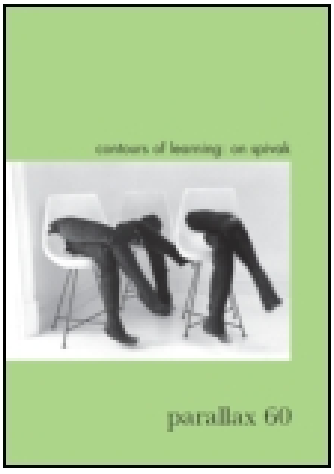


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# Performing the Wounded Body: Pain, Affect and the Radical Relationality of Meaning

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# Performing the Wounded Body: Pain, Affect and the Radical Relationality of Meaning

Amelia Jones



In Derek Jarman's 1986 movie *Caravaggio* the artist says to his friend, '[i]n the wound, the question is answered. All art is against lived experience. How can you compare flesh and blood with oil and ground pigment?' In a telescoping set of identifications, Jarman, via an actor playing the artist Caravaggio, begs the question of the effect of the *wound* as felt, enacted and represented visually: is a 'live' wound inherently more authentic than one made 'with oil and ground pigment' or, for that matter, with photographic media?[1] (Figure 1) And, in relation to these registers of mediation, what does the wound *mean* as a cultural signifier: one presented to an-*other* in a moment of communicative exchange?

Looking at the wound, primarily in a performance art context but also in the larger social realm as I will do here, foregrounds two major questions in terms of how we relate to and make meaning in relation to other bodies. The first question is whether different registers of signification *matter* in conveying human pain – that is, as Caravaggio's statement begs: can a *representational* wound be as 'painful', elicit the same degree of empathetic response, and thus be as meaningful, as one carved into a body in real time before our 'present' and watching eyes? Second, the question of the context in which wounding takes place: does a wound that is self-inflicted or inflicted by request of the 'victim' in an *art* context mean as much, or in the same way, as a self-inflicted wound perpetrated in a political or broadly social context? My interest in this paper is in looking closely at how we respond to acts of bodily harming in order to come to an understanding of how explicit wounding in a performative art context (whether viewed *live* or through *documents* remaining from the act) can function politically.

I begin first by stressing the impact of the *contexts* of wounding on how the wound comes to mean specifically in relation to its particular moment and disseminated referents. I move on to trace circuits of meaning on a deeper level to explore how the wound comes to have significance via spectatorial identification and bonding or disavowal and repulsion. I discuss a range of performative wounds to play out these points, arguing that the wound makes the body read for others and thus opens up complex circuits of intersubjective desire that have the potential to transform the way we inhabit the world.

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## Contexts of wounding

Obviously some bodies (far too many) are egregiously wounded against their will – this in fact occurs with shocking regularity every day, particularly in war zones, but also in the art world – as witnessed by works such as Algerian artist Adel Abdessemed's controversial 2008 video *Don't Trust Me*, in which a number of animals including a horse, a sheep and a deer are shown being slaughtered with a sledge hammer.[2] It is worth noting that I could not find examples of *humans* being hurt against their will in visual or performing arts contexts. Other human bodies, however, wound themselves or have themselves wounded on purpose to make political points, both in the public arena and within performance and art institutions. These different contexts provoke radically different effects due to the expectations attached to each venue or site of wounding, expectations that determine how we relate to the different bodies and thus what they end up signifying.

I begin then by contrasting of acts of wounding in an art or performance context to activist acts of wounding on the political stage. For example, in a 'selected site' in Amsterdam in 1976, Marina Abramović attempted to articulate the thoughts of her partner Ulay, while he sewed his mouth shut (in her script for the piece she notes: 'I answer the visitors' questions for him, until I make a mistake by answering for myself. I depart').[3](Figure 2) For audiences in the art world at the time, such acts – this one pointing to the different registers of translation through which we silence and/or relate to others – would have been not entirely unexpected, as extreme body art had taken off from the political protests of the 1960s.

Alternative galleries of the time in major metropolises of Europe and North America were thus filled with explicit and brutal critiques of the ways in which individual, collective and state power can rent and mutilate the subject – activating such harm on the body made such oppressions *visible*. For example, in *Sentimental Action* (1973/74), Gina Pane traced rosettes of blood onto her arms with razors, calling forth images of recent colonial wars such as that in Vietnam from contemporaneous press reports, but also (at least for many women) the various ways in which women *bleed*, both literally and metaphorically.[4] (Figure 3)

