

Pain and Performance Art

This article will be divided into two parts. In the first part, I will try to talk about pain in general: How do we feel pain? What is the history of pain? How is pain existing as an image in the arts?

The second part will connect the concept of pain as an image or a metaphor in performance art: Which artists use pain as an image in performance art? What kind of pain do they use and for what reason?

The possibility to feel pain is important for a human being. It is essential. Even the lightest experience of pain is useful to correct our behaviour or give us a warning sign. Without these signs, we would not recognize when our bodies got hurt and so the lightest wounds could cause serious health problems through inflammations when not recognized. People who have the serious inability to feel pain live in a constant danger. As children they are not able to play like others because if they fall or bump into something they are unable to decide whether they have to stop their activities because of a wound or not. Pain can be seen as helpful and as a characterization of being human.

Allan Basbaum writes in his essay „Unlocking the secrets of pain: The science“: „Pain is not only an irritation, that gets sent on different ways, but a complex emotion, whose character is not only based on the intensity of the irritation, but on the situation, in which pain is felt. And most important is the affective and emotional situation of the individual. Pain as a somatic irritation is the same as beauty as a visual stimulus: both are very individual experiences.“

I am sure that this way of looking onto pain also plays an important role in the use of painful images in performance art as I will show later.

In history there are countless examples which illustrate the thought that pain is not only a biological or chemical problem but also the experience of a search for interpretation.

The religious meaning of pain, for example in christianity, is explained as gods punishment, as long act of suffering and penance. It can be seen parallel to the suffering of the wounded Jesus Christ on the cross. Pain is the punishment for the original sin of mankind. It becomes the sign for the human disobedience against god.

In this direction, the religious motivated pain allows also the interpretation of pain as test of trust or method for redemption.

In some cultures, for example the Aztecs, the ritual pain of victims that got killed for brutal gods, was a try to buy peace through the sacrifice of life. They gave the gods a symbolic height of pain to stop incredible suffering for the whole culture that could be sent by the angry gods. This kind of martyrdom may also play a role in some motivations for artists to suffer in their work. So pain was for some reasons brought from a personal state to a public one. Like the flagellants, who went through the streets in times of plague to hurt themselves in the public to show their will for penance and hope for gods mercy.

Pain was and is a content for painters and writers. In all times they tried to find images and metaphors for the phenomenon of pain.

In the 20th century there are some personal views on pain by artists. Edvard Munchs „Der Schrei“ for example shows an autobiographical moment of fear and pain. Munch, who had to go through a lot of familiar traumas, was able to bring a kind of vigorous emotion into a piece of art.

The mexican artist Frida Kahlo is another example. She made her own suffering visible in a series of autoportraits that show her constant pain after an accident in her youth. She brought personal pain into art in a very harsh and emotional artistic language.

The big problem of pain in general is the possibility to communicate pain:

Pain is different to all other physical experiences because it is only itself. Pain does not have any object. There is no "pain from something" or "pain for something", like there can be hunger or thirst for something. Pain remains without object. But in his individual, physical experience pain is absolute and total.

When somebody is suffering from pain, it is impossible to ignore it: pain becomes the main feeling that covers every other emotion. But at the same time it is not possible to communicate this experience.

Here I want to quote the author Hans Peter Dreitzel in: "Vom Menschen - Handbuch Historischer Anthropologie" :

"For someone who has pain, the pain is questionless and undoubtable present. So you can say, to have pain is the most plausible evidence for what it means to have certainty. For the other person, the same

experience is so uneasy to get, that "to hear from pain" can be taken as an example for doubt. So pain presents itself as something that is unable to be communicated. That cannot be doubted on the one hand, but is not provable on the other hand."

Performance art has a chance to be the medium for communication and change in a way: The radical treatment of their own bodies can make the performers becoming a kind of representative:

When Gina Pane said with her body actions she wanted to "protest against a world in which everything is anaesthetized", she was revolting. Using her own body as a sign against the power, that forces women to submit to the rules of masking their own bodies in beauty and kindness. With slits of razor blades through her tongue and arms, she destroyed the image of female narcissism and the passive role of women as object. For her the (quotation) „wound is the memory of the body, it memorizes its fragility, its pain, thus its „real" existence. It is a defense against the object and against the mental prosthesis.“ (Gina Pane in Kathy O'Dell: "Contract with the skin")

But this language in the performances does not only have a relation to the images in art world: Today the "war against the bodies" of women is visible when more and more young girls suffer from anorexia nervosa or problems like self-cutting in trying to become the image that is brought over by media. The body seems to be more an object and a surface for projection by others than the „real existence" that Pane was searching for.

The artist that maybe works most consequent in the modification of her own body as material is the french performer Orlan. Through several surgical operations during her work „La ReINCARNATION DE SAINTE ORLAN" she changes her body forever. She uses several images of women painted or sculptured by men for several reasons and lets plastic surgeons manipulate her face after these images. Orlan calls her work Carnal Art.

(quotation)

„Carnal Art is a self-portrait in the classical sense, yet realised through the technology of its time. Lying between disfiguration and figuration, it is an inscription in flesh, as our age makes now possible. No longer seen as the ideal it once represented, the body has become an „modified ready-made" (Statement from Orlan)

Younger artists like Kira O'Reilly use the idea of the marking of the body in a nearby context. With her cuttings, Reilly „approaches the body as a site in which the social, political and personal intertwine". Her actions synthesise and problematise the materials and discourses of the body in relation to memory, trauma and gender. She proposes the surface of the body to be a porous material that recalls a similar porosity existing between inside/outside and private/public.

