

**The Dionysian in Performance: Reclaiming the Female
Transgressive Performing Body**

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Zanne Solomon

603s1516

Supervisor

Ms Heike Gehring

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Abstract

In this thesis I investigate the theoretical or philosophical notion/archetype of the Dionysian in relation to the transgressive female body in performance. I do so through 1) an investigation into the theories behind the Dionysian and the transgressive; 2) an examination of the performative practice of the transgressive female body; and 3) a personal exploration of the theatrical practice.

- 1) In the first chapter I introduce and thoroughly explore the archetypal concept of the Dionysian, and identify its significance because of its intrinsic association with the transgressive. I associate it with its oppositional force, the Apollonian, which is similarly significant because it is through the Dionysian disruption of the Apollonian from which the very notion of the transgressive springs.

Through a review of Camille Paglia's seminal text on the subject of the Dionysian¹, this chapter provides a historical, mythological and theoretical context for the schism between the two archetypal aesthetics, starting from the description of the mythology of the ancient Greek gods, Dionysus and Apollo, and unpacks the transgressive nature of the Dionysian.

Drawing on concurring theories of Friedrich Nietzsche and Julia Kristeva, as well as Hans Thies-Lehmann's writings on post-dramatic theatre², Chapter One attempts to firmly establish the inherent link between the Dionysian and theatre and performance, as well as the Dionysian and the transgressive, and provide a thorough theoretical framework for the rest of the thesis.

¹ Paglia, Camille. *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. England: Penguin Books, 1990.

² Lehmann, Hans-Thies. *Postdramatic Theatre*. Trans. and Intro. Karen Jürs-Munby. London and New York: Routledge, 2006.

2) The second chapter investigates the work of two female performance artists³ who (re)present⁴ their bodies as transgressive in performance, namely Marina Abramovic and Karen Finley. It critically examines specific performance works of theirs, and through this examination it explores how they (re)present their bodies as transgressive in performance, and why they do so.

This chapter furthermore establishes the connection between the transgressive female performing body, as (re)presented by Abramovic and Finley, and the Dionysian. In so doing it explores how they negotiate this ancient aesthetic or practice in a contemporary performance context. I believe that these performance artists are in fact striving to celebrate and reclaim the Dionysian within their work, and I attempt to establish this within this chapter.

3) The third chapter of this thesis analyses my own practical exploration of the transgressive female body in performance in a piece entitled *Bleeding Mermaid* (2008). It examines this exploration in the context of the theory of the Dionysian, as well as investigating how and why I (re)presented my body as transgressive in the performance. The analysis furthermore questions how I understand my work on the (re)presentation of the transgressive female body in relation to, and within the context of, Finley and Abramovic's work on the same subject.

³ Performance Art began around the 1960s in Europe and America. It is performance with a sense of immediacy – in that it is hard to replicate as it interacts with each unique audience – it is thus effectively a fresh/new experience each time. It breaks the boundaries of traditional theatre (form, structure, venue, time etc) and is often shocking or provocative in nature. It mixed the aesthetics of theatre and art, often taking place in installation settings. Performance Art has developed and morphed throughout the years, and is also referred to as Live Art in Britain. A performance artist is someone who produces performance art. It is possible that Performance Art no longer exists/is possible because it no longer shocks or affects the audience.

⁴ My use of the brackets in (re)presented/(re)present throughout this thesis is because I would like to make simultaneous reference to the words/connotations of „presentation“ and „representation“, without being bound to the connotations of illusion/falseness/non-reality as is associated with the word „representation“ (in opposition to the concept of the „real“), and thus be left only with the one-dimensional approach/meaning of „presentation“.

Through this investigation, I aim to establish a link between the Dionysian and the transgressive female performing body; and investigate the motivation(s) behind the (re)presentation of the transgressive female body in performance. I hope to open up a pathway to the reclamation of the Dionysian, both in performance practice and research.

Introduction

A woman is standing in a pool of water, on a brightly lit stage incandescent in flickering hues of purple. Her bulging body is clothed in thin white. At her legs the body of a man is floating, his naked form is projected onto the broken screen above her head. As the onlookers are walking onto the stage and taking their seats in the position of the audience, she is holding out her arms to them as if in supplication or open-armed welcome. It is only her facial expression that belies the latter. She then begins to rub at her own body with an air of repulsion; alternating between hitting herself and rubbing her skin and her fat with revulsion and almost allergic despair; stroking her arms, her breasts, her stomach; pulling at the fat underneath her upper arms, and the fat beneath her chin; shifting her point of centre by shoving her belly forward and pushing it forcefully back with her hands, her body flopping from the pull of gravity. She interrupts this violent rubbing treatment of her body with a fleeting moment of a softer stroke or caress to her cheek...but this is quickly subsumed by the grotesque physical dance of disgust.

The above depiction describes the opening image of *Bleeding Mermaid*¹, a solo contemporary performance production I created in 2008. This piece was the culmination of an ongoing practical investigation as part of the first year of a Masters degree in Drama. An hour-long production, the piece explored my relationship to my body as an „other than normal“ performing body. This „other than normal“ characteristic was brought about by a high percentage of body fat present in/on the body of the performer: a physical element that was already existent as part of that body, before bringing the body into the performance space, but something that was additionally highlighted through the performance and which, by its very existence, engendered a transgressive female performing body.

This word or concept of „transgressive“, however, needs to be unpacked:

Transgressive – adjective of *transgress* – definition: 1. to violate a law, command, moral code, etc.; offend; sin. 2. to pass over or go

¹ See addendum 1.5.

beyond (a limit, boundary, etc.): *to transgress bounds of prudence*.
 3. to go beyond the limits imposed by (a law, command, etc.);
 violate; infringe: *to transgress the will of God*. From Latin
trānsgressus from *trānsgrēdī* which means „to step across“. *Trans* –
 definition: across, beyond, through. Synonyms: sin, contravene,
 disobey, do wrong, err, exceed, infringe, offend, overstep, trespass,
 violate.²

This Random House Dictionary definition of the word „transgressive“ demonstrates a clear association with the infringement of moral or social order; but the connotations of transgression also include going against that which is socially acceptable or considered the „norm“; shocking or offending people through action or appearance; repulsing or disgusting others; and doing or displaying things which are socially considered wrong or inappropriate to do or display.

The female body in *Bleeding Mermaid* can be termed a transgressive performing body because it is precisely „other than normal“ to witness a fat female body, especially one actively engaging with its fat, on stage. Furthermore it has the potential to be shocking, offensive, repulsive and socially unacceptable to some. Sedgwick and Moon explain this, describing the fat body on stage as “a kind of cul-de-sac blockage or clot in the circulation of economic value,”³ and they go further to explain: “The fat female body functions both as a disruptive *embolism* in the flow of economic circulation...and more durably...as the very *emblem* of that circulation.”⁴ As both this quote and the above dictionary definition express then, to transgress contravenes either defined societal laws, commandments and decrees, or unspoken cultural edicts and canons; but either infringement is perceived as a violation and a taboo.

² "transgress." *Dictionary.com Unabridged*. Random House, Inc. 11 Feb. 2009.

³ Epstein, Marcy J. “Consuming Performances: Eating Acts and Feminist Embodiment”. In *The Drama Review*. Vol. 40, No. 4 (Winter) 1996:30.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.30.

The notion of the transgressive is a key subject that is interrogated throughout this thesis, with definitive reference to the (re)presented body of the female performer and its inherent link to the Dionysian. With regards to the female body in performance, there is a very specific canon of taste, as well as a specific culturally and socially defined aesthetic standard of beauty and acceptability in terms of how that body should be (re)presented in Western society and performance – what is „normal“, „right“, „good“, „proper“, „acceptable“ and „polite“. Then there is a very clear discourse of transgression of these socially accepted standards. (These transgressions go much deeper than just the „fat“ body, and will be explored fully further on.) This status quo is unpacked in detail in Chapter One through the introduction of the ancient archetypal literary, philosophical and artistic conjoined concepts of the Dionysian and the Apollonian, based on the myths of the ancient Greek gods, Dionysus and Apollo.

Camille Paglia explores these archetypes. She maintains that in the Ancient World of the Mother Cults, woman governed the world. This was a Dionysian dimension where the world existed in harmony under the natural principles of benevolence and malevolence; chaos and death; celebration and ecstasy; ugliness and disorder. Woman's body was seen as sacred and magnificent because it was inherently bonded to omnipotent nature; fecund and mysterious as nature itself. But man was afraid of her power (and her mysterious bond to nature) and grew tired of being subservient to nature and its chaos, and so he took woman and shifted/elevated mankind (man and woman)⁵ from the Dionysian to an Apollonian dimension.

Paglia argues that through this paradigm shift (to the Apollonian dimension we are in today) most Dionysian elements were suppressed and concealed to maintain an

⁵ Paglia's theory is that in modern Western society, we are all Apollonian beings, male and female, who have mostly lost touch with our Dionysian bodies.

illusion of Apollonian rule or control. It is her theory that it is as a consequence of this rejection of the Dionysian (resultant of the paradigm shift) that all Dionysian hallmarks - those that once were valued, honoured, worshipped, held in high regard – came to be seen as transgressive and taboo, in the sense that they transgress the moral and social order imposed; and thus the female body, when embracing its true Dionysian natural characteristics, falls into the category of that which is transgressive.⁶

Although this thesis concentrates on the Dionysian, reference to its counterpoint, the Apollonian, is important because it is precisely the Dionysian disruption of the Apollonian, which gives rise to the transgressive. Therefore a thorough discussion of both the Dionysian and the Apollonian are vital in order to unpack the female transgressive body in performance.

Marina Abramovic and Karen Finley are two female performance artists who embody the Dionysian through their work with the transgressive female body in their individual performances. In performance, the female artist who engages with the notion of the Dionysian in her work, creates or generates a (re)presentation of the transgressive female body. Her body is perceived as transgressive because it embodies that which Apollonian Western society has continuously tried to deny or suppress: the Dionysian; therefore a social taboo is contravened in performance. But I posit that in (re)presenting and performing a transgressive female body, these two performance artists are not only attempting to transgress and contravene the Apollonian, but also to celebrate and reclaim the Dionysian.

⁶ An overly simplistic summary – see Chapter One for a full analysis and explanation. Paglia, Camille. Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson. England: Penguin Books, 1990.

Chapter Two explores this theory through the investigation of selected works of Abramovic and Finley, and examines the distinct manners in which they manipulate their bodies as tools through which to access a discourse of transgression. Abramovic utilises pain combined with physical and mental endurance in an attempt “...to denounce the many atrocities of our times...⁷; whereas Finley uses “...hyperbolic transgression...”⁸ so as to generate disgust, surprise and revulsion, designed to subvert the Apollonian construct of the female sex-object. Both artists, while attempting to reclaim the power of the Dionysian, also have distinct motivations behind their (re)presentation of the female transgressive body in performance; and it becomes implicit that Abramovic’s work leans more towards a celebration of the Dionysian and Finley’s more towards a reclamation of the Dionysian, although both artists encompass both concepts in their work.

Further motivations behind and techniques of the (re)presentation of the transgressive female body in performance are unpacked in Chapter Three with reference to my own work in this area. *Bleeding Mermaid* was inspired by research into the ancient myths of the Dionysian, and by the work of Abramovic and Finley. It was a performance generated from personal issues regarding my body weight or fat. In an attempt to grapple with these issues and express my suppressed anger and frustration, I engaged with my performing body as a Dionysian organism and so (re)presented a transgressive female performing body. Through the manipulation and embodiment of the Dionysian element of water, I attempted to reclaim the Dionysian as a discourse of celebration, beauty and power. In this chapter I examine this process.

⁷ *On Ugliness*. Trans. Alastair McEwen. Ed. Umberto Eco. London: Harvill Secker, 2007:423.

⁸ Pramaggiore, Maria T. "Resisting/Performing/Femininity: Words, Flesh, and Feminism in Karen Finley's *the Constant State of Desire*." *Theatre Journal* Vol.44.No.3 (1992): 290. [JSTOR](#). 12/10/2009.

To summarise then, this investigation seeks to 1) establish the origins of the transgressive within the Dionysian discourse; 2) explore the various manners in which Abramovic and Finley strive to celebrate and reclaim the Dionysian and so remove it from the realm of the taboo; and 3) unpack my personal attempt at reclaiming the Dionysian.

Chapter One

Transgression and the Dionysian

The Mythological Origins of Transgression

The Dionysian is no picnic. It is the chthonian realities which Apollo evades, the blind grinding of subterranean force, the long slow suck, the murk and ooze. It is the dehumanizing brutality of biology and geology, the Darwinian waste and bloodshed, the squalor and rot we must block from consciousness to retain our Apollonian integrity as persons. Western science and aesthetics are attempts to revise this horror into imaginatively palatable form.¹

1.1 Introduction: From the Characteristics of the Gods to the Archetypes

According to Camille Paglia, as she outlines in her seminal text *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickenson*, the female body is inherently connected to the Dionysian. She poses that this, in turn, is associated with nature, chaos and the transgressive. The Dionysian, in addition, stemming from its ancient roots in celebratory ritual and religious rites, is intrinsically linked to theatre and performance.

The archetypal and aesthetic associations connected with the Dionysian are inherited from the associations linked to the ancient Greek god, Dionysus². In ritualistic rites and venerations to and of Dionysus, transvestism was invoked; because Dionysus was linked to androgyny from the advent of his mythic deviant

¹ Paglia, Camille. *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. England: Penguin Books, 1990:5-6.

² According to ancient Greek mythology, Dionysus is one of the gods of the Olympian Age, although he is not actually part of the twelve Olympian gods himself. He is the son of Zeus, the ruler of the Olympian gods. In Greek Mythology, the Olympian Age came after the Titanic Age (or Golden Age) when the twelve Olympian gods overthrew the twelve Titans. They were named after their mythological home, Mount Olympus.

birth - according to mythology he was born of Zeus" thigh.³ Paglia explains how these theatrical or performative associations with transvestism have come to link Dionysus with the mother:

[A] man putting on women"s clothes...memorializes his mother, whom he watched at the boudoir ritual of her mirror....Dionysus" transvestism, then, symbolizes his radical identification with mothers.⁴

I contend that this ritualised devotion to the god Dionysus is also the advent of the performativity I associate with the Dionysian. The ceremonial donning of female clothing and performing of the transvestite role is an inherently theatrical one – the formalistic taking on and performing of a role in costume for an audience, associating this ancient ritual to an early form of theatrical performance.

Apart from the affiliation between Dionysus and the mother, transvestism, women, and performance and theatre, the Dionysian is also associated intimately with nature. Dionysus represents Plutarch"s *hygra physis* – the "wet or liquid"⁵ aspect of nature, the elemental component of life.⁶ This Dionysian natural fluid, however, is not a picturesque or charming liquidity, but rather it is the glutinous, gelatinous, primordial petri dish out of which all life is produced: "Dionysus represents opaque liquids that ooze, drip, or swell in organic sacs."⁷

Before man, before the world as we know it, there was the birth of life on our planet; a writhing, primordial matrix of slime and ooze and biological matter. It is from this heaving mass of pulpous material that all life sprung. Birth is in reality broken down

³ "Dionysus" androgyny...begins in a sexually irregular birth. When his pregnant mother, Semele, demands her lover prove he is Zeus, she is burnt to a crisp. Zeus plucks his son from her womb, makes a slit in his own thigh, and sews up the fetus till it comes to term." Paglia, Camille. Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson. England: Penguin Books, 1990:89.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p.90-91.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p.91-92.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.91.

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.480.

to reveal the womb as the cement mixer combining viscous seminal fluid with jelly-like ovum to create a web of blood, neurons, nerves, muscle, tissue, flesh, all folded up in an envelope of skin and ejected out the vagina in a sea of blood.

In the same chaotic and overflowing manner, nature burst into thriving existence:

Everything is melting in nature...blooming and withering...spuming and frothing, its mad spermatic bubbles endlessly spilling out and smashing in that inhuman round of waste, rot, and carnage...⁸

It is this reality of nature that Paglia refers to as “chthonian”⁹ – literally meaning that which dwells in the underworld, or of the subterranean, but which she has come to refer to as the primordial dark underbelly of nature. And it is this chthonian, primal nature that is represented by Dionysus. It is liquid and fluid – the amniotic fluid of life, it is the slime from which life springs, it is blood, milk, saliva, vomit, urine, faeces, semen, vaginal fluid, pus; it is abjection.

As a corollary to this liquid chthonian attribute, in nature, as in the Dionysian, there is no freedom, nor individual identity; no human rights or justice:

There is an undertow in nature, sucking phenomena back to primeval nondifferentiation. Personality maintains its discreteness by an act of will. Otherwise one person will flow helplessly into another.¹⁰

Modern Bohemian non-conformists or „hippies“ often misunderstand the Dionysian principle, mistaking it for freedom, excess and unlimited pleasure¹¹; but the ancient worshippers of the cult of Dionysus understood that he represented both pleasure

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.28.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p.28.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.293.

¹¹ “The Dionysian was trivialized by Sixties polemicists, who turned it into play and protest. Pot on the picketline. Sex in the romper room. Benign regression. But the great god Dionysus is the barbarism and brutality of mother nature.” *Ibid.*, p.94.

and pain, and their rituals consisted of sexual orgies and alcoholic, feasting excess, as well as blood and sacrifice.

Dionysus...is not pleasure but pleasure-pain, the tormenting bondage of our life in the body....Dionysian orgy ended in mutilation and dismemberment. The Maenads' frenzy was bathed in blood.¹²

This notion of excess feeds into a notion of ritual, both in the ancient Greek times and in the swinging 60s – a performative ritual of excessive pleasure, and sometimes excessive pain; a theatrical ritual of ceremony and communion.

In order to frame the topic of transgression adequately, a discussion of the Dionysian needs a brief discussion of the Apollonian. These two ancient archetypal aesthetics form a status quo: the Dionysian disruption of the Apollonian being the cause of transgression in both Western society and performance.

Apollo is in balanced opposition to Dionysus. Where Dionysus represents nature, the chthonian, fluidity, liquidity, the mother, chaos, emotion, excess, violence, cycles, ugliness, darkness, night, dissolution, collectiveness, reality; Apollo represents order, individuality, achievement, Western civilisation, rationality, aggression, definition, beauty, the visual, aestheticism, light, day, linearity, logic, society, construct, conception, illusion: "Melting and union are Dionysian; separation and individuation, Apollonian."¹³

These associations with the ancient Greek gods are the associations now linked to the archetypes of the Dionysian and the Apollonian. Paglia asserts that the balance within this existing status quo is what controls or generates the notion of

¹² *Ibid.*, p.94.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.30.

transgression in Western society and thus the contravening or contraband nature of the transgressive female body in performance.

1.2 A Dionysian Dimension: When Woman Dominated the World

Woman is the primeval fabricator, the real First Mover. She turns a gob of refuse into a spreading web of sentient being, floating on the snaky umbilical by which she leashes every man.¹⁴

The Dionysian, as well as being affiliated with the mother, nature, liquid and the chthonian, and partly as a natural corollary to these associations, is inherently linked to the female. Although the human body as a natural organism is already ruled over by the Dionysian - as a biological machine that exists through the complicated weaving together of chthonian biological forces - “[a] chthonian miasma hangs over woman...”¹⁵ specifically.

Woman’s body is rounded and soft like the shaping of the earth, but most significantly, it is fecund as nature. In the times of the ancient mother cults¹⁶ woman was respected, revered and venerated because it appeared that she had a clear link to nature. Just as nature went through distinct cycles, such as the seasons or the lunar cycle, so too did woman: “Nature’s cycles are woman’s cycles.”¹⁷

Every month with the lunar cycle, with mysterious consistency, woman would bleed. What seemed all the more uncanny was woman’s strange capability to produce offspring through a period of distension and then ejection. These are natural

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.12.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.93.

¹⁶ In ancient times – B.C. - pagan societies prior to Judeo-Christian principles worshipped/revered nature as the Divine Mother; linked to the cult of Dionysus.

¹⁷ Paglia, Camille. *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. England: Penguin Books, 1990:9-10.

processes we now understand as menstruation and pregnancy, natural Dionysian forces that we are now able to control. But in ancient times these forces were not scientifically understood nor were they by any means controllable, and so this Dionysian domination over the body resulted in human, particularly male, fear.

The very survival of humankind and primitive societies was dictated by nature and its cycles, a "...primitive world where culture had not yet risen as a defense against nature and where human life was dictated by brute rhythms of the chthonian,"¹⁸ and so woman was respected as powerful because of her intimate link to the almighty chthonian cycle of nature and the Dionysian. This respect was manifested through performative rites and rituals to appease nature; rituals that in their elementary forms hailed the advent of theatre and performance.

But as humankind has moved away from its dependence on nature through the millennia and has learnt to control it, or at least maintain the illusion of control, so the cycles or laws of nature have become less important to humankind, and by the same token the chthonian power of woman has become less important.¹⁹ So, too, the Dionysian has become a force less recognised, respected or revered.

1.3 The Chthonian Female Body: the Hallmarks of the Dionysian Revealed

Despite this illusory „divorce“ from nature and the Dionysian, chthonian forces still powerfully control the female body. The Dionysian reality is that the female body has one chthonian purpose and that is to become pregnant:

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.480.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.7-8.

