

(Re)Presenting pain in body art

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Pain is a recurring theme for artists who use their own bodies in their art. Their motivations may be manifold, but collectively they have much to say about the body and its place in contemporary life.

‘Body art’ was a term coined to describe the practices of artists such as Vito Acconci, Chris Burden, Bruce Nauman and Dennis Oppenheim during the late 1960s and the early 1970s. The principal mouthpiece of this movement was the 1970s magazine *Avalanche*. Nowadays, however, use of the label ‘body art’ has broadened and its meaning has become more diffuse. Art historians and art critics do not use body art in a purely historical context, but in a more inclusive sense. Body art has become an artistic discipline, a practice or ‘way of creating’, that has emerged from the confluence of dance, theatre, sculpture and painting. This broad definition of body art is the one I will adopt, an inclusive category including events, performances, action art, behaviour art, body painting and so on.

In this sense, body art is an artistic ‘genre’ or discipline, much the same as painting or sculpture. It was a development that started among several arts of the late 1950s, although it was consolidated in the mid-1960s and reached its climax during the 1970s. The main characteristic that distinguishes body art from traditional art is its use of the living body as its principal medium. Body art draws upon forms and procedures of dance and theatre – particularly their existence in ‘real time’ and in ‘real space’ – to express concerns and reflections characteristic of art throughout history.

The emergence and development of body art coincided with an entire philosophical discourse based around the nature of the body, the relationship between the mind and the body (or, as Danto put it in *The Body/Body Problem*, between the ‘body known’ and the ‘body unknown’), and, an awareness of the body as a site of pleasure as well as suffering. This discourse was exemplified in French thought in the work of Bataille, Sartre, Merleau-Ponty and Jacques Lacan.¹ On the other hand, as both Thomas McEvelley and Amelia Jones observed, body art can also be seen to be drawing upon essentially artistic conventions, such as surrealism and dadaism, in particular the work of Georges Bataille and Marcel Duchamp.² Both Bataille and Duchamp were influential figures in neo-avant garde art (minimalism, pop art and conceptual art), at a time when the traditional status of art was being questioned, and the meaningfulness of discrete artistic disciplines (painting, sculpture, etc.) was being challenged. These threads all created an environment in which body art could flourish.³

On pain and body art

During the past few decades, especially in the 1970s, body artists have meditated on pain, subjecting their bodies – and their minds – to tremendously

painful experiences. For instance, the French artist Gina Pane has cut her forearms, eyelids and abdomen with knives; Chris Burden asked a friend to shoot him, to crucify him on a car, to shut him in a locker; Vito Aconci has bitten, hit and injured his own body; the artistic partners Ulay and Marina Abramovic have been slapped, burnt, cut, and have removed pieces of their own skin; in the early 1970s Rudolf Schwarzkogler and, more recently, the North American Bob Flanagan have mutilated themselves, even resorting to castration; Orlan has subjected her body to plastic surgery in order to change her body appearance and become a form of human sculpture; and Hannah Wilke has even exhibited her own pathologies, being photographed with a body swollen due to a lymphoma that would kill her. As is clear – and these are just a few examples – artists hurt themselves in many different ways when meditating on pain.

If the ways of inflicting pain on the body have been varied, the artists' motivations have been similarly diverse. One of the best analyses is by Kathy O'Dell in *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s*, which drew out similarities but also substantial differences in the work of artists such as Chris Burden, Gina Pane, Vito Aconci, and Marina Abramovic and Ulay.⁴ Thus, to write about pain in body art one would have to examine specific cases and the motivations of each artist. When this is not done, the work tends to get categorized and condemned as sensationalist, essentially frivolous.⁵ The fact is, only a deep study will truly reveal the point of this work, for a casual reading only reveals its shock value, never the true motivations. As Arthur C Danto argues, to understand a work of art, it is necessary to explore the things that the eye cannot see, the things that lie beyond the simple view.⁶

Although artists have injured themselves in similar ways, even though they may have used different approaches, they have *studied* pain from different points of view. In fact, reflections on pain have hardly ever constituted a purpose in itself. More usually, pain is a metaphor or a means of accusation. Pain in body art, I would like to suggest, is a kind of 'somatization', a rendering in flesh and blood, of issues of politics, race, identity, or art. In this sense, Mary Kelly's notion "the personal is political" can be recast as "the corporeal is political".

One of the core concerns of body art – and contemporary art more generally – is the issue of gender. Most of the painful works of Gina Pane, Mary Kelly, Ana Mendieta, Carol Schneeman, Hannah Wilke, Orlan and many others were driven by a desire to highlight the objectification of women in a male-dominated capitalist society. French Artist Gina Pane's work is typical. Dressed in an immaculate white costume, Pane hammered rose thorns into her forearms, chewed broken glass, and made cuts in her abdomen or in the soles of her feet. In 1971 in 'Bleeding Climb', she ascended a ladder with cutting edges barefoot and barehanded. These actions seek to represent women's plight as a 'wound', as a bleeding and painful injury that has remained hidden and must be exposed. As François Pluchart observes, "by her suffering, her risking (...) the body is projected as the conscience of the self. It is pure thought, an intellectual and sensitive analysis".⁷

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Similarly, it is possible to interpret much gay activist art in similar terms. Pain sometimes appears to be used in order to be deliberately provocative (as in the case of Robert Mapplethorpe), and in other situations is more of a somatization of illness, as in the work of North American performer Ron Athey, who has HIV. He inflicts pain on himself by tattooing, piercing and cutting his skin, understanding his own body as memory and cartography of his illness.⁸

As well as the somatization of these 'questions of difference', characteristic of postmodern discourse, much of the most interesting body art on pain has been carried out by artists that use the body to contemplate their own limits. Here pain is not a metaphor for other questions, but a reflection on the body itself. It represents a new perception of the body, in which pain is one of its essential elements.

