in their videos and especially during public appearances.

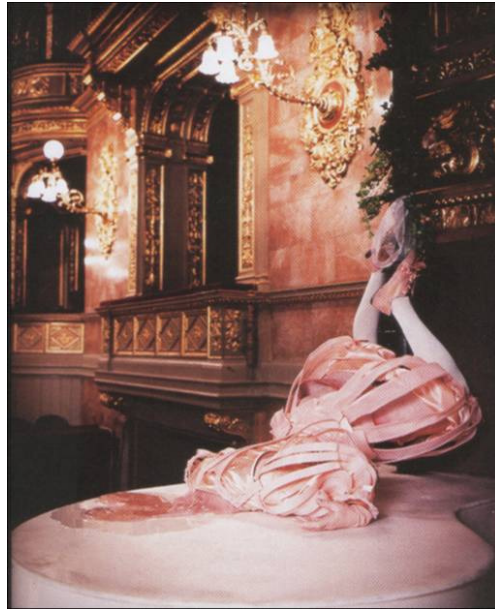
viewers. It is just such manipulation of the viewers' sensibilities, which can be exploited for shock value.



Fig 14. Matthew Barney, *Cremaster5* (1997).



Fig 15. Steven Cohen, *Fashion mule* (1998).



**Fig. 16. Matthew Barney,
Cremaster 5 (1997).**

Together with the fact that film and video are ‘virtual reality’, the artists are able to satirise the feelings of repugnance that such figures arouse (fig 15, 16). Although the artists are satirising the fears and the fascination of their viewers through the appropriation of the Gothic and Baroque, they are themselves engaged in a reflection on what their own being-in-the-world is.

2.5. Narcissism and meaning

If personal identity is continuously under fire and issues of authenticity are being taken up, one of the results is an increasing narcissism. Lasch (1991:77-81) claims that in this postmodern context political power is introduced in the guise of benevolence, but exposes corruptible value systems and general feelings of anxiety result for individuals. Lasch (1991:33) points to feelings of repressed rage, personal inadequacy, entrapment, and fear of illness, old age and death, which are fuelled by the mass media. The proliferations of mediated electronic images promote an altered sense of time, devalue the past and include forecasts of dangers ahead. Lasch (1991:91, 248) perceived the pre-millennial world as confusing to the individual. His observations are still applicable:

To the performing self, the only reality is the identity he can construct out of materials furnished by advertising and mass culture, themes of popular films and fiction and fragments torn from a vast range of cultural traditions, all of them equally contemporaneous to the contemporary mind. More than anything else it is the coexistence of hyper-rationality and a widespread revolt against rationality that justifies the characterization of our way of life as a culture of narcissism.

In Greek mythology Narcissus was a youth who spurned the love of Echo. So enamoured was he by his own beauty that he spent days admiring his own reflection in a pool of water. Psychoanalysts including Freud used the term to describe people who have an exaggerated sense of self-importance and are preoccupied with receiving attention. Because they often fail to live up to their own expectations they are frequently depressed (Barlow and Durand 1999:395, 396). Hewitt (1997:23) states that narcissistic individuals lack a cohesive self and incessantly struggle to create and confirm their self-worth. Christopher Lasch wrote *The Culture of Narcissism* from a sociological point of view, assessing the increasing prevalence in most Western societies of large-scale changes such as hedonism, individualism, competitiveness and success. He (1991:33) says, "Narcissism remains at its loosest a synonym for selfishness and at its most a precise metaphor that describes the state of mind in which the world appears as a mirror of the self". Madonna serves as the best example here. She satirises the desire her fans have for a single identity, which they imagine, is in her appearance, but at the same time is an icon of narcissism (fig 17, 18).



Fig. 17. An early publicity photo of Madonna (1987), dressed in typical ‘street culture’ style that established her identity as pop icon.



Fig 18. Madonna clones (1985).

A further explanation of the selected artist’s motives might be found in the postulations of psychoanalytical theorist, Jacques Lacan, who enriched and re-worked two key points of Freud’s theory of the narcissistic ego. He suggests that it is through the divided self and the mediation of self by others that we gain a somewhat deluded sense of ourselves via the identification with images and reflections. Lacan (Ward 2003:136) suggests that our sense of self or identity is

established when we perceive ourselves as an individual entity or ‘other’ for the first time.

This means alienation²³ and division are built in from the outset. During adulthood we constantly desire to become whole by mirroring ourselves in the presence of others. Personal identification from that moment onward is possible only in relation to another.

One of the best examples here is Abramović’s performance *Cleaning the Mirror I* (Performance at Oxford University in 1995, 19).

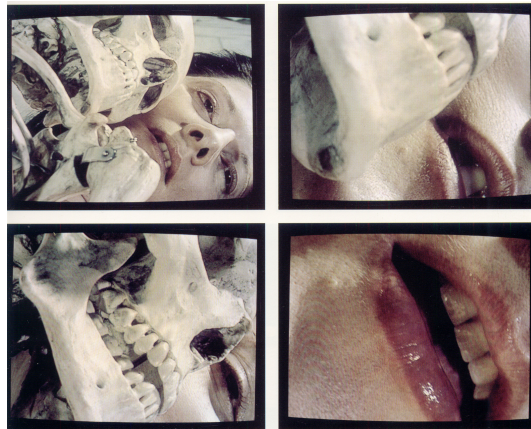


Fig 19. Marina Abramović, *Cleaning the Mirror* (1995).

While scrubbing a skeleton on her lap she breathed deeply with the skeleton lying on top of her to make it move to the rhythm of her breathing. By scrubbing and breathing she imitates the symbiosis between people in an environment. Television monitors multiplied close-up details of performance while the amplified sound of

²³ In contemporary society our sense of displacement and alienation has been articulated in a variety of ways by the theorists quoted here. The Phenomenological sense of *Geworfenheit* and alienation they address is comparable to the state described in Lacan’s mirror phase (explained in detail later in this research). It is reiterated by Hewitt (1997:11) who states that the struggle to achieve identity is reflected by the implosion of self and identity and reality, of the body as seen in the illustrated artworks in this paper. Likewise, Kristeva (in Warr 2000:243) proposes that the solace derived from this splitting of the ego is “fortifying” and offers an opportunity for the artist to “extricate himself” but constantly “questions their solidity and impels him to continuously start afresh.

scrubbing and breathing was overlaid with a confusion of murmuring voices representing society as the backdrop of the individual (Abramović 1998:341).

During the extreme category of Performance art described in this study, the artist enters into a type of 'contractual' relationship with the audience that might solicit participation/protest from a normally passive person. It is the politics of a shared (mirrored) ontology of the body and its finitude that makes both the viewer and artist "come to terms with an unsettling indeterminate consciousness of our own bodies" (O'Dell 1998:16). While becoming a mirror for individuals in the audience these Performance artists also use the audience as a mirror for themselves.

In contemporary society Kristeva, Hewitt, Baumeister and Lasch have articulated our sense of displacement and alienation in a variety of ways. The Phenomenological sense of *Geworfenheit* and alienation they are addressing is comparable to the state described in Lacan's mirror phase. It is reiterated by Hewitt (1997:118) who states that the struggle to achieve identity is reflected by the implosion of self and identity into the physical symbol, and reality, of the body. Likewise, Kristeva (in Warr 2000:243) concludes that the solace derived from this splitting of the ego is "fortifying" and offers an opportunity for the artist to "extricate himself" but constantly "questions his solidity and impels him to start afresh. Hurley (1996:42) states that:

Bifurcation becomes a "mechanism of resistance that blocks the disgusted subject's recognition of it's likeness to the disgusting object and thus aggravate the intensity of the affect, the doubling relation or amorphous version of the self. His position allows for an amorphous version of the self which is a non-self".

In the light of this, the self-reflexive processes of these Performance artists can be interpreted as attempts to disengage themselves from the *Unheimlich*²⁴ (uncanny, dread and creeping horror) to obtain some measure of contemporary, cultural and

²⁴ In 1919, Sigmund Freud wrote that the "*unheimlich* was concerned with aesthetics ... not only in terms of beauty but in terms of the qualities of feeling". In German the word *heimlich* means homely, but to do something *heimlich* is to act in secret. The addition of the negative prefix 'un'

personal order. The artists' being-in-the-world' confronts viewers with over-determined, self-centred theatrical scenarios that may be perceived as merely obsessive, private, intimate and narcissistic. Hewitt (1997:24) argues that narcissists simultaneously seek to "be self" and paradoxically "not to be self" She elaborates:

The narcissistic anxiety and fear of disintegration can only be eased by identifying and being subsumed by, an Other The corruptible aspects of the body - illness, aging and death - frighten the narcissist. The narcissist attempts to surmount the limitations of the body in order to deny change and mortality. Because extreme narcissists so desperately desire something they can trust they believe that the ego should be above the body's natural fate.

Pitting the ego against the natural fate of the body is part of shamanic practice and the assumption of these rights is a common factor in the work of Abramović, Barney, Cohen and Madonna. Not only the repertory material but also much of the adornment and masquerade in their oeuvres seem to be voluntary constraints, self-sacrificial, fetisistic or masochistic in nature. Like shamans, they use their masks and attire as devices to 'be-beyond-the-world'. This does not mean a Gothic and Baroque life-after-death sensibility but rather the uncanny neo-Baroque and neo-Gothic expression of free will to surmount personal and socio-cultural politics. After researching the repercussions of long-term shifts in the structure of cultural authority, Lasch (1991:33) concluded that there is a sense of loss, alienation and displacement as suggested in Lacan's theory. From the examples here one may deduce that individuals in contemporary society experience a void due to the disruption of once familiar cultural and social contexts.

2.6 Abjection and the neo-Gothic

Opening up discourse is part of the social process of making sense of reality by analysing, re-collecting and then critically assessing meaning. Cultivating an

indicates intellectual uncertainty. *Unheimlich* (uncanny) "excites in the spectator the impression of a [secret] process at work beyond the ordinary mental activity". The uncanny creates a feeling of uncertainty and psychological artifice. What is feared are the signs of an uncanny entity having the "power or the intention of doing harm ... and recalls the discarded animistic stage in "primitive men"". It re-calls repressed feelings that have been preserved under a thin disguise and concerns the 'purely gruesome', 'dead bodies', 'animism', 'magic and sorcery' (Freud 1955:217-256)

obviously artificial appearance and the deliberate undermining of traditional constructs of human identity can be seen as part of a cause and effect pattern. For instance, at the turn of the nineteenth century, Darwinism caused confusion and destabilization of long held ideas. This is reflected in the appearance of the Gothic representations of bodies in flux and hybrid species surfacing in a variety of trajectories.

Sigmund Freud's account of the *Unheimliche* together with Huxley's scientific analysis of cells and his essays on slimy grotesque protoplasm drew attention to liminal entities and the "gothic of matter" (Hurley 1996:33). Socio-medical discourse in sexology and speculation about variant sexual identities and pathologies as well as degeneration theory and criminal anthropology were the order of the day. Victorian literature is known for its dark disruption human/non-human spectacles.²⁵ Gothic exploration of identity and the possibilities of hybrid creatures during the *fin-de-siècle* caused a preoccupation with the abhuman and even the denaturalized post-human condition. This is strangely compatible with contemporary hermeneutic concerns about the physical body and the future of humankind in the twenty-first century, amply reflected in science fiction films, computer games and art practice.

From this perspective, the self-reflexive processes of these Performance artists can be interpreted as attempts to disengage from the *Unheimlich* to obtain some measure of cultural and personal order. This is demonstrated in Abramović's *Cleaning the Mirror* (1995, fig 19,). In *Cleaning the House* (1995) Abramović sat scrubbing a heap of bloodied cattle bones as a cleansing ritual which served as a metaphor for war-torn Yugoslavia.²⁶ Disengagement from the *Unheimliche* may also be read into Barney's *Cremaster 5* (1997 figs 11, 13), Cohen's *Fashion Mule*

²⁵ Mary Shelly's *Frankenstein* (1818), *Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde* (1886) by Robert Louis Stevenson in (1886), *Count Dracula as a leech* (1878) and *The Lair of the white Worm* by Bram Stoker (1911) (Hurley 1996:10, 147, Fernbach 2002:50 - 64, 86 - 91).

²⁶ Marina Abramović, *Cleaning the House* (1993-1998) Performance art, New York, Venice. (Illustration: Abramović 1998:365).

(1998 fig 15) and in *The one who got away* (2003)²⁷ This artwork deals with Cohen's Jewish heritage (Estonia is near the birthplace of Cohen's grandparents who were displaced by the holocaust). The same emphasis on the uncanny applies to Madonna's Gothic inspired video *Frozen* (1998).²⁸ She appears dressed in a black cape in the style of the 'grim reaper' set in a desolate and baneful landscape. She encounters clichéd symbols such as crows and threatening black dogs as the plaintive lyrics develop. All these contain role-playing around subjective mythologies, and a reference to strange Gothic phenomena, symbols, omens and personal encounters with fear, or death.

Hurley (1996:28) suggests that "Gothic is the realm of disorder, wherein cultural ordering systems are revealed as always already having collapsed". Ndalianis (2004:14) argues that the current worldview of "instability and untrustworthiness, of reality as truth, the concern with simulacra ... layers of meaning; and the inherent self-reflexivity and the sense of virtuosic performance" have parallels with seventeenth century Baroque sociology, resulting in the neo-Baroque. In the light of instability Ndalianis (2004:7) defines seventeenth century Baroque aesthetics as "possessing traits that were unusual, vulgar, exuberant and beyond the norm" and that era has been regarded as "a decline of the classical and harmonious ideal". I argue that this description is applicable to the contemporary performances under discussion. Unlike the static, idealised, classic body, the adorned and exaggerated living bodies of Abramović, Barney, Cohen and Madonna are objects of their own making. These are sometimes vulgar and exuberant, challenging social conventions, yet expressive of confusion and cultural conflicts. Barney's images in *Cremaster 2* (1999)²⁹, Abramović's *In Between* (1996)³⁰ and Madonna's *Blonde Ambition* tour (1990 fig 24) are good examples.

²⁷ Steven Cohen, *This one who got away* (2003). Performance Art, Vinistu, Estonia. (Illustration: De Waal, & Sassen 2003:71, 9).

²⁸ Madonna, *Frozen* (1998). Performance Art, San Remo Festival, San Remo, USA (Clerk 2002:73, Blake (a:115).

²⁹ Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 2* (1999). Performance Art, USA, New York. *Cremaster 2* is about the internal re-organisation of sexual differentiation of the foetus from an original state of bi sexuality to a progressive division and eventual sexual determination. Barney based the film

The average citizen has an idealistic, unrealistic and mythical desire to be in a predictable situation of unity and stability. Sometimes this desired structure results in subjection to various kinds of “disciplinary power”. Foucault (1979:138, 25) says these “relations of power invest it, mark it, train it, torture it, force it ... to emit signs”. The eccentric performances discussed here reflect the type of signage that Foucault refers to.

The signage of certain physical acts may vary from culture to culture. However in all cultures there are acts that challenge the notion of normal or perverse. Sensationalist artworks such as the above 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). When used as props in Performance art, Hurley (1996:3) suggests that they allude to the “spectacle of the body, metamorphic and undifferentiated ... gross corporeality; in place of a unitary and securely bounded human subjectivity, one that is both fragmented and permeable”. Abramović, in her performance *Spirit Cooking* (2005, fig 20) at the Johannesburg Art Gallery, is a good example as she used blood, tears and soft maize porridge as metaphors for the political situation in South Africa.



loosely on real events of a murder committed by Gary Gilmore (believed to be Houdini's grandson) and uses the biological system of sexual differentiation as a metaphor for conflict. (Spector 2003:35, 182).

³⁰ Marina Abramović *In Between* (1996). Performance art, USA, Dallas, Texas. Abramović traced the lines on her open palm, pricked her fingers, and traced the moles on her neck and the veins in her open eyes with a needle (. Illustration: Abramovic 1998:362-363).