...for your body does not belong to you. The female body is a chthonian machine, indifferent to the spirit who inhabits it. Organically, it has one mission, pregnancy, which we may spend a lifetime staving off.²⁰

Woman is reminded of this, as well as nature's powerful hold over her and her body's enslavement to the chthonian, on a monthly basis as she menstruates. Pregnancy itself is an uncontrollable chthonian force that takes over the female body with no consideration of the soul inside or the identity of the person who owns the body,²¹ because in nature there is no individual identity. If the pregnancy is welcome, woman succumbs willingly to this process, but in an unwanted pregnancy the chthonian reality of the violent coup becomes clear – the body becomes an incubator for an alien creature, a vampiric parasite that feeds off the host in order to survive and be born.²²

Although man has respected woman and her mysterious chthonian powers since the beginning of time, he has also been repulsed by them: rites and ceremonies abound throughout the history of Western culture and religion for the ritual cleansing of woman during menstruation, a further ritual link to performance and theatre. Paglia has a compelling argument for the reason behind this:

I will argue that it is not menstrual blood per se which disturbs the imagination...but rather the albumen in the blood....This is the chthonian matrix from which we rose. We have an evolutionary revulsion from slime, our site of biologic origins.²³

It is therefore not merely menstruation, and thus woman's chthonian powers that cause revulsion, but rather the slimy fragments of endometrium, Paglia's

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.10.

²¹ "Every pregnant woman has body and self taken over by a chthonian force beyond her control."
Ibid., p.11.

²² *Ibid.*, p.11.

²³ *Ibid.*, p.11.

“...placental jellyfish of the female sea,”²⁴ that call to mind the primordial ooze of nature from which we come – the chthonian, ugly and chaotic²⁵. It is the fact that the female is inherently, biologically and intrinsically linked with the Dionysian and the chthonian that causes the revulsion. It is this revulsion which leads to the schism between the Apollonian and the Dionysian, and it is this same revulsion, when manipulated, employed, or encountered, which causes the advent of the transgressive female body in performance.

Paglia unpacks this revulsion further: “Humid horror: here is that inescapable connection I find between female physiology and the chthonian liquid realm.”²⁶ It is this „humid horror“ that inspires revulsion in the Apollonian mind, further than just the association to the albumen references. Paglia clearly links the female body to the Dionysian through her use of the word „horror“. The horror of this Dionysian liquidity is that it dissolves form and identity, leaving nothing solid or whole. As already mentioned, in nature there is unity and conglomeration, a melting together of all things, a melting apart of clarity and individuality and objects.

This *hygra physis* is typified by fat: “Fatness is fluidity, the Dionysian master principle.”²⁷ The female body is naturally rounder and softer than the male body; medically or scientifically, woman has a higher percentage of body fat than man. Fat is mostly liquid – a chthonian energy storage system that is inexorably bound to the female figure, “...fat...is mother nature’s grip on the human will.”²⁸ This is clearly depicted in ancient fertility statues such as *The Venus of Willendorf*²⁹

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.11.

²⁵ “...the mucoid, the swampy morass I identify with female physiology and Dionysus.” *Ibid.*, p.591.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.434.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p.92.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.359.

²⁹ A small statuette from the Stone Age.

...where procreative woman is bound down by her own abundance...The intimacy between fat and fertility is demonstrated by menstruation halting in woman athletes whose body fat falls below a certain biological level.³⁰

Being a Dionysian principle or hallmark, fat becomes a transgressive principle in/on the contemporary female performing body, especially when deliberately being manipulated as part of the attempt at (re)presenting the female transgressive body³¹; although it must be noted that fat was not always seen as a transgressive characteristic throughout the ages.³²

According to Paglia's theory, sex is also a liquid chthonian Dionysian act.³³ Sex, apart from linking us back to the chthonian, reveals the true nature of the Dionysian, embodying its pleasure-pain principle:

The operations of sex are convulsive, from intercourse through menstruation and childbirth: tension and distention, spasm, contraction, expulsion, relief. Sex is not the pleasure principle but the Dionysian bondage of pleasure-pain.³⁴

This pleasure-pain principle is manifested in the act of *sparagmos*³⁵, part of the rites of ritualistic reverence of chthonian nature in the ancient mother cults or the cult of Dionysus. This sacrament involved the tearing apart of a live animal or human, which was then either eaten or ritually discarded. This was an offering to the destructive side of nature which melts down individuality through violent chaos into chthonian

³⁰ Paglia, Camille. Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson. England: Penguin Books, 1990:79.

³¹ For example, my own attempt at the (re)presentation of the transgressive female body in *Bleeding Mermaid*, which I examine in Chapter Three.

³² In the Baroque Period, for example, fat was considered a pleasing characteristic in women.

³³ "One of my central theses is that sex and parturition occur in the liquid realm." Paglia, Camille. Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson. England: Penguin Books, 1990:294-295.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.27.

³⁵ "The violent principle of Dionysian cult is *sparagmos*, which in Greek means „a rending, tearing, mangling“ and secondly „a convulsion, spasm.“ The body of the god, or a human or animal substitute, is torn to pieces, which are eaten or scattered like seed.“ *Ibid.*, p.95.

liquidity, “Dionysian sparagmos and Dionysian liquidity are analogous. Sparagmos denies the identity of objects. It is nature grinding down and dissolving matter to energy.”³⁶

Dionysian sparagmos was an ecstasy of sexual excitation and superhuman strength.... The scattering of sparagmos inseminated the earth.... Nature lives by sparagmos....She is forever tearing apart in order to remake...³⁷

Pain and ecstasy represent a loss of control and a deviance from order through emotional and physical excess, in short: a form of chaos. Therefore they directly subvert Apollonian laws of control, delineation and order; and so manifestly represent Dionysian transgression.

This ritualistic veneration of Dionysus or the Dionysian through *sparagmos* can be seen as a form of performance. Through the celebratory rite of formalised re-enactment, a type of ancient theatre is created, reminiscent of the contemporary performance art as produced by the Viennese Actionists³⁸ or Marina Abramovic³⁹, in which the bodies of animals are ritually dealt with, and the concepts of pain and ecstasy are explored. RoseLee Goldberg describes a moment in one of the works of the Viennese Actionists:

They viewed the body as so much flesh, draping intestines from eviscerated lamb carcasses over performers in rites connected with the primitive cult of Dionysus, in which the tearing of animals and eating of raw flesh generated a state of ecstasy and frenzy.⁴⁰

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p.97.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.95.

³⁸ A group of Austrian performance artists who worked predominantly in the 1960s.

³⁹ See Chapter Two for more on performance art, with particular reference to the work of Marina Abramovic.

⁴⁰ Goldberg, RoseLee. Performance: Live Art Since the 60s. Thames and Hudson, 1998:96.

1.4 From Dionysus to Apollo: Man's Fear of Woman's Terrible Power

The gravest challenge to our hopes and dreams is the messy biological business-as-usual that is going on within us and without us at every hour of every day. Consciousness is a pitiful hostage of its flesh-envelope, whose surges, circuits, and secret murmurings it cannot stay or speed.⁴¹

According to Paglia, woman accepts the dominance of nature and accepts that her body is inescapably bound to the chthonic. She realises she has no choice in the matter: "Woman does not dream of transcendental or historical escape from the natural cycle, since she *is* that cycle."⁴² Paglia elaborates:

Biologic femaleness is a sequence of circular returns....Woman's centrality gives her a stability of identity. She does not have to become but only to be.⁴³

She is not deluded into believing that there is such a thing as free will or freedom because try as she might, her body is taken over by the chthonian Dionysian force of nature on a monthly basis.⁴⁴ On the other hand, man does not accept this subservience.

Paglia argues that the male identity is not stable because since birth he has been fleeing the chthonian and has been trying to escape the female, in the form of his mother, and nature, in search of his own autonomous identity:

[Woman's] centrality is a great obstacle to man, whose quest for identity she blocks. He must transform himself into an independent being, that is, a being free of her. If he does not, he will simply fall back into her.⁴⁵

⁴¹ Paglia, Camille. Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson. England: Penguin Books, 1990:7.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p.10.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p.9-10.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.10.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, p.9-10.

Man therefore has the drive to create or conceptualise in order to discover his own identity as self-contained and individual. This drive towards conceptualisation and individuality, and away from the Dionysian, cyclical and chthonian, is an Apollonian one. This is significant because it is precisely this move away from the Dionysian that gave rise to the nascence of transgression. In contemporary Western society or performance anything of Dionysian nature is perceived as transgressive as a result.

This Apollonian enterprise of conceptualisation is accentuated by the genital metaphor. There is an opposition between the Dionysian female genital metaphor and the Apollonian male genital metaphor, with the essential difference being that the female genitals are hidden while the male genitals are visible. The metaphor extends to the notion of female mystery versus the male continually conceptualising and projecting outwards and upwards. This metaphor is applicable to the realm of theatre and performativity where that projection and conceptualisation extends to the aggressive and objective gaze of the audience, translating into a scopophilic (male) gaze that creates a passive (female) object.⁴⁶

The Apollonian conceptualisation, or move away from the Dionysian, was motivated largely by fear. Not only is the vagina Dionysian in metaphor, but it is also chthonian in literal appearance: "The woundlike rawness of female genitals is a symbol of the unredeemability of chthonian nature. In aesthetic terms, female genitals are lurid in color, vagrant in contour, and architecturally incoherent."⁴⁷

Paglia argues that this raw ugliness is like an open wound that is a constant reminder of birth, that every vagina therefore becomes reminiscent of the scene of

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.19-23.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.17.

that violent separation.⁴⁸ Paglia further maintains that this is the symbol of the chthonian power of woman, and that it is this chthonian female power that inspires fear in man.

The fear of the chthonic Dionysian power of woman is linked to a fear of the mother, which in turn is associated with the male instability of identity, or need to establish an individual identity as separate from the Dionysian, and thus separate from the mother:

The chthonian superflux of emotion is a male problem. A man must do battle with that enormity, which resides in woman and nature. He can attain selfhood only by beating back the daemonic cloud that would swallow him up...⁴⁹

Woman, as mother, thus is imbued with the threat of reappropriating man as part of her Dionysian self, dissolving the individual identity which man has strived to define against nature's chthonic liquidity: "...the malign gravitation of mother nature, who dissolves all forms in her cycle of change and remaking."⁵⁰ In a Dionysian paradigm then, man is left in an untenable position,

Male power can never surpass female power. We live in the slime of our bodies, which hold imagination hostage. Our mother-born bodies are unregenerative nature, beyond God's redemption. The „slimy sea“ of chthonian nature nullifies the words of Christ.⁵¹

Paglia's entire theory revolves around the premise that this intolerable fear and existing status quo drove man toward Apollonian conceptualisation and projection as

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.16.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p.18-19, and "Man justifiably fears being devoured by woman, who is nature's proxy." *Ibid.*, p.16.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p.167.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p.324-325.

a defence against the omnipotent Dionysian force of woman⁵², “[m]ale bonding and patriarchy were the recourse to which man was forced by his terrible sense of woman’s power, her imperviousness, her archetypal confederacy with chthonian nature.”⁵³

It is for this reason, to retain his individual identity and escape the chthonian, that man shifted humankind from the Dionysian to the Apollonian, establishing society, culture and order. As Umberto Eco describes the Apollonian, it is an “...ordered whole governed by a single law,”⁵⁴ as opposed to the chthonian chaos of nature. And it is only through the existence of order and law that there can be transgression.

1.5 The Evolution from Earth-Cult to Sky-Cult

It is this paradigm shift from the ancient mother cults of the Dionysian towards the Apollonian Western societies of civilisation and culture, dating back to the time of Classic Ancient Greece⁵⁵, that Paglia coins as the shift from earth-cult to sky-cult; or the move from belly-magic to head magic. Woman had a clear chthonian magic, linked to the Dionysian power of nature, “Woman was an idol of belly-magic.”⁵⁶ But man had his own brand of magic through which to fight this belly-magic of woman: head-magic, in the face of the terrible power of woman:

Men...invented culture as a defense against female nature. Sky-cult[s] switch of the creative locus from earth to sky is a shift from

⁵² “Man, repelled by his debt to a physical mother, created an alternate reality, a heterocosm to give him the illusion of freedom.” *Ibid.*, p.9.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.12.

⁵⁴ On Beauty: A History of a Western Idea. Trans. Alastair McEwen. Ed. Umberto Eco. London: Secker & Warburg, 2004:61.

⁵⁵ The Classical Period in ancient Greece dawned in approximately 500 B.C., after the Archaic Period.

⁵⁶ Paglia, Camille. Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson. England: Penguin Books, 1990:9.

belly-magic to head-magic. And from this defensive head-magic has come the spectacular glory of male civilization...⁵⁷

Tired of his subservience to nature, man created western society to order and control nature – to elevate himself above nature: “Both the Apollonian and Judeo-Christian traditions are transcendental. That is, they seek to surmount or transcend nature.”⁵⁸

Society, culture, civilisation and religion, then, are Apollonian constructs that serve as protective barriers against chaotic, violent and omnipotent Dionysian nature: “Society is an artificial construction, a defense against nature’s power...reducing our humiliating passivity to nature”⁵⁹

This construction, however, is an Apollonian illusion that merely covers the Dionysian reality and makes it more palatable⁶⁰. As Paglia emphasises, “Apollo can swerve from nature, but he cannot obliterate it.”⁶¹ Modern human beings labour under the delusion that they are free – that they are free from nature and that they are in control and that they have free will, but the Dionysian reality is that “[c]ivilized man conceals from himself the extent of his subordination to nature.”⁶² James Porter rhetorically asks: “What does the world look like in the absence of Apollo, which is to say, without its Apoll[o]nian transfiguration? The thought is literally unthinkable...”⁶³

The very fabric of Apollonian society rests on the existence of rules, whether criminal laws or socially accepted and unpunishable edicts, and any transgressions thereof threaten dissolution into chthonic Dionysian chaos: “We have made Apollonian

⁵⁷ Paglia, Camille. Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson. England: Penguin Books, 1990:9.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p.8.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.1.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p.1.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p.14.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p.1.

⁶³ Porter, James I. The Invention of Dionysus: An Essay on *the Birth of Tragedy*. Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000:156.

demarcations that function as ritual preserves against nature; hence our complex criminal codes and elaborate erotics of transgression.”⁶⁴ The female transgressive body in performance then is a violation of these Apollonian laws, the unspoken yet socially accepted codes that govern Western society – this body embodies, manipulates or utilises the taboo associations of the Dionysian.

In the evolution from the Dionysian to the Apollonian, man took woman with him from earth-cult to sky-cult. Modern Western woman is thus an Apollonian construct struggling with her Dionysian roots. Therefore the woman who (re)presents the transgressive female body in performance does so in order to claim or reclaim the Dionysian, and she can do so only by disrupting the Apollonian social order. And so, even though the Dionysian is associated with the female body, the Dionysian is also linked to transgression in modern Western society and performance, and is therefore perceived as transgressive by both men and women.

Paglia explains that dysmenorrhoea⁶⁵ was a rarity in the ancient Dionysian mother cults, because woman was in synch with chthonian nature. However, she points out that modern “Western woman is in an agonistic relation to her own body: for her, biologic normalcy is suffering, and health an illness.”⁶⁶ This is very simply because the Apollonian attempts to deny the chthonian; but, as has been established, woman, no matter how ingrained she is in Apollonian culture, society and civilisation, cannot deny or escape nature.

It is precisely in advanced western society, which attempts to improve or surpass nature and which holds up individualism and

⁶⁴ Paglia, Camille. *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. England: Penguin Books, 1990:35-36.

⁶⁵ Pain or problems associated with menstruation.

⁶⁶ Paglia, Camille. *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. England: Penguin Books, 1990:10.

self-realization as a model, that the stark facts of woman's condition emerge with painful clarity.⁶⁷

More importantly, Paglia further postulates that it is at this particular time that woman is caught between the Dionysian and the Apollonian: "In every premenstrual woman struggling to govern her temper, sky-cult wars again with earth-cult."⁶⁸

It is this illusion of order through Apollonian construction and conceptualisation that has trapped woman in a position where any expression of her true Dionysian nature becomes a transgression. But through the performance of her inherently Dionysian body, she is able to break down that Apollonian illusion of social order and civilisation, and, in so doing, she (re)presents a/her female transgressive body in performance.

1.6 The Suppression of the Dionysian: Beauty as an Apollonian Construction

One of the greatest illusions created by Apollonian conceptualisation is beauty, a constructed image at the opposite end of the spectrum to the Dionysian female transgressive body. As Eco claims, "[b]eauty does not participate in truth, but is its artifice."⁶⁹ Part of the Apollonian strategy of suppressing nature; minimising its hold over man – or enhancing the delusion thereof; and neutralising its fearful power; is reducing it down to prettiness, "[o]ur focus on the pretty is an Apollonian strategy."⁷⁰

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, p.10.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.12.

⁶⁹ *On Beauty: A History of a Western Idea*. Trans. Alastair McEwen. Ed. Umberto Eco. London: Secker & Warburg, 2004:317.

⁷⁰ Paglia, Camille. *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. England: Penguin Books, 1990:5.

We don't look at nature and see a chthonic undertow of destruction and renewal. We, through our trained Apollonian delusion, see beauty⁷¹. We lull our fears to sleep by plastering fragile masks of beauty onto the Dionysian, "[s]cratch that skin, and nature's daemonic ugliness will erupt."⁷² Beauty, therefore, is a defensive outlook on chthonic nature, a suppression of the chaos of nature that continuously threatens to overwhelm man and dissolve identity.

As Paglia states, "The daemonism of chthonian nature is the [W]est's dirty secret."⁷³ But this is a secret that we are not even aware of keeping. The Apollonian illusion is only effective if we are able to fool ourselves completely. Paglia describes this absolute delusion: "Beauty, an ecstasy of the eye, drugs us and allows us to act. Beauty is our Apollonian revision of the chthonian."⁷⁴ Without this „Apollonian revision“ we would be paralysed with fear in the face of the chthonian; man would be unable to conquer the awesome power of Dionysian woman, sky-cult would lose to earth-cult.

This Apollonian notion or illusion of beauty is significant because it is this which is used to cover up the transgressive Dionysian, and which is held as the ideal in opposition to the Dionysian, where the transgressive Dionysian is seen as ugly. There have been different standards of beauty throughout the ages⁷⁵, but they all have one thing in common: they are all Apollonian revisions of the Dionysian. Eco argues that although these standards of beauty may have changed with the differing stages in history, people have still always tried to define beauty with reference to a

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, p.15.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p.5.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.6.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.16.

⁷⁵ "Standards of beauty are conceptualizations projected by each culture." *Ibid.*, p.31-32.

certain “stable model,”⁷⁶ because throughout history beauty was seen as synonymous to good, with reference to moral worth and favour. Therefore not only is the Dionysian associated with transgression and ugliness, but also with moral lack or deficiency.

This Apollonian construct of beauty created a hierarchy in which beauty was synonymous with good, and ugly with bad. Furthermore, there was an ethos that beauty was equivalent to divinity and that “[b]eauty is the first step of a ladder leading to God.”⁷⁷ This led to a belief that “Beauty replaces morality as the divine order.”⁷⁸ The antithesis of this is that the “...ugly belong to a lower order of being...”⁷⁹

Eco unpacks this opposition of the divine versus the base, with its correlating affiliations to love and revulsion, postulating that human beings in Western society have always been disgusted by, or at least uneasy with, Dionysian elements, such as excrement, the abject and sex. It is therefore defensively labelled as ugly, and arouses in us feelings of embarrassment and shame, and any encounter with it in the public sphere is imbued with a sense of violation.⁸⁰ He quotes Montaigne who ruminates on the Dionysian act of sex:

...what has the sexual act ever done to mankind, what has this natural, necessary, and legitimate act done that men do not dare talk of it if not with shame and exclude it from all serious or pondered discourse?⁸¹

⁷⁶ *On Ugliness*. Trans. Alastair McEwen. Ed. Umberto Eco. London: Harvill Secker, 2007:15.

⁷⁷ Paglia, Camille. *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. England: Penguin Books, 1990:121.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, p.122.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, p.515.

⁸⁰ *On Ugliness*. Trans. Alastair McEwen. Ed. Umberto Eco. London: Harvill Secker, 2007:131.

⁸¹ Quoting Montaigne, *Essays II, V. Ibid.*, p.131.

It is for this precise reason that beauty becomes such an important construct in Apollonian society: disgust is a rational Apollonian response to the Dionysian, rationality being an Apollonian hallmark. However the female is inherently Dionysian. Eco elaborates and provides descriptions of Apollonian disgust provoked by the Dionysian. One man states, "Think of when she has her menses and she will disgust you,"⁸² while another writes:

....[T]here is undoubtedly nothing ugly nor more unpleasant than the procreation of...man....In fact, anyone who witnesses those repulsive mixtures of dark blood, filthy seed, dirty menses and putrid sperm would be profoundly nauseated.⁸³

This is where the Apollonian construction of beauty becomes necessary to overcome rational Apollonian disgust at natural Dionysian processes. Paglia maintains that this is in order to ensure woman's desirability⁸⁴. She claims that animals mate out of a biological imperative but human intelligence makes desire more than merely biological, therefore desire must be highlighted and affirmed.⁸⁵ The chthonian reality of the female is rationally repulsive, thus woman must be plastered with beauty to assure her desirability.

Therefore man conceptualised woman "[b]y focusing on the shapely..."⁸⁶ in order to suppress his fear of her as a Dionysian being, as nature's proxy: "...by making woman a sex object, man has struggled to fix and stabilize nature's dreadful flux."⁸⁷ It is this revision of the chthonian that has displaced woman's natural Dionysian body into the realm of the transgressive, and has emphasised her Apollonian desirability.

⁸² An extract from Francisco de Quevedo's *Fin del mundo por de dentro* (1612). *Ibid.*, p.173.

⁸³ An extract from Antonio Rocco's *On Ugliness* (1635). *Ibid.*, p.149.

⁸⁴ Paglia, Camille. *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. England: Penguin Books, 1990:16.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, p.16.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, p.30.

⁸⁷ *Ibid.*, p.30.

