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BODY ART

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It. Body Art; Fr. Body Art; Germ. Body Art; Span. Body Art. Within the arts, the notion of body has always played a central role especially as the subject of representation. Traditionally, Art Theory has considered the human body the most important theme in painting and sculpture because of its “nobility” and the difficulty of depicting it realistically. It can be said that the traditional concept of “mimesis” in art corresponds to the greatest part (above all in the context of Classicism and Academicism) of the artist’s capacity to represent the body in its different poses, attitudes, expressions. A statement about Michelangelo by Giorgio Vasari in his 1568 edition of the *Vite* demonstrates the “myth” of the body in art: «And, finally, he opened out the way to facility in this art in its principal province, which is the human body» (Vasari 2006: 387). In Michelangelo’s painting and sculpture, in short, critics of the late Renaissance saw the highest point of the representation of the body in art. With ample reserve, though, especially since the emergence of the Counter-Reformation pointed in nudes frescoed in Cappella Sistina’s Last Judgement many examples of indecency, immorality and deviation from the biblical message (Aretino 1906: 492; Dolce 1960: 191). Later, particularly in Caravaggio’s painting and in the framework of 17th century Naturalism, art investigates the crudest aspects of corporeality: on the one hand, as if to emphasize the sacredness of the body (even in old age, illness, and filthiness); on the other hand, almost like a virtuosic game on the possibilities granted to the art. This is not to forget Winckelmann’s concept about the close connection between the perfection of the body represented in “Greek” statues and the superiority (both physical and moral) of the Ancients (Winckelmann 1972: 65; Winckelmann 2013: 137). Although at a certain point the imitation of nature became an unessential factor for art, the representation of the body has not lost its centrality. However from the main subject of artistic representation, in many cases it became representation itself.

THE CONTEMPORARY DEBATE: THE STATE-OF-THE-ART IN THE ART

In *Corpus* (first published 1992) Jean-Luc Nancy rejected the traditional distinction between *Körper* (intended as "body-object") and *Leib* ("lived body"), which is typical of Western culture (Nancy 2008: 57). In a more recent text, he wrote: «My body, therefore, isn't an outer shell under which I would exist in an independent manner. It is not at all a shell: it is the development of this singular point which will be assigned "somebody"» (Nancy 2014: 38). And also: «Each time it is a gesture of the painter's body that makes the image appear, that is the true presence of that absent who is projected towards himself to offer himself as a show, a game of strokes or spots, arrangement of what is actually incorporated in the body painting» (Nancy 2014: 46). The artists belonging mainly to the avant-garde currents, that in the early 20th century started the first experiments of Body Art, were thinking just about this inseparability between body and work: the body is itself a work of art.

Although one of the first Body Art performances is probably to be considered that of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec defecating on the beach at Le Crotoy, Picardy (1898), photographed by his friend Maurice Joyant, it is with Dadaism that the dualism art-life (on the support of the body) becomes a properly new creative expression. Marcel Duchamp's *Tonsure* (1919?) is traditionally considered as an archetype of the artistic use of the body. The artist, taken from behind at head level (maybe by Man Ray), shows his shaved hair to form a comet, while (all indifferent) smoking a pipe. Here is one of the main Body Art characteristics: differently from the traditional artistic forms, it doesn't aspire to durability or even to eternity. Its main feature, indeed, is the ephemeral, the manifestation of "hic et nunc": the Body Art's product doesn't exist outside of the moment in which it takes place, if not in photo, audio, video testimonies (Campione 2010: 105). Another, but no less important Body Art trait is the absence of an inherent meaning: since in it there isn't an iconography that connects signifier and signified, the sense of the performance is bound only to the emotional response from the public. According to some scholars (Jones 1994; Hopkins 1998; Hopkins 2003; Jones 2004; Zapperi 2007) *Tonsure* would have to be considered as an act of abandoning gender identity from Duchamp, and with it the practice itself of conventional painting. In this sense, his feminine alter ego *Rose Sélavy* (1921) «suggests that Duchamp was searching for another way of representing himself as an artist» (Zapperi 2007: 293). Transvestism, explicit and publicly exhibited sexuality and the breaking of taboos are in fact the third particularity of Body Art.

Between the late 1950s and early 1960s Body Art is stated as one of the most characteristic forms of 20th century art. In its most radical form, it can be identified with the Wiener Aktionismus, the Movement founded by Hermann Nitsch, Otto Mühl, Günther Brus and Rudolph Schwartzkogler (Clair 2016: 49-59). Even if in different ways, the members of this movement have in common the willingness to stage all form of violence – often self-addressed – to bring themselves and those present to a real experience of the limit. Lea Vergine (2002: 20) has repeatedly referred to psychopathology and numerous passages by Donatien-Alphonse-François de Sade's novels to describe the attitude of this partnership of artists. And so, Schwartzkogler shows himself in disconcerting performances of self-mutilation or self-torture (like, for example, in the series of the *Aktion*, 1965, in which he appears bandaged, tied up, connected to surgical tubes in the act of inflicting wounds on himself); Otto Mühl, in *Piss action* (1969) appears nude in public

