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Günter Brus: A Walk Through Totality

Tomáš Kubart

Abstract

This study focuses on examining a specific artwork of a member of the Austrian action group of Viennese Actionism, Günter Brus through the prism of Trauma Studies. The research question of how the trauma of World War II expressed itself in the art of Günter Brus encompasses a focus on three sub-areas based on the nature and definition of trauma and following neurosis/psychosis: individual trauma (e.g., childhood trauma), societal trauma (a consequence of WWII), and the return of trauma if it has not been consistently processed. The experience of WWII left traumas in the generation of artists such as Brus (e.g., his experience of bombing at an early age) that were individual, society-wide (the complicity of the whole Austrian society in the Nazi crimes and the Shoa), and/or the traumas caused by some *recurring trauma*. According to a British theatrologist Patrick Duggan, trauma on the individual level is doubled upon recurrence, which is similar to the conclusion at which German researcher Gerald Schröder arrives when he writes about the *Wiederholungstrauma* of a society on the whole. When the level of social traumatisation reaches a borderline level, it manifests itself through various valves, including artistic ones. Günter Brus became such a materialisation of the repetition of trauma, a living reminder, literally walking through the streets of Vienna during his event *Vienna Walk*. The study introduces and describes the nature of such trauma in the artwork of the Austrian post-war artist through the framework of Duggan's methodology coupled with trauma-related symptomatology.

Key words

Viennese Actionism, Günter Brus, performance art, biopolitics, Trauma Studies, Austrian post-war art, Fascist Man, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

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Günter Brus and Viennese Actionism

In the present study I deal with the partial issue of the formation of the Austrian Action Group, the so-called Viennese Actionism, which I frame within two main methodological frameworks: the biopolitics of the Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben (2011: 9–19) and Trauma Studies (see DUGGAN 2015: 1–13). Using the works by one of the members of the Viennese Actionism, Günter Brus (b. 1938), I discuss the relationship between the artist and the establishment, the possibilities of expressing individual and collective trauma through artistic creation, and the extent to which the nature of a creation can influence the relationship between the two. The Viennese Actionism is an ideal example for tracing these influences, since in less than a decade (1962–1970) their artistic provocations were considered the ‘bad guys of happenings’, and their work was soon criminalised in Austria at the time. But what if society decided to punish defenceless ‘children’ who, in their provocative way, were merely reacting to the severe trauma they had gone through? How could they create ‘nicely’ after what they had been through? Therefore, my research question is related to the previous ones: could Brus’ artistic production have been a reaction to a form of individual or social trauma? The experience of WWII left individual, societal, and re-emerging traumas in a generation of artists like Brus. Brus’ generation is the last one to remain silent on the echoes of the Austrian trauma, solitary in the midst of the ‘rotting swamp’ (BRUS 2000) of Austrian society.

In summer 1965, *Le Marais* magazine was published to mark the occasion of an art exhibition of several Austrian artists. Its first and, at the same time, last edition introduced the wider public to the art of four artists who had met at Höhere Graphische Bundes-Lehr- und Versuchsanstalt (Higher Federal Institution for Graphic Education and Research in Vienna, commonly known simply as ‘die Graphische’) and who left with an unmistakable imprint of violence, blood, and ritual on Austrian art that lasted till the next decade.

One of those artists was Graz-native Günter Brus who spent his formative years in the mountains of Styria. When he arrived in Vienna at the age of twenty, he met and was befriended by an artist almost a generation older, Otto Muehl (1925–2013). At the time, Muehl was at the beginning of his career as a painter, which he came to after long periods of psychotherapy. He attended these to cope with the traumatic experiences of the battlefields of WWII. But all too soon, at the beginning of the 1960s, Brus was drafted to the army to do his military service, so he could ‘only watch from afar’ (GEYRHOFER 1981: 47) the activities of his friend Muehl with new colleagues at die Graphische. It was with painter Adolf Frohner and the Viennese-born Hermann Nitsch (1938–2022), who had originally wanted to become a church painter, that Muehl locked himself up in a basement in Vienna’s Perinetgasse in 1962. It was not until the first edition of *Le Marais* – which means ‘swamp’ in English – that this trio was joined by its d’Artagnan: a young graphic designer dreaming of success in the area of body art, Rudolf E. Schwarzkogler (1940–1969).

By the time they presented their art in 1965 at the Galerie Junge Generation [Young Generation Gallery], they were not completely unknown to the Austrian public. Yet, in

the 1960s, they were not known so much for their artistic work as for its persecution by the state apparatus and in 1961/1962 their activities were followed closely by the Austrian police. Tabloid journalists reacted with horror at their performances filled with blood, nudity, and mud, unstructured explosions of unconsciousness in enigmatic actions where the titles alone speak volumes: *Psycho-Motorische Geräuschaktion* [Psycho-Motor Noise Action]¹ (1967), *Bodybuilding* (1965), *Breathexercises* (1966), *Ten Rounds for Cassius Clay* (1966), *Wehretüchtigung* [Military Proficiency] (1967), *Turnstunde in Lebensmittel* [Body Building at the Grocer's] (1965), *Den E-Schock, bitte, ich kann nicht mehr* [Electroshock Therapy – Please, I Can't Stand It Any Longer] (1967), *Einatmen, Ausatmen* [Inhale, Exhale] (1967), *Zerreiẞprobe* [Ordeal] (1970), or *Lieber Gott, wir sind alle epileptisch* [Good Lord, We are All Epileptics] (1967). Without the use of metaphor and mimesis, these titles identified the main topics of their art: the social marginalisation of certain groups and individuals. It was there, within marginal social groups, criminals, the psychologically ill, within the 'sacred mob' (DVORAK 1981: 4) as the psychotherapist and gallery director Josef Dvorak referred to them, where these artists searched for and found inspiration, in the spirit of the Austrian expressionist tradition. They focused on the problem of the status of homosexuals, women, and psychiatric patients in the conservative and as yet not de-Nazified society of Austria in the 1960s.

The reverse metaphor of a swamp, to which the group of young artists referred during their first joint exhibition in the Junge Generation Gallery in 1965 (under the title *Le Marais*), reflects a complicated and earlier-established socio-cultural narrative complex. By giving themselves the name 'Actionists', they (un)consciously addressed the contemporary social situation, mainly the strengthening of Austrofascism and nationwide resentment. Variations on metaphors emanating from this 'swampy' complex are commonplace in the art of Günter Brus. This is distinct in his faecal art, for instance, in his *20th September* (1967), where a camera records motionlessly and in detail Brus passing a stool or in the performance *Kunst und Revolution* [Art and Revolution] (1968) where Brus smears his excrements over his thighs and cheeks.

Brus lacked the cosmopolitan experience of his colleague Hermann Nitsch. He thus perceived Vienna's 'Wasserkopf', the Austrian social swamp, with fresh eyes. Brus had been brought up by his grandfather in Mureck, in the very south of Austria, on the border river with Slovenia. His youth, spent in a federal state with a large Slovenian minority, vigorously persecuted during the Nazi regime during Brus' childhood, represented an important influence for his later radical rejection of Nazism and Austrofascism, even though his father remained a 'silk fascist'² till the end of his life (BRUS 2002: 154).

1 Unless indicated otherwise, all the translations from German and Czech are mine.

2 In his memoirs, Brus refers to his father as a 'silk fascist' – not an evil man of bad character, but a weakling who is attracted to fascism by one of its psychological affiliations: respect, gained through violence and force, and physical drudgery. A 'silk fascist' is a 'good man' sympathetic to fascist ideology.