The conception of the Apollonian illusionary construct of beauty feeds into the aforementioned notion of the scopophilic gaze in performance. The concept of the aesthetic of beauty revolves around the projection of the gaze or the eye, which focuses outwards and clearly delineates an object of beauty. As Paglia maintains, “The westerner knows by seeing;”⁸⁸ the Apollonian is visual and mute⁸⁹, and remains at a distance, whereas the Dionysian is raw contact with no boundaries.⁹⁰ However, the Western eye aggressively objectifies that upon which it gazes, creating passive objects. This represents the domineering and scopophilic gaze of the audience, the active subject; whereas the female performer becomes idealised sex-object and passive object.⁹¹

Paglia asserts that it is this Apollonian construct of beauty, when applied to woman, which gives rise to the term „femininity“, itself an Apollonian creation. Through the illusionary veil of constructed Apollonian prettiness or beauty to cover the dark, chthonian horror of Dionysian femaleness, Western society throughout the ages has actively moved away from femaleness towards femininity; femaleness connoting the Dionysian reality of the female body whereas femininity connotes the Apollonian construct of beauty for the female body. Paglia places this shift historically in Egypt: “Egypt is the first to glamourize small breasts. The breast as vernal adornment rather than rubbery milk sac, outline rather than volume: Apollonian Egypt made the first shift of value from femaleness to femininity...”⁹²

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, p.5.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, p.595.

⁹⁰ *On Beauty: A History of a Western Idea*. Trans. Alastair McEwen. Ed. Umberto Eco. London: Secker & Warburg, 2004:57.

⁹¹ Paglia, Camille. *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. England: Penguin Books, 1990:37.

⁹² *Ibid.*, p.60.

If one subscribes to Paglia's theory then, the female transgressive body in performance is one that actively engages with its chthonic nature and grapples with its femaleness, discarding notions of beauty and femininity; a disruption of the Apollonian social order but a reclamation and celebration of the Dionysian female.

1.7 Nietzsche on the Dionysian

Friedrich Nietzsche wrote extensively on the Dionysian and Apollonian archetypes, most notably in his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). His theories on the Dionysian seem to support those held by Paglia. In this book, which Philip Auslander describes as a "canonical work of dramatic theory,"⁹³ Nietzsche describes the Dionysian as "the creative, primordial life force...that is, the chaotic life force that precedes the order of civilization and is its creative source."⁹⁴

Nietzsche thus concurs with Paglia's theory that the ancient world was dominated by a Dionysian order, prior to the paradigm shift towards the Apollonian era. However, in contrast to Paglia, he describes an interim period in the culture of ancient Greece in which there existed a certain balance between the two forces.⁹⁵ Auslander describes Nietzsche's view on the subsequent shift to Apollonian society; similar to Paglia's, yet with a much clearer emphasis on the negative impact of this shift on the psyche of humankind:

Nietzsche believed that in the centuries since ancient Greece, western civilization had gradually repressed the Dionysian, leaving

⁹³ Auslander, Philip. *Theory for Performance Studies: A Student's Guide* London and New York: Routledge, 2008:22.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.22.

⁹⁵ "Contrary to the prevailing view of ancient Greece as a world of noble harmony and rational order, Nietzsche argued that Greek culture existed in the tension between two opposing forces: on the one hand, the Apollonian forces of moral order and sober rationality; on the other hand, the Dionysian forces of amoral desire and non-rational, creative exuberance." *Ibid.*, p.22.

modern western society predominantly Apollonian, starved of creative energy and in poor health.⁹⁶

Nietzsche determines the root of this „poor health“ in the “dualistic separation of God and Nature,”⁹⁷ and in the belief that humankind has lost faith in a „transcendent“ God.

According to Auslander, he locates this God in the chthonic, natural Dionysian:

[Nietzsche“s] God...faces an entrance into the qualitative primacy of consciousness, into the totality of being, without moral deduction... where good and evil, the ugly and the beautiful...dwell side by side...„even the ugly and horrible are redeemed and made meaningful in the fatality of the whole.“⁹⁸

Nietzsche“s philosophy around the Dionysian poses that we – men and women alike - are all trapped within our unnatural Apollonian society and culture, and thus he appealed for a “resurrection of the Dionysian...”⁹⁹ in order to reach psychological and spiritual wellbeing. This ties in to his theory of „tragic faith“ by which we are constantly striving to reclaim the Dionysian and so break free of Apollonian constructs and illusions: “The symbolic quintessence of this tragic faith is Dionysus, who, according to Nietzsche, represents the passionate and tortured search for a meaningful life, beyond any objective ground of moral principles.”¹⁰⁰

Ikenna Dieke elaborates Nietzsche“s philosophy on the Dionysian:

For Nietzsche...Dionysus is skeptic, critic, destroyer, builder, and creator. He is the „Ur-Eine,“ primal oneness and the ground of

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.22-23.

⁹⁷ Dieke, Ikenna. “Tragic Faith and the Dionysian Unconscious: An Interfacing of Novelist Baraka and Friedrich Nietzsche.” Black American Literature Forum. Vol.24. No.1. (1990). Academic Search Premier. 22/11/10

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹⁹ Auslander, Philip. Theory for Performance Studies: A Student’s Guide London and New York: Routledge, 2008:23.

¹⁰⁰ Dieke, Ikenna. “Tragic Faith and the Dionysian Unconscious: An Interfacing of Novelist Baraka and Friedrich Nietzsche.” Black American Literature Forum. Vol.24. No.1. (1990). Academic Search Premier. 22/11/10

being, ever contradictory and every suffering....He is also the will to power, the will to overcome, to affirm, and to create.¹⁰¹

Yet, while this theory concurs with Paglia's in that it describes the Dionysian as powerful, and malevolent whilst simultaneously benevolent, Dieke goes further to affirm Nietzsche's view of the Dionysian as a representation of modern humankind's quest, in the face of dehumanising and denaturalising Apollonian society, to reclaim life, wellbeing, or the „meaningful life“:

Dionysus is Nietzsche's symbol of modern man who has lost all traditional values and beliefs and faces nihilism and despair. But he also represents the heroic individual who overcomes nihilism and finds a new meaning of life...¹⁰²

This return to wellbeing or a meaningful life, as is posed by Nietzsche as the Dionysian symbol, or the reclamation of the Dionysian, is echoed by Walter Friedrich Otto: "...the Dionysian nature is one of madness, a madness inherent in a world itself, not the passing or lasting derangement that comes as a disease, or even a sickness or degenerative state, but the companion to one's „most perfect health“."¹⁰³

For Nietzsche, the reclamation of the Dionysian represents a return to full consciousness and unarticulated desires – a journey into the chthonic and chaotic. He is quoted saying: "the greatest epochs of our lives come when we gain the courage to rebaptise our evil as our best."¹⁰⁴ This description sounds very similar to the female performer manipulating her transgressive body onstage in order to reclaim and celebrate the Dionysian. He states: "...the Dionysian artist plunges into

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*

¹⁰² *Ibid.*

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*

time, risks [her]self and [her] world in the flux, dark to all except [her] desire, to the élan of the dance to which [she] abandons [her]self.”¹⁰⁵

1.8 The Abject as Dionysian

The abject refers to that which is seen as „other“ to the self, most notably bodily fluids or excretions that reveal the Dionysian nature of the chthonic and organic human body, such as blood, urine, faeces, vomit, spittle and so forth. Along with this notion of „othering“ is a coexistent notion of revulsion and antipathy. Bert Oliver elaborates:

„Abject“...implies a strong aversion to, a separation, distancing, or rejecting of something as „other“; a banishment of it to the periphery of consciousness in an attempt to keep it at arm“s length, and...to attain a sense of self-with-borders or boundaries.¹⁰⁶

This notion of human subjectivity as interlinked with abjection is one theorised by Julia Kristeva.¹⁰⁷ She maintains that an infant is initially unable to identify between itself and its mother – that the baby, for the first period of its life, thinks that it is its mother or, in other words, has no subjectivity of its own yet. But she notes that there comes a time when that infant does identify its own subjectivity and this is what generates abjection or the notion of the abject.

Tina Chanter explains: “The process by which the infant separates from the mother, and in doing so situates itself, produces subjectivity precisely by rejecting what it

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁰⁶ Oliver, Bert. “Nature as ‚abject“, critical psychology, and ‚revolt“: The pertinence of Kristeva”. *South African Journal of Psychology*. Vol.37. No.3. (2007). *Academic Search Premier*. 25/11/10

¹⁰⁷ Who herself draws on the theories of other philosophers, such as Jacques Lacan and Sigmund Freud.

took itself to be – the mother's body, or part of the amorphous maternal corpus."¹⁰⁸

Therefore the mother becomes the first source of abject, rather than an object or subject.

Kristeva maintains that it is from then on that human beings separate themselves from the abject as a means by which to sustain their subjectivity: "...all is rejected and a „territory“ is created „edged by the abject“;¹⁰⁹ however at the very borders of this subjectivity, constantly threatening to blur the boundaries, hovers the abject. This echoes Paglia's theory of the Apollonian as a carefully structured illusionary construct threatened by the reality of the Dionysian truth. A very clear rejection of the Dionysian abject becomes necessary in order to maintain an Apollonian subjectivity, and so a discourse of transgression is developed. Chanter explains that even though we transgress the demarcations often,

...we separate ourselves from another, create the sacred as distinct from the profane, institute boundaries...whereby the clean and the proper body comes to be socially acceptable. We partake in myths that we continue to articulate by establishing...the pure as divergent from the impure...¹¹⁰

This abject is therefore distinctly located within the sphere of the Dionysian. Kristeva associates it with revulsion and maintains that the reason it inspires such horror is because it relates back to the childhood pre-linguistic state and elicits the fear of the breakdown of meaning, of language, of signification, of self, of the discernment between subject and object. It imports the chaos of the Dionysian, the non-distinction

¹⁰⁸ Chanter, Tina. "Abjection, or Why Freud Introduces the Phallus: Identification, Castration Theory, and the Logic of Fetishism" The Southern Journal of Philosophy. Vol.42. (2004) Academic Search Premier. 25/11/10

¹⁰⁹ Harrington, Thea. "The Speaking Abject in Kristeva's *Powers of Horror*" Hypatia. (1998) Academic Search Premier. 21/11/10

¹¹⁰ Chanter, Tina. "Abjection, or Why Freud Introduces the Phallus: Identification, Castration Theory, and the Logic of Fetishism" The Southern Journal of Philosophy. Vol.42. (2004) Academic Search Premier. 25/11/10

of objects, the „blind grind and ooze of matter;“¹¹¹ the Apollonian fear of dissolution into the anarchy of the Dionysian. She maintains that the confrontation with any wound in the body, any blood, and by association, any display of pain, results in the fearful confrontation with the Dionysian reality of the body as a mortal envelope of flesh that will rot and decay, and become consumed by nature and recycled as a source of natural energy. Kristeva explains:

„The corpse...*show[s] me* what I permanently thrust aside in order to live....If dung signifies the other side of the border, the place where I am not and which permits me to be, the corpse, the most sickening of wastes, is a border that has encroached upon everything.“¹¹²

The manipulation of the abject in performance then brings this Dionysian reality of mortality to the fore in a manner that is very real and immediate, as opposed to a theatrical representation thereof. Therefore the audience is viscerally confronted with the abject and hence their own mortality and/or Dionysian nature. Antonin Artaud conceived of this in his vision of/for a Theatre of Cruelty, and as Finter and Griffin state: “Representation, as far as its pact with the theatre goes, has been set free: the nonrepresentable of all that is alive and present, which Artaud had already called for in his theatre, should take its rightful place onstage.”¹¹³

Artaud grappled with the question of how genuine suffering of the body could be translated into language, or how it could transcend the boundaries of our known language, and how theatre could facilitate this.¹¹⁴ He suffered from a painful

¹¹¹ Paglia, Camille. Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson. England: Penguin Books, 1990.

¹¹² Quoting Julia Kristeva. Oliver, Bert. “Nature as „abject“, critical psychology, and „revolt“: The pertinence of Kristeva”. South African Journal of Psychology. Vol.37. No.3. (2007). Academic Search Premier. 25/11/10

¹¹³ Finter, Helga and Matthew Griffin. "Antonin Artaud and the Impossible Theatre: The Legacy of the Theatre of Cruelty." TDR Vol.41.No.4 (1997):20. JSTOR. 30/12/2009.

¹¹⁴ (*Ibid.*, p.18.)

hereditary disease himself and thus "...wanted to give voice to that which had made his body suffer."¹¹⁵

He maintained that there is a certain „attraction“ to the authentic danger of the „real“ for the audience, and that this form of performance frees the audience member from the traditional “contract of the „as if“,”¹¹⁶ conventionally found in theatre or performance, but that at the same time it has the unpleasant side-effect of confronting the audience with their suppressed Dionysian corporeal realities of the *objet*.¹¹⁷

Blau elaborates by connecting this theory with that of Deleuze and Guattari’s notion of „the body without organs“, a theory involving „lived“ experience as opposed to the representation thereof or mode of mimesis.¹¹⁸ He provides a description of the „real“ as manifested by the body without organs, as described by Deleuze and Guattari:

Nothing here is representative; rather, it is all life and lived experience: the actual lived emotion of having breasts does not resemble breasts, it does not represent them, any more than a predestined zone in the egg resembles the organ that it is going to be stimulated to produce within itself.¹¹⁹

Hence the Dionysian *objet* not only threatens subjectivity and the Apollonian construct, but it also breaks the traditional mould of representational theatre through confronting the audience with the „real“.

¹¹⁵ (*Ibid.*, p.26.)

¹¹⁶ (*Ibid.*, p.19.)

¹¹⁷ (*Ibid.*, p.19-20.)

¹¹⁸ Very simplistic explanation – see Blau, Herbert. "The Surpassing Body." *TDR* (1988-) Vol.35.No.2 (1991): 74-98. [JSTOR](https://www.jstor.org/stable/4547000). 12/10/2009 for further information.

¹¹⁹ (*Ibid.*, p.94 – footnote 3.)

1.9 Reclaiming the Dionysian: The Female Transgressive Body

The Apollonian construct of the female body, or female beauty, creates an ideal in Western society which, by virtue of its artifice, cannot be attained, yet it has still come to be viewed as the „norm“ for woman. The transgressive female body, however, is (re)presented as a subversion of the „ideal“ or „normal“ female body in Western society, through the manipulation and employment of natural chthonian Dionysian elements.

This body is ugly and jarring; it is loud and vulgar; it is female but not feminine; it is a body that eats and consumes; it is un-seductive, raw, fleshy, flabby, fat, chaotic, bleeding, salivating, urinating, defecating, vomiting, menstruating and abjecting. It is a body that challenges socialised notions of what is „right“ and „proper“ in/for the female body, both in Western society and performance, and attempts to redefine or rewrite notions of beauty and normality, and so reclaim the Dionysian – removing it from the realm of the transgressive.

1.10 From Theory to Performance: Postdramatic Theatre

Hans-Thies Lehmann analyses the new forms of theatre that have developed since the 1960s in his book *Postdramatic Theatre*, with particular focus on the language and new aesthetics of postdramatic or contemporary performances.¹²⁰ Through the lens of this comprehensive study, Paglia’s theories, as outlined in this Chapter, can be applied to performance, as well as providing an introductory link to the work of the two performance artists discussed in Chapter Two.

¹²⁰ Lehmann, Hans-Thies. *Postdramatic Theatre*. Trans. and Intro. Karen Jürs-Munby. London and New York: Routledge, 2006:1.

In her introduction, Karen Jürs-Munby points out that there has been a significant „paradigm shift“ from the study of traditional theatre, to the „...emergence of Performance Studies as a discipline,“¹²¹ due to the shifting trends in performance. She adds that these trends heralded the move within theatre away from the supremacy of text, and towards the written text as just one part of many elements that contribute towards performance.

Lehmann describes the traditional mode of theatre, which he terms „dramatic theatre“, and I find patently linked to the Apollonian, as the precursor to this shift in theatrical modes. He characterises dramatic theatre as „...subordinated to the primacy of the text,“¹²² and as having the function of catharsis within the audience.¹²³

...dramatic theatre was the formation of illusion. It wanted to construct a *fictive cosmos* and let all the stage represent – be – a world...abstracted but intended for the imagination and empathy of the spectator to follow and complete the *illusion*.¹²⁴

This is linked to the traditional model of Aristotelian Dramatic Theatre – itself a rational, logical, Apollonian construct for the theatrical structure of tragedy.¹²⁵ “For [Aristotle] drama is a structure that gives a logical (namely dramatic) order to the confusing chaos and plenitude of Being.”¹²⁶

¹²¹ Jürs-Munby, Karen in Introduction. *Ibid.*, p.4.

¹²² *Ibid.*, p.21.

¹²³ Lehmann’s definition of catharsis: “...the bringing about of affective recognition and solidarity by means of the drama and the affects represented and transmitted to the audience within its frame.” *Ibid.*, p.21.

¹²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.22.

¹²⁵ “Aristotle’s *Poetics* conceptualizes beauty and the order of tragedy according to an analogy with logic. Thus the rule that tragedy has to be a „whole“ with beginning, middle and end, coupled with the demand that the „magnitude“ (the temporal expansion) should be just enough for the movement to a „peripeteia“ (a sudden reversal in the plot), and from there to a conclusive catastrophe, is conceptualized according to the example of logic.” *Ibid.*, p.40.

¹²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.40.

However, both Jürs-Munby and Lehmann appear to concur with Paglia, Kristeva and Artaud on the theory of the power of the theatre or performance that breaks out of naturalistic representation and accesses the „real“. Jürs-Munby notes:

...performance has the power to question and destabilize the spectator's construction of identity and the „other“ – more so than realist mimetic drama, which remains caught in representation and thus often reproduces prevailing ideologies.¹²⁷

Lehmann agrees, identifying theatre as “...the site...of a *real gathering*...”¹²⁸ where “...the aesthetic act itself (the performing) as well as the act of reception (the theatre going) take place as a real doing in the here and now.”¹²⁹

He notes that the use of the body as a physical text within the performance is a powerful tool to create meaning, as it defies traditional signifiers and “...refuses to serve signification.”¹³⁰ This is a primary and inherent aspect of the (re)presentation of the female transgressive body in performance, where the manipulation of the physical body is fundamental. Lehmann also aptly notes:

...there is often the presence of the *deviant body*, which...deviates from the norm and causes an „amoral“ fascination, unease or fear. Possibilities of existence that are generally repressed and excluded come to prominence...and repudiate all perception that has established itself...¹³¹

This displacement of the Dionysian from the realm of the transgressive and „repudiation“ of previous perceptions is precisely what the female performance artists attempt to do in their performances when they endeavour to reclaim the Dionysian.

¹²⁷ Jürs-Munby, Karen in Introduction. *Ibid.*, p.5.

¹²⁸ *Ibid.*, p.17.

¹²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.17.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.95.

¹³¹ *Ibid.*, p.95-96.

Although the artists do not actually make the aforementioned claim, I posit that the theory is applicable to their work.

Lehmann recognises this form of theatre as provocative and audacious, referring to it as an „aesthetics of risk“.¹³² He defines a „taboo“ as “...a socially anchored form of affective reaction that rejects („objects“) certain realities, forms of behaviour or images as „untouchable“, disgusting or unacceptable prior to any rational judgement...”¹³³ and identifies theatre or performance as the place to break or transgress these taboos through the aesthetics of risk:

This is given when spectators are confronted with the problem of having to react to what is happening in their presence...this reality of the theatre...in which a situation develops that confronts the spectators with abysmal fear, shame and even mounting aggression.¹³⁴

As Lehmann’s study shows, the reclamation and celebration of the Dionysian requires not only an exploration of Dionysian content, but also the breaking away from traditional Apollonian modes of theatre. This trend in performance is one that is evident in the work of both Abramovic and Finley, as will be further explored in Chapter Two.

¹³² *Ibid.*, p.187.

¹³³ *Ibid.*, p.187.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.187.

Chapter Two

Transgression in Action

Contemporary Female Performance Artists and the Transgressive Performing Body: Reclaiming the Dionysian

[P]erformance artists produce social change by experimenting with and confronting social and personal boundaries....Performance artists are interested in broadening traditional moral boundaries and oppressive assumptions about marginal members of society and hold the possibility of creating a society based on an overall acceptance of difference rather than an either/or, good/bad set of definitional assumptions.¹

2.1 Introduction

Marina Abramovic and Karen Finley are two female performance artists who not only embody the opening quote of this chapter, but also manifest the fundamental Dionysian characteristics unpacked in the previous chapter in their performance work. Through the embodiment and manipulation of their chthonian Dionysian attributes, they disrupt the Apollonian social order and in so doing (re)present a transgressive female body in performance.

The prevalent reason why female performance artists (re)present the transgressive female performing body is because they are attempting to subvert the „norm“, as prescribed by Apollonian Western society²; they strive to redefine notions of normality and what is and is not acceptable in our everyday society. They try to subvert stereotypes, reimagine notions of beauty and revise concepts of femininity.

¹ Wheeler, Britta B. “Negotiating Deviance and Normativity: Performance Art, Boundary Transgressions, and Social Change.” In *Performance: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*. Vol. 4. Ed. Philip Auslander. London and New York: Routledge, 2003:270.

² As outlined in Chapter One.

By challenging traditional and ingrained conceptions of the female and feminine body through performance, the „traditional moral boundaries and oppressive assumptions“ mentioned previously are called into question and subverted, so creating a space for different and additional parameters – more tolerant and permissive ones – to be included in the social construction or definition of the female body.

Although Abramovic and Finley have individual and distinct reasons behind their (re)presentations of their bodies as transgressive in performance, they share the common goal of reclaiming or celebrating the Dionysian, and of displacing it from the realm of the transgressive. Their mode of performance is often unpleasant or uncomfortable to experience because it utilises the transgressive body as a tool through which to push the restrictive boundaries of the acceptable body, and often favours challenging prohibitive parameters over offering entertainment purely for entertainment“s sake.

Selected works of theirs will be analysed in order to explore how and why these two performance artists (re)present the transgressive female body in performance. The link between this body and the Dionysian will also be unpacked, with reference to it being a celebration or reclamation thereof.

