

The Body as the Object of Modern Performance

Jon Erickson

Max Weber had described the progress of what he called "rationalization" in the modern world. It calls for the "disenchantment of the world," with the replacement of magical thinking by reflective reason. Collective myth which for so long had acted as the unifying element in culture is displaced by a reason which compartmentalizes reality through its "will to knowledge" (Foucault). This compartmentalization results in what Weber designates as autonomous "cultural spheres of value," namely three: science-technology, art-literature, and law-morality. The separation of the artistic sphere from its relation to the culturally unifying agencies of religion and centralized political power has resulted, through the ongoing process of rationalization, in the search for the "essence" of art. Jürgen Habermas has noted that art becomes rationalized when, first, it becomes autonomous, second, it divests and purifies itself of "theoretical and moral admixtures," and third, in reflecting upon its own formal processes, makes those processes transparent (178).

Each particular form of art within modernism has engaged in this process--literature, painting, sculpture, music, dance, theatre--and in each, the relentless pursuit for understanding the essence of its formal properties has resulted in one or another kind of minimalism. Each has reduced itself to its most basic form of objecthood--sound, color, plastic form, etc., but also drawing attention to what gives it shape--silence, emptiness, stillness. This movement has even resulted in certain reversals that end up encroaching on the territory of other arts or disciplines: conceptual art's reliance on language, minimal art becoming body art, then performance art, which slides into the theoretical purview of theater.

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In reaction to a society in which, as Marx put it by invoking Shakespeare, "all that is solid melts into air," many arts in their minimalizing self-reflection have eschewed what is human as too ephemeral, in order to create works whose objecthood and survival value depends greatly upon the elimination of representation, of the human or anything else. Paradoxically, the nonhuman object becomes a refuge for the self--a materialized projection of "inner" creative consciousness. The desire for the objectification of self that this reflects emerges from the existential dread of a loss of self, inspired by the vertiginous positioning of the human being at the edge of the abyss of history and mass society.

Since the theatre ultimately depends upon what is human, this non-human objectifying poses something of a problem for it. The famous turn-of-century actress Eleanora Duse was quoted by Gordon Craig as saying that in order to save the theatre, all the actors would have to die of the plague so that it could start over with a clean slate (Kirby 33). This seemed to have been accomplished in at least two instances of empty stage performances. One was an Italian Futurist performance whose "performer" was a bullet shot from a gun offstage. The other was Samuel Beckett's "Breath," a thirty-second performance consisting of the sound of an inhalation and an exhalation. But in both cases a human agency is made present by its absence.

The theatre finds itself in the position of having to objectify what it is that can be construed as human, while trying at the same time to either radically reduce or eliminate the distance between the human being and its representation, or else radically increase the distance so that, as in Brecht, representation stands apart from the human being as a transparent process. There is on the spectrum of possible representation a dehumanizing limit and a humanizing limit. On one extreme one finds Gordon Craig's solution to be the replacement of the actor with the Ubermarionette, whose nonhuman character and whose two virtues of "silence and obedience" provide the only adequate basis for a "symbol of man," since no particular actor with his eccentricities can really be such a symbol, with the two intentions of purity and universality. On the other extreme, there is Jerzy Grotowski's work, in which what is essentially human can only be accomplished in the full embodiment of the *particular* human being, so that, following Artaud, not only the split between representation and the human being is reduced, if not eliminated, but that the rift between mind and body, or as Grotowski puts it, "soul and body," is healed. In this process layers of personality are stripped away until one reaches an "inexplicable unity" (Grotowski 131). We can see that the dehumanization of theater and the radical humanization of theater follow a parallel course--toward the establishment of a pure and unified object for contemplation.

Of course the problem is that what is "essentially" human is what is not unified in the first place. The very nature of human consciousness is its split character, in which the source of consciousness can never be located, and therefore never objectified. As Jacques Lacan put it, "I am not wherever I am

the plaything of my thought; I think of what I am where I do not think to think" (166). But when Grotowski puts so much emphasis, in his early work, in *impulse* as a unifying force, he is not really talking about reflection but action, although the equally emphasized ideal of the actor's self-revelation already belies this. Even his reduction of theatre to its essential relationship of actor to spectator demonstrates in that very relationship a materialization of the structure of consciousness that must be split.

