Viennese Actionism

Total Art and the Social Unconscious

Tatjana Seserko-Ostrogonac
BA (Honours)

This thesis is presented for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts (by Research) of
The University of Western Australia

Faculty of Architecture, Landscape and Visual Arts
May 2010
Abstract

In a decade spanning from 1960 to 1971 four Viennese artists Otto Muehl, Günter Brus, Hermann Nitsch and Rudolf Schwarzkogler executed a prolific number of live actions that caused tremendous public antipathy, authority intervention, imprisonment and scandal. Their art had strong overtones of taboo breaking, ritualised dramaturgy and an array of transgressive performative experiments that aspired to self-liberation from the conventional confines imposed by their society. It was conceived as a brutal reaction against the dominant ideology of Catholicism, right wing social conservatism, bourgeois convention and generally against the sublimated social climate that dominated Austria in the postwar period. This thesis will scrutinise the history of misconceptions associated with Actionism, and focus its analysis of the art around the intentions of the artists and their sense of engaging with avant-garde art at the time.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ................................................................................................................. 2

Table of Contents ................................................................................................. 3

List of Illustrations ................................................................................................ 4

Acknowledgments .................................................................................................. 6

Introduction ............................................................................................................ 9

Chapter 1: Historical background of Viennese Actionism as a group and as a concept .................................................................................. 24

Chapter 2: Politics of local galleries and art influences ........................................ 44

Chapter 3: Signification of die Blutorgel and the principle of destruction ............... 55

Chapter 4: Otto Muehl: from Material Actions to Total Art ..................................... 71

Chapter 5: Günter Brus: “Birth from obliteration” - aspects and visions of immersion of body in Direct Art situations ........................................ 82

Chapter 6: Hermann Nitsch: lamb and the wound .................................................... 96

Conclusion .............................................................................................................105

Bibliography .........................................................................................................109

Illustrations ..........................................................................................................114
List of Illustrations

Figure 1.1 Hermann Nitsch. *Reworking of print made after Rembrandt “Hundred Guilder Print.”* 1956-60. Emulsion paint on etching paper.................114

Figure 1.2 Hermann Nitsch. *Reworking of print made after Rembrandt “Hundred Guilder Print.”* 1956-60. Emulsion paint on etching paper.................114

Figure 1.3 *Kunst und Revolution/Art and Revolution* poster, University of Vienna. 1968.................................................................115

Figure 1.4 *Kunst und Revolution/Art and Revolution* article in local newspaper. 1968.................................................................115

Figure 1.5 *Kunst und Revolution/Art and Revolution.* 1968..............................116

Figure 3.1 *Die Blutorgel/ The Blood Organ.* 1962. manifesto and invitations.................................................................117

Figure 3.2 *Die Blutorgel/ The Blood Organ.* 1962. Otto Muehl and junk sculpture.................................................................118

Figure 3.3 *Die Blutorgel/ The Blood Organ.* 1962. junk sculpture detail.................................................................118

Figure 3.4 *Die Blutorgel/ The Blood Organ.* 1962. Stairway banister, entry into the Perinetkeller and Otto Muehl working on junk sculpture.................................119

Figure 3.5 *Die Blutorgel/ The Blood Organ.* 1962. Otto Muehl working on his junk sculpture.................................................................120

Figure 3.6 *Die Blutorgel/ The Blood Organ.* 1962. Hermann Nitsch. 7th Painting Action.................................................................120

Figure 3.7 *Die Blutorgel/ The Blood Organ.* 1962. breaking the entry.................................................................121

Figure 3.8 *Die Blutorgel/ The Blood Organ.* 1962.................................................................121

Figure 3.9 *Die Blutorgel/ The Blood Organ.* 1962.................................................................122

Figure 4.1 Otto Muehl. Materialaktion Nr. 30 *Nahrungsmitteltest/ Material Action Nr. 30 Food Test.* 1966. Example of material detritus after Muehl’s material action.................................................................123

Figure 4.2 Otto Muehl. Materialaktion Nr. 3 *Klarsichtpackung - Versumpfung in einer Truhe - Panierung eines weiblichen Gesäßes- Wälzen im Schlamm/ Material Action Nr. 3 *Transparent Packing - Degradation in a Trunk - Bread-crumbing of a Backside - Rolling in Mud.* 1964.................................................................124

Figure 4.3 Otto Muehl. Aktion *Leda mit dem Schwann/ Action Leda and Swan.* 1964.................................................................125
Figure 4.3a Otto Muehl. Aktion Leda mit dem Schwann/Action Leda and Swan. 1964..........................................................126

Figure 4.4 Kurt Kren. Otto Muehl Aktion - Mama und Papa/Otto Muehl Action Mom and Dad. 1964. (film stills).................................127

Figure 4.5 Otto Muehl. Aktion Kardinal/Action Kardinal. 1967. film by Helmut Kronberger. (film stills).............................................128

Figure 5.1 Arnulf Rainer. Head of the Diver (Deny your Birth). 1950.................129

Figure 5.2 Arnulf Rainer. Centralized Design Overpainting. 1951/63...............129

Figure 5.3 Günter Brus. Aktion Ana/Action Ana. 1964........................................130

Figure 5.3a Gunter Brus. Aktion Ana/Action Ana. 1964........................................131

Figure 5.4 Gunter Brus. Aktion Selbstbemalung 1, Handbemalung/Action Self-painting 1, Handpainting. 1964........................................131

Figure 5.5 Gunter Brus. Aktion Selbstbemalung 1, Kopfbemalung/Action Self-painting 1, Head-painting. 1964.................................131

Figure 5.6 Gunter Brus. Aktion Selbstbemalung 1/ Kopfzumalung/Action Self-painting 1, Headpainting. 1964.................................131

Figure 5.7. Günter Brus. Aktion Selbstbemalung/Action Self-painting. 1965......132

Figure 5.7a. Günter Brus. Aktion Selbstbemalung/Action Self-painting. 1965......132

Figure 5.8 Günter Brus. Aktion Selbstverstümmelung 3/Action Self-mutilation 3. 1965.................................................................133

Figure 5.9 Günter Brus. Aktion Wiener Spaziergang/Action Vienna Walk. 1965.............................................................................134

Figure 5.10 Günter Brus. Aktion Zerreißprobe/Action Breaking Test. 1970................................................................................135

Figure 6.1 Hermann Nitsch. 31.Aktion Maria-Empfängnis/31. Action (Mary’s Conception). 1969.............................................................136

Figure 6.2 Hermann Nitsch. 5. Aktion/5th Action. 1964........................................137

Figure 6.3 Hermann Nitsch. 7. Aktion/7th Action. 1965........................................137

Figure 6.4 Hermann Nitsch. Malaktion/Painting Action. 1961........................................138

Figure 6.5 Hermann Nitsch. 1. Aktion/1st Action. 1962........................................138
Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my supervisor Associate Professor Peter Mudie for his expertise, insight and pertinent discussions that made a significant contribution towards this thesis, and whose endless encouragement, understanding and support considerably added towards the fulfilment of this degree.

I would also like to thank my thesis supervisor Associate Professor Ian McLean for his expertise and significant contribution towards this thesis throughout the duration of the research.

I would also like to thank Dr Malcolm Riddoch for his friendship, encouragement, professional and moral support towards the end of the thesis, Dr Martin Heine and Dr David Bromfield for their insightful support, and leading a number of conversations pertinent to the topic.

Finally, I would like to thank my colleagues and postgraduate students in the Faculty for numerous peer discussions and friendship, and my family for their unconditional love.
Through my artistic production (a form of life worship) I take upon myself everything that appears negative, unsavoury, perverse and obscene, the lust and the resulting sacrificial hysteria, in order to spare YOU the defilement and shame entailed by the descent into the extreme.

(Hermann Nitsch)
INTRODUCTION

In a decade spanning from 1960 to 1971, four Viennese artists, Günter Brus, Hermann Nitsch, Otto Muehl and Rudolf Schwarzkogler, executed a prolific number of live Actions that caused tremendous public antipathy, police intervention, imprisonment and scandal. Their art had strong overtones of taboo breaking, ritualised dramaturgy and an array of transgressive performative experiments that aspired to self-liberation from the conventional confines imposed by Viennese society. It was conceived as a brutal reaction against the dominant ideology of Catholicism, right wing social conservatism, bourgeois convention and generally against the sublimated social climate that dominated Austria in the postwar period.1 This is why Daniele Roussel amongst others has argued for the importance of locating Actionism within the political, social and historical aftermath of the Second World War in Vienna. She argued that fascist ideology still permeated the social psychology of the Austrian conservative bourgeois culture and this informed the levels of brutality and violence inherent in Viennese Actionism—as the art is known.2

---

2 The conservative ideals of the bourgeoisie (referred to in the text) is a complex trait that evolved out of the manorialism of the Catholic Church in Western Europe and its influence which extended from feudal ownership and the legacy of centralised moral servitude to the Catholic doctrine. The legacy of feudalism established the critical concepts of social order, the basis of common law and the political/moral obligations that extended from the monopoly of Catholic scholarship during the Middle Ages. The remodelling of Hapsburg society by Emperor Joseph II (1780-87) during the Enlightenment would consolidate a unitary state in which the role of government and the secular influence of the church would coexist. Following WW1 features of Franz Joseph’s reforms from the late 19th century were retained upon collapse of the Austran-Hungarian empire (and the formation of the First Republic in Austria). Following WW2 the democratic Republic of Austria was reinstated (and Franz Joseph’s reforms were retained as well as Hitler’s imposition of a 1.1% Church Tax for all Roman Catholics in Austria). In 1961 89% of Vienna’s population were identified as Roman Catholic – the large proportion of church/parish land holdings support the importance (and dominance) of ‘Catholic’ values within Viennese culture. Refer to Marc Bloch, Feudal Society: Vol. 2 Social Classes and Political Organisation (Second Edition edn.; London: Routledge, 1975), pp. 183-189; Hans Hollerweger, Die Reform Des Gottesdienstes Zur Zeit Des Josephinismus in Österreich (Pustet, 1976), pp. 417-464; Alfred Diamont, Austrian Catholics and the First Republic: Democracy, Capitalism, and the Social Order (1918 -1934) (Princeton University Press, 1960).
Viennese Actionism has frequently been referred to as one of the most contested movements in the history of the 20th century avant-garde. During the 1960s their performances were met with an overwhelming public animosity, largely due to a fear of scandal. Numerous newspaper articles, reviews and hate-mail letters appeared that largely focused on scandal and the breach of public order. If these, alongside a vast number of police reports, might ordinarily supplement our understanding of an art movement, they have tended to dominate the reception of Actionism even in the artworld, to the extent that it is difficult to separate myth from reality. Furthermore, while their art has been known elsewhere since the 1970s, Actionism has been poorly understood because of a lack of suitable translations of primary sources.

In this thesis, I will focus on the notion of the social unconscious, and how the contemporary social and political milieu impacted on the levels of brutality in the Actionists’ art. I will generally ignore other aspects of their art that have been discussed, such as shock value, moral justifications and questions pertaining to the judicial validity of their work. Instead I will focus on the information and issues found primarily in artists’ statements and the writing of authors who sought to understand the artists’ intentions, especially those who were close to the artists.

The first chapter discusses the four artists’ biographical backgrounds as well as the historical and political contexts of Actionism. To this day a certain myth about the Actionists has hindered a proper understanding of

---

their context in the history of avant-garde art. Malcolm Green sought to overcome this problem by publishing a monograph in 1999 in collaboration with the four artists. The book is an attempt to demystify misperceptions that exist about their work, by publishing their manifestos, diary excerpts and writings. However, residual myths are difficult to shift. The first chapter largely traces a trajectory of the literature brought to light by Green and a number of other authors (such as Peter Weibel, Veit Loers and Daniele Roussel), an analysis of the kind of problems that surround Actionism and an adequate contemporaneous interpretation of their project.

One such problem is exemplified by the international reception of the Actionists’ work. In a recent publication of a monograph on Hermann Nitsch’s oeuvre, Aaron Levy stated that the reception of their work in America was unprecedented.4 The lack of familiarity of the post-war Viennese art context generated impulsive reactions based on shock values, rather than those that sought redemptive qualities.5 Nitsch’s work was not discussed soberly until the end of the Millennium, and after the office of the Austrian president acquired one of his paintings in the late 1990s.

According to Dr Peter Mudie, who has written on the Actionists’ films,67 most remarkable was the audience’s aesthetic expectations. When viewing large cibachrome photographs that depicted defiled female genitalia with a chicken corpse up-close, spectators were fascinated with the abstract

---

5 Ibid.
6 Peter Mudie, Below the Centre/Unterhalb Des Mittelpunkts: A Selection of Filmwork from the Austria Filmmakers Cooperative (Perth: The School of Architecture and Fine Arts, University of Western Australia, 1994).
beauty that radiated from the image. However, as they slowly stepped back, and they saw what the image depicted, the expression on the viewers’ faces changed from an appreciative gaze to that of shock and horror. In one particular instance, Otto Muehl’s scheduled participation with Oh Sensibility! project in the International Underground Film Festival in London in 1970 was cancelled due to the staff’s fear of loss of employment if they were to proceed with an on-stage live decapitation of a chicken. With support of the agency for animal protection, the bird was confiscated and performance cancelled.

Similar reactions occurred in many other situations around the world. The Actionists were judged according to the spectators’ aesthetic and moral values rather than the artists’ intentions. The artists specifically emphasised their intention to critique conventional aesthetic and representational values of art. They utilised an avant-garde understanding of art history in order to obliterate and react against aesthetic regimes of conventional artistic media. They radically transgressed the boundaries of pictorial illusionism by integrating directly the human body in a three-dimensional Material Action.

Furthermore, the core of Actionism stressed the importance of a philosophical speculation of the body in society, and one that emphasised the body in terms of psychoanalytical rather than the biological or strictly

---

8 From a conversation with Dr Peter Mudie in relation to Otto Muehl’s participation in International Underground Film Festival in London among a group of Australian filmmakers., Ibid., pp.260-261
11 This statement is speculative and reliant upon information derived from literary sources that will be discussed in the first chapter. The research in this thesis does not cover the scope of Actionists’ exhibitions that took place in other countries apart from Austria in the 1960s.
phenomenological concerns of some 1970’s performance artists, such as Stelarc, Chris Burden, Dennis Oppenheim and Vito Acconci. By integrating its physiological and instinctive values, the body was perceived as a mediator of vital life force and one that directly implicated its viewers on social and psychological levels.

The Actionists also envisaged their art practice as live Actions or Direct Art that cut directly through the ideological mediations of social codes. They deliberately stripped the body of codified social referents in order to expose its primordial realities as the bases for radical even revolutionary Action.12 Commenting on Fest des psycho-physischen Naturalismus (Festival of Psycho-Physical Naturalism) (1966), Muehl and Nitsch claimed that working with strategies such as “madness”, “horseplay”, “destruction” and “eternal puberty” enabled them to “produce an antidote to the languor and cultural decay” that surrounded them.13 Muehl openly referred to the art system as the “art pig-sty” whose practitioners were only viable to carry out “dim-witted ideas.”14 Nitsch stated that he loves his “mutilated lamb more than a minister for education.”15

Numerous statements of this nature were made as invitations to collaborative Actions that were directed against conventional cultural activities. The launching of their underground publications in order to market their intentions usually attracted substantial amounts of people. In the Second Total Action that took place in 1966, Muehl and Brus defined Total Action as a Direct Art Action that entailed all forms of art “which have

13 Ibid., p.81
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
been so infected by the progressive cretinisation in [their] society that any examination of reality has become impossible by these means alone."\textsuperscript{16} This ‘examination of reality’ extended the notion of conventional art media such as film, theatre, painting, music and literature to all objects and living matter that constitute social reality—including people, animals, food, movement, gas, wind, warmth, coldness, plants, noises, smells, fire, water, dust, and virtually any given particle that could be brought into a staged Action.\textsuperscript{17} The materials were subjected to various forms of treatment that included an array of “incalculable possibilities” of madness and subjection to the actors’ unconscious drives.\textsuperscript{18}

In individual working terms, Muehl and Nitsch placed their focus on an ascending number of passive performers and their observing masses, whereas Brus and Schwarzkogler emphasised the self-referential singularity of their own body, relying on documentary devices to bring the work into a public sphere. In general terms, both Muehl and Nitsch utilised the confrontational power of live performative interaction with their audience—Brus and Schwarzkogler would often employ the influential nature of representations of the body in pictorial form.

What is the role of the body, and what are the socially encoded referents that inhibit its existence in the art system and its cultural context? What is the social body Muehl and Nitsch refer to, and what is the factual body Brus and Schwarzkogler point towards?

\textsuperscript{16} Günter Brus and Otto Muehl cited in Ibid., p.41
\textsuperscript{17} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{18} Ibid.
Malcolm Green stated that the Actionists identified an array of paradoxes that exist among the dualities of the “physical” body and “social” body.\(^\text{19}\) The physical body epitomises a singular body of an individual subject, encompassing all of its physical, biological and psychological functions, including the desiring and communicative body that exists in its social milieu.\(^\text{20}\) In the history of art, we are familiar with lengthy passive poses in art classes, and representations of various models on two-dimensional painting panels and canvases. In 1960s performance art and Action art, the conventional objectified body was transformed into a subjective and interpretive vehicle, off the pedestal and off the canvas into a living three-dimensional context.

The social body, or the public body refers to the complex network of associations that exists between individual perceptions of the world outside itself, the way that it responds to society and the way that the body is perceived in the nexus of social and ideological interrelations.\(^\text{21}\) Weibel’s philosophical evaluation of the body as a social being, derived from Ludwig Wittgenstein’s writing, was taken as a foundation upon which the body as a material living subject exists in live art situations. The body was placed in the centre not only of galleries and studio spaces, but also in the centre of public scrutiny.\(^\text{22}\)

Green contends that from the onset, the Actionists questioned the nature of social definitions and paradoxes that exist in relation to the differences between the physical body and social body. He argued that they did not

---

\(^\text{19}\) Ibid., pp.15-19  
\(^\text{20}\) Ibid. p.16  
\(^\text{22}\) Peter Weibel cited in Green, Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists., pp.15-16
only endeavour to expose the rift that exists between the physical and social, but to contemplate an inter-dependent paradoxical nature manifested in both, through “outrageous... bodily delusions (Brus).” Green defines the nature of this paradox through a list of binary opposites:

the body as a means of fulfilling desire, and the body as a threat or obstacle, as in the case of illness, disease, impending death, hospitalisation, imprisonment, narcosis, or the estrangement of childhood... the body as mine, and the body as yours (your slave, your property, your object in material action); the body as I, and the body as not I (in situations where it is used to punish the “owner” - fromspanking to whipping to torture); the body as proof of doing and authorship, and the body as evidence against you...24

These traits delineate the Actionists’ initiative to pinpoint the body’s existence in social space as a positivist self, and simultaneously as an object of Material Actions that simultaneously reveal and deconstruct the ideology of social life.

For example, Peter Weibel stated of Günter Brus: “Through the actual mutilation of the body, the reality of its social encoding and the mutilating function of social encoding itself are attacked.” Weibel was aware that by making this statement there was a danger of reducing Actionism to the “body and its drives.” However, the Actionists refused to reify the body as an autonomous entity. They believed that the body, or one’s body image, is the product of social flux: “via the mediation of the mother... the person [comes] to discover the body as part of its world.” Here the body is not a representation, rather as Günter Brus suggested: “My body is the intention.

