



Hermann Nitsch, (*Aktion*) 48th Action, presented at the Munich Modernes Theater, 1974

The influence of American new dance exponents was felt in England where the Ting Theatre of Mistakes set up a collaborative workshop in 1974 to continue the earlier experiments. They put together the various notions developed by American dance pioneers from the fifties and sixties in a handbook, *The Elements of Performance Art*, published in 1976. One of the few such explicit texts on the theory and practice of performance, the book outlined a series of exercises for potential performers. *A Waterfall* (1977), presented on the forecourt and one of the terraces of the Hayward Gallery in London, illustrated some of the notions expressed in the book, such as task-oriented actions, theatre in the round, or the use of objects as spatial and temporal indicators. This particular work developed from the company's interest in structuring performances according to so-called 'additive methods'. With performers positioned at various levels on a large scaffolding, and holding containers, water was conveyed up and then down again, creating a series of 'waterfalls' each one hour long.

### Ritual

In contrast to performances which dealt with formal properties of the body in space and time, others were far more emotive and expressionistic in nature. Those of the Austrian artist Hermann Nitsch, beginning in 1962, involving ritual and blood, were described as 'an aesthetic way of praying'. Ancient Dionysian and Christian rites were re-enacted in a modern context, supposedly illustrating Aristotle's notion of catharsis through fear,

terror and compassion. Nitsch saw these ritualistic orgies as an extension of action painting, recalling the Futurist Carrà's suggestion: you must paint, as drunkards sing and vomit, sounds, noises and smells.

His *Orgies, Mysteries, Theatre* projects were repeated at regular intervals throughout the seventies. A typical action lasted several hours: it would begin with the sound of loud music – 'the ecstasy created by the loudest possible created noise' – followed by Nitsch giving orders for the ceremony to begin. A slaughtered lamb would be brought on stage by assistants, fastened head down as if crucified. Then the animal would be disembowelled; entrails and buckets of blood were poured over a nude woman or man, while the drained animal was strung up over their heads. Such activities sprang from Nitsch's belief that humankind's aggressive instincts had been repressed and muted through the media. Even the ritual of killing animals, so natural to primitive man, had been removed from modern-day experience. These ritualized acts were a means of releasing that repressed energy as well as an act of purification and redemption through suffering.

Viennese 'actionism', according to another ritualistic performer, Otto Mühl, was 'not only a form of art, but above all an existential attitude', a description appropriate to the works of Günter Brus, Arnulf Rainer, and Valie Export. Common to these actions was the artist's dramatic self-expression, the intensity of which was reminiscent of Viennese Expressionist painters of fifty years earlier. Not surprisingly, another characteristic of Viennese action artists was their interest in psychology; the studies of Sigmund Freud and Wilhelm Reich led to performances dealing specifically with art as therapy. Arnulf Rainer, for example, recreated the gestures of the mentally insane. In Innsbruck, Rudolf Schvartzkogler created what he called 'artistic nudes – similar to a wreckage'; but his wreckage-like self-mutilations ultimately led to his death in 1969.

In Paris, Gina Pane's self-inflicted cuts to her back, face and hands were no less dangerous. Like Nitsch, she believed that ritualized pain had a purifying effect: such work was necessary 'in order to reach an anaesthetized society'. Using blood, fire, milk and the recreation of pain as the 'elements' of her performances, she succeeded – in her own terms – 'in making the public understand right off that my body is my artistic material'. A typical work, *The Conditioning* (part 1 of 'Auto-Portrait(s)', 1972), consisted of Pane lying on an iron bed with a few crossbars, below which fifteen long candles burnt.

Stuart Brisley's actions in London were equally a response to what he considered to be society's anaesthetization and alienation. *And for Today, Nothing* (1972) took place in a darkened bathroom at Gallery





Joan Jonas, *Funnel*, 1974, performed at the University of Massachusetts

House, London, in a bath filled with black liquid and floating debris where Brisley lay for a period of two weeks. According to Brisley, the work was inspired by his distress over the depoliticization of the individual, which he feared lead to the decay of both individual and social relationships. Reindeer Werk, the name for a couple of young London performers, were no less concerned by similar feelings: their demonstrations of what they called *Behaviour Land*, at Butler's Wharf in London in 1977, were not unlike the work of Rainer in Vienna, in that they recreated the gestures of social outcasts – the insane, the alcoholic, the bum.

The choice of ritualistic prototypes led to very different kinds of performances. While the Viennese actions fitted the expressionistic and psychological interests so long considered a Viennese characteristic, the work of two American performers reflected much less well-known sensibilities, those of the American Indians. Joan Jonas's work referred back to the religious ceremonies of the Zuni and Hopi tribes of the Pacific coast, the area where she grew up. Those ancient rites took place at the foot of hills on which the tribe lived and were conducted by the shamans of the tribe.

In Jonas's New York work *Delay Delay* (1972), the audience was similarly situated at a distance above the performance. From the top of a five-storey loft building, they watched thirteen performers dispersed throughout the empty city lots, which were marked with large signs indicating the numbers of paces away from the loft building. The performers clapped wooden blocks, the echoes of which provided the only physical connection between audience and performers. Jonas incorporated the expansive sense of outdoors, so characteristic of Indian

ceremonies, in indoor works using mirrors and video to provide the illusion of deep space. *Funnel* (1974) was viewed simultaneously in reality and in a monitored image. Curtains divided the room into three distinct spatial characters, each containing props – a large paper funnel, two swinging parallel bars and a hoop. Other indoor works such as the earlier *Organic Honey's Visual Telepathy* (1972) retained the mystic quality of the outdoor pieces through the use of masks, head-dresses of peacock feathers, and ornaments and costume.

Tina Girouard's performances were also built around costumes, and in several works around a cache of antique fabrics, given to her by her mother-in-law, which she entitled 'Solomon's lot' (after the wandering salesman who had left them in a Louisiana attic). Girouard's interest in ceremonies was inspired by the Mardi Gras festivities; she was born in the American south and studied Hopi Indian rites, being fascinated by their use of staple ingredients, such as corn, as sexual, ancestral and power symbols. Combining elements from these ceremonial precedents, Girouard presented *Pinwheel* (1977) at the New Orleans Museum of Art. In this work, several performers marked out a square on the floor of the main entrance of the museum, using the fabric to separate the square into four sections representing animal, vegetable, mineral and other so-called 'personae'. Slowly fabrics and various props were ceremoniously added by the performers, transforming the existing pattern into what the artist considered to be 'a series of archetypal world images'. Girouard intended that the ritualized actions would place the actors in a context 'symbolic of the universe' in the spirit of Indian ceremonies, and by so doing create precedents for modern-day versions.



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