Fig 20. Marina Abramović, *Spirit Cooking* (2005).

Barney used tapioca, excrement, sperm and its counterpart Vaseline, in *Cremaster 2* (fig 31b), *Cremaster 4* (fig 35) and *De Lama Lãmima* (fig 28). Cohen has deployed blood, excrement and sperm as props on several occasions (fig 21, 31c) 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”. Cohen admits that he is fearful during his outrageous performances, yet he persists, repeatedly challenging social regulations.³¹ His performance titled *Taste* in 1999 courts confrontation. While the Yiddish drinking song *Le Chaim* played on a soundtrack, he ejected black

³¹ Cohen’s Artist Statement in the 1998 *FNB Vita Awards* catalogue. In 1998 he attended a rightwing rally commemorating the Anglo-Boer War, adorned as *Princess Menorah*, wearing an orange wig, pink ostrich feathers, red fetish shoes and a black diamanté-encrusted evening gown (fig 29). The costume had a ‘Jewish sensibility’ which accentuated the Neo-Nazi attitudes of the *Afrikaner Weerstandbeweging* in South Africa. Predictably he was expelled by right-wing supporters while they gave the Nazi salute. Theatrical performance is out of step with the puritanical values of Orthodox Judaism. However, in the past during annual Jewish Folk theatre or *Purim-spiel*, cross-dressed players were usually underprivileged, marginal, liminal or ‘other’ and took advantage of voicing their resentments at the festive occasion of Purim (Belkin in Tseëlon 2001:103). Cohen’s Performance art can be regarded as a contemporary rendition of this tradition with its satirical and topsy-turvy intentions.

fluid from his anus into a glass Victorian bedpan, decanted it into a glass and drank it as a toast.



Fig 21. Steven Cohen, *Taste* (1999).

His intention was to “prove that queer self acceptance is an acquired taste”; an act that accentuates the satire and parody in the performance. De Waal and Sassen (2003:21) who have analysed Cohen’s work extensively, propose that:

The performer’s extreme self-abasement and the relentless focus on his body as present physical being, both as surface and as a collection of cavities, generate the powerful internal reaction that Cohen calls for ... making art out of his personal baggage of sexuality and identity.

This describes the concept of counterphobia, exposure therapy and desensitization, when a person seeks repeated confrontation with a fearful situation in order to “extinguish the fear” (Barlow and Durand 1999: G-20). It reflects Cohen’s sense of himself in a *Lebenswelt* as a marginalised individual, against the collective identity of society. Bataille (1986:58) is of the opinion that we as viewers experience such events with a “sinking sensation ... our protest if we make one, implies our own humiliation and our refusal to see”. Cohen deliberately employs this notion in his communication with audiences.

The artists' personal fear, which is the basis of such disgust, is also addressed by Abramović in *The Onion* and *Dissolution*³² and by Barney in *Cremaster 3*³³. Performances of this nature reflect the findings of Baumeister (1991:71, 72), the author of *Escaping the self*, who concludes, "shedding (or stripping down) the self reduces one's vulnerability to emotional distress". He explains that "research shows that inhibitions cease to function when identity is forgotten and meaning rejected".

There is criticism of the type of anti-social behaviour or self-Othering as expressed by these Performance artists. Hansmartin Siegrist (1998:27), a Swiss art critic has observed that:

Barney's generation grew up with the video recorder (and Daddy's dirty movies), is thoroughly drilled in scandal free assimilation of explicit genres In the age of Aids, consensual models and multimedia, films that flaunt all matter of splatter, sleaze and porn have become value free slots in the channel-switching between discourses, scenes and sectors. Bodily juices there excreted en masse flow like water off a duck across Barney's surfaces.

In her article *Body language* Vergine (in Warr 2000 b:237) labels this behaviour "romantic rebellion" and describes it as a conversion of "neurotic and psychotic formations into surrogate cultural activities". Vergine (in Warr 2000 b:236) suggests that many artists involved in performance, "use infantile shocks to affirm themselves ... exalt the excretory functions and the uses and abuses of all the body orifices.

³² Marina Abramović, *Dissolution* alternative title: *The onion* (1995). Performance Art video, UTA, Texas, USA (Abramović 1998:357). Abramović ate a large onion while looking up towards the sky and complaining about her country, her appearance, her life an artist and the disparity of her desires.

³³ Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 3* (2002). Performance Art, USA, New York (Spector, 2002:311). This film was the last production in cycle and the most narcissistic as it refers to Barney's heritage and himself as a struggling Masonic candidate who is repeatedly confronted with his own inadequacies. The narrative is a metaphor for self-imposed resistance and exploration of the difficulty of emotional distress, antagonism and eventual acceptance of transcendence after a liminal phase.

Obsessive neuroses are no longer renounced nor is coprophilia censured; everything that derives from anal eroticism is accepted and put to use'.³⁴

Elizabeth Gross (Fletcher and Benjamin 1990:89) in an essay entitled *The body of signification* reasons that:

Abjection is the underside of the symbolic. It is an insistence on the subject's necessary relation to death, animality and materiality, which is the subject's recognition and refusal of its corporeality. The abject demonstrates the impossibility of clear cut borders, lines of demarcation, division between the clean and the unclean, the proper and the improper, order and disorder.

Hermeneutic thoughts and acts seek to overcome the alienation of the individual. Strange and defiant performances in public as indicated throughout this chapter are a part of a mediating process and include an open confrontation with the self. For these Performance artists, being witnessed invests the disclosure with wider significance. The artist's desire for the audience, who metaphorically represent the social identity, to witness and share their subjective and self-conscious understanding of the abhorrent experiences of the body as referenced in the section on narcissism. Examples which illustrate this well are Barney being beheaded, in *Cremaster 4* (fig 16); and Abramović staging her own crucifixion above a dog gnawing bones in an autobiographical performance (fig 22).

The artists use neo-Baroque and neo Gothic theatrical devices such as dramatic lighting, amplified sound and adornment and evocative stage props to create a setting of both horror and beauty. Their intention is to demand active audience engagement and arouse emotions of pity and fear. The staging of such violent acts comes close to the ancient Greek social drama of purgation, the Catholic confession of human imperfection; and the Calvinistic prayerful "self-inventory" that seeks mercy and forgiveness through self-reproach to obtain personal catharsis (Kemal et

³⁴ This corresponds to Freud's first stage of ego development and autoerotic, narcissistic, anal-sadistic self-love. Chasseguet-Smirgel (in Spector 2002:24) says that in her research on creativity and perversion that this regressive drive results in the creation of anal sadistic universe, a Sadean realm in which "the paternal law is violated on every possible level".

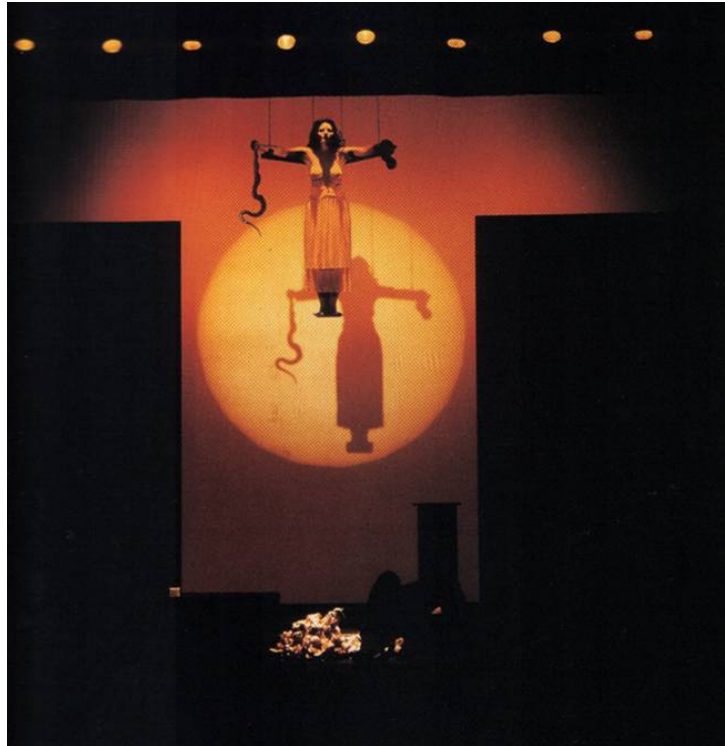


Fig 22. Marina Abramović, *Biography* (1992).

al 1999:20, 54, 55).³⁵ Kristeva (cited in Morgan and Morris 1995:22) suggests that this state of dissolution can be experienced as “rapture”. She points out that “in Flemish and Gothic paintings you can see corpses and monsters representing the hellish element, but as a counterpoint to the state of beauty”. This reflects Bataille’s (1986:39) opinion that “desire is usually closely linked with terror, intense pleasure and anguish” which may reflect the motivation of the artists.

2.7. Conclusion

³⁵ Purgation or exegesis may take the form of a ceremonial moral cleansing in order to eliminate stigma and introduce change. In traditional Greek drama it served the purpose of repentance and freeing a person from suspicion. In his tracts on *Politics* and *Poetics*, the Greek philosopher Aristotle recommended purgation and catharsis as successful theatrical devices. He suggested that during traditional Greek dramatic rituals, performance should contain emotional communication in the form of fear, pity or terror. He suggested that inducing the ‘pleasure’ of sharing sympathetic pity in an audience was an artistic achievement that “cleared the mind” (www.aristotlethefreelibrary.com/poetics-of-Aristotle/1-6#purgation). This “sympathetic pity” is resonant of Burke’s (1967: 65,131-136) description of “the sublime of delightful horror”. Medical purgation serves a related curative function as in Barney’s (fig 28) *De Lama Lāmina* and Cohen’s performance *Taste* (fig 21). In psychology it is defined as the “alleviation of hysterical symptoms by allowing pathogenic ideas to be expressed consciously” (Hergenhahn 1997:506).

Contributing to a sense of alienation or *Geworfenheit* is the proliferation of mediated electronic images, promoting an altered sense of time. These devalue the past yet forecast problems ahead. The ever-increasing dominance of these images in our consciousness has created the suspicion that our perceptions of the 'real world' are already duplicates.³⁶ Continuous media simulations are aimed at mass audiences and these phantoms of authenticity influence our daily existence. These images appear as a reinvention of the status quo by means of 'media effects', but hark back to the much earlier intentions of the Catholic Church in the original Baroque era.³⁷ The exchange between artifice, myth and reality, the invasion of space and the refusal to respect limits and containment within a framework, are characteristics seventeenth-century baroque art and opera aesthetics and these are evident in the props, stage sets, costumes and masks of the artists under discussion.³⁸

³⁶ The suspicion and objections about image overload are a remnant of Western hostility towards images and representations that harks back to Plato. He compared reproduction to the distorted shadows cast by the light of a fire on the wall of a cave. He declared: "Painting and imitation are far from the truth when they produce their works; ... moreover, imitation keeps company with the worst part in us that is far from prudence and not comrade or friend to any healthy or true person" (Plato 1997:286). Later the Ten Commandments containing the ban on "graven images" reinforced this notion. During the Enlightenment certain literary forms and the mental images they evoked were thought to have a corrupting influence, and the introduction of censorship followed. Nicholas Mirzoeff (1999:11) is of the opinion that, "the general antipathy of intellectuals to popular visual representation may be a displaced hostility to those who participate and enjoy mass culture. In the eighteenth century this hostility was directed at theatre and is now directed at film television and the Internet

³⁷ Since the mid-sixteenth century Printed books have been available and can be regarded as the beginning of mass culture in the early Baroque period, and may be compared to the media influence on contemporary urban culture. During the first decade of the seventeenth century "copies of paintings and mass produced images became a successful industry" (Ndalians 2004:46). The media theorist Baudrillard has explored the influence of the proliferation of imagery in postmodern culture extensively in *The Evil Demon of Images* (1987) and other publications.

³⁸ Apart from the fact that Baroque opera drew together all the arts as a unified whole, the spatial arrangement and visual devices of the Baroque theatrical stage were characterized by large vertical hierarchical sets, containing "flying" machinery and trapeze. The typical baroque stage set had access to the stage through trapdoors in the floor (Taruskin 2005:12-18). The proscenium formed part of Baroque stage architecture and extended the confined space of the stage, into the audience, and actors sometimes entered the opera or play through the auditorium. The invasive articulation of space and 'the rupture of boundaries' is comparable to the selected Performance artists' attitude and work and can be regarded as neo-Baroque (Cf. fig 14, 16)

The process of *Dasein* is about human evaluation, acceptance, rejection and development within a particular circumstantial situation of 'thrown-ness'. Deduced from the examples above, these Performance artists exploit this type of postmodern deconstruction. Their tools or strategies have become the constant reification of personae, archetypes, stereotypes and mythological creatures and a neo-Baroque aesthetic in their appearance management. Ndalianis (2004:60) draws our attention to historical baroque literature, which "took the repetition of stereotypes for a process of intensification". This resonates with the development of a hermeneutical framework as seen in the artists' work.

Ndalianis (2004:60) explains:

Like the fragment and ruin, the seriality particular to allegory accumulates multiple pieces of its kind, seeking to produce a new whole in the process. Like ruins containing memory of past existence, an understanding of the meaning of a fragment functions as a nostalgic remnant or emblem of the past but it is also a re-invention of itself as a unique whole that belongs to its own time.

In postmodernism "difference suggests multiplicity, heterogeneity, plurality, rather than binary opposition and exclusion" (Hutcheon 1999:66). The selected artists are constantly challenging central and pivotal binary opposites that concern all of us, such as male/female, black/white, East/West, moral/immoral, and heterosexual/homosexual narratives. These artists have been severely criticised for it, but have self-consciously publicised the interconnectedness of postmodern society. Each has challenged and deconstructed dominant cultural understandings of gender stereotypes - based on biological - sex, through appearance management in their performances.

I concur with Janis Bohan, Professor of Psychology at Metropolitan State College, Denver, who discusses the origins and meaning of sexual orientation, lesbian, gay, and bisexual identity development and stigma management in her publication *Psychology and Sexual Orientation, coming to terms*. Bohan (1996:9) states that: "the culture we live in constructs sexual orientation as a core nuclear essential defining attribute of identity which can be defined by membership to one of two (or

at best three) discrete categories”. Bohan (1996:43) is of the opinion that “it misconstrues sexual orientation as an intrinsic aspect of individual identity, because what we take as truth is actually a situated understanding”. Strict gender binaries and the oppositional view of the sexes are modern inventions dating from the late Nineteenth century (Bolin in Mascia-Lees and Sharpe 1992:81, Bohan 1996:16).³⁹ This division and fundamental fracture coincided with the emergence of psychoanalysis. Bohan (1996:17) argues that, “Heterosexuality, which was simply that form of sexuality that was left over after the perversions were catalogued, was taken as normative”.

In their re-ordering of existing structures, these Performance artists can operate from two points of view: a culturally hierarchized, binary position or a non-hierarchized cultural marginality. They have elected to adopt the postmodernist polycentric approach, of dissolving exclusions and boundaries, constructing numerous versions of themselves and exploring concepts of hybridization.

Adornment, and binary aesthetic strategies are used by the Performance artists as defence mechanisms. Along with the reflection of the state of narcissism they serve as a means to portray the refiguring of the self and the Other. I suggest that the undermining of conventional socio political myths, such as described in this chapter is part of the artists’ intention to open up a dialogue with the audience as a type of survival strategy. Various types of fetishism as discussed in Chapter Three further assist the artists’ resilience.

³⁹ Male homosexuality was only made illegal in France by the Labouchère Amendment to the Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1885 (Fernbach 2002:40). The biologist and gender theorist Anne Fausto Sterling (quoted in Spector 2002:13, 15) identifies five different sexes: males, females, hermaphrodites (one testes and one ovary), male pseudo-hermaphrodites (testes and some aspects of female genitalia but no ovaries), and female hermaphrodites (ovaries and some aspects of male genitalia but no testes). “Modern medical science may have routinely used surgical intervention to fix these unruly bodies to eradicate sexual variation ... but the recognition of intersexed people is gaining currency” (Spector 2002:15).