24 Green, Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists., p.16
25 Ibid., p.16
26 Daniele Roussel (ed.), Der Wiener Aktionismus Und Die Österreicher (Klagenfurt: Ritter Verlag, 1995)., cited in Green, Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists., p.16
27 Green, Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists., p.16
My body is the event. My body is the result.”

Life itself is taken as a material, and eventually the difference that exists between the real and the represented is dissolved. 

The social codes that Green referred to include Brus’ reflection on the “bodily delusions”, and an array of mostly traumatic experiences that are imposed upon a person. Later in a person’s life, the history of these experiences may become intensified by occurrences of abrupt emotive states linked to surprises, shock, uncertainty, guilt, pressure or denials. According to Green, through such intensified moments, the self undergoes changes due to the standardisation of the social order. As such, persons in estranged situations are removed from the “normal flow of events” and are repressed and marginalised in the “invisible” social pockets. Referring to the anthropological discourse of Victor Crapanzano, Malcolm Green contended that people who are alienated from society in this manner are not simply sunk into repression, but are instead “hidden away as written out of the discourse, made “unmentionable” and unaccountable, and thus inaccessible.”

The emphasis on corporeal singularity is perceived as a desperate cry to reunite the split between mind and matter brought about by Fascism and the Second World War. For the Actionists, Fascism was not only an oppressive political ideology but also a repressive psychological condition that permeated Austrian social order in the post-war period. Such speculation stems from Viennese psychoanalysis such as that of Sigmund Freud and

---

28 Günter Brus cited in Ibid.
29 Ibid.
30 Ibid., p.17
Wilhelm Reich.\(^\text{32}\) The legacy of their ideas is evident in the conceptual framework of live art Actions. Reich’s Marxist perspective expanded Freud’s psychoanalytic ideas about the individual in order to talk about the psychology of the body in society. In his book *Mass Psychology of Fascism* Reich discussed Fascism in psychological and social terms, rather than explicitly referring to a political ideology. The ideas within Reich’s book would deeply impact the Actionists and should be summarised.

In a preface to the 1946 edition, Reich discussed what he called the biopsychic layering of human character. He distinguished three basic layers: the surface layer, an intermediate layer (of repressed drives or the Freudian unconscious), and the “biological core.”\(^\text{33}\) The superficial surface layer entails traits equivalent to tolerance, compassion, conscientiousness, politeness, and responsibility.\(^\text{34}\) These traits occur on the surface level of appearance and are utilised in the immediacy of human relations.\(^\text{35}\) They are the driving force of conversation and human interrelations in society, which generally tend to mediate social tolerance and acceptance.\(^\text{36}\) In Reich’s words, manifestation of social tragedies would not occur if the

\(^{32}\) Freud’s ideas that were relevant in Actionism stem from psychoanalysis, derived from his complex study of language in determining symptomatology in traumatic and obsessional neurosis patients. The core of Freud’s psychoanalysis includes structuralisation of human mind into the tripartite conglomerate of the Consciousness (Ego), preconscious mind, and the Unconscious. The unconscious sits beneath the perceptible layer of human experience and it harbours the complex web of unprocessed, latent, repressed, traumatic or forgotten experiences that occur through an individual adult life as well as infantile stages of development. Freud’s relationship with the unconscious was incredibly complex and the parameters of this thesis will not permit the thorough elaboration of the entirety of his oeuvre. The key aspect of his study relevant to this thesis is a brief summary (as opposed to a reductive definition) that explains the way in which the unconscious ideas are stored. Freud stated that what separates the Ego from the Unconscious mind is a form of “censorship” (p.250) that represses desires, dreams, fantasies and experiences that are socially unacceptable. He states that the latent desires, that most often include substitutes for sexuality, are processed from the unconscious in dreams, in forms of various pathological states such as hysteria and neuroses, and that can become evident in the consciousness through abreactive catharsis. Refer to Sigmund Freud, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis: A Course of Twenty-Eight Lectures Delivered at the University of Vienna*, trans. Joan Riviere (London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd., 1922), pp. 231-250.


\(^{34}\) Ibid., pp.13-14

\(^{35}\) Ibid.

\(^{36}\) Ibid.
superficiality of social cooperation were in direct correspondence with the depth of one’s selfhood. Unfortunately, repressive states that often result in manifestations of tragedies and violence in society hinder the idealism of this connection. Reich equated the state of everything that is repressed to the Freudian unconscious, the intermediate character layer that exclusively contains sadistic, cruel, lascivious and envious impulses. These elements embody anti-social traits, whose repressions of biological urges become exposed in much wider social parameters.

According to Reich, under favourable social conditions the biological core renders a human being as genuine, essentially honest, cooperative and loving. The deepest layer entails the true creative potential of being. He believed that this energy is what makes humans one with cosmos, and is the source of what he called orgone energy that he believed is omnipresent in all living matter.

Furthermore, Reich argued that the structuralisation of human character permeates political and ideological sub-groupings of society. He saw the manifestation of the superficial layer of tolerance and ethical social ideas in Liberalism. Liberal individualism, a prevalent trait of capitalist societies, repudiates human sociability that stems from the inner core of one’s selfhood. As much as this suppression is clearly evident in liberal capitalist modus operandi, Reich also stresses that the formal imposition of normative ethics only superficially overcomes perversion and sadistic patterns. Reich argued that the catastrophes of the twentieth century prove

---

37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
39 Ibid., p.13
40 Ibid.
41 Ibid.
42 Ibid., p.14
that this particular approach of liberal superficiality “did not get very far.” Furthermore, Reich contends that every art, science and genuine revolution stem directly from the biological core of one’s selfhood. Fascism, in stark contrast to Liberal capitalism, does not embody either the surface or the depth. Instead, it focuses on everything that hinders a direct relation of ideal human functioning, which is the intermediate layer of murderous, sadistic and perverse drives.

This basic outline of the permeation of human behavioural character into the social order appears as an underlying structure for most Actionist art. The social alienation of the body reflects Reich’s notion of the social unconscious. The unconscious is the unseen area of the social and epitomises the unity of its undesirable facets. Otto Muehl made a critical reference to this situation by reducing the body to a material art object devoid of personal traits. Hermann Nitsch and Günter Brus made direct incisions into their body, and the body was exposed in its helpless states – such as induced catatonia – caused by the body’s inhibitions. Nitsch claimed that he wanted to wake up people from dormant stages of their “manifold pseudo-existence.” The intentions of throwing the “unsavoury” contents of the unconscious real into the face of a “sleeping” public expressed a desperate form of rebellion “against redefining [the] social situation.” They aimed to initiate a re-birth into the flux of a new social order that would reveal un-exposed social activities long sunk into the underground of repressions. They turned the body’s reality inside out by overturning conventional table manners into gluttonous orgies and

43 Ibid.
44 Reich, The Mass Psychology of Fascism.
45 Hermann Nitsch, 6-Tage-Spiel in Prinzendorf 1998 (Vienna: Museum moderner Kunst Stiftung Ludwig, 1999), cited in Green, Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists., p.17
46 Green, Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists., p.17
excreting ordeals. They turned against homophobic conventions by reinforcing the Actionist version of transvestism, they blasphemed the Church by making conscious reference to religious iconography in the context of pornographic Actions (Nitsch), and they turned to traits of violent destruction as a means of creative potential.

The question of artistic influences and the politics of local gallery spaces are examined in the second chapter. I have particularly focused on the influence of Tachisme and of contemporary artists such as Joseph Beuys, Georges Mathieu, Alan Kaprow and Arnulf Rainer. Other more general and historical influences are mentioned later in the thesis. Viennese galleries played a fundamental role in defining local avant-garde practice in the 1960s. I have focused on two influential galleries and the kind of political ideology that influenced the promotion of the content of local art. I do not discuss the full history of local artists’ commitment to these premises or the full history of exhibitions that took place there. Instead, I mention only a number of exhibitions that significantly influenced the four Actionists under consideration in this thesis. Also, I theorise the ideological stance and manipulation of ethical beliefs that held sway over exhibited works in these places. This knowledge informs the depth of the Actionists’ ideas that vehemently critiqued much local art practice.

In the early 1960s each of the Actionists were interested in what they referred to as three-dimensional painterly realities. Meeting each other and discussing philosophical and theoretical ideas brought the artists together on a number of occasions to perform collaborative events. In the fourth chapter, I focus on Action *The Blood Organ*, whose preliminary actions and the event itself signified an entry and initiation into the Actionist decade as
a group. Even though Günter Brus’ and Rudolf Schwarzkogler’s works were not included in this particular Action, it explains the kind of conversations that took place that provided a conduit for the rapid evolution of their collaborative ideas. Brus’ input was such that he influenced Muehl to make significant changes in his previous thinking and methods in order to reach the state of the material immersion of the body in art. Schwarzkogler was engaged in an intimate exchange of ideas with Hermann Nitsch before meeting the others.

The fourth chapter critically evaluates Otto Muehl’s individual art practice as it is perceived after The Blood Organ event. It scrutinises the evolution of his Material Actions and Direct Art and their relationship to film. Günter Brus’ individual Actions are analysed in chapter five, whilst selected aspects of Hermann Nitsch’s oeuvre are discussed in chapter six. Rudolf Schwarzkogler’s art is only mentioned in the biographical section of the first chapter, and his individual practice is not discussed separately due to the limitations of this thesis. Schwarzkogler was the youngest Actionist and he performed only six Actions in the period of three years (1965 – 1968) before his premature death in 1969.47 He often attended Actions performed by the others, and he opted to perform in isolation, mainly focusing on the formal relationship between live Action and photography. Nitsch stated that Schwarzkogler’s ideas were unique and that he introduced new “aesthetic possibilities of drama.”48 He was particularly impressed with cathartic and purifying alchemical processes that not only worked with the body of the artist and designated passive actors in a drama, but also the audience’s bodies. While Nitsch said that Schwarzkogler’s approach was

different to the others, his contribution to Actionism was “incontrovertible” and influential.\textsuperscript{49}

\textsuperscript{49} Ibid.
CHAPTER 1:

Historical background of Viennese Actionism as a group and as a concept

The four Viennese Actionist artists come from different backgrounds of complex artistic development with distinct biographies. However, they all shared a common agreement that painting could be extended into a three dimensional reality with the main focus on the centrality of the human body. Perceived in its “thingness”, the body was utilised as a working surface and an integral constituent of Material Actions that was also deeply embedded in the complexity of its psychoanalytic and existentialist traits.\textsuperscript{50} Such development of “psycho-archeological existentialism”\textsuperscript{51} through Material Actions shattered not just the mimetic illusionism of traditional painting but also the very aesthetics and politics of representation that had previously constituted Western painting. For them, the dominant avant-garde trends of Informel and Tachisme became too conventional, as they were concerned too much with matters related to painting.

During the 1960s, the decade most prolific for Actionism, the artists mostly strived to work on their individual practice. It was largely through shared views, arising from their early biography and their educational background that led them to collaborate. It was only through the consensus of a group that they could attain the levels of contestation that Actionism is known for. Even though Nitsch claimed that they were never a group, a


\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.,p.42.
number of literary sources and the artists’ own publications offer accounts on the progression of ideas that led to the inception of a group.

Otto Muehl was the eldest of the four artists, and was born in 1925 in Grodnau, Burgenland in east Austria.52 At the outbreak of war in 1940, during his secondary education, he was sent to work as an agricultural labourer. Shortly after, he was conscripted by the German army and sent to the Western Front, regardless of his previous endeavours to be recruited as an officer cadet in order to avoid being sent to the war.53 In the barracks he painted a mural of the *Fall of Pompeii.*54 In 1945, at the end of the war, he was transferred to Czechoslovakia from where he was forced to flee the Soviet liberation regiment.55 The Czechs imprisoned him but he managed to escape by “hiding in the luggage compartment of a destroyed car.”56

After the war, Muehl obtained a university degree in German history, after which he studied Art Pedagogy at the University of Vienna.57 During this time he befriended an artist Adolf Frohner with whom he frequently collaborated in the inceptive stages of Actionism.58 In the early 1950s, Muehl worked as an art therapist in a centre for emotionally disturbed children, predominantly Hungarian refugees. This experience informed his

---

54 Ibid.
55 Ibid., p.113
56 Ibid.
58 Ibid.
psychoanalytic approach to art.\textsuperscript{59} His early paintings were characterised by the figurative style of late Cubism developed at the Ecole de Paris art school.\textsuperscript{60}

Muehl was struggling with his Cubist figurative work of flat colour planes before meeting Günter Brus in late 1960.\textsuperscript{61} Brus vehemently criticised Muehl's first exhibition that took place at the Gallery Junge Generation in 1960, a commentary that greatly impressed him.\textsuperscript{62} As such, the rigorous criticism, enthusiasm and concern of Brus' youth provided an inspiration and foundation upon which Muehl would radically change the course of his actions in his practice during the 1960s.

Günter Brus was born in 1938 in Ardning, Styria in central Austria. In 1957, he graduated from the School of Applied Arts in Graz, after which he moved to Vienna to study at the Academy of Fine Arts.\textsuperscript{63} Frequent conflicts with staff during his student years resulted in feelings of overwhelming dissatisfaction causing him to abandon the course. His critique of teaching methodologies was aimed towards the debilitating effects of prescriptive academic drawing techniques.\textsuperscript{64} On the other hand, for Brus the academy years positively resulted in a friendship with a peer painter, Alfons Schilling, with whom he took interest in visiting many exhibitions that took place in the Nächst St. Stephan Gallery that housed local avant-garde art and Informel.\textsuperscript{65} The two witnessed numerous exhibitions of works by Egon

\textsuperscript{59} Schwarz, ‘Chronologie/Chronology’, p.114
\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., p.113
\textsuperscript{61} Schwarz, ‘Chronologie/Chronology’, p.157
\textsuperscript{62} Roussel, ‘Viennese Actionism: Destruction Brings Creation’, p.162
\textsuperscript{63} Schwarz, ‘Chronologie/Chronology’, p.95
\textsuperscript{64} Ibid.
Schiele, Richard Gerstl, Markus Prachensky, Josef Mikl, Wolfgang Hollegha and most notably the work of Arnulf Rainer.  

Hermann Nitsch, whose father was killed in the war, was born in Vienna in 1938 where he spent most of his childhood with his widowed mother. He used to spend much time on the outskirts of the city, and he frequently visited his relatives who owned a castle in Prinzendorf, a vineyard area in lower Austria close to the Czech border. At the age of fifteen, he became a church painter, a job that drew him close to Renaissance and Baroque art, in particular that of Titian and Rembrandt. His tertiary education entailed training in the Pedagogical Institute for Graphics, where he became acquainted with traditional techniques of printing and drawing. He also became interested in the work of Egon Schiele, Oskar Kokoschka and Gustav Klimt, whose paintings he saw as a type of “cosmic dance.” Kokoschka’s and Schiele’s gestural works inspired him to begin painting in 1954. Nitsch’s early work was very influenced by religious iconography and he executed a number of paintings of Crucifixions. In the 1950s, Nitsch’s interest in Renaissance work often resulted in him copying the work of the old masters (see Figures 1.1 and 1.2).
In 1957, he conceived the idea for the *Orgien Mysterien Theater (Orgies-Mysteries Theatre)* – which he later abbreviated to the *O.-M. Theatre*. The work was initiated as an ongoing series of his future magnum opus, the Gesamtkunstwerk, whose Wagnerian proportions of a dramatic festival entailed the initiative to integrate all art. This work embodies his intense interest in philosophy, psychology, religion and literature. Authors on comparative religion, mythology and past cults were largely influential. Already in the early stages of his artistic development, he envisaged the Prinzendorf castle as a stage for his opus of Dionysian dramaturgy. Towards the end of the 1950s he saw Tachist and Abstract Expressionist works that impacted on the course of development of his *Abreaction Plays* and the *O.-M. Theatre* project.

Rudolf Schwarzkogler was the youngest Actionist and was born in Vienna in 1940. His mother was a beautician and his father a doctor who shot himself in Stalingrad as a result of losing both of his legs in the war. His parents’ medical practitioners’ background informed the clinical approach to most of his art. He enrolled in the Pedagogical and Experimental Institute for Graphics in 1957, where he met Hermann Nitsch. He never finalised his degree, and left the institution in 1961.
Like Nitsch, Schwarzkogler was interested in texts about eastern mysticism, the philosophy of Arthur Schopenhauer, nihilistic and expressionistic plays of Hans Henny Jahnn, along with the literary works of Laurence Stern and Edgar Allan Poe. His enrolment in the Academy of Applied Arts in 1961 deferred his compulsory nine-month military service for a year. His interest in Yves Klein’s and Arnulf Reiner’s art influenced his early painting experiments in 1963. One of the most noted experiments was his interpretation of Klein’s ideas that led him to paint blue his external surroundings including grass, trees, benches and anything else that was visible. For Schwarzkogler, the blue pigment epitomised an “expression of the Apollonian principle,” which dialectically opposed Nitsch’s interest in the temporal layers of Dionysian drama. His paintings entailed a process of splashing and pouring materials such as enamel, encaustic and powders onto wooden panels. He even produced an International Klein Blue monochromatic painting, whose intensity of blue was much deeper than Klein’s original, and applied more thinly. Nitsch introduced him to Muehl and Brus in 1963. His attendance at Muehl’s Actions inspired him and led him towards developing his own version of Actionism. Schwarzkogler died in 1969.

Muehl, Brus and Nitsch exhibited for the first time in the years spanning from 1960-1964 in the Gallery Junge Generation, which provided considerable support for young artists. According to Peter Weibel’s bibliographic records of the Actionists, all four exhibited once in this gallery followed by a subsequent gap until the early 1970s. After 1961,
Brus’ records show that his work never entered an exhibition until 1976 in the Kunsthalle in Bern. Hermann Nitsch’s first exhibition took place in 1964, followed by a 1973 exhibition in Gallery Klewan in Vienna. Otto Muehl’s early Cubist works were shown in 1960, and then his work was not seen until 1969 in Galeria Milano in Milan, Italy. Schwarzkogler’s work was never exhibited during his lifetime. The first exhibition of his work took place in Vienna Museum in 1992/93.\(^7\)

This decade long gap reflects the gallery’s refutation of all experiments that were conducted as a result of the four artists’ collaborative efforts and progress. The decade’s worth of work, which was publicly omitted in terms of acknowledgment of any historical significance, was the most important and most prolific for the four artists. Why was that? What was it about their work at this crucial stage that the contemporary artworld authorities could not tolerate? Why did their work ferment massive public contempt and outrage? Veit Loers, Peter Weibel and Daniele Roussel posited a number of viewpoints that address these questions.

Loers situates the Actionists’ work as a real-time art, emerging from the 1950’s Informel, that appropriates the language of Catholicism of suffering and atonement in order to combat its dominance as an ideological power. Weibel contends that the artists challenged the State and the status quo via a mediation of a series of social appearances that directly implicated the public view on morality. Roussel stressed the emergent intensification of violence as a historical consequence of Austrian participation in war on the side of Nazi Germany.

According to Veit Loers, an author of a text on Actionism that appeared in 1988, there were specific qualities that occurred in their early work. These qualities pertained to self-initiated process of discovering “excitement” in executing Actions and handling materials. Everything was meant to be utilised in order to construct a Material Action: groceries were used as paint, “balloons, tweezers, and razors” were used as chisels and paintbrushes. Skin, cardboard, plastic, paper plates and curtains served as a surrogate canvas.

