

## THE MIND AND THE BODY IN PERFORMANCE ART

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In the 1960s, the performer Carolee Schneeman transformed her body into materials, exposing "the naked (...) flowers painted on her cheeks, her breasts and body covered with the splashes of paint, grease, and chalk, or lying on the floor slithered over by live snakes."<sup>1</sup> The performance was shocking, but it was also an erotic celebration of nature.

After a period of activities that underlined the sacral aspects of the female body, performers such as Lydia Lunch, Johanna Went, duo Dancenoise, Annie Sprinkle a Kipper Kids entered the domain of performance art. They were particularly famous for their activities that disturbed the sanctity of the human body in favour of displaying an obscene, aggressive, or even scatological body. Karen Finley was among those who belonged to the aforementioned group of artists. Obscenity in her work can neither be ignored nor reduced to mere obscenity.

Finley raises questions concerning performing arts in general as well as her unique approach. The issue in question is who the person Finley presents is and if there is a difference between her creation and the traumatic person she presents. "I want the audience to see what I am going through. I want to demystify this process you go through when you are trying to expose yourself. Also, this issue can't be packaged and polished. It is not like a talk about having a nice day. So it is important to have that rawness to it."<sup>2</sup> In her performances she moves as if in a trance, showing typical signs of it such as closed eyes or four-letter words, which however do not serve as padding to fill an empty space, but want to capture the audiences as well as challenge them. It is the language of ID, "a kind of extreme child abuse, like satanic ritual abuse, in which according to some therapists, children talk of being placed in cages or closed boxes."<sup>3</sup>

The voices of her performance - representing psychopathic personalities, paedophiles, lunatic masochists, murders of children and insane women - rise up from the depths, call for attention and are reminiscent of a dream that is over, yet the trauma remains. The final effect shows the performer being

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<sup>1</sup> Fuchs, Elinor: Staging the Obscene Body. TDR 33, No 1 (T121), Spring 1989, p. 33

<sup>2</sup> Carr, C.: Unspeakable Practices, Unnatural Acts: The Performance Art of Karen Finley. In: Acting Out: Feminist Performance. Michigan (Univ. Michigan Press) 1993, p. 147

<sup>3</sup> Kubiak, Anthony: Splitting the Difference. Performance and Its Double in American Culture. TDR 42, No 4 (T160), Winter 1998, p. 97

closely attached to the event. Such an approach requires the highest degree of impersonation of the presented material. It is therefore neither important nor possible to reveal the traumatised person even if the personality of the performer tempts us to do so.

What is important is the event that happened, and this event in performance reminds us of a dream, some reminiscence, a part of our culture. Finley expresses herself through her acting directly and without hesitation as to the taboo parts of the human body or taboo events. Her openness may look like boasting, but at the moment of the traumatic experience, decent language is out of question. She achieves such a high degree of authenticity that the event seems real. Finley uses the third person singular to present the moment of evocation, she presents herself as the one who is going through the experience, gradually discovering the power of memories, and her position in the story changes from SHE to I.

The transitions from the third to the first and the second persons represent a migration of the disembodied memory that also contains fragments of somebody else, whose memories Finley enters. At the same time it is a shift from storytelling to immersion. The characters of I and YOU are being attracted to each other and they seemingly act together. Finley is not herself, it is not her own identity, she is rather permanently shifted by means of memory and imagination from ID to EGO. Haunted by various memories, she retrieves the moments of events.

What is more important than that the event has happened is to whom it has happened. The style of performing does not call for any exact features of character. The characters become more and more ambiguous as Finley overcomes the boundaries of her physical body. They migrate throughout the various monologues and meet in the culmination of emotions, joined in a feverish dream, which expresses the logic of storytelling. "I'm really interested in being a medium, and I have done a lot of psychic type of work. I put myself into a state, (...) so that the things come in and out of me, I'm almost like vehicle. And so when I'm talking it's just coming through me."<sup>4</sup>

In addition, food and the oral make frequent subject matter of her work. Finley's work represents the taboo of consuming. She coats herself with chocolate, smears herself with gelatine, or covers herself with sausages or cabbage. In her work influences of existentialism can be seen, as eating to existentialists meant both destruction and satisfaction of the human being. By multiplying the act of consuming Finley reduces the female body to a mouth, a symbolical opening, and links it narratively with sexual destruction, abuse and violence. Excrements turn into a metaphor of food and obviously have an

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<sup>4</sup> Finley, Karen: *A Constant State of Becoming*. An interview by Richard Schechner. TDR 32, No 1 (T117), Spring 1988, p. 154

obscene effect. However, the power of her performance lies beyond obscenity. The pain evoked by trauma becomes more and more present.

Finley's work came out of conceptual art of the 1960s, which tried to depict "the pure presence". Or, as Yvonne Rainer puts it, the artist should be seen as "a neutral doer" and the action of his/her performance should be assessed according to what this "doer" has done. The spectators form a part of the events. Their presence and direct participation demonstrate their immersion and full involvement in the created event. Performance art of the 1970s and the 1980s results from these activities, but concentrates rather on the performer than on the spectator. Nevertheless, Laurie Anderson represents a completely unique type of performer.

