



LOVER BOY.
Notice Franco's proximity to the spectators and the way in which the blood trickles down his whitened body.

Notice the proximity of the spectators to the performance. Again, blood, bandages and medical paraphernalia is used to create a fluid composition.



The Body as Fluid Dramaturgy: Live Art, Corporeality and Perception

Stephen Di Benedetto

Live Art uses the body as an expressive form—it relies on our perceptions of our bodies and the way in which they inhabit and shape the world. Rather than organize a work on the basis of words and language, its performances are organized around the ways in which bodies are able to flow and alter shape freely to provide a constantly changing visual image.

Pearl Tessler writes:

Nothing is so familiar and at the same time so mysterious as our own bodies. We are the container and the contained, cast simultaneously as coroner and cadaver in the mystery that our bodies present. We look at ourselves and others not just for the pleasure of looking, but for the need to understand our bodies: how they work, how we are alike and different from one another, why we get sick, why we die.¹

She suggests that the artistic representations of the body are a direct result of a culture that is fascinated by corporality. We can see this in the way that contemporary culture spends its time fetishizing athletic ability watching sporting events—watching how we can run, lift, and jump; worshipping the body's beauty—placing images of it in advertisements and contorting our bodies to match. As an extension of this, we are fascinated with bodily functions—films can be found on the Internet of sleeping, operations, sex acts and even defecation.

Live Art is the realm where art and our cultural obsessions merge and commingle, allowing voyeuristic self-reflexive evaluation and critique. Lois Keidon goes as far as to observe, that:

During the late 90s Live art has proved that it is uniquely positioned to articulate and represent seemingly problematic

Stephen Di Benedetto is currently an Assistant Professor of Theatre History and Dramatic Theory at the School of Theatre, University of Houston. He received his PhD from Goldsmiths College, University of London in 1999 for his thesis *Playwriting as a Visual Art: A Study of Contemporary English-speaking Dramaturgy Using the Works of Five Playwrights Trained as Fine Artists*. He has contributed scholarly essays as part of *Space and the Postmodern Stage*, edited by Irene Eynat-Confino and Eva Sormova, and *The Professions in Contemporary British Drama*, edited by Daniel Myer-Dinkgraffe. Other essays have been published in *New Theatre Quarterly* and *Irish Theatre Magazine*. He is now actively engaged in research on the body in contemporary performance art and scenography.

issues through alternative strategies and that it is one of the most flexible and responsive artistic tools there is to pursue new ways of representing and responding to these shifting and uncertain times.²

A Live Art performance is a place to watch and see the body. The artists use the body as an expressive form to trigger responses within the spectator's body, so that they can viscerally consider the experiences. While it can be said that the acts of such performers as Vitto Acconti, Ron Athey and Karen Finley are performances of emblematic conceptual actions, they can also be considered as a form of dramaturgy with a visual and durational form of organization and logic. Their expression is conveyed primarily through the use of image, sculpture and space. Even when text is a primary component, as Toni Morrison states:

Image increasingly rules the realm of shaping, sometimes becoming, often contaminating Knowledge. Provoking language or eclipsing it, an image can determine not only what we know and feel but also what we believe is worth knowing about what we feel.

Image, therefore, supercedes language and shapes our perception of what we hear.

RoseLee Goldberg offers the most satisfying definition of performance art—it involves theatrical devices, but the artist usually performs it: “Unlike theatre, the performer *is* the artist, seldom a character like an actor, and the content rarely follows a traditional plot or narrative”.³ Live artists use the medium of theatre to create a three-dimensional spatio-temporal art product, while visual theatre uses dramatic texts or scenarios to enact a fictional story in three-dimensions.⁴

More attention needs to be paid to the view of live artists, who consider their performance and object art as equivalent creatures:

Performance has been considered as a way of bringing to life the many formal and conceptual ideas on which the making of art is based. Live gestures have constantly been used as a weapon against the conventions of established art.⁵

The function of expression changed, so the form has been adapted, thus providing expression that neither theatre nor art can perform separately. Live Art is a split-off of traditional forms in the same way that installation, body art, or mannequin art are developments of architecture, painting and sculpture.