The process of ultimate immersion of all particles into an art process promised a new creative potential, not only for them individually but in their collective aim to resurrect art from the “ashes of Informel.” Furthermore, there was a spiritual even apocalyptic and messianic intensity to their enterprise. Loers contends that self-infliction of wounds and mutilation, evident most specifically in Brus’ and Nitsch’s works did not correspond as much to a “real life dialectic” as much as it did to a trajectory of hysterical attacks. He sees the dramatisation of basic social situations as a kind of “parable of guilt and atonement” that specifically relates to the symbolism and traditional discourse of the Catholic Church. He argues that their work stems from the “inner affinity with religious archetypes” present in Vienna through Roman and Spanish traditions in art, architecture, literature and education (Jesuits and Habsburgs).

---

88 Ibid., p. 539.
89 Ibid.
91 Ibid.
92 Ibid.
93 Ibid.
Furthermore, Loers contends that “the reason why the Action took root in Vienna rather than Fluxus or the happening was because the petty bourgeois pragmatism and the political and cultural isolation of Austria” in the post-war period. The attitude towards cultural tradition Brus referred to as Austrian “masturbation material,” often provoked and encouraged aggression in art “as a form of stress relief.” Young artists at the time found it difficult to express irony and humour “in the face of the submissiveness demanded by the authorities as well as by the art institutions.” However, what the Actionists managed to attain was a type of “obsessive counter-model” in which the body was used amidst ritual dramaturgy and assemblage. For example, The Blood Organ project, Brus’ Self-Painting Actions and Muehl’s material assemblages of wrapping bodies in plastic bags, ironically detest such visions of submissiveness.

Peter Weibel contended that the Actionists directly questioned “objective reality” whose monopoly was invariably underwritten by the State. This pertinent enquiry of the positivist real revealed its suppressed components. This exposition and bringing into awareness of the “deciphered collective basic conditions of the soul (Nitsch),” brought Actionism to juridical persecution and punishment. Weibel claimed that the “State did not want to give up its monopoly on...its construction and representation of reality.” Through Actionists’ means of extended reality from pictorial planes to the incorporation of the human condition itself, art

---

94 Ibid., p.19
95 Günter Brus cited in Ibid., p.20
96 Ibid.
97 Ibid.
98 The three examples will be discussed later in the thesis, in Chapters four, five and six.
99 Weibel (ed.), Beyond Art: A Third Culture: A Comparative Study in Cultures, Art, and Science in 20th Century Austria and Hungary., p.539
100 Hermann Nitsch cited in Ibid.
101 Ibid., p.539
gained an access to “new social areas.” In this way they questioned the already rigidly imposed social rules, taboos, and pragmatism that was taken for granted by the overruling bourgeois principles and by authorities of law.

Weibel stated that the “scandal exploded” as soon as the naked body entered into a social space. The problem was that the nude body appeared in the “wrong” social setting, i.e. outside of a drawing class, a sauna or a surgeon’s table. Secondly, the artists’ insertion of their masculine bodies in Material Actions defied traditional female nude representations. Furthermore, the result of the appearance in the “wrong” social setting resulted in a major uproar in the courtrooms. The Austrian legal system lacked specific articles that could deal with the Actionists’ ordeals. On several occasions the court’s ruling resulted in “serious distortions of the observed facts and a total dismissal of the artists claiming to be ‘doing art’”. The severity of these exaggerations resulted in a series of convictions. The legal procedures were also accompanied with a pile of publications comprised of enraged letters on behalf of the general public. The public reaction and juridical hearings overruled the artists’ intentions. The Actionists’ publications and texts were ignored, and their Actions were surrendered to the immediacy of public shock reaction.

102 Ibid.
103 Peter Weibel cited in Green, Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists., p.15.
104 Ibid.
105 Ibid.
106 Ibid.
107 Ibid.
Otto Muehl’s art manager, Daniele Roussel, stressed that the historical and political milieux impacted on the initiative behind the group’s Actions. 108 1960s Austria was still under the severe impact of the Second World War. The country was subject to the tripartite rule imposed by the Allies. The Soviet, American and English troops did not leave Austria until ten years after the end of the war in 1955. 109 Roussel said that the influence and the “stench” of Fascism still prevailed in Vienna in the 1960s, a fact that deeply implicated the “necessity” of the course of brutality that eventuated in the artists’ Actions. 110

After the World War Two, Austria emerged as a state with a population of seven million inhabitants, a number that was significantly reduced from its former incarnation as the Austro-Hungarian Empire that had a population of fifty million inhabitants. 111 Historically, Austrians have never recovered from this significant loss in terms of territory, power and cultural influence. They saw the Alliance with Germany that materialised in the 1938 Anschluss as a form of recovery of its lost grandiosity. This increased resentment against the Jewish population, even more than in Germany, as after the end of the First World War Austrian culture was increasingly aligned with the Jewish population. 112 According to Roussel, then 70% of cultural practitioners were Jewish, whose cultural pool included literature, science, psychoanalysis, art and music. 113 Vienna was the third largest

---

109 Ibid.
110 Ibid.
111 Ibid. Following WW2 Vienna was split into five zones with the occupational armies of the Soviet Union, Britain, France and the United States each given authority with a single zone and a shared role in the central 1st District. The segregation of districts in Vienna (with each occupational force) would continue until 1955 (wherein the Democratic Republic of Austria would be reinstated and a unified city ‘state’ of Vienna was formed).
113 Roussel, ‘Viennese Actionism: Destruction Brings Creation’, p.159
centre of the European Jewry.\textsuperscript{114} The Jewish population was not only dominant in cultural spheres, but also financially, and this had largely contributed to the hatred for this ethnic group.\textsuperscript{115} Consequently, Hitler’s entry into Vienna in 1938 epitomised for the Viennese a possibility for the recapture of their former grandeur, power and identity.\textsuperscript{116}

In Roussel’s words, in 1938 the Jewish people were forced to clean the streets on their knees with toothbrushes and nailbrushes, bent over on the ground, with the full support of the Viennese public.\textsuperscript{117} Many of these people, largely consisting of old men, women and children, were severely beaten and forced to descend onto their knees in shame.\textsuperscript{118} The street cleaning process was an event that preceded and “prepared” a path for Hitler’s entry into the city in order to give his famous historic speech on Heldenplatz.\textsuperscript{119} His presence was wildly cheered and applauded by the Viennese.\textsuperscript{120}

Roussel contends that fascist ideology “crystallised” all the problems that resulted from not only Christian but also all religious doctrines and civilization in which the separation between the body and mind was “absolutely flagrant.”\textsuperscript{121} Like many Austrian men after the war, the Actionists were asking themselves the following question:

\begin{quote}
If we are really men, and we are religious men, if we are men who behave correctly, if we are men for whom the idea of the
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{114} Thalmann, \textit{Crystal Night: 9 - 10 November 1938.}, p.15
\textsuperscript{115} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{116} Roussel, ‘Viennese Actionism: Destruction Brings Creation’.\textsuperscript{117} pp.157-159
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{118} Thomas Weyr, \textit{The Setting of the Pearl: Vienna under Hitler} (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005)., pp.27-28
\textsuperscript{119} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{120} Roussel, ‘Viennese Actionism: Destruction Brings Creation’.\textsuperscript{121} pp.157-159
\textsuperscript{121} Ibid., p.158
body is something dirty and the mind is something good, and this produces individuals as inhumane as Fascists, then there is something wrong.\textsuperscript{122}

It was the focus on the ethical implications of fascist ideology and its direct relationship to Christianity that puzzled the artists. The severity of this omnipresent discontent was the key issue they strove to reveal in their Actions. This questioning process led them to their conscious decision to descend into the “inferno of the human being”\textsuperscript{123} and the unconscious. This psychoanalytic approach was taken directly from the writings of Wilhelm Reich and Sigmund Freud, both of whom were influential pre-war Austrian thinkers.

Austria's involvement on behalf of the Germans in the Second World War was glossed over after the war, a great silence that was nurtured by the extreme conservatism of the bourgeoisie. Unlike Germany, Austria was predominantly Catholic country. The Catholic Church and right-wing conservative Austrian People’s Party dominated political processes in the post-War period. Political and religious ideologies dominated the art world as well as what the public perceived as moral issues.\textsuperscript{124}

The galleries that monopolised the exhibition of avant-garde art operated in full support of the political parties. Gallery Junge Generation was a cultural enterprise of the Socialist Party, whilst the Church and the Austrian People’s Party sponsored and controlled Nächst St Stephan

\textsuperscript{122} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{123} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{124} The Catholic Church largely contributed to the status quo and it determined socially adopted moral judgments. As such, the Actionists’ work overturned Catechist traits such as confessionals, rituals, and the notion of agony of the Christ alongside overturning social taboos leading into explicit pornography, debauchery, and exposition of primordial behavioural acts in the context of Action art. Through this dialectic of referring to pretty much everything that was repressed into the social unconscious, their work caused tremendous sense of antipathy and anger.
This co-dependence between the galleries and political ideology supported art that was safe to handle, and that was in a dialogue with the art institution and its discourse. For example, the wide acceptance of Informel was the result of this relationship. However, towards the end of the decade, Nächst St Stephan made a decision to "extend their programme" by accepting transgressive art, by inviting Joseph Beuys to do a performance in 1967. By this stage, it was too late for the Actionists, as their art had already incited high levels of brutality and violence.

The name Viennese Actionism has its own history of denial, and misperception. Reference to the four artists as a group appeared for the first time in Günter Brus’ 1965 publication Le Marais (The Marsh) under the name Wiener Aktionsgruppe (Vienna Action Group). The publication, which was initially conceived as a magazine, contained contributions from Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler and a couple of other Viennese authors. After that, Peter Weibel’s and Valie Export’s publication wien. bildkompendium wiener aktionismus und film was published in 1970. This anthology of “candid sexual representations in a black book on Viennese Actionism” became the subject of a lawsuit against its publishers. Reliable English translations were not forthcoming for another decade. Translations from Lea Vergine, a noted scholar of body art of the 1970s, were misinforming due to poor translation. The most accountable and detailed document that became available to English-speaking audiences

126 Ibid.
127 Ibid.
129 Ibid.
130 Peter and Export Weibel, Valie, Wien - Bildkompendium Wiener Aktionismus Und Film (Frankfurt am Main: Kohlkunstverlag, 1970).
132 Green, Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists.
appeared for the first time only in 1988 in the form of a bi-lingual two-volume exhibition catalogue. The exhibition took place in Germany, Switzerland and Austria yet failed to reach the United Kingdom and the Americas (as a result of its cancellation in Edinburgh). This comprehensive catalogue entails detailed chronological information about the artists, with inclusion of texts by authors such as Hubert Klocker, Veit Loers, Konrad Oberhuber and others. Nevertheless, the catalogue still omitted to include writings of the Actionists. Prior to this occasion, the only information about the Actionists was available to German-speaking audiences through newspaper articles, manifestos, film archives, documentations and photographs.

Bearing in mind a history of omissions, misperceptions and mistakes, Malcolm Green published a detailed historical account about Actionism in direct collaboration with the artists in 1999. He stated that publications about avant-garde happenings, such as those by Wolf Vostell, omitted Actionism. Amos Vogel’s 1974 influential account on subversive film discusses the controversy behind Muehl and Nitsch as individual filmmakers, but omits to mention the others. RoseLee Goldberg’s influential survey of performance art from the 1960s till the late 1990s briefly mentions Muehl’s, Nitsch’s and Rainer’s work in which Viennese Actionism is mentioned as a group whose “psychosexual taboo breaking” utilised “horrific imagery to protest against political repression and social hypocrisy.” Green’s articulate version includes not only artists’

133 Ibid., p.10
biographies but also their manifestoes, posters, detailed accounts of events and writings.

The name “Viennese Actionism” was also mentioned in a 1970 text by Rudiger Engerth that appeared in a magazine Protokolle. However, his text excluded Schwarzkogler’s contributions. Both Weibel and Engerth referred to Actionism proper in a much larger context. Weibel for example referred to Actionism in the context of Wiener Gruppe (Vienna Group) and Viennese avant-garde since the 1940s and 1950s that begins with the work of Arnulf Rainer and mentions twenty to thirty other artists. Both 1970 texts confused the Wienner Gruppe with Wiener Aktionismus (Viennese Actionism). The former refers more specifically to concrete poetry works of authors such as Friedrich Achleitner, H.C. Armann, Konrad Bayer, Gerhard Ruhm and Oswald Wiener.

Daniele Roussel’s transcript on Viennese Actionism was published in a monograph Art Action/Action Art 1958 – 1998 that appeared succeeding a colloquium about global Action art in Quebec, Canada in 2001. The conference entailed contributions from twenty-one countries. Her chapter provides a political and historical context within which Actionism took place. In 2002 Andrew Grossman conducted a detailed interview with Otto Muehl, five years after his release from a six-year prison sentence. The interview was dispersed electronically on a number of websites.

---

136 Green, Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists.
137 Ibid.
138 Ibid.
139 Ibid.
140 Roussel, ‘Viennese Actionism: Destruction Brings Creation’.
Throughout the 1960s, the Actionists performed more than 150 Actions individually and collaboratively,\textsuperscript{143} most of which remained virtually ignored by the art critics and galleries that supported local avant-garde art at the time.\textsuperscript{144} The critics and historians failed to engage in the particularity of discourse that the Actionists developed as a reaction to international avant-garde art during the 1950s and 1960s. This reaction also extends to the dialogue with the post-World War I avant-garde, such as Dada and the art of Marcel Duchamp.

The Actionists were consistently referred to as cot-cases for psychiatrists, discredited as artists and denied an art context.\textsuperscript{145} Almost all reactions to their exhibitions were based on humiliation and ridicule. On a number of occasions their Actions were subjected to open public debates that focused on breaches of morality and that sought a way to acknowledge “such borderline cases of painting” rather than “simply suppressing them”.\textsuperscript{146} The deep sense of public antipathy against the Actionists was based on the scandalous and shocking nature of their Actions and public appearances. As a consequence, the artists were often imprisoned, subjected to numerous court hearings and forced into exile.\textsuperscript{147} Numerous newspaper articles were published, more so as a result of the shock they caused, rather than being based on the artists’ highly articulated intentions.

A 1968 Action \textit{Kunst und Revolution (Art and Revolution)} was an example of such public reaction (see \textit{Figures 1.3, 1.4 and 1.5}). The project was

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{143} Green, Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists., p.9
\textsuperscript{144} Ibid., p.10
\textsuperscript{145} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{146} Otto Stainiger cited in Schwarz, 'Chronologie/Chronology'., p.300
\textsuperscript{147} Green, Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists., p.9.
\end{footnotesize}
generated as a response to the 1968 protests throughout Europe, and it took place at the University of Vienna in the context of student activist speeches organised by the Austrian Socialist Student Association (S.Ö.S). Günter Brus, Otto Muehl, Peter Weibel, Oswald Wiener and Franz Kaltenbäck were invited by the S.Ö.S. to perform. Other members from the Institute of Direct Art also took place in this event, which was initiated with one of the student activists giving a lecture about “the position, possibilities and functions of art in late capitalist society.” The follow up consisted of the Actionists’ simultaneous Action. Otto Muehl read out defamatory excerpts on Robert Kennedy, who had been assassinated several days earlier. Peter Weibel was reading out insults aimed at the Austrian minister of finance whilst wearing flaming asbestos glove, Wiener lectured about “input-output relationships between thought and language”, Kaltenbäck talked about language and information while Brus performed one of his Actions Citizen Günter Brus Studies His Body (see Figure 1.5). In the Action, Brus undressed, laid on the table, cut his chest with a razor, bled into a beer glass, urinated, drank the contents, defecated and smeared his body with the matter synchronous to the sounds of the Austrian national anthem. Muehl whipped a volunteer masochist while reading excerpts from pornographic texts. Following the violent ordeal, three naked men lined up on the stage in order to perform a “how-far-can-you-urinate” competition, the results of which were measured and recorded on a black board. Their audience, shocked and distressed by the event, was left feeling physically

149 Green, Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists, p.223
151 Ibid.
152 Green, Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists., p.223
153 Ibid., pp.55-58
154 Ibid., p.223
unwell. The artists were later summoned by the authorities, charged and arrested. After being removed from the stage, the artists planned to repeat the same Action in the St Stephan cathedral, a plan that never materialised due to the authorities’ intervention.

In a letter to the local newspaper, Günter Brus was referred to as a “filthy swine” who dared to expose his “stinking naked body” in a space of “respectable institutions” such as the University with an intention to repeat the same gesture in the cathedral. This structure epitomised not only a historical phenomenon and a symbol of historical significance for the Viennese, but also a monumental architectural edifice of power and authority represented by the Catholic Church. Bearing this in mind, the Actionists’ intent to perform in the church would cause tremendous upheaval. For them, the choice of such a fine edifice to perform in would result in the ultimate expression of contempt for the dominance of the Catholic Church.

In regards to many of his individual Actions, Muehl was told by various sources that if he continued with perversities in his actions, he would “end up starving,” that there was nothing left for him “to sell,” his staging had nothing more to do with art, and that he was “simply craving for sensation.” Furthermore, he was warned that “people like [him] used to be burned in public,” that his “actions forebode the seductive splendour

---

155 Ibid., pp.223-224
156 Letters from the public cited in Ibid., p.63
157 Ibid.
158 Ibid.
160 Ibid.
of hell with its reek of sulphur.” With the growing ascension of contempt and aggressive attack on social taboos, he was doomed to fail and end up in prison.  

As most of their actions were denied the status of art, the four sought to realise most of their work in cellars and abandoned places; particularly a cellar on Perinetgasse, often referred to as the Perinetkeller. Their rejection did not discourage them. On the contrary, the more they were refuted, the more provocative and brutal their art became.

---

161 Ibid.
162 Otto Muehl cited in Ibid.
CHAPTER 2: 

Politics of local galleries and Art Influences

While the Actionists were alienated from the local Viennese art environment, it, along with various avant-garde developments in Vienna and elsewhere, were instrumental in shaping their art. Most contemporary art galleries in Vienna in the 1950s and 1960s promoted the art of Abstract Expressionism, Tachisme and Informel that dominated contemporary avant-garde art. Two galleries that played a significant role in the shaping of the Actionists’ notion of protest due to a series of disputable refutations were Gallery Nächst St Stephan and Gallery Junge Generation. Most Viennese artists exhibited in these galleries in the post-war period. The galleries played a significant role in administering content related to the historicity of the local avant-garde and its appropriation in the local sector. As such these outlets were influential for local practicing artists at the time. Georges Mathieu’s local exhibition was significant for shaping the Actionists’ reaction against the conventional techniques that were taught in academia. Other artists who significantly influenced Actionism were Joseph Beuys, Alan Kaprow and Fluxus.

One of the most dominant galleries in Vienna was Gallery Nächst St Stephan, whose founder and main curator was Monsignore Otto Mauer. Mauer’s role was significant in Viennese circles as he bridged Viennese cultural life with conservative politics and the Catholic Church.163 Through this symbiosis a common moral and ethical function of contemporary art

---

was established.\textsuperscript{164} In Mauer's view, the “emancipatory character of the church”\textsuperscript{165} was equated with “the freedom of mankind.”\textsuperscript{166} This analogy left avant-garde art with a clear purpose to focus on the ethical and moral purpose.\textsuperscript{167}

During the 1950s the Actionists were familiar with the exhibitions held in the gallery.\textsuperscript{168} The Actionists were largely influenced by its content, particularly the work of Arnulf Rainer. On the other hand, through a rough trajectory of provocations that began in the early 1960s, the artists encountered a consistent flow of refutations from the gallery director, due to a fear of scandal and a desire to protect the gallery's reputation. As a result their art developed a language that served as a counter-model to the painters who had exhibited there.