If we are to draw away from Grotowski's ascetic enclave that postulates an essential humanity into the much larger realm of social and historical forces, the unified self becomes even more unfeasible, as Bertolt Brecht argues when he says, "The continuity of the ego is a myth. A man is an atom that perpetually breaks up and forms anew. We have to show things as they are" (Brecht 15). For Brecht it is not the responsibility of the actor to objectify what is human as *self* at all. What is objectified are the relations *between* human beings, made manifest in the *gestus*. One should not even conceive of the *gestus* as a unified or pure act, however, in that Brecht desires as well that every act contain the conditions of possibility for alternative action.

What I am primarily interested in examining is a particular form of objectification that takes place in modern experimental theatre whose focus is on the *body*.¹ One can view the distinction between, to borrow terms from R. D. Laing, the "disembodied self" and the "embodied self." Although the continuity of the ego may be a myth, and consciousness may be split and its source unlocatable, the body appears to be substantial, irreducible and solid, so that the focus of any theatrical search for its essential object locates itself there.

Before I begin, I would like to make some brief comments on a type of theatre that sets itself in opposition to the phenomenological reduction of actor as the central feature of theatre, either as sign or body. "Total theatre" resists the ongoing rationalization of theatre, that is, its inexorably reductive process of self-reflection, in that it tries to mobilize other forces outside of its minimal generic boundaries: dance, music, visible spectacle, advanced technology. Yet what is still posited is a basis in an essential and unquestioned theatricality. Total theatre tries to claim hegemony over the other arts in that it puts to theatrical use elements from the other arts, trying to draw out the *theatrical* aspects of dance, music, visual art, etc. This is reflected in Nietzsche's demand, after his break with Wagner, that "The theatre shall not lord it over the other arts" (636). Total theatre would maintain that the only synthesis can be a theatrical one. Yet what it is resisting is its own essentializing reduction by expanding its horizons in a desire for a larger cultural unity, a unity that defies the compartmentalization of modern life.

Brecht recognized in this process a real lack of self-reflection, the positing of a cultural unity that is the promotion of a bourgeois myth. His own work is a meeting place of diverse arts, yet it is not a synthesis. As he puts it: "So let us invite all the sister arts of the drama, not in order to create an

'integrated work of art' in which they all offer themselves up and are lost, but so that together with the drama they may further the common task in different ways; and their relations with one another consist in this: that they lead to mutual alienation" (204). Brecht's aim in this is to maintain a true reflection of the divided and alienated nature of social and cultural spheres.

Insofar as Brecht's theatre was operating critically at a time within capitalist society, his criticism of total theatre seemed justified. But if we turn to Russian Constructivist theatre, also operating along the lines of total theatre, we see that its primary function in a newly revolutionary society was a unifying, propagandistic one, where critical self-reflection would have seemed out of place and counter-revolutionary.

It is important to note that total theatre, for its synthesis to be complete, depends upon a certain dehumanization of the actor, for the human presence is too strong to allow everything to be viewed with equal attention. Recognition and identification with the human always draws us away from other sensory elements and relegates them to mere backdrop. Thus we see the incredibly stylized acting in both constructivist and Bauhaus theatre and even today in the performance theatre of Robert Wilson and Richard Foreman (despite the ruthless "ontological" self-reflection of the latter.)

Brecht's form of schizoid acting, designed to separate in performance the actor from the role, is meant to draw attention to the role, its socially constructed nature, and not so much to the actor himself. In that the disembodied style of the role is to be maintained throughout, the actor must maintain a critical attitude toward his role, even acknowledging dislike for the character he plays. In effect, Brecht accepts the actor's attitude to the role and wants to use that to reveal the possibility of other social constructions through the independent decision-making ability and will of the spectator as "actor" in real life. Grotowski takes that back further in getting the *actor* to question his own real socially-constructed layers of personality in order to strip those away as well.