Guilty victims

When he arrived in Vienna at the age of twenty, Austria's largest city, nicknamed Wasserkopf due to the extreme concentration of people living there in comparison with the rest of the country, was still a 'brown shirt'³ area, as was in essence the whole country. Austria, in fact, exploited its position of a 'buffer zone' between two geopolitical powers and, as early as in the Moscow Declaration of 1943, it started erasing its label of Nazi collaborator to be able to stick a label of Nazi victim over it. In the end, it seemed that

the 1938 [...] annexation [was] initiated and provoked by the military threats from the outside and also from the inside, through the highly treacherous terror of the Fascist Nazi minority [...] and the helpless Austrian people had it forced upon them by the military and wartime occupation of the country. (ŠVEJČER 2015: 53)

But this was not true. The Austrian Chancellor, Engelbert Dollfuß, stood at the root of Austrian tragedy when he dissolved parliament and paralysed constitutional institutions in the 1930s. When the Austrofascist faction used these steps as an excuse for assassinating him, they left Dollfuß to bleed to death in his office (MESSNER 2004). With his death, many of the democratic mechanisms of the state, which had contributed to the acceleration of Austrofascism and the Anschluss of 1938, and Austria's participation in war crimes, collapsed. And it was this blood, the blood of Mauthausen and Austrian guilt, that post-war Austria, led by Karl Renner, sought to wash off. The second Austrian Republic entered 1955 without any occupation zones and with a clean sheet: its *Nationallüge* (national lie) and the *Opfer-Mythos* (victim myth) (BISCHOF 2017: 29) were accepted by the whole of the civilised world. Up until the arrival of the 1960s.

Austrofascism of the 1960s

The 1960s in Austria represented the time of 'deepest cultural Austrofascism' (Siegert quoted in DVORAK 1981: 4) as the Austrian theoretist Michael Siegert retrospectively weighted up the situation for the *Neues Forum* in 1974: 'when the [political] scene was dominated by figures of corporatism like Heinz and Drimmel and the then existing SPÖ [social democracy. – T.K.] quietly served the dark cultural dictate' (Siegert quoted in DVORAK 1981: 4).⁴ For example, in the Czechoslovak Communist newspaper *Rudé právo* [Red Right] on 12 March 1963, the caption below a photograph of a man in Nazi uniform reads: 'a member of the revanchist Austrian military organisation *Kamerad-*

3 In the 1920s and 1930s, members of the Sturmabteilung paramilitary units, whose original purpose was to accompany and protect Nazi marches and demonstrations, were referred to as *Braunhemden* (brown shirts).

4 „Es war das die Zeit des ödesten kulturellen Austrofascismus, als Ständestaats-Figuren wie Heinz und Drimmel die Szene beherrschten und die damalige SPÖ dem schwarzen Kulturdiktat still diente“ (DVORAK 1981: 4).

*schaftbund*⁵ – decorated with Nazi medals' (*RUDE PRÁVO* 1963). This Czechoslovak newspaper actually refers to the members of a group I could call a 'camaraderie club', which included not only Brus' father, but also the father of the German cultural theorist, Klaus Theweleit. This is, probably, why both Brus and the sociologist Klaus Theweleit refer to this revival of Austrofascism in the 1960s in their work. As well as to the generation of their fathers that accelerated it. It is Theweleit's *Faschistischer Männertyp* (Fascist Man) theory, based on his extensive research and published in 1977/1978 as *Männerphantasien* [Male Fantasies] (THEWELEIT 2019), which helps to explain the tools of expression Brus and his colleagues chose to use. As we will demonstrate further, all of the exalted sexuality and fecalism represented a strong arsenal for attacking the patriarchy.

The Fascist Man 'revealed himself' to Theweleit during extensive research of the mentality of Freikorps (Free Corps) soldiers. On the basis of the analysis of shared narratives, he formulated a hypothesis that a person with an insufficiently structured ego, i.e., an ego where the Oedipus complex could not have been triggered because the ego had not psychologically broken away from the mother yet, expresses themselves by metaphors of impure and fluid. In *Male Fantasies*, Theweleit develops on one of the theses of French philosopher Michel Foucault which can be found in his *Lectures on the Will to Know* (1976). The power dispositif uses the body as a machine and begins to concentrate 'on its training, enhancing of its abilities and the concurrent growth of its usefulness and obedience as well as its integration into the systems of the administrative and economic control' (FOUCAULT 1999: 162). Economic control through disciplining of individuals via compulsory military service is a component of the *anatomo-politics* discursive strategy of the state which shapes a Fascist Man, preoccupied with strict upbringing and physical drill, with the purely technician bodily prowess that he finds so captivating.

In addition to Foucault's anatomo-politics, Theweleit also took into account the psychological aspect of the question of the body in relation to power. He attempts to answer the question of where this fascination with bodily drill originated from and how it makes the Fascist Man feel that if he becomes component to anatomo-politics, he becomes component to power (THEWELEIT 2019: 498–499). He has the feeling that he shares in that power. To explain this relationship, Theweleit cites hypotheses put forward by Freud's pupil, Wilhelm Reich, who defined in his work the 'emotional armour' created as a result of the conflict between natural sexual instinct and education/civilisation, so at a very early stage of childhood, when boys can have involuntary erection after contact with their mother or father (for example, during nappy changing), and thus an unwanted association of sexual arousal close to a subject towards whom it should not be felt (the mother), giving rise to feelings of guilt. Theweleit turned the Reich's *Körperpanzer* (body armour) into a hypothesis of *Charakterpanzer* (character armour) and ascribed its development to the Fascist Man, who dreads physical contact (particularly with a woman) (see REICHARDT 2006).

5 German nationalist organisation in Czechoslovakia, officially existing in 1926–1934.

Theweleit's Fascist Man is affected by an obsessive fear that he will be consumed by something shapeless, something fluid and impure in which his own ego will dissolve. He dreads women, he feels threatened by them, and reveals it in metaphors used in communication and for naming surrounding phenomena: he is afraid of being 'swamped by Communism' while on the other hand invites others to join the 'current' of Fascist marches through the city (THEWELEIT 2019: 292). Instead of creating his own '*Self*' he turns his fear into body armour in order to help him give structure to his insufficiently structured ego, *de facto* holding it together. Ego is fragile and therefore needs constant confirmation from the outside: it needs the institutions of education and army; it needs authority and 'values' (e.g., the 'traditional' family so often invoked in the Central European environment) to be constantly confirmed from the outside. So why do we find the Fascist Man important in this paper?

An inseparable part of the mentality and emotionality of the Fascist Man is an aversion to all the impure and bodily, mainly to excrements, urine, and sperm. Because it was the Fascist Man that bred the Actionist generation, the derivatives of the metaphor of excrement and mud formed in the mentalities of this generation are put into motion, aimed *against* their own fathers. And that is why their *Schweinwokabular* (swine vocabulary), as journalists at the time labelled the Actionists' form of communication (SCHWARZ 1988: 197), is constructed from the derivatives of everything fluid and impure for the precise reason of hurting the generation of fathers as much as possible. Only its force can enable them to deliver a strong blow to the 'silk fascist' (BRUS 2002: 154) inside their fathers and together with that the whole construct of Austrian paternalism.

As fascist 'gaffers' were all around in Vienna, Brus would stumble over them during his studies, at the theatre, in newspapers. Taras Borodajkewycz, a former Nazi, was still teaching history at the University of Vienna and when a young student, Ferdinand Lacina, tried to force him to do penance for this at the press conference organised for this purpose, Borodajkewycz instead proudly admitted being a member of the NSDAP and again praised Hitler's speech in Heldenplatz (LACKNER 2015). Borodajkewycz was only one of the many unpunished Nazi criminals whose presence in Austrian society provoked students to demonstrate. As soon as the demonstrations met with repression and police interventions, the repressive feeling of the Nazi era returned. The trauma came back and, as we are going to demonstrate in the following part of the study, it 'doubled' upon its return.