The artists' attitude against the conservatism of Mauer's ambitions started as early as 1961 by their refusing to enter into an exhibition he curated. Mauer invited Brus and Schiling to enter their work in a group exhibition \textit{Geist und Form (Spirit and Form)} that took place in the union building of catholic students.\textsuperscript{169} Among other young artists, Frohner and Nitsch took part in the exhibition.\textsuperscript{170}

Gallery Junge Generation was also available for young artists to exhibit their work. The gallery was run by the Austrian Socialist Party and relied on in-kind support, which means that the artists had to sponsor their own

\textsuperscript{164} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{165} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{166} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{167} Ibid. \\
\textsuperscript{168} Klocker, 'Die Dramaturgie Des Organischen/ the Dramaturgy of the Organic', p.41 \\
\textsuperscript{169} Schwarz, 'Chronologie/Chronology', pp. 161-162. \\
\textsuperscript{170} Ibid.
work, take care of the premises, and had to remain in charge over the opening hours.\footnote{Ibid.} All Actionists, apart from Schwarzkogler, held their first exhibition on its premises: Brus in 1961, Muehl in 1960 and Nitsch in 1964.

Already in his early stages of collaboration with Alfons Schilling, Brus encountered problems with the gallery.\footnote{Ibid.} In their first exhibition (1960), Alfons Schilling had to take over the preliminary preparations for the exhibition due to Brus’ compulsory commitments with the military service.\footnote{Ibid., p.162} During the exhibition itself he could only return for a brief visitation. Schilling’s and Brus’ work received sceptical reviews which claimed that even though they were familiar with Abstract Expressionism, they could not “go on blindly for ever” relying on the impulsive nature of bodily liberation mechanisms in their recently attained monochromatic ways.\footnote{Alfred Schmeller, 'Mit Dem Kopf Durch Die Leinwand. Zur Ausstellung Brus Und Schilling in Der ‘Jungen Generation Am Börseplatz”, Kurier (Wien), (1961)., cited in Schwarz, ‘Chronologie/Chronology’, p.163} The reviewers further claimed that the work of other artists was much “better” because they engaged with “more colour,” were more vibrant and promised more intellectual capacity.\footnote{Ibid.} Finally, the review concluded that the exhibition promised future embarrassment for both artists if they were to continue in this way.\footnote{Ibid.}

This kind of response failed to take into account the antagonistic intentions of Brus and Schilling, who intended to create a counter-model to Pollock by deliberately placing the focus on the corporeal centrality of the work and by working towards a dialectic of image obliteration of figurative
representation. The figure was meant to be the artist himself, conscious of his body function and body's capacity to liberate itself.

Brus’ next encounter with the Gallery took place in 1965 that resulted in a distressing experience. A series of responses from the director claimed that his experimentations were “borderline” and their public showing an attempt to resurface the content of the underground, which could not simply be “repressed”.177 The work became the subject of public interrogation and experts including psychiatrists accused Brus of crawling out of the space as an injured man.178

Hermann Nitsch’s experience with the gallery entailed the performance of an action in which he worked on a crucified lamb assembled on a table among real objects including beer bottles and cherries.179 The space was filled with stench from pouring hot water with dyes onto a fresh carcass, dripping blood and thick incense smoke.180 The gallery’s director was covering up the bloodstains that dripped from his paintings with a handkerchief. The atmosphere resulted in a sense of public unease and the Mayor closed the exhibition after two days. Nitsch’s lecture that was scheduled to take place later was also cancelled.

Muehl’s first exhibition in this gallery resulted in Günter Brus’ criticism of conventional and outdated techniques he deployed in his early Cubist work. Brus’ performance of wild gesticulations accompanying a loud speech of discontent in front of his work encouraged Muehl to talk to this

177 Otto Stainiger cited in Schwarz, ‘Chronologie/Chronology’. p.300
178 This particular event resulted in Brus’ performance Wiener Spaziergang/Vienna Walk that is analysed in Chapter 6.
179 Schwarz, ‘Chronologie/Chronology’. p.283 -284
180 Ibid.
young man. The conversation that took place between the two, and a subsequent visit to Brus’ studio, resulted in a long collaborative friendship and a series of provocative disputes with the gallery that recurred in the following decade.

In the 1960s, the most crucial and most prolific decade for Actionism, all of the four artists initiated numerous attempts to transgress the pictorial illusionism of image representation. This transference of the represented into the domain of the real took place through processes of material destruction, the obliteration of compositional forms and assemblage. The aim – to integrate aspects of every day life into art and to formulate a language that operated against the restrictive nature of pictorial representation – was already inherent and simultaneously evolving in international avant-garde art such as Fluxus, the Situationists, No-Art, Art Brut, Nouveau Realisme, Happenings and Arte Povera. All of these artistic directions in some way stressed the importance of experimentation that would allow for art to attain the qualities of real life. Art would become the ‘real thing’ itself.182

182 Notion of the real discussed in this thesis excludes possible analogies to Hal Foster’s thesis on the “Return of the Real”. Foster’s elaboration on modern day technologies and the meaning of the “real” through processes of technological reproduction in particular as seen through productive repetition in Andy Warhol’s work, are irrelevant to this thesis. Foster draws on a number of poststructuralist authors such as Barthes, Baudrillard and Lacan in order to discuss the seeking out of a referential image and simulacra through photographic representation. The Actionists specifically utilise an articulate understanding of the real through direct immersion of not only physical corporeal subjects into real life situations, but also of behavioural and psycho-dramatic occurrences as they arise from Direct Art Actions. The body in Actionism is not a bland Warholian machine-like automaton that exposes, in Foster’s terms the traumatic real in imagist process driven ruptures, but is a real subject that grunts, moans, suffocates and is immersed into each time a one off artistic momentum generated by intentional specificity of each executed Action. If necessary, refer to Hal Foster, The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996), pp.127-168.

The parameters of this thesis are not sufficient to set this argument, but focuses on the Actionists’ intentions as they personally understood them, including an array of avant-garde influences in the postwar era.
The philosophy of deconstructing the conventional opposition between art and life owed much to the 1950’s work of US artist Allan Kaprow. Kaprow coined the term “Total Art”, which brought real-life situations and objects with their sound and smell, into a gallery space.\textsuperscript{183} The viewers would experience the installed environment through direct bodily immersion into the constructed spatial and temporal reality. Their movement among installed objects provided a significant interactive contribution. What the Actionists shared with Kaprow was the adaptation of the term “Total Art” to utilise real bodies and every-day life objects in a three-dimensional space. The difference in the Actionists’ methodology was a brutal and “carnal saturation”\textsuperscript{184} of painterly destruction, excess and violence as a main source of creative drive.

The art of Viennese Actionism was responsible for bringing forth “new art” that strived towards social change, even though the artists performed mostly in social isolation.\textsuperscript{185} Their art existed between fine art, revolutionary protest and demonstration, cabaret, theatre and religious rituals.\textsuperscript{186} In this they took inspiration from the work of Joseph Beuys.\textsuperscript{187}

Beuys used to say that there was an existing connective thread that unified all activities, stemming from the actual performance, assembled leftovers carefully arranged in vitrines, to environments and energy that was


\textsuperscript{186} Ibid.

\textsuperscript{187} Ibid.
transmitted to the audience on the receiving end of the work. He used to tie performative activities to notions of “giving life” to sculpture that entailed physical traits of movement between its particles. As such, the conventional three-dimensional characteristics of sculpture crossed over into its surrounding space. Thus, the sculpture was “staged” rather than mounted on a static pedestal. Beuys used to set his sculptural works in theatrical milieus in which the artist existed amidst all his actions.

Beuys derived a notion of “social sculpture” that was largely consummated in the work of the Viennese Actionists. He believed that moulding the process inherent in the technical aspects of sculptural production metaphorically reflected the ability to “mould” society. The society in Beuys’ terms is perceived as an organic living entity that exists in its perpetual motion. He was largely known for sculptural works comprised out of ragged, obliterated, raw and debased objects. To him, working with such forms promised a re-invention of new life, and the ability to work with the binary opposites such as chaos/order, expansion/contraction, undetermined/determined, cold/hot, that were commonly used in sculptural terms. As such, the transformative sculptural qualities were applied to the organic fluidity of the social order.

Gallery Nächst St Stephan invited Joseph Beuys in 1967 to perform his work EURASIENSTAB 82 min fluxorum organum with musician Henning

---

189 Ibid.
190 Ibid.
193 Ibid.
194 Ibid.
The gallery’s initiative was to expand their programme by introducing the transgressive qualities of conventional painting. However, by this stage Actionism was already deeply involved in the *modus operandi* of extreme violence and in radical stages of protest. Their Actions specifically developed a language that entailed the literal destruction, mutilation and obliteration of pictorial imagery as a reaction to the gallery’s responses. According to Schwarzkogler, any form of integration and cooperation was neither possible nor desired on behalf of the artists, as the Actionists had already deeply retreated into a “non-communicative state of self-reference.” In the Actionists’ view, any form of historical and museological infrastructure that promoted avant-garde art was considered “just too weak or too conservative.”

In 1959, George Mathieu, a Parisian artist, held a one-man exhibition in Gallery Nächst St Stephan. The opening for this show entailed a public staging of live Action painting that took place at the Theater am Fleischmarkt. The performance was simultaneously filmed. For the opening programme, an artist, Markus Prachensky poured paint over a 3.65 x 11 metre large canvas. Mathieu then followed with his fifty-minute painterly ordeal accompanied by Pierre Henry’s concrete music, on the surface of a 2.5 x 6 metre picture titled *Hommage au Connétable de Bourbon*. Adolf Frohner, who emerged and collaborated with the Viennese

---

197 Ibid.
199 Roussel, ‘Viennese Actionism: Destruction Brings Creation’, p.158
200 Schwarz, ‘Chronologie/Chronology’, p.115
201 Ibid.
Actionists in its initial stages, took part in this performance by holding the canvas upright.\(^{202}\)

Mathieu was one of the major proponents of Tachisme, which is often referred to as a French version of Abstract Expressionism. The difference between the French and the American version was that the technique utilised in Tachisme was informed by strategies of social resistance.\(^{203}\) Georges Mathieu stressed that such resistance was only possible by celebrating existence outside of ideology and language,\(^{204}\) as opposed to American Abstract Expressionism.

He remarked that:

> In all known societies human behaviour is regulated by beliefs and ideologies, built on values, which lie on the existing facts. Art exists first in relation to these, and by becoming universal, cuts off every relationship with the reality. The decisive turn, which has now happened in art, which is prophetic by nature, demands therefore a radical change in the realm of ideas and morals. Lyrical abstraction not only established new modes of expression but also new ways of confronting the world based on a radical questioning of Western dialectics from Aristotle to Derrida! \(\text{sic!}\)... As soon as security takes over and the terror will be gone, we will experience the jubilation of risk; the celebration of existence that ensues will introduce not only new aesthetics, but a new morality and new metaphysic as well.\(^{205}\)

Mathieu’s plea to change radically the “realm of ideas and morals”\(^{206}\) influenced the Actionists’ desire to question artistic progress in the context of the conservative social order in Vienna. However, within this context, for the Actionists, Mathieu’s informalist and action based strategies in painting

\(^{202}\) Ibid.
\(^{204}\) Ibid.
\(^{206}\) Ibid.
mutated into sadistic impulses in which “the deepest layers of psyche [were] drawn to the surface.”

All of these influences had some bearing on the Actionists, some more than others. However the intensity of the Actionists’ performances has no precedent. The artistic influences of the 1950s and 1960s provided a basis for the Actionists’ conception of ‘Direct Art’ rather than a direct model to emulate. Generally, the term stands for an experience of totality manifested through staged action environments in a three-dimensional space. In the context of Actionism, the principle of ‘Direct Art’ was perceived as an attack on the essence of image representation by literal insertion of the body in the centre of Material Actions, as if this would provide direct unmediated access to the real. Muehl and Brus would define Total Art (Direct Art) as:

“... a further development of the happening and combines elements of all art forms, painting, music, literature, film, theatre, which have been so infected by the progressive process of cretinisation in our society that any examination of reality has become impossible using these means alone.... Total action is the unprejudiced examination of all the materials that make up reality... It is a dynamic occurrence in which the most varied materials and elements of reality are linked, swapped over, turned on their heads, deformed, and destroyed... The actual occurrence depends on the composition of the material and the actor’s unconscious tendencies... Anything may constitute the material: people, animals, plants, food, space, movement, noises, smell, light, fire, coldness, warmth, wind, dust, steam, gas, events, sport, all art forms and all art products... All the possibilities of the material are ruthlessly exhausted. As a result of the incalculable possibilities for choices that the material presents to the actor, he plunges into a concentrated whirl of action, finds himself suddenly in a reality without barriers, performs actions resembling those of a madman, and avails himself of a fool’s privileges, which is probably not without significance for sensible people...”

208 Cited in Green, Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists., p.41.
Reference to painting was gradually dissolved from Material Actions in which the body was soaked and worked with a plethora of painterly substance and its substitutes, to later actions in which the body appeared in staged “theatrical-literary” Total Art environments.\textsuperscript{209} Total Art manifestations always integrated the dimension of public interaction.\textsuperscript{210} If they shared this approach with other contemporary artists, what distinguishes their Actions is the psychological content, intensity of realisation and radical intent.

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{210} Cited in Green, \textit{Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists.}, p.41.
\end{flushright}
CHAPTER 3:
Signification of The Blood Organ and the principle of destruction

Early meetings

There was an event that occurred early in Muehl’s career that initiated a philosophy legitimising the principle of destruction as a paramount process of making art. The initiative was not only taken as a process that points towards a dialectic core of creative desire but also the formation of a critical social commentary. Destruction was taken as a means of liberation that tended to expose Reich’s notion of the Freudian unconscious directly into the social surface. For Muehl, the discovery of corporeal liberation mechanisms evolved over a period of time, stemming from an event that took place in his studio in early 1960 and that then culminated in an event called die Blutorgel (the Blood Organ).

Before meeting Günter Brus in 1960, Otto Muehl was a painter who took much interest in Cubism, though he believed that he had failed.\textsuperscript{211} The culmination of this affirmation materialised for Muehl when Brus audaciously criticised an exhibition at the Gallery Junge Generation in which he showed his figurative work.\textsuperscript{212} After the exhibition, Brus and Muehl exchanged studio visits in which Brus introduced Muehl to his personified methodology of producing Tachist paintings by tying his hands and feet.\textsuperscript{213} Brus, who was much younger, told him: “You can stop what you’re doing old man, you are totally behind. Art is much more advanced than you think, your Cubist paintings are worthless!”\textsuperscript{214} This remark really

\textsuperscript{211} Roussel, ‘Viennese Actionism: Destruction Brings Creation’, p.162
\textsuperscript{212} Schwarz, ‘Chronologie/Chronology’, pp.157
\textsuperscript{213} Roussel, ‘Viennese Actionism: Destruction Brings Creation’, p.162
\textsuperscript{214} Günter Brus cited in Ibid.
impressed Muehl, and it significantly influenced him. In a letter to a friend he stated that he had finally met an artist from whom he could learn something. He found inspiration in Brus’ exploit of “total creative excess” in a “psychomotoric expressionist style” that made paint explode “like a bomb when it hit the picture.”

Subsequently, one day in 1961, whilst “vainly daubing away at a stretched canvas” in his studio, Muehl thought that something was wrong with his paintings altogether. To him, the process of “daubing” and smearing semi-liquid materials over a two dimensional plane became “half-witted.” At the moment of such recognition, he decided to slash the canvas with a knife and tear it apart with his hands. The consistency of the initiative “demanded” that he should continue with the entire composition, and that he should chop the entire stretcher with an axe, throw it on the floor, pour paint and mud all over it, stomp on it, and twist the framing wire around the entire “tangle” which he then hung back on the wall. Through this process of completely destroying the painting and then assembling it into a sculptural object Muehl discovered the force of destructive desire as a powerful creative potential.

Muehl agreed that the process of cutting directly into canvas was not a new formal discipline utilised in the history of avant-garde painting. He claimed that artists such as Lucio Fontana and Milares had already done it. However, the difference was that his forerunners’ incisions were based on aesthetic decisions rather than relying on the potential of forces of

---

216 Ibid.
217 Otto Muehl cited in Green, Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists, p.79
218 Ibid.
219 Ibid.
“energy” and excess. For Muehl, working with “energy” and movement was a seminal mechanism with which he could engage his entire body in the process of destruction. He stated: “While I worked, I felt “IT” build up inside me and the emotions exploded. I had opened the gates of unconscious. It streamed out. I knew it was good... [and he continued to paint] with insane energy.”

Soon after the moment of this recognition, Muehl sought out discarded household utilities to work with, such as prams, bikes, fridges, radios, television sets, chairs, cables, cupboards, tables, etc. He thought of buying a whole furniture set that he wished to publicly dismember. The authorities had arrested him for “shoving a kitchen dresser filled with jam out of a 4th floor window” onto the pavement. This incident resulted in a two-week jail sentence and him being “fed up with ‘sculpture’.” At this point he decided that he should work with the human body and this made him realise that “things were moving at last.”

After his experience with creating ‘bric-a-brac objects,’ as he liked to call his sculptures, Muehl discovered that he could not create any more without destroying. Destruction became the underlying principle for his art, and it also became central to the art of other Actionists’ creative destruction. According to Otto Muehl, destruction played a key role in the twentieth century avant-garde, in particular in Dada as a reaction to the First World War. Dada’s intention was to eradicate art, which was synchronous with the post-war sentiment and feelings of outrage. He stated that, even though

221 Ibid. 222 Ibid. 223 Otto Muehl cited in Ibid. 224 Otto Muehl cited in Green, Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists., p.79 225 Ibid. 226 Ibid.
this was the Dadaists’ intention, it could not be said that they were criminals. However, he remarked:

it was dangerous to be around them – they actually shot at the public in their plays... After the First World War, people expressed outrage against society because millions of human beings were killed. No one was making art. The artists turned to destruction. Everything was possible.228

In a similar manner, destruction in Actionism was a process that reflected the outrage turned against the Second World War and Austrian involvement on the side of the Third Reich. For them, it was an attitude to seek not only formal reconstruction of destroyed particles, but also to destroy and rekindle the “old moral values of civilisation.”229 According to Muehl, destruction was meant to take place in art, not outside of it.230 He said, “Hitler wished to become an artist, but in reality he destroyed. He was never an artist. If an object is too powerful, it is vehemently rejected,” as it happened with Cezanne and Van Gogh.231

Muehl once stated that: “I apperate [sic!] everything that is beaten and crestfallen, shot to bits, dilapidated, all that has exploded, rusted and come apart at the seams. I regard this as something positive and necessary.”232 Furthermore, he claimed that opening up the valves of creative desire in acts of destruction turned him into a loving person in real life, and that he never considered “the idea of revolution” and was “against insurrectionists and violent criminals of every kind.”233

228 Ibid
229 Roussel, ‘Viennese Actionism: Destruction Brings Creation’. p.162
231 Ibid.
232 Green, Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists., p.80
233 Ibid.
Alleviation of his destructive urges against objects culminated in *The Blood Organ* event. The project exposed early collaborative developments between Muehl and two other artists, and it began to integrate artists’ bodies as agents of action.