CHAPTER THREE: FETISHISM

Fetishism has associations with medieval Christianity, Freudian psychology with its sexual basis, as well as contemporary popular cultural ideas about sado-masochism⁴⁰ and taboo erotic practices. These associations offer Abramović, Barney, Madonna and Cohen the opportunity to engage their viewers by using props consisting of a variety of fetishes, pain, bodily fluids and their own physical beings as commodities to challenge and shock their viewers.

This chapter presents a brief exploration of the concept of ‘fetishism’ to contextualize its use by the Performance artists. This is followed by a detailed discussion of fetishism in their performances. The intention in this chapter is to explore the hermeneutic process involved in the Performance artists’ manipulation of various forms of fetishism. It is argued that for the selected Performance artist fetishism functions as a shield or amulet in dealing with *Dasein*’s vulnerability.

Achieving heightened states of consciousness are endeavours in both shamanic and fetish phenomenology. Practitioners deliberately alter, intensify and self-regulate their physiological and psychological thresholds through dissociation, role-play, pain, ritual, myths and metaphors to attain this goal. However, his chapter will mainly focus on fetishism because the final chapter in this dissertation explores shamanic action in detail.

⁴⁰ *Sadomasochism*, a description used to give definition to the licentious writings of the marquis De Sade (1740-1814). *Sadism* refers to the deriving of pleasure by inflicting pain or humiliation on others; *masochism* refers to the suffering of pain or humiliation of the self. In the case of sexual interaction and gratification these are regarded as psychologically deviant patterns of arousal (Barlow and Durand 1999:325, Gaines and Makinen 1990:223). German neurologist Richard Kraft Ebbing coined the label to refer to a particular pattern of sexual behaviour based on the novels of Leopold von Sacher Masoch, which involves the reversal of gender roles and the fetishization of fur (Baumeister 1991:118). For the masochist, pain is not the antithesis of pleasure, but becomes a pre-condition – “A feeling of empowerment from a position of disempowerment” (Fernbach 2002:196).

3.1 Fetish and contemporary culture

Fetishes⁴¹ are a richly evocative symbol in visual art in contemporary cultural codes, in music videos, science fiction films, advertisement and the fashion industry. These media are the common currency 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 performances⁴². 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 the adult fetish practitioner 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,

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.

Most psychoanalytical thought has excluded female fetishism. 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

⁴¹ The concept of fetishism becomes a commonplace in Europe during the period of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries when travellers, explorers and colonizers looked for a way of describing non-European witchcraft and charms – *fetico* in Portuguese, from the Latin *facticium*, 'artificial' (Ashley 1986:97, Fernbach 2002:104). The eroticization of the 'fetish' probably came about through the objectification and eroticisation of the non-European female body. In *The Other Question: Difference, discrimination and the discourse of Colonialism*, Homi K. Bhabha draws a comparison between Freudian and racial fetishism. Bhabha is of the opinion that racial stereotyping can generate contradictory reactions of desire and debasement similar to those generated by the fetishized female body. "Once the artifice of the fetish is firmly in place it masks nature and makes it desirable" (Bhabha 1994:75).

⁴² George Bataille (1986:9), author of *Eroticism, Death and Sensuality* illuminates the religious dimension of eroticism, "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".

because of phallogocentrism in psychoanalysis (Gamman and Makinen 1994:98,103).⁴³

The author and researcher of *Fetishism, visualising power and desire*, Anthony Shelton (1995:54), argues that, “fetishism is firmly anchored in the space between cultures”. For the Performance artists the value of this kind of stereotype is that they are able to use the associated ideas of ‘magical’ potions, charms and amulets, and ‘alternative semantics’ of the body which has been suppressed by layers of Western rationalism (Warr 2000:11), to fascinate and challenge audiences.

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.⁴⁴ 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. 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.

⁴³ Fernbach (2000:34) points out that recent texts challenge the primacy of traditional psychoanalytical models because they exclude the pluralities of fetishism.

⁴⁴ 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.

Contemporary visual culture enables the artists' fetishized bodies with their promise of fulfillment of desire through magic, myth and illusion, to become a substitute for whatever is lacking in the viewers' sensations. Utopian speculation and euphoric messages have become an existential necessity (Bullock et al 1988: 889) which *techno fetishism* promotes - as the cultural studies scholar, Amanda Fernbach (2002:60) says, "... promises of utopian tools for post-human existence whereby new or hybrid mutant identities may be fantasized into being

3.2 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, things that appear socially offensive must be controlled. When certain unexpected acts and desires surface such as those of Abramović, Madonna, Barney and Cohen it is labeled as an 'anti-social threat' or decadent.

Peter Wollen (1983:12), a researcher of twentieth-century culture, explains decadence and its relation to fetishism very aptly. He maintains that the true political significance of decadence lies, of course, in its sexual politics and its negation of the 'natural' in re-contextualizing of the body in terms previously considered perverse. One such perversion is body suspension, which began as a means of rejecting society's conservatism in the 1970s by drawing attention to its potential dangers. However, since the early 1990s it has become a commonplace with the rapid increase in fetish inspired clubs such as *Torture Garden* in London Randall (2002:7-14). Fernbach (2002:15) points out that "*Torture Garden* is an arena that intensifies many contemporary cultural anxieties, desires,

preoccupations and obsessions, including those surrounding the often eroticized interface between technology and the flesh”. The increase in the recreational use of pain and fear as a method of producing a sense of heightened sensation amongst people from varying ages and backgrounds has become a form of escaping the confines of the body into a different plane. Vergine (2000 a: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. They frequently make use of multiple fetish practices with a remarkable degree of self-consciousness, while transforming themselves into eroticized spectacles in the public domain. 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 is 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”.

3.2.1 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 23). 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. She is foregrounding the safe haven of the African American church, which provides sanctuary for marginalized individuals (Scott 1993:71).

Apart from the political subtext ambiguities between religion and eroticism in the video are deliberately extended. A sacred altar, radiating otherworldly qualities, is re-created to become a place of seduction. 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 23. Madonna *Like a Prayer* (1998).

Pastiche, in the postmodern sense, uses retrograde appropriation and multiculturalism to create novel associations. It becomes a tool to address the plural

realities that define postmodern society. Madonna's video alludes to the Hindu Tantric philosophy of embracing eroticism as fundamentally sacred and as a talismanic path to divine communion. Conversely, the Christian culture advocates chastity and asceticism where the 'sinfulness' of sexual desire ought to be conquered to achieve spirituality and sainthood. 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. As Mirzoeff (1999: 25, 26) points out, "The West assumes it is a hermetically sealed cultural entity ... the task is to find transcultural permeability as a means of resolving cultural and political dilemmas ... rather than the static edifice of anthropological culture".

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.

As Paglia (1992:11) who repeatedly discusses the phenomenon of ‘buried’ paganism in art and religion, remarks:

Responding to the spiritual tensions within Italian Catholicism, Madonna discovered the buried paganism within the church. The torture of Christ and the martyrdom of the saints, represented in polychrome images, dramatize the passions of the body, repressed in art-fearing Protestantism of the kind that still lingers in America. Playing the outlaw personae of prostitute and dominatrix, Madonna has made a major contribution to the history of women. She rejoined and healed the split halves of woman: the Blessed Virgin and holy mother, and Mary Magdalene, the harlot.

Madonna has provoked an unprecedented amount of academic writing because of her status as a symbol of contemporary culture. Some of these authors have commented on her use of fetishism, for instance Miklitsch (1998:73) says, “Madonna offers the enigmatic something extra, the X in sex, which is the definition of fetishism”. Margery Metzstein, (cited in Miklitsch 1998:184) the author of *Sex, signed, sealed and delivered*, comments on Madonna’s behaviour:

The Queen of desire is selling a desire that can never be fulfilled. [*The characteristic of a fetish*] This is a point of a product, which slid into the world symbiotically tied to the media, which self-interestedly promoted both itself and the bastard child of the culture industry

Madonna functions as cultural barometer. She 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 spokesperson for the liberation of society from these particular prejudices. In addition, she has orchestrated the persona of a libidinous, simulacral artefact, so that the exchange of objects and bodies as commodities is effected. Paglia and Metzstein differ on exactly what Madonna is achieving. But dialogue and interaction with the audience is essential for the completion of a Performance artist’s contextualisation (this includes the meta-communication, ‘silent, tacit’ dialogue between performer and audience), whichever critic’s opinion might prevail.

3.2.2 Identity and fetishism

As the viewers are witnesses to the fetishistic acts of the performers they function in an invaluable way to help produce identity. The psychoanalyst, Lacan, Existentialist philosopher, Jean Paul Sartre and cultural theorist, Foucault, have all pointed out that, “Our identities are partly produced in the gaze of the ‘Other’ (Stratton 1999:16, 17). The artists in question have based their communicative acts on the value we all attach to the Other and our desire to be validated.

The performers test the idea that the transgression of societal prohibitions and taboos against sexual function, pain and death will not provoke so much animosity that their performances will be stopped. The publicity, attained by challenging the sense that there is no prohibition, that nothing is so sacred that it cannot be transgressed, is an invaluable addition to the political act of dominating the viewers. By establishing that domination, an identity of some sort is brought into being. The theorist David Klemm (1983:17) asserts that identity is established through “... a spiral process by which the self comes ever more deeply into itself by comprehending the limits of being a self in a world”. Desire for gratification (only obtainable through disavowal) is intimately associated with the fetishist. It enjoys so much interjection and contemplation that what is visible on the surface to the spectator is only a glimpse of the inverted somatic sensations astir within the person.

In the public performances such as these, performer and viewer do not have the luxury of a Sade’s salon for privacy. The gallery or theatre in which Abramović performs is a public space as well as a private one. The public shopping mall in which Cohen performs aims to be public and private - living, leisure and working space combined, as is common in the ‘global village’. That the consumer articles, which are to be bought in the shops, are fetishes in themselves is a rich pun on fetishism, which is exploited by the performer. Barney uses film in the gallery as the private space of the erotic salon. Madonna’s extensive use of video as a device that compels viewers to be witnesses to her shows in the privacy of their homes

(when they are not attending concerts) is a wise marketing strategy aimed at commodity fetishism.

3.3.1 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. It can be deduced from this that people feel a need for a temporary re-formulation of beliefs and this is expressed as a search for 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 along an arc of transcendence" (Bourgeois and Schallow 1990:62). This links to phenomenological embodiment and awareness of one's own finitude. Such experiences also have resonance with mimetic self-regulating death-rebirth rituals of shamans who use various devices to descend to the 'lower world' and emerge transformed.

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.

3.3.2. Masochism and identity

The illusion created by Performance artists is one of the stock in trade for drama. A prop from the S/M scene such as Madonna used extensively in her *Blonde Ambition Tour* (Fig 24), ⁴⁵ is a provocative way of testing the public's fascination. Likewise Madonna's publication, *Sex*, included photographs of her in S/M poses, and she has appeared in stage costumes designed by Jean Paul Gaultier that have obviously been derived from the fetish scene (Taraborelli 2001:387, Randall 2002:11, Gamman and Makinen 1994:85). She widely publicises her painful and strenuous exercise routines, and the Botox injections she receives for modifying and 'controlling' her body. The vigorous programme of advertising herself ensures her image remains controversial and in the public eye. 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.

⁴⁵ The *Blonde Ambition World Tour* in 1990 was notorious for its provocative vintage corsets, sado-masochistic bondage gear, gender blurring and explicitly sexual choreography (Clerk 2002:84 – 91).



Fig 24. Madonna, *Blonde Ambition Tour*, Japan (1990).

Cohen, (Fig. 25) 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.



Fig 25. Steven Cohen, *I was fucked up my art* (1999)

Whereas Madonna stages her performance so that it is risk free, Cohen exposes himself to further attack than he has already experienced. 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.

In a similar way to fetish practitioners the viewers and the performers are engaged in a powerful dialogue with each other. Issues which would be raised easily with less shocking tactics are made plain by the artists. Physical metaphors for alienation, psychological pain and estrangement are paraded publicly.

3.4 Eroticism and death

The element of eroticism in the performances of these artists is one of the drawcards with their audiences, not simply because the advertising industry has promoted it to produce sales. The performers are aware that viewers will take the erotic content for granted. There is a very strong association between the libidinal, as it is suggested in their acts, the props and the concept of finitude. 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. Shamanic 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 *Patriotic drag* (1998) (Fig 29), Abramović's *Dragon Heads* (1992) (Fig. 2) and Barney emulating Houdini's death defying acts in *Cremaster 5*.⁴⁶ 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). Such a deliberate exposure to stress awakens the senses and provides therapeutic physiological affirmation of identity for the performer. 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? ".

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:

⁴⁶ Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 5* (1997). Performance Art, Budapest, Hungary. *Cremaster 5* is the final link in Barney's narrative chain. The artwork was filmed in Budapest the birthplace of Barney's alter ego Ehrich Weiss (Harry Houdini) in 1915. Barney fetishizes Houdini's character as he emulates Houdini's death-defying plunge with shackled limbs from the Lánchíd-Chain Bridge on Houdini's birthday, March 24. Like the other films in the series it is "psychological, biographical and geographical". (Illustration: Spector *The Cremaster Cycle* 2003:73) He deals with a biological metaphor focussing on the involuntary gonadal migration and testicular dissension, which leads to eventual 'hermetically sealed' gender differentiation. 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.

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, Abramović (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 blatant 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 2, *Spirit House* 1997, fig 26, and *Delusional* 1994 fig 33). In mediating such ideas through dramatic enactment she compels her viewers to take in the double message of both the erotic and the closeness of death. It is an attractive combination of themes for a dialogue between performers and viewers. However, in extreme acts of masochism there is sometimes the real risk of death.

3.5 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 euphoria⁴⁷ 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". When such emphasis on ecstatic states is placed on the body, pain and eroticism or sadomasochistic interaction has to enter the discourse. 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

⁴⁷ 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 whips in the hope that God would ease their suffering in future (Baumeister 1991:44).

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-flagellation promotes the release of histamines and adrenaline into the bloodstream, leading to a sense of euphoria and physiologically based mystical experiences (refer to Abramović in fig 26).

3.5.1 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. Drugs and alcohol are common tools, which debilitate as thoroughly as does pain. But in the performances since the viewers fulfill the role of a sadistic partner, there is little chance of the performers going to extremes. Their 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. Like the physical urges of thirst, hunger, and sexual craving, which direct the body towards a search for potential sources of gratification, the sensory intensification of extreme pleasure and pain, serve as tools, alien presences or fetish objects.

Abramović 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 26).



Fig 26. Marina Abramović, *Spirit House* (1997).

In a review of Abramović's exhibition *Spirit House*, at the Biennale in Lisbon, Portugal, Gregory Volk (1998:101) wrote in *Art in America*:

Physical pain and palpable eroticism all came together, along with references to charged Christian symbols like crucifixions and ascensions. Abramović remains a cathartic artist, with a rare ability to make things sizzle around her. As you studied her face it became clear that while she was in this absurdly exposed position, a large part of her was elsewhere – in a concentrated interior zone from which, in all likelihood, the power to carry out such performances emanates.

The type of transference described 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.”

Unlike Abramović, Cohen and Madonna, there is no indication of overt personal S/M activity in Barney’s work. However, *Cremaster 2* (fig27) 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* (27) dressed in ‘waist nippers,’ worn under their turn of the century attire. Barney’s *Cremaster* series of artworks primarily deals with gender indeterminacy during the labioscrotal phase of development during gestation. In this scene he underscores post-feminist theory, seeking an existence beyond the male–female disjunction by acknowledging the existence of male corset fetishists. 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. This echoes Barney’s belief in self-denial: by withstanding physical strain he can effect future gratification (Saltz 1996:90, Spector 2002:4).