while he's urinating in the mouth of his friend Günther Brus. «The artist – writes Tracey Warr – was spokesperson for a personal and sexual degeneration of the man through the “consciousness of the body” to allow him to touch existence in a more direct way» (Warr and Jones 2012: 95). Hermann Nitsch's *Orgien Mysterien Theater*, furthermore, shows emotional violence, delirium and frenzy: the barrier between artist and his public was torn down and the performance itself turned into a great cathartic ritual, where the dismemberment of animals, the immersion of the participants in the jumble of their entrails, the sprinkling with their blood, are not excluded. By mixing pagan symbols and Christian liturgy, Nitsch wants to bring his public – in a collective sacrifice – to an ancestral state of experience. «We are increasingly attracted to our own experience – writes Nitsch in presenting to Lea Vergine his 1965 Performance. Every artwork is nothing but the mystique of being. The aesthetics that drives us to horror. The aesthetics of horror» (Nitsch in Vergine 2002: 176). Anyhow, body artists use their body as a “canvas” on which to impress/express their aching humanity. French artist Gina Pane, while performing her *Sentimental Action* (1974) appeared in public dressed in white in the act of sticking rose thorns into her arms, blood gushing out copiously. She explained the contents at the same time erotic and purifier of her act in these terms: «My body, conductor substance in a movement of “going to the return”, returning to its start point to a de/construction of primary image (mental puzzle): the red rose, mystic flower, erotic flower, turned into vagina by a reconstruction in its most current state: the painful one» (Pane in Vergine 2002: 197). Elsewhere the action simulates the death, like in *Death Control* (1974) in which Gina Pane appeared as a decomposing body covered with worms. Or in Paul Thek's installation (see for example *Death of a hippie*, 1967), in which the artist stages his own funeral through the exhibition of a dummy that looked just like him.

In some cases, Body Art has repossessed painting in a different way from the traditional one. Yves Klein's *Antropométries*, the series of paintings made in 1960s, used the feminine body as a matrix dipped in a particular shade of blue to create – in front of a crowd and at the sound of an orchestra – several forms impressed on large canvas in which the parts (breast, belly, vulva) responsible for reproduction are emphasized. In them, devoid of any subjective identity attribute – writes Klein himself – «the Ego without the Ego becomes one with life itself» (Klein in Warr and Jones 2012: 57). Jackson Pollock's Action painting, on the other hand, further tightens the link between body and work: the artwork “lives” in the apparently casual movements of the painter on the canvas, and directs him to doing. Pollock claims: «When I am in my painting, I am not aware of what I'm doing. It is only after a short “get acquainted” period that I see what I have been about. I have no fears about making changes, destroying the image, etc., because the painting has a life of its own. I try to let it come through. It is only when I lose contact with the painting that the result is a mess. Otherwise there is pure harmony, an easy give and take, and the painting comes out well» (Pollock 1948: 79).

The question of corporeality runs also through the entire production of Piero Manzoni: in all his work body is assumed to be an art tool / instrument not unlike colours, canvases, media. And what is more, the artist gives of himself in the image of a demiurge, or of a saint, or even of Christ. Everything touched by his body – or coming out of it – is sacred, and becomes a real relic all the more precious, when there is a public ready to idolize it. So, since the early 1960s, Manzoni made a series of works hovering between irony and a sense

of precariousness: among them the *Artist's Breath* (1960), a little balloon inflated by his wind bound to blow over in a short time. A real metaphor of artistic inspiration, and at the same time of a life that inexorably dies out, that the artist grants for consideration. In the previous year, Manzoni signed the skin of some models thus creating the Living Sculptures (Grazioli 2007:113-117). The organic body becomes a real statue, whose economic and artistic value, whose authenticity are exclusively determined by the artist's will. «Whatever is emerging in Manzoni – writes Germano Celant (2014: 144) – is the coincidence between the spurious body of the creator and the supreme body of the artefact, that drives him in 1959 to plan “to expose living persons (others dead, instead, I wanted to close and store in transparent plastic blocks)”» (Manzoni 1962 [2013]: 87). The finish line of these experiments is probably one of the most irreverent and scandalous works in the history of art, *Artist's Shit* (1961). The artist leaves a part of his body to the audience of his disciples, just like Christ offers his own as a sacrifice: only instead it is the filthiest of materials. Nevertheless, this takes place through an authentic alchemical transmutation, or a real transubstantiation, and it assumes the value of gold (Grazioli 2007: 122-128).

In the last part of the 20th century, Body Art has lost much of its subversive charge and has become, on the one hand, a reflection about the boundaries of art understood as the limits of experience (the staging of pain by Marina Abramović; the surgical metamorphoses by Madame Orlan; the disconcerting Suspensions by Stelarc; or even the public bleeding by Franko B); on the other hand, it has taken the form of an extremely widespread art practice through tattoos piercings, scarifications and other practices of body transformation that have eliminated the differences between high and popular art (Campione 2015: 79).

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