

PREFACE

This dissertation researches aspects of contemporary Performance art. It explores strategies used by four artists to dramatize socio-cultural politics by focusing attention on states of marginalization in relation to conventional social frameworks in the contemporary Western world. When these states reflect their own psychological issues, the Performance becomes in part an act of catharsis for the artists. The main contention in this research is that the artist's subjective performances mirror back to the audience conflicts experienced between social and psychological identities. In doing so, the artists not only become a type of barometer demonstrating socio-cultural tensions, but they become paradigmatic signifiers, negotiating and mediating between the realm of personal politics and contemporary culture. The premise of this research is that the performers engage in a 'dialogue' with viewers as a form of self-preservation and self-healing.

My original interest in this area was prompted by witnessing Matthew Barney, Steven Cohen and Marina Abramović, as well as the American 'Pop' artist Madonna's apparent use of shamanic techniques to achieve real or simulated heightened states of consciousness. When shamanic practices - ancient modalities of healing - are appropriated by contemporary Western artists, it is argued that an urgent need must exist in society. In the context of this study, this refers to the individual's need to overcome feelings of powerlessness as a type of therapeutic practice and that phenomenological and hermeneutical articulation seems to provide some support system.

The research strategy consisted of the following primary research: formal interviews with Cohen in 2002, 2003; an informal meeting with Barney at the Sao Paulo biennale in 2004, and a video-recorded interview with Abramović at the Johannesburg Art Gallery in 2005. In addition, I attended viewings of the following Performances: *I was Fucked up my Art*, *Chandelier* and *I wouldn't be seen dead in that* by Cohen. I attended the premiere of *De Lama Lāmina* by Barney in Sao Paulo and *Spirit cooking* by Abramović in Johannesburg. I also spent time analysing the following videos: Barney's entire *Cremaster* series, Madonna's *Like a Prayer*, *Frozen*, the *Blonde Ambition Tour*, Various

MTV award appearances by Madonna, as well as a number of her other videos not used as examples in this research. My area of investigation is illustrated with stills from the performances of the abovementioned artists. Although their biographies and lists of their performances are not provided in this paper, they may be accessed easily by electronic means. The exhibition component of this research is contextualised with essays and images of my own artworks in the attached appendix. The layout of the original catalogue has been modified to accommodate an A4 format.

My field of research required an interdisciplinary approach to articulate the premise and the reader should approach the paper from this perspective. I have attempted to offer explanations for various key terms and phrases that run through the paper. Significant literature listed in the literary review in Chapter One was consulted in the fields of: Performance art; gender politics; cultural discourse; theatrical strategies and neo-Gothic and the neo-Baroque aesthetics. There are also references to psychology, especially related to narcissism; fetishism and sexual behaviour; as well as readings on hermeneutics; phenomenology, and shamanism. The nature of this dissertation limits a comprehensive discussion pertaining to the listed disciplines in relation to Performance art, but attempts to map a territory for future research possibilities and avenues of pursuit.

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