Trauma in performance art, live art, and body art

According to a British teatrologist Patrick Duggan (2015), recurring trauma is maybe more important to process than the original trauma itself. To begin with, psychology and psychoanalysis paid little attention to trauma for a long while. Although Sigmund Freud wrote about *war neuroses* as early as 1920 in *Jenseit des Lustprinzips* [Beyond the Pleasure Principle], the idea that a victim or a witness of a violent act could suffer

from consequences did not establish itself as valid amongst the professional public. That is also the reason for pointing out that although the Actionists were familiar with the work of the most important psychologists of the 20th century, they were not on the pulse of the latest developments in methods of psychoanalysis; quite the opposite, in my view, they reflect the history of the failure of psychoanalysis, one of which was Freud's very 'poo-pooing' of war neuroses. The first post-war generation in the 1960s acknowledged not only the presence of the Nazis, but also the total failure of rationalism and language (*logos*) as the central means of psychoanalysis. At the same time the anti-psychiatry movement of Roland D. Laing was making progress and *body psychotherapy* took over. This way Viennese Actionists unconsciously copied the abandonment of the language and methods of psychoanalysis in psychotherapy, which later led to interpretational uncertainty amongst some of the researchers as to whether the work of Actionists belonged in the field of art or therapy (cf. e.g., *Theater im Grenzbereich von Revolution und Therapie* [Theatre Between Revolution and Therapy] by Strauß in 1970). The parallel development of para-therapeutic methods, as Muehl's understanding of *Selbstdarstellungen* (self-creation) and the later *Sprechstunden* (therapeutic session) as alternatives to psychotherapy, used by the Actionists and the use of the performative methods in therapy suggests a parallel development, possibly related to a *performative turn*, rather than conscious effort of artists to implement expert therapeutic methods into their own artwork.

The foundations of Trauma Theory were laid by Sigmund Freud's casuistic works *Der Wolfsmann* [Wolf Man] (1918), *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920), and *Der Mann Moses und die monotheistische Religion* [Moses and the Monotheism] (1939); later development took into account also Charcot's *névrose traumatique*, which openly defined the agency of returning trauma not only for the victims of violent acts, but also for the obviously unharmed witness-victim. Freud's and Charcot's concepts of traumatic neuroses were remodelled by literary scientist Cathy Caruth, American historian Dominic LaCapra, Israeli psychiatrist Dori Laub, and American psychiatrist Judith Herman, whose research could already build on another essential fact, namely that the *post-traumatic stress disorder* (PTSD) was recognised by experts in 1980 (DUGGAN 2015: 22).

And it is the foundation laid by Charcot's work which enabled the development of the trauma topic by the likes of Caruth or Laub who explored the close connection between trauma and theatricality as well as performativity. Charcot is moving towards 'acting out', i.e., replaying a traumatic event, or replaying emotions during a therapy session. This is close to both theatricality and performativity. Trauma acting out also became a part of Charcot's therapeutic method (DUGGAN 2015: 19–20).

Trauma theory as we know it today cannot thus be seen to have its roots in a succession of violently theatrical traumatic experiences and pecuniarily motivated presentations of performed hysterical symptoms before audiences that, when not motivated by pure entertainment, were there to 'watch', 'see' or 'observe' another in a theatrically framed experimental space. (DUGGAN 2015: 20)

Duggan's contribution to Trauma Studies is that he has managed to widen the range of meanings of PTSD, or to take into account its manifestations in the artistic area. While it took 60 years for PTSD to be at least recognised as an expert diagnosis, although concepts like *Kriegszitterner* (war shakes) or *Granaten-Schock* (shell shock) were not unknown to the German doctors during and just after WWI (see HUBER 2003: 25), it took another 40 years until recurring trauma was accepted to be on the same level as trauma itself.

According to Duggan, trauma does not traumatise the victim only through the original traumatic event, but through its recurrent return which can escalate the traumatising of the victim. According to Duggan 'to use the word "post" in this context is to deny the very present-ness of traumatic hallucinations (a central component of "trauma-symptoms"), and so in turn denies the potency and immediacy of these psychic returns' (DUGGAN 2015: 23). Therefore, Duggan offers a distinction between the *traumatic event* and the *traumatic symptoms* themselves. According to American historian Dominic LaCapra, the traumatic event virtually numbs the senses at the moment of its origin and that is why such moment cannot be sufficiently sensually reflected: 'traumatic events numb the senses to the moment of impact and therefore they cannot be registered at the time of their occurrence' (DUGGAN 2015: 23–24). That helps us to understand the importance of Linda Hart's statement, according to which '[t]o feel pain and to be in pain [...] is an extreme state of existence which virtually erodes the language possibilities. In this sense the pain is represented by the space behind the words' (HART 1998: 134), and the same way enables us to critically consider the theses of Aleide Assmann, Karoline Jetic, and Friederike Wappler (2014) saying that trauma is *unimaginable* (when the word base for the German expression for 'impossibility to imagine' *Undarstellbar* is the verb *darstellen* meaning 'represent', also in the mimetic sense. *Darsteller* is a term used to denote an actor in German). In the moment of trauma, the organism is flooded with different hormones, and it is therefore extremely hard retrospectively to describe the traumatic events either 'objectively' or by means of narrative procedures (DUGGAN 2015: 25)

In fact, during the recurrence of a trauma, *mimesis* applies itself in two different ways: 'recurring nightmares amount to an internal mimetic, representational restaging of the trauma-event' (DUGGAN 2015: 24). Duggan strives to clarify Linda Hart's or Aleide Assmann's definition by stating that the experience of trauma is in fact not integrated into a personality because it had been experienced together with all sorts of hormones involved, therefore it is not possible to integrate it into a personality narrative and retroactively 'objectively' reflect on it (DUGGAN 2015: 38). This is why the trauma remains 'inaccessible'. It is fundamental for integration of traumatic experience into the personality structure to relive it again or, as the American psychiatrist Arthur Janov says, you must walk through pain all the way to recovery and not everyone is able to do it or wants it (JANOV 1993: 262).

The reliving of a trauma in the form of nightmares or muscle tension can be an experience of even greater intensity for the victim. This is because the body does not create the fight, flight, or freeze response, which means that the process necessary for

the release of the hormones that can dull the senses does not get initiated. So while the original experience of trauma precludes its narrativisation because the victim does not perceive the course of events consistently, although its reliving allows psychological distance, its narration is however affected by imperfection in the chaining of events. The trauma resists narrativisation and therefore explanation and integration into the personality structure: ‘manic production of retrospective narratives that seek to explain the trauma’ (DUGGAN 2015: 25). So Duggan, as opposed to Peggy Phelan for whom trauma is ‘untouchable [...] it cannot be represented’ (PHELAN 1997: 5), suggests that it would be more precise to say that it is the representation of its symptoms which makes trauma accessible (and at the same time capable of being integrated).

Imagine the Austrian society as a traumatised organism suffering from severe neurosis on the verge of psychosis unable to address its trauma and make its integration into the personality structure possible. The Austrians do not speak about their trauma of WWII and their own Fascism. At the first post-war exhibition in Vienna called *Niemals vergessen!* (Never to be Forgotten!) at the Viennese Künstlerhaus, Fascism and Nazism were meant to be presented in their entirety. But Austrofascism, the *sieg*-healing Salzburg of 1938, Planett’s gun still smoking over Dollfuß’s stiffening body, the Führer’s birth house in Austria, were missing from the collective consciousness. This was the first step the Austrians made towards oblivion.