The Irish Performer Andre Stitt choose a very different way in dealing with pain:

His personal past, including drug addiction, alienation and depression led to very physical but also deeply psychological performances where on the one hand the male body is treated with hard physical torture like beating on a steelbathtub for hours, shouting, crying and pouring any kind of liquid over it. On the other hand there is a strong search for a cathartic rush comparable to the Viennese Actionists. But all his work is related to his personal experience as a human being: (Quotation)

„This could come from some part of my childhood which had to do with that separation from a reality that everyone participated in, but often confused me. I actually did not know how to participate in situations. It was like people had this little rule book of how to behave and I didn't have it" (Andre Stitt in: Performance Research 1 London 1996)

Stitt tries to tear down walls that society built to control its participants. He uses the traditionell figure of the trickster. This is a kind of holy rogue, which can be found in nearly every culture. The trickster stands for the disturbed order, his humour is creative but also destroying.

In the psychoanalytical theories of C.G. Jung, this figure is able to change the senseless into something that makes sense. He is the symbol for all the darker qualities of a character. When he appears it means that there is a kind of trouble inside a society that needs to be repaired.

Stitt identifies in his performances very strong with this theories:

„The artist cast as the embodiment of this contemporary trickster figure mixing good and evil, manifesting opposites, going in and out of death, laughing at the dark side. The performances became ritualised, a journey to the heart of contemporary addictions. The recurrent themes have remained: issues of power, control, oppression, manipulation, freedom, the commodification of human/nature consciousness. Central to these concerns are the relationship between human addiction, fear/destruction, group narcissism, emotional and spiritual loss and the journey toward redemption." (Andre Stitt in: Apparition, Apparatus,

Akshun, London 1996)

In a Performance from Ben d'Armagnac in 1978, the artist was laying on the terrace of the Brooklyn Museum in New York, while a hard jet of water constantly splashed down on his heart. His chest went up and down quickly, while his heavy breathing could be heard from loudspeakers. Viewers of this performance described it as very moving. In a text about this work, Antje von Graevenitz quotes Nietzsches Term of „a sudden moment of emotion, in which notions of space and time for the present and the future vanish and a feeling of horror takes over“. Maybe these feelings of horror are the first steps of a real connection to a performance one watched.

The brain scientist Christian Keysers found out that there are mirror neurons in our brains that make it possible that we feel empathy. When these cells get influenced from something that we see (for example a performance where somebody hurts himself), they make it possible that we feel as if we where hurt ourselves. The brain is able to mirror another person. In the direct way of watching a performance this effect is very important in my opinion.

A kind of energy-dialogue with the audience is set up. The whole intensity of the performer is feelable by the audience (if the performer is really present and concentrated in his work). Sometimes the "Flow" (Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi used this term in describing a kind of total engagement in acting and consciousness), the performer feels, is transformed to the audience. Cathartic effects may be doubted, but sometimes it seems that the unbearable thrill of a performance can have similar effects on viewers.

The indonesian performer Yoyo Yogasmana uses actions oriented towards violence in order to find out the levels of human emotion and feelings of people when they see the realities of hurting another person. He lets himself be tied in ropes by the audience and afterwards the audience controls the strength with which the ropes get pulled and hurt the Performer.

For Yogasmana his work has to deal with the political and social situation in Indonesia. In a correspondence with him, he said that people in Indonesia „always think about how to make a living, but mostly forgot how to be human.“ For him it is nearly too dangerous to perform his actions in his country because the distance of the people is too big so that the danger of being strangled by the audience is present.

In East Europe the use of painfull images has got another history and dimension then in western culture. The political and economical isolation led to a very strong movement of body works in the past and still brings out a lot of extreme positions.

Petr Stembera from Czech Republic did a work called "Grafting" in Prag 1975 where he put a flower into his arm to "get in real contact with the plant". He was suffering from blood pollution afterwards. In another collaboration with Tom Marioni (Joining, 1975) the two artists were drawing two circles on their naked chests with milk and cacao and letting hungry ants move around the two circlces. The Circles should represent their brotherhood in the conflict between the East and the West. Other artists like Jan Mlcoch found methaphorical images for the isolation of the East, like in "Hanging- The Big sleep" in 1974. In this situation, Mlcoch was hanging under the roof of a house, bound at three points of his body, his eyes covered by a black mask and his ears shut from wax. This image seems to remind on archaic rituals of initiation and on the other hand has got strong political sense. The artist uses his body to show the impossibility to react on the violence from the institutions.

The political dimension of body art performances in questions of feminism, religious suppression or ethnic persecution is obvious. Sometimes the pain of being punished is much bigger then any live art work could translate into an image. But performers all over the world try to find a way to communicate with their own body to find solutions, to make hidden links in our society visible. Sometimes crawling through a field of broken glass like Chris Burden did in „Through the night softly“ in the 1970s or Boris Nieslony, who recently did a similar image in rolling arm in arm with a stone over the soil, is the only chance to behave against numbness and helplessness.