**Early meetings between Nitsch and Muehl preceding *The Blood Organ* (1962)**

*The Blood Organ* was one of the earliest collaborative works, which also serves as one of the finest examples of scandal and provocation. Muehl and Nitsch met in late 1961 after Nitsch’s exhibition opening at the Fuchs Gallery, and during Muehl’s group exhibition with Adolf Frohner and Hans Niederbacher at the Gallery Junge Generation. Nitsch introduced Muehl to his theory bound to the *Orgies Mysteries Theatre* and the *1st Abreaction Play*, which stated the following:

> The abreaction play creates states of ecstasy which break down inhibitions and so produce incidents of abreaction that are experienced by all. By leading people back into less conscious areas of the psyche the real values of tragedy are made manifest, as in the raw, existential state of excitement that lies behind every word in the form of the scream.

In his Action paintings from 1960, Nitsch created a series of his “Schüttbilder” paintings. He used this term to refer to pouring paint over canvases and allowing it to run (see *Figure 6.4*). According to Veit Loers, Nitsch’s painting process entailed a ritualised liturgical performance.

---

234 Schwarz, ‘Chronologie/Chronology’, pp.200-229
235 Ibid., pp. 168-180 and pp.197-199
236 Ibid., p.197
238 Schwarz, ‘Chronologie/Chronology’, p.199
239 Loers, ‘From Action Painting to Actionism, Vienna 1960 - 1965.’, p.17
240 Ibid.
would enter into a state of “Dionysian frenzy” and would re-enact symbolic
gestural motions that imitated the cleaning of Christ’s wounds.\textsuperscript{241} He would
soak his paintings, which he would then clean with brooms and sponges,
similarly to the way that St Veronica catered for Christ’s wounds on the
cross.\textsuperscript{242} The abstract appearance of the liquid paintings, whose
pigmentation was always within the spectrum of abject reds, browns and
black, would also attain the appearance of bodily internal fluids, organs
and sacrificial blood.\textsuperscript{243} Nitsch’s work relied on didacticism and it quoted
entire passages of Biblical scores and excerpts of his own writing.\textsuperscript{244} For
him, the painting process was not purely a formal experience but a
shamanistic one, relying on the symbolism of passing away, atonement and
sacrificial murder.\textsuperscript{245} He utilised the painting process as a symbol for self-
discovery and liberation of the deepest core of his existential being.
Nitsch’s script for the \textit{1st Abreactive Play} and the \textit{O.–M. Theatre} entailed
ideas about working with theatrical performance and extending art into the
public dimension.

Muehl was interested in Nitsch’s ideas about public intervention, even
though his main influence at the time was Kurt Schwitters and Dada.\textsuperscript{246} His
interest lay in the treatment of debased furniture, junk and other relics of
everyday life, instead of focusing on their aesthetic qualities, such as in the
work of Armand for example.\textsuperscript{247} The treatment would rather entail the kind
of process in which junk would be ground, broken, torn up and blown up,

\begin{footnotesize}
\textsuperscript{241} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{242} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{243} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{244} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{245} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{246} Schwarz, ‘Chronologie/Chronology’. p.193
\textsuperscript{247} Otto Muehl cited in Ibid.
\end{footnotesize}
rather than applying preserving painterly mediums such as lacquers and varnishes.\textsuperscript{248}

Nitsch had agreed to see Muehl’s exhibition that contained some of the ideas he had talked about. The process on display still appeared to be “too mild”\textsuperscript{249} for Muehl’s genuine intentions. The artworks were stabbed with a knife, pictures were cut open, were stomped upon, and a chair was thrown at them by the three participating artists.\textsuperscript{250} In his letter to an acquaintance, Erika Stocker, Muehl mentioned that in their painting, the artists recognised “materials as the real objects” and that it was seminal to present the material as matter itself.\textsuperscript{251} Furthermore, he stated that the manufactured traditional application of paint did not exist any more in their work, and rejection of its materiality was considered as something “aesthetic and degenerate.”\textsuperscript{252} They came to the decision to fully replace the idea of paint with solid matter.\textsuperscript{253}

The following passage Muehl wrote to his friend entails a seminal lens through which the evolution of Actionism can be seen:

It is not the existence of a work that is important, but the creative act and its consequences. I am destroying volume; there is no more inside and outside. I needed colour before. The rubbish is astonishingly sensuous and colourful. I use an unequivocal technique: smashing, cutting open, defiling, mixing up. I hate people who force their way through at traffic accidents to see blood. They love to read in the newspapers, that people sleep with their daughters, kill each other, grab at schoolgirls beneath their skirts, rape and dismember virgins, and have orgies.

\textsuperscript{248} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{249} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{250} Ibid., p.195  
\textsuperscript{251} Ibid., p.196  
\textsuperscript{252} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{253} Ibid.
Blasphemy, obscenity, charlatanism, sadistic excess, orgies and the aesthetics of the gutter, these are our moral expedients against stupidity, satiety, intolerance, provincialism, dullness, against the cowardice to bear responsibility, against the sack that eats at the front and shits behind.
I tear metal to pieces instead of all of you. I would like to make things scream. I love people.\textsuperscript{254}

Even though Muehl and Nitsch were content to remain loyal to their distinct individual theories and course of individual art, they agreed to collaborate bearing in mind a possibility of existing similarities and distance they both needed. Nitsch continued to work on his several-minute-long painting Actions in which he poured substantial amounts of thick red paint and water over a vertically suspended canvas surface.\textsuperscript{255} Later he would take them off the wall, position them on the ground and attack them in fits of rage and aggression.\textsuperscript{256} He would smear paint with both hands and sponges and would then throw himself into the puddles of paint in order to continue painting with his body.\textsuperscript{257} Muehl worked on his junk sculptures and paintings whose crucifixion forms were synonymous with them.

According to Veit Loers, artists such as Muehl, Nitsch, Brus, Schiling and Frohner engaged in a process of producing art that did not lead to discovery of new forms in painting.\textsuperscript{258} Instead they attempted to resolve problems of contemporary Tachisme by traits he referred to as “obstructed aggression, mental blockages and compulsive forms of painting” that turned a “psycho-physical process of [making art] into a quasi-criminal activity.”\textsuperscript{259} He contended however, that the art they all made in the years preceding \textit{The Blood Organ} in 1962 was not merely the result of fits of

\begin{thebibliography}{1}
\bibitem{254} Ibid., pp.196-197
\bibitem{255} Ibid., p.199
\bibitem{256} Ibid.
\bibitem{257} Schwarz, ‘Chronologie/Chronology’. p.199
\bibitem{258} Loers, ‘From Action Painting to Actionism, Vienna 1960 - 1965.’, p.16
\bibitem{259} Ibid.
\end{thebibliography}
anarchistic rage that led to their self-appointed artistic isolation.\textsuperscript{260} In this time, only the writers of the Wienner Gruppe and Arnulf Rainer recognised the importance in the course of their early Actions.\textsuperscript{261}

Working with excessive energy that enabled the opening of the unconscious resonated with Reich’s ideas. Nitsch talked about “states of ecstasy” that dissolved all “inhibitions”, and about the manifestation of a “raw, existential state of excitement that lies behind every word in the form of a scream.”\textsuperscript{262} Nitsch’s evaluation of his 1st Abreactive Play refers more to the narcissistic idea of descending into personal angst, while Muehl wanted to alleviate destructive urges in the face of social fabric. The society dwelled on the surface level of tolerance to which the enormous underlying veneer of Freudian suppressions only became exposed through the mouthpiece of published columns, hidden taboos and latent social curiosities. Muehl resolved to “destroy” the volume of formal compositional planes that gave way to rubbish. Working with derelict leftovers of social consumption turned putrefied substance into a mass that was “astonishingly sensuous and colourful.”\textsuperscript{263}

The resolution to expose unsavoury perversities in the face of society provided a mirror surface in which their latent desires were reflected. For Muehl, observation that people “force their way at traffic accidents to see blood,”\textsuperscript{264} and reading in the paper about adultery, murder and paedophilia became a Beuysian strategy and artistic medium to work with in Action Art.

\textsuperscript{260} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{261} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{262} Nitsch, ‘Orgien Mysterien Theater/Orgies Mysteries Theatre’, cited in Schwarz, ‘Chronologie/Chronology’, p.197
\textsuperscript{263} Otto Muehl cited in Schwarz, ‘Chronologie/Chronology’, pp.196 – 197
\textsuperscript{264} Ibid.
According to Reich, “The social revolution concentrates all of its forces on the elimination of the social basis of human suffering.”265 The suffering rests on the social inhibition of desires by bourgeois pragmatism and Catholic doctrine. Reich contended that the social revolution and clearing path to human happiness could take place only through an embittered conflict against religion, whose goal was to impose a “supernatural, eternal authority” over pragmatic and scientific reason.266 The safe haven of supernatural bliss and redemption was only possible through denial of the body, renunciation of desire and a demand for sacrifice. Reich’s idea of revolution was the “cultural revolution of the human,” in a reaction against the “subjugation of all fields of life under the idea of happiness.”267

As already related, for Reich the process of natural progression, of attaining happiness and reaching into the genuine core of creativity was obstructed by the presence of fascist ideology and the Freudian unconscious. In The Blood Organ the immersion of artists’ bodies in the underground vault became synonymous with the desire to smash through this Fascist obstruction and into the chthonic depths of the unconscious drive.

In this particular instance, the architectural edifice of the walled in cellar epitomised the process of reaching not only into the depths of human psychology, but also the psychology of society. In this case the body was not directly taken as a living subject of representation, but rather through the process of being walled-in for four consecutive days the body was intentionally deprived of its basic biological functions, leading to

265 Reich, The Mass Psychology of Fascism., p.170
266 Ibid., p.171
267 Ibid., p.170
starvation and the suppression of desires in order to reach a pure force of energy to make art. As such, the descent aimed against the authority of Catholic tradition as well as the traditions of fine art.

**The Blood Organ**

The project was planned soon after the artists’ exchange of ideas, with a particular mutual agreement to create a counter-event to the Vienna Festival week.\(^{268}\) Muehl and Nitsch appointed Adolf Frohner as a third participant for their collaboration.\(^{269}\) The event took place in the Perinetkeller, over a period of three days. At first, Otto Mauer had agreed to host their exhibition at Nächst St Stephan Gallery but due to his fear of scandal he withdrew his offer.\(^{270}\)

**Preliminary Actions**

Prior to the event’s occurrence, the three artists had charted precise plans, had written a manifesto and made posters that included bloody hand prints, fingerprints and other personified insignia\(^{271}\) (see *Figure 3.1*). A couple of weeks prior to the event, an article under the same title appeared in the local newspaper.\(^{272}\) Detailed posters were stuck to the cellar’s door. The opening ceremony was to take place at the end of the four-day Action.

The following text delineates details from their opening statement:

> We have resolved for the appeasement of mankind to descend into the vaults for four days. (Where we shall allow ourselves to be immured). Three days of unbridled disinhibition, liberation from

\(^{268}\) Green, *Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists.*, p.224

\(^{269}\) Ibid.

\(^{270}\) Schwarz, ‘Chronologie/Chronology’., p.200

\(^{271}\) Ibid., pp.200-217

\(^{272}\) Ibid., p.217
all sexual lust, transposition of the same into sheet metal, scrap, rotting garbage, meat, blood, junk, etc. – we wish to transform the entire material of the cosmos.

After these three days of spiritual exercises, during which we shall neither eat nor sleep nor care for our bodies – obviously without women – WE shall await the ceremonial disimmurement in a purified state.

*After the disimmurement, Messrs. Adolf Frohner, Otto Muehl and Hermann Nitsch are to be addressed as Herr Dr. Adolf Frohner, Herr Dr. Otto Muehl and Herr Dr. Hermann Nitsch.

This article already points towards the intention to undergo a process of creating which utilised the body “deprived of its biological functions” as an agent of creation within a given spatiotemporal frame. The body was to be immersed into the assemblage of vast collections of scrap materials that comprised a composition of a three-dimensional painting. The space in the cellar was used as a vast three-dimensional canvas within which the three were going to live and create art. All of the body’s libidinal forces and destructive urges were meant to engage with the given materials. Also, the act of immurement was meant to isolate them from the context of the social order. There was the line, a literal wall that existed between the private space, or the space inhibited by the ‘factual body’ and the social space.

The newspaper article stirred public reaction which eventually reached the police with rumours that they would slaughter a lamb, that they were “sex murderers,” that they “had girls down there.” They also stirred the reaction of an animal protection agency which provided an already slaughtered lamb from an abattoir.

273 Green, Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists., p.224
275 Ibid., p.217
The event

The artists walled themselves in by blocking the main entrance to the cellar with bricks. They made vast junk sculptures that emerged as extensions of walls and stairway banisters (see Figures 3.2, 3.3, 3.4 and 3.5). They used materials such as wood, sheets of metal, iron, sand, cement and other corroded objects. They collectively worked on a vast 2 x 9 meter painting which entailed blood, sand, cement, junk, and which was later torn apart and re-assembled as a total manifestation of its own destroyed fragments. As a final step, they brought in a lamb, which was torn open, like the painting, and then eviscerated, beaten to the ground and the head split open with an axe. Later, the lamb carcass was stretched on the wall near the painting (see Figure 3.6). The blood splatters were evident through the entire space, the result of four-day long violent acts that entailed signifiers of chthonic and ceremonial values. Nitsch created an altar constructed from a bowl of roses and incense placed in front of the lamb which resulted in an atmosphere of thick smoke. They brought in composers who produced rhythmic beats of “estranged noises.”

Throughout the entire time of the artists’ inhabitation of the cellar, people continuously banged on the door yelling abuses, accusing them of committing cannibalistic acts and that it was unbelievable that such people could possibly exist. The public havoc and press brought the attention of police on a number of occasions. Children from the street would show

---

276 Ibid., pp.222-226
277 Ibid.
278 Ibid.
279 Ibid.
280 Ibid.
281 Ibid.
282 Ibid., p.228
283 Ibid., p.222-226
284 Ibid.
them the way to the back entrance.\textsuperscript{285} Upon their arrival, the artists were interrogated about the meaning of art and the art exhibition.\textsuperscript{286} Muehl responded with premeditated answers that not only pointed to their artistic expertise but that also confirmed their employment in secondary education. Later he stated in a letter to a friend that the policemen were “so stupid.”\textsuperscript{287}

In the evening of the final day, a woman in an evening dress and high heels timidly kicked open the door declaring the exhibition open\textsuperscript{288} (see Figure 3.7). As soon as the hole was big enough for a person to crawl through, a stream of journalists began to pour into the space, euphorically photographing the event.\textsuperscript{289} The woman proceeded to kick down the wall. The journalists’ shouts could be heard for her not to do it “so quick”, that she should “pull [her] dress up a bit.”\textsuperscript{290} Then they stated that the opening was an “unqualified sensation”\textsuperscript{291} (see Figures 3.8 and 3.9).

Josef Dvorak was a Catholic theologian, psychoanalyst and journalist – he would open the event with a prepared speech. His role in founding Actionism was predominantly based on his access to the local press that catered towards publication and marketing not only of art, but also for activist contact with the public. In his opening speech for the event Dvorak stated:

\begin{quote}
Human art began beneath the surface of the earth, it began in an inaccessible cave. Today, it is returning to the catacombs, the
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{285} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{286} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{287} Ibid., p.223  
\textsuperscript{288} Ibid., p.226  
\textsuperscript{289} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{290} Ibid.  
\textsuperscript{291} Ibid.
cellar, the underground. It is turning away from the surface, from society, from a mortal tradition, that has just finished, but it is also turning away from all attempts, to prevent a downfall, that is a decline, at the last minute by constructing ingenious precepts about harmony. But this act of turning away is a return to those residual aspects of life which show the true face of reality. But after in all its horror and strangeness, in all its coldness and absurdity, which lies behind the deceptive façade of pseudo-artistic, pseudo-religious and pseudo-humanistic rationalisations that people make. All the slag has been burnt off, after fear and terror have purified everything, there arises the New, the ecstatic rebirth out of dirt and decay, out of the stink of putrefaction.292

All the participants were arrested shortly after the opening remarks.

The opening speech confirmed the artists’ intentions. Resonant with ideas of leading psychoanalysts such as Freud and Reich, Dvorak talked about the process of descending into the underground vault, the cellar, as if descending deep into the unconscious of the human psyche. The acts of turning away from false attempts to equate creative process to “harmony” show the “true face of reality.” This is the reality that is cold, absurd, strange and enveloped in horror. As such, the work in the exhibition turned this vault of the unconscious and repressed desires into the face of social order.

According to Muehl, Dvorak intended to collaborate by including his tape recordings of the activities that took place in the basement and by painting the ceiling, a proposition that Muehl vehemently rejected by telling him that his unqualified artistic contributions would ruin the entire project.293 Dvorak nearly pulled out of the project on the accounts of Muehl’s egocentric and authoritarian attitude.294 However, without Muehl’s leading

292 Josef Dvorak cited in Ibid., pp.226-228
293 Ibid., pp.222-223
294 Ibid.
role and rigorous attitude, the project would have remained impossible.

*The Blood Organ* Action profoundly shaped his future career.²⁹⁵

CHAPTER 4:

Otto Muehl: from Material Actions to Total Art

Following The Blood Organ, Otto Muehl launched into a prolific production of Material Actions that gradually evolved into the concept of Total Actions and Direct Art. The Material Actions embodied references to painting by directly immersing human bodies in materials he perceived as substitutes for paint (see Figure 4.1). His participation in Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS)\textsuperscript{296} in 1966 was decisive for turning his Actions into Total Art Actions that were specifically designed for staging in front of an audience, without reference to painting. Largely influenced by Wilhelm Reich’s ideas, Muehl’s exposition of the body was a means of critiquing the status quo and radically transgressing social taboos. Ever since the inception of his work in the early 1960s, Muehl’s art was perceived as extreme and subversive. A number of “liberal critics” denounced his art as “fascist” and “anti-humanist,”\textsuperscript{297} while several art historians argued for the radical proficiency of his social pragmatism and anarchist ideas.

According to Andrew Grossman, a historian who conducted interviews with Muehl, the preliminary reactions to his work were often antagonistic. These “venomous debates”, said Grossman, have surrounded his works for five decades and have often resulted in “misinformation and tenebrific rumour.”\textsuperscript{298} This is understandable, as Muehl’s themes are deliberately

\textsuperscript{296} The artists went to London as a group co-founded between Otto Muehl and Günter Brus, Institute for Direct Art, under which name many collaborative events took place. Other members of the institute, apart from the four Viennese Actionists, included Valie Export, Peter Weibel, Kurt Kren, Josef Dvorak, Ottmar Bauer, Herbert Strumpfl and Oswald Wiener. The artists who performed in the DIAS event were: Otto Muehl, Hermann Nitsch, Günter Brus, Peter Weibel and Kurt Kren. In the festival, the artists met a number of Fluxus artists. Al Hansen in particular was influential, as the Viennese staged an action in Vienna upon their arrival dedicated to him.

\textsuperscript{297} Vogel, Film as a Subversive Art., p.250

\textsuperscript{298} Grossman, ‘An Actionist Begins to Sing: An Interview with Otto Mühl’.
provocative, and include issues relating to misogyny, perversion, defilement and reduction of the human body to a material objecthood (see Figure 4.2).

However, according to Grossman, Muehl’s art and the art of the Viennese Actionists was the most interesting that emerged in 1960’s Austria. Far removed from the “narrow parameters of the cineaste” and the “projected frame controlled by commerce and critics”, Grossman argued that their art was an “autonomous way of being” that overcame the alienation that existed between the nature and the State, “between the unorganised individual and over-organised corruption”. Muehl’s exhibition of the extreme was against the constraining nature of the State.