Theatre as a visual art

Viewing theatre and viewing art are two separate experiences, yet they share many common traits. Michael Blass outlines the differences:

In theatre, for example, it is rather important that 'things happen'. Otherwise you get bored just sitting there in rows in the dark. In a gallery, you're not disappointed when 'nothing happens', and for that matter you don't expect to just sit there. As soon as you start crossing the borders between these different ways of viewing art, expectations can be confused. A 'theatre person' expects to watch something, a 'visual art person' expects to look at something. Live performance that 'follows the rules' of visual art can be pretty dull, unless you start looking at it actively instead of watching it passively. This means that the expectations of the public before they come are in practice very important—for our work it's important that they expect to look, not watch, even though there are many live elements.⁶

Live Artists demand that the spectator utilize some of the skills normally associated with viewing an art object. Those types of compositional structures expect spectators to distance themselves from the experience to assess the production as an art object whose component parts unfold over the duration of the production. Therefore, the sum of all the compositional parts becomes the whole. As with a painting or a sculpture, its compositional parts when experienced within the context of the whole production are greater than the object itself. The visual not only augments the text through physical illustration, but can also use it as a principal component to elicit or convey visual rhetoric through the construction of images as its mode of expression.⁷

When the body is placed in a performance environment it becomes an object that shapes and relates within and to space.⁸ Actors become what Kantor describes "as an almost biological symbiosis between actor and object," or in other words, as a 'bio-object'.⁹ Bio-objects performing in space show how theatre can be considered a medium for seeing. Goldberg explains: "To consider the body and object as interchangeable inevitably emphasized the body itself as the individual measure of space: as our first means of perceiving space".¹⁰ Bodies make manifest abstract spatial experience. Theatre shapes physical space temporally to show changing spatial relationships.

Rather than to consider painting, sculpture, architecture and theatre as distinct things, they should be treated as activities that share basic forms of visual expression.¹¹ These forms are employed to create objects such as paintings, sculptures, buildings and performances. The spectator's experience is a place where

basic forms meet, merge with and mutually reinforce one another, often in unexpected and compelling ways. The differences between the media are what the expressive capabilities are of the material object produced.¹² Goldberg points to the advantages these differences have for performance:

It is clear that performance implies a different kind, i.e. quantity of space, for its execution. Space becomes the medium for practice and actual experience. Put simply then, 'theory'—whether 'concepts', 'drawing', or 'documentation'—remains essentially two-dimensional, while 'practice/ performance' implies a physical context, a space in which to experience the *materialisation* of that theory.¹³

Objects in space are our means of perceiving space, and theatre uses space as a medium for expression. Thereby, performance is a physical expression of theoretical perception of visual arts concepts. Contemporary theatre artists can exploit these concepts to create visual narrative and alternative modes and models of perception.

Theatre and the pictorial arts create images that the spectator responds to synaesthetically. In other words, the artwork produces mental sense-impressions that stimulate other senses thereby creating an aesthetic experience. Intuitive knowledge of how the spectator responds to visual stimulation guides an artist's proxemics. Clause Gandelman's *Reading Pictures, Viewing Texts*, suggests visual perception is a tactile process: "One reads a picture either haptically (by touch, visual touch) or optically (according to the pure vectorality of outlines), or by a dialectical combining of the two visions".¹⁴ Our sight actively seeks to perceive as we might examine by physical touch. We feel this part and then another, consider its shape, weight and texture and then seek to make a judgment as to what it is or means in its context. [E.H.] Gombrich further elucidates what goes on in our minds when we look at a picture:

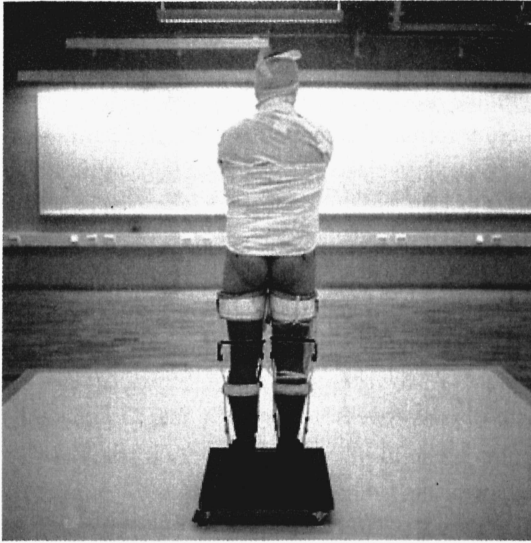
We build it up in time and hold the bits and pieces we scan in readiness till they fall into place as an imaginable object or event, and it is in this totality we perceive and check against the picture in front of us . . . what Bartlett called the 'effort after meaning' leads to a scanning backward and forward in time and space, the assignment of what might be called the appropriate serial orders which alone give coherence to the image. In other words, the impression of movement, like the illusion of space, is the result of a complex process which is best described by the familiar term of reading an image.¹⁵

A spectator's impression of visual stimuli is based on a complex mental process that amounts to scanning an image until it makes sense. In performance, formal relationships that came before are constantly being modified by subsequent depicted events. Visual perception is a gradual process of assembling impressions until a mental image of the event or picture forms. Perception is affected according to whether the visual stimulation is received synchronically, as in a single static image containing all the relationships as with a Ruben's painting, or diachronically, where images are presented sequentially as in performance.

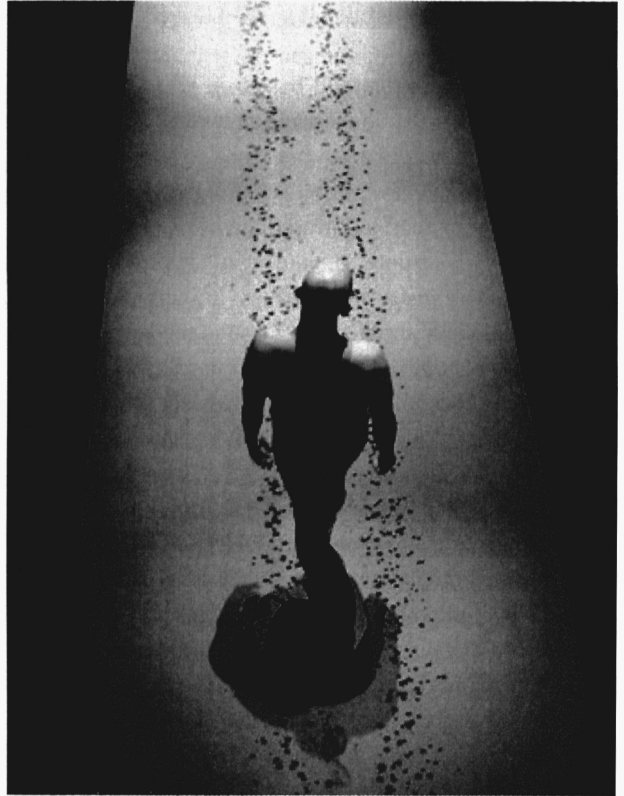
Individual compositional components (characters, setting, props and actions) do not exist in a vacuum. Their inter-relation defines what they are, as much as their presence signifies something about the play. Artists include many elements to make the image's expression clear. As a writer turns an idea around to discuss its different aspects, artists relate objects together to substantiate the artwork's rhetoric. Arnheim explains:

Experience indicates that it is easier to describe items in comparison with others than by themselves. This is so because the confrontation underscores the dimensions by which the items can be compared and thereby sharpens the perception of these particular qualities.¹⁶