The Viennese Actionists did not try to shock just for the sake of it; it was the side-effect of communication with the generation of their fathers. Communication accusing, conflicting in places, and fundamentally confrontational; it is the only way that the Viennese Actionist generation can hold the last *sieg*-healing generation accountable. These *Rotzbuben* (snivellers) (BRUS 1972: 126) were not default enemies of the state or naturally born rebels. They were taught to be brats by the state because the state needed them. The state accused them of disobedience not to make them obedient, but to demonstrate its dominance over them. Yet, the show was meant not only for Viennese actionists but for the whole of the society of the time. The Austrian state in the 1960s was not punishing the former Nazis, nor the South-Tyrolean terrorists, but a group of artists who did not know how to protect themselves from being criminalised by the state. Though the German literary scientist called them a ‘weapon’ of art (SCHMIDT 1987), the art of the actionists proved insufficiently powerful to break through the force of laws, fines and police tariffs.

Language and law situation in post-war Austria

In post-war Austria, language was a natural component of generating and maintaining the socio-cultural narratives. Speech (*logos*) was influenced and modelled by the law (*nomos*) and through the law also by everyday life. The law worked mainly in two ways: by promoting new narratives and dismantling or polishing up older ones. The newly emerging narratives related mainly to three areas: the status of women, homosexuals, and psychiatrist patients in society. The woman of post-war Austria no longer had to

join the ranks of *Lebensborn*, as she did during WWII, but she became a virtuous wife and emancipated human being able to manage her career and the family care at the same time. Although the actions of the Actionists are often seen as misogynistic from a Gender Studies perspective, many aspects of their actions show the opposite: the social understanding of the female body in 1960s Austria is defined by a dominant patriarchal discourse, affirmed by strong Catholicism, which presents the female body as hierarchically subordinate to the male body and applies to it the requirements of sexual purity, permissiveness, and a utilitarian reproductive function. This phallogocentric and patriarchal discourse begins to disintegrate in the Western world in the 1960s. The body and action become instruments of a new social and political narrative of the female subject, body, and identity. Instead of the images of clean and always groomed mothers or sexualised female bodies imposed by good morals, Catholicism, or patriarchal society, the vocabulary of the Actionists includes dirty, muddy, menstruating women. Moreover, the Actionists are heavily anti-freudian, which also places them in feminist rather than patriarchal paradigms (see PARCERISAS 2012).

The question of homosexuality and psychiatric patients was regulated by the institute of law. This way, homosexuals appeared to be officially outside the law, while psychiatric patients were exposed to completely insufficient conditions of the psychiatric care; the institution also doomed them to life outside society. They became ‘sacred’ in the sense of Agamben’s interpretation of the ancient Roman institution of *homo sacer*, i.e., a person not protected by law. Compared to that the Allies’ (1945–1955), Renner’s (1945–1950), and later also Raab’s cabinet (1953–1961) had already applied the tactics of silencing: for instance, in the effort to suppress possible Nazi or Austrofascist relapse, after WWII the state emblem disappeared from the coins and bank notes (HABARTA 1996: 217). The Actionists decided to get ahead of this practice: they did not want to let themselves be erased from public consciousness by state restrictions but preferred to remain silent themselves – to remain silent in a specific way: through incomprehensibility.

When the Viennese Actionists tried to accentuate the topic of women’s emancipation, homosexuality, and psychiatric care, the state institutions attempted to work against this effort repressively. The state seemingly cared about the form and that is why it used §305 StGB⁶ (the offence of disregard for the institution of marriage, family, ownership, and agreeing to illegal and immoral behaviour) or §299 StGB (disrespect of state symbols) and §516 StGB (causing of public outrage by morality and shame). When the police dispersed the second joint Actionist event called the *Fest des Psycho-Physischen Naturalismus* [Psycho-Physical Naturalism Celebration] on 28 June 1963, that was when the systematic persecution of Actionist art using the power of economical and moral liquidation of the subjects begins. The fines that the activists were subsequently forced to pay for their actions had one purpose: to make them give up their public performances.

6 *Strafgesetzbuch*, or Austrian Criminal Code.

The 'Psycho-Physical Naturalism Celebration' did not finish with police intervention. On 28 June 1963, Muehl stuffed a dead lamb into a sack, Brus tossed it over his shoulder and ran with it through the town. In the end he threw it into the Danube (MILAUTZ 2012b: 76). Terrified passers-by alerted the police and Brus and Nitsch were taken into custody where they spent three days. Muehl and Nitsch were both later sentenced to 14 days in prison for causing public outrage and for disturbance of public order (SCHWARZ 1988: 255). We could make a long list of examples like this in the short history of Viennese Actionism (1962–1968).⁷ The other instrument of oppression of the Austrian Police were financial penalties, such as fines or bails, directed against the activities of Actionists.

Muehl's *Materialaktion nr. 6* [Material Action no. 6]⁸ of April 1964 that he performed in the newly opened Chattanooga Jazz Club in the centre of Vienna, had been banned by the police already in advance, for preventative reasons. Muehl ignored the ban and had to pay a fine of 1,000 Austrian Schillings (BADURA-TRISKA and KANDUTSCH 2012b: 188) which is the equivalent today of 423.97 EUR (HISTORISCHER WÄHRUNGSRECHNER 2019). 'I did it in a bar in Am Graben street,' he wrote in a letter to his girlfriend Erika Stocker. 'And it made a terrible stir. The owner wanted to cancel the event at the last minute. And the criminal police made their appearance too' (MUEHL and NOEVER 2004: 77). The largest fine awaited Muehl after the *Vietnam Party* action when he and Brus were fined 5,000 Schillings (MUEHL 1969), or almost 2,200 EUR today, each.

In June 1964, Nitsch wanted to exhibit some collages made from relicts of his previous performance at his 6th *Action*. But then the Mayor of Vienna stepped in to change the gallery programming and the performance was forbidden. Nitsch was later detained several times due to violation of §188 StGB (disregard of religious teachings), the law against blasphemy and defamation of state symbols. In June, two years later, Nitsch agreed with psychiatrist and gallery owner Josef Dvorak to let him hold his 19th *Action* at his gallery and, as a central piece for the event, he exhibited a work titled *Erste Heilige Kommunion* [The First Holy Communion]. Women's sanitary pads were used on this assemblage, something which Dr. Albert Massiczek, a socialist with a strong faith, could not accept and therefore filed a lawsuit against Nitsch and Dvorak for violating the very same law.⁹ Later the police tried to find anything on Josef Dvorak which would make it possible to close his gallery: for example, there were reports of the presence

7 Though researchers have not come to an agreement on the art group timeline, I would follow F. Meifert's approach limiting the existence of the group to 1962–1965/1966 (MEIFERT 1990).

8 The club owner Uzi Förster invited Muehl to execute a material performance. Muehl announced it by the following invitation: 'Filling of the woman's body and filling up into a plastic bag.' People: pans for soda water 50 chicken eggs beef summer dress summer dress sour goats milk 40 degrees warmed up chicken soup spaghetti roof slats 5 rolls of toilet paper 4 kg of wheat flower plastic bag jam up to pieces crush the oranges cotton wool sanitary pads strings ropy balloons and a woman's body. Noises: balloons' (quoted in MUEHL and NOEVER 2004: 77).