2.2 Marina Abramovic

...for me, the only idea I have always had is the human body. That“s the only thing I have always been interested in. It“s a large area to be explored, and I always feel that I“m just at the beginning.³

³ Kaplan, Janet A. "Deeper and Deeper: Interview with Marina Abramovic." *Art Journal* Vol.58.No.2 (1999): 19. [JSTOR](#). 12/10/2009.

Marina Abramovic was born in Belgrade, Yugoslavia in 1946 and studied performance art at both the University of Belgrade and the University of Zagreb. She moved to Amsterdam in 1976 and still lives there today⁴, although she spends much of her time travelling to different countries performing, researching and lecturing.

Abramovic establishes her transgressive body through a process of the/her body in pain during performance, as well as submitting herself to gruelling ordeals of extreme physical endurance throughout performance. As described by Mark Dawes, “[h]er actions have involved self-mutilation, the threat of assault and death, and the most rigorous levels of endurance.”⁵

She utilises her transgressive body as a means through which to transcend the constraints of the physical and mental „norm“ and reach a higher state of consciousness; to test the limits – both of her personal physical and mental capacity, and of social or societal boundaries, and so redefine the limits surrounding the body; to address political issues such as war, especially with reference to her native Balkans, and social issues of oppressive systems or cultures; and to wake up art and force a connection between it and the real world. In so doing, she embarks upon a unique celebration of the Dionysian and all that it encompasses.

This section will examine two of her works, *The Lips of Thomas* and her *Rhythms* series (with specific reference to *Rhythm 10*, *Rhythm 5*, and *Rhythm 0*).

⁴ Novakov, Anna. "Point of Access: Marina Abramovic's 1975 Performance *Role Exchange*." *Woman's Art Journal* Vol.24.No.2 (2003-2004): 31. [JSTOR](#). 12/10/2009.

⁵ Dawes, Mark. "Performance Art: Spectacle of the Body." *Circa*.No.74 (1995): 26. [JSTOR](#). 30/12/2009.

2.2.1 Abramovic's Approach to Performance Art

A continuous exploration of the body is the key aspect of Abramovic's (re)presentation of the transgressive female body in performance; it is through her constant testing of the limits and bounds of her physical body⁶ that she makes the transgressive manifest. Her primary method of testing the limitations of both her body and her mind, and so redefining those boundaries and reaching new levels of physical and mental existence, consists of subjecting herself to taxing processes involving corporeal pain and physical endurance.

Some examples of the performances in which she has inflicted extreme forms of pain and endurance upon herself in a Dionysian rite of transcendence through subversion, have been *Interruption in Space* (1975) in which she ran against a wall repeatedly until she fell to the floor and could no longer get up⁷; *Freeing the Voice* (1975), a performance of three hours which she describes: "Laying on the floor with my head tilted backwards I scream until I lose my voice;"⁸ *Freeing the Body* (1975) in which she danced/moved continuously to the beat of a drum with her head covered by a scarf for eight hours until eventually she collapsed from exhaustion⁹; *Role Exchange* (1975) in which she traded places with a prostitute in Amsterdam where the prostitute posed

⁶ Article quoting Steven Henry Madoff in "A Viewable Fast, Enforced by Knives" in New York Times, November 10, 2002, 37. Novakov, Anna. "Point of Access: Marina Abramovic's 1975 Performance *Role Exchange*." Woman's Art Journal Vol.24.No.2 (2003-2004):31. JSTOR. 12/10/2009.

⁷ Article quoting Steven Henry Madoff in "A Viewable Fast, Enforced by Knives" in New York Times, November 10, 2002, 37. *Ibid.*, p.31.

⁸ Anonymous. "Review: Endurance Art." Performing Arts Journal Vol.18.No.3 (1996):70. JSTOR. 30/12/2009.

⁹ Carlson, Marla. "Marina Abramovic Repeats: Pain, Art, and Theater." Hunter College Theater Department. 2005. Hot Review. 18 May 2009.

as Abramovic in the gallery, and Abramovic took up the prostitute's place in the brothel window¹⁰; *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful* (1975)¹¹, a video installation where she repeatedly brushed her hair with a metal brush and a metal comb "...until her face and hair were damaged..."¹²; *Breathing In/Breathing Out* (1977) a collaboration with Ulay (Uwe Laysiepen) in which they locked their mouths together and breathed in only each other's exhalation, which became more and more saturated with carbon dioxide, until they both passed out from oxygen starvation¹³; Gina Pane's *The Conditioning, first of three phases in self-portrait(s)*¹⁴ which she performed in 2005 as a part of *Seven Easy Pieces*, where she lay on a metal frame in a flame-resistant boiler suit above fifteen lit candles which were only about 25cm below her back¹⁵; *Nightsea Crossing* (1982), another collaboration with Ulay, in which they sat across a table from each other in a museum gallery, completely motionless and staring at each other, from the time the museum opened to the time it closed, a period of around seven hours¹⁶; and *Rhythm 2* (1974) in which she took medication for catatonia in the first half of the performance, but "[b]eing completely healthy, Abramović's body reacted violently to the drug, experiencing seizures and uncontrollable movements..."¹⁷, while in the second

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ See Addendum 1.2.

¹² Carlson, Marla. "Marina Abramovic Repeats: Pain, Art, and Theater." Hunter College Theater Department. 2005. Hot Review. 18 May 2009.

¹³ "Abramovic, Marina [Bibliography]." Lacan.com. 18 May 2009.

¹⁴ See Addendum 2.1.

¹⁵ Pollard, Will. "Review: Marina Abramovic, Seven Easy Pieces, Will Pollard, Solomon R. Guggenheim, Museum, New York, November 2005." Circa.No.115 (2006): 71. JSTOR. 29/12/2009.

¹⁶ Fisher, Jennifer. "Interperformance: The Live Tableaux of Suzanne Lacy, Janine Antoni, and Marina Abramovic." Art Journal Vol.56.No.4, Performance Art: (Some) Theory and (Selected) Practice at the End of This Century (1997): 32-33. JSTOR. 29/12/2009.

¹⁷ 16 May 2009. Wikipedia. 18 May 2009.

half she took medication for aggression which resulted in „immobility“ and memory loss¹⁸.

This abridged description of some of Abramovic's work clearly illustrates her performance style and the versatile manner in which she (re)presents her body in performance as transgressive. The very fact or reality of her body in pain and suffering or endurance, bleeding or battered, tired or hungry embodies the Dionysian corporeal reality of the body as merely biological matter. Through her work, Abramovic dispels or shatters the Apollonian illusion of control over nature and the body, and control over the chthonian chaos. She explores the biological realities of the chthonian body by exploring her entrapment in her „fleshy envelope“, testing its limits and restraints.

Her work evokes connotations of Dionysian *sparagmos* (as discussed in Chapter One), the literal tearing apart of animal flesh to worship the mother god/nature, or the figurative rending apart of something in order to remake it. This strongly suggests a sense of the celebration of the Dionysian in her work, significantly associated with the ancient mother cults who practiced this archaic form of veneration. It also connotes the Dionysian pleasure-pain principle, the spilling of her blood or affliction of her body being simultaneously painful and celebratory or transcendent. Her body is (re)presented as transgressive in her performance as it is a Dionysian embodiment and does not conform to the Apollonian idealisation of the body that is hermetically sealed and independent or superior to nature, pain and mortality.

In 1975, Marina Abramovic performed *The Lips of Thomas*¹⁹ in the Krinzinger gallery in Innsbruck, Austria. Her body was presented or displayed as naked,

¹⁸ *Ibid.*

yet this was a subsidiary concern with regards to the content or subject matter of the piece. Abramovic has commented that she uses her naked body in performance purely because "it's the most natural, simple, architectural."²⁰ It seemed more like an expression of the natural state of bodily existence, a Dionysian attitude of acceptance of the physical and the natural - as opposed to the hiding or disguising thereof, rather than a statement of a more sexual, erotic, feminist, or scopophilic agenda.

Abramovic proceeded to consume a kilogram of honey, which she ate with a teaspoon, followed by a litre of red wine, which she drank with a wine glass. She then broke that wine glass in her right hand and deliberately sliced the shape of a communist star, implicative of her native Balkans, into the flesh of her bare stomach with the glass. She impassively knelt down and "...whipped herself until she no longer felt pain..."²¹ and then, still seemingly emotionless and detached, lay down on her back upon a large cross made of ice, her body lying lengthways on the body of the cross and her arms outstretched along the arms of the cross; the archetypal image of Christ. But after half an hour the audience intervened and dragged her numbed body off the ice, and so brought the piece to an end.²²

However, in 2005, Abramovic reworked *The Lips of Thomas* as part of her performance entitled *Seven Easy Pieces*, a collection of seven pieces performed at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York over seven consecutive nights, five of them being performance art pieces performed by

¹⁹ See Addendum 2.2. & 2.3.

²⁰ Kaplan, Janet A. "Deeper and Deeper: Interview with Marina Abramovic." Art Journal Vol.58.No.2 (1999): 15. JSTOR. 12/10/2009.

²¹ Carlson, Marla. "Marina Abramovic Repeats: Pain, Art, and Theater." Hunter College Theater Department. 2005. Hot Review. 18 May 2009.

²² *Ibid.*

other performance artists in the 1970s that she was now reworking and performing herself, one being a new work of hers, and one being her reworked version of *The Lips of Thomas*.

This revised version of the piece involved a similar set of actions, with some additions, but utilised continuous repetition which resulted in a gruelling seven hour duration. In this version, a metronome ticked unceasingly throughout the performance. Abramovic had the communist star drawn on her stomach – a five-pointed star, made up of five lines. She used a razorblade to cut one line of the star into her stomach and then dabbed the running blood with a white cloth. Abramovic then went to another part of the stage where she donned military boots and a military hat, and picked up the wooden staff that she had used to walk half-way across the Great Wall of China.

Marla Carlson describes how “...she stood and cried, her belly heaving, tears streaming down her cheeks as she, and we, listened to a Russian folk song.”²³ She then lay on the cross of ice for a while, trying to remain motionless, but powerless to control the automatic shivering convulsions of her body; and following that, knelt on the floor and flagellated herself with the whip until numb. After this, Abramovic sat down at a table and ate one teaspoon of honey and drank one sip of red wine from a wineglass. Abramovic repeated this for seven hours, only varying the order of the actions in the sequence, stopping at midnight.²⁴

Like her 1975 performance, Abramovic performed this version largely impassively, seemingly detached or mechanical, a body being acted upon and

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ *Ibid.*

enduring or experiencing rather than performing; a Dionysian ritual sacrifice or offering. However, Carlson notes that the one segment that Abramovic did repeatedly express emotion in was the „Young Communist“ section – the new section where she dresses in military garb and listens to the Russian folk song and cries.²⁵ This segment, however, does move directly away from the more subtle signification of suffering and oppression experienced through systems or governments of oppression as (re)presented by her body in pain, towards a more literal representation of the political situation in her native Balkans. In fact, at some points, she even attached the white cloth, with which she dabbed the blood from her stomach, to the wooden staff and waved it like a flag in this section.²⁶

The Dionysian aspect of this performance is evident in the ritualised quality of the event. It takes on the impression of a chthonian sacrificial ritual celebrated by the ancient mother-cults in celebration of both malevolent and benevolent Nature. Abramovic (re)presents her body as a chthonian tool through which to enact this ritual of endurance. Carlson notes that throughout the performance the varying actions started to take on certain qualities: the honey and the wine became soothing, while the whipping and cutting were purging, and the ice induced concentration or calm.²⁷

The symbolism of this multifarious ritual, apart from having associations with the Greek Orthodox Church, resonates with the Dionysian pleasure-pain principle. Furthermore, a hallmark of the Dionysian, this performance transcends the rational. Carlson comments: “*The Lips of Thomas* positions

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

²⁷ *Ibid.*

her body and its sensations, pain most particularly, at the center of a mystified circle, available for perception but defying rational comprehension.”²⁸

Abramovic’s body is therefore clearly (re)presented as transgressive in this performance through its Dionysian embodiment of pain, suffering and endurance; a Dionysian celebration implicative of the pleasure-pain principle.

From 1973 to 1974, Abramovic created and performed her *Rhythm* series. *Rhythm 10*²⁹ was first performed in 1973 at the Edinburgh Festival in Scotland. Abramovic knelt on a large sheet of white paper and silently laid out twenty knives of various sizes and shapes. She switched on a tape-recorder and proceeded to play the Russian game where you spread one hand on the ground before you and with the other hand you stab a knife between each finger as fast as you can, back and forth, trying not to cut yourself.

Every time she stabbed herself, she laid down that knife and picked up a new knife. She repeated this until she had gone through all twenty of the knives. Abramovic then re-winded and replayed the tape recording and tried to replicate her actions, including the mistakes, and recorded this on a second tape-recorder.³⁰ The performance ended with both tape-recorders playing together. This is a palpable example of danger and risk, but Abramovic goes further by forcing herself to re-experience her pain and so test the limits of her body. An anonymous author describes the piece:

...the pain and the sounds of the stabbing, the double sounds from the history and from the replication. With this piece, Abramović began to consider the state of consciousness of the performer.³¹

²⁸ *Ibid.*

²⁹ See Addendum 1.3.

³⁰ 16 May 2009. Wikipedia. 18 May 2009.

³¹ *Ibid.*

In *Rhythm 5* (1974)³², Abramovic constructed a communist star made out of wood, and soaked it in 100 litres of petrol and set it on fire. As she stood on the outside of the burning star, she ritually cut her hair, her finger- and toenails, and threw these cuttings into the fire at each of the five points of the star, in a ritualistic act of cleansing.³³ Then, as “the final act of purification,”³⁴ she jumped through the fire into the centre of the star and lay down, but due to the amount of oxygen being consumed by the flames, she lost consciousness soon after lying down. The audience remained oblivious to this until the fire touched her legs yet Abramovic remained motionless. The performance ended when a few audience members rescued her unconscious body from the blaze.³⁵

Abramovic was once again trying to transcend the limits of her physical body in this performance through a process of endurance and pain, as well as push the limits of her mental capacity or consciousness. However, her loss of consciousness interfered with this process, it meant that she was figuratively absent from the experience and therefore could not actually consciously experience the occurrence and thus go through the process of endurance. This infuriated her: “I was very angry because I understood there is a physical limit: when you lose consciousness you can’t be present; you can’t perform.”³⁶

³² See Addendum 2.5.

³³ Media Art Net. 21 May 2009.

³⁴ 16 May 2009. Wikipedia. 18 May 2009.

³⁵ Westcott, James. "Marina Abramovic's *the House with the Ocean View*: The View of the House from some Drops in the Ocean." *TDR (1988-)* Vol.47.No.3 (2003): 129-130. [JSTOR](#). 12/10/2009.

³⁶ Quoting Abramovic in A. Daneri et al (Eds.) *Marina Abramović* [Charta 2002]. 16 May 2009. Wikipedia. 18 May 2009.

*Rhythm 0*³⁷ became one of Abramovic's most notorious pieces. In this performance of six hours, which she performed at the Studio Morra in Naples in 1974, she presented herself fully clothed to the audience beside a table on which there lay 72 objects, ranging from food, to bandages, to clothing; to a rose, a hammer, make-up; to weapons including knives, pins, a scalpel, a saw, and a loaded gun. She (re)presented herself as a silent and passive body and her only communication with the audience was through a sign which read:

There are 72 objects on the table that can be used on me as desired.
 I am the object.
 During this period I take full responsibility.
 Duration: 6 hours (8 pm – 2 am)
 1974
 Studio Morra, Naples.
 This performance is the last in the cycle of rhythms (Rhythm 10, Rhythm 5, Rhythm 2, Rhythm 4, Rhythm 0)
 I conclude my research on the body when conscious and unconscious.³⁸

The audience at first used the objects in gentle ways, stroking Abramovic's face with the rose, or combing her hair with the brush, but as time went by, "several people began to act quite aggressively,"³⁹ and the tone became violent. People began to transgress the boundaries set up by society of how to treat someone else's body;⁴⁰ "I felt really violated: they cut my clothes, stuck

³⁷ See Addendum 2.4.

³⁸ Marina Abramovic *Rhythm 0*. 21 May 2009.

³⁹ 16 May 2009. Wikipedia. 18 May 2009.

⁴⁰ "Anyone can do anything to me. It's an extremely risky piece..." Kaplan, Janet A. "Deeper and Deeper: Interview with Marina Abramovic." *Art Journal* Vol.58.No.2 (1999): 15. [JSTOR](#). 12/10/2009.

rose thorns in my stomach, one person aimed the gun at my head, and another took it away. It created an aggressive atmosphere.”⁴¹

After the allotted six hours, Abramovic got up and began approaching the audience. According to her, they immediately dispersed, suddenly afraid of her. In her position as passive object the audience had the confidence to violate her physically, but as she assumed the active role of subject, they lost their power and there was the danger of confrontation.⁴²

These selected pieces of the *Rhythm* series demonstrate Abramovic’s (re)presentation of the/her transgressive female body in performance. In all of them she puts her body through, or allows her body to be put through, an ordeal of both pain, and physical and mental endurance, transcending the limits of the physical and mental and redefining those limits. In so doing, she (re)presents a body that breaches the Apollonian aesthetic ideal of the beautiful woman, of the body that does not succumb to chthonian nature and mortality, pain or death.

Even in *Rhythm 0*, where she (re)presents a passive object, itself an Apollonian ideal, she shatters Apollonian illusions through testing the “limits of the relationship between performer and audience”⁴³ by exposing the chthonian Dionysian reality of brutal nature that is only held in check (or at least there is the illusion of control) by the laws created by Apollonian society. Abramovic then reclaims her subjectivity by stepping forward and confronting

⁴¹ Quoting Abramovic in A. Daneri et al (Eds.) *Marina Abramović* [Charta 2002]16 May 2009. Wikipedia. 18 May 2009.

⁴² *Ibid.*

⁴³ *Ibid.*

the audience, naked and bleeding, a further indication of her transgressive body in performance.

2.2.2 Abramovic's Body as a Dionysian Celebration

Abramovic's (re)presentation of the body in pain is utterly transgressive because it disrupts the Apollonian illusion of society, and thus human beings, as independent from and superior to nature and mortality. It reveals, in a harshly visceral way, the ugly chthonic truth of Dionysian nature – pain being the emissary of death. Furthermore, three of the four performances mentioned involved Abramovic's body bleeding – a Dionysian fluid in itself, and one that directly connotes nature and mortality.

As Chapter One outlined, the Apollonian has always tried to suppress or repress the Dionysian - it is a construct of defence against the chthonian - yet Abramovic's (re)presentation of the body in pain and the bleeding body shatters this illusion. She (re)presents a Dionysian embodiment of the dark and ugly chthonic truth through her body in pain and bleeding and it is thus a transgressive embodiment.

This pain is so harshly palpable to the audience that Carlson describes one audience member's horrified reaction: "On the third cut, someone called out, „you don't have to do it again.“"⁴⁴ This is manifestly a reaction to the „horror“ of the Dionysian – a harsh and terrifying chthonian force confronting the audience in their Apollonian paradigm, and their response is horror and shock or revulsion; responses in accordance with Apollonian rationality.

⁴⁴ Carlson, Marla. "Marina Abramovic Repeats: Pain, Art, and Theater." Hunter College Theater Department. 2005. Hot Review. 18 May 2009.

This horror is furthermore a response to the abject. Herbert Blau concurs with Kristeva's theory on the horror of abjection (as outlined in Chapter One), elaborating: "Yet if excrement is the abhorrent sign of originary separation, the filthiness that occurs within separation itself, the awful truth is that existence cannot be without the body and its detestable organs;"⁴⁵ this is the core of Apollonian fear and of Dionysian power.

An additional manifestation of Abramovic's (re)presentation of her body as transgressive in performance is the manner in which she mostly performs naked. As previously mentioned, this is not done in an erotic manner in any way – she maintains that she is not interested in feminine body issues;⁴⁶ in fact this aspect of her work seems to be secondary to the more primary elements of pain and endurance. Abramovic uses her naked body as a functional tool with which to carry out her performance, which is a transgressive element in itself.

Abramovic, moreover, provides a transgressive image of beauty through her (re)presentation of her body in her performance. In an interview with Janet Kaplan she explains that for many years she struggled with the contradiction between her „masculine“ side of aggressive confrontation and her „feminine“ side in need of beauty and glamour⁴⁷, but that she had finally reconciliated these two oppositional forces and found a balance – a reimagining of beauty

⁴⁵ Blau, Herbert. "The Surpassing Body." *TDR (1988-)* Vol.35.No.2 (1991): 90. [JSTOR](#). 12/10/2009.

⁴⁶ Kaplan, Janet A. "Deeper and Deeper: Interview with Marina Abramovic." *Art Journal* Vol.58.No.2 (1999): 15. [JSTOR](#). 12/10/2009.

⁴⁷ "I am between these two. It took me a long time to come to terms with this..." *Ibid.*, p.7.

through her performance of her transgressive body, a Dionysian redefinition of the beautiful.⁴⁸

In addition, Mark Dawes has argued that a further link to a transgressive image of beauty that Abramovic (re)presents is to that of Christian iconography. This is especially relevant to *The Lips of Thomas* where Abramovic utilises Christian references such as the flagellation and the cross of ice, and even the wine and honey which Carlson points out are part of Orthodox Christian rituals.⁴⁹ Dawes states: "The fact that an act which involves pain or self inflicted violence can be elevated to the level of a rite clearly relates closely to Christian memory, and is perhaps an equivalent to judgments of beauty in 19th Century painting..."⁵⁰

The dominant manner, however, in which Marina Abramovic (re)presents the transgressive body in performance, and thus the dominant reason why her body becomes a manifestation of the reclamation of the Dionysian in performance, is because through her manipulation of her body in pain, suffering, bleeding and endurance in performance, her work is shifted from the realm of representation, which is traditionally the realm of the theatre, into the realm of the presentation of the „real“.