Objects are understood based on what their context says about them. We gauge character behavior and action by the effect it has on the whole environment. For example, consider Anthony Caro's series of sculptures based on paintings.¹⁷ His *Act of War* is based on Goya's *The Third of May, at Madrid*. The painting depicts a firing squad pointing their rifles at a group of peasants. Caro rendered the effect of the painted image in a sculptural medium. A spectator can walk around this sculpture in the gallery looking at the different perspectives: If you stand behind the abstracted figures with the guns you can see the perspective of the soldiers; if you walk behind the prisoners, you become one of the men about to be executed; and so on. In a sense, Caro broke down the narrative depicted in the painting into sculptural experiences, thereby enhancing the painted composition's effect. Caro reduced the shapes of the figures into their formal components: The executioners become masses with horizontal beams stuck out and the victims become narrow bent shapes, and the dead body drapes over the pedestal while the living bodies hold their arms out in supplication. The painting's component details are translated into shape and mass. The spectator's feelings for the sculpture can be traced to the shapes rather than the colour and expression of the figure. Both the painting and the sculpture depict the same action, the same moment in very different ways, they trigger different reactions, but both remain potent images of death and war. Caro's sculpture tells its story through multiple perspective and



Here is an example of a pose that might have been seen during the MAMA I CAN'T SING (part iii) performance. Notice the use of braces and bandages to create a living sculptural object.



LOVER BOY. Notice the pattern the blood creates as it drips on the floor. As well, lighting is used to create shadow and bring out the sculptural qualities of his body.

abstract shape, while Goya's painting tells its story from a single point using light, color and physiological expression. The medium of expression is different, but the formal components are used to tell a tale, or to trigger a response. If one were not able to walk around the sculpture much would change; a single perspective would reign and deny the appearance of several component parts. It is frightening to stand behind the victims and see the guns directed at you. This is the same kind of experience a theatrical composition can give. The moving objects provide a changing pictorial perspective and the characters can offer highlights of different viewpoints. As we watch theatre, our phenomenological awareness leads us through the rhetoric that the playwright communicates through staging.

Live art and the case of Franko B

The term fluid dramaturgy was chosen as an attempt to describe the constantly fluctuating form of dramaturgy where bodies are used as a dramatic medium. The fluidity of the substances that live artists employ with their bodies as expressive media are useful to describe the way in which images presented in a theatricalized space can be a form of dramaturgical composition. Bodies and fluids, especially bodily fluids, carry their own history of meaning. We not only have built-in cultural aversions to bodily waste products, but we also have visceral reactions when we come in contact with them. They play such an important role in our lives that we do not confine our talk of them to clinical matters, but rather refer to them constantly in everyday conversation when we disparage objects as "crap," and accuse our friends of "taking the piss"—our idioms have their own colorful and offensive history. Furthermore, when these fluids are placed in public, offensive associations begin to pour out. So much so that Andres Serrano, Karen Finley, Holly Hughes and Robert Mapplethorpe became the targets of the Congress.

No less than words, fluids carry with them a range of meanings and reactions depending on the context. The fluids from one's lover in the privacy of one's home are far different than encountering menstrual blood or semen in the museum or theatre. The public and private contexts blend, allowing these fluids their own form of expression quite separate from anything else around them. The presence of fluid and bodies in the theatre becomes an expressive and evocative form.

Bodily fluids and naked bodies can speak on their own by virtue of how they have been encountered in public, private or social venues. Bodies and their fluids are not only ideas shaped by cultural perceptions, but also are experienced as visceral sensations (smells, texture, consistency). Yet, the role of culture is important. As Constance Classen asserts:

Smell is not simply a biological and psychological phenomenon, though. Smell is cultural, hence a social and historical phenomenon. Odours are invested with cultural values and

employed by society as a means of and model for defining and interacting with the world. The intimate, emotionally charged nature of the olfactory experience ensures that such value-coded odours are interiorized by the members of a society in a deeply personal way.¹⁸

Our bodies can sense and react to pungent smells, viscous textures and colorful liquids. We have a natural as well as culturally conditioned response to these sensations. As a consequence smell is an essential way that we situate ourselves in the environment. Live artists use our human knowledge of these substances as their sensorial scenario. Their script is in the order and presentation of substances, shapes, smells or actions that will trigger some sort of contingent response within spectators. Not only do the bodies on stage speak and express, but also the bodies of the spectators have some sort of contingent response to these. There may not be a rational understanding of what is occurring on stage, but the visceral experience provides the body a possible way of understanding and participating in the performance.