Anderson brings forward the electronic medium onto the stage; this not only disrupts the moment of pure presence, but also multiplies her "personae" through high technology. She creates an image which refers more to cyberspace or to virtuality than to the real world. Her approach lets the audience go through the inner experiences and represents an intentionally stylized artificial space. Part of such experience is what cyber mystics call "embracing of cyberspace".

Anderson makes the issue of pure presence in performance art up-to-date; within the structure of interactive media this is transferred to forms where the physical body becomes a barrier to the floating mind. Immersion means to give up one's physical body in favour of becoming a co-part of cyberspace.

Cyberspace is defined as an infinite artificial space. It enables a kind of free floating along the stream of information. At the same time, it is a world behind the computer screen, often compared to Alice's world behind the looking-glass. Cyberspace together with virtuality enables the participants to experience what can be described as "being inside". In the context of cyberspace Meredith Bricken mentions that "when we want to describe an unfamiliar place", we think "it would be approximately like that". When we are inside the environment, however, we think "it is exactly like this". We do not rely on the metaphor of "a house" after we've moved into our house.<sup>5</sup>

The term "immerse" becomes magical and presents the most important moment of penetration into virtual space. Metaphorically, it represents jumping through the monitor and relates to the feeling of floating or surfing. Being inside also means that observation changes into feeling because the interaction does not allow just observing but also experiencing itself.

The need for analysis, interpretation and understanding of symbols and metaphors changes in favour of the need to create and construct.

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<sup>5</sup> Bricken Meredith: *No Interface to Design. Cyberspace*. Massachusetts 1991, 369

The player involved in the situation is drawn through his alter ego into one of the characters. His potential to control the character, the ability he gained by overcoming obstacles in the game, enables him not only to enjoy the power, but it also provides him with a space to project his own personal and aesthetic imagination. For the player the artificial character acquires the features of a human being. This is one of the aspects that partake in the experience of the full authentic immersion in the play. Therefore, cyberspace changes from an informative and communicative level into a world where one can project new ideas that will arise from their failure in the real world.

William Gibson defines cyberspace as hallucinatory<sup>6</sup>, Michael Benedikt proposes to use a more appropriate term delusive<sup>7</sup> and Bricken describes virtual reality as an environment of “pure information, which we can feel, see and touch it.”<sup>8</sup> Virtual reality is different from the virtuality of a computer display. It represents an environment which competes with reality by means of high technology. A stereoscopic helmet with a visor makes it possible to overcome the barriers of the screen and literally immerse in space.

Sensor-datagloves react to psychophysical impulses in the body and an acustographic environment makes it possible to hear three-dimensional sound. Nowadays it is possible to reach such high levels of quality that a combination of image, sound and physical contact creates new aesthetic criteria. The participant penetrates a delusive world which might be fascinating precisely because it is in a stylised way analogous to the real world.

It is paradoxical that space described as hallucinatory or delusive gives the participant the feeling of HERE and NOW, which is considered to be the domain of theatre. The delusion is perfect: a man remains alone in the space but he still gets feedback for every reaction. He can choose his virtual image and become Don Juan, Hamlet, a satyr or a scarf. He can manipulate things and move around the space because he does not need his physical body.

Virtual microgravity forms the next important experience virtuality provides. It is a state of body that produces a feeling that can be compared to the feeling after ingestion of psychotropic drugs. The participant can enter the virtual space of video, computer graphics, sound, and the interactive environment which works independently on him, even though it is his own creation.

The mind of the participant dominates and creates “connecting space” (Nelson, Rheingolds), which runs and moves. Within the context of digital

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<sup>6</sup> McFadden Tim: Notes on the Structure of Cyberspace and Mallistic Actors Model. Cyberspace. Massachusetts 1991, 339

<sup>7</sup> Item.

<sup>8</sup> Bricken Meredith: No Interface to Design. Cyberspace. Massachusetts 1991, 363

communication, it is shared by all, but it can also work without participants. The mind is shared, but the bodies belong to individuals.

Such a world is delusive and full of paradoxes. The participant develops a “pure form” out of the feeling and thus he creates his own world. However, the ownership is imaginary. Although the participant creates the world, his main role is to imitate its artificiality. Fascination with one’s own experience is the consequence of what has been programmed by others, just like the feeling of freedom is stimulated by technological methods.

The technology is invisible, but it is sensitively adapted to human activity. When virtual reality is preferred to the real environment thanks to its anonymity, choice of identity, and because of the hyper-democracy it offers - with the participant at the centre of attention - the paradoxes become even bigger.

Artificiality offers more authenticity than the real world. The physical body is no longer means of penetrating artificial space, it rather represents a barrier. Therefore, the body cannot be represented as ideal, the way Carolee Schneeman used it. On the other hand, the old, fat and unproportional body becomes an inappropriate cultural model. In this light, it is quite natural for the noble mind to escape from such a hideous house.