Whatever art viewers expected, nonetheless the act of piercing skin with a knife, shard of glass or needle tends to evoke a visceral empathetic response. Certain modes of violence have had particular salience in performance contexts, such as the act of sewing the lips shut to signify the oppression and silencing of particular groups of people. Following on Abramović and Ulay, for example, artists from Americans David Wojnarowicz, Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose, and Ron Athey to London-based Italian Franko B. and Australian Mike Parr have had their lips laced or sewn shut in performances that protest the silencing of victims of AIDS, censorship in general and the mistreatment of asylum seekers.[5] (Figures 4, 5 and 6)

Mike Parr's *Close the Concentration Camps* (2002), the piece in which he had his lips (and eyebrows, nostrils and ears) sewn shut with the word 'ALIEN' carved into his thigh, referred explicitly to political protests around that time in

Australia involving lip-sewing among asylum seekers.[6] And, in fact, in the political realm, there have also been recent cases that brutally evoke the power of self-harm as a mode of activism – in these cases, explicitly as a means of garnering media attention and thus potentially bringing about political transformation. Such political protests have occurred in the past decade in the UK, the Netherlands and Australia. In Britain in 2003, for example, Iranian refugee Abas Amini protested the horrifying conditions of his incarceration, demanding rights for asylum seekers and insisting on the right to asylum by sewing his mouth shut.[7] (Figure 7) This work, which uses the wounded body as a vehicle to send an explicit political message, obviously addresses an entirely different, and potentially much broader, audience from the art world audience of those works performed in visual arts and performance venues.

## The wound as representational/the wound aestheticized

Crucially, as my examples here suggest, these actions in both the art world and the broader political realms signify to us today largely through their *representations*, indicating that the imaging of pain is the primary mode through which its political effects take place. I discuss the representational mode of the wound below, but first it is worth asking what happens to wounds that are never pictorially documented? An alternative case, which has largely escaped representation, is the harrowing incident of a man named Israfil Shiri, a destitute Iranian refugee who, on being told he would not receive asylum from the British government in 2003, immolated himself in the offices of Refugee Action in Manchester. But it is impossible to find an image of Shiri on the Web, which makes less likely the spectacularization and commodification of his body but also severely limits the knowledge of this event (and the violent refusal of the state to provide sanctuary which was its nominal cause) on the international stage. The lack of *visual* documentation surely makes it less likely for an intelligent dialogue about the terrible treatment of refugees in the UK to take place. In fact, it is largely through cultural *representations* of the case of Shiri, such as the 2005 play produced by the 'In Place of War' research group at University of Manchester, *I've Got Something to Show You*, featuring Shiri's protest, that this painful event is known at all.[8]

Political knowledge about and empathetic reactions towards such actions are thus provoked largely through their documentary residues. Given this importance of particularly visual images in disseminating signs of suffering to provoke political change, it is important to ask how such images avoid becoming simply 'shock' art or circulable commodities in the market for trauma tourism, as exemplified by what happened with the images of US soldiers torturing prisoners at Abu Ghraib. How do such images avoid participating in the debasement of actual human suffering, tapping into a kind of compassion fatigue borne of too many available pictures of suffering? It is tempting to argue that, in a globalized economy of image-saturation that seems to turn everything into spectacle, the act of wounding apprehended first hand is somehow more authentic and less commodifiable than the photographic or (as in Caravaggio's case) the painted wound.

Luc Boltanski, in his important 1993 book *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media, and Politics*, addresses such questions at length. Boltanski argues that responses to suffering take one of three forms: we might initially feel a response of anger when confronted with suffering, accompanied by a desire to denounce a persecutor; this response he labels one of *denunciation*. A second possible response is a tendency towards an emotional attachment to the suffering, a 'tender-heartedness' that becomes *sentiment*; this response tends towards a problematic catharsis, letting the spectator off the hook as it were by allowing her to feel 'touched' rather than morally obligated to mitigate the suffering.[9] For Boltanski it is precisely the third, *aesthetic*, response that activates a politically more productive relation to the body in pain viewed at a distance. With the aesthetic response, an 'initial movement of pity is contained and even repressed [...] in such a way as to be taken up in the transformed form of *sublimation*'.[10] Boltanski argues that this response

> consists in considering the unfortunate's suffering as neither *unjust* (so as to become indignant about it), or as *touching* (so as to be moved to tears by it), but as *sublime*. An initial movement of pity is contained and even repressed [...] in such a way as to be taken up in the transformed form of *sublimation*.[11]


For Boltanski, it is through this potential sublimation in the aesthetic response that the *empathy* of the spectator is kept from a hysterical over-identification, which can freeze action and lead to sentimentality rather than political change; the response thus potentially activates what scholars drawing on Boltanski's work have articulated in terms of morality or ethics – what art and performance scholar Christine Stoddard calls an 'ethical intentionality' or what film theorist Lisa Cartwright terms 'moral spectatorship'.[12] By proposing aesthetics as a more politically advantageous mode of engaging distant suffering, Boltanski's argument favors the representational work of painters who depict suffering they themselves did not necessarily witness; he argues that