What are we finally left with in the end? The body of the actor. Although it can be noted, as Brecht did, that the idea of the universality of human nature is a bourgeois illusion, when it is actually a social and historical construction, it can be argued that what human beings all have in common are bodies: this seems incontrovertible and irreducible. And our bodies feel pleasure and feel pain. Our common humanity as bodies operate as the first level of sympathy: "If you prick us do we not bleed? If you tickle us, do we not laugh? If you poison us, do we not die?" What strikes us as so shocking about certain types of body art, such as that of Chris Burden, who has himself shot in the shoulder, or crucified to a Volkswagen, or Stelarc, who suspends himself by hooks piercing his flesh, is this seemingly inhuman or superhuman disregard for that which we hold most primally in common. The identification with these acts strikes too close to home and must be denied. But the denial of the flesh does not necessarily have to be so drastic, as a good portion of the

mythos of both East and West affirms a self separate from the body. But can the self we "know" really be a self separate from the body? Brecht's denial of the "continuity of the ego" disregards the seeming continuity of the body. Freud connects body and ego this way: "[T]he ego is first and foremost a bodily ego," and in a footnote remarks, "I.e. the ego is ultimately derived from bodily sensations, chiefly those springing from the surface of the body" (16). We construct our sense of the continuity of self on the apparent continuity of the body. It is, as Michel Foucault writes, "the locus of a dissociated self (adopting the illusion of a substantial unity)" (148). It is on this "illusion of a substantial unity" that the stability of the personality rests. We cannot *observe* it in the process of changing or being acted upon subtly by social forces, watching it continuously be "the inscribed surface of events." We are always surprised that we are physically not what we once were.

In the long run Brecht's view is vindicated by Foucault. An actor taking on a role must observe the comportment of a particular body acted upon by the dynamics of a social role--the hunched shoulders of the scholar or accountant, the ramrod spin of a military man, etc. But what is the bodily comportment of the actor who is trained to take on these roles? One must take into account not only the body as the site of social inscription, but as the materialization of the individual will that resists these forces. A training of the body to deal with a variety of situations is a strong tradition in the theatre. The development of flexibility can be observed from Meyerhold's biomechanics and acrobatic training to the work of Grotowski. To alter the body's comportment is to alter one's relation to oneself. This was a factor in Meyerhold's reversal of Stanislavsky's working from the inside out to working from the outside *in*. As he put it, "All psychological states are determined by specific physiological processes" (199).

Gordon Craig's extreme view of absolute physical control caused him to reject the ability of human actors in this regard in favor of the completely uncontrollable Ubermarionette. In this Craig never theoretically dissolved the split between the actor and the role inasmuch as he knew that every puppet needs a puppeteer, even if the wires that ran from the poet's soul were "not material." Still, the puppeteer remains invisible to the audience. In order for the actor to be an artist, "his body would have to be the slave of his mind, which healthy bodies refuse to do. Therefore the body of man . . . is *by nature* utterly useless as a material for art" (37). In other words, the body always at some level thinks for itself, disrupting the absolute physical and formal control of the mind. Despite this, Craig eventually abandoned the idea of replacing the human actor by the Ubermarionette, but instead held up the latter as an ideal for the former. The marionette as body, the body as exteriorized, disciplined ego.

Heinrich von Kleist, a hundred years earlier, had expressed nearly the same criticism as Craig, in his essay "On the Puppet Theatre." He had observed that the real advantage of the puppet over living performers was that

it was "incapable of affectation." This was due to the fact that the inanimate puppet contained an implacable center of gravity, unlike the human being, and that the human attribute of affectation is created when the soul is located anywhere else than in "the center of gravity of a movement" (213). The puppet's center of gravity is in eternal homeostasis, and when the puppet is moved by the puppeteer, the limbs describe the inevitable lines of inertial force. If the actor were to follow Craig's advice, he would internalize the puppeteer, find his center of gravity, and move with the whole movement of the emotion. One must find the body's center in order to discover its limits.

Craig traced the marionette back to its religious origins as statue in the Temple. Can men create their gods, even unavoidably in their own image? The very impulse to escape the body drives men to create it ever anew. The pain of living as a body conscious of itself drives men to create bodies without consciousness. Lack of self-consciousness in the hieratic, noble, godlike and cruel ideal, to avoid sympathy, and pity that stinks of mortality. As Kleist put it, grace can only reappear in the theatre in "bodily form that has either no consciousness at all or an infinite one, which is to say, either in the puppet or a god" (216).

If we are to examine the role of the body in the theatre, we should pay close attention to its most animate feature: the face. The face draws our attentions, says Sartre, because of its essential *futurity*: "[W]e discover among objects certain things we call faces. They have not, however, the same kind of existence as objects. Objects have no future, while the future surrounds faces like a muff" (Natanson 162). This futurity of the face, inasmuch as it defies reduction to static objecthood, also reflects the movements of the mind's ability to transcend situations: "If we call transcendence that ability of the mind to pass beyond itself and all other things as well, to escape from itself that it may lose itself elsewhere, anywhere; then to be a visible transcendence is the meaning of a face" (Natanson 163).