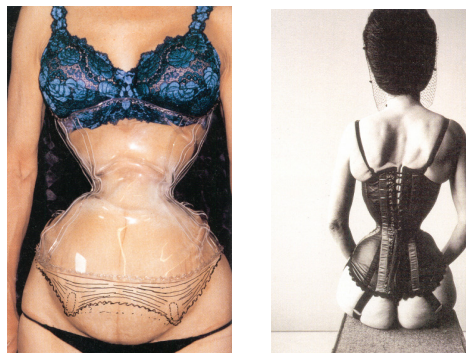


Fig 27. Matthew Barney, the characters Fay and Bessie in *Cremaster 2* (1999).

As discussed earlier in this chapter (Cf. footnote 7 page 75) Barney reworks Houdini's death-defying ventures. By performing the stunts himself, he constantly exposes himself to situations of danger, discomfort and pain, for example, *Blind Perineum* and *Drawing restraint*.⁴⁸ For the duration of the video *De Lama Lāmina*, (2004, Fig. 28) he represents himself as being tightly wedged into a severely confined space in the undercarriage of a moving truck/carnival float, during festivities in Salvador.



Fig 28. Matthew Barney, *De Lama Lāmina* (2004).

⁴⁸ Matthew Barney, *Blind Perineum* (1991). Video still (Illustration: Spector 2002:8). Barney dangled from the ceiling of a studio that resembled a “hybrid version of a gym and an S/M fetish club” (Illustration: Spector *The Cremaster cycle* 2002:4). Dressed only in a body harness and straining against tethers he traversed the ceiling with the assistance of titanium ice screws some of which penetrated his anus referencing certain ‘erotic compulsions’.

⁴⁸ Matthew Barney, *Drawing restraint 7* (1993) Video Stills (Illustration: Spector the *Cremaster Cycle* 2002:22, 23). Wearing full body prosthetic as a satyr Barney stages a chaotic primordial battle resulting in severe physical discomfort and eventual sexual union between two mutant beings who “test the limits of hubris” or irreparable violence (Spector 2002: 23) inside the confined space of a moving limousine in New York. The metaphoric vocabulary is derived from Pan the Greek god of fertility and carnal desire, but also the god of regression. Barney intimates the fact that the root of the word panic is derived from Pan, which indicates anarchy and a loss of boundaries (Spector 2002:22-24).

While wedged in this position, he manufactures a vessel using the mud from the wheels off the truck, faeces from his dead pet monkey/child, his own sperm, and white 'candy floss' which pours from the sleeves of a woman traveling on the back of the truck. Body fluids regularly have a fetish quality in Barney's works. Other aspects of this were discussed fully in Chapter Two, (Cf. pages 53-57).

Loy (1996:27) points out that "death is not our deepest fear" but rather our lack of being: "our sense of lack shadows our sense of self". He (1996:27) reasons that the resolution of anxiety is "to become completely anxious." Barney addresses exactly this point. He appears to be anxious and uncomfortable under the truck and the child/monkey has died so he immediately starts to create a new 'product' towards immortality. In Barney's world the vessel he is fashioning may easily morph into another child/monkey.

3.6 Fetishism as satire

Busch and Gallagher (1992:11) remind us that postmodern understanding is a human enterprise, which is hermeneutically situated. Objective and subjective perspectives in our communication with others are not clear-cut; morality is slippery to define. Our own perspectives are most easily taken for granted. Cohen's artist's statement in *Pieces of you*, as published in the 1998 (unpaginated) catalogue for the *Vita Awards*, articulates yet another perspective:

You are the many people who make up my world. I love you and I don't know why, you are called the public. You are the tribe. I dance where you gather. I seek you out even if you have come to shop or play sport I interrupt your prayers. Whatever you are doing you see me ... I am pieces of you, after all you eat me with your eyes and yes, I am there for that. But often when we are together we are afraid and we are like children. Then it is very beautiful for me ... (Cohen 1998:unpaginated).



Fig 29. Steven Cohen, *Patriotic drag* (1998). A public intervention at Fort Klapperkop, Pretoria during the commemoration of the South African (Anglo Boer) war.

The personae that Cohen creates are guaranteed to put him into threatening situations where he will experience fear. The satire and parody directed at Cohen's viewers is aggressive towards their perceived prejudices. For Cohen this creates anxiety leading to an intensified awareness of the body's vulnerability. It is noted that animal species and humans vary their behaviour in accordance with the environment or their internal state (Marks 1987:7-10). Such a moment of intense and surprising visual power evokes admiration, awe, terror and desire suggesting

the sublime of delightful horror⁴⁹. During the heightened state of anxiety for the performers and the audience, each is trying to come to terms with the contradictions, fears and insecurities of contemporary culture.

Paglia (1990:5, 6) suggests that the contemporary anguish and neurosis of the human condition lies with attempts by Western science and aesthetics and their attempts to erode savage, repressed, chaotic realities:

It is the chthonian realities, which Apollo evades, the blind grinding of subterranean force, the long slow suck, the murk, and the ooze. It is the dehumanising brutality of biology and geology, the Darwinian waste and bloodshed, the squalor and the rot we must block from our consciousness to retain our Apollonian integrity as persons.

Cohen and Madonna do not shy away from these 'chthonian forces'. According to Tracy Warr (2000:29), the democratising trend within postmodern art practice since the 1960s has caused Performance artists to acknowledge the body as a "stinking, breathing, needy, everyday body".

3.7 De-sensitization and 'stress immunization'

The traditional boundaries of the body have been shifted to accommodate fetishism in some performances of Cohen, Madonna and Abramović. Aggressive dramatisation and the implied violence and pain inflicted (on their own bodies) – create devices to authenticate their personae. The artists disrupt the Apollonian notions of culture and aesthetics by drawing attention to the normally repressed

⁴⁹ **The Sublime of delightful horror:** Edmund Burke first published his *philosophical enquiry into the Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful* in 1757. The concepts introduced in his book are especially valid in contemporary art making. The Performance Artists in this discussion are repeatedly utilising the sensibility of shock and our fascination with terrifying spectacles as the apprehension of death.. Burke has described it thus: "A mode of terror or of pain is always the cause of the sublime. ... Astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended, with some degree of horror ... its strongest emotion is an emotion of distress brought about by the power of strength, violence, pain and terror and is stronger than the highest degree of pleasure". Burke proposed that when the pain and terror is modified and the direct threat observed from a safe distance; we are flooded with a sense of well-being and awe that he has labelled "delightful horror" (Burke & Boulton 1958:57, 64, 136).

dialogue between their extreme form of art and seemingly 'normal' everyday life. In other settings, performance takes on qualities of show business. Schechner (1994:115,116) says, "Aesthetic drama is less instrumental and more ornamental than social drama and may be entirely fictionalised". In the case of Madonna there is a deliberate overlap of these roles, as is exhibited in the way she has conducted herself in public and managed her stage career. 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 (Graver 1995: 44).

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. In a chapter discussing encoding of the body in society, and particularly in cinematic portrayals, Louise Krasniewicz (in Mascia-Lees 1992:34, 35) draws our attention to the following:

Obeying or breaking taboos involves making moral judgements about the proper use of the human body in order to establish who is "us" (kin and kind) and who is "them" (non-kin and kind). Nothing breaks down social, moral and legal boundaries faster than bodies that are thought to be misbehaving, and any set of narratives that frequently and fervently dedicates itself to this topic demands our attention.

Performance artists who practice fetishism in public create a cultural space where their 'misbehaving bodies' 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.

During a meeting with Barney in Salvador in September 2004, it became clear that his critical consciousness of the world functions in the same way as Cohen's. In his personal capacity, without the masks and performance qualities he is as nervous, shy and self-conscious as Cohen.

In her book *Sexual Personae* Paglia (1992:1, 22) says, "Civilised life requires a state of illusion ... the pagan cult of personality has reawakened and dominates all art". This phenomenon can be seen as an extension of contemporary virtual, visual culture. Translated into psychological terms, Cohen, Barney, Madonna and Abramović are acting like those whose behaviour is dissociative. This is a category of defence mechanisms that include amongst other things, duality and disavowal, which are facilitators of survival in hostile environments (Barlow and Durand 1999:167-179). Whether the artists are really these personalities or not, is less important than how they exploit the viewers' prejudices or sympathies for the marginalized people they portray. Mirzoeff (2000:31) remarks on the interface between reality and virtual reality saying, "There is nothing everyday about everyday life any more. Visual culture used to be seen as a distraction from the serious business of text and history. It is now the locus of cultural historical change".

Cinematography and photography are closely associated with cultural surveillance. By rendering works in these media, the artists extend their comment to a double articulation, where publicity becomes their language. By observing (voluntarily or involuntarily) these mostly political, eroticized spectacles, such as video clips or photographs of Cohen or Madonna in the media, we are participating in a dialogue.

Jon Stratton (1999:80), the author of *The Desirable Body*, points out that, "One feature of the frenzy of the visible lay in the new making-visible of the social, and the stimulatory transformation of its contents into spectacle". 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. Vergine (2000a:16) comments on the performances that “it is rather an alarming documentation of a pernicious autism and of a frenzied and sadistic self-satisfaction not only with respect to the artist in performance but also to the spectator – true and proper neoplasms [*sic*] of sadomasochistic perversion”.

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. Marks (1987:14) argues that, when coming to terms with fearful emotions, animals make use of ‘displacement’ activities such as preening, grooming or comfort movements applied to the surface of the body to reduce anxiety. By the same token, humans use displacement activities by resorting to surrogate or fetish devices - amulets, erotic codes and technological fantasies. These are all management disciplines that assist in making the ‘life-world’ more endurable.

In their confrontation with contemporary social dynamics, the Performance artists are self-revelatory. Their hope might be to fulfill that which the founder of the influential *Polish Theatre Laboratory*, Jerzy Grotowski (1981:42), describes as a “search for the things that can hurt us most deeply, but which at the same time give us a total feeling of purifying truth that finally brings peace and then we will inevitably end up with representations collectives”.

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).

Like Madonna, Abramović has also publicly dealt with family issues in performances such as *Biography* (fig 22.) *Balkan Baroque* part I: *The Mother*, part III: *The Father* and *Delusional* (fig 32, 33.). She 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 26). Kristeva 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 (Kristeva 1982:31).

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 12.) 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. 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-Oedipal⁵⁰ myths of re-birth, candidacy and rites of passage entwine hermeneutics, fetishism and abjection as seen in *Cremaster 4* (fig 34). 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. These natural expulsions from the body are metaphorical in the artworks of Barney and Cohen and signify the disintegration or permeability of 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 for the elasticity of meaning and perpetual collapse of hegemonic social order. Spector (2002:82) suggests that it indicates the "slippage between".

⁵⁰ 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.

3.8 Conclusion

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.

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. It can be deduced that there is a need in our present society for a temporary re-formulation of identity and that these artists are reflecting this.

It has been shown that the abject in the performances of Barney, Cohen and Abramović reveals personal contemplation and subjectivity on the destabilization experienced in contemporary society. This reflects a concern and desire to order the lived environment and to take up a position to avoid 'thrown-ness'. There is a drive to establish personal 'truths'. A metaphysical discourse occurs when artists transcend boundaries by presenting their bodies as primal material in order to engage in violent and painful spectacles, becoming a quest for emotional equilibrium and reparation. This is confirmed by the latest research about the interconnectedness of subjective phenomenology and hermeneutics in relation to the objective cognitive sciences and is discussed in Chapter Four.

CHAPTER FOUR: RITUAL AND TRANSCENDENCE

Performance artists appropriate and apply ancient rituals as transformative therapeutic strategies. Schechner (1994:112) points out that “theatre developed from ritual and, conversely, ritual develops from theatre”. Phelan (2004:17), the author of *Unmarked: the politics of performance*, agrees that the origins of theatre emerged from ritual practices and are “understood to be performances designed to respond, indeed to manage transformations in the life cycle”.

The discursive structure of this chapter necessitates cross-referencing and reviewing some of the aspects discussed in previous chapters. This has a dual purpose: The first is to ascertain how the tactics of contemporary cross-cultural liminal rites, myths and shamanic actions “stills the individual’s encounter with the world in order for the individual to become a being in the world” (Quick 2004:95). The second purpose is to align all the strategies and methodologies investigated in this dissertation and contextualize the artist’s resourcefulness in terms of the premise, namely that these devices are hermeneutic pathways to mediation, transcendence and self-healing.

This concluding chapter focuses on neurotheological⁵¹ strategies of re-creating and transcending the self, with specific reference to the traversal of traditional boundaries between contemporary Performance art, rites of passage, myth and shamanic action. Michael Winkelman, a behavioural scientist from Arizona State University, has been my main source for this theory. He has discovered that innate brain processes are directly affected by certain shamanic practices. Winkelman (2002 b:1875) has physical proof that rituals produce psychophysical

⁵¹ Neuropsychology is the study of changes in behaviour that result from alterations in the physical state of the brain. (Bullock, et al 1988:575). Neurotheology is the study of the contemporary manifestation of the universals of shamanism as reflected in innate brain processes. These involve psychophysiological dynamics of altered states of consciousness. It concerns the stimulation of neurotransmitters and their responses to spirit concepts and how they influence and manipulate individual and group psycho-dynamics (Winkelman 2002 b:1875).

healing responses. In the search for a method to bridge the disjunction between the individual and society, rituals have become increasingly recognised for their therapeutic value.

4.1 Liminal states

A significant part of the performances of Barney, Cohen, Madonna and especially Abramović comprises the trance-like states they enter during performances. Together with their use of ritual, there appear to be strong resemblances to the liminal states and rituals of shamans. Performers and shamans have the ability to enter into liminal states at some time or another, as do many ordinary individuals. Liminality means to be in a state of segregation, or to be disconnected from the usual interaction with the exterior world, eventually leading to some form of transcendence.

In this chapter, the contention is that liminality arises as a subjective realisation that something meaningful in a person's existence has been extinguished or separated from previous relationships and roles. Sometimes a liminal phase is merely the repression of the fear that something vital is absent. A liminal period in a person's life ultimately results in the crossing of a threshold or margin, a movement of an individual from one mental/physical state of being to another. In terms of phenomenological articulation, Bourgeois and Schalow (1990:83) say,

The decisive catalyst at issue, one which takes the form of preparing *Dasein* to heed itself, or in prompting a certain responsiveness to its own Being as care. ... It is precisely in being wrenched out of its own anonymity that the self undergoes the radicalisation of its everyday comprehension of itself and endures its suspension within beings as a whole, which is fostered by anxiety.

It can be further contended that challenges to identity come via voluntary or involuntary exposure to certain experiences and there is a desire by the person to emerge transformed. Stephen Greenblatt, (cited by Greenblatt in Morgan and Morris 1995:29) in the catalogue of the exhibition *Rites of Passage*, at the Tate Gallery, London, in 1995, defines the *limen* as follows:

The threshold or margin, the place that is no place, in which a subject is rendered invisible - a shadow, a negative, a mutilated fragment, the empty space in an unworn, unwearable set of clothes. And that no place – Utopia – is the place at once of art and of dying.

4.2 The community and ritual performances

The fact that the global village no longer has a sense of community causes significant contemporary misery and is expressed in the sense of deep alienation and marginalisation by the Performance artists. Such loss of the sense of community is a disadvantage to the artists, as they have to constantly re-create a community of some kind. This is done on a grand technological scale by Madonna, and by the other artists in slightly different ways. Barney uses film, which separates him completely from the community. Cohen goes into places and communities where he marks with the greatest emphasis the fact of his not belonging to the community but assumes the shamanic role of a mediator (fig 30). Cohen staged an intervention at an informal settlement while the ‘red ants’ (a South African government team that carries out forced removals of squatters) was in progress.