9 This was particularly difficult as he was afraid that he would not get a US visa because of the prosecution. Luckily the ambassador was in favour of art and arranged a lifelong visa for Nitsch (BADURA-TRISKA and KANDUTSCH 2012b: 188).

of minors at the opening nights, even though their presence was strictly forbidden by Dvorak, the police also tried to prosecute him for breach of the pornography law or, started to demand that he had to possess a theatre concession for happenings etc.¹⁰

The culmination of the government and police's repressive actions against the work of the Actionists was the criminalisation of the artists after the *Kunst und Revolution* [Art and Revolution] action in 1968. After the event, organised upon the request of the Austrian leftwing students' organisation Sozialistischen Österreichischen Studentenband (SÖS) by the Actionists, where they lectured on non-affirmative, i.e., anti-state power, art, and the relationship between the artist and the state, a series of articles by journalists Michael Jeannée¹¹ and Richard Nimmerrichter¹² started another, this time the last, wave of repressions against the Actionists. The interesting thing about this situation is not the fact that an open letter to the minister of culture, Richard Nimmerrichter, and a couple of tabloid outcries concerning the *Kellerkinder*, Satanists – 'the evil boys of happenings' (BÖSE BUBEN ... 1980: 14) – gained the attention of the public and subsequently also the police, but what we are mainly interested in is the process of medicinisation and psychiatrisation which can be observed in this short legal proceedings with the artists that followed.

The expert opinions of two psychiatrists, Dr. Heinrich Gross and Dr. Rudolf Quatember¹³ formed part of the lawsuit against Brus, Muehl, and other participants of the performance (Nitsch was in Munich at the time of the action and Schwarzkogler was unable to participate for some reason),

With Mr. Brus' case we are dealing with a personality trait of psychopathy which means that he is not in a state to balance his own psychological strains. Next, we can see significant indices for increased aggressive mechanisms and a huge tendency to seek conflict with his neighbourhood, environment and society. As far as his personality is concerned, he shows no signs of psychological illness, no signs of schizophrenia, and also no damage to his central nervous system. [...] In this case it is not an excess which can occasionally occur due to stress, during which the actor gets into the state of ecstasy through the medium of a crowd he had provoked. These are the reasons why we cannot take into consideration weakened ability to resist the incriminated incoming impulses. [...] Günter Brus is neither psychologically ill nor insane. (BRUS 1972: 128)

10 Paradoxically there were situations when Muehl was denounced for being the 'master of the happening' for Dvorak not to have to declare the event as a dilettante one and in this way avoid the need to have a theatre concession (DVORAK 1981: 8).

11 Michael Jeannée (b. 1943 in Olomouc) is an Austrian tabloid journalist, war correspondent, and a columnist. During his career he worked for the *Bild am Sonntag Express*.

12 Richard Nimmerrichter (b. 1920) is an Austrian journalist and columnist.

13 Brus mentions Quatember in his new novel *Irrwisch* (Will-o'-the-wisp): '[...] and bases his verdict on the findings of an expert witness of contemporary art Dr. Quatember, a veterinarian who was able to confirm the human dignity of a human expression of contemporary art which is very popular in Greenland, whereas in Austria this magician has got a bit lazy' (BRUS 2000: 83).

Behind the table where Doctor Gross met his patients, his troubled past sat there together with him. Until 1945 this *Euthanasie-Arzt* (euthanasia doctor) worked as a head physician of the infamous sanatorium Am Spiegelgrund. This facility was used as a research centre for adolescent neurology; 789 of the young patients died during the short time of its operation. After the war the Nazi doctor became a respectable member of the socialist SPÖ party, successfully hiding his Nazi past from the public eye, later even gaining the Cross of Honour First Class for his services to the Austrian Republic. ‘Those days he bragged about the largest collection of embalmed specimens of abnormal child brains in the world owned by the clinic which the sanatorium obtained during the euthanasia programme,’ journalist Jan Ciglbauer (2016) writes about Gross in his report on the Nazi Euthanasia Programme. It was not until 1997 that the public learned about Gross’ Nazi past and his collection of human brains. The legal proceedings launched against him ‘were terminated due to Gross’s medical incapacity’, continues Ciglbauer. But such an outcome was not at all an isolated case amongst the Nazi doctors of the Third Reich, as the psychotherapist Michaela Huber emphasises: ‘Those who tortured children and adults later became renowned (child) psychiatrists and as leaders of clinics they trained young doctors in their procedures. Some of them were even celebrated as figureheads of modern psychiatry and psychosomatics’ (HUBER 2003: 26). The psychiatrisation process led to the criminalisation of the Actionists and, while the South Tyrolean separatists remain unpunished to this day (at least 21 people died in the terrorist attacks executed by members of the German-speaking minority between 1961 and 1968 to draw attention to the Italianisation of South Tyrol (ALCOCK 1982)), the Actionists faced ongoing repression from the state as if they were members of a ‘secret criminal organisation’ as Muehl stated (MUEHL and NOEVER 2004: 22).

Soon after the action, Günter Brus received an anonymous letter in which someone told him that they had dug up all the information about his life, addressing him as a ‘dirt bag’ and a ‘pig’ and reassuring him that they ‘definitely know some people who will catch [him] after [he is] released from prison and who will beat [him] up so hard that [he] will end up deaf and blind’ (BRUS 1972: 123).

Muehl and the cooperating gallery owners in Germany started receiving threatening letters and only very occasionally was there a different reaction. Yet, not everyone was hostile: during Brus’ exile, Brus’ partner Ann and their daughter Diane were offered free meals by Terry Vachan in the pension she owned. And the action *Art and Revolution* did not affect only the participants, but also their families and colleagues (BRUS 2004: 146) which illustrates the extent and seriousness of the state’s criminalisation of Viennese actionists.

Paradoxically this very significantly affected the life of cameraman Kurt Kren, Muel’s former filmmaker and collaborator who did not even participate in the action *Art and Revolution*, since it was Ernst Schmidt Jr. who did the filming. The media played a significant role here again: the tabloid newspaper *Blauer Montag* [Blue Monday] published an article after the action with the headline ‘Uni-Ferkelei nun auch im Kino – Filmemacher Kurt Kren’ [University Filth Now at Your Local Cinema – Kurt Kren, the Filmmaker]. Soon enough, the police came knocking at his door and even though they

did not find any films recording the action itself, simply due to the fact that he was subjected to a police search and in consequence of the media coverage, he was forced to resign from the bank (KREN 1992) where he had already successfully completed his ‘pragmatisation’, so theoretically his position in the bank should have been secure.¹⁴ Members of the Wiener Gruppe literary group, Wiener and Rühm, sent a written appeal to the Austrian government for amnesty for the persecuted artists signed by the writers Elias Canetti, Günter Grass, and Heinrich Böll. Due to Nitsch’s conviction and continuing problems with the police, persecution of the other members of the group and continuous accusation of committing absurd criminal acts, he decided not to return from Munich where he had fled to in 1967 after being accused of desecration of a church and being threatened with imminent punishment upon his return (FLECK 2003: 8). Muehl returned first to Gols near the Neusiedler See where his mother lived and later he bought a farm house in nearby Friedenshof. Brus emigrated to Berlin.

Austrian society had finally got rid of their ‘snivellers’, but at the same time it had lost its scapegoat. ‘If it is impossible to project your guilt onto a scapegoat, then the existence of guilt in the world continues’ (Girard quoted in BRUCHER 2008: 57). Austrian society was projecting its guilt for its non-existent de-Nazification and share in the war crimes of WWII onto the artists (Actionists) in order to avoid confronting its own guilt and shame, and also due to continuing untreated collective neurosis. By removing visibly different individuals, the society confirmed the validity of deviant social norms and *nomos*. The collective neurosis was once again sociably acceptable. That is the reason why one of Brus’ first reactions to the collective neurosis was the aging of neurotic, almost psychotic behaviour.

Körperanalyse (Body Analysis) represents a closed circuit of Brus’ actions in which he recognises his own body through the agency of several chosen sense organs. Here he touches on the problem of autonomisation of the body not as a piece of art but as an autonomous island separated from the authoritative discourse. When, during the performance for the action *Art and Revolution*, he urinates into his own mouth, rubs his own excrement on his face until he forces himself to vomit, his aim is not only to invoke a shocked reaction in the spectators, as Austrian art historian Gerald Schröder correctly noted, but his message to authority was primarily the emancipation of his own body. The content of the communication here is identical with the medium itself: he stands on a threshold beyond which no authority can take anything away from him that would help create his identity even if it involves something as absurd as tasting his own secretions.