If we were to look at Craig's idea that desiring the human face, "the realest of things," to take us beyond reality is "too much to ask" (Craig 21), it is clear that he denies the visible transcendence that Sartre grants the human face. The value of the mask, or the face of the idol, the proto-Ubermarionette, is that it should seem to look without looking. Perpetually gazing into Eternity, or eternally gazing at nothing? If the mask remains the same it contains in itself no futurity; therefore, can it be said to indicate transcendence? As the face of a statue, it is "Concerned only with obedience to the laws of equilibrium and of motion" (Natanson 159). If, as Sartre says of his friend's face, "his face is everywhere; it exists as far as his look can carry" (Natanson 162), then in a context of total theatre in which all parts have equal weight, the human face will always attract attention even while guiding it: *it* will be the center of attention and the animating force, even without language.

The mask, in that it contains no futurity, implies no transcendence for it is eternally fixed; one could possibly say that it *is* transcendent in that it is free

of human vicissitudes, but in that its spirit is fixed, spectator identification is more difficult, since it contains no *possibility* of transcendence. The spectator cannot identify himself with anything eternal or divine. The purpose of the mask (or the marionette) is to inspire awe, which requires a level of estrangement. That estrangement depends upon the spectator's reaction to the ambiguous state of the mask as human in appearance yet also as an object that is not alive--giving it the quality of something or someone beyond life and death, the embodiment of a principle or perpetual attitude. Still, if this ambiguous state is not maintained by supplementary actions, gestures, actions or words, the estrangement ceases and the mask is simply reduced to the state of an object without effect or affect.

It should be noted in this regard that Grotowski's desire to reveal the essentially human in the actor depends upon the stripping away of masks. In this sense the mask can be seen as a form of repression, a blockage that must be removed before transcendence can be achieved. What is remarkable, however, is that the actor is also called upon to mold his own face as a mask. It is a commonplace that masks actually allow more to be revealed, in that they protect the identity of the actor while he engages freely in activity he might normally not if his person was identified with that activity. In this sense, the mask operates as a form of denegation, which draws attention to a certain reality while denying it at the same time. Of course, if Grotowski's aim is to demonstrate the possibility of transcendence through the stripping away of masks, through confessional enactment, it is necessary to begin with the mask as a concentration, a *gestus*, if you will, of that element of personality to be stripped away. Once the mask has been removed, we then see the actor in his vulnerable state. Yet this vulnerability may be yet another mask, what Meyerhold called the "inner mask," problematizing the endpoint of Grotowski's project, inasmuch as the soul of the actor has as many masks as Peer Gynt's onion has layers.

Brecht attempted to defeat spectator identification with both the corporeal and representational being of the actor. "Spectator and actor ought not to approach one another but to move apart. Each ought to move away from himself. Otherwise the element of terror necessary to recognition is lacking" (26). Although Brecht is clearly using, in words like "terror" and "recognition," Aristotelian language, the identification of spectator with actor purely on the level of characterization is denied. So the terms are used in a very different sense. Identification with the critical method of the actor is implied, however, in the hope that if the actor can demonstrate his own objective attitude to his theatrical role, the spectator can correspondingly split off from himself his own social identity in the terror of recognition that this role is *not his* identity, but a socially imposed sense of self. The actor objectifies the role in a critical distance from himself, in the hopes that the spectator should follow suit.

To what extent can self-objectification in the consciousness of performer or spectator actually take place? Sartre apparently denies this processes: "One cannot judge oneself. . . . [My reflection] is something I can't lay hold of; it is not an object, but an image. . . . In other words the reflection passes into the state of object when it is not recognized and of image when it is" (Sartre 87). Here we must distinguish the possible differences between Sartre and Brecht's use of the word "recognition." In the first place Sartre is talking about recognition of one's own physical appearance, which cannot be estranged or objectified. So what he means by "recognize" is acknowledgement and acceptance of a certain state of "things as they are." What Brecht means by it is the ability to recognize that things are not as they should be, that one is objectifying a part of one's self that, upon reflection, becomes strange and in contradiction to the true needs of one's self. But this alienation of object from self-accepting image that Brecht hopes to accomplish is a difficult task in the theatre, where image always becomes the dominant factor, and where even his own alienation effects in time become conventionalized images. Alienation of object from image is difficult enough to be accomplished on stage, much less in the passive spectator, who is more concerned with what is going to happen next before him, than what should be happening now inside of him. Bert States, in using an extreme example of observing a dog onstage, denies the split by saying that "in the theatre there is no ontological difference between the image and the object" (35). Though there may be no *ontological* difference, there will always be a *phenomenological* difference, as anyone who attends the theatre knows. Identification is never strong enough for one to continuously merge image and object in perceiving the actor, even in the best of performances. But for that split to consistently carry into the spectator's perception of himself outside of his role as spectator may be asking too much.