Muehl’s work has often been explained in terms of two world wars and the “crushing trauma of Nazism”. Even though Muehl personally strived to overcome any form of pathos, allegory, satire and myth, authors such as Amos Vogel claimed that his work could not be understood without the historical context which bore the “stench of concentration camps, collective guilt, unbridled aggression and hallucinatory violence.” Furthermore, Vogel stated: “If these are works of defilement – as they surely are – they reflect a society of defilement; they capture its essence by means of harrowing violence and perverse sexuality.” For Muehl, the only way to “exorcise cruelty” was by performing actual violence in the form of Direct Art, and not merely by staging literary theatrical reproductions. According to him, art must reflect society back to itself in order to reveal

299 Ibid.
300 Ibid.
301 Vogel, Film as a Subversive Art., p.251
302 Ibid.
303 Ibid.
304 Ibid.
the latent inhibitions that were widely omnipresent in the social consciousness.

Grossman argued that Muehl’s work was not just meant to be provocative and controversial, as Vogel did. Instead, he said that his work embodies pragmatic values based on the notion of radicalisms acting out as a series of “rational” responses to “moral hypocrisies and the limitations of representational objectivity.” Muehl worked throughout the 1960s in order to confront the representational limitations in art in contemporary society. His Material Actions directly refer to an effacing of pictorial representations, whereas the Total Actions and Direct Art projects reference the introspective nature of the body in relation to the State and organised society.

_Leda mit dem Schwann (Leda and Swan) (1964)_ is an example of a Material Action that responds directly to the history of representation in painting (see _Figure 4.3 and 4.3a_). It is evident in the title that the artist made a direct reference to a story derived from Greek mythology, in which Zeus descended to earth in the form of a swan in order to seduce and rape queen Leda. Consequently, she gave birth to four children, two of whom were the offspring of rape, whilst the other two were the children of their mortal father, king Tyndareus. Leda’s children personified visions of disaster and suffering pride. A number of painters including Michelangelo, Leonardo da Vinci, Gustave Moreau and Paul Cezanne depicted this subject matter in their paintings.

---

307 Ibid.
308 Ibid.
In this Action, the female nude model underwent a type of treatment that was typical of Muehl’s Material Actions from 1963 till 1966. The process included serial bathing of men and women with a number of dramatic Actions as if applying layers to a painting: the skin would be covered with oils, salads, jelly-like custards, flour, eggs and other liquid and solid food stuffs, bed feathers, flowers, nails, ropes and plastic hosepipes. Saturated liquid pigments would be poured over the bodies from watering cans. The application of these substances left the bodies drenched and saturated in polymorphous material surroundings, appearing as if inside a Tachist painting. In *Leda and Swan*, the body of the woman was laid across the table; she was tied with ropes, her arm suspended from the ceiling. She was covered in the various materials as described above, and an inflated rubber swan was placed between her legs. The Action was photographed and filmed by Kurt Kren.

Whilst working on the sequences of his Material Actions, Muehl wrote a number of manifestos. The exact wording of the 1964 version best explains his stance towards the body as a material object in the context of its spatiotemporal settings:

Material action is painting that has spread beyond the picture surface. The human body, a laid table or a room becomes the picture surface. Time is added to the dimensions of the body and space. The material action works with symbols (its difference from theatre), which in themselves constitute a storyline, a consecutive series and mingling of symbols as self-existing realities. They do not aim to explain anything, they are what they appear to be, a reality that transpires on its own terms.

---

309 Otto Muehl cited in Green, *Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists.*, pp.87-91
310 Ibid.
311 Ibid., p.87
Slicing a cucumber over a human body means nothing more than what occurs, requires no explanation and speaks for itself. The fact that one will think one’s own thoughts is understandable. Performing any normal occurrence before an audience voids the occurrence of purpose, transforms it into a material action. A person is not treated in the material action as a person but as a body. The body, things, are not viewed as objects for our purpose, but have all purpose radically removed from them. Everything is understood as form. The human being is not seen as human being, a person, but as a body with certain properties. Material action extends reality.\textsuperscript{312}

The bodies in these Actions were deprived of any form of subjectivity. They were seen as bodies with certain physiological properties, including all orifices that connected the interior corporeal reality with that of the outside world.\textsuperscript{313} He studied the body thoroughly, just as a child would discover a world (Freud), exploring everything that happens around it. He also exploited human instinctive nature bound to primordial aggression and impulsive behavioural characteristics as integral parts of his Action.

Similar to \textit{Leda and Swan}, Muehl’s Material Action \textit{Mama und Papa (Mom and Dad)} - filmed and edited by Kren - portrays some of these points. The film exposes single-shot time fragments of bodies covered in various highly saturated substances. The male and a female subject in this Action engage in acts that imply sexual intercourse, violent eruption of birth and seeing the world as if through the eyes of a newborn suckling. Being born into the world of social flux that is then gradually discovered “via the mediation of the mother”\textsuperscript{314} is depicted in a most literal fashion. The body is born into the world of material reality via gradually applied layers of paint and its substitutes, in which it discovers and is incessantly reborn.

\textsuperscript{312} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{313} Klocker, ‘Otto Mühl - Biographie Und Aktionschronologie/ Biography and Action Chronology.’, p.189
\textsuperscript{314} Green, \textit{Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists.}, p.16
into the field of visual reference, as seen in Kren’s film. The body exists, and it returns to the states of decay submerged in the debris of painterly reality (see Figure 4.4).

Kurt Kren would make a number of films in collaboration with the Viennese Actionists over the 1964-71 period – particularly Muehl and Günter Brus. Each of Kren’s films with the Actionists would incorporate the features of his unique metrical structures with the documentary verisimilitude of the Actions. His films of Muehl’s Material Action, particularly *Leda and Swan* and *Mom and Dad*, cannot be perceived as a substitute for the real time Actions. Even though those films exist as documentary evidence of the Actions taking place, Kren’s editorial work stipulated an independent artwork. Kren treated these two projects as experiments that devised a formal and structural language of film cutting that corresponded to the aggressive nature of the Actions. He deployed a method of “serial flash-editing” in which the Action time was severed through structured and dense cutting of the film strip. Fragments of scenes become interlocked thus enabling them to co-exist in a circular motion. For example, the scene of a simulated sexual intercourse whose climax was epitomised by the bursting of a balloon, reappears as a series of flash-backs among other fragments in which the female nude is covered with pigments and mud.

The preceding and subsequent activities revealed in fragments reappear in

---

315 6/64 Mama Und Papa (Materialaktion: Otto Muehl) (1964), Kurt Kren (dir.).
316 Kren would preface each film with a numerical indication of its chronological order and the year it was made (hence 6/64 Mama und Papa was his sixth film completed in 1964). 6/64 Mama und Papa was his first collaboration with Muehl – he would complete three other films with Otto: 7/64 Leda mit dem Schwan, 9/64 O Tannenbaum, 12/66 Cosinus Alpha; one with Muehl and Günter Brus: 10c/65 Brus wünscht euch seine Weihnachten, and five with Brus: 8/64 Ana, 10/65 Selbstverstümmelung, 10b/65 Silber – Aktion Brus; 16/67 20. September (known widely as The Eating, Drinking, Pissing and Shitting Film) and 27/71 Auf der Pfaueninsel – refer to Hans (Ed.) Scheugl, Ex Underground Kurt Kren (Vienna: PVS Verleger, 1996); pp.166-178.
318 Ibid.
such a way in order to confuse the beginning and the end of the Action, thus formulating a sense of timelessness about the film.\textsuperscript{319} As such, the film posits a crucial relationship between the temporality of film and the freedom of audience perception.\textsuperscript{320} Thus Kren’s film relationship to the viewer is not dissimilar to the initial intentions of Muehl.

Muehl’s Material Action often provides an avenue in which the viewer becomes a participant in the work. The witnessing subject is often exposed to real-time violence, explicit sexual activity and defiling actions of the human bodies. As such, the live work—to which nowadays we cannot possibly testify apart from referring to numerous arrays of written accounts, films, photographs and public narratives—was real and induced a sense of shock, horror and disgust. As such, the work in question does not become a reference to violence, but an actual act of violence itself, which may induce a secondary trauma. Muehl’s live performances gradually evolved from Material Actions to the Actions he referred to as “Direct Art” in which the viewer became implicated directly. Direct correspondence between the viewer and the performers provided an arena for insurgency against perceptions of social morality and the status quo.

In 1970, Muehl staged a Direct Art performance \textit{Oh Sensibility!} that could be seen as an extension of \textit{Leda and Swan} conceived six years earlier. In this work, reference to painterly reality of Material Actions was dissolved. The performance was particularly staged for the audience, unlike the Material Actions in which the focus was more on the three-dimensional painterly work. This performance could be perceived as one of Muehl’s most

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{319} Mudie, \textit{Below the Centre/Unterhalb Des Mittelpunkts: A Selection of Filmwork from the Austria Filmmakers Cooperative.}, p.15
  \item \textsuperscript{320} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
controversial taboo-breaking Actions. In it, the artist engaged in a sexual act with a female partner and a goose. Instead of using an inflatable plastic bird, as happened in the *Leda and Swan*, Muehl brought a live goose onto the stage. The bird was subsequently slaughtered and its neck was utilised as a sexual tool. This work caused much controversy, as the act was committed in real time.

In response to this Action, Muehl contended:

> I stage myself pornographically in order to show truths. I provoke the moralists who do the same thing on a daily basis. I hold the mirror before them. They have marriage laws, morals, and at the same time, the brothel. I make no accusation, but I demonstrate the two-sidedness, the split in which human beings live. The public was appalled by my intentions. The spectators rejected the slaughter of the goose. If I think of the killing human beings [sic!] in the prisons of the USA, that is a crime. I do not condone animal murders. I show the sentimentality and hypocrisy. With tears in their eyes they gobble up their geese! Actionism is provocation and performance, the representation of moral double standards.

In the 1970 performance, Muehl explicitly addressed Reichian issues through staging facets of every-day life that are conventionally suppressed into the domain of the social unconscious. Fusing a number of these activities as a singular Action was perceived as an unacceptable extremity because it was staged as art. He argued that the nature of the State is such that nobody questions it; no revolution could change it or its moral values.

---

322 Ibid.
323 Ibid.
324 Muehl cited in Ibid.
325 Ibid.
Kardinal

*Kardinal* (1967) is an example of a Material Action that took place in the Perinetkeller and was simultaneously filmed by Helmut Kronberger. The film footage is the only remaining documentary archive of this work. The Action appears to have been specifically staged for the camera, as the human subjects moved around the designated frame that corresponded to the camera’s viewfinder.

The film begins with an act that takes place on the surface of a bust of a male subject, who remains seated in a static position (see *Figure 4.5*). First, the face of the subject is tied with a rope, and then slowly, materials such as paint, paste, eggs, dusty pigment, flour and dough are roughly applied to the body. In the film, the appearance of the subject changes, his compositional form mutates as the various substances are applied to his skin. There is also a sound of a whining voice and a consistent rhythm of grunting noises. The film exposes a rough and violent application of substances to the face. One could almost feel the pain and discomfort of this mutating and grotesque human form. The second part of the film contains a number of bodies twisted around each other, and who attempt to resolve their tangles in a material environment. This situation gradually becomes violent, as again, noises and screams could be heard, of bodies falling on top of and kicking each other.

---

326 *Kardinal* (1967), Helmut Kronberger (dir.).
327 Ibid.
328 Ibid.
329 Ibid.
330 Ibid.
331 Ibid.
The image in itself exposes the “ghastly beauty”\textsuperscript{332} of a perpetually moving and mutating form of immediately visible and perceptible body parts, immersed in a liquid whose colouring corresponds to the flesh and blood-like fluids, dyes, pigments and other painterly substances. The moving image in itself appears at times abstracted, and suggests references to the inversion of a physical corporeal reality to the interior one. The moving image resembles the body organs, the moving foetus in a womb, a birth awaiting its violent eruption into the outside world, or a mound of bodies struggling for survival in a pit.

When asked about his work’s references to the war and “the stench of concentration camps”\textsuperscript{333}, Muehl replied that his work could generally not be understood because of people’s lack of understanding of art.\textsuperscript{334} He stated that the public fails to engage with the medium, and seek any importance in it.\textsuperscript{335} Instead they opt to see only that which is repulsive.\textsuperscript{336}

The preliminary response that his art navigates the visions of the trauma of the Holocaust was not his intention.\textsuperscript{337} He believed that art mediates the subconscious of the artist’s identity and memories.\textsuperscript{338} In his instance, he took part in the war and referred to it as “the most horrible thing imaginable.”\textsuperscript{339} The following statement may reflect some of his most dominant narrative memories that filtered through in his art:

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{332} When asked about the motives behind one of his Material Actions, Muehl responded that he “had taken part in the Rundstedt offensive as a young soldier, and seen all but 13 of approximately 150 comrades fall in action. The memory of the frosty winter day on which he set eyes on their bodies, frozen and solid and covered in blood and mud, had stuck in his mind in all its ‘ghastly beauty.’” Green, Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists., p.84
\textsuperscript{333} Vogel, Film as a Subversive Art., p.251
\textsuperscript{335} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{336} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{337} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{338} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{339} Ibid.
\end{flushright}
In 1945 I experienced something grotesque. The war was just over. Ceasefire. We were quartered in a school in Czechoslovakia when I heard an extraordinary report over the radio: the Fuhrer had fallen in battle while spearheading his troops against the Bolshevik menace. Then Wagner's music was played. The most astonishing thing about this is that everyone who heard this believed the lie. This announcement showed that people were criminals.340

Otto Muehl's art experienced its most profound and radical stages during the 1960s. His seminal input towards Actionism largely influenced the course of the group's events, which came to an end shortly after the Art and Revolution performance in 1968. Throughout the 1970s Muehl retreated into a commune to develop his Action-analytic Reichian project. In it, he continued to film and stage Actions with more emphasis on the psycho-therapeutic properties instead of working with the body purely in terms of its objectified materiality.

340 Ibid.
CHAPTER 5:

*Günter Brus: “Birth From Obliteration” – Aspects and visions of immersion of Body in Direct Art Situations*

Günter Brus was an artist who preferred to work on a solitary and individual body, most often his own. Interest in working specifically with his own body in solitude stems from a number of influences both from personal life, international art and acquaintances with artists most of whom utilised methods of performance in relation to large scale abstract expressionist paintings.

After his dispute with the academy, Günter Brus left Austria with Alfons Schilling on a brief sojourn to Spain and Venice.\(^{341}\) In Malorca, the artists met an American Abstract Expressionist painter Joan Meritt, whose large scale works embodied traces of bodily movement.\(^{342}\) Due to financial problems, Brus returned to Styria from where he cycled to the Venice Biennale to see large scale Expressionist works.\(^{343}\) These international encounters greatly impressed him. Evidence that there was a possibility to develop a language of gestural expression that goes far beyond the confines of conventional techniques taught in art school, made him enter into a long struggle to find a language of his own. In 1960, he began experimenting with techniques such as placing paper on concrete pavement, which he would then rub with drawing materials and paint, often ripping the surface.\(^{344}\) His experimentations extended into

---

341 Schwarz, ’Chronologie/Chronology’, p.118
342 Ibid., p.116
343 Ibid., p.117
344 Ibid., p.118
employment of other objects with which he strived to apply paint; such as a Persian dagger he received as a present and a whip.\textsuperscript{345}

These early experimentations resulted in a series of undocumented Actions that were left over with a series of artefacts of painterly traces of gestural mark making and ripped surfaces. He later saw this stage as necessary in order to realise the importance his body played in the process of making art.

Unlike his Viennese compatriots, Brus showed little interest in Informel. The only artist whose work really interested him was Arnulf Rainer, in particular his \textit{Overpainting} series. Rainer’s work in the 1950s evolved from an interest in Surrealism, apropos which he founded a group \textit{Hundsgruppe (dog group)} with artists Ernst Fuchs, Erik Brauer and Josef Mikl.\textsuperscript{346} The body of work he created at this stage was synonymous with his suspicions of rationality, and he explored the potentialities of madness and the subconscious as dominant expressive forces in art.\textsuperscript{347} The series entailed detailed lithographs and drawings (see \textit{Figure 5.1}). His immaculate drawing techniques and growing interest in psychoanalytic aspects of madness led him towards establishing temporal and durational pieces that aimed towards destruction of form.\textsuperscript{348} He experimented with painting blindfolded, painting with both hands and with his feet, thus often engaging the whole body and its movement. From the mid 1950s until much later in his career, Rainer dedicated his time to a series of \textit{Overpaintings}, in which he

\textsuperscript{345} Ibid., p.124
\textsuperscript{348} Ibid.
“obliterated” works of historical significance including Biblical art, his own earlier work and drawings made by his friends. These Overpaintings were thick, textured monochromatic surfaces that most often appeared black or red. The underlying layer of original subject matter of pictorial representation was over time destroyed. For example, “Overpainting with Centralised design” was conceived from 1951 to 1963 (see Figure 5.2). The original drawing form was gradually concealed with application of black paint over a period of an entire decade. Later in his career, Rainer painted over photographs of his own face and body, their expressions distorted and grimaced.

Like Rainer, Brus experimented with monochromatic applications of black paint on large surfaces, which disabled a possibility of compositional and illusionistic conventions. Instead, the painting process was geared towards producing visible traces of the movement of the body through gestural paint marks. For Brus “pure line is meant to record the movement of the body and not be overshadowed with other effects.”

In a 1960 diary entry, Brus remarked that it seemed strange to him that “one doesn’t paint with both hands at the same time.” His ambitions and queries reached out for the possibility to integrate parts of the body such as stomach, hair, backside and feet. He said:

One has to live in painting. Painting all around. Surely a picture is for that very reason a part of this world and is not self-contained. Spatially incomprehensible – at least incomprehensible in traditional sense – that is what I want my pictures to be. A complete and total renunciation
of the view that the centre of the work lies within the painting.\textsuperscript{354}

The body lies in the centre of the work, the body lives inside the painting, the body is utilised by total means in order to produce a picture, but not in the sense of Jackson Pollock, whose work Brus found outdated. He was more influenced by Mathieu's Tachisme, which in Mathieu's words, sought art directly related to human behaviour ideology—what Mathieu called "existing [social] facts", and not an art that aches to attain universal values by stark deviation from reality. He argued towards a necessity for making radical changes in art that concerns the realm of morals and ideas.\textsuperscript{355} Brus, among the other artists of Viennese Actionism, sought an art that reconciled with the body as matter.

Brus' early period of experimentation was abruptly severed by his involuntary nine-month participation in the military service.\textsuperscript{356} In the army, he painted out army barracks, insulted an officer and was punished three times.\textsuperscript{357} He escaped from a civil suite, and went to see Otto Muehl who was then working on his junk sculptures.\textsuperscript{358} The army left deep scars on Brus; he abandoned painting and suffered from severe depression.\textsuperscript{359} He worked in a kitchen washing dishes.\textsuperscript{360} The only good thing that came out of this period was meeting his wife Anni.\textsuperscript{361}

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{354} Ibid.
\bibitem{355} See Chapter 2 on Art Influences and politics of gallery spaces.
\bibitem{356} Schwarz, 'Chronologie/Chronology'., p.259
\bibitem{357} Ibid.
\bibitem{358} Ibid.
\bibitem{359} Green, \textit{Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists}., p.25
\bibitem{360} Ibid.
\bibitem{361} Ibid.
\end{thebibliography}
In the depth of financial strife, Brus fortunately received 5,000 schillings from the Institute of the Advancement of the Arts, money that enabled him to develop a project he called *Labyrinth*. Josef Dvorak provided a premise for Brus to use in order to develop his three dimensional painting project. He purchased cheap calico, which he then installed on the walls in ways that resembled labyrinthine corridors within which the body could be immersed. The wandering process through this space would achieve a kind of anti-composition, or “decomposition.”