The realm of representation is one of illusion and mimesis generally associated with performance, but in Abramovic's work she literally undergoes pain, danger, and bleeding, with no falsification or mimicry thereof, therefore she unequivocally presents the „real“. This (re)presentation of the „real“ is

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p.7.

⁴⁹ Carlson, Marla. "Marina Abramovic Repeats: Pain, Art, and Theater." Hunter College Theater Department. 2005. Hot Review. 18 May 2009.

⁵⁰ Dawes, Mark. "Performance Art: Spectacle of the Body." Circa.No.74 (1995): 28. JSTOR. 30/12/2009.

Abramovic's reclamation of the Dionysian, the chthonic reality breaking through the Apollonian illusion.

Johannes Birringer refers to this embodiment of the „real“ by Abramovic as making her body „present“. He comments that “...she had used her body deliberately – to expose it to certain pressures, dangers, and contingencies, or to present it, make it present, as subject and object in specific relationships to the world.”⁵¹ This construction of her body as „present“ creates a tangible connection between the audience and Abramovic, as witnesses or accessories to her pain and suffering. Carlson comments on one of her performances: “Abramovic solicits her audience’s emotional engagement by offering up her pain. I talked to other people who felt, as I did, that we owed it to her to stay.”⁵²

Carlson has also noted that the very realness of Abramovic’s physical ordeal becomes painful for the audience themselves, as witnesses to the „real“, stating that “[t]he event was a test of endurance for spectators as well as for the artist.”⁵³ Will Pollard seems to support this notion of an intimate connection being created between the audience and Abramovic through the (re)presentation of the „real“ when he comments on Abramovic’s performance of Gina Pane’s *The Conditioning* (as a part of *Seven Easy Pieces*, 2005) that

⁵¹ Birringer, Johannes. "Review: Marina Abramovic on the Ledge." *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* Vol.25.No.2 (2003): 66. JSTOR. 12/10/2009.

⁵² Carlson, Marla. "Marina Abramovic Repeats: Pain, Art, and Theater." *Hunter College Theater Department*. 2005. Hot Review. 18 May 2009.

⁵³ *Ibid.*

“...we as an audience became implicated in the action; it was as if we bore some of her pain and responsibility for that pain.”⁵⁴

An anonymous author refers to this point where the audience becomes aware of the fact that they are witnessing the „real“ and that Abramovic’s body is „present“ and in authentic danger, this divide between representational theatre and the „real“, as „the point of rupture“. The author states:

[Abramovic] has said: “I’m interested in art that disturbs and that pushes that moment of danger; then, the public watching has to be here and now. Let the danger focus you; this is the whole idea – to put you in the focus of now.”⁵⁵

David Graver explains the process by which Marina Abramovic’s (re)presentation of the/her transgressive body in performance disrupts the conventional theatricality of performance and results in a manifestation of the „real“. He asserts that “[v]iolence generally destroys theatricality.”⁵⁶ He explains that traditional theatre or performance operates in a realm of signifiers and metaphors and representation.

However, Abramovic makes use of real pain and endurance in her performance - she does not metaphorically harm herself, or indicate the injury or suffering of her body through a system of signification and representation. As Finter and Griffin maintain, Abramovic literally presents danger and the threat of mortality in performance, as opposed to the traditional signification thereof:

⁵⁴ Pollard, Will. "Review: Marina Abramovic, Seven Easy Pieces, Will Pollard, Solomon R. Guggenheim, Museum, New York, November 2005." *Circa*.No.115 (2006): 71. [JSTOR](#). 29/12/2009.

⁵⁵ "Abramovic, Marina [Bibliography]." *Lacan.com*. 18 May 2009.

⁵⁶ Graver, David. "Violent Theatricality: Displayed Enactments of Aggression and Pain." *Theatre Journal* Vol.47.No.1 (1995): 46. [JSTOR](#). 12/10/2009.

This theatre does not evoke death through a play of signifiers...it stages death by means of its real harbingers... through the symptoms of mortality, as if this were the only way that human vulnerability and mortality could penetrate consciousness.⁵⁷

Graver maintains that it is this evocation of „symptoms of mortality“ that ruptures the theatrical representation of Abramovic’s work and transforms it into a presentation of the „real“.⁵⁸ And, as Finter and Griffin assert,

Some of today’s theatre directors believe that only a discourse of the Real can actually touch the spectator ...only the provocation of actual danger and actual corporeal pain seems capable of giving meaning or sense...to existence...⁵⁹

They elaborate, arguing that it is the absence of „grand narratives“, as postulated by Jean-François Lyotard⁶⁰, in the presentation of Abramovic’s body in pain, that results in her performance being located within the realm of the „real“.⁶¹ They further postulate that it is only this form of raw physical brutality that cuts through the traditional signification of performance and allows the audience member to viscerally be confronted with the Dionysian, that is still able to make an impact on audiences today.

It is this performance or presentation of the real that engenders Marina Abramovic’s body as transgressive in performance, and concurrently links up to the earlier discussion of the horror of the abject associated with the

⁵⁷ Finter, Helga and Matthew Griffin. "Antonin Artaud and the Impossible Theatre: The Legacy of the Theatre of Cruelty." *TDR* Vol.41.No.4 (1997): 20. [JSTOR](#). 30/12/2009.

⁵⁸ Graver, David. "Violent Theatricality: Displayed Enactments of Aggression and Pain." *Theatre Journal* Vol.47.No.1 (1995): 46-49. [JSTOR](#). 12/10/2009.

⁵⁹ Finter, Helga and Matthew Griffin. "Antonin Artaud and the Impossible Theatre: The Legacy of the Theatre of Cruelty." *TDR* Vol.41.No.4 (1997): 20. [JSTOR](#). 30/12/2009.

⁶⁰ Grand narratives, according to Lyotard, being overarching truths behind dominant existing belief systems and patterns of thought. (In his *The Postmodern Condition*)

⁶¹ Finter, Helga and Matthew Griffin. "Antonin Artaud and the Impossible Theatre: The Legacy of the Theatre of Cruelty." *TDR* Vol.41.No.4 (1997): 20. [JSTOR](#). 30/12/2009.

Dionysian. The very act of breaking down the barriers of representation and signification simultaneously collapse the Apollonian illusions of the hermetically sealed body superior to nature and mortality, and confront the audience with the Dionysian reality of the abject, chthonian and mortal body. Abramovic (re)presents reality: "...the reality of place and time, but also the corporeality of the performer."⁶²

2.2.3 Why Celebrate the Dionysian?

Abramovic's continual experimentation with pain and physical endurance in her performance is a means through which she allows herself to test the limits of her body, in both its physical and mental capacities. She constantly pushes the boundaries of her corporeality and consciousness, determined to overcome the limiting confines of what Western⁶³ bodies are accustomed to, to transcend these conventional limitations and access higher planes of existence. In an interview with Kaplan she states:

[I]f you cross a threshold into a certain state of mind, you can push your body over this limit. My whole research in this piece is to find the limit....I am interested in this because for me performance is a means of research...⁶⁴

Abramovic therefore uses her body in performance as, amongst other things, a method through which to research a personal system by which to access a higher state of consciousness, and it is in this higher state of consciousness

⁶² van Mechelen, Marga. "Abstracts (A Choice)." 2002. Faculteit der Geesteswetenschappen. 18 May 2009.

⁶³ Abramovic makes a distinction between Western and Eastern bodies, arguing that Eastern bodies are more able to transcend the physical limits and so "...push much farther into an area unknown for us." Kaplan, Janet A. "Deeper and Deeper: Interview with Marina Abramovic." *Art Journal* Vol.58.No.2 (1999): 8. JSTOR. 12/10/2009.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p.8.

that Abramovic claims that "...you can push your body to do things you absolutely could never normally do."⁶⁵

As Jennifer Fisher postulates, Abramovic reaches this higher state of consciousness through the manipulation of her body in pain, through the endurance of the induced pain and suffering in her performance: "She has used physical conditioning as well as acts of endurance and even danger to tap energies deep in the body as sources of lucidity and attunement."⁶⁶

Abramovic herself refers to this self-induced ordeal of pain as a tool through which to access the desired higher plane of consciousness:

When I'm afraid or don't know something, or when I enter into a completely unknown area, I always think that's the moment that I want to go through...because the pain is such a good door to cross into another state of consciousness.⁶⁷

The pain, in fact, is subordinate to the process of experiencing the pain and thus transcending it⁶⁸; rather, the pain is a tool or mechanism through which to access the higher state of consciousness, a process of "being rather than doing."⁶⁹ In fact, Charles Green notes that Abramovic states quite emphatically that "[p]ain is not there in the performance."⁷⁰

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.10.

⁶⁶ Fisher, Jennifer. "Interperformance: The Live Tableaux of Suzanne Lacy, Janine Antoni, and Marina Abramovic." *Art Journal* Vol.56.No.4, Performance Art: (Some) Theory and (Selected) Practice at the End of This Century (1997): 32. [JSTOR](#). 29/12/2009.

⁶⁷ Kaplan, Janet A. "Deeper and Deeper: Interview with Marina Abramovic." *Art Journal* Vol.58.No.2 (1999): 13. [JSTOR](#). 12/10/2009.

⁶⁸ Abramovic seems to support this when she states: "What is really important for me in the performance is the process. When the performance is finished, the memory is something else, but the process is what is essential." *Ibid.*, p.17.

⁶⁹ Fisher, Jennifer. "Interperformance: The Live Tableaux of Suzanne Lacy, Janine Antoni, and Marina Abramovic." *Art Journal* Vol.56.No.4, Performance Art: (Some) Theory and (Selected) Practice at the End of This Century (1997): 32. [JSTOR](#). 29/12/2009.

⁷⁰ Green, Charles. "Doppelgangers and the Third Force: The Artistic Collaborations of Gilbert & George and Marina Abramovic/Ulay." *Art Journal* Vol.59.No.2 (2000): 42. [JSTOR](#). 30/12/2009.

The question then remains why Abramovic attempts to achieve this higher state of consciousness. She refers to it as „the superior self“ and vividly illustrates it, saying: “It’s a different world; a sort of ecstasy, and every human being should experience this state when there is clarity and everything seems possible.”⁷¹

Furthermore, Dawes points out⁷² that Abramovic envisions this „superior self“ as a possible solution to the problem of the current Western society, in which there is such a schism between body and mind or spirit. She identifies the environment we exist in as something akin to Paglia’s Apollonian realm, in which we are so significantly separated from our Dionysian selves, and she conceives of a return to “...the power of human will.”⁷³

This may sound like a lofty goal, but through her work she confronts the audience with the hidden chthonian truth or reality of nature or existence, and in so doing celebrates the Dionysian and significantly moves towards reclaiming it. In fact, Abramovic uses the principal Apollonian fear - the horror at the abject, chthonian, mortal, Dionysian body – through her manipulation of pain and endurance in her (re)presentation of her transgressive body in performance, to access a common thread of elevation or motivation or revelation in her audience members:

Drawing on the fears and taboos of our physical manifestation accurately spotlights a source of inspiration which...offers routes to common sources of power which individuals *can* contact...physical and spiritual strength...⁷⁴

⁷¹ Dawes, Mark. "Performance Art: Spectacle of the Body." *Circa*.No.74 (1995): 29. [JSTOR](#). 30/12/2009.

⁷² *Ibid.*, p.28.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p.28.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p.28.

Another pertinent motivation behind Abramovic's representation of her body as transgressive in performance comes from her background as a Serbian national; exposed to civil-war and oppressive systems from a young age, her work often has either an underlying or an overt social commentary on war and war related violence, which she expresses through the violence which she inflicts or allows to be inflicted upon her own body in performance.

As Birringer notes, "...body art as a transgressive and self-endangering practice under politically repressive regimes had a decidedly darker and more painfully existential quality."⁷⁵ *The Lips of Thomas* contained a very clear reference to the communist regime of Yugoslavia⁷⁶, illustrated by Abramovic's continuous carving of the five-pointed communist star into her stomach, around her belly-button, as well as the patent war reference in her procedure of putting on the military shoes and cap, and waving the „flag“, whilst listening to the Russian folk song and crying – an emotional demonstration evocative of war. Carlson refers to a "...theme of a painful liberation from constraints and social conditioning...a ritual escape from a repressive culture,"⁷⁷ present in this piece.

Rhythm 5 establishes a similar reference to the communist star, but in this performance it is on fire and serves as part of Abramovic's final act of purification: "Burning the communist five-four rayed star represented a

⁷⁵ Birringer, Johannes. "Review: Marina Abramovic on the Ledge." *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* Vol.25.No.2 (2003): 69. [JSTOR](#). 12/10/2009.

⁷⁶ Or The Social Federal Republic of Yugoslavia as it was known as after World War II, under the leadership of Josip Broz Tito.

⁷⁷ Carlson, Marla. "Marina Abramovic Repeats: Pain, Art, and Theater." [Hunter College Theater Department](#). 2005. Hot Review. 18 May 2009.

physical and mental purification, while addressing the political traditions of her past.”⁷⁸

Dawes makes a compelling point when he asserts that on the one hand Marina Abramovic gets widely criticized for harming herself physically in her performances, but war, on the other hand, is widely approved or supported by society. He argues that this “...illuminates a central hypocrisy about bodily transgression which our society broadly accepts,”⁷⁹ in that “[o]fficial public violence, as in war, is assimilated quite differently into the collective consciousness from self-inflicted violence.”⁸⁰ I contend that Abramovic is aware of this discrepancy and appropriates it in her performance in order to make her point; a point that is antithetic to war.

In fact, a paramount motivation behind Abramovic’s (re)presentation of her body as transgressive in performance is to be disturbing. Michael Rush argues that performance artists sprang out of a need to awaken art and to force it to communicate and interface with the real world – to make it socially responsible and socially useful. He describes the mood of that time:

...you have the sense of an artworld willing to sacrifice anything to make connection with the world...a world which artists felt was woefully out of step with the cultural explosions of the 1960s and the refuse of World War II.⁸¹

Lynda Frye Burnham affirms this view of the performance artist as one who disturbs and redefines boundaries in her description of “...the performance

⁷⁸ 16 May 2009. Wikipedia. 18 May 2009.

⁷⁹ Dawes, Mark. "Performance Art: Spectacle of the Body." *Circa*.No.74 (1995): 28. [JSTOR](#). 30/12/2009.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p.28.

⁸¹ Rush, Michael. "A Noisy Silence." *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* Vol.21.No.1 (1999): 4. [JSTOR](#). 12/10/2009.

artist as revolutionary pioneer, a person destined to stretch art's boundaries, test its limits and research its impossibilities almost as if on a dare."⁸²

Abramovic herself confirms these viewpoints, stating:

To me art has to be disturbing. It has to ask questions and have some kind of prediction of the future within it....Art has to have a spiritual value and something that opens certain states of consciousness, because we are losing ourselves so much.⁸³

Therefore performing, for Abramovic, becomes a spiritual journey of transcendence in which she attempts to transgress the boundaries of the physical body. In so doing she transports herself and her audience to a higher state of consciousness where, I posit, a celebration of the Dionysian can allow them to become more aware of or in touch with their chthonian selves.

⁸² Burnham, Linda Frye. "High Performance," Performance Art, and Me." The Drama Review: TDR Vol.30.No.1 (1986): 15. JSTOR. 29/12/2009.

⁸³ Kaplan, Janet A. "Deeper and Deeper: Interview with Marina Abramovic." Art Journal Vol.58.No.2 (1999): 16. JSTOR. 12/10/2009.

2.3 Karen Finley

The early Finley performances were, in the exact sense of the word, sickening. I mean this quite literally.¹

Karen Finley is an American performance artist who "...ironizes discourses of defilement, pollution, and the unclean, improper body of woman."² She started her work in performance art in the 1980s and is still actively performing.

Much of her performance work takes place in „unconventional“ theatre venues – such as bars and clubs, on small stages with nothing but a microphone and a smoky café full of noisy patrons. Therefore, not only does her work deal with transgressive content, but it is performed in theatrically transgressive spaces too. Her work was generated out of a time of strong feminist protest³, and it therefore deals primarily with contentious issues such as traditional female roles, education and abuse.

Finley uses her transgressive body in performance to redefine the conventions surrounding the female body, as prescribed by Apollonian society (as outlined in Chapter One). I contend that she furthermore does so in order to reclaim her Dionysian heritage.

¹ Fuchs, Elinor. "When Bad Girls Play Good Theaters." The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater After Modernism. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996: 119-120.

² Hart, Lynda. "Motherhood According to Finley: *the Theory of Total Blame*." The Drama Review Vol.36.No.1 (1992): 125. JSTOR. 12/10/2009.

³ The Thatcher era: 1979 – 1990 when Margaret Thatcher served as the Prime Minister of Britain; a noted period of struggle for and prejudice against women.

2.3.1 *The Constant State of Desire*

The Constant State of Desire (1986) [henceforth *TCSD*], is a solo performance by Finley that is presented as a series of vignettes. She performs it largely through verbal text and accompanying action, alternating between monologue form and addressing the audience directly; as well as fluctuating between lucid, clear speech and a more trance-like state.⁴ She mostly stands behind a microphone and utters the monologues in a way reminiscent of ululations, in a rhythmic song-like form.

The content of the piece focuses on violent themes of rape, abuse, incest and sex – all transgressive subjects in themselves, but it is through the manner in which she performs the content and in which she presents her body that the transgressive nature of the subject matter is heightened; the excess or offensiveness of her body is amplified; and the „sickening“ aspect mentioned by Fuchs in the opening quote is made manifest.

The title of the piece is itself very evocative. It elicits a sense of unfulfilled longing, and a perpetual eroticism or sexual need. It also hints at the aspiration or desire to shed the confining or constricting definitions of femininity or femaleness in favour of the natural and organic state of the chthonian Dionysian.

There is a sense of a vehement hate for men that comes through in *TCSD*, accentuated by vignettes that play out savage fantasies of revenge, such as the vignette entitled “Cut off Balls” where Finley speaks about severing the testicles of Wall Street businessmen and serving these as chocolate

⁴ Erickson, Jon. "Appropriation and Transgression in Contemporary American Performance: The Wooster Group, Holly Hughes, and Karen Finley." *Theatre Journal* Vol.42.No.2 (1990): 228. [JSTOR](https://www.jstor.org/stable/3209099). 12/10/2009.

confectionary to their children.⁵ This is a hate born out of a systematic personal abuse by the dominant male figure; out of traditional male power and domination; and female submission. Erickson elaborates on the roots of this hate, explaining:

The obsession that Finley articulates is...a socially imposed value that infects all other relations – the desire for absolute control and mastery which in turn promotes abuse at every level...⁶

There is subsequently an impression of a dealing with the power of the role or voice of the father in the family within this piece – an aggressive appropriation of that power which further augments the transgressive nature of the work.⁷ It feeds into Finley's desire for control over her own body, and over the construction of meaning.

This power of the father or dominant male figure is explored in the vignette entitled "Refrigerator" in which Finley describes, in the first person, the rape of a five-year-old girl by her father in the fridge with carrots and zucchini⁸. Pramaggiore describes this vignette in relation to Finley's transgressive use of food:

The shocking juxtaposition of food with sexual orifices serves to underline the horrific nature of the encounter: the taboo mixture of the father and daughter's bodies and his

⁵ Champagne, Lenora, ed. Out from Under: Texts by Women Performance Artists. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1990:62-63.

⁶ Erickson, Jon. "Appropriation and Transgression in Contemporary American Performance: The Wooster Group, Holly Hughes, and Karen Finley." Theatre Journal Vol.42.No.2 (1990): 231. JSTOR. 12/10/2009

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.230-231.

⁸ Champagne, Lenora, ed. Out from Under: Texts by Women Performance Artists. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1990:67-68.

abusive invasion of her body are illuminated by the improper mixing of body parts and food.⁹

Finley furthermore plays with a constant schism in *TCS* as she presents herself as seductive and enticing to the audience, but yet constantly jarringly subverts that through her hostile dialogue.¹⁰ Erickson describes this process with regards to the beginning of her pieces: "Finley begins her performances with an initially friendly seduction of the audience, speaking openly about her body and its functions, and then proceeds to destroy that rapport through her aggressive speech."¹¹ Yet despite Finley's deliberate aggression and belligerence, she presents a palpable vulnerability¹² that comes from the reality of the violence that she is inflicting upon her own body.

In 1991, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*¹³ ran an article on Finley in which they dealt with this discordance between her transgressive performance art and her seemingly contradictory attractiveness and „normality“. They tried to emphasise how very „normal“ she was as if to excuse her graphic and „obscene“ performance art as some sort of artistic transgression of the norm but not, thankfully, as a lifestyle pattern.¹⁴

⁹ Pramaggiore, Maria T. "Resisting/Performing/Femininity: Words, Flesh, and Feminism in Karen Finley's *the Constant State of Desire*." *Theatre Journal* Vol.44.No.3 (1992): 286. JSTOR. 12/10/2009.

¹⁰ Erickson, Jon. "Appropriation and Transgression in Contemporary American Performance: The Wooster Group, Holly Hughes, and Karen Finley." *Theatre Journal* Vol.42.No.2 (1990): 231. JSTOR. 12/10/2009.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p.227-228.

¹² *Ibid.*, p.228.

¹³ Hart, Lynda. "Motherhood According to Finley: *the Theory of Total Blame*." *The Drama Review* Vol.36.No.1 (1992): 124. JSTOR. 12/10/2009. Reference to *The Philadelphia Inquirer*'s "Sunday Magazine" of 7 April 1991.

¹⁴ "The article emphasizes that Finley is as „normal“ as the next person. She might keep up her Christmas tree a little too far into January, but besides such small eccentricities, she lives in a „normal“ house, with a „normal“ husband, and lives an „incredibly normal life“..." *Ibid.*, p.125.