The American artist Vito Acconci marked his body with bites, reaching as far as he could with his mouth. Dennis Oppenheim searched for the limits of his own body flexibility by stretching it between two surfaces. Chris Burden was shot in a shoulder, crucified on a Volkswagen and thrown wrapped in a sack onto a motorway – in all cases risking his life, examining the seduction of 'risk', one of the passions of our time.⁹

The use of pain in an 'experimental' way, to explore the body's reactions, is exemplified by the work of Marina Abramovic and Ulay. They try to take the body to its limits, and to see what happens. For instance in 'Light/Dark' (1977) they slapped each other harder and harder for 20 minutes until one stopped; on another occasion ('Interruption in Space', 1977) they deliberately ran into a wall, always searching for the limits of their resistance. These artists have also carried out interesting solo works. In the mid-1970s, Ulay cut a tattoo from his forearm and framed it. Marina Abramovic has subjected her body to all sorts of intense experiences. In 'Rhythm 2' (1974), she took psychoactive medications in front of an audience, experiencing and reporting their effects in an open and trusting way.

Finally, no description of the painful side of body art would be complete without mention of the so-called Viennese Actionist Group, a four-person team from the 1970s comprising Günter Brus, Otto Mühl, Hermann Nitsch and Rudolf Schvartzkogler. In their work, pain is inflicted through self-mutilation and self-injury, characterized by a ritual, baroque and transgressive approach that owes more to symbolic aesthetics than reflections on corporeal identity.

Reflections on pain in body art

So what do all the examples tell us about the use of pain in body art?

Reality and pain

Reflections on pain form one of the most important themes for all contemporary artists, not just body artists. In body art, however, these reflections become more explicit and shocking. Nevertheless, the use of pain in body art is not an isolated phenomenon, but a reflection of a *zeitgeist* in which pain is a fundamental aspect of contemporary culture.¹⁰

Thus, one of the essential problems is the question of reality. Body art is a kind of art where the boundary between life and art, between representation and reality, is broken. Here pain is *presented* rather than represented (or

perhaps re-presented). So, where are the frontiers between representation and presentation? When an artist cuts himself and feels real pain in a representation, what is the status of that pain? Even though it is real pain, it has taken place in a context that is not totally real. It is life or it is art?

In some senses, one could say that the pain that the artist feels is not a real pain because it is self-inflicted. The 'art-body' is distinct from the 'real-body'. The individual who really feels the pain is not the person, but the 'artist-person'; in other words, a body-supplement, an 'I-supplement'. As Amelia Jones states, the artist's real entity disappears in performance, and the subject acts as a symbol in a context: he/she becomes a form of communication or language.¹¹ The pain that artists feel takes place in this context and is – although real – a symbolized pain, put to work by means of a series of acquired codes. Here, pain occupies a half-way house between the real and the symbolic.

A characteristic of pain is its non-communicability: the expressed, communicated pain is never the lived pain. Pain is a failure of language: it causes screams, cries or silence, that is to say, pain dislocates the word from the thought. So, if we understand art as language, as a communicative act, the corporeal actions that seek to communicate pain will never enable audiences to fully share the experience. The symbolic cannot embrace the entirety of the real, and these works end up being predominately private works of art, since most of their meanings are forever incommunicable.

To follow David Le Breton's conception of pain, we could compare pain in body art with what he calls 'laboratory pain'.¹² For him, laboratory pain is a kind of 'society game', a simulation that leaves the individual free to retire from the scene at any moment, and to interrupt the experience without any harmful consequences. It would be pain without fear and without suffering. So, in what way does suffering appear in these works? Or, as Le Breton asks: "Is it possible, then, to speak of pain when anxiety, fear, surprise are eliminated?"¹³

Even though pain is a physical sensation, it is always accompanied by a mental reaction, suffering. In the real world there is no pain without suffering. Physical pain transforms the individual's self: painful information (sensory pain) implies personal perception (suffering pain). Like laboratory pain, body art eliminates the suffering associated with pain, as evident in the work of Chris Burden, Dennis Oppenheim, Marina Abramovic or Ulay, but perhaps most strongly in the work of Marcel.Lí Antúnez. His work 'Epizoo' (1995) is a kind of machine that onlookers can use to provoke pain in the artist's body.