Brus had to abandon this project briefly in order to work as a hotel room cleaner with Anni. After returning from a six month sojourn, Brus found Dvorak’s basement emptied and rented out to a student club. His work suffered irrecoverable damage from exposure to dampness, and was destroyed due to negligence.

His depression, and disappointment with art left Brus in a state that he referred to as “arrogant Rimbauduchampianism” that forebode the death of art. At this time, conversations with Nitsch, Muehl and Schwarzkogler revived his creative desires as a painter. He was introduced to Kurt Kren with whom he discussed the intentions of corporeal manipulation of temporal painting and process driven Material Actions. Kren immediately concurred with Brus’ ideas and agreed to film his work.
The first work Kren agreed to film was an Action called *Ana* that took place in 1964 in Muehl’s apartment. In it, Brus had intended to literally immerse himself into the three dimensional surroundings of the room by painting his body and the body of his wife. He painted all the walls white and wrapped his body in strips of calico, which began to exist as a living art object assembled alongside an array of other static objects found in the room. The painting he “entered” was monochromatic white. By rolling his body throughout the space, he became an “unruly parcel” whose strips of cloth unwound leaving behind a trace of chaotic motion. According to Brus, in the course of this Action, the preconceived artistic intention separated itself from the actual course of events that took place. As a result, the artist entered into a lengthy painting frenzy. He found himself climbing the ladder, pouring black paint over his body and the body of his wife, and curled on the floor in a catatonic position with his feet stuck to the wall (See Figures 5.3 and 5.3a).

Brus often referred to this Action as an “intellectual blunder”. However, the blunt execution of self-referential mistakes became a strong foundation upon which the artist could develop a profound series of Actions that directly focused on his own body as a painting surface. As such, the rich trajectory of “errors” enabled an array of structural possibilities for Brus to develop his own theory of the notion of “Action” that marked much of his later work.

---

373 Ibid.
374 Ibid., p.26
375 Ibid., pp.25-26
376 Günter Brus cited in Ibid., p.26
For Kren the Action became a landmark for establishing a working relationship with Brus. The expressive style of Brus’ art confronted Kren with his usual mathematical and structural approach of filming and “flash editing”, whose time cutting related much more to the aggressive nature of Muehl’s material art. Kren’s film 8/64 Ana – Aktion Brus deployed a filming strategy of “gestural photography” that corresponded to “Brus’ pathos.” He shot the Action in single frames without montage cutting, relying purely on intuition. The filming technique resonated a “Tachist disintegration” of the Action that was directly transferred onto the film strip. The way that Kren used camera to film this work was like a writing device, moving through space following the artist’s movements.

Following Ana, Brus developed a series of Self-Painting Actions in which the body was viewed simultaneously as a protagonist agent of Action and a pictorial surface. The viewing eye was the one of the camera documenting the pictorial plane in its living human motion. An acquaintance, John Sailer, allowed Brus to execute his Actions in his studio space. The series consisted of three parts: Hand-Painting, Head-Painting and Total Head-Painting (see Figures 5.4-5.8). The work was analogous to Arnulf Rainer’s Overpaintings. However Brus adopted the Actionist extension in which the artist’s head was incorporated directly into the pictorial plane, and through the process of applying paint, making it appear to disappear in the surface that surrounded him.

377 Tscherkassky, ‘Lord of the Frames: Kurt Kren’.
378 Ibid.
380 Tscherkassky, ‘Lord of the Frames: Kurt Kren’.
381 8/64 Ana-Action Brus (1964), Kurt Kren (dir.).
382 Green, Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists., p.29
383 Ibid.
384 Ibid.
Even though public exposition of this work left the artist feeling “embittered,” the act of occasionally doing so pertained to “deliberate aspects of theoretical ideas.” This process of placing his body in the context of Direct Art Brus later described as a “birth from obliteration,” as the body appeared in its severed and distorted version of the vision of the self and painting.

The Selbstbemalung/Selbstverstümmelung (Self-Painting/Self-Mutilation) Actions portray a succession to Brus’ early monochromatic experiments. The sign of a black stripe that was initially retrieved from a series of frenzied gestural acts in Ana became a significant trait that followed Brus’ Actionist work throughout the 1960s.

As it can be noted in the images (see Figures 5.5-5.7a) the stripe was worked directly on the body, thus making a direct reference to injury, the tactile vulnerability of human body, and a schizophrenic split. For Brus, Self-Painting was not meant to point towards the strength of its aesthetic qualities but towards the body’s analytical aspects. The black stripe and its mutilating references were eventually juxtaposed with objects referring to masochism (such as scissors, nails, an axe and other surgical devices). Immersed in such surroundings, the body appeared in such ways that the boundary between the implied and the real became blurred.

According to Hubert Klocker, Brus’ art became an “analytical method” that included an evolution from an implied signatory mark to an idea, and to its

385 Ibid.
386 Ibid.
387 Ibid.
direct merging with the real.\textsuperscript{389} The \textit{Self-Painting} became the analysis of the self, whilst \textit{Self-Mutilation} became the analysis of the factual body. Klocker contended that Brus’ radical nature of bodily analysis resulted in the obsolescence of representation in art.\textsuperscript{390} The painted sign became one with the idea. This logic of firstly blurring the boundary with the real, and then eventually eliminating any implied painterly references followed the course of Brus’ Actions until 1970.\textsuperscript{391} The body could be seen literally stripping off layers of paint as if being re-born from the states of decay and from the codified layers of his second (painted) skin.

Loers contends that Brus’ use of masochistic juxtapositions had allegorical values analogous to “modern arma Christi (armory of Christ)” as a personified means to suffering.\textsuperscript{392} He stated that Brus’ inverted bodily realities of limped limbs resembled the paintings of martyrs such as that of the Danube School, Italian and Spanish Renaissance painters.\textsuperscript{393} Also, the helpless states in which the body appears resonate with early-twentieth-century American lynching photographs.\textsuperscript{394}

Brus placed much importance on photography and film to document his Actions. As such, he performed most of them in solitude in order to give the viewer a sense of confrontation with images that entailed tightly cropped compositional framework, evident both in Ludwig Hoffenreich’s photography and Kren’s film work. As such, Brus’ aim was not to focus on

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{389} Klocker, ‘Die Dramaturgie Des Organischen/ the Dramaturgy of the Organic‘, pp.54-55
  \item \textsuperscript{390} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{391} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{392} Loers, ‘From Action Painting to Actionism, Vienna 1960 - 1965.’, p.20
  \item \textsuperscript{393} Some of the examples most evocative of masochistic representations of suffering from Danube School would include paintings of martyrdom by Albrecht Altdorfer, Lucas Cranach the Elder, Wolf Huber and Jörg Breu the Elder. Even though that Loers referred specifically to Danube School, Brus’ limped body in a three-dimensional spatial reality also reminded of paintings of martyrs such as that of El Greco, Nicolas Poussin, Titian and others.
  \item \textsuperscript{394} Loers, ‘From Action Painting to Actionism, Vienna 1960 - 1965.’, p.20
\end{itemize}
the theatrical aspects of his works, but rather to surrender his body to the “magic of film.” He stated: “The inclusion of my body as an expressive element results in an event, the course of which is captured on camera and which the viewer can then experience.” The decisive cropping of frames focused on an “extreme tension of the body... which makes the bunk where the action takes place seem even narrower.” The spatial reality around the body was not as important as the focus on the movement of facial mimes and gestures that simultaneously conveyed “a precision of feeling.”

**Vienna Walk**

While he was working on the series in 1965, a remarkable event *Wiener Spaziergang (Vienna Walk)* took place. In this work, the artist walked the city streets whilst all visible external features of his body, including hair and shoes, were painted white. A continuous vertical black line was painted on his body to appear as if it was split open. He intended to walk past places of historic significance, such as Heldenplatz, the Burgtor, the Spanish Riding School and the Dorotheum, and finally the St Stephan square. The police stopped this work on a street corner on account of “annoyance” and disturbance in a public space. The artist was taken to a police station where he was questioned and issued a warning. Later, he was escorted home in a taxi (see Figure 5.9).

---

395 Ibid.
396 Günter Brus cited in Ibid., p.22
397 Ibid.
398 Ibid.
399 Green, *Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists.*, p.33
400 Schwarz, ‘Chronologie/Chronology’, p.300
401 Ibid.
402 Green, *Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists.*, p.33
For Brus, this particular work’s intention was to make a public appearance as “a living painting” in the context of historically significant buildings. His public appearance preceded an exhibition of his work *Painting – Self-Painting – Self-Mutilation*, at the Gallery Junge Generation. Brus stated that the gallery’s invitation to host the exhibition of his work entailed a decision to “risk a half-hearted attempt to bringing Vienna Actionism out of the underground.” The gallery’s director, Otto Stainiger, insisted that the artist do a performance as well, which would then be followed with a public discussion. Various people of authority and importance would attend the discussion, which was supposed to acknowledge “these borderline cases of contemporary painting.” According to the director, it would be in principle simply “wrong to suppress such things.” In Steiniger’s view, it seemed that more importance had been granted to those activities than was justified.

Even though Brus had only wanted to exhibit Hoffenreich’s photographic records of his Actions and surviving works from his *Painting in a Labyrinthine Space* from 1963, Steiniger was adamant that Brus should perform a public Action as well. It was the live Action that was then meant to be scrutinised, more so to please the questioning sense of public morality, rather than validate Brus’s intentions.

*Vienna Walk* was a direct response to the gallery director’s cynical insistence for the artist to perform a “stunt” for public amusement. Brus’
intentions to take the living painting for a walk were part of his methodology to “prevent the venture from seeming like a compromise.”\textsuperscript{410} He also claimed that “the Janus-faced nature of the gallery’s activities drove [him] from the rats’ cellars on to the street [sic].”\textsuperscript{411} The entire process of his preparations and escort of his living painting self onto the street made him feel intensely nervous. His accomplice Hoffenreich contended that the whole event could not end well, and that they could all “end in prison or the madhouse.”\textsuperscript{412} Muehl and Schwarzkogler followed the procession with an 8mm camera filming the entire event.\textsuperscript{413} Hoffenreich and Ronald Fleischmann made photographic evidence.\textsuperscript{414} The entourage of a couple of friends and his wife felt agitated and kept a safe distance throughout the event.\textsuperscript{415}

According to Brus, it was only natural to conclude that the press and members of the public would be “loath to find any deeper meaning in this Action,” and would fail to respond in any other way but to shout abusive and distressing commentaries.\textsuperscript{416}

Again, the artist was publicly accused by the press of performing pre-pubescent ordeals of painting himself with “spinach and semolina”, only to later call it a “Happening” with the rest of the five Viennese “happening specialists.”\textsuperscript{417} The derogatory remarks further claimed that Brus is an artist who “besmears himself, simultaneously hinting at mutilation”, “claiming

\textsuperscript{410} Günter Brus cited in Ibid., p.33
\textsuperscript{411} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{412} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{413} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{414} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{415} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{416} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{417} A local newspaper report cited in Ibid., p.35
this to be art” or “revolting against one’s own inability to produce art.”

The article concludes by enlisting Brus as a successor of “humanity’s more recent self-mutilations,” including its historical happening predecessors such as the Marquis de Sade and “Nero who set fire to Rome” which are “all too present” in the moral mind of the Viennese public.

With such public responses in mind, Brus proceeded to perform the Action in the Gallery Junge Generation a day later for his opening night. The Action that was performed in the gallery was later reviewed in the newspaper, which described the event:

A jolly, elderly man, wearing a green apron, a red muffler and a brown hat, pulls a hand cart into the room, calling out again and again ‘O, what a wretched world it is!’ On the flat top of the cart, between bags and buckets of paint, between clamps and nails lay Günter Brus dressed in white-painted suit. The performance began by his daubing a white mass on to his face and hair. Then he dipped a brush into some black paint, drew long lines over his body from his feet right up to his head, used a clamp and other tools to press against him and cut open bladders that he had attached to his chest and his belly. All sorts of black and white pasty stuff oozed out and was daubed around. The artist twisted and turned. He then got down from the cart and crawled out of the room on all fours, an injured and mutilated man.

The insulting nature of the gallery’s response was the main initiative for Brus to appear in a public space, exhibiting not only the living (and walking) corporeal centrality of his own body to his art, but also a symbolic injury of a schizophrenic split. The stripe that appeared on his body carried a certain history which was overly suppressed as a public shame.

---

418 Ibid.
419 Ibid.
The culmination of Brus’ theoretical attempts to reach into the body’s not only physical but also psychological interiority, resulted in *Zerreißprobe* (*Breaking Test*) in 1970 that ended his Actionist work. In this public performance, Brus directly cut into his body, and by attaching himself to a carefully structured mechanism he tied both of his feet that were pulled apart. The act appeared literally as if the artist wished to split his body in half⁴²¹ (see *Figure 5.10*). Brus stated that if he continued after this final performative work, he would end up literally splitting his body, a process which would result in his death.⁴²²

Brus’ last Action was a result of a creative crisis endured after receiving a prison sentence in 1969, and as such was performed in exile in Berlin, Germany.⁴²³ This conclusive act and a realisation of self-destructive potential forced him to withdraw into solitude and work on his illustrative work *Irrwisch*.⁴²⁴ This work is an extension of rage over social hypocrisies.⁴²⁵ It integrated his Actionist drawings and textual information that allowed him to illustratively speculate on the extension of his unrealised Actionist ideas.⁴²⁶ Subsequently, he worked on lithographic drawings some of which were integrated among Arnulf Rainer’s work in the Tate Gallery in London.

---

⁴²³ Klocker, ‘Der Zertrümmerte Spiegel/ the Shattered Mirror’, p.106
⁴²⁴ Günter Brus, *Irrwisch* (Frankfurt am Main: Kohlkunst Verlag, 1971).
⁴²⁵ Klocker, ‘Der Zertrümmerte Spiegel/ the Shattered Mirror’.
⁴²⁶ Ibid.
CHAPTER 6:  

Hermann Nitsch: Lamb and the Wound

Childhood memories of Allied forces’ air raids, sirens, fire and mortal fear of armed invasions left a permanent scar on Hermann Nitsch. He remembered how bomb craters and heaps of dirt replaced roads, and how the omnipresence of fear alienated the middle-class people. The impact of fearful apocalyptic religious tales of “fire-spewing volcanoes” and “earthquakes” accompanied his childhood memories of war. Nitsch placed importance on the notion that the invasion took place on behalf of the “enemy”. The consistent presence of the threatening other invoked feelings of danger. On the other hand, he stated that “despite the suffering brought by war... war can assume an aesthetic appearance, and the compulsion exerted by war to live the life intensely.” The recollection of terror and beauty continued to influence the intensity of his life, and had deeply impacted on the way he approached his art.

Nitsch began to develop the ideas leading towards the Orgien Mysterien Theater (O.-M. Theatre) in 1957. This festival was meant to take place over a six-day period and take on Wagnerian proportions of Dionysian drama. The festival was only realised in 1998 in Prinzendorf Castle. This work constituted his 100th Action. All of his art works since the late 1950s were seen as predecessors that culminated in the vision of his Gesamtkunstwerk. The one hundred Actions that preceded this six-day

---

427 Green, Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists., p.129
428 Ibid.
429 Ibid.
430 Ibid.
431 Schwarz, ‘Chronologie/Chronology’. p.92
432 Green, Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists., p.171
434 Hermann Nitsch cited in Green, Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists.
event entailed his *Abreaction Plays*, painting Actions and his drama theatre such as *König Oedipus (King Oedipus)*. All Actions were numbered according to their consecutive appearance.

Initiation of his idealistic visions was influenced by compositions of Richard Wagner, Greek Tragedy, Georg Trakl’s poetry, as well as the sixteenth and seventeenth-century masters.\(^{435}\) His illustrations of compositional drawings of the architecture for the *O.-M. Theatre* bore remarkable resemblance to Gustave Klimt’s art.\(^{436}\) Later in the 1960s Oswald Wiener introduced Nitsch and Muehl to the writings of the Marquis de Sade that enriched the content of sado-masochistic impulses in their work.\(^{437}\) This influence can be noted in Muehl’s 1969 film *Sodoma*\(^{438}\) and Nitsch’s most controversial work *Maria-Empfängnis-Aktion (Mary’s Conception-Action)* that was filmed in 1969.\(^{439}\) Nitsch’s notion of the Gesamtkunstwerk was meant to realise Wagner’s ambition for the unity of all art. In his texts, he remarked that he wanted to surpass and “outdo all that theatre has previously achieved.”\(^{440}\)

His ambitions with the *O.-M. Theatre* were to create a drama that would strive towards extending the concept of stage production. He envisioned that this could only happen by directly integrating the audience into the core of theatrical production. The participants were not merely meant to comprise passive observers who would be exposed to a series of representations, as is the case with conventional theatre. Instead, his work

\(^{435}\) Ibid.
\(^{436}\) Loers, ‘From Action Painting to Actionism, Vienna 1960 - 1965.’, p.17
\(^{437}\) Schwarz, ‘Chronologie/Chronology’, p.261
\(^{438}\) *Sodoma* (1969), Otto Muehl (dir.).
\(^{440}\) Green, Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: *Writings of the Vienna Actionists*, p.129
was always based on immediacy and it often denied his viewers the option to remain neutral.\footnote{From a speech given by Aaron Levy on the occasion of Hermann Nitsch’s book launch in 2008, cited in ‘Blood Orgies: Hermann Nitsch in America: Austrian Cultural Forum, New York’.} As such, for the initiation of his oeuvre, he consummated the idea of ‘Total Art’ that was already inherent in the art of Fluxus, Kaprow and Happenings. However, his version was intended to remain in the dimensions of Wagnerian proportions, and he dedicated his entire life to the process of achieving this state of idealistic perfection.

According to Nitsch, the drama was meant to reflect a narrative analogous to the “story of the creation in the old testament.”\footnote{Hermann Nitsch cited in Green, Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists., p.129} This work was not only meant to stage the linearity of a narrative sequence that depicted humanity’s “outward history, with its wars, struggles for power and regicides.”\footnote{Ibid.} Instead, it aimed to amplify an interpretive psychological reaction and dramatisation of a historical momentum.\footnote{Ibid.} Through his avid interest in psychoanalysis, C.G. Jung and Freud in particular, Nitsch wanted to show the “dramatic form” in which the human psyche is developed.\footnote{Ibid.} He believed that the human consciousness worked in a similar manner as geological formations, based on the accumulation of sedimentary layers.\footnote{Ibid.} His aim was to peel off deeply seated “psychic layers of awareness” in order to reach the core of unconscious chaos.\footnote{Ibid.}

His theoretical background intensified through Freudian psychoanalysis. One of the key concepts Nitsch appropriated in his art was a theory of abreaction. This is a psychoanalytic term Freud invented at the end of the
nineteenth century, and it stands for the process of re-living traumatic memories.\textsuperscript{448,449} For Nitsch, besides its psychoanalytic connotations, abreaction became analogous to dramatic Action theatre.\textsuperscript{450} As such, the concept provided an underlying foundation for his performances.