The reactions to her work, because of its transgressive nature, has often provoked violent reactions of shock and disgust from its audience members: "Male spectators have thrown lit cigarettes at her, dropped their pants, shouted „whore,“ and Finley has been vilified and trivialized in public discourse..."¹⁵

2.3.2 Finley's Body as a Reclamation of the Dionysian

Finley presents her naked body shamelessly and fearlessly, which in itself is transgressive, but she does so in a manner that becomes further subversive:

It is transgressive, I would claim, for a woman to display her naked body without the explicit goal of attracting attention as a sexual object, for a woman to consciously choose to appear „ugly“ in conventional terms.¹⁶

She is not presenting her naked body as something attractive, seductive or alluring. Rather she offers it openly and bluntly as a biological structure. This forthrightness effectively nullifies the provocative quality of her naked female body, and as Pramaggiore argues, destroys the conventions associated with the naked female body and, by association, pornography:

Finley appropriates the power of her body to exaggerate the conventions of pornography to the point of rupture; nudity is not necessarily pleasing, displayed body parts do not provoke sexual arousal.¹⁷

¹⁵ Pramaggiore, Maria T. "Resisting/Performing/Femininity: Words, Flesh, and Feminism in Karen Finley's *the Constant State of Desire*." *Theatre Journal* Vol.44.No.3 (1992): 272. JSTOR. 12/10/2009.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.284.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.284.

Finley subverts this conventional scopophilia through the inversion of the male gaze¹⁸, “[i]n performance, Finley wields power, refusing to sacrifice her body to the all-consuming gaze of the audience.”¹⁹ Instead of being the docile female passively objectified, she makes herself the active party by objectifying herself.²⁰ She exposes herself and her naked body and does so with candour and evident enjoyment, “[s]he undresses in a matter-of-fact manner, deliberately mocking the conventions of the striptease.”²¹

In one vignette, with utilitarian nonchalance, she pulls off her simple dress and stands only in her underpants and shoes, neither of which are particularly attractive in the conventional sense – the sexy and alluring sense traditionally associated with the naked or semi-naked female body; “[w]hen she tells the audience that her white cotton high-waisted underwear was purchased at the „performance art store,” she gleefully points to a stain on them from her last period.”²²

She steps away from the microphone and picks up a large plastic bag, tips in a bowl of raw dyed eggs and puts several stuffed toy rabbits inside. She then pragmatically, without excess emotion or aggression, smashes the filled bag on the floor a few times, crushing the contents. Finley then pulls out one of the toy rabbits and uses it as a sponge to wipe the slimy yellow crushed egg concoction all over her naked body, but does so in a completely functional

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, p.271.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.282.

²⁰ “Finley is indeed working to objectify herself, rather than allowing conventional patriarchal systems of signification to objectify her.” Erickson, Jon. “Appropriation and Transgression in Contemporary American Performance: The Wooster Group, Holly Hughes, and Karen Finley.” *Theatre Journal* Vol.42.No.2 (1990): 234-235. JSTOR. 12/10/2009.

²¹ Pramaggiore, Maria T. “Resisting/Performing/Femininity: Words, Flesh, and Feminism in Karen Finley’s *the Constant State of Desire*.” *Theatre Journal* Vol.44.No.3 (1992): 282. JSTOR. 12/10/2009.

²² *Ibid.*, p.282.

manner, as if she's alone in her shower lathering herself with soap, with no hint of performativity or eroticism.

She then unceremoniously dumps confetti on herself, and follows that with golden glitter which again she sprinkles on herself in a purely practical manner. Similarly she untheatrically adorns herself with colourful paper boas, before returning to the microphone for another monologue. All of this is done to the accompaniment of sexy or provocative jazz music which is in complete antithesis to her matter of fact attitude.²³

Finley manipulates her performance astutely so that a series of actions that normally would be highly erotic, become a transgression of feminine eroticism through their utilitarian nature. "She appears to enjoy the audience's discomfort with her deconstruction of the traditional viewer position."²⁴

Pramaggiore elaborates:

After she coats her body in crushed raw eggs, she throws glitter and eggshells over herself, catching a piece of eggshell as it clings to her nipple and, as she pulls it off, says „that would be too erotic.“²⁵

Finley thus reappropriates the power of the male gaze in a traditionally phallogocentric discourse, namely that of female nudity and/or „pornographic“ display, and so effectively appropriates the male voice and control in pornography.²⁶ According to Tamblyn, early performance artists/feminists of the 1970s steered clear of pornography or anything affiliated with it because

²³ See Addendum 1.4.

²⁴ Pramaggiore, Maria T. "Resisting/Performing/Femininity: Words, Flesh, and Feminism in Karen Finley's *the Constant State of Desire*." *Theatre Journal* Vol.44.No.3 (1992): 282. JSTOR. 12/10/2009.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, p.282.

²⁶ Erickson, Jon. "Appropriation and Transgression in Contemporary American Performance: The Wooster Group, Holly Hughes, and Karen Finley." *Theatre Journal* Vol.42.No.2 (1990): 230. JSTOR. 12/10/2009.

of the patriarchal dominance traditionally associated with it, but Finley has chosen to appropriate it instead and has taken ownership of this discourse and of her body as a transgressive female performing body.²⁷

Before *TCS D* starts, Finley comes on stage and gives an „introduction“ through which it is mediated to the audience that they are voyeurs in this performance,²⁸ and thus they are unable to fully relax and settle into the position of invisible viewers. Instead Finley reflects the voyeuristic gaze back upon them and does not allow them to be comfortable. She takes ownership of her own objectification, giving her own naked body power. As Finley herself comments:

“...people are very fearful of women showing their body or using sexual language when they’re in power – and when I’m on stage, I’m in a position of power. It doesn’t bother anyone nearly as much if a woman shows her body when she’s in a position of sexual passivity...”²⁹

In addition to this technique of subverting the scopophilic gaze, Finley also (re)presents her (naked) performing body as transgressive by subverting the conventional notions of the body beautiful (as discussed in chapter 1) by purposefully endeavouring to make her body ugly and disgusting. She does so by deliberately presenting her body as a biological organism – one that bleeds, vomits, urinates and defecates.

²⁷ Tamblyn, Christine. "No More Nice Girls: Recent Transgressive Feminist Art." *Art Journal* Vol.50.No.2 (1991): 53. [JSTOR](#). 12/10/2009.

²⁸ Pramaggiore, Maria T. "Resisting/Performing/Femininity: Words, Flesh, and Feminism in Karen Finley's *the Constant State of Desire*." *Theatre Journal* Vol.44.No.3 (1992): 270. [JSTOR](#). 12/10/2009.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, p.284, quoting Finley.

In the „introduction“ to *TCS* Finley tells the audience how nervous she is, how her body is reacting to the nerves, how she“s nauseous with anxiety.

Pramaggiore elaborates:

In taking us through her body in pain prior to her body in labor, we are reminded that she is body, is organic material, with openings and smells, with responses to her own status as subject and object of performance.³⁰

Finley therefore confronts the audience with a body that does not accommodate the conventional or accepted Western societal standards of beauty, but she does so through the manipulation of conventional signifiers of beauty and appeal, such as nudity and the striptease.

As Pramaggiore points out, “Finley taunts the audience with its desire for a „classical“ body, one that is clean, contained, distant, and therefore safe and paradoxically desirable,”³¹ and “[s]he forces audience members to confront their/our desire for a „classical“ female body – one that is clean, hairless, bloodless, bodiless...”³², but,

...by literally throwing up her „grotesque“ body as a reminder that no body conforms to the specifications of the female nude, [she] thwarts our attempt to objectify her as that image.³³

Finley utilises abjection actively as a means through which to show her body as a transgressive and grotesque living biological structure. Pramaggiore notes that “[o]ne trademark of Finley“s performances is her obsession with

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p.269.

³¹ *Ibid.*, p.282.

³² *Ibid.*, p.270-271.

³³ *Ibid.*, p.270-271.

bodies as consuming, producing, and recycling machines,"³⁴ while Tamblyn concurs, observing that she "...seems particularly obsessed with bodily excretions..."³⁵

Throughout *TCSD*, both her monologues and her actions are permeated with references to or direct physical interaction with the abject. She explores her female body with all its "excesses and its recesses"³⁶ and so pushes it to the maximum boundaries of transgression; "Finley negotiates interstices, specifically, the body as interstice between food and excrement."³⁷

Hart maintains that Finley (re)presents this excessive „obscenity“ and transgressivity in order to exaggerate and inflate the flaws of the conventional models of normality and beauty in the „proper“ and „clean“ female body and so cause these constructed parameters to thoroughly implode.³⁸ Pramaggiore describes Finley's interplay with abjection aptly:

Her scatology serves an important function; like her naked body and the materials she uses to embellish it – glitter, eggs, dog food, chocolate, cream, yams, condiments – it recalls the material world. Finley is obsessed with talking about shit, in both literal and figurative senses...³⁹

Finley furthermore uses food in a subversive manner in order to (re)present the/her transgressive female performing body. Instead of using food in a

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p.284-285.

³⁵ Tamblyn, Christine. "No More Nice Girls: Recent Transgressive Feminist Art." *Art Journal* Vol.50.No.2 (1991): 54. [JSTOR](#). 12/10/2009.

³⁶ Pramaggiore, Maria T. "Resisting/Performing/Femininity: Words, Flesh, and Feminism in Karen Finley's *the Constant State of Desire*." *Theatre Journal* Vol.44.No.3 (1992): 284. [JSTOR](#). 12/10/2009.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p.284-285.

³⁸ Hart, Lynda. "Motherhood According to Finley: *the Theory of Total Blame*." *The Drama Review* Vol.36.No.1 (1992): 130. [JSTOR](#). 12/10/2009.

³⁹ Pramaggiore, Maria T. "Resisting/Performing/Femininity: Words, Flesh, and Feminism in Karen Finley's *the Constant State of Desire*." *Theatre Journal* Vol.44.No.3 (1992): 284-285. [JSTOR](#). 12/10/2009.

nutritive manner, she employs it as something with which to further invoke revulsion and aversion. She smears it over her body and hair, crams it in her mouth, and stuffs it up her vagina and anus.

Epstein describes this with reference to Finley's themes in *TCSA*: "The eating in Finley's work represents taboos of consuming food beyond proper or nutritive eating, in, most often, a reaction to sexual destruction through rape, sodomy, and incest."⁴⁰

In *TCSA* she smears a raw egg concoction over her body; in *I'm an Assman* she pours dog food and cream down the neck of her dress⁴¹, in *Shut Up and Love Me* (2001) she has masses of honey poured over her and rolls around naked in it⁴²; another performance sees her covered in nothing but chocolate⁴³; in *The Theory of Total Blame* (1988) Finley continuously „cooks“ by mixing together ingredients to make an inedible mess of a „meal“, where she ends up covered in food⁴⁴: "...bits of raw beef hang from her nose, stick to her hair, litter the floor. Ketchup runs down her arms and legs."⁴⁵

This reference to food and cooking bears further reference to the traditional role of the woman in the kitchen. In a further vignette in *TCSA* entitled "Yams up Granny's Ass" Finley turns her back to the audience and bends over, naked, and pours a container of tinned yams on, over and between her

⁴⁰ Epstein, Marcy J. "Consuming Performances: Eating Acts and Feminist Embodiment." *The Drama Review* Vol. 40.No. 4 (1996):29.

⁴¹ "Given the deep socialization attaching to cleanliness and „good clothes,“ especially for women, it was shocking to witness a female performer wilfully make the clean filthy, and just for the hell of it, without the „redemptive“ value of hard work of poverty usually associated with soiled clothing." Fuchs, Elinor. "When Bad Girls Play Good Theaters." *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater After Modernism*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996:119.

⁴² See Addendum 2.7.

⁴³ See Addendum 2.6.

⁴⁴ See Addendum 2.8.

⁴⁵ Hart, Lynda. "Motherhood According to Finley: *the Theory of Total Blame*." *The Drama Review* Vol.36.No.1 (1992): 129. *JSTOR*. 12/10/2009.

buttocks. The yams specifically have the consistency and colour of diarrhoea.⁴⁶ As Epstein describes it:

...[She] smothers her butt with yams, evacuates her diarrhea at the edge of the stage, dollops her nipples with sauerkraut...[T]his orality offers the entrances of her digestive and reproductive tracts as the ingress to a female sensibility, at once powerful and degraded...⁴⁷

In *TCS*D Finley amplifies the transgressivity of her performing body through her speech, which is aggressive, crude and „obscene“; she „poetically“ strings together expletives along the themes of the piece/vignette. This is especially clear during the “Yams up Granny’s Ass” vignette in which she sings a „song“ which has become popularly known as the “Yam Jam”⁴⁸.

Upon the first listening, one can hardly help but be shocked at the extremely crude and seemingly gratuitous lyrics. But after subsequent replays, it becomes evident that words of the song are intimately interwoven with both the subject matter of *TCS*D and with Finley’s goal of (re)presenting her body as transgressive. She deals with themes of incest, as well as copious references to food in relation to sexual organs: “got Belgian waffles in my twat”⁴⁹ and “beer on my clit”⁵⁰, as well as the continual substitution of the word „wiener“ for „penis“.

The recurring theme of anger towards men also comes out strongly in this song, with a high level of aggression towards the person being spoken or

⁴⁶ Fuchs, Elinor. “When Bad Girls Play Good Theaters.” *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater After Modernism*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996:119.

⁴⁷ Epstein, Marcy J. “Consuming Performances: Eating Acts and Feminist Embodiment.” *The Drama Review* Vol. 40.No. 4 (1996):29.

⁴⁸ See Addendum 1.5. and Addendum 3.

⁴⁹ Karen Finley. *Yam Jam.*, 1986. *YouTube*. hxr0x. 11 August 2009.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

sung to. She bombards the listener/audience member with expletives and obscenities in order to completely transgress the boundaries of the desired or desirable classical polite female archetype, by forcing them beyond the point of shock to a more desensitised and a more accepting or open-minded place.

Toepfer describes it saying, "Speech itself becomes a violent spewing of desire at the audience by the naked, food-smearred body of an „unsocialized“ woman..."⁵¹ According to Toepfer the obscenity arises out of the rupture between the audience's desire for Finley's naked body and their disgust at her offensive speech.⁵² He describes this division:

The nude performer presents her body as a lurid object of desire, but her incredibly filthy language roots the desire to see her and her own desire to be seen deeply in contradictory moods of disgust, degradation, defilement, and desecration.⁵³

2.3.3 Reasons for Finley's Transgressions

I think I stir people to be responsible for what's going on in their own personal lives, in their one-to-one relationships, interweaving this into the whole society's corruption. That's very disturbing. I destroy the games people live on...⁵⁴

Finley uses her transgressive female performing body as a powerful tool through which to address issues of rape, incest, sexual abuse and violence, all through the lens of female oppression. By bringing to light the reality of the violence experienced or endured by women in the inequality of the patriarchal

⁵¹ Toepfer, Karl. "Nudity and Textuality in Postmodern Performance." Performing Arts Journal Vol.18.No.3 (1996): 86. JSTOR. 12/10/2009.

⁵² *Ibid.*, p.86.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.86.

⁵⁴ Finley, Karen and Richard Schechner. "Karen Finley: A Constant State of Becoming: An Interview by Richard Schechner." The Drama Review Vol.32.No.1 (1988): 153. JSTOR. 12/10/2009. Quoting Finley.

power structure through the appropriation of that power in her work, Finley exposes the concealed truth of Western society and attempts to shatter the silence.

As Pramaggiore comments “[t]he power Finley appropriates is ruthlessly and relentlessly violent and often self-abusive.”⁵⁵ She goes further to state the role of Finley’s transgressive performing body as both tool against and receiving of the violence. “Her theatricalization of white heterosexual female sexuality is a grotesque mirroring of patriarchy in which her body is mirror and weapon.”⁵⁶ This is because Finley cannot escape the confines of the patriarchal paradigm in which she operates therefore she uses her body as a transgressive tool within the system:

Finley must stand within patriarchal culture, yet she explores and explodes the limits of representability by transgressing the norms of a culture obsessed with violating the female body with ritual abuse.⁵⁷

Apart from bringing to light female oppression with regard to violence, Finley also attempts to expose female oppression with reference to the patriarchal structures that govern the creation of female roles and the ideals or norms of femininity as opposed to the reality of femaleness (as discussed in chapter 1). According to her, “[w]oman’s value is still based on her biology.”⁵⁸ Again, Finley attempts to expose that inequality and shatter it through her representation of the female transgressive body in performance; she

⁵⁵ Pramaggiore, Maria T. "Resisting/Performing/Femininity: Words, Flesh, and Feminism in Karen Finley's *the Constant State of Desire*." *Theatre Journal* Vol.44.No.3 (1992): 290. JSTOR. 12/10/2009.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, p.290

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p.290.

⁵⁸ Finley, Karen and Richard Schechner. "Karen Finley: A Constant State of Becoming: An Interview by Richard Schechner." *The Drama Review* Vol.32.No.1 (1988): 154. JSTOR. 12/10/2009.

endeavours to show the schism between the Apollonian societal system and the Dionysian female body:

The only two things that a woman does that is not compared to a man is giving birth and spreading her legs. I bring that to light, and that's very threatening. Female oppression is everyday...⁵⁹

As Pramaggiore notes, Finley does so - exposes the Dionysian female body in performance and so reveals the oppression of the female by the Apollonian system and in so doing breaks the stereotype of the conventional „norm“ - by exploring the female body in performance that both inspires lust and disgust. She subverts the Apollonian ideal of femininity by revising notions of what is beautiful and what is acceptable through her performance of her transgressive body: “Finley’s strategies unearth the potential the female body has to provoke both desire and disgust.”⁶⁰

A further aspect of the female body that Finley attempts to expose as natural and inherent in her (re)presentation of the transgressive female performing body is the innate sexuality of woman. This is an overtly transgressive trait as the very notion of sexuality violates the ideal of the woman as a passive and demure object, as opposed to an empowered subject in charge of her own sexuality.⁶¹

Finley explores female sexuality as an entity in its own right, as well as something in opposition to male sexuality, and celebrates it. She probes into

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p.154.

⁶⁰ Pramaggiore, Maria T. "Resisting/Performing/Femininity: Words, Flesh, and Feminism in Karen Finley's *the Constant State of Desire*." *Theatre Journal* Vol.44.No.3 (1992): 290. JSTOR. 12/10/2009.

⁶¹ Finley, Karen and Richard Schechner. "Karen Finley: A Constant State of Becoming: An Interview by Richard Schechner." *The Drama Review* Vol.32.No.1 (1988): 153. JSTOR. 12/10/2009.

this subject with greater depth by inverting the common flippant insult of „penis-envy“ into what she terms as „womb-envy“, with regards to female and male sexuality.⁶² She identifies this „womb-envy“ with a celebratory stance towards female sexuality, describing men as jealous of female-only privileges, such as the multiple orgasm⁶³ and the ability to produce children.

Tamblyn refers to Finley as one of a generation of performance artists that she coins as „bad girls“, and according to her, the reason why she (re)presents the transgressive performing body is because she is decisively and intentionally invoking the transgressive „...cultural stereotypes about „bad girls,“⁶⁴ in order to deliberately not conform to the socially acceptable feminine ideal and so show her antipathy for it:

...bad girls sabotage patriarchal moral codes. Privileging difference rather than constructing idealized role models, they manifest their autonomous liberation through a staunch refusal of identification and affirmation.⁶⁵

Both Erickson and Pramaggiore agree that Finley’s target audience is “...a privileged white male audience...”⁶⁶ and more specifically “...upwardly mobile and greedy males...”⁶⁷ because they are the ones who dominate the patriarchal discourse that runs Apollonian society, and since Finley’s (re)presentation of the transgressive female performing body is aimed at

⁶² Erickson, Jon. "Appropriation and Transgression in Contemporary American Performance: The Wooster Group, Holly Hughes, and Karen Finley." *Theatre Journal* Vol.42.No.2 (1990): 230. [JSTOR](#). 12/10/2009.

⁶³ Karen Finley. *Yam Jam*, 1986. [YouTube](#). hxr0x. 11 August 2009.

⁶⁴ Tamblyn, Christine. "No More Nice Girls: Recent Transgressive Feminist Art." *Art Journal* Vol.50.No.2 (1991): 53. [JSTOR](#). 12/10/2009.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p.57.

⁶⁶ Pramaggiore, Maria T. "Resisting/Performing/Femininity: Words, Flesh, and Feminism in Karen Finley's *the Constant State of Desire*." *Theatre Journal* Vol.44.No.3 (1992): 290. [JSTOR](#). 12/10/2009.

⁶⁷ Erickson, Jon. "Appropriation and Transgression in Contemporary American Performance: The Wooster Group, Holly Hughes, and Karen Finley." *Theatre Journal* Vol.42.No.2 (1990): 227. [JSTOR](#). 12/10/2009.

shattering the conventions of female representation and idealised notions of femininity in favour of the creation of new conceptions of what is beautiful and what is acceptable, the custodians of Apollonian culture appear to be the most logical target audience.

Lastly, Erickson proposes a final reason for why Finley (re)presents the transgressive female performing body: he proposes that sometimes, with Finley and with other performance artists, "...appropriative and transgressive acts are done less to stimulate dialogue than to increase alienation between groups, and to create a feeling of power among those who feel they have none."⁶⁸

He thus suggests that Finley's actions in or thinking behind (re)presenting her body as transgressive in performance is more an act of spitting in the face of her oppressors, the patriarchy and those who seek to suppress her, her body, her femininity and her sexuality, rather than maybe an act of making a permanent change in the fabric of society. Finley seems to confirm this hypothesis when she says: "I wanted to destroy certain people, but I thought that was part of my tradition. I consider good art that which destroys the last generation's hopes."⁶⁹

2.3.4 Reclaiming the Dionysian

The link between the Dionysian and the work of Karen Finley is fairly explicit, and it is made manifest both in the content or subject matter of *TCSD* and in

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, p.235.