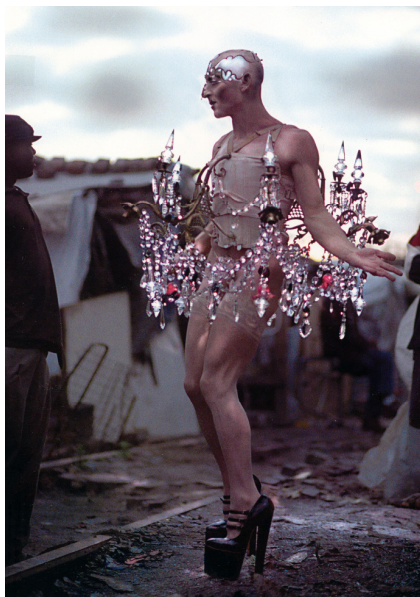


Fig 30. Steven Cohen *Chandelier* (2001-2002).

His costume consisted of an elaborate chandelier to emphasise the plight of persons without basic amenities such as water and electricity, and to accentuate his sense of empathy at such marginalization, alienation and displacement. This was reinforced both by his race and his exotic adornment within that particular environment. This action could also be interpreted as a ritual of reconciliation, in the context of the recent political past in South Africa.

Most often the communities/audiences of the artists are different from their own. For many years Abramović had no fixed abode. Abramović uses viewers dedicated to her performances as the community she engages with, for instance in *Spirit Cooking* in Johannesburg in 2005 (fig 20) (Cf. Chapter 2, page 53, 54). Political transformation in South Africa was still in progress on the evening of April 2005 when *Spirit Cooking* was performed in The Johannesburg Art Gallery. Not only Abramović but many members of her audience had been stripped of previous roles and were in abject rites of passage. Gadamer (cited in Kemal and Gaskell 1999:78) proposes that such events are comparable to a church service:

One might only intend to attend church as an onlooker but one's presence nevertheless adds to the congregation and its witness. Contemplative participation in the presentation or performance of an artwork is also the condition of the work bringing into being certain meaningfulness.

The subjective intensity occasioned by a viewer standing before an artwork or a performance has as its objective corollary, "the cultic ceremony," that according to Gadamer (cited in Kemal and Gaskell 1999:78), "is the most original and exemplary manifestation of the self-fulfilling moment". I agree with Kristeva (cited in Morgan and Morris 1995:23) who explains that artworks drawing attention to something incongruous, quasi-religious and cathartic⁵² could be regarded by some viewers as "disgusting and stupid" while the rest of the audience might experience the "strangeness they see with their own regression, their own abjection and at that moment, what occurs is a veritable state of communion". Therapeutic aspects of shamanism, ritual and community

⁵² Cf. the discussion on the function of traditional Greek catharsis in footnote 30 chapter 2 page 58.

involvement evoke neurotransmitter responses and spirit concepts that represent and manipulate individual and group psychodynamics (Winkelman 2002 b:1875). Abramović thrives on such shamanic, mediating roles.

The communities created by the artists are made to serve a purpose, which is different from that of the shaman's community. Madonna's pop concerts are examples of a non-homogeneous community that can be manipulated to her purpose to become the community with whom she can interact. Because of the distance between her and the audience, who neither share her fame, nor her wealth, nor her style of life, all of which they might desperately aspire to, she allows herself to become a fetish for them. She stands for the richly erotic/ tough gender political activist or whatever is currently popular. The audience is abject, beyond and cast out of her dazzling and desirable world.

The difference between rituals performed in a homogeneous community and those in the 'global village' is enormous. The Candomblé in South America⁵³, for instance, do not exploit technological and multimedia effects. They are unconcerned about trade and economic policies that underpin global trade, or the neo-Gothic, the Baroque props used by Western Performance artists. Their belief system is profoundly different from that of the beholders watching any of the four Performance artists under discussion. Healing rituals, which take the shaman into a trance-like state usually, happen in a community context. The shaman in a Salvador Candomblé⁵⁴ community, for instance, has the absolute commitment, during his ritual, of the community. Without it the ritual cannot happen. In a ritual⁵⁵ used to exorcise evil influences, the community uses footstamping, apotropaeic spitting and other devices to help the several shamans to scare the evil off. Young people are employed to ensure that the community is alert and does not doze off. Those involved in the ritual are locked into the shelter. Performance artists use very different means to keep their audiences alert and

⁵³ I was privileged to visit Salvador 2004 and interact and observe some shamanic activities.

⁵⁴ Gondim 2004:21-27

⁵⁵ From a personal experience in Brazil, Salvador, in 2004.

committed. The rituals and bizarre props used by the Performance artists deliberately set them off from their audience as strange and uncanny, which is resonant with shamanic practices in many countries such as Siberia, the Amazon region, the Caribbean, North America and Brazil (Eliade 1974:114, 125, 128, Gondim 2004: 21, 22, Krippner 2000:25).

Society has always engaged in rituals, collectively and individually. It is no surprise that the Performance artists exploit this part of human behaviour for their own ends in performance. Cooper and Thalbourne (2004:142), theorists of the School of Psychology at the University of Adelaide describe healing through ritual for humans). They maintain that providing sufficient levels of activation are reached, during ritual, subliminal consciousness can become a supraliminal consciousness, “Transliminality is a perceptual personality variable, which has been found to correlate with a history of childhood trauma”. As everyone has had some sort of trauma, real or perceived, the chances of healing oneself during a liminal state are good. Winkelman (2002 b:1880), explaining the benefits of community ritual, maintains that, “it represents the importance of the roles of symbolic processes and social others in synchronising human psychobiological functions ... and elicits the body’s serotonergic, upload and immunological systems”.⁵⁶ Certain types of cathartic rituals for healing and transformation have additional benefits, in that “psychodynamics are set in motion - re routing the viewer back to his/her own domestic site where identities were first formulated” (O’Dell 1998:14).

Such a ‘move towards recognition’ of the identity, is often problematic. Noble and Walker (1997:33, 38) argue that “the notion of the *ideal self* is often beyond current perceptions of who we really are The gap between one’s perceived self and one’s ideal self would widen in the midst of a liminal transition as compared to nonliminal states”. Abramović’s *Delusional* (fig 31), which deals

⁵⁶ Barlow and Durand (1999:Glossary G-14) explain the benefit of the serotonin released from the brain into the body. The immune system is the body’s means of identifying foreign material entering the body. Opioid-releasing neurons are nerve cells which release endogenous opioids and endorphins that play a role in the brain’s pleasure pathway controlling the experience of reward.

with personal issues stemming from her youth in Yugoslavia, seems to exemplify Baumeister's (1991:6) findings that, "failure of the expectations, norms, values and principles might arouse either no emotion or intense emotion ... too often there are discrepancies between what they [individuals] would like to be and what they are".

The desperate need to pin down an identity arises as (Lasch 1991:36, 37) from, "feelings of an amorphous futile existence" that have created a need for "defence against anxiety and guilt" amongst modern Westerners. The sense of a futile existence does not seem to be one of the most prominent psychological ills of societies employing shamans as the go-betweens in their experience of this world and the other world. The alienation which contemporary society experiences can be lulled briefly in mass events like sports events or pop concerts with their rituals and sense of communion with the group. Madonna exploits these feelings at her concerts, ably assisted by her musical and effects team.

When Abramović and Cohen speak about healing and repairing their own psychological states, they are dependent on a concept of the psyche as an interior organising principle. Cohen is asking for acceptance by a society, which he feels, marginalises him, he seeks reparation for his treatment as an outsider because of being Jewish and gay. When Madonna laments the early loss of her mother and her subsequent struggle, she articulates what many millions feel who lament losses daily. The psychological issues being dealt with as one can expect in the pre-industrial Candomblé community are exteriorised as evil spirits.⁵⁷ But the four artists share a modern outlook which conceives of an identity separate from the community's identity,

4.3 Symbolic adornment and transitional objects

Laughlin (cited in Winkelman 2002 b:1883) maintains that human construction of the lived environment "develops through socialisation processes that canalize

⁵⁷ Personal communication from shaman on the island of Itaparica, Brazil, 2004.

physiological responses to symbols”. Symbolic adornment and transitional objects form an important part of the artists’ iconography and they use them repeatedly, for example those in (fig 31, for elaboration on emblems Cf. Chapter Two page 23).

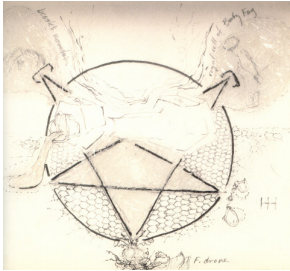


Fig 31. Matthew Barney, pentagram. *Cremaster 2* (1999).

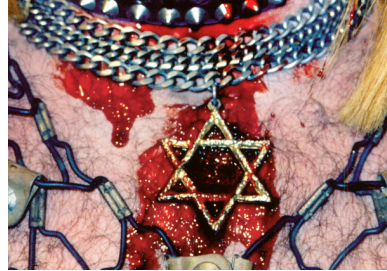


Fig 31. Steven Cohen, star of David. *Best Dressed Woman/Jew* (1998).

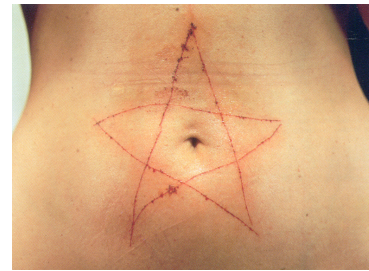


Fig 31. Marina Abramović, pentagram. *The Biography* (1997).

In *Time and narrative*, Ricoeur (1984:68) points out that symbols, metaphors and myths are a method of attaining transcendence, “It is an interplay between creative imagination and reason clarifying the postulate of reference within poetic and narrative discourse”. I agree with Noble and Walker (1997:34) who have found that symbolic possessions usually have emotional significance and may facilitate or ease a sense of lack while in a liminal phase.

They state that such objects are mostly associated with religion, relationships, memories or achievements. During transitional periods these objects serve two functions; they define identity or confirm new relationships. Such past or present (pre-liminal/post liminal) objects or emblems symbolise the role of family, friends, and relationships “once held as the individual’s extended self” (Noble and Walker 1997:32).

Madonna, Cohen, Abramović and Barney use such imagery and perhaps experience Winkelman’s (2002 b:1883) “symbolic penetration” as perceptions and cognition are linked and in turn physiological responses are affected. He

confirms that the results of using symbols are that the subject “establishes links of ‘proverbial mythic’ levels with cultural and egoic structures, creating psychosocial and psychophysical integration”. This is very apparent in the work of all the selected artists. Aspects of the use of symbols as adornment and fetishes have been discussed in Chapter Two and Chapter Three and their signification is now explored further within the context of the focus this chapter.

4.5 Communitas

The concept of *communitas* refers to a certain form of social interrelatedness, which emerges in liminal phases. Duffy (2001:219) explains that “this occurs when normal structures of society are broken down; the liminal personae are, at one and the same time, stripped of status and freed from the constraints that come with specific social roles”. Performance art offers such opportunities. The selected artists have what Winkelman (2002 b:1883) calls an “intuitive psychology” showing an ability to gauge the culturally inscribed mental states of the contemporary viewer, which can be likened to the knowledge a shaman has of his/her community. Although the Performance artists’ audiences are usually not homogenous and have a variety of expectations, there are cohesive and conventional elements that the selected Performance artists exploit.

This is manifested by the Performance artists in the introduction of rituals which allude to the state of *communitas* and are emphasised by the use of familiar and significant symbols, metaphors and myths, such as crucifixes, madonnas, stars, flags, doves, water sprites, ‘fairies’ and nostalgic, sensual neo-Baroque images. These offer indirect access to familiar cultural worlds beyond the symbol. They stimulate poetic and speculative thought, resulting in a sense of community and belonging. One might view the use of familiar emblems as attempts to deconstruct alienation, because they represent certain cultural values and certainties, and social rituals. Performance artists are able to manipulate responses by romanticising such symbols, which permits a mystical view of the symbol through its evocation of the sense of belonging. Many of these artefacts

represent 'something to hold on to' during an uncertain liminal phase. It seems that the Performance artists are pointing to everyone's attempt or need for these appropriated symbols and metaphors, to attain psychological integration, as a ritual process.

4.6 Identity disturbed - a modern concept

The modern idea of identity as a construct is not questioned in Western scientific circles and is taken seriously by philosophers and psychologists alike. For pre-industrial communities, who use the services of shamans to conduct their psychological business, their sense of identity seem less ego driven and more community based. The Western contemporary idea about the formation of identity is based on personal experiences; hence major dislocations in life - uncertainty, vulnerability, threat, anxiety, stress, shock, confusion, and disorientation - are a challenge to one's sense of identity. Some contemporary socio-political events - political instability, public violence, migration and technological advances - have given rise to traumatic emotional feelings of 'thrown-ness' and being in situations beyond one's control. Contemporary individuals interpret these phenomena in terms of their individual experiences and relate them to their identities. The sense of self is fragile for Westerners, as Mirzoeff (1999:174) points out:

Identity is neither cultural nor natural; in terms of the binary opposition it is a formation in constant flux, drawing on physical, psychical and creative resources to create a sense of self from a range of possibilities that are fractal rather than linear.

Phenomena, which threaten individuals in contemporary society, manifest in the form of existential anxiety and have a "generalized sense of crisis in everyday life, without any clear solutions being available" (Mirzoeff 1999:28). People relate problems back to themselves as individuals and to identity because society no longer consists of small hunter-gatherer groups where the community's identity is paramount or in close knit communities like that of the Candomblé believers. The idea of individual identity is central to Western culture. The present incumbent of

the Chair of Sociology at the University College of Cork in the Republic of Ireland, Professor Arpad Szokolczai (2000:216) postulates that, for historical sociologists, “the individual subject, with self-management based on his/her desires and interest, has become the foundation of the modern world”.

In contrast to the semi-magical ideas of shamanism, modern psychology suggests that all humans have mechanisms, which can contribute towards their own healing and psychological survival. Brenner (cited in Polifroni and Welch 1999:304) of the Department of Physiological Nursing, University of California, explains for instance that “health and illness cannot be understood by studying a mind that possesses a list of talents, traits, and attributes nor can it be understood by strictly studying biophysical states”. Shamans understand this and exploit it in a different way to Performance artists, no matter how long, as in the case of Abramović, she has studied shamanism. It is a pre-scientific belief system which informs their thinking and which distinguishes the contemporary world from the healing practices of shamans who go into a trance to contact the ancestors (Eliade 1974:24, 29, Gondim 2004:23).

If the Performance artists are shamanic in any way it is with a clear understanding that internal value is based on self-management. As mentioned before, Eliade (1974:27), Walsch (2007:55), Winkelmann (2002 a:72) and Krippner (2000:25) agree that traditional shamans are above all persons who have ‘cured’ themselves. Likewise the hermeneutic discovery of one’s own validity within the contemporary social order, enables a sense of identity. This is the cornerstone of the contemporary cult of individuality. Such a quest for survival and balance could be defined as a search for self-transcendence. In this regard, Bourgeois and Schalow (1990:63) expand on phenomenological conceptions as follows:

In the process of *Dasein*, a person can only discover his nature through the act of transcendence; indeed, it is only when standing outside himself that he encounters the “can be” of existence which corresponds to freedom. In emphasising the centrality of transcendence, one takes a position outside the debate as to whether man [humankind] is defined by reason or sensuousness, infinitude or finitude or a synthesis of the two.

4.7 Transcendence of the self as a therapeutic practice

The kind of transcendence, which Bourgeois and Schalow speak about, is what philosophers describe as the act of conscious, thinking people who give value to rationality. The freedom referred to is from a subjective standpoint in reaction to social ills. It is knowledge, which informs this kind of transcendence and particularly self-knowledge. Transcendence as discussed here does not only involve the transgression of certain limits that are normally associated with the human condition, but also to seek understanding. It is about ‘openness’ to disclosure and self-revelation. Transcendence means to be in a state beyond the reach of others’ apprehension. It is opposite to the immanent, that which is now. Bullock et al (1988:869) say, “transcendental aspects of the mind are the logical apparatus of concepts and principles common to all rational minds”. The transcendence the viewer experiences in the breakdown of his resistance to the power of the performer eliminates the separation for that moment of life and art (Schechner 1994:122). It is transcendence on the small scale and is the reward the viewer has. Transcending his *Lebenswelt* by watching a spectacle powerful enough in its capacity to make the world of art and life converge momentarily, the viewer can step outside himself. Szokolczai (2000:216) postulates that,

If knowledge is the most cherished ‘external’ value of modernity, the mode of being of the individual subject, or identity of the self, is the most evidently taken for granted aspect of being. It can be called the most cherished ‘internal’ value of modernity.