The theory of abreaction resonates in Nitsch’s work through the recurrence of topological iconography and allegory.\textsuperscript{451} He presents instruments of torture such as butchers’ hooks, knives, ropes, blood, carcasses and their entrails juxtaposed to clinical implements suggestive of redemptive values (bandages, cotton, scissors, gauze, warm water and flowers).\textsuperscript{452} The Actions contain sado-masochistic impulses of cruelty and corporeal defilement in order to attain purified states and abreaction of suffering. The staged iconography references Catholic notions of atonement through Crucifixion and imitation of Christ’s wounds.\textsuperscript{453} However, at the same time he induced feelings of blasphemy and desecration by overturning Christian symbolism into explicit pornographic acts suggestive of incest, sacrificial murder and ritual ceremony, creating altars of soaked rose petals, sweet water, incense and milk.\textsuperscript{454} (see \textit{Figures 6.1 and 6.3})

\textbf{The Lamb and the Wound}

Two symbols that recur in his work are that of a slaughtered lamb and of a pierced side wound that appears on the animal’s carcass. Both elements are

\textsuperscript{449} According to Freud, abreaction stands for a way of giving way to tormenting feelings and vehement emotions associated with traumatic experiences. The process often accompanies a form of emotional catharsis as a defensive reaction through a broad range of behavioural experiences such as weeping, screaming, a sensation of revenge, anger, etc. (Ibid.)
\textsuperscript{450} Green, \textit{Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkogler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists.}, p.129
\textsuperscript{451} Loers, ‘From Action Painting to Actionism, Vienna 1960 - 1965.’, p.20
\textsuperscript{452} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{453} Ibid.
loaded with symbolism derived from psychoanalysis and Christianity. He wrote a number of didactic manifestos, two of which are solely dedicated to the meaning of the lamb and the wound.

The *Manifesto of the Lamb* (1964) explains that the symbol of the lamb strived towards notions of the orgiastic through sado-masochistic urges.\(^{455}\) Nitsch wrote about “sublimation and repression” as key points of the symbolic phenomenon of the lamb.\(^{456}\) He utilised Reichian psychoanalytic methods and sought methodologies that translated the content of latent dreams and the unconscious through symbolism manifest in concrete objects and events.\(^{457}\) Unlike traditional representations, he used objects in real time alongside real-time activities in an immediate encounter. Unlike Muehl, these objects and activities were loaded with symbolism, mainly of Christian origins but turned to psychoanalytical purposes. For example, the physical piercing of a wound on the side of a crucified lamb carcass corresponds to Christ’s side wound\(^{458}\) but also—in Nitsch’s words—“constitutes a paradoxical symbol of an erotic ebullition, the break through of the phallic at the climax of excessive repentance (the cross) for the original sin (incest with the mother).”\(^{459}\) He stated that the wound was represented frequently in Western art as “wide open, or with apostle Thomas holding his finger to the scar”\(^{460}\) (see *Figure 6.2*). For Nitsch, the open side wound symbolised female genitalia, whilst the cross, the grail and the spear piercing the wound had phallic connotations. Understanding Christian symbolism as sexual and incestuous reflected the suppressed

\(^{455}\) Hermann Nitsch, ‘Manifesto of the Lamb’, (1964)., cited in Ibid., p.140

\(^{456}\) Ibid.

\(^{457}\) Ibid.

\(^{458}\) Hermann Nitsch cited in Green, *Brus, Muehl, Nitsch, Schwarzkoehler: Writings of the Vienna Actionists.*, p.153

\(^{459}\) Ibid.

\(^{460}\) Ibid.
anxieties of Austrian society and its “collective-neurotic mythical self-punishment, as represented by death on the cross.”

Nitsch often combined animal and human crucifixion, these Actions of evisceration representing, he believed, an “aesthetic substitute for the sacrificial act.” Most of his work operated on the accounts of “blasphemy and desecration” as the only means to “gain access to the profoundest holiest symbols”. Notions of death, repentance, atonement, sacrifice and resurrection are all displayed in the cacophony of ritualised orgiastic excess. Nitsch stated “I descend to inferno in order to spare you.” This statement is a key to all of his Actions that directly intends to implicate the audience by displaying blasphemous Actions as a critique of Christian suppressive doctrine.

**Actions**

All of Nitsch’s life work that preceded the six-day festival was created as a progression towards his magnum opus. His performative work can be seen as a trajectory that started with simplified structure involving himself as a sole participant in the early 1960s. Later, his Actions integrated “passive actors” whose number gradually increased over time.

For example, his *1.aktion* took place in Muehl’s apartment in late 1962. Nitsch staged himself as a passive actor. He appeared in a “white alb-like

---

461 Ibid.
463 Ibid.
464 Ibid.
466 Ibid.
467 Ibid.
shift” tied to the wall with ropes, as if he was crucified\textsuperscript{468} (see \textit{Figure 6.5}). Muehl poured blood over his face with the provided vessels, such as an enema syringe and watering cans.\textsuperscript{469} The Action was photographed, and no one else participated.

Subsequently, Josef Dvorak offered Nitsch an exhibition in his gallery.\textsuperscript{470} For this event, before staging the 2.\textit{aktion}, Nitsch prepared the gallery by painting out the walls and installing jute as a ground on top of which he poured red paint, water and blood.\textsuperscript{471} Additionally, he assembled his theoretical texts among the paintings.\textsuperscript{472} The Action constituted a lamb carcass suspended from a butcher’s hook from the ceiling.\textsuperscript{473} A white cloth was spread beneath the carcass whose head pointed down, the intestinal entrails poured onto the cloth.\textsuperscript{474} He swung the lamb through the room, and the blood splattered over the participant audience. He threw blood and raw eggs against the walls. The Action ended with him chewing rose petals, pouring blood over the jute paintings and the lamb carcass.\textsuperscript{475}

 Preliminary installation of the space and its subsequent actions resulted in Nitsch exhibiting an Informel piece radically intensified with violence and Christian iconographic symbolism. Splattering the audience with blood was envisaged as a Total Action that not only incorporated the gallery space but also everyone present in it. In this way, the audience became directly immersed into the realm of a three-dimensional painting. This Action

\textsuperscript{468} Ibid., p. 232
\textsuperscript{469} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{470} Ibid., p.249
\textsuperscript{471} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{472} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{473} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{474} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{475} Ibid.
differentiated Nitsch from Brus for example, as Brus only submerged his body in a three-dimensional spatial reality.

Veit Loers argued that Nitsch’s work was an “illustration of Tachisme” that contrasted with the excessive dynamism of Brus’ work.\textsuperscript{476} Brus’ endeavours were to eliminate any traces of traditional composition through the body’s movement across the pictorial field. Nitsch on the other hand consummated the idea of Tachisme through “self-indulgent narcissism” and the suggestion of “devotional attitude” stemming from his background in theology.\textsuperscript{477} This background informed the ritualistic intonation of his work and his affinity with Catholic religious archetypes.\textsuperscript{478}

One of his most controversial plays was \textit{Maria-Empfängnis-Aktion} (Mary’s Conception-Action) performed and filmed in 1969.\textsuperscript{479} The film entails a document of a crucifixion of a woman juxtaposed to a crucified mutilated lamb. The film is ridden with sexual defilement of the female body. Placement of the bloody entrails of the animal onto the woman’s body equated her with the lamb. Sexual intercourse was inferred with piercing of the lamb’s side, as if analogous to Christ’s wounds.\textsuperscript{480}

\textbf{Nitsch and Muehl}

On many occasions, Nitsch collaborated with the Actionists - particularly Otto Muehl. Both artists saw the importance of creating performative situations that mirror society’s conformity to dominant ideological systems of power.

\textsuperscript{476} Loers (ed.), \textit{Viennese Actionism: From Action Painting to Actionism, Vienna 1960 - 1965.}, p.17
\textsuperscript{477} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{478} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{479} Vogel, \textit{Film as a Subversive Art.}, pp.288-289
\textsuperscript{480} Sommer, ‘Maria-Conception-Action-Hermann Nitsch, Film’.
His friendship with Muehl slowly dissolved towards the mid 1960s due to a clash of interest and Muehl’s humorous approach towards an idea that integrated levels of profound spirituality for Nitsch. The two artists grew more distant in 1964 after collaborations on Muehl’s third Material Action and Nitsch’s fifth Action. Nitsch’s work resulted in a crucifixion of a male subject who was covered in eggs, blood and whose penis was rinsed with warm water. This Action corresponded to Muehl’s fourth Material Action Crucifixion of a male body. Muehl’s parody and humour of religious subjects offended Nitsch’s intense spiritual approach to his work. Unlike Muehl, Nitsch’s work was highly allegorical. Contrarily, Muehl aimed towards elimination of any form of pathos and metaphor focusing more on the positivist notion of the body in the context of a social milieu.

Nitsch was also the only Actionist who had Otto Mauer’s support and protection. The gallery director respected Nitsch’s theological ideas, despite his incessant reference to pornographic material. However, in response to Muehl’s exhibition requests, Mauer would respond: “Mr. Muehl, I will visit you only as a priest and then only in jail, for that is where you belong.” This favouritism based on preconceived religious ideas mirrored simultaneously the status quo and a sense of irony considering the equally subversive nature of both artists’ works.

481 Schwarz, ‘Chronologie/Chronology’, p.262.
482 Ibid
483 Ibid
484 Ibid
485 Ibid., pp. 261-262
486 Ibid., p.268
487 Ibid.
CONCLUSION

While misperceptions, misappropriations, incomplete surveys of the Actionists’ work in the history of avant-garde art, gallery refutations and omissions widely contributed to their Actions in the 1960s, by the end of the century the artists were widely appreciated for their contribution to the art of this decade. Today, photographs, films, illustrations, notes and other archival material of their Actions are held in many art collections including the Museum of Modern Art in New York, Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris, Tate Gallery and The Saatchi Gallery in London.

The 1960s was the crucial decade for Actionism proper. Brus’ Actions culminated in this decade and then abruptly came to an end with his last Action in 1970. After this event he continued to realise his performative actions in form of illustrations and he maintained a close collaborative collegiality with Arnulf Rainer. Rudolf Schwarzkogler’s early death in 1969 was followed with a myth that it was due to his actual castration. The myth was followed with numerous responses from international artists, some of which debunked his implied references to self-mutilation, whereas others, such as American artist Paul McCarthy, extolled the beauty of his allegorical Apollonian principles. Recently a Bulgarian feminist artist Boryana Rossa simulated the myth by castrating a red jellied strap-on, thus positing an array of questions pertaining to Jacques Lacan’s post-structural theory. Schwarzkogler’s first solo exhibition was realised posthumously in 1992 in Vienna, that then followed with a number of international exhibitions in Prague and Paris.


In the 1970s, Muehl founded an action-analytic commune where he continued to make his films and Material Actions for therapeutic reasons.\footnote{Otto Muehl cited in Grossman, 'An Actionist Begins to Sing: An Interview with Otto Mühl'.} This Reichian project resulted in the merging of art ideas into a real life situation where references to pictorial realism were dissolved. Instead of working with passive actors, Muehl directly deployed Reichian principles in order to bring his subjects to life and to make art. Analogous to Reich’s ideas, life in the commune provoked ideas of sexuality, exogamy and the liberation of instinctive creative drives. Acknowledgment of sexuality unhindered by taboos either as art, or as an integrated facet of everyday life, sparked a public debate and outrage that entangled Muehl in a law suit against accusations for paedophilia that resulted in a seven-year prison sentence. One particular film he shot at the commune, \textit{Back to fucking Cambridge}, that dealt with the Austrian \textit{fin de siècle}, attracted participation by renowned artists such as Nam Jun Paik, Orlan, Dieter Rott, Konrad Oberhuber, Norman Rosenthal, Francesco Conz and Günter Brus. His release from prison in 1998 at the age of 77 was followed with two subsequent retrospective exhibitions held at the Louvre in 2000 and 2001. The curator, Michel Regis, stated that exhibition of his work in either the Louvre or Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris would have been impossible in the mid 1990s. According to Muehl, radical expression that sparked public outrage needs time before any recognition of its historical validity.\footnote{Ibid.} In the first exhibition, which was about sexuality in Western art and based on a statement from Schwarzkogler’s manifesto, Muehl’s work was exhibited with artists such as Lucien Freud, Michelangelo, Nicolas Poussin, Jacques-Louis David, Théodore Géricault, Eugène Delacroix, Jean-Auguste-
Dominique Ingres, Edgar Degas, Marcel Duchamp, Pablo Picasso and Yves Klein.492

Nitsch was the only one who continued to perform in a similar manner as in the 1960s, until concluding with his six-day play in 1998 in the Prinzendorf castle. Numerous books were published about him, and he became one of Austria’s iconic avant-garde artists. Despite the linear continuity of his performative praxis over five decades, his art never attained such levels of brutal intensity as in the 1960s.

Viennese Actionism was an artistic direction that in its time specifically resonated with the social and political climate in post-war Vienna. As such, as much as the artists widely referred to and were influenced by the international avant-garde art, the specificity of the course of their Actions was pertinent to their contemporary social setting. Universal themes they generally dealt with were derived from psychoanalysis and as such they posited a rich ground for experimentation that directly mirrored not merely the social fabric that surrounded them, but thoroughly scrutinised the problems bound to its psychology and dominant ideologies that dictated the course of public morality. Often these imposed a veneer of forceful tolerance that collectively suppressed the outrage and trauma of the war atrocities that remained a part of Austrian collective memory.

Despite its very local context, the Viennese Actionists were an immense influence on the performance art that subsequently took place in Europe, America and Australia. Their stance validated a sense of intensity that occurred in the works of artists such as Chris Burden and Anna Mendieta in

492 Ibid.
America, Marina Abramovic in the Balkans, Gina Pane in France and Mike Parr in Australia. Most of these artists, all of whom emerged in the 1970s, utilised similar methodologies that questioned the body politic (as in Direct Art) in relation to psychoanalytic themes with an emphasis on intensifying local expression. However, the Actionists’ local expression was unique precisely because of the course of its actions in this particular historical timeframe.
'Arnulf Rainer, b.1929',


'goings-on',


"Altered." (Rudolf Schwarzkogler, Austrian Cultural Institute, New York),


---, Irrwisch (Frankfurt am Main: Kohlkunst Verlag, 1971).


GERUM, MICHAELA, 'Joseph Beuys: 1921 - 1986: Biographie',


GROSS, FRED, 'Mathieu paints a picture',


HOLLERWEGGER, HANS, Die Reform des Gottesdienstes zur Zeit des Josephinismus in Österreich (Pustet, 1976).


KREN, KURT, '8/64 Ana-Action Brus',

6/64 Mama und Papa (Materialaktion: Otto Muehl) (1964), --- (dir.).
8/64 Ana-Action Brus (1964), --- (dir.).

Kardinal (1967), KRONBERGER, HELMUT (dir.).


MOULTON, AARON, 'Dispatch from Sofia (Article)',

MUDIE, PETER, Below the Centre/Unterhalb des Mittelpunkts: A Selection of Filmwork from the Austria Filmmakers Cooperative (Perth: The School of Architecture and Fine Arts, University of Western Australia, 1994).


Sodoma (1969), MUEHL, OTTO (dir.).


---, 'Manifesto of the Lamb', (1964).


--- (ed.), *Der Wiener Aktionismus und die Österreicher* (Klagenfurt: Ritter Verlag, 1995).


Figure 1.1 Hermann Nitsch. *Reworking of print made after Rembrandt “Hundred Guilder Print.”* 1956-60. Emulsion paint on etching paper.

Figure 1.2 Hermann Nitsch. *Reworking of print made after Rembrandt “Hundred Guilder Print.”* 1956-60. Emulsion paint on etching paper.
Figure 1.3 Kunst und Revolution/Art and Revolution poster, University of Vienna. 1968.

Figure 1.4 Kunst und Revolution/Art and Revolution article in local newspaper. 1968.
Figure 1.5 *Kunst und Revolution/Art and Revolution.* 1968.
Figure 3.1 *Die Blutorgel/ The Blood Organ*. 1962.
manifesto and invitations
Figure 3.2 *Die Blutorgel/ The Blood Organ*. 1962.
Otto Muehl and junk sculpture

Figure 3.3 *Die Blutorgel/ The Blood Organ*. 1962.
junk sculpture detail
Figure 3.4 Die Blutorgel/ The Blood Organ. 1962.
Stairway banister, entry into the Perinetkeller and Otto Muehl working on junk sculpture
Figure 3.5 *Die Blutorgel/ The Blood Organ*. 1962.
Otto Muehl working on his junk sculpture

Figure 3.6 *Die Blutorgel/ The Blood Organ*. 1962.
Hermann Nitsch. 7th Painting Action.
Figure 3.7 *Die Blutorgel/ The Blood Organ*. 1962. breaking the entry

Figure 3.8 *Die Blutorgel/ The Blood Organ*. 1962.
Figure 3.9 *Die Blutorgel/ The Blood Organ*. 1962.
Figure 4.1 Otto Muehl. Materialaktion Nr. 30 *Nahrungsmitteltest*/Material Action Nr. 30 *Food Test*. 1966.
Example of material detritus after Muehl’s material action.
Figure 4.2 Otto Muhl. Materialaktion Nr. 3 Klarsichtpackung - Versumpfung in einer Truhe - Panierung eines weiblichen Gesäßes - Wälzen im Schlamm/ Material Action Nr. 3 Transparent Packing - Degradation in a Trunk - Bread-crumbing of a Backside - Rolling in Mud. 1964.
Figure 4.3 Otto Muehl. Aktion Leda mit dem Schwann/
Action Leda and Swan. 1964.
Figure 4.3a Otto Muehl. Aktion *Leda mit dem Schwann*/
Action *Leda and Swan*. 1964.
Figure 4.4 Kurt Kren. *Otto Muehl Aktion - Mama und Papa/Otto Muehl Action Mom and Dad*. 1964. (film stills)
Figure 4.5 Otto Muehl. Aktion *Kardinal/ Action Kardinal*. 1967. film by Helmut Kronberger. (film stills)
Figure 5.1 Arnulf Rainer. *Head of the Diver (Deny your Birth)*. 1950.

Figure 5.2 Arnulf Rainer. *Centralized Design Overpainting*. 1951/63.
Figure 5.3 Günter Brus. Aktion Ana/Action Ana. 1964.
Figure 5.3a Günter Brus. Aktion *Ana/Action Ana*. 1964.

Figure 5.4 Günter Brus. Aktion *Selbstbemalung 1, Handbemalung/Action Self-painting 1, Handpainting*. 1964.

Figure 5.5 Günter Brus. Aktion *Selbstbemalung 1, Kopfbemalung/Action Self-painting 1, Head-painting*. 1964.

Figure 5.6 Günter Brus. Aktion *Selbstbemalung 1, Kopfzumalung/Action Self-painting 1, Headpainting*. 1964.
Figure 5.7. Günter Brus. Aktion Selbstbemalung/Action Self-painting. 1965.

Figure 5.7a. Günter Brus. Aktion Selbstbemalung/Action Self-painting. 1965.
Figure 5.8 Günter Brus. Aktion Selbstverstümmelung 3/
Figure 5.9 Günter Brus. Aktion Wiener Spaziergang/ Action Vienna Walk. 1965.
Figure 5.10 Günter Brus. Aktion Zerreißprobe/Action Breaking Test. 1970.
Figure 6.1 Hermann Nitsch. 31. Aktion Maria-Empfängnis/31. Action (Mary's Conception). 1969.
Figure 6.2 Hermann Nitsch. 5. Aktion/5th Action. 1964.

Figure 6.3 Hermann Nitsch. 7. Aktion/7th Action. 1965.
Figure 6.4 Hermann Nitsch. *Malaktion/Painting Action*. 1961.

Figure 6.5 Hermann Nitsch. 1. *Aktion/1st Action*. 1962.