⁶⁹ Finley, Karen and Richard Schechner. "Karen Finley: A Constant State of Becoming: An Interview by Richard Schechner." *The Drama Review* Vol.32.No.1 (1988): 156. JSTOR. 12/10/2009.

the fact that the body she is (re)presenting is transgressive. I pose that it is the concept of Apollonian disgust that Finley directly engages with in her performance of her transgressive body in order to reclaim the Dionysian.

Finley maintains that “[t]he reason why the feminine way or the maternal way has been oppressed is because the male energy is so scared of it. And so the only way males can deal with it is to knock it down, to not allow it to come up.”⁷⁰ This is synonymous with what I identified in Chapter One regarding the break from the Dionysian towards the Apollonian, or the evolution from earth-cult to sky-cult; from belly-magic to head-magic; a deliberate paradigmatic substitution towards the suppression of the Dionysian, born out of a terrible fear of its chthonian power and dominance.

Paglia explains that one of the Apollonian strategies to „knock down“ the Dionysian „maternal way“ is through the rigid definitions of beauty and the creation of the notion of the ideal feminine body (as unpacked in Chapter One); and as Pramaggiore expounds: “Because feminine subjectivity has been rigorously circumscribed by male interpretations of female bodies and of the feminine as body, Finley’s work strikes at the core of patriarchal culture: the power to represent the other.”⁷¹

And Finley’s theatre is a fitting battle-ground in which to defend this Dionysian „other“ because, as Fuchs notes, “Both women’s bodies and the theater have

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p.154.

⁷¹ Pramaggiore, Maria T. "Resisting/Performing/Femininity: Words, Flesh, and Feminism in Karen Finley's *the Constant State of Desire*." *Theatre Journal* Vol.44.No.3 (1992): 271. [JSTOR](https://www.jstor.org/stable/3245444). 12/10/2009.

traditionally been sites of prohibition and separation, subject to „prophylactic“ separations of the clean from the dirty.”⁷²

The themes of *TCSD* also deal directly with the Dionysian, for example one vignette approaches the concept of motherhood through a Dionysian viewpoint rather than the Apollonian idealisation. Finley speaks about and enacts a woman giving birth, but this parturition does not conform to the Apollonian image of quietness, cleanliness, domesticity and love. Rather it is painful, bloody, agonising, sexual, animalistic, chthonian, primal.

Finley (re)presents this Dionysian woman-as-mother and it is this that propagates the image of her body as transgressive. In *TCSD* the doctors represent the Apollonian and they regard and treat her as disgusting:

These were the same doctors that called her animal as she nursed...the problem really was in the way she projected her femininity. And if she wasn't passive, well she just didn't feel desirable. And if she wasn't desirable, she didn't feel female.⁷³

At the end of this excerpt, Finley seems to touch on the very rigidity of the Apollonian structure of femininity that is based on the denial of an inherent Dionysian nature, and ensures transgressivity through non-conformity. Thus her performance of this Dionysian body results in her body being transgressive in performance. Pramaggiore elaborates:

To feel the pain of giving birth and to express that pain –
and/or perhaps a painful sexual pleasure in giving birth –

⁷² Fuchs, Elinor. "When Bad Girls Play Good Theaters." *The Death of Character: Perspectives on Theater After Modernism*. Bloomington & Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1996:124.

⁷³ Champagne, Lenora, ed. *Out from Under: Texts by Women Performance Artists*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1990:60.

would shatter the image of painless, bloodless maternity, the icon of the self-abnegating madonna.⁷⁴

The cardinal link, however, between Karen Finley's work and the Dionysian is that she (re)presents her female body as transgressive in performance. I find this supportive of the notion that she eludes and rejects all the Apollonian ideals of femininity in favour of a Dionysian celebration of the chthonian:

Finley frustrates fetishistic viewing practices by thwarting our desires for tastefully representable female bodies that are of a particular size, that do not ingest or excrete....Finley's body speaks...but not in a language that can be recuperated by mainstream or masculine representation...⁷⁵

She intentionally attempts to invoke disgust through various means, including the manipulation of scatology and abjection. She explores her body as a Dionysian organism with all its chthonian natural and biological functions, and experiments with taking obscenity to excessive levels. As Pramaggiore appropriately states: "...she reclaims a female body without sanitizing it for public consumption."⁷⁶ And in so doing, she reclaims the Dionysian.

Finley offers an unpleasant female body for scrutiny....The disgust that surrounds femininity and femaleness is located in the grotesque body's rhythms, ingestions, and expulsions, yet Finley simultaneously celebrates that body's excessive qualities.⁷⁷

⁷⁴ Pramaggiore, Maria T. "Resisting/Performing/Femininity: Words, Flesh, and Feminism in Karen Finley's *the Constant State of Desire*." Theatre Journal Vol.44.No.3 (1992): 276. JSTOR. 12/10/2009.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p.284.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p.287.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p.273.

2.4 Conclusion

Marina Abramovic and Karen Finley both use their bodies uniquely in performance. I maintain that the manner in which they do so is inherently Dionysian and that they use their bodies as tools through which to celebrate the Dionysian, and work towards reclaiming it.

Through the manipulation, utilisation and performance of the very hallmarks of Apollonian fear and aversion, Marina Abramovic threatens the Apollonian illusion of control over chthonian nature, and in so doing aims for the possibility of a more symbiotic integration between body and mind in the West. Through her performance of the body in pain, bleeding, suffering and endurance, Abramovic (re)presents a Dionysian embodiment of the chthonian; a transgressive female body in performance.

Karen Finley, in turn, manipulates the Dionysian elements of scatology and abjection, purposefully evoking disgust and abhorrence and revelling in the chthonian excessive of the Dionysian; pushing the limits of the Apollonian audience's disgust, she aims to redefine notions of normal, acceptable and beautiful. In her celebratory performance of the body and its functions, Finley (re)presents a Dionysian rite of revelry through her transgressive female body in performance.

Chapter Three

Transgression in Person

Bleeding Mermaid: A Personal Interpretation of the Dionysian

Much of the content of my solo performance work deals with the straitjacketing manipulation of socially constructed ideals of the „feminine“, including concepts of the „body beautiful“. Through the use of my own body on stage, I strive to subvert stereotypes...¹

3.1 Introduction: Aims and Goals

As previously established, *Bleeding Mermaid* (2008)² is the product of extensive research, both practical and theoretical, into the Dionysian in performance. This was carried out as a means through which to both (re)present and celebrate this transgressive Dionysian notion or quality, and as a theatrical approach to the reclamation of the Dionysian and transgressive, especially with regards to the female body.

In this piece I attempted to set up an „other than normal“ performing body³ as an object of transgression against the „norm“ of society. I aimed to build up this image to its stereotypical bounds and so induce the beginnings of a feeling of disgust in the audience, as is reportedly associated with Apollonian rationality, according to Paglia.

Simultaneously, throughout the piece I juxtaposed this transgressive body with the honest emotional journey that I, as performer, underwent throughout

¹ Aston, Elaine and Geraldine Harris. *Performance Practice and Process: Contemporary [Women] Practitioners*. Houndsmills, Basingstoke, Hampshire; New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008:47.

² See Addendum 1.1.

³ See introduction p.1.

the performance, and so attempted to break down the transgressive (re)presentation that I initially set up. I wanted to remove the Dionysian from the realm of the transgressive and subversive by allowing it to resonate with the audience members personally or emotionally, and so subvert their expectations or opinions regarding this female body and its transgressive nature.

As opposed to Abramovic and Finley, I wanted to create the effect of a slow and subtle celebration of the Dionysian, that drew the audience in through performativity, rather than the use of more aggressive transgressive tactics and alienation or shock. I wanted my performance to work towards a final reclamation of the Dionysian through the means of my own body.

3.2 Notions of Body Perception

Before the audience walked into the venue of the performance, they entered through a side-foyer. This was part of the pre-set activity of the performance.⁴ Each person was given a glass of water and asked to drink it. Each audience member was then asked to step onto one of the awaiting scales, where one of the attendants would record their weight onto a label and affix that to the audience member's shirt.

This happening began approximately twenty minutes before the beginning of the actual performance, which allowed time for the audience members to walk around and either look at the posters on the walls of the foyer (which

⁴ A pre-set is generally the events/happenings related to the performance that happen before the performance, as the audience is entering the venue and/or sitting down. They do not necessarily watch all of it/participate in all of it.

depicted pictures and comments – both positive and negative – regarding weight and femininity), or enter the main theatre and watch the pre-set DVD (which is discussed in detail further on in this chapter).

Simultaneously it also allowed ample time for audience members to observe each other being weighed, and to see the weight measurements on each other's labels.

I set this up because I wanted the audience members to go into the performance with an engaged sense or awareness of body perceptions, especially from such a personal level. Some people willingly stepped on the scale and recorded their weight, whilst others refused, whilst still others did so shyly or nervously. However everyone was forced to wear a label – whether it had a genuine weight measurement, a dreamed-for one, a lie, or whether it was blank.

I wanted the audience to start engaging with the notion of bodily „perfection“ and their own ideals; how they perceive their bodies and how they believe others perceive theirs; as well as what they think of the bodies of those around them. I felt that this process created a vulnerability, which was a powerful tool for placing the audience and myself all on equal footing within the performance – making it easier to forge a connection and critique the perceptions of the body beautiful.

3.3 Fat as a Transgressive Tool

Fat, as mentioned in Chapter Two, is a liquid, chthonian Dionysian hallmark, however it has not always been perceived as a transgressive trait in itself⁵ – apart from its Dionysian affiliation. However, in modern times, it is a feature which exacerbates the transgressive nature of the/a female body. As Paglia maintains: “Fat is femaleness, nature’s abundance....Femaleness...is primitive and archaic, while femininity is social and aesthetic.”⁶

In *Bleeding Mermaid*, I engaged actively with this attribute, deliberately setting up a (re)presentation of a fat female body on stage. The physical dance or ritual of bodily exploration and antipathy that was performed at the opening of *Bleeding Mermaid*⁷ was repeated several times throughout the performance, each time highlighting the excess body fat of my performing body and accentuating that corporeal element as a transgressive one in modern Western societal notions of beauty or „normality“.

This is not something that needs particular illumination because the fact that my body is fat is apparent on sight, and without alluding to it, it would still have been an ever-present feature throughout the performance. However, the allusion to this fact brought the chthonic feature to the foreground of the thematic concern of the performance and allowed me to engage with my fatness through the tool of performance.

⁵ For example, in the Baroque ages, a fat female body was considered beautiful, and “...Mannerism and the Baroque had no fear of using elements that classical aesthetics found irregular. Hence even the theme of the ugly woman was seen from a different point of view: a woman’s imperfections were described as elements of interest, sometimes as sensual stimuli...” Eco, Umberto. *On Ugliness*. Trans. Alastair McEwen. London: Harvill Secker, 2007:169.

⁶ Paglia, Camille. *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. England: Penguin Books, 1990:359.

⁷ See Introduction p.1.

This continuous reference to my fat, and how it affects my body, forced the audience to confront my performing body as a fat female body (as opposed to politely ignoring or overlooking it) and, as a result of that, as a transgressive body in society. It furthermore forced them to begin questioning their reaction to this body – whether they found it transgressive on a personal level or not; whether it evoked revulsion and disgust, or empathy and self-recognition; or whether it evoked any other associations or feelings.

Throughout *Bleeding Mermaid*, I underwent a personal emotional journey, as I too worked through my feelings regarding my body, oscillating between disgust and tenderness. I both physically and emotionally reached out to the audience throughout the piece. I aimed for this evocation of pathos to gradually break down the initial Apollonian consumption of my body as transgressive. Like Abramovic, I wanted to connect to the audience on an emotional and primal level.

Through this process, I believe that I reimaged the notion of my fat body from ugly or repulsive or subversive or unacceptable, to a new perception of my body as beautiful or attractive or appealing. In so doing, I rewrote notions or conceptions of beauty and redefined what is and what is not socially acceptable with regards to the fat female form.

By the end of the performance I hoped that the audience would find themselves no longer consuming the image of my flabby and fleshy body as grotesque, disproportionate, or ugly, but rather that they would begin to see my body in a new light, one that revealed my body as soft and warm and female; a subversion of the Apollonian gaze and a reclamation of my Dionysian heritage.

3.4 Water as Source

The title of the performance piece, *Bleeding Mermaid*, connotes the abundant presence of water; a mermaid being a mythological water-dwelling creature. Water, the Dionysian liquid source of life, “Dionysus was identified with liquids...”⁸, similarly provides the source of inspiration or life for this piece, as well as the literal source from which the piece sprang.

I employed water, as the chthonian Dionysian fluid, in both its benevolent and malevolent associations or forms (connotations which I will unpack later within this subsection) in order to first set up and then gradually break down the transgressive associations of my Dionysian performing body.

Before the main performance in the Rhodes University Main Theatre Recess, the audience filtered through the side foyer from their personal weigh-in experiences, into the Main Theatre. The curtains covered the stage, and hanging from the centre was a large screen showing a projected DVD. This was the pre-set DVD recording⁹. The DVD witnessed me, the bleeding mermaid, dancing silently underwater, to the superimposed music of Natalie Merchant.¹⁰

I moved underwater, weightless and elegant, in sharp contrast to the physical restraint placed on me by gravity weighing on my fat body, as experienced out of water, as is encountered by my body later in the actual or non-recorded

⁸ Paglia, Camille. *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. England: Penguin Books, 1990:30.

⁹ The pre-set DVD recording of *Bleeding Mermaid* was part of the performance as a whole, yet at the same time independent thereof. This pre-set DVD took place in a different venue from the actual performance.

¹⁰ See Addendum 1.6.

performance. In the pre-set DVD recording, my mermaid fantasy, or that of my character, was actualised and I was able to do what I physically could not in „real“ life.

Before I reached this level of elegance and gracefulness in the water, however, I first explored being stuck in a cycle of violent spasms and discontent. The viewer was initially only exposed to my floating legs, from just above the knee downwards, and these legs do not have the appearance of belonging to a fat person. They gently caressed each other and began to explore the watery space, toes extended, a relaxed and harmonious image, but the gesture became more and more agitated, until gradually the viewer was exposed to the image of the full body of the performer – a more overtly fat woman in a visibly distressed state. There was an overwhelming sense of frustration and entrapment, interspersed with moments of forlorn stillness, a sense of wanting to escape or communicate but being unable to.

It is then that a shift took place, almost as if the trapped mermaid began to accept her fate and makes peace with it. I stretched out my arms, and closed my eyes, exuding absolute calmness; a stream of bubbles escaping my nostrils. From this point onwards, I wanted to explore the notion of beginning to enjoy my surroundings more, to luxuriate in the water. I lazily spun around like an entranced dancer with my hands in the air, and began to play in the water – revelling in the feeling of it on my skin, in a Dionysian rite of chthonic enjoyment.

This (re)presentation of my body in the DVD of *Bleeding Mermaid* is a manifestly Dionysian one, where the notion of water is not only a chthonic Dionysian fluid in itself, but it also becomes a metaphor in which I am trapped

within my fat body (the water as a metaphor for my fat body¹¹, but also the fat as a chthonic Dionysian liquidity in itself) and cannot escape, and eventually I make peace or come to terms with it. The metaphor thus revolves around my non-conformity to the Apollonian ideal of beauty and my entrapment in my Dionysian body, and my subsequent reimagining of the notion of „beauty“ through a Dionysian viewpoint.

I set up an expectation of quiet peacefulness and beauty for the performance through this DVD, which was immediately ruptured as the performance started. The more violent soundscape of reality, splashing and crashing water, slapping and pounding flesh, and moaning cries broke through the lullaby effect of the peaceful music. And the inescapable presence of gravity fractured the fanciful illusion. Yet the initial quiet beauty of the piece was gradually restored as the performance progressed/culminated.

The connotations surrounding water are multifarious, and these undertones abounded in this piece. The act of swimming insinuates lovely, free frolicking in the water; the idea of childlike play and freedom and invincibility. This was expressed in the piece as a joyful celebration of the benevolent aspects of the Dionysian. Swimming also connotes the beauty of the floating body in water – graceful and elegant like a mermaid, hair gently fanning out like seaweed, bubbles of air delicately escaping the lips, dancing and weightless, toes pointing and mimicking jumps like a ballerina, almost a simulation of flight.

Another association is floating. This can be a relaxing, quiet, peaceful and luxurious experience, something encountered in slow motion, like sleeping or

¹¹ As an inescapable presence on the physical body of the underwater performer – trapped under the water or by the water; just as out of the water, the performer feels/is trapped by fat/fat is an inescapable presence on the physical body.

dreaming. Although in the Dionysian medium of water, I used these graceful associations to set up the Apollonian idealisations of beauty and grace with regards to the female body; according to Eco “Serene harmony, understood as order and measure, is expressed in a Beauty that Nietzsche called Apollonian Beauty.”¹²

Floating can also be associated with fat - scientifically, the more adipose tissue (fat) a person has, the more that person will float in water, as opposed to a person who is thinner, or in other words has less adipose tissue or fat - that person will sink, or float less. I used this factor to engage with my fat body as transgressive or „other than normal“ in the piece, and show up its „difference“ or transgressive nature.

There are also the less picturesque images of swimming or floating that were alluded to within *Bleeding Mermaid* such as death - the image of floating in the water, dead, an eerie image of peacefulness - moving yet dead; or the idea of screaming under water but there is no sound audible, or speaking yet you are not heard. This links to the image of drowning, hand in the air, sinking below the surface, desperation for air; the metamorphosis from agony to peace. These more macabre associations link to my attempt to evoke a feeling of pathos in the audience, and they point to a deeper level of emotional investment within the piece, as well as the deeper emotional implications involved in the fat female body.

All of these associations regarding swimming and floating featured in *Bleeding Mermaid*, with alternating focus on the comedic elements or the more serious

¹² Eco, Umberto. *On Beauty: A History of a Western Idea*. Trans. Alastair McEwen. London: Secker & Warburg, 2004:58.

aspects, sometimes leaving me and my body in blissful harmony with the water, and at other times in an antagonistic relation to it.

The piece began and ended with the image of a floating corpse – at the start it is the body of the male performer floating in the plastic pool at my feet, the image of his body projected onto the broken screen above the pool; an anonymous corpse and the object of my affections; and at the end it is my body floating in the pool, my image also projected onto the broken screen above; the image of a drowned Ophelia. These both (re)present the Dionysian return to death, the chthonic reality of our mortal bodies as biological organisms. “We are born into the indignities of the body, with its relentless inner movements pushing us moment by moment toward death.”¹³

Yet the roles of power of these two bodies are reversed by the end of the piece. At the beginning the Apollonian male body held the power because it was floating in the water, denoting the above mentioned associations of Apollonian beauty and grace, and was projected onto the screens above my body, elevated in Apollonian judgement of my Dionysian transgression. By the end, my aim was for my female body to have reclaimed its Dionysian power in the eyes of the audience, the Dionysian power of the ancient mother-cults; for it was now floating in the water, at one with the chthonic fluid, no longer in an antagonistic relation to its Dionysian self; “...woman’s power, her imperviousness, her archetypal confederacy with chthonian nature.”¹⁴

¹³ Paglia, Camille. Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson. England: Penguin Books, 1990:116-117.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p.12.

3.5 Rain and Sex

A further manifestation of water that lent itself to the creation of the transgressive female body in this performance was the element of pouring water or rain. I utilised this as a comedic tool through which to heighten the transgressive nature of my fat female body; and as a means of further invoking pathos through its defeat of my objectives or goals.

A jet of water gushed down upon me as I was standing in the pool of water, softly singing, threatening to slice my arm open with a knife, which subverted the expected drama or angst through the sudden comic relief, reminiscent of a clown slipping on a banana peel. Yet, like the clown, this lent an air of the sad and pathetic to me as the performer. I tried to create a tangible sense of pathos, a sense that the last straw has been reached.

This links to the notion of the persistence of the deluge of water – it traps a person or prevents that person from speech or action, filling their mouth and nose, quite in opposition to the steady stream of a hot shower which traditionally is associated with notions of cleansing, soothing, and melting of tension. This Dionysian cascade of cold rain interrupted me and once again stopped me from achieving my goal, continuing the extended metaphor or association I find of the water as my chthonic body fat, holding me hostage within my own body and continuously interfering with my objectives.

I set up the deluge of water at that moment in the performance as an elimination of all disguises. It not only exposed my vulnerability in terms of the level of the pathetic that was reached, but it also exposed my bulging fat body more clearly. My thin, white, billowy outfit became sodden and thus clung to

the shape of my body, exposing my figure in detail and leaving no possibly flattering mysteries.

This transgressive (re)presentation of the female body was augmented by the fact that I used the element of the pouring rain to introduce the Dionysian theme of sex. I parodied traditional modes of seduction, but interpreted them through a comedic element of transgression brought upon by the continual thwarting of my aims through my fat body. As Paglia notes, "Standards of beauty, created by men but usually consented to by women, ritually limit women's archetypal sexual allure."¹⁵

As part of my seduction routine, I alluringly sprayed water as perfume on myself, and played under the fountain of water in attempts at tantalisation. I even managed to erase the numeric symbols of my weight off the wall with the sprays of water. I retrieved some condoms from nearby the corpse and on my way back to the pool I coyly threw a few onto his naked form. Once back in the pool, I attempted to seductively open the condom and tempt him or the audience with it, tearing it open with my teeth, rubbing it on my face, stretching it over my body, bringing it to my lips and filling it with air, filling it with water and licking it.

This Apollonian ritual of beauty or seduction, however, was continuously subverted in a comedic manner as I failed to live up to the Apollonian ideal or „norm“ of beauty and so kept making „mistakes“ or being defeated by the Dionysian aspects. As I tried to spray myself provocatively with the water, I fell over backwards into the pool of water; and the deluge of water constantly ran into my eyes or mouth, forcing me to wipe it away or spit it out; and I found

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p.32.

myself unable to reach my vagina with my hand because my stomach was too large, so I had to circumnavigate my stomach and find an alternative „sexy“ route there; and as I stretched the condom over my breasts, my waist and my stomach, it snapped from my fingers because it would not stretch around the circumference of my stomach. Eventually I gave up, enacting despondency.