14 ‘I was always the black sheep from the very beginning. But by that time I had completed my “pragmatisation” [“pragmatisation” is an institute in Austria that ensures that a state official cannot be dismissed. – T.K.] and so I couldn’t be fired. As soon as I returned from my first journey to America, I thought to myself that I have to deal with the situation, so I handed in my notice at the end of the year’ (TSCHERKASSKY 1988: 130).

Total Action

In his well-known essay, *Homo Sacer* (1995), Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben bases his thoughts on the ancient Roman figure of law applied to convicts: although any *homo sacer* could be killed without risking punishment, he could not be sacrificed, thereby making his killing senseless, and so he became an untouchable, a social outcast. This is where the meaning of the term *sacer* becomes ambiguous, since it means both ‘cursed’ and at the same time ‘sacred’. Following up Foucault, who attempts to ground the concept of biopolitics in legal theory, Giorgio Agamben puts forward the theory that biopolitics is trying to reduce human beings to a zero biological value which makes ‘bare life’ the real subject of modernity (AGAMBEN 2011: 180–181). In doing so, Agamben bases his theory on the concept of sovereignty put forth by German lawyer, Carl Schmitt, and arrives at the interpretation of the concentration camp as a ‘*nómos* of modernity’ (AGAMBEN 2011: 162) where right and wrong, rule and exception, life and death become indistinguishable. In the prisoners teetering on the brink of death as well as in the refugees of today he sees a mass embodiment of *homo sacer* and bare life that has become reality above whose fate stands only the figure of the sovereign who is a regressive descent from the laws of society. The sovereign is above the law.

In attacking one of Agamben’s sovereigns (in other words an individual standing above the law), Brus does not stop in the field of physicality, but he also explores the field of language which for Actionists represented an important element in general. When he is trying to ‘break’ the language and its structure of hierarchies, he performs actions like *Head Destruction*. In this 1966 action during the international symposium DIAS (*Destruction in Art Symposium*), he read a text from scribbled notes on scraps of paper, stammering more and more until he substituted the articulated sound by chewing up and swallowing the paper. In the second part of the ‘lecture’ he rocked his head back and forth, the head movement gradually being more and more violent till he bent his head above a sack full of old paper lying on the lectern. With convulsive strokes of his head, he managed to break the sack and to scatter the paper over the stage and in one jerky gesture he painfully cried out and fell on his back. The action was over. This kind of dynamics, when Brus proceeds from the logical towards the irrational and towards instinctive physical exhaustion, is something we are able to trace a line towards the climax of in the swan song of Viennese Actionism, his *Ordeal* in 1970.

Ana

Another area of Brus’ actions, which does not represent direct criticism of the regime or the social system, but still can be perceived in a category close to the above-mentioned actions, is performances for which I use a working title – *horror vacui* (from Latin, lit. fear of emptiness). Here Brus tries to fill the environment surrounding him

in order to ‘subjugate’ it, to understand it, to comprehend it. In October¹⁵ 1964 in Otto Muehl’s Vienna apartment, Brus brought his first action *Ana*¹⁶ to fruition. It was not intended for the public and, apart from the actors themselves, it was attended by three photographers of Viennese Actionism events, Ludwig Hoffenreich, Siegfried Klein, and Kurt Kren. Brus’ wife lent her name to the action, and Muehl’s later action *Sankt Anna* was dedicated to the very same lady and one of Brus’ actions that were primarily intended just for a camera lens (i.e., there were no spectators except the cameramen).

Brus rolled out of ‘white cloths strewn with white lumps’ (BRUCHER 2008: 18) through a white room with white painted furniture until the clothes unwrapped completely, and he remained lying against the wall in a catatonic position. White was the central colour of Brus’ art creation: white space as an empty place, *tabula rasa*, like an extension of a painting canvas into space. The venue chosen for this action was not Muehl’s studio in the cellar in Perinetgasse which had been used for the *Festival of Psycho-Physical Naturalism*, but a studio in upper Augartenstraße: ‘Everything is painted white, everything becomes a projection area,’ Günter Brus (1965) writes as if he knows that in artistic communication it is never possible to remove content completely. Simultaneously, by painting it white Brus deprives the object of the specific sensuality that this object emits.

In *Ana*, for the first time, we notice Brus’ identification with the object and the subject at the same time; the audience happened to be only a step away from the imaginary place, formally, where action depiction becomes the action itself, performed in some specific environment, but it is still only the undercurrent where the dissolution and disappearance of the border between the object (actor) and subjects (material used by Brus) is happening. (For Brus, the environment is still primarily a painting arena in which action takes place, but it is not a happening.)

There are other actions where Brus also performs in ambivalent roles as an actor and the victim, the designating and the signified at the same time (BRUCHER 2008).

Wiener Spaziergang

Another way in which Brus communicates with the power discourse is by using public space. Possibly in commemoration of his first conflict with the police at the beginning of the 1960s when an officer issued him a fine for ‘strolling five metres across a lawn’ (BRUS 2002: 227), Brus decided to conceive the ‘walk’ through the Vienna city centre as a ‘living painting’ (BADURA-TRISKA 2002: 8) against the background of the architectural panorama of the inner city. He covered himself from head to toe in white paint with a single black vertical line running from his head down to his right foot.

15 Austrian art historian Gerald Schröder writes ‘in summer’ (SCHRÖDER 2011: 320).

16 As I focus on how Brus uses his work to speak out against the establishment, or against the state, or the law, I analyse the works according to their importance and relevance. Though we can trace these aspects in all of his actions in some way, *Ana* is mentioned only now since it is the action where Brus is the least vocal.

While the Austrian researcher Gerald Schröder perceives Brus' walk to be the legacy of a metropolitan flaneur of 19th century,¹⁷ Brus' action may be interpreted more politically (SCHRÖDER 2011: 323). With every action performance, the basic interpretational indices remained the same: the name, the date of the action, and mainly the location where the action takes place. While *Electroshock, Please, I Can't Stand It Any Longer* clearly referred to the problems of psychiatric treatment and the *Vietnam Party* took place on the anniversary of the Battle of the Somme, the *Vienna Walk* started in the Heldenplatz, continued through Burgtor and went on past the Spanish Riding School towards Am Graben and St. Stephen's Cathedral. It was no accident that he set off from Heldenplatz where, only 27 years before, Hitler was building his protective 'bastion of the nation'. Brus starts his route intentionally at the Heldenplatz; yet, though he never mentioned any link between Hitler's speech and his action, he speaks about the essential influence of Nazism on his art in his novel *Will-o'-the-Wisp*:

Yes, I am a schizo-trap. As you say, the core of my later existence lies in my early childhood. I experienced the outbreak of war in my mother's belly, my mouth wide open – and suckled (Poland already paid the price), the hot breast milk gradually dried up and as my childhood culminated it turned into a dry mass. (BRUS 2000)

He knew too well that public space was forbidden to artists in Austria. Already the Wiener Gruppe, an Austrian art group active mainly at the end of the 1950s and beginning of the 1960s, experienced a situation when their *Protestmarsch gegen die Wiederbewaffnung Österreichs* [Protest March Against the Rearmament of Austria] and also their *une soirée aux amants funébres* [Evening of Funeral Lovers] (WEIBEL 1998: 188) were broken up by the police. 'Be careful,' one of his friends advised him, 'they'll put you in Steinhof and they'll give you electric shocks' (GEYRHOFER 1981: 47).