An extreme example of the contemporary artist using the theatre as a medium is that of Franko B. He considers himself a painter, yet he uses live performance to create his living paintings, composed of images of bondage and biological captivity.¹⁹ In *Mama, I Can't Sing (part III)*, he paints and colors the environment using light, and using his body and props such as cages, gurneys, chairs, braces and medical paraphernalia. He further adds texture and coloring to these images by smearing body effluvia over his body— thus coloring himself white and spraying fluids in a fine red mist in the air. There is no linguistic or visual narrative, but the sequence of images triggers a visceral response within the spectator of the event. He uses his body as a sculptural form to be manipulated, painted upon and bound. It is a hybrid of live performance, live art and a theatre of sensation. As each piece of medical paraphernalia is attached or inserted, the spectators encounter uncomfortable experiences. Our reactions to seeing naked, mutilated bodies, bodily fluids not seen in public and procedures usually reserved for the doctor's office become the text of the performance. By the time Franko's bonded body is placed in a cage, we begin to formulate feelings of helplessness within this, our uncertain and ever changing world.

As a self-professed painter Franko B uses the theatrical attributes as he would a canvas, paints and emulsion. Theatre allows him to control the time that the spectators look at his images. He exploits the live elements of performance to activate the spectator's awareness. It is worthwhile to examine an extensive description. Stuart Morgan describes an earlier work:

In a deep, murky space a naked man, Franko himself, makes his way towards a spotlight. As onlookers realize that he is already bleeding from both arms simultaneously, the mixture of powerful reactions is overwhelming—disgust and compassion certainly, but most of all powerlessness and inability to prevent the inevitable: a quick death . . . Arms dangling by his side and pools of blood starting to form at his feet, Franko adopts a pose which has long been commonplace in the religious art of the West. With palms held upwards . . . he seems to be imitating an accepted posture of the risen Christ of the New Testament . . . By the end, he is on his knees groveling, palms raised, smoke blurring his outline, while dry pigment on the floor combines with the blood to make an unexpected parody of orthodox painting techniques. Metaphors arise faster and faster still . . . He is losing blood quickly . . . on hands and knees, [He] makes one final attempt to signal his message before collapsing head first onto the stage. Apparently dead, he is dragged away by assistants and with this gesture the event is over. . . . After the music has reached its crescendo, the audience disperses in silence, pondering on what they have witnessed.²⁰

It is in this final stage of reflection where the shape of the dramaturgy takes shape—and where our conventional methods of interpretation are most useful. Our sense impressions and responses give us the material to ponder.

Franko B is a walking canvas and sculpture, his tattooed and mutilated body is in itself an art object shaped by the artist as an expressive form. The way in which he displays and shapes his body in a performance situation becomes a context in which to read those marks and shapes. His body is part sculpture and part bio-object in a stage-composition. By following the changes and the process of the images we can distill reactions whatever they may be. His body becomes an artistic tool on its own, to experience as one might an installation. It is the shape and movement of his body that becomes the organizing principle behind the performance. Rather than by organizing around a linear idea, he uses a visual idea that is demonstrated through his body and his fluids.