However, in other works, particularly those of activists, the 'pain–suffering' axis is reversed. Their pain becomes a physical representation, a somatization, of their suffering. The works of Gina Pane, Ana Mendieta, Bob Flanagan or Pepe Espaliú see a visible pain created from internal – moral or mental – suffering.

Skin and visibility

In general, pain in body art centres on the skin, with a few specific exceptions ('Rhythm 2', Marina Abramovic's ingestion of medicines). As James Elkins comments, this applies to the whole history of pain in art.¹⁴ Since external appearance is one way in which an identity is defined, it constitutes a 'self' in itself. Some psychoanalysts, such as Didier Anzieu, see the 'I-skin' as a cover of the internal tissues and organs of the body, in the same way that conscience wraps the psychic apparatus.¹⁵ Skin is, therefore, a kind of body

boundary or limit, skin is what encapsulates the body. Most of the painful experiences in body art are concentrated on the skin. The wound (incision, cut, puncture) is an opening of the body, a kind of violation of the 'external inside' of the body.

Nevertheless, the fact that almost all painful actions are carried out on the skin probably reflects more prosaic matters, such as the nature of each performance. Body art is first and foremost a visual art, so there must be 'something to see'. Moreover, many of works are carried out *live*, with spectators sharing the space – the gallery scene – and to some extent sharing the experience with the artist. In certain cases, it is possible to 'perform' in private, with photographic or video documentation. Even when the source of pain is internal, as in Marina Abramovic's 'Rhythm 2', the visual impact remains paramount: how does what is happening inside manifest on the outside, visible through changes in facial expression. It remains a matter of visual art.

Beyond the mundane

According to Pedro A Cruz, these painful experiences are designed to provoke the body out of the stupor imposed by everyday life.¹⁶ In modern life, Cruz argues, we are becoming ever more remote from the 'blood and guts' of the body: "We can say that the Western society is based on a vanishing of the body in a peculiar symbolization of its uses translated by distancing."¹⁷ Body art, adopting the strategy of pain, seeks to make us once again aware of the body, intensifying our conscious perceptions of our own form.

Pain, then, enhances our conscious awareness of the body – an awareness that makes 'touch' appear as a primordial sense, since pain is a predominantly tactile sensation. Therefore, body art is a reaction to the denigration of touch in Western culture. *Noli me tangere*. Do Not Touch. Touch is prohibited even in modernism, which above all values sight and, in many cases, hearing. Here, according to Jean-Luc Nancy, the words of Jesus Christ can be used to sum up the Western view of the corporeal: *Hoc est enim corpus meum*: This is My Body.¹⁸ This is not a physical body, but a body without space, always summoned, prospective. And facing this intangible, untouchable body, pain acts as a sign, a mark, a projection, a fissure – a fault that proves the body's physical reality. 'Here and now is my body'.

In this sense, body art aims to challenge the 'discourse of spectacle' – the view that life is being reduced to little more than a series of representations – subverting it and, on occasion, taking it to the extreme. In a society focused on 'the spectacle', the body is aseptic, perfect and without pain. Pain as witnessed in body art displaces the body from this pedestal, breaking its fiction, returning it to a visceral reality.

Body art, to sum up, offers a challenging commentary on contemporary society and its relationship with pain. On the one hand, it offers a wake up call, an intensification of experience dulled by conformity and routine. On the other hand, it also attacks the idea of the 'body as spectacle' as promoted to an extreme by the schools of modernity.

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- 1 See Jay M (1993) *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- 2 McEvelley T (1983) 'Art in the Dark', *Artforum* (Summer) 62-71; Jones A (1994) *Postmodernism and the End-Gendering of Marcel Duchamp*. London, Cambridge University Press.
- 3 Foster H (1996) *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of Century*. Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press.
- 4 K (1998) *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art and the 1970s*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- 5 Julius A (2002) *Transgressions. The Offences of Art*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- 6 Danto A C (1983) *The Transfiguration of the Commonplace*. Harvard: Harvard University Press.
- 7 Pluchart F (1978) Risk as the Practice of Thought. *Flash Art*, 80-81 (February–April) 39-40.
- 8 See Crimp D (1985) AIDS: Cultural Analysis/Cultural Activism. *October* (43) 3-16.
- 9 Le Breton D (2002) *Conduites à risque. Des jeux de mort au jeu de vivre*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France.
- 10 Julius A (2002) *Transgressions. The Offences of Art*. London: Thames and Hudson.
- 11 Jones A (1999) *Body Art: Performing the Subject*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- 12 Le Breton D (1995) *Anthropologie de la douleur*. Paris: Éditions Métailié.
- 13 Ibid, p.194.
- 14 Elkins J (1999) *Pictures of the Body. Pain and Metamorphosis*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- 15 Anzieu D (1985) *Le moi-peau*. Paris: Dunod.
- 16 Cruz Sánchez P A (2004) *La vigilia del cuerpo: arte y experiencia corporal en la contemporaneidad*. Murcia: Tabularium.
- 17 Le Breton D (1990) *Antropologie du corps et modernité*. Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 122; See also Le Breton D (1985) *Corps et sociétés*. Paris: Méridiens-Klinsieck.
- 18 Nancy J-L (2000) *Corpus*. Paris: Éditions Métailié.