In fact, the tension between the image and object, between the actor and the role, is what gives performance in the theatre its measure of power in the first place. But that power is also sufficient to prevent it from being carried to the next level of rational self-reflection. To go in the opposite direction, the tension between the *body-as-object* and the *body-as-sign* gives birth to an awareness of *presence* as the tension between the basic corporeal being and the becoming of signification.

"Presence" in the theatre is a physicality in the present that at the same time is grounded in a form of "absence." It is something that has unfolded, and is read against what has been seen, and presently observed in expectation as to what will be seen. It means that the performer is presenting himself or herself to the audience, but at the same time holding something back, creating expectation. The most frightening people are those of whom it is said "they are not all there." What this means is that you don't know what they are going to do next; you are put on edge expecting the unexpected, at every point knowing that words may turn into physical actions, whether embarrassing or violent. In other words, not only does the notion of presence in performance

imply an absence, but that absence itself is the possibility of future movement, so paradoxically, presence is based not only in the present, but in our expectation of the future. If Gertrude Stein could actually achieve her ideal of the "continuous present" in the theater, in which no expectation existed, the "presence" of the performer would be lost. Even if the spectator is familiar with a play and knows what will come next, the "how" of what will come next is still missing in the present perception and the actor with presence will know how to keep that "how" indeterminate.

This is not all. Presence has an inverse relationship to language. Presence seems to be most obvious in silence, since it resists the disembodied proclivities of discourse. One is holding back the articulate meaning that the audience is expecting. Presence of the body is stronger when linguistic desublimation is absent; more precisely, not absent, but not yet manifested. Presence becomes most acute at the moment of its possibility of dispersion into language, the moment of working into speech, at the edge of articulation. Demonstrations of uncertainty, stuttering, Artaud's cries that lapse back into silence, draw the audience into the space of the performer's lack of articulation. Cries and stuttering draw attention not so much, or not only, to what is to be articulated, but to the physical origins of speech in the body of the performer.²

This all might seem to place the idea of presence at only an extreme level of embodiment, as contrarily one can recall people who are primarily effective speakers fully engaged in discourse as having presence as well. But even here, we acknowledge their presence only when we cease to simply acknowledge the meaning of their words, or at least become aware of their body's relationship to their words. We acknowledge the physical property of the voice, we acknowledge the timing of their words--which draws attention to the physical action of the voice, and again the relation of expectation to silence. So in fact the words almost become supplements to the meaning displayed by the body's physical attitude. At times, presence is made even more acute when the body displays an attitude contradictory to the words, and at that point we always believe the truth of the body over the truth of the words--which is articulated in psychoanalysis as the "acting out" of a repressed subtext.

Brecht's distrust of presence is reflected in the dependence of his work on discourse, for pure presence allows for no dialectical understanding. It erases the discursive self-consciousness of the spectator. Even Brecht's use of the physical gesture is designed as a supplement to discourse--its value as sign is more important than its physicality. In this sense, physical presence has no meaning in itself except that of a pure investment of one human being's interest (the spectator) in the performer as a human being, although within the theatre's tyrannical framework of representation, this requires a physical commitment that is "larger than life."

The use of voice as utterer of a text is literally a "becoming-disembodied." Artaud's cry has a signature. It is identified with a *particular* body, while at the

same time resisting inevitable symbolic difference *from* the body. Spoken words belong to everyone. One can repeat what someone said, but try to repeat his cry. The distrust of text in certain post-Artaudian theatrical experiments was a distrust of its power to diminish the presence of the actor in his embodied state. Language that is uttered belongs to all, it dissipates in the mind, it draws the mind away from the present to possibilities, probabilities, dissimulations, memories, promises, etc., and it ceases to belong solely to the act, the event, the being before you. This "givenness" of language (constantly giving itself up) in other contexts obviates the notion of "an appropriation of discourse," for "discourse" in its very meaning contradicts the idea of it as a possession. As Wittgenstein said, there is no private language. Artaud's fear of someone stealing his words is founded on his mistaken belief in a unified consciousness, not accepting the fact that language is social, and hence based in the Other.