In the middle of his journey, after about four minutes of walking, he was detained by the police on the corner of Stallburggasse and Bräunerstrasse, taken to the police station and sent home by taxi. 'What else would you expect in the 1960s Vienna?', he commented later on the outcome of the action (Brus quoted in MILAUTZ 2012a: 54). Because he was 'painted white and behaving in a way which cannot be called appropriate and could cause a public outrage, and it really did in the passersby, which disrupted order in the public space' (SCHWARZ 1988: 299), he was detained by the police. Thus, while during his first detention he had been talking to the policemen about poetry till the good man in the end had forgiven him the fine, after his *Walk* he was sentenced for 'causing a public outrage' either to pay a fine of 80 Schillings (34 EUR) or to go to prison for 12 hours. Brus decided to pay (BADURA-TRISKA and KANDUTSCH 2012b: 188).

17 According to Gerald Schröder (2011), Brus was following up on the role of *flaneur*, which, at the end of the 19th century was essential for the self-conception of the modern artist. See also (BENJAMIN 1991: 509–653).

Art and Revolution

A few years later, in the revolutionary year of 1968, the Actionists of Austria already had a reputation of being the *enfants terribles* of domestic culture. The ever stronger leftwing scene, especially youth and student organisations, saw them in that light. In June 1968, representatives of the Austrian Socialist Students Union met Brus and some of his colleagues in Café Savoy. They agreed to organise an event under the name *Art and Revolution* that was to take place in the new Vienna University building, where, as progressive artists, they were meant to explain the relationship between contemporary art and the government and the Left. Once philosophy and art student Peter Jirak and Brechtian philosopher Christof Šubik had delivered their lectures to the crowded new lecture hall on 7 June, Otto Muehl came to deliver his piece. And the topic? ‘Kennedy Snuffed It!’ Muehl made the most of the assassination of Robert Kennedy and, in a ‘devastating eulogy’ (MUEHL and NOEVER 2004: 262) he insulted not only the tragically assassinated Kennedy, but also his entire family. Before the students and members of the public in the audience had a chance to close their mouths that stood wide open in shock, Weibel took the podium. The lecture was meant to be devoted to the minister of finance, Stephan Koren, and Weibel did stick to his original topic, but due to the constantly changing intensity of the lighting and, primarily, the sound from the public address system thanks to the unwelcome interference of Austrian performance artist VALIE EXPORT, his speech turned into an incomprehensible *Tohu wa-bohu* (ENGERTH 1970: 157)¹⁸ as German Dadaists would put it.

Other performers attempted to deliver their pieces, too, always coming up to the lectern and delivering an improvised version of their act. This resulted in several activities taking place simultaneously in different parts of the lecture hall at once. One *Krone Zeitung* reporter described the situation on 10 June 1968 as follows:

Unprecedented spectacles occurred in the main lecture hall of the new university building. After a four-minute performance by one of the students at a lecture evening organised by a socialist student association, during which he spoke of art and revolution, the four lecturers stripped naked and, while singing *Gaudeamus Igitur* and the national anthem, began urinating and masturbating. (MARSCHALL 2005: 494)

Brus broke into his *Körperanalytische Aktion* (body analysis action), during which he stood on the lecturing desk, cutting into his upper thighs and chest with a razor blade (‘I’m cutting my chest, I’m really cutting into it, really cutting it’) (MUEHL and

18 Here I cite the term used by German Dadaists. This Hebrew term comes from the Book of Bereshit (Genesis 1:1–6:8): מְצֵמָה יִגְפִּילֵעַ תַּפְחֻרָמִּי מִהֶלֶא חוּרֵי מוֹהֵת יִגְפִּילֵעַ וְשִׁחֵי וְהִבֵּי וְהֵת הַתִּיָּה וְרָאָהּ (Ve-ha-arets hajta **tohu va-vohu** ve-khoshekh al pne tehom ve-ruach Elohim merakhefet al pne ha-mayim.) הַרְוֵת, מִיָּבֹוֶת, מִיָּבֹוֶת (A JEWISH BIBLE... 2003: 1).

Translated into English: ‘And the earth was **without form, and void**; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God was hovering over the face of the waters’ (Genesis 1: 2). I am grateful to Hanela Palková for this note.

NOEVER 2004: 22). ‘He looked just like Jesus on the cross when he was doing that,’ Muehl (MUEHL and NOEVER 2004: 22) recalls. He cupped the palm of his hand, urinated into it, drank the urine, and then stuck his finger down his throat to trigger the gagging reflex, causing him to vomit immediately. As he opened his mouth to sing the first verse of the Austrian national anthem, *Land der Berge*, he squatted down and began defecating on the floor (WEIBEL and EXPORT 1970: 262). Then he started smearing excrement on himself and again he vomited. He lay down on the desk and started masturbating. ‘Brus was the most radical of us, standing on the lecturing desk, shitting into his hand while at the same time singing the national anthem,’ Muehl recalls in his *Away from the Swamp* (MUEHL 1977: 154). If you looked into the audience, you could see expressions of ‘panic and horror’ (WEIBEL and EXPORT 1970: 262) while cyberneticist Wiener analysed the ‘output-input ratio’ between language and thought, writing up appropriate equations and diagrams on the blackboard.

By this time, Malte Olschewski had also climbed onto the podium, his head wrapped in bandages and newspapers, sitting on the lecture desk reading out a text while Otto Muehl tried to slice the paper Olschewski was holding in his hands in two with his belt. He then whipped the reading Olschewski on the head with the belt, provoking journalists to call Olschewski ‘Laurids the masochist’, because Olschewski appeared under the pseudonym of Laurids to maintain his anonymity, which was also the reason why his head was wrapped in bandages (the same strategy as adopted by the model appearing at Schwarzkogler’s actions, Heinz Cibulka, whose head is never visible in any photo). According to contemporary accounts, Laurids was visibly under the influence of drugs (BADURA-TRISKA and KANDUTSCH 2012a: 184) and enjoyed every blow, while reading out excerpts from pornographic literature. Muehl’s four naked ‘dogs’ began competing about who could urinate further, chalking up the results on the board. Then they picked up some bottles and everybody began pretending to masturbate them until beer started spraying into the audience. Meanwhile, psychoanalyst Fritz Kaltenbäck gave a lecture about the relationship between information and language and Peter Weibel delivered a literally fiery speech about Lenin, wearing a burning glove on his hand (BRUS 2007: 135)¹⁹ and shouting out ‘*Was tun?*’ (What is to be done?), he plunged it into a bucket of water. His performance was a fiery act; a performative and cynical reply to the leftist students’ main question: ‘art and politics? It is a burning issue for us too.’ His reference to Lenin’s work of 1902 *What is to be Done?* ended with a hiss in the bucket of water, leaving behind just the smell of burnt glove. This topos of a burning hand repeats itself in Weibel’s works, and three years later it could be seen in his action *Initiation* (1971).

A debate had been planned to follow these performances, but by then the audience had started to vacate the hall in protest. Then a man stood up saying that he rated the performance for being very provocative, but that in his opinion it would have been even better in St. Stephen’s Cathedral. This comment later counted against the group, because in court it was used to imply that the group in fact had wanted to perform their

19 ‘Pjotr Odessa delivered a fiery speech by wrapping his forearm in gauze, pouring petrol on it and lighting it’ (BRUS 2007: 135).

action in the Cathedral; the prosecution wanted to put Oswald Wiener, who was accredited with this provocative statement,²⁰ on trial alongside Muehl and Brus. However, none of the Actionists had considered this action as being political; Brus 'just wanted to provoke, that was his priority' (MUEHL 1977: 154). However, the event culture of 'permanent happening' caught up with them too. Their occupation of public space and the university building resulted in suspended sentences.