> by painting the unfortunate's suffering, by revealing its horror and thereby revealing its truth, [the agent or painter] [...] confers on this suffering the only form of dignity to which it can lay claim [...]. [T]he presentation of the unfortunate in his horrific aspect is the only one which makes possible the communication of that unpresentable horror which overcomes the spectator and which is none other than the horror residing within him and which defines his condition.[13]

If applied to the case of performance art, Boltanski's model might seem to privilege the aestheticized photographic representations of a live act over the live act itself; at least it encourages us to take documents seriously by allowing for an appreciation of how aestheticizing representations can have strong political effects because of their availability as aestheticized and yet also circulable images, as in the case of the lip-sewing incidents noted above.

I want to take up Boltanski's model, however, to suggest that self-wounding performances, albeit often known through documentation, can, through activating

a relation of pain in and through the body of the artist/performer *collapse* the 'painter' or 'agent' (the person who represents the suffering) with the unfortunate sufferer. This collapse is begged in a particularly strong and useful ways by the performance practice of Los Angeles-based Ron Athey, a former heroine addict who is HIV positive and radically queer. Since the early 1990s Athey has developed a practice, widely documented in a range of photographic media, in which he notoriously wounds himself or has others wound him in live acts.

On the one hand, I am arguing that Athey himself both *enacts* (or 'represents', though the highly theatricalized and mediated medium of his body) and *is* the body in pain. On the other hand, Athey's practice explicitly draws on and makes use of artful and aestheticizing documentary photographic practices to make its effects felt more widely. Often Athey has thus worked with fine art photographers such as Cathy Opie and Manuel Vason to produce gorgeous, glossy, highly aestheticized pictures of a leaking, lacerated body that nonetheless survives the ravages of bloodletting and thus produces a body of survival and strength out of pain and loss. Athey's acts of wounding have resulted in the production of beautiful pictures that are disseminated on the art market and in a range of commercial publications as artworks and commodities.[14] (Figures 8, 11) Opie's life-sized unique Polaroid photographs of Athey, for example, have been displayed in sites such as the Tate Liverpool in 2003-2004 in the context of an exhibition on performance documentation called *Art, Lies, and Videotape*, and the Guggenheim Museum in New York, for Opie's 2009 retrospective.[15] Adopting Boltanski's argument, Opie in a sense is the 'agent' who sublimates the pain of Athey's suffering into aesthetic form; following my point above, however, Athey is *already* a kind of agent and so Opie doubles the act of re/presenting suffering, potentially making more evident the brute fact that we can never fully apprehend, represent or 'know' another's pain.

Opie's images function clearly as mediating representations, saving us the difficulty of direct witnessing – but at the same time, through affording this distance, as Boltanski would have it, they explicitly aestheticize and offer an opportunity for a kind of (in Cartwright's terms) moral spectatorship. After all, if all we were to apprehend of Athey's self-wounding were the brutality, the dripping blood, the pained facial expressions, the brutalized orifices, how many of us could even stand to experience such work? In a sense, the aestheticizing of pain is a necessary mediation between Athey's felt agony (which we could never access directly whether 'live' or not) and our ability to bond with him over the pain in a way that opens us to call for something to *change* in order to end the agony. (Figure 9)

And, crucially, Athey's entire practice is in a sense about the always already aestheticized character of the body in pain. In his brief article tellingly entitled 'Becoming Total Image' Athey himself has noted vis-à-vis such aestheticizing photographs that his wounding takes place in an already highly artificial environment, his body itself rendered theatrical rather than brutally 'everyday':

> Bloating these physical actions with superficial accessories is not meant to whitewash their reality, but to repackage it. The artifice makes the orifice iconic. Using real actions to stand in for even more

> serious ones [in the live art context], I rely on distance, sightlines, timing, haze, and lighting.[16]

I can attest as well that Athey's body, experienced first hand and synaesthetically available through touch, smell, sound, sight and even potentially taste, is also always already *other* – it never becomes bonded to my body, as spectating body, in an unmediated fashion. For example, as I watched Athey reenact *Solar Anus* at the Hayward Gallery in London in 2006 crouching on the front row of spectators, the drops of liquid flying through the air from his anus as he slowly drew the string of pearls out flew into my face… In spite of my professional and intellectual embrace of the bodily vicissitudes of wounding, I am embarrassed to admit I found myself repelled on a gut level, afraid of his supposedly infectious blood… but also deeply concerned about the imminent health of the Ron I know as a friend, as he enacted his permeability in such a fearless and visceral way. (Figure 10) This worry opened me to my own permeability, and I felt flayed, exposed and aware of my own limits, my own capacity to experience the effects of wounding as I flinched away from his bodily fluids. Perhaps, in fact, I project his body as representational in order to guard myself from its obvious liquidity, porousness and *woundedness*.