Through this Dionysian parody of seduction, I highlighted the transgressive nature of my body as a fat, female body in society, and asked the audience to interrogate the body beautiful and the definition of „sexy“ or „seductive“. I deconstructed the Apollonian construction of the sex-symbol, „...the giant displacement of women“s historical status as sex object, whose beauty is endlessly discussed and modified,”¹⁶ into raw and chthonic Dionysian sex and bawdy comedy, and tried to locate the real within the constructed.

As Paglia argues “Woman“s beauty is a compromise with her dangerous archetypal allure. It gives the eye the comforting illusion of intellectual control over nature.”¹⁷

3.6 Drinking and Weight

Body weight was another aspect of the transgressive female body in performance that was augmented by the source of water in this piece. I used the revelation of my authentic body weight as a means through which to connect to the audience on a real level, one that transcended performativity.

I furthermore portrayed theatrical images of excessive eating and drinking as a means through which to show the break down of the „clean“ and „proper“

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p.17.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p.17.

boundaries of the/my body, and (re)present it as transgressive and abject (in the tradition of Karen Finley and her use of food in performance).

In one section of *Bleeding Mermaid*, I dramatically gulped down water on the command or prompt of a mysterious external force, portrayed by a loud buzzer, and then weighed myself, and repeated the ritual by force. After every forced weigh-in, I wrote down my weight in large and luminous chalk letters on the black wall next to the corpse. I then drank more water and repeated the cycle, however this time my weight had inevitably increased.

I wanted to set up the idea of weight as a variable factor, yet one that holds the potential for a vicious cycle of consequence and punishment in the struggle to attain the Apollonian image of bodily perfection. Kim Chernin calls this “the hunger knot”: “...the binding of women’s bodies into an immovable relationship with femininity and starvation.”¹⁸

Implicit in this is the notion of drinking water rather than eating - water as an appetite suppressant, thus denying the Dionysian biological body. Simultaneously, I explored gulping down the water in desperate thirst, violently forcing the water down, water overflowing from my mouth and pouring over my face and body, transgressing the conventions and manners of polite society.

This link to weight and eating was found in another section of the performance where I sat on the floor and „cooked“ or prepared a meal using water. With several mixing and serving bowls, spoons, ladles, whisks and a salt shaker, all filled with water, I prepared a watery meal that I carefully measured and

¹⁸ Epstein, Marcy J. “Consuming Performances: Eating Acts and Feminist Embodiment”. In *The Drama Review*. Vol. 40, No. 4 (Winter) 1996:25.

stirred and tasted. When it was finished, I served it into a glass bowl and delicately started eating it. Soon, however, I started devouring the meal, spilling the water all over my face and clothes.

When my bowl was empty, was about to refill it, when I realised that I was being watched by the audience, and so I feigned satiation. The audience themselves were not necessarily sitting in judgement at all, but I wanted to play with the notion of the imagined critique as perceived by the „other“ – the one in transgression of the norm, and (re)present how the Apollonian gaze curbs my Dionysian celebration.

Both the rapacious drinking and eating forms of consumption, as (re)presented by me as the performer, show consuming beyond nutritive needs, „...women“s eating acts as a cultural consumption unrelated to the nourishing of actual bodies,”¹⁹ an animalistic devouring beyond the norms or conventions of Western society, a chaotic disintegration of order, form and outline.

Whereas the Apollonian is order, delineation, individuality, control, rationality, beauty; this ingestion represents the chthonian Dionysian world of chaos, the irrational, lack of control, formlessness, destruction, the ugly. Epstein identifies this as an inherently female issue: „...physical nourishment (and its inverse: hunger, starvation, or food misuse) is central to the theatricalization of feminine roles; eating means the stoppage of a purely relational body.”²⁰

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.25.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, p.23.

3.7 Chaos and Blood

The Dionysian principle of chaos is one that appeared recurrently in *Bleeding Mermaid*. When I knelt downstage centre at a small wooden box that was present throughout the performance, I was bathed in red light, and when I opened the box, the space was filled with an almost unbearable sound of white noise.²¹ In doing this I wanted to bring up the associations of the mythological roots of Pandora and her ancient box filled with chaos and despair. Similarly, this onstage box was metaphorically filled with Dionysian and chthonian anarchic energy, threatening to dissolve the frail Apollonian illusion of civilisation and control that was represented by the rest of the stage or performance area/realm.

I set up this box as a symbol for a container of Dionysian energy within the piece. At the beginning it was unable to remain open for long, and it became a source of mystery, intending to invoke curiosity in the audience. It was set up as something powerful and terrifying, that gradually bled into the safe outside environment „infecting“/„corrupting“ it. But as the transgressive nature of my body was broken down, or displaced into the realm of that which is not transgressive, so the mystery of the box was revealed, and the terror or transgressive nature of the Dionysian was symbolically broken down and reclaimed too.

Every time I knelt before the box, I attempted to communicate with the audience, but found that speech was somehow impossible, or beyond my grasp. This is because I wanted to indicate that speech is an Apollonian

²¹ White noise referring to the loud, grainy sound of jumbled radio or bandwidth frequency.

function and somehow, with the interference of the Dionysian chaos of the box, it could not exist.

It was here that the communication between myself as performer and the audience became based on pathos. I dug into the fleshy depths of my left breast, as if excavating the essence of my heart, and attempted to offer that to the audience. I repeated this gesture several times, but set up the performance so that the action was clearly not successful – I seemed disappointed or unfulfilled, as if something was not working, and so I gradually enacted giving up, and turned my attention to the box of Dionysian chaos, opening it cautiously and with evident trepidation.

At every opening, but the last, I appeared overwhelmed by the chthonian contents of the box, and did not allow the Dionysian forces out; always quickly closing it – only once stopping long enough to retrieve a knife from its depths. I wanted to play with the idea of this box as a theatrical symbol of the trapped source of Dionysian energy that engaged me as the performer and allowed me to communicate with the audience on a chthonic or sensorial level; transcending the logical and rational; and eventually freeing me from the Apollonian and facilitating me in reclaiming the Dionysian.

Upon the last opening of the chthonic box, I began to speak or stammer to the audience: “I want...I want you...I want to...I want you to...I want to...I want...”²², now attempting to communicate the essence of my heart to the audience through verbal expression, as I applied a tourniquet to my upper arm, located a vein, and disinfected the skin with an alcohol swab. I then

²² Bleeding Mermaid. Prod. Tang Acty. Perf. Solomon, Zanne. DVD. Rhodes University Drama Department, 2008.

proceeded to insert a needle into that vein and with focused attention drew out a measure of blood. Upon removing the syringe, a droplet of blood trickled darkly down my pale inner arm, but I calmly wiped it away with cotton wool and applied a band-aid. I then transferred the blood from the syringe into a vial. As Campbell and Spackman note "...blood is a pervasive presence, both abject and celebratory."²³

Holding the vial in my right hand, I repeated the earlier gesture of digging into the depths of my left breast with my right hand, and proffering my right hand to the audience, but this time, instead of an empty hand and an empty gesture, I held forth a vial of warm blood, the Dionysian fluid of life. I set this up as the climactic moment between audience and performer, as our wordless connection was now complete through this Dionysian dialogue.

As with other performance artists, the use of the performer's blood "...implicates, rather than excludes, the audience."²⁴ With reference to Kristeva's theory on the abject, as outlined in Chapter One, I wanted the connection between the audience and myself to resonate with the individual viewers through our common ground as chthonic mortal, biological organisms, and so continue the process of subverting the „transgressive“ nature of my fat performing body.

I then crawled to the corpse and folded the vial of blood into his cold hand, placing his hand and the vial on his heart. This was my final gesture before my „death“ at the end of the performance of *Bleeding Mermaid*. As I lay

²³ Campbell, Patrick and Helen Spackman. "With/out An-Aesthetic: The Terrible Beauty of Franko B." In *The Drama Review*. Vol. 42, No. 4 (Winter) 1998:58.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p.62.

floating dead in the pool of water, so the corpse reanimated with or through my Dionysian life-blood; a laboured and agonisingly jerky partial reanimation.

This Dionysian box of chaos is present throughout the performance of *Bleeding Mermaid*, yet remains a small and inconspicuous wooden box during most of the performance as the Apollonian discourses are revealed, played with and subverted, only featuring as a powerful force at intermittent stages with strong red light and overwhelming white noise signalling its chaotic interference. However, at the end of the performance, once I had thoroughly transgressed the Apollonian ideal or „norm“ of the female body, and had decided to embrace the Dionysian reality of my body through the exposing of my abjection, in this case my blood, the chthonic Dionysian force of the piece came to the fore, and so metaphorically, the Dionysian energy of the mythological box was allowed to escape. I was finally able to communicate with the audience because I had been given Dionysian tools to do so – I communicated through my abjection, my blood; I no longer saw myself as an Apollonian prisoner in a Dionysian fleshy envelope.

3.8 The Corpse, Death and Music

The corpse was set up as the passive object of my desire or affections throughout *Bleeding Mermaid*; my foil; my continual source of Apollonian rejection; and my final source of acceptance.

His naked cadaver, floating at my feet from the beginning of the performance, gave me the drive to attempt to rescue him or nurture him. He thus became both a maternal object – the object of my maternal affections – and a

sexual object, both categories which he, even in death, refused to succumb to because I, the female performer, steadfastly do not fit into the Apollonian standard of mother or seductress. Therefore, the corpse offered Apollonian rejection even in death.

The corpse was Apollonian, even in the Dionysian state of death. Dionysian death is ugly, rotting, putrid, chthonic decay; whereas this corpse provided the image of a pleasant, handsome and hermetically sealed young man – the quintessence of Apollonian beauty.

However, this corpse did provide a macabre soundtrack to the performance, gasping, gurgling and groaning in response to my actions, and these sounds were, at occasional intervals, accompanied by physical actions. This was most conspicuous when I was playing any music on the piano. It was at these times when the corpse became most active, seeming to reanimate, as if attempting to rise up off the ground, jerking and spasming where it lay.

It was almost as if the Apollonian corpse was responding to the Dionysian essence of music, and it was this Dionysian energy that it was waking it from its distant, untouchable and unreachable position, as defined by the gaze of the aggressive Western eye²⁵, because, as Paglia maintains, “Dionysus is deeply immersed in time – rhythm, music, dance...”²⁶

Yet classical music is an Apollonian reigning-in of the Dionysian freedom of music, submitting it to form and specifications. The Beethoven piece I was playing on the piano was an Apollonian entrapment of the Dionysian. I wanted to use the piano to show this essential dichotomy within music, and within my

²⁵ As discussed in Chapter One.

²⁶ Paglia, Camille. *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson*. England: Penguin Books, 1990:117.

body, (and within all things caught between the Apollonian and the Dionysian), and so I performed as if I could not control my Dionysian body. It was a chthonic machine enslaved to nature and had a mind and a will of its own, and thus I was unable to continue playing the piano for any length of time, and so was unable to complete the reanimation of the corpse.

My limbs betrayed me and crashed upon the keys, or my body collapsed forwards or sideways – control became impossible; my wild, tangled hair was another symbol of the disorderly and chaotic chthonian forces in charge of my corporeal form. It wanted to show the struggle of trying to break free of the Apollonian, as if it was an involuntary and violent/powerful instinctual battle; the Dionysian forcefully breaking through the Apollonian illusion in a desperate attempt at reclamation.

I set up the male corpse as a direct comparison to my body; an Apollonian idealisation set against my Dionysian subversion; male versus female, accepted versus transgressive. Furthermore, it allowed me to work off his „judgement“ rather than that of the audience and use him as the antagonistic force in the piece.

Therefore, I could allow the audience the freedom to interrogate their opinions on the subject and choose their stance on my body as transgressive (whether they feel that it was, or not, or they were not sure), instead of villainising them and automatically placing them in the role of negative judgement. This in turn would better allow for the subsequent reimagining of conventional notions of beauty.

3.9 Brief Analysis of *Bleeding Mermaid* in relation to Initial Aims

Although it is somewhat difficult to judge the fulfilment of my initial aims by this piece objectively, I feel that *Bleeding Mermaid* thoroughly explored and interpreted the Dionysian through a personal journey in the attempt to (re)present my transgressive female (fat) body.

I set up a deliberately transgressive female performing body, attempting to provoke feelings of Apollonian disgust or revulsion, and then broke down that notion of transgression through establishing a genuine or real connection with the audience, through emotion and pathos. I cannot be certain how successful I was at provoking disgust or revulsion, but I do believe that by the end of the performance, I had removed the Dionysian, with regards to my body, from the realm of the transgressive, and reclaimed it as acceptable and as something to celebrate.

As a culmination of practical and theoretical research, the link to both of the previously discussed female performance artists and their work is patent. Firstly, there is the corresponding incontrovertible (re)presentation of the transgressive female body in performance.

Secondly, there are similar methods through which this transgressive female body is manifested in the work of the three performers (mine included), such as the manipulation or employment of the Dionysian aspects of sex, food and the uncontrollable body, akin to the work of Karen Finley; and the use of the chthonic elements of blood, death, and the body in pain, similar to the work of Marina Abramovic.

Furthermore, the reasoning behind my (re)presentation of the/my transgressive female body in performance is analogous to those of Finley and Abramovic. Although my focus was my body as a fat body, or a fat female body, and a fat female performing body, this thematic focus falls into a notion or goal of a Dionysian reimagining of Apollonian definitions of beauty or of Apollonian standards of what is socially and culturally acceptable regarding the fat female form.

Through my (re)presentation of this Dionysian and chthonian transgressive (fat) female body, I, like Finley and Abramovic, attempted to subvert notions of Apollonian ideals and „norms“ in favour of new definitions or standards of more Dionysian beauty and social acceptability; a vision for a Dionysian celebration and reclamation. As Britta Wheeler states: „...performance artists produce social change by experimenting with and confronting social and personal boundaries...“²⁷

²⁷ Wheeler, Britta B. “Negotiating Deviance and Normativity: Performance Art, Boundary Transgressions, and Social Change”. In Performance: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies. Volume 4. Ed. Philip Auslander. London and New York: Routledge, 2003:270.

Conclusion

Within this investigation I have attempted to establish a concrete link between the Dionysian and the transgressive female performing body. I have demonstrated that the Dionysian is not only an inherently female principle, but it is also the chthonic aspect biologically congenital to the human body.

I have also determined that although this Dionysian essence is natural and inherent to the female body, it is something that is, and has been, actively denied or suppressed in Western society through an Apollonian concealment and construction of illusion, and is therefore simultaneously transgressive in Western society. I have established that the Dionysian is therefore intrinsically linked to both the transgressive, and to the transgressive female performing body.

I have also established a link between the Dionysian and the performative, establishing that the Dionysian historically or mythologically was grounded in performative ritual and rite. These ancient practices have been negotiated in a contemporary context by contemporary performance artists who have found a modern form or ritual of an ancient practice, that has allowed them to reclaim the Dionysian.

A thorough analysis of the theoretical archetype of the Dionysian, with reference to its conjoined force, the Apollonian, as undergone in Chapter One, has established the contravening nature of the Dionysian and all subsequent Dionysian embodiments, and has given a historical, philosophical and theoretical framework within which to place the concept of the transgressive female performing body in a modern context.

The link to the Dionysian in modern or contemporary performance art has been firmly established through the investigation of the work of Marina Abramovic and Karen Finley in Chapter Two, as well as my own work in *Bleeding Mermaid* in Chapter Three, and has been clearly demonstrated through the examination of how each of these three performance artists negotiated various Dionysian aspects or principles and manipulated or employed them in order to (re)present their Dionysian and transgressive female performing bodies.

Not only does this thesis clarify a connection between the Dionysian and the transgressive female body in performance, but it has also provided some insight into the reasoning behind why a performer would want to (re)present her body as transgressive in performance. These reasons have been found to range from the personal, to the political, to „for the sake of“, and these are merely the results from the experience of three practitioners.

The Dionysian is a dark, subterranean force bubbling unceasingly beneath the frail Apollonian illusion of our Western society and culture; a biological and chthonian reality that we delude ourselves about and refuse to face. However, this inescapable reality or dark secret has been surfacing in the world of performance art and theatre for decades as a transgressive and subversive form of art and bodily expression.

This investigation has sought to emphasise that the female transgressive body embodies the Dionysian in order to reimage notions of beauty and acceptability and „normality“ so that one day, hopefully in the near future, the Dionysian body will not be synonymous with transgression, subversion,

ugliness, and taboo; that the Dionysian will not give rise to a transgressive female body but rather to a „normal“ female body.

It is this deterioration of conventional aesthetic stereotypes that appears to be the latent goal of the (re)presentation of the transgressive female performing body. And this appears to confirm my theory that this is a form of Dionysian reclamation and celebration in our contemporary performance culture and society.

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Addendum

1) DVD and Sound Footage

On attached DVD disk:

- 1.1. Amateur DVD recording of a performance of Zanne Solomon's *Bleeding Mermaid* (2008)
- 1.2. DVD extract of Marina Abramovic's *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful* (1975)
- 1.3. DVD extract of Marina Abramovic's *The Star* (1999) – a recreation of *Rhythm 10* (1973)
- 1.4. DVD extract of Karen Finley's *The Constant State of Desire* (1986)
- 1.5. Sound recording of Karen Finley's *Yam Jam* (1986)
- 1.6. Pre-set DVD presentation for Zanne Solomon's *Bleeding Mermaid* (part of entire performance) (2008)

2) Images



2.1. "Marina Abramovic in Gina Pane's *The Conditioning*"
 <http://joannemattera.blogspot.com/2009_02_01_archive.html>



2.2.
 "Marina Abramovic in *The Lips of Thomas*"
 <<http://twi-ny.com/blog/?s=Marina+Abramovic>>



2.3.
 "Carved Communist Star"
 Marina Abramovic's stomach in *The Lips of Thomas*
 <www.nationalgalleries.org/.../GMA%204191%20A.jpg>



2.4. "Marina Abramovic in *Rhythm 0*"
<www.theslideprojector.com/.../art6lecture13.html>



2.5. "Marina Abramovic in *Rhythm 5*"
<www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/rhythm-5/>



2.6.

“Karen Finley covered in Chocolate”

Timothy Greenfield-Sanders

<[http://www.greenfield-sanders.com/
image/karen-finley-covered-
chocolate](http://www.greenfield-sanders.com/image/karen-finley-covered-chocolate)>



2.7.

“Karen Finley in Honey”

<[www.mackenzieland.com/labels/
Karen%20Finley.html](http://www.mackenzieland.com/labels/Karen%20Finley.html)>



2.8.

“Karen Finley Covered in Food”

<[blogs.dallasobserver.com/.../index.p
hp?page=2](http://blogs.dallasobserver.com/.../index.php?page=2)>

3) Lyrics to Karen Finley's *Yam Jam* (1986)

You don't own me bastard
You fucking asshole
You wanna suck my pussy
Well let me suck your dick
Suck your dick bastard bitch
Ooh I wanna get your wiener in my ass
Well I've got your fucking cock
And it's in my twat good
I'm not gonna give it up you piece of shit
You can't own me like you have
Just start licking that little pussy juice
And maybe I'll take that clit
Put it on your face bastard
Put it on your mind
Ooh get me off
Get me off
Get me off right now
Let me tell you how I take the yams
Ooh I stick it up my granny's ass
She's a real real nice granny
Ooh and I never touch her snatch
Coz she's my granny
Ooh and I love her ass
Ooh I take those Belgian waffles
Ooh I smear it up her crack
And I put it up her butthole
Coz I love those Belgian waffles
Ooh and I take that Belgian beer
Ooh I'm coming
Ooh I'm coming
Get me off
Get me off

Get me off

Suck my nub

Suck my nub

Suck my tits

Suck my clit

Suck my dick

...

Mama you are sucking your granny

Ooh you are fucking your sister too

And I got those Mulato children

And I suckle under my breast

Ooh get me off

Get me off

Get me coming boy

I'll suck your wiener for you

You don't know what it's like to be finger fucked

You wish you could be a baby-maker

Oh you wish

You just wanna be fucked in your ass

But you'll never know what it's like

Coz I've got those multiple orgasms

And I'm coming every night, ooh boy

Just suck me off

Just suck my tits

Just get me going right

Ooh make me a tit sandwich

Ooh get me going right

I want my granny's ass

I want me a dwarf

I want your wiener in my mouth

Ooh I want those wieners in my cock

Ooh I got a cock too

Ooh it's called Dr Taurus and you never knew what

Ooh boy get me off, off too

Ooh I'm swimming in my piss
And I'm gonna shit in your ears
Ooh shit boy
Just shit in my mouth
Ooh fuck me you bastard bitch
Ooh you don't own me
Let me wet your face
Let me piss in your mouth
Ooh boy I'm gonna shit on you
I'm gonna pull that cock
I'm gonna tug on those balls
Ooh let me suck those balls
Gonna take a big brown hot steaming shit on you
I'm gonna make you cum
Ooh boy I'm on the subway with those...in there just drinking my piss
Ooh baby I just want you
Ooh baby get me off
Get me cumming
Get me cumming
Get me off
Get me off
Get me cumming
Suck me
Suck me
Suck me
Suck me
Get me off
Get me off
Get me off off off
Ooh I'm swimming in piss and sucking my tits
Get me off granny granny
Suck me boy
Ooh you're fucking your granny
And you're fucking your girl

Ooh you wish you had a clit but you only got cock
Ooh come boy, come boy
Get me, get me off
Get me off
Ooh get me off
Suck me boy
Got Belgian waffles in my twat
I got beer up my pussy and you never knew what
Coz I've got the clit
I've got the master action
And boy you don't own me
Not one bit
Ooh I suck that cock
I'll suck that wiener
But you just listen here Mr Horse
You drop that ghetto blaster
Suck me off
Suck me off
Suck me off