Sixty-two-year-old Professor Richard Pittioni, under whom Muehl had taken and passed an exam in prehistory, left the lecture hall with the words: 'This is unbearable! Such a terrible disgrace, what a disgrace!' (MUEHL 1977: 154), and the Austrian minister of education purportedly declared that he was ashamed to be Austrian (which, in fact, was exactly what the Actionists and Bernhard and Handke wanted to hear). For the duration of the entire event, nobody in the lecture hall made any comment on the scenes they witnessed, which all the more drove journalists to assail the authors of this 'inferno', primarily Michael Jeannée and Richard Nimmerichter,²¹ alias 'Staberl', of the Viennese newspaper *Krone Zeitung*. When everybody had dispersed and gone home where they had a chance to reflect on what they had just seen, Jeannée, also a reporter for the tabloid newspaper *Express*, who had come to the lecture at the invitation of an art dealer Kurt Kalb, decided that it would be best to file a criminal complaint against all of these artists.

Ordeal

In Munich's *Aktionsraum I*, Brus entered the spotlight which intended to reveal his bare body in stockings and a suspender belt and his shaved head covered in scabs from overzealous shaving. No detail of Brus' symbolic suicide was meant to remain hidden. Brus did not make any record of the half an hour action, which makes the action different from *Ana* or *Strangulation* intended only for video cameras and happening without the viewers' presence. His last action was meant to represent his absolute surrender, the climax of the action-created works by this graphic creative, who had until then been struggling to make ends meet for some time in Vienna, working as a stage designer, and had found himself on the stage by mistake. Even though he did not intend the *Ordeal* to be his farewell action, he retrospectively admits to Geyerhofer: 'one of the main reasons I stopped doing the actions was that they became too dangerous for me or, more precisely, they would have become extremely dangerous if had continued in the same style' (GEYERHOFER 1981: 47).

This dynamic action lasted no more than half an hour and the convulsive seizures, during which he rolled around the floor in a feigned epileptic fit, alternated by images of the artist swallowing his own urine and energetic falls representing the actor's actual

20 This absurd misinterpretation was cited by an anonymous writer in a threatening letter to Günter Brus: 'It is a shame that you did not go through with your idea (made at the university). And now on to St. Stephen's Cathedral to do all of this again!' (BRUS 2007: 122).

21 Richard Nimmerichter (1920–2022) was an Austrian journalist and columnist.

exhaustion, lying on the floor or kneeling, or absolute concentration on bodily processes – either on the discharge of fluid during the urinating or again on the communion of the fluids into his body. At one moment he tied his ankles to a radiator, echoing scenes from his own sketches and, like a living marionette, he spread his legs as wide as physically possible.

In the text accompanying the action, Brus describes the ordering of action sequences which are not separated from each other by any intermezzos but a sharp light. In the course of 25 minutes, Brus takes his body through a ‘tough test’ (BRUS 1972: 161) and all its manifestations are immediately visible: in the *Ordeal* he seemed to interconnect two seemingly contradictory principles, the principal of externalisation of his own mind and the principle of provoking an involuntary reaction (aversion or compassion) in the spectators through bodily analysis (aversion or compassion). No, he is nothing like Marina Abramović and her *Lips of Thomas*, a silent protest; Brus does not suffer stoically, but immediately reflects all impulses with a fitful reaction. ‘His muscles start to convulse,’ Schröder describes in his book *Schmerzensämmänner* [Man of Sorrows], ‘sometimes he wheezes, breaks out in a terrible sweats, the whites of his eyes turn red and he seems not to be able to see properly’ (SCHRÖDER 2011: 323).

It is as if he is trying out all the possible ways he (we) can torture himself (ourselves), all kinds of pain the body can take. It is here where his most transparent criticism of the Nazi regime lies, as it was during the Nazi regime that a person in a concentration camp (which was a status involving far more than mere physical placement in that space) had a status no higher than a mere *homo sacer* – person without any protection under the law or in society. The experiments performed by Nazi doctors on people – durability tests – Brus tries on himself, thereby demonstrating his self confidence and his readiness to fight for his own autonomy to the state. While Foucault writes that only ‘suicide brought with it the individual’s right to die’ (FOUCAULT 1999: 161), Brus shows to the highest authority of the collective *Superego* that he is willing, at least symbolically, to stand on the brink. So he tries to hurt himself with different objects, he strangles himself and forces himself to vomit. According to the record of the event written by German painter Werner Schulze

[... Brus is kneeling] in his underpants and stockings on a white canvas. He places a see-through plastic triangle on his thigh and cuts into his own flesh leading the razor along one of its sides. Brus tilts the triangle on his knee and waits for the blood to run from the triangle. Rolling around on the floor like wildfire. Next to the wound Brus hooks two strings onto the stocking and tears the stocking. Then he gets up and calmly asks: ‘Could somebody give me a glass?’ Brus urinates into the glass [the urine is green] and drinks it. He cuts the tights and the underpants using scissors. Brus stands naked with his back to the audience and slides tensely down the wall until he is kneeling. He makes a cut in his bald head with a razor blade and waits for the blood to trickle down to his bottom. He wraps strings around his ankles and spreads his legs with the help of the string while sliding to the floor by the radiator. He says in a calm tone: ‘I would like one more glass.’ He shouts: ‘No! No!’ Frenetically rolling around on the floor. He climbs into a small, oblong bath full of water, falls down, and climbs

into another one. He says calmly: 'Can somebody close the window?' He does not wait for the reaction, but he throws himself on the floor beating the floor, into the water, shouting, throwing himself around till exhausted, he pushes his stomach upwards, touching the ground only by his head and feet and stays in this position till exhaustion. Brus walks through the audience to the toilet. End of action. (Schulze quoted in BRUCHER 2008: 44–45)

He pulls out a thread, wraps it around his penis so that he can pull it to the side and urinates into his wound.

After this more or less calm scene, Brus starts acting out more and more hectically. He stands placing each of his feet into one of the two metal baths, but he loses balance and falls to the ground where he remains lying down in a catatonic position. Soon he launches into a new action. He scribbles something on the floor with a chalk and then he cowers on the floor and again calmly asks the spectators for a glass of water. But without waiting for any reaction, he suddenly shouts: 'No, no!' and cracks a belt and rolls around the floor like crazy. After about twenty-five minutes the action is over and Brus, exhausted and covered in blood and urine, leaves the room.

The BODY as a design of reality, as a special, temporal, active, and passive organisation of the world of perception and experience. It is on our own body (and in the environment that has been directly determined by bodily activity or into which the body has been exiled) where the shock of CANCELLED reality takes place and becomes reality, wanting to attain itself, on its own chained body, which reduces and mutilates itself, crawling snail's pace back to the centre, towards its origin. (DVORAK 1981: 6)

Conclusion

In the light of his actions, Günter Brus can be seen as a bearer of Austrian war trauma on three levels: he experienced the trauma himself as we can see not only in the descriptions of his own prenatal memories, but also from the fact that, with his grandfather, he witnessed the bombing of Ardning. He is also a bearer of social trauma as one of the 'fatherless generation', to which he could not or would not turn because of its moral failure. And thirdly, he is the bearer of the *recurring trauma*, a 'double wound' – a doubling of trauma that actually occurs only on his return. Brus is one of the first artists in Austrian society who wants to 'talk' about trauma, despite the fact that these artists cannot relate to it by objectifying it. That they cannot relate to it with language (as the members of the literary group Wiener Gruppe have shown: language and poetry are not enough for trauma). Brus had chosen the fate of the messenger of trauma by non-narrative thematisation, by departing from re-presentative and generally comprehensible narrative models. The messenger stands naked and defenceless before the sovereign, who does not decide according to the law, but according to actual motives and emotions. And the strongest emotion in Austrian society, at the time of Brus' *Viennese walk*, was still one – shame.

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