Each of the four Performance artists addresses the issue of transcendence of self in different ways. Sometimes Abramović appears to enter a trance-like state, which might or might not be authentic. That she uses the persona of the shaman-in-trance to excellent effect is undoubtedly true. Curiosity and admiration is provoked. The bizarre spectacle, the shock associated with the performance helps to trap the viewer into a collusive moment. As with Madonna, the exploitation of Abramović’s icon of the Virgin Mary, as the sign of the intercessor, is sure to compel the individual, who resonates with the drama enacted, to stay and witness

what is happening. The performer has achieved in the performance a victory in keeping the individual fixed and transformed into a witness, devoid of his/her own volition to get up and leave. The Performance artists on their viewers regularly use the isolating function of fascination, horror, and awe.⁵⁸ The transcendence achieved from suspending judgement, belief and volition as with all entertainment is a shadow of a spiritual transcendence before the return to the banal world. Psycho-dramatic techniques (Schechner 1994:118) are shared by Performance artists and shamans alike.

4.7.1 Ritualized transcendence

Performance artists can rely on the viewer's preconceived ideas about ritualized transcendence and blurring the categories of tribal ritual and performance is one of the mechanisms, which is successfully employed by the artists. The mutual gratification or transformation experienced by public and performer is part of the dramatic contract. Rowe (2007:182) emphasises the potential for opening up new perspectives for narrators and spectators at such encounters. But in respect of the ideas of how ritual and transcendence have the capacity to assist healing of psychological states, it is interesting to analyse briefly what anthropologists and ethnographers have to say about the liminal state.

During regenerative processes in traditional rituals, the person passes through liminal states of consciousness. For van Gennep (1960:21) regeneration is accomplished in the social world by "rites of passage and given expression in the rites of death and rebirth". He places the dynamics associated with resulting ceremonial behaviour into three major categories, namely, *separation* – pre-liminal rites, *transitional* - liminal rites of aggregation and the gradual return to

⁵⁸ **The Sublime of delightful horror:** This concept of Edmund Burke's has been previously introduced in this dissertation (Cf. Chapter 2 page 58). The Performance artists in this discussion repeatedly implement the sensibility of shock and exploit our fascination with it. Burke has said "Astonishment is that state of the soul in which all its motions are suspended" and proposed that when pain and terror are modified and the direct threat observed from a safe distance we are flooded with a sense of, well-being and awe that he has labelled "delightful horror" (Burke and Boulton 1958:57, 64, 136).

stability, and *incorporation* – post-liminal rites. These categories are a helpful way of describing the *modus operandi* of Performance artists as well.

With recent events in the 1990s in Serbia, Albania and Yugoslavia, Abramović has rich source material from her homeland. The three works directly related to her self-definition in terms of her shame, guilt, anger and sadness, namely, *Cleaning the House* (1995)⁵⁹, *Balkan Baroque* (fig 32) and *Delusional* (fig 33) are harrowing performances. These works deal with her painful identity, family history and her politicised *Lebenswelt*.

As an example of a healing ritual performance, Abramović's meditation on war and her own experience are an example worth dealing with at some length. *Delusional* was conceived as a three-part theatre piece in Turm, Frankfurt in 1997. Part I, titled *Balkan Baroque - The Mother* and *Delusional* (32, 33) is a grotesque neo-Gothic video monologue by Abramović's aged mother. It is projected onto the wall of a set that consisted of 150 plastic rats⁶⁰ on a grey canvas floor. There was an iron bed with a mattress of ice, an iron chair with a seat of nails, a metal window frame and the strong smell of rats in the theatre. Abramović lay on the bed and sat on the chair, singing folk songs and relating anecdotes from her childhood about her own hypocrisy and shame, while her mother related stories of her own life and bizarre Gothic dreams before Abramović's birth.

In *Delusional* Part II, *The Rat Queen* (1994) (fig 33), Abramović removed the grey canvas to reveal a floor of glass, housing 400 live rats underneath. Simultaneously an image was projected of a 'rat doctor' explaining the origin and breeding habits of rats and the difficulties involved in exterminating them. In *Delusional* Part III, *The Father*, Abramović interacts with the rats while her father, a beneficiary of the war as a general, tells horrific tales of his encounters

⁵⁹ Marina Abramović, *Cleaning the House* (1993-1998) Performance art, New York, Venice. (Abramović, Illustration: *Artists body* 1998:365). Abramović sat scrubbing a heap of bloodied cattle bones as a cleansing ritual with reference to war-torn Yugoslavia.

⁶⁰ The English word "rat" means war in the Serbian language, so in *Delusional* and *Balkan Baroque*, the rats became a metaphor for the never-ending aggression and war in her country of origin.

with the cruelties of war. Part 1V consisted of loud techno-music and bizarre disco lighting with the rats alone on the stage.



Fig 32. Marina Abramović, *Balkan Baroque* (1997).

In *Delusional* Part V, the naked Abramović entered the glass stage/cage with the four hundred live rats while relating her image of happiness. At the end she forcefully pushed the glass front of the stage with her feet to open it and release the rats into the audience.

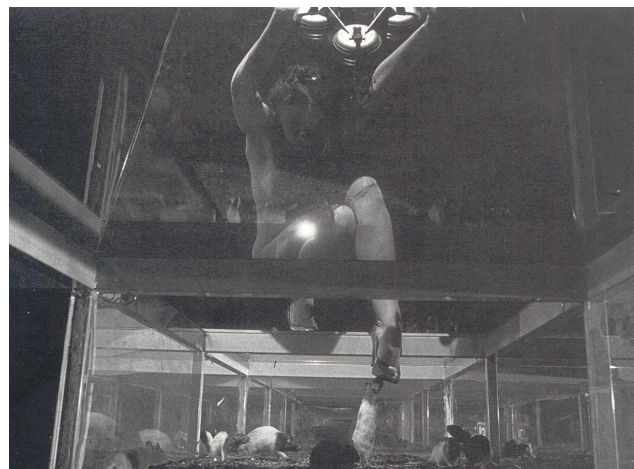


Fig 33 Marina Abramović, *Balkan Baroque* (1997).

By juxtaposing the objective (the rat doctor and the factual accounts by her parents) with her own subjective history, Abramović, performs the role of a mediator, who passes into a transliminal state.

The performer (Abramović 1998:366-377) acknowledges the deliberate activation of the subliminal for her performances: “This is where most of my work

generates". She (Phelan in Heathfield 2004:21) believes that this liminal in-between state is where "the mind is most open, we are alert, we are sensitive and destiny can happen". What is meant by "destiny", one assumes is healing. The presentation of her childhood experiences in *Delusional* in a coded and dramatic way would seem to give her an opportunity to air the issues. Whether it brings closure and reparation psychologically to her personally would seem to be what she is suggesting. As a means of bringing healing to the community of people who have experienced dilemmas similar to those of Abramović, it is difficult to ascertain the success of her performances.

The performance has all the characteristics of neo-Baroque logic as described by Ndalianis (2004:9, 11, 15, 17-18), in terms of the inherent self-reflexivity of the monologues, the mythical elements and metaphoric context of the rats. The theatrical spectacle of the double glass stage, the hyperbolic aberration, the sensorial smell of the rats, and the grandeur and chaotic exuberance when the rats are released recall the dramatic extravagance of a seventeenth-century Baroque opera.

Bojana Pejić, an art critic on Abramović's work, explains that the function of this type of work is "not to reproduce the past but to transform the past" (Abramović 1998:36). Drama is always about transformation, whether of the past or currently perceived present or future. Performances, which happen for a limited public audience, cannot be described as 'community rituals' except in the narrowest sense of that convened community for the performance, but Abramović seems to have some community in mind, which she hopes to serve by her actions, perhaps those of her countrymen who feel as she does about the past in Yugoslavia.

Another element of transcendence has to do with the 'neo-Gothic uncanny' because it can be described as a means of participating in the reaching of a mental threshold through heightened awareness. As part of a traditional self-healing ritual the shamanic candidate is required to embark on an ecstatic journey to another realm whether through induction procedures, a dream, spiritual vision,

‘soul loss’, or some form of uncanny physical and mental challenge. Such events may activate altered states of consciousness and require the individual to pass over a psychological threshold in order to overcome a sense of alienation and transcend from one mode of being to another. Whatever the nature of such a threshold experience, the resulting impact is usually, subjective, extraordinary, transformative and therapeutic (Walsh 2007: 158, 208). Barney’s entire *oeuvre* is centred on the novice candidate constantly challenging himself to transcend such physical and mental thresholds. It is a *Leitmotif* found in his narratives and his own physical involvement. Most of the performances described in this dissertation indicate that the selected artists are all steeped in this type of neuro-phenomenological process.

Hurley (1996: 35, 40) suggests that such a threshold experience may consist of anything that is “simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar and violates a crucial binarism by which we organise the world ... the sensation of uncanniness is a symptomatic response to liminal phenomena which confound and exceed classificatory systems”. She goes on to quote Freud, who considers the uncanny in relation to pre-Oedipality.⁶¹ It is the phase when the child “imagines himself merged with the environment during the oral stage”, before the child becomes aware of the father figure who disrupts his relationship with the mother. This is reflected by Barney’s aestheticized evocation of the female reproductive system and womb-like environments in his film images (fig 34) (for a previous reference about other aspects of this artwork Cf. Chapter 2 page 54-56).

⁶¹ Freud postulated that young males tend to love their mothers and hate their fathers. “He called this tendency Oedipus complex after the Greek play by Sophocles in which Oedipus unknowingly kills his father and marries his mother” (Hergenhahn 1997:473).



Fig 34. Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 4* (1994). Barney evoking a transcendental 're-birth' through a sculpted tunnel of Vaseline.

The fixations of Cohen and Barney on the orifices of the body would seem to signal the removal of internal barriers and are an evocation of the archetypal feminine principle of life-giving, nurturing and caring. Hurley (1996:35, 42) suggests it consists of:

A time when the ego was not yet sharply differentiated from the external world and from other persons. Anything which threatens to dissolve the boundaries that the ego has erected to distinguish itself from other people, other things ... provokes in the subject a half-recollection of this period of amorphous identity ... in a womb-like sense of security.

This is also comparable to Lacan's symbolic order of the pre-mirror phase, the anonymous interstice before the child discovers him/herself as an independent entity from the mother. For Lacan the result is that one spends the rest of one's life attempting to capture the receptivity and harmony of this pre-lack unity (Lacan in Warr 2000:248). Freud and Lacan's theories inform Kristeva's idea of

the abject, a state of “crises and collapse when one is neither a subject nor an object” (Kristeva in Warr 200:242). From this point of view the liminal is a subjective developmental stage, where the person often feels faceless, nameless and passive, on the verge of becoming, awaiting a social transformation and a new niche in the social order. According to Kristeva, this recalls the trauma of birth when the child experiences both a union with and a separation from the mother (Kristeva 1982:10, Lechte 1990:27, Hurley 1996:43).

Barney’s entire conceptual vocabulary is inspired by liminal fantasies and resonates with the theories of Freudian pre-Oedipal oral stages, Lacanian mirror phases and Kristeva’s concepts of abjection. His focus on bisexuality also belongs to the liminal. His *Cremaster* series is based on an amorphous in-between phase of identity with specific reference to testicular migration and its role in the pre-natal state of sexual differentiation. He is particularly interested in the detours that may occur during this journey in gestation (Spector 2002:13). Destabilization is indeed the territory of the liminal. His focus is on a rebirthing process; the transforming of current circumstances through struggle and physical discomfort to emerge victorious over the setbacks marks his work.

Barney’s disruption of ‘traditional’ gender roles is apparent in many of his works. In *Cremaster 4*, The Loughton candidate reveals the impacted sockets of his underdeveloped horns as a metaphor for ambiguous sexual potential (fig 35). The Loughton sheep is indigenous to Isle of Man, where *Cremaster 4* was filmed. The Loughton ram has two sets of horns. One set arches upward and the other downward. The ascension and dissension equates the path the testicles might take during gestation to determine the sex of an unborn baby. For Barney this is the liminal threshold of pure potential and equilibrium before transcendence (Spector 2003:60).



Fig 35. Matthew Barney, *Cremaster 4* (1994).
Barney revealing sprockets, as the Loughton candidate's potential for growing horns.

Vergine (2000 a:22) points out that bisexuals as well as transvestite Performance artists draw attention to our own liminality; it is a “question of a human being who transcends the limits of his own body and becomes what he desires to be and not what his society would force him to be”. Despite the fact that we all share gender characteristics with each other, for most of us “the dominant sex has repressed the psychic representation of the vanquished one”. Vergine (2000 a:23) continues:

By giving himself to our gaze with extreme seductivity of dress and attitude and, thanks to a subtle telepathic current, he succeeds in creating a kind of emotional contamination within the spectator thus becoming a willing or unwilling partner and closing the circuit and returning the same interchangeable perception. ... striking out directly towards the doubts and desires that have been hidden from consciousness.

4.7.2 Pain as mediator for transcendence

Aldous Huxley and Holger Kalweit, who studied various religions in the 1970s, confirm the well known fact (Hewitt 1997:28) that men and women who torment their bodies in a cruel way believe that “self inflicted punishment may open the door to paradise”. Mastering pain and discomfort facilitates endorphin-induced states that can be compared to mystical, divine and sexual union. The physiological effects of these phenomena, such as the release of histamines and adrenaline into the bloodstream seem to be important to Performance artists. In addition, Ritualistic states of pain evoke neo-Gothic sensibilities while simultaneously recalling the sensuality and otherworldly transcendence of the Baroque.

The relationship between fetishism, eroticism, power and desire, and sexual masochism qualify as liminal rituals, according to Baumeister (1991:18) they afford people “escape from the symbolic identity roles into liminal consciousness”. The repeated fasting and self-castigating rituals that Abramović learned from a variety of shamans,⁶² fall into the same category and assist feelings of transcendence by creating “feelings of harmony between mind, body and spirit” (Hewitt 1997:28).

Psychological pain inflicted by others and revisited by the victim repeatedly as in Cohen’s case becomes a liminal rite: a redefinition of social role identities, and the renegotiation of networks. De Waal and Sassen (2003:12, 13) comment on Cohen as follows:

He draws on drag, which deliberately troubles the external signs of gender identification. ... He frequently emphasises precisely that part of the body conventional entertainment drag tucks out of sight: the penis. ... Cohen places the penis visibly at the centre of his own performing body ... refusing to pretend to be a woman.

⁶² Abramović has been deeply influenced by Tibetan Buddhism and shamanic wisdom from disparate traditions learned during the early 1970s (Heathfield 2004:19, Abramovic *Cleaning the house* 1995: unpaginated). In April 2005, she visited sangomas in South Africa for the same purpose.

To ensure that he engages the audience in his painful activities he, “flouts social mores around privacy causing embarrassment to some viewers. He embarrasses himself and thus the audience” (De Waal and Sassen 2003:13). Such a ritual of measuring one’s position in society can be called a *ritual of aggregation*. In Van Gennep’s categorisation of liminal states, Cohen is using an opportunity for psychic integration of distinct experiences to reduce his vulnerability so as to reach a point of integration. Such “meaning-giving acts of constitution” (Rabil 1967:xiv) seem to establish structures for interpersonal, retrospective reflection, linked to the present to find ‘new truths’ for future integration.