But the body has also been seen in the past as a unified "body of knowledge." This is exemplified in the earliest forms of drama. *Anagnoresis* as the dénouement or turning point of the play, is the point of *recognition* (Oedipus recognizes his crime, Agave recognize she's killed her son Pentheus). Things, facts, histories are drawn together again. The hero's body is rent so that the body of the state can be made whole. There is another Greek word that, although not identical in meaning to *anagnoresis*, bears in its use a similar dynamic. *Anamnesis* is the Platonic basis for the revelation of knowledge, that is, all knowledge is known prior to bodily existence, and *anamnesis* is the process of recollection of that ideal knowledge. Socrates used the maieutic method to facilitate *anamnesis*. The maieutic method is metaphorically related to midwifery, birthing. Yet perhaps it is not so metaphorical after all, if all our knowledge is forgotten (repressed) when we are first embodied and enter this world. This embodiment, therefore, is also a repression of knowledge. Amnesia is first and foremost a physically produced state, in this case produced by the trauma of birth. Thus is *anamnesia* a rebirthing process, a *disembodiment* of knowledge through language.

Brecht, a dialectician like Socrates, was engaged in a particular type of maieutic method. Catharsis comes after the moment of recognition. Timothy Wiles has shown that the term "catharsis" has varying interpretations after being translated from the Greek. The work of Else, Golden, and Hardison reads it as "clarification of incident" rather than "purgation of emotion," clarification preceding purgation (Wiles 126-127). Wiles has also pointed out that in conventional Aristotelian dramaturgy "actor and audience achieve catharsis at the same time during the apprehension of the play; Brecht is really 'non-Aristotelian' in that, according to his scheme, his actor would have to have achieved catharsis before the play or the performance began, while his audience cannot experience it until after the play has ended" (82). Inasmuch as recognition for the actor is prior to the play and maintained throughout, knowledge is *never* embodied in the Platonic amnesiac sense. It is disembodied

throughout, remaining separate from the actor who "delivers" it as he consciously "enacts" his part.

Finally we have to ask ourselves--the body "itself": *is there such a thing?* The thing that experiences libidinal pulsations, joy, anger, hate, lust, pain--inasmuch as it is *viewed* in a certain way, can it be considered the body proper? Even identification with someone else's pain involves an *image* that is interpreted (grimaces, tears, cries, etc.). This entails the philosophical "problem of other minds." One "knows" that one has a mind, feels pain, etc., but *how* does one know this is true for *others*? One answer is that we assume the mind and feelings of others by using ourselves as models which we then project on others *as if* they had minds and felt pain.

Both the physical sensations that the body experiences and its incorrigible visibility have led certain performance and body artists to preserve the fragile status of the subject that has been under attack by deconstructing philosophies, as well as social forces, by rendering it visible as bodily object. This is roughly analogous to Samuel Johnson's material act of kicking the stone to refute Bishop Berkeley's dematerializing idealism. The avoidance by these artists of theatrical spaces can be seen as a way of defying the distancing and disembodiment propensities of the relentless signifying structure of the stage, which as we have seen, threatens the unified notion of the self. Of course most of these artists emerged from the art world, and so display themselves in galleries and museums. Art galleries, inasmuch as they are ostensibly places where objects, not social selves, are on display, provide an appropriate structure for viewing the body as object. Other social spaces--especially if the artist is involved in some experientially-based interventionary practice--position the embodied subject in its natural habitat. Such is Vito Acconci's "Following Piece," where he chose random pedestrians to follow through the streets of New York. Or the year-long performances of Tching Hsieh--one spent living outdoors in New York, one spent silently in a prison cell built in his loft--operate on a conceptual level, where the "problem of other minds" truly poses itself, since the performance is not based so much on the external action of the performer's body as it is on the performer's internal experience of the action, or *non-action*.