In *Lover Boy* (2000), a 4 to 15 minute performance—its duration depends upon loss of blood and of consciousness—he walks down a runway. Attendants watch or snap pictures of him as his blood trickles down his whitened body and splatters on the cloth lining the stage. As a self-professed painter, he uses theatrical attributes to realize his sculptural images over a set duration of time. He activates the attendants' awareness. Franko B describes his aim:

When I go to a museum and I see a beautiful painting, that's the nearest thing I can think of to what I want my work to be able to do: to create that, but in real life. So I mean creating a very beautiful image with the difference, people can smell it, and also they can touch it.²¹

Franko B employs a range of devices to insure that his spectators will have a range of sensorial experiences. Those experiences are embodied thinking, and only through an active awareness of sensorial stimuli can the experience begin to be spoken about using language and cultural models of interpretation. By trying to touch our senses, he asks us to embrace being human and recover our tenderness.

Franko B employs a variety of devices to insure that his spectators will have a range of experiences of the condition of a real body and bodily fluids. Perhaps, the actual flow of images will disappear from memory, but a sense of the experience will remain vivid. For me a handful of beautiful, yet disturbing images vividly remain in my consciousness and in my sense memory. No photographic documentation can reproduce those feelings; his prints and sculpture lack those sensations. It is only through the live medium and the dramaturgy of his body changing shape and appearance that his art exists.

Our sense perceptions are consciousness of the world. By becoming more aware of this consciousness and noting what stimuli triggers the sensations of mediated experience, we can understand the mutable layers of expression. As artists make conscious use of triggering our sensations, analysts must be bold and break from passive modes of critical inquiry, embrace the subjective personal sensations generated by an event, tie them to the form of the artwork and make tangible the sensorial experience of the arts.

The form fits the temperament of the times. It is an expression of contemporary thought processes—combining our visual knowledge of art and our awareness and interest in bodily sensation. As the world changes, so too do our ways of representing them. The live art world finds ways of creating theatrical pieces with different techniques than conventionally used in twentieth century realistic theatre. It does not have the same aims as 20th century theatre, but rather strives to make sense of contemporary cyber experience and is looking for a form of expression that is appropriate for the 21st century.

Notes

1. Pearl Tesler, "Revealing bodies," in *Exploratorium: Picturing the Body*, 23.3 Winter 1999/2000.

2. Lois Keidon, "Blood on the Tracks: The Performance Work of Franko B," in Lois Keidon and Stuart Morgan, *Franko B* (London: Black Dog Publishing 1999).

3. Rose Lee Goldberg, *Performance Art: From Futurism to the Present* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1988) 8.
4. Studies of performance art focus on ideas about the body or signification of the political/sexual being. Nick Kaye, *Art into Theatre: Performance Interviews and Documents* (U.K.: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1996) interviews artists on their performance work, but still neglects to tie together how their techniques can reveal something about the relationship of theatre and art.
5. Goldberg 7.
6. Michael Blass in a private email (1996).
7. Visual Rhetoric is the construction of images for the purpose of persuasion as defined by the rhetorical discipline.
8. Stanton Garner, *Bodied Spaces* (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1994) explores the expressive signification of actors on stage.
9. Kantor 240.
10. RoseLee Goldberg, "Space as Praxis", in *Studio International*, 190.997 (September/ October 1975) 131.
11. See Robert Sowers, *Rethinking the Forms of Visual Expression* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990) for a discussion of the ways in which the different fine art disciplines share compositional principle within which they exploit their medium's expressive capabilities.
12. Sowers.
13. Goldberg 130.
14. Clause Gandelmann, *Reading Pictures, Viewing Texts* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1991) ix.
15. E. H. Gombrich, "Visual Discovery Through Art," in *Image and the Eye: Further Studies in the Psychology of Pictorial Representation* (Oxford: Phaidon, 1982) 51.
16. Rudolf Arnheim, *Visual Thinking* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969) 63.
17. See John Golding, *Caro at the National Gallery: Sculpture from Painting* (London: National Galleries Publications, 1998).
18. Constance Classen, David Howes, Anthony Synnott, *Aroma: The Cultural History of Smell* (London: Routledge, 1994) 3.
19. Private conversation March 1997.
20. Keidan and Morgan, introduction.
21. Gray Watson, Interview with Franko B, 13 June 2000, www.Franko-B.com.



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Women & Performance, New York University,
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