4.7.3 The politics of transcendence in performance

The apparent achievement or participation in liminal states of being or by reference to such states the performers are able to exploit one of contemporary society’s great interests, namely the problem of healing the individual’s self through means alternative to a medical model. Such phenomena often appear subversive, when they are used in such a way that they signify critiques of existing societal structures.

For this reason Cohen’s performances are usually not private events. They are political and very public. Schechner (1994:118) postulates that:

The incorporation of psychodramatic techniques [such as Cohen’s] reflects the pre-occupation with the individual that marks modern western societies. Where “distancing” is used, a definite social or political consciousness is engaged and the appeal of performance is not to people as individuals, but as participants in larger social units So-called ‘real events’ are revealed as metaphors.



Fig 36. Steven Cohen, *Dog* (1998).

Cohen's conflation of symbolic and real events serves exactly that purpose. "Any ritual can be lifted from its original setting and performed as theatre - just as any everyday life event can be" (Schechner 1994:138). Cohen's parody as metaphor during a dog show in 1998, serves as a good example. His particular performance illustrates Schechner's argument about society's attempts at 'distancing' and controlling marginalised people (which also connects to Foucault's theories about the control of the state). Van Gennep (1960:XIV, 3) cites liminal experience as primarily a group and an educational phenomenon for the purpose of reducing harmful effects in a community.

Traditionally men's nude bodies have been hidden from sight. Cohen and Barney invert the idea that "only women are supposed to be spectacularised for the male gaze" (Stratton 1999:182). Thus one might deduce that Cohen and Barney are attempting to mediate and transform destructive reactions to people outside of the heterosexual norm into constructive, "liberating symbolic ritual manipulations" in the way that a shamanic healer does (Winkelman 2002 b: 1879, Eliade 1974: 31).

Madonna and Abramović have also both addressed gender issues. Their performances, such as Abramović's *Imponderabilia* (1977) and Madonna's 'gender bender' performances and behaviour substantiate Vergine's and Stratton's

observations about the interchangeable consciousness of the viewer. Winkelman (2002 b:1883) explains that community rituals enhance social attachment via brain opioid systems, providing neuro-chemical mediation of social bonding. Both Madonna and Abramović target fairly large live audiences and have, for instance, taken advantage of this feeling of *communitas* to draw attention to the threshold status of transsexual people.

4.8 Conclusion

Performance art of the nature of the four artists described evokes the 'tribal'. Winkelman's research on the neurological bases of shamanic practice suggests that shamanism, humanity's most ancient spiritual, religious and healing practice, has achieved a dramatic modern resurgence (Winkelman 2002 b:1875). Franklin Sirmans (2008:12) confirms in his essay in the catalogue of an exhibition, *Neohoo doo, art for a forgotten faith*, that in numerous contemporary artworks the presence of the sacred and the profane cannot be overlooked. I am in agreement with them that our current Western society, with its lack of a unifying religion, attempts to fulfil spiritual needs via shamanic practices which are re-emerging with surprising frequency. The type of Performance art that is discussed in this research is part of that dynamic. This seems to be possible only because the artists manage to articulate the comprehension of their contemporary *Lebenswelt's* afflictions by appropriating and re-enacting therapeutic, archaic rituals of care and concern. The sincerity of Abramovic, Barney, Cohen and Madonna's 'care and concern' might be questionable because their open political engagement through parody and ironic inversion are a criticism directed at the hegemonic moral standards of the audience.

I propose that creating unexpected cultural narratives becomes part of an analytical framework, which uncovers and facilitates a phenomenological understanding of a particular culture. It seems that the artists' juxtaposition of satire and shamanistic practice is part of their transcendental disclosure of possibilities. I concur with Sirmans who states that that it is often in such

“subversive works that artists unearth rich unexamined aspects of the past that have spiritual resonance in the present”. These devices seem to function as a resolution of the conflicts as experienced by the artists between social and psychological identities in their contemporary society. The therapeutic aspect of such activities is underwritten by amongst others Winkelman and Krippner whose neurotheology links intersubjective phenomenology to the factual sciences.

In this quest Abramović, Barney, Cohen and Madonna employ the ‘synthesis of reason’ as well as ‘sensuousness’ to consider the ‘can be’ of existence. The author of *Dreaming with open eyes*, Michael Tucker (1992:99), agrees that the call of the shaman [Performance artist] is visible in contemporary art. He suggests that:

It is a call to take wing beyond the familiar look and sound of things. At the same time it is a call to dig deep in to the ground of being. ... In beginning to surrender our boundaries, our sense of belonging in the world may both deepen and broaden us. Such a call requires us to summon a participatory courage and open mindedness Ultimately, however, it is a journey, or path of enormous heart, shot through with the healing spirit of shamanic vocation and wonder.

CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSION

The performances of Abramović, Barney, Cohen and Madonna have been studied, analysed and interpreted as cultural phenomena which reveal how each performer experiences the existential notion of 'being in the world' in multiple ways. As creative beings the artists display the possibility of a power to destroy and re-build themselves. Such an exercise is a symptom of Western society's malaise of powerlessness which many individuals feel. It is through the agency of fantasy, the media, theatre, spectacle and the commonplace tropes of Otherness, especially those of shamanic practice, that this powerlessness can be overcome. Through a close look at what the artists satirically say about us as performers in the world, we come to a different understanding of that world and ourselves.

Although Performance artists use very similar techniques and mechanisms to those associated with shamanistic practices, whether they are neo-shamans or those for whom shamanism is a belief grounded in their community – the audience has to be manipulated to experience what the shaman wants it to feel. In relying on a range of props, dramatic devices and dramatic skills to encourage viewer participation, it becomes possible for the performer to pursue a whole range of communicative games with a variety of intentions. The same may be said of shamans who engage their audience and then manipulate them to achieve outcomes, which are part of a shared belief system. The shaman becomes a middleman to encounter strangers in the otherworld. He/she is not the stranger. To suggest that Performance artists are a species of shaman for the art viewing public as Beuys did is to use the idea metaphorically.⁶³

The metaphor of a shaman is valuable, despite how outrageous it may seem. The specific intention of shamans is therapeutic in terms of self-preservation and

⁶³ Goldberg (2004:39) says of Beuys that he "saw art as a tool for awakening both spiritual and political awareness".

adaptation, whether they are New Age shamans or those who operate in historical communities where there is a consonance in the belief system and its expression, or the contemporary Condomblé community, for instance. Shamanistic practices in the hands of Performance artists who seem to achieve trance-like states are embedded in contemporary experiences, understandings and beliefs.

The expressed intention of Madonna, Abramović, Barney or Cohen as artists is not an idealistic attempt at eliminating the ills in communities; it is about cathartic witnessing and sharing of abhorrent experiences. They cannot have the fluid, unquestioned status of traditional shamanistic practices. When Abramović hangs up her fetishes before a performance starts or appears to have entered a trance for four hours in a performance, she does not have the same expectation as traditional shamans have of rebalancing social relations in her viewers. Nor does she expect their illnesses to be drummed or danced out of existence. Her focus is on herself as performer as she appropriates themes from contemporary history (the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission for instance, or the American 9/11²) to expand the performance. However, the powerful political statements she makes are about individuals (and their identities) who have suffered at the hands of the State. It is true she suffers extreme discomfort being still for so many hours, but it cannot compare with torture, nakedness and humiliation.

² From November 13-26 2002 Abramović performed *The House with an Oceanview* on three wooden stages at the Sean Kelly Gallery in New York. There were three ladders providing access to the three elevated wooden stages with butcher's knives serving as rungs to commemorate the flight of victims down the stairs as well as the fire fighters burden during the 9/11 disaster. There was the sound of the lapping of ocean waves, a metronome signaling the passage of time, and a table with a huge crystal in it. During this twelve day period she did not eat, write or speak. She wore suits lined with magnets, hummed and sang to herself and drank water and showered three times a day and slept in the gallery at night. There was a telescope in the back of the gallery for viewers who wished to study her magnified features. Her intention was to keep herself in a liminal state of subjective fusion, simplicity and silent communication with her audience to bring about ritualistic emotional and spiritual development for herself and her viewers. On the last day she descended from the stage and told the gathered crowd that she wished to give the busy island of New York time to heal, to think about other wars and attacks on cities, to love in the face of hate and take time to live despite death (Phelan in Heathfield 2004: 22-27).

The sense of the modern individual as an individual is such a strong one that it is not easy to imagine ourselves back into a situation in which the group's harmonious interaction and engagement with the natural environment could be a matter for a shaman to heal. Rather the artist as shaman is a go-between: the artist mediates from a platform of contingency by opening up the discourse around personal and public political dimensions. Discourse provides a mode of access between imagination and reason to facilitate *Dasein*. Abramovic, Barney, Cohen and Madonna are addressing issues that some individuals find intolerable in their *Lebenswelt* and attempt to mediate the comprehension of contemporary human existence.

That the artists make an extensive commentary on their society is evident in what they choose as their themes for development in the performances. Their main critical comments are, not surprisingly, how hypocritical society is. Abramović releases her rats into the audience who is complicit in the crimes against her countrymen while pretending to be beyond that. Barney reminds his viewers of their prejudice against people without whole limbs. This is the same viewing public who do nothing about child soldiers hacking off the limbs of their countrymen in Sierra Leone. Madonna lampoons the Church's propaganda about the hysterical ecstasies of lady saints to drive home the similarity between sexual orgasm and saintly ecstasy. The whore and people of colour are despised, and the saint revered by a church, which at the same time supported the Spanish State's massive genocide of South American Indians and one which is currently indicted for pederasty. The anti-Semitism of the Rainbow Nation provides Cohen with an endless variety of targets in his performances.

The choice to use fetishism, baroque and gothic themes and props in the performances reflects a specific sensibility which has been remarked in other periods of western culture, that of extreme flux and anxiety. The changes people find in their society seem to be overwhelming and performance artists and entertainers make extensive use of the exotic, the exaggerated and the mysterious

to amplify their spectacles. Within a particular range of expectations, viewers will be amused or outraged and these responses serve the satirical or cathartic intentions of the performers.

It was demonstrated that the sexualization of everything is commonplace in contemporary society and the artists exploit it. In Goldberg's (2004: 129-131) discussion of Performance art issues of feminism and sexuality were already well articulated by the 1970s as were gay issues. It is how the performances are deployed, as for instance in South Africa, with less exposure to identity politics, that Cohen's choice of place to emphasise his gay orientation is successful and provocative.

It was argued that technological amplification is part of the spectacle audiences are accustomed to. The effortlessness of new technical equipment enables more dazzling effects, manipulated in impressive new ways. 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 either Cohen or Barney. The manipulation of gender stereotypes, ethical stereotypes, racial stereotypes, human rights, religion and exclusionist power politics offer rich possibilities to the artists. They are aware that the mass media will have made many of these ideas available (if unnamed) to their audience through soap operas, advertising, news and the Internet.

Despite the personal risks the artists might run from violence, infection, assault, despair, it was shown that the personal rewards for their efforts, such as fame and with it a spurious immortality and financial gain were no less than their pleasure in the interaction with the viewers. The performance is a species of game, in which the viewers are the target of the performance, they have to be persuaded, fascinated, captured, manipulated, convinced, they have to buy in. Performances essentially set up a dialogue between viewers and artists. In this way whatever their own *Geworfenheit* might be, they order and recreate a new identity in the

performance. This serves as a reminder to the audience that they too have the same power to find an identity beyond that which might be forced upon them.

Attention was drawn to the fact that the Performance artists objectify the body. Fetish props used as tools for the performance to shock and amaze the viewers, fluids of the body; costumes from the world of S/M (Madonna, Cohen, Barney) exploit the audience's interest in taboo erotic practices. The bodies of the performers become themselves fetishes for the audience who see the bodies and all that they allude to as representations of what might be desired and longed for, a promise of later satisfaction. The body is objectified and commodified and becomes an object of exchange. This device works very well to retain the audience's interest.

The ability to enter a trance-like state, which has been described as liminal, is manipulated by actors, no less by performers and Performance artists. It is a powerful way of engaging viewers as they wait for closure while the tension is maintained. Barney and Cohen share Abramović's interest in liminality. For them as for her it facilitates therapeutic creativity and so helps with healing the consequences of the *Lebenswelt*.

The influential theatre anthropologist Eugenio Barba noted (Schechner 1994: xiv) that "Performers specialise in putting themselves in disequilibrium and then display how they regain their balance psychophysically, narratively and socially – only to lose their balance and regain it again and again". It has been argued through the analysis of the various performances of the artists that Barba's comment is true. The extreme conflict, which exists between the Performance artist's social and psychological identity in his/her dramatic persona is spectacularly enacted. The personal transformation through extremes of behaviour, while sometimes acting as a form of self-preservation and self-medication, are also an entertainment. But, the performer regains equilibrium through the performance. The ability of the audience to empathise with the drama

before them places demands on their personal understanding and beliefs and is aimed at opening up a tacit discourse.

This research used Ricoeur and Gadamer's hermeneutic and phenomenological frameworks. The general philosophical analysis by Foucault of human sexuality remained the fundamental base for this research, particularly as he has been important in contributing to understanding the connection between power and sexuality. As this research has been concerned with the interpretation of human beings' surroundings and the meaning they attach to them, which in turn is directly linked to identity and awareness of the self, the exaggerated form given to the question by the artists was discussed. Since the comprehension of personal and cultural identity begins with the physical self, it seems natural for Performance artists to use their bodies as political barometers in the contemporary environment. As Gadamer (1975:99-108) has said about hermeneutic cognition that it contains, "risk of peril, existential authenticity, transformative modes of interpretation and aesthetics", so the performers are engaged in risk, a search for validity, liminal states and an expression of those phenomena through their aesthetics.

The psycho-social conflict between the needs and desires of the individual and the dominant ideological demands of the collective can never be completely resolved. It is this interstice that the selected Performance artists draw on to mobilize their critique of postmodern hegemonies. As has been mentioned throughout this dissertation, although the performances are presented seductively (and sometimes commercially) through the use of familiar and innovative technology, media, costume and sound, the content is satirical, often vicious in its invective and raises questions about moral prejudices, prevarications, power, gender and religious attitudes. The intention of the artists is to call the audience as witnesses for the sake of opening up a discourse. The personalised aesthetic constructions of theatrical devices, fetishism and Othering as practised by the selected performers have been argued as models of authentic phenomenological and political

negotiations within the stressful contemporary *Lebenswelt* in order to activate therapeutic cultural growth.

The Performance works of Abramovic, Barney and Cohen and Madonna are too complex to be 'simply entertaining'. They attempt to transcend the limitations imposed by their societies on them as they act out for themselves and their viewers the role of the marginalised individual and the shamanic healer. Their success in using a coping mechanism, which is simultaneously a creative response, enables them to use identity in numerous ways. One of the most powerful ways is to make the self a political artefact, to raise what is questionable to the consciousness of the audience.

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APPENDIX

Celia de Villiers

**Exhibition catalogue as partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree**

of

MASTER IN VISUAL ARTS

At the

Fried Contemporary Gallery, Brooklyn,

Pretoria

February 2006

LIVEWIRE

Artist, Celia de Villiers has investigated the concept of the human body as a site of subjection, agency and postmodern identity politics. Her exhibition deals with the dialogical engagement attached to physical adornment, masquerade and props that enrich and broaden a performance artist's self-disclosure. Performance artists today utilise theatrical Neo-Baroque poetics that delights in illusionism and flamboyance. Due to our preoccupation with the inhuman or post human in the last decade, traumatic spectacles and Gothic hybrid species have returned as a trend in art-making and popular entertainment, mixing pain with pleasure.

In her exhibition 'LiveWire', the props of physical adornment and masquerade perform the fears, hopes and mysteries of the body. With one breath the work speaks of the performance artist's existential quest, with the next of gothic horror, bizarre rituals and the abject human yearning for transcendence. De Villiers has investigated the phenomenon of artists who subject the body to various painful processes in the quest for self-expression.