A perfect example of this "non-action" is the work of the performance couple Marina Abramović and Ulay. The work "Nightsea Crossing" consists of them sitting across a long table from each other for seven hours a day and at each location doing this for a week. Over the course of years they did this until they reached the total time of ninety days. They simply sat and stared into each other's eyes for the duration of the work. Not averse to having themselves perceived as symbols, they could be seen as the exemplification of duality, as male and female principles. But while one could perhaps grasp this signification quite easily, what is more enigmatic is their own internal experience as it is "displayed" to us. In this opacity we find that despite all our theories the body still retains an air of mystery.

So in the end the problem of the body in performance is a two-fold one: when the intention is to present the body itself as flesh, as corporeality, as living organism itself free of signs, it remains a sign nonetheless--at the very least the sign of "the body," "mortality," "sensuality." It is not *enough* of a pure *corpus*. When the intention is to present the performer's body as primarily a sign, idea, or representation, corporeality always intervenes, and it is *too much* of a body. On the one hand, it is the "problem of other minds" which posits the "as if" of projection, but finds its identification always incomplete. On the other hand, it is a lack of distance, a reflection of human vicissitudes which makes the sign less than full for the spectator. The body can be seen, then, both as instrument *for* the sign and something inexplicably Other.

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Notes

1. What will be quickly recognized in the reading of this essay is that my concentration on the body as "object," an examination of its phenomenological reduction, does not take into account the question of gender. The omission of this question is not because I dismiss it as unimportant, but because I am not really prepared to discuss it here with the attention it deserves. There is a wealth of feminist writings on the objectification of the female body, especially by the "male gaze"--first addressed in film studies by Laura Mulvey in her "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (*Screen* 16, No. 3, Autumn 1975), and later taken up extensively by film theorists such as Teresa de Lauretis, Tania Modleski and Annette Kuhn. It has been addressed subsequently in art (Kate Linker, Mary Kelly, Victor Burgin), photography (Abigail Solomon-Godeau, John Berger), and theater and performance (Sue-Ellen Case, Moira Roth, Elin Diamond). What I intend to show here, in a larger sense, is that the body as the signifying object of performance does not embody essential or universal attributes, except as those attributes are socially constructed. This is true for male as well as female bodies, while of course recognizing that *how* any particular objectification is taking place is what is really at stake within a patriarchal system, not *the fact that* objectification is taking place, which seems to me to be an undeniable aspect of cognition (or desire).

2. This has been made even clearer to me recently in watching a performance by Karen Finley. Known for excessively abject, personally political, pornographic, and vitriolic monologues that seem to issue from a state of possession, the most unnerving moments of the performance are when she stops speaking. Her ranting, which is what is upsetting at first, becomes almost a zone of security after a while (despite its content), since one gets the sense she is not *there* to really threaten the audience.

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Self-Possession. November 6 & 7, 1987. Milwaukee Art Museum.

A square performance space divided into the diminishing squares of the Golden Section. The largest halves are labeled: the blank one is BE, the regressively subdivided one HAVE. The labels are to be united as BEHAVE. Beginning with Plato's parable of the Cave, working through Locke, Marx and Proudhon on the nature of personal property and the person as property, and ending in the all-consuming center of the Labyrinth, a voice-over commentary traces the journey of the body through the spaces of its habitation. Attempts at self-possession take many futile forms: the capture of the body's shadow and its mirror image; the body dancing to its own private music; rabid consumption of food, stimulants, sex; the pursuit of money that ends in the loss of the senses and the body's mobility. At the end of this chain the body confronts the minotaur at the center--where thought winds down in fear of its origin--it confronts the devourer of youth. The unravelling thread leading out eventually divests you of what you have in order to be. At the edge of mystic oblivion the body projects the scream the binds the escaping soul to the flesh, impulsively followed by the gasoline-fed flame that completes self-possession in annihilation.

Finally, even when the lights come on, in the direct address that follows each play, the body is faced with its inescapable reduction to the status of a sign in the eyes of the audience. The body extends its hand to cover those eyes, passing from watching body to watching body. What they had, what the body had, in the course of performance is gone as quickly as it materializes, and its memory cannot be held. Departing, the body kicks apart the sign, and *BEHAVE loses its properties, its hold on being.*

In the act of possession the possession dies.

Every time I turn to face my shadow, he turns away from me.

I reside in the limbo of appearance.

You render me fleshless.



From *Self-Possession*. Written and performed by Jon Erickson. Performance photo by Jim Brozek.