In researching for her Masters in Visual Arts, de Villiers came to the conclusion that Gothic and Baroque aesthetics re-emerge during periods of cultural stress and communicate anxieties about social transformations and crises. As gene science increasingly forces its way into our daily lives, popular entertainment grapples with armies of neo-Gothic zombies or the perfect post-human clone. This struggle for the personal human identity finds its way into the work of people too sensitive to ignore a society in distress. They are 'LiveWires' - shamans, fetish practitioners and performance artists who attempt to remove the safety nets and security blankets for themselves and their audiences, breaking social conventions to express the individual identity's suppressed pain. De Villiers' evocative works in glass, resin, vinyl, digital prints and video are exquisitely crafted to disclose the convergence of idiosyncrasies and the manner in which contemporary artists challenge conformity by working across different media, desiring different identities in their attempts at maintaining a cohesive self.

Vainglorious Distaste (2006)

Disavowal (2006)

Fetish (2006)

Transmania (2006)

Performance artists Marina Abramović, Matthew Barney, Steven Cohen, and the pop star Madonna have become extreme artifacts of our present civilisation. These artworks are an exploration of the Adornment, Masquerade and Props in their artworks. Through their self initiated appearance management and overdetermined theatricalized scenarios they are “re-inventing the status quo”. This is extremely similar to the seventeenth century Baroque logic. By placing these artists into a comparative framework I hope to reveal how their signification is created and in what manner it reflects on current society.

The dialogical engagement attached to physical adornment, masquerade and props enrich and broaden the artist’s self-disclosure and the comprehension of their world. Appearance management is a component of identity formation and an expression of feelings about social relations. It usually consists of messages derived from environmental triggers and cultural conventions. A part of this “self in context” is the search for aesthetic stimulation, diversity and novelty in one’s situation. Significant meaning is produced and conveyed through tangible artifacts and products including clothing, adornment and masquerade. Appearance imagery is a silent communication through which cues are encoded and decoded; structuring elements of reality and manipulating these in an imaginative manner perpetuates cultural beliefs and values. It provides a sense of order and control of the self.

Performance art, media entertainment the social, cultural, economic, and multi technological transformations have resulted in fetishistic spectacles where fantasy and illusion blend with reality to create alternative worlds that resemble the innovations of late Gothic and 17th century Baroque eras. Contemporary Western society defines itself by looking back in search of new and different “truths”. This type of re-inscription is simultaneously an inscription and a challenge to established norms. Opening up discourse is part of the social process of making sense of reality, by analysing, re-collecting and then fixing meaning. Cultivating an obviously artificial appearance and the deliberate undermining of traditional constructs of human identity can be seen as part of this cause and effect pattern.

New technological virtuosity facilitates the artist’s creation of visual effects, sounds and text. These processes emulate the fantasies of hyper mediated abject neo-Gothic bodies and demonic neo-Baroque figures in constant transformation. Instead of the religious concerns of the original Gothic and Baroque era they articulate the social and cultural concerns of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. This frenzy of the visible lies in a type of disavowal making visible the social and articulating it into a fetishistic spectacle. Many of the props of the aforementioned performance artists are based on fetish practices and find resonance in this exhibition.

Fetishism concerns irrational fantasies, reverence or attachment to ideas, objects or parts of the body. The role of illusion is vital in the functioning of fetishism and the work of fetishism is to bring alive and in doing so transform it from what the fetishist desires and fears to compliment his/her apparent lack. There are multiple layers of fetishistic projections in the communication between performance artists and their audience. Dissociate behaviour such as fetishism, doubling or disavowal is a defense mechanism to facilitate survival. The resultant split off persona or created object functions as a shield or amulet against negative energy. Contemporary cultural anxiety desires, pre occupations and obsessions include the often-eroticised interface between technology and the flesh.

The dominance of red in this section of the exhibition symbolizes and stimulates vitality. All the artworks here contain an element of the sublime of 'delightful horror' and evoke hybrid ahuman/non human configurations, referring to the post human.

The shoes refer to the Freudian theory of a shoe as a libidinized object. In the colder light of science this has reproductive implications of cloning and hybrids. The mirror becomes a metaphor for the staged and sometimes absurd illusion of reality, self-scrutiny and narcissism. Tactile qualities and sensual shapes in Disavowal, Fetish and Vainglorious Distaste stimulate the desire to stroke them. An aversive attraction is lent by the animalistic hybrid forms and 'slimy' creatures included in them. They come to liminal life as animated props in the video Transmania, performing episodes of individual survival strategies against the backdrop of society. Like Alice in the mythical realm of Wonderland, frustrating adaptation attempts and the challenge to maintaining a total identity are the constant features of an ever-changing environment.

The Fetish/bed is not intended to be seen as a resolved artwork. Taking the cue from Matthew Barney I have decided to include this sensual and perhaps decadent video prop as a part of the installation to double up as a seating arrangement for the audience while watching the video.



Fig 1. Vainglorious Distaste (2006)

Resin Castings, Wood, Mirror.

Installation: 140cm x 40cm x 40cm,

Shoe size 5.



Fig 2. Disavowal (2005-2006)
Poly-urethane, Velvet, Suede, Fake fur, Latex.
Approx. 50cm x 10cm x 15cm.



Fig 3. Fetish (2006)

Fake fur, Latex.

200cm x 150cm.



Fig 4. Transmania (2005-2006)

Video.

Duration 2 minutes 30 seconds.

Red Obsession (2006)

The research for this exhibition centres on the devices performance artists use in coming to terms with their lived environment.

Our differences and similarities to others in our immediate environment define our sense of self. Our identities are partly produced by the gaze of the “Other”. Our formulation of morality is the recognition of others and how they transgress our own perspectives; survival is dependent on how we deal with these transgressions.

This research has shown that the performance artists Steven Cohen and Matthew Barney challenge the element of taboo by a ritual display of their genitals. They superimpose and destabilize audiences with their own neurosis, fears and issues setting themselves up as a commodity-body image, artifacts for consumption or simulacrums of use value. Barney and Cohen use their nudity as a ‘commercial instrument.’ They have slotted the penis into the management disciplines of contemporary social codes and present it as a type of narcissistic branding device. It simultaneously becomes a camouflage, a type of urban armour and a negotiated exchange. Barney’s Cremaster film series is named after a muscle that regulates heat in the scrotum. His brand identity and corporate logo known as a “field emblem”, is based on the male reproductive system. In turn Cohen admits that he is “hiding in his own body”* when audiences withdraw from his exposed genitals in shock.

There seems to be a contradiction between the concepts of promoting or branding a product and concealing or camouflaging it, but branding and camouflage are both about fantasy, artifice and exaggerated dis/play. They represent something other than the real and may be compared to the persona of the two Performance artists in question.

The use of repetitive vinyl 'cut-outs' in this work has compulsive and fetishistic implications and also speaks of the artificial. (The type of vinyl used for this work also reacts to heat and curls up and alters its shape as the testicles might do). The patterning of Red Obsession is just as playful and attractive as the adorned artists in question but on closer scrutiny may also be perceived as offensive and could be categorized as the sublime of delightful horror.

*Personal Interview in Johannesburg 2003

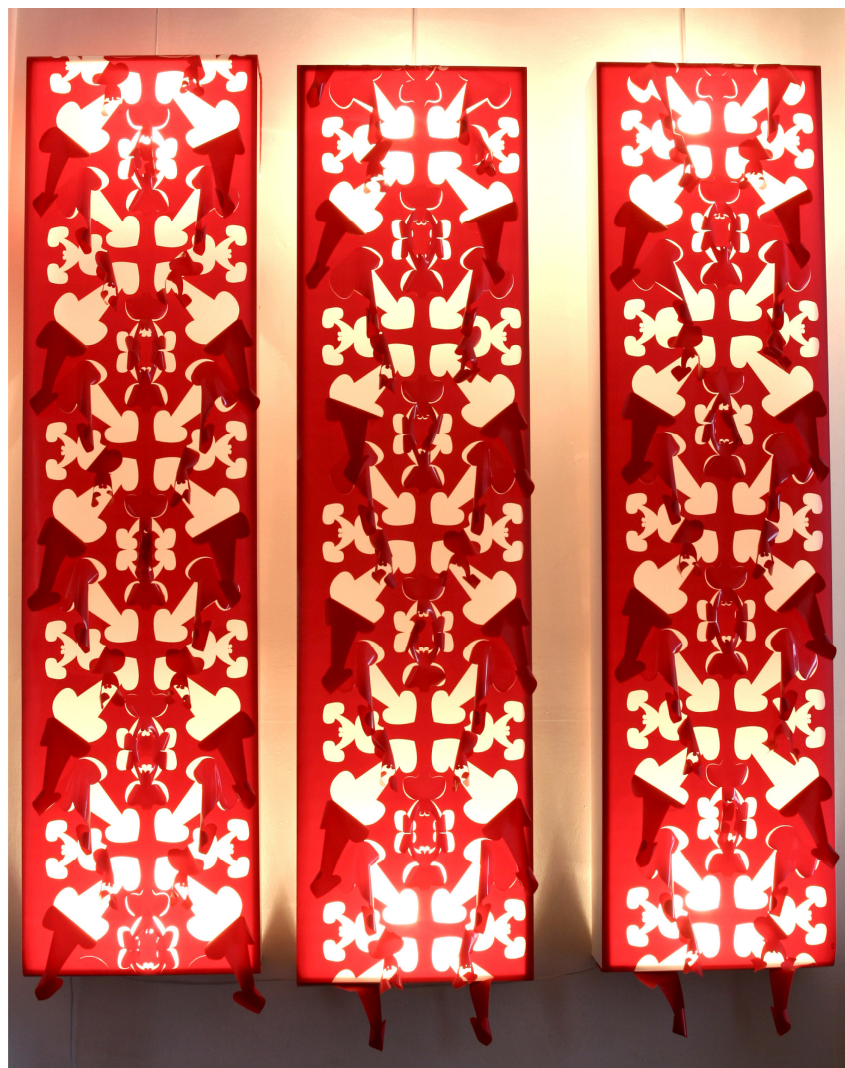


Fig 4. Red Obsession (2006)

Vinyl, Wood, Light.

3 x 200cm x 51cm.

Extropian (2005)

The so-called natural body is nothing but a cultural construct. There is an increasing social sub-culture that de-stabilizes the traditional Western construct of the unmarked body as a civilized body.

This work comments on the heightened visibility and the infiltration of fetishism in film, music videos, fashion catwalks and street culture. Today's body modification practices forge an identity via technologically linked props and prosthetics.

This everyday cyber-body, both exoticised and disparaged by mainstream culture, is a flirtation with the post human existence fantasy. Here, the magical and technological become inseparable in the embodied self.



Fig 5. Plexi-glass, Copper, Resin casting.

90cm x 38cm x 15cm.

Interstice (2006)

Tweaking (2006)

The title Interstice indicates a pause or interruption something that is incomplete or a semitone, between stages. Tweaking has a dual meaning as it may indicate discomfort, distress and pain and is also associated with wrenching and distorting parts of the body.

Science and technology are rethinking the physical body. Genetic engineering and transgenic cloning have become realities; we live in a climate of utopian hybridization and denaturing of the living being. Traditional constructs of human identity and the creation of creatures to supersede the human species are ongoing quests. This is reflected in contemporary popular entertainment and Performance art. Science-fiction films, videos and computer games abound with images that indicate the ‘collapse’ of the body and to the re-shaping of physical features that incorporates an astonishing range of morphemic and mutant creatures.

At the turn of the last century, scientific discoveries, Darwinism and Freud’s development of the uncanny (*unheimliche*), surfaced in a variety of trajectories for example representations of bodies in flux, for example neo Gothic novels such as Count Dracula and Dr Jekyll and Mr. Hyde. This historical interest in the abhuman, denaturalised, trans-human gothic corporeality is strangely compatible to our own pre-occupations at the turn of this century.

This artwork is a response to the aforementioned socio medical discourse. It hints at post human development issues but is also metaphorical. The art of seeing what is questionable forms part of the coping mechanisms of the performance artists I have researched. Visually negotiating seemingly incompatible realms might lead to analysis and perception of contentious situations. My “tongue in cheek” construction of new mythologies for Interstice and Tweaking is a personal

adventure into the manipulation of seemingly incompatible realms and hints at synthetic neo-Gothic life forms.

The metaphor of found laboratory equipment and sculpted glass, as a medium is appropriate because of its scientific implications. Chemical additives and fire transform glass. Its malleability and ability to morph via manipulation with instruments such as pliers and tweezers enhances the meaning of the work. Glass is both fragile and tough and may be equated to the body under siege. The hybridized shapes have been based on animal and human features, cells, neurons, dendrites, axons, and nodes that are activated by heightened states of consciousness. The salt in the Interstice installation has medicinal properties and is part of the chemistry necessary to sustain living beings.



Fig 6. Interstice (2006)

Mirror, Glass, salt.

Installation: Dimensions variable.



Fig 7. Tweaking (2004-2006)
Glass, Copper, Found objects, Light.
Approx. 150cm x 40cm x 40cm.

The Liminal (2006)

Mediacy (2006)

A liminal period in a person's life means the crossing of a threshold or margin, a movement of an individual from one mental/physical state of being to another. This transition may take the form of a public or private rite or a death/life ritual. Since identity is based on experiences, challenge to identity comes via voluntary or involuntary exposure to certain sensations to emerge transformed.

Our sense of self is constantly shadowed by fragile anxiety that points to a gnawing sense of lack. We repress fear that something vital is absent. The Buddhist point of view is that our greatest denial is not of our fear of death, but especially of the paranoid suspicion that "I" am not real. Phenomenological and hermeneutic articulations are attempts to make ourselves 'real' in the world.

In our contemporary society criminal violence, HIV and technical objectification has become a constant negotiation of death terror. This leads to the creation of symbolic immortality projects containing expressive aspects that are instrumental in bringing about change in our lives. Insofar as we repress our fear of death, the repression returns as our compulsion to secure an authentic identity and if possible immortalise ourselves symbolically. The yearning for fame as manifested in the selected Performance artists' work is part of the immortality quest.

I regard the recent upsurge of tattooing, piercing, scarring and branding of the skin as part of such a quest. In contemporary society pain has almost become a taboo subject; people find it embarrassing to be in the presence of someone in pain. To be brave enough to confront the fear of pain is to offer symbolic testimony of heightened sensitivity. Research has shown that self-injury stimulates endorphins, histamine and adrenaline that induce euphoria into the bloodstream. Dealing with the discomfort of abjection and pain is instrumental in

bringing about a change of status whether mental or physical. It is about pushing boundaries to demystify the fear and render it impotent and is therefore cathartic.

A person's willingness to invite pain into the body fulfills their need to pass thresholds and obtain states of well being. The artists of this study are legitimising anti-social acts by choosing to inflict pain on themselves in public while simultaneously immortalizing themselves due to modern publicity. I propose that this type of libidinal self love and aggression is merged to annul anxiety caused by social imposition on the individual. It is mirrored by the performance artists Marina Abramović; Matthew Barney, Steven Cohen and pop star Madonna. They are constantly in a process of re-establishing identity.

The glass torsos, in both material and iconography, evoke the frailty and changeability of the body. (One might be reminded of the historical fetishistic images of the martyrdom of Saint Sebastian). The salt beneath has the textural implications of broken glass. The relation between these two solid materials, which appear to be similar and yet are known to be different, alludes to a hidden process of transformation. An obviously liminal material in itself, salt is often used as an antiseptic to heal piercing; lacerations and self inflicted scars. Superstitions and scientific facts concerning the healing power of Acupuncture needles or even magical protection of archaic lucky charms are numerous. The metals copper, silver and gold are specifically used for the curative properties popularly attributed to them.



Fig 7. The Liminal (2003-2006)
Mirror, Glass, Salt, Copper,
Pewter, Brass, Aluminium, Steel.
Installation: Dimensions variable.



Fig 7. Mediacy (2006)
Glass, Acupuncture needles.
50cm x 32cm x 12cm.