And the pain I experienced empathetically as I sat 15 feet away from the stage watching Athey and his performance partner Dominic Johnson cut each other in the 2007 *Incorruptible Flesh (Perpetual Wound)* is no more or less cutting than the pain I feel looking at Opie's image of Athey in her life-sized unique Polaroid photograph *Suicide Bed* (2000): I am pierced by the image of this arm riddled with needles, the dents in his tender flesh rendered all the more visible in the photograph as I find myself absorbed in its viscous surface than they would be were I to view the piece from afar in a performance setting.[17] Even touched by drops of excrement and blood, one experiences the wounding of the other through a representational screen: the wound is in fact precisely a mode of *signifying* that makes the body of the other available as meaningful through identification. It makes pain readable as inscribed in and on the body. (Figures 8, 12)

While the experience of wounding first hand is ontologically distinct from experiencing it through a picture, film or video (after all, there is no fluid erupting from a photograph), I argue here that a 'live' wound is not necessarily more affective (or for that matter politically *effective*) than a representational one. In fact, as Athey's work makes clear, *because the wound is a mode of signification*, it renders the body as always already representational, complicating our attempt to make a firm division between the 'real' and the 'image'. At the same time, the wound affects us if and only if we interpret and experience it as 'real', that is, on some level as a violation of bodily coherence that we feel could happen to *us*.

In this way, an act of self-wounding that is obviously simulated, as with Daniel Martinez's 2000 series of self-evisceration images, such as *Fifth Attempt to Clone Mental Disorder, or How One Philosophizes with a Hammer/After Moreau and Cronenberg*, does not inspire the same kind of empathy or identification as looking at Athey's work provokes. (Figure 13) Rather than making us cringe and recoil as we worry about Athey's, and by extension our own, safety within our skin, Martinez's photograph

functions, through its appearance and the deliberately belabored title, to compel us to think in a more intellectualized way about cultural representations of ruptured bodies (as in David Cronenberg's films). Boltanski notes that suffering only has a potentially radical (unsettling) effect if we believe it to be 'real'.[18]

If we view the wound as 'fake', then, the act of wounding becomes a predominantly *conceptual* gesture devoid of the full potential for affective bonding – in fact, I interpret Martinez's photograph as eschewing precisely the kind of bonding that can (as Boltanski notes) easily slip into sentimentality.[19] Unlike Boltanski's point about suffering that has been lifted to the level of sublimity through an aestheticization that compels an emotional bond, this suffering is experienced as *solely* existing as a simulation. It can have political effects, but not the kind I am exploring in detail here.

The wound we perceive as actually violating the body of the other, ripping into the skin, making it bleed, penetrating its orifices or forging new holes, pricks us with fear and desire. It makes us smart and wince with recognition – whether we experience it in a live body or in a representation, in a political or art context – and it is this *empathetic* response that gives such wounds the potential to move and change us. It is the *perception* of the wound as having occurred in an actual body – and thus as potentially occurring in our own body in the future – that makes the wound signify and have political significance.

## Empathy as mode of identification

In her elaboration of moral spectatorship in her recent book by this title, Cartwright explores affect in the viewing of film; drawing on the work of Boltanski and the psychological theories of Heinz Kohut and others, she argues that this empathetic relation is distinct from the avant-gardist models of dominant theories of spectatorship in film through the turn of the twenty-first century. Rather than pivoting around the spectator's putative putting of herself metaphorically in the place of the other on the screen, per 1970s-1990s theories of spectatorship by authors from Laura Mulvey to Mary Ann Doane, spectatorship, Cartwright suggests, might function via 'empathetic identification' in which 'I do not necessarily feel the other's feelings or imagine myself in his or her place [...], but rather recognize and even *facilitate* the otherness of the other'.[20] This mode of identification is 'radically intersubjective and multisensory in its enactment'; it is fundamentally a *projective* mode of identification that potentially produces effects that are not isomorphic with the apparent feelings of the character or subject being identified with – I can never 'feel as you feel', as traditional film theory suggests in its readings of spectatorial responses as more or less homogeneous across types of viewers; I can only to some degree feel that I 'know how you feel' and even be moved to 'feel for you'.[21]

Cartwright's model allows me to refine my reading of empathy here in relation to Ron Athey's work: having never impaled myself, either via my anus or other orifices, on a giant pyramid in front of a live audience as Athey did in his 2004-2005 performance (with Juliana Snapper) *Judas Cradle*, I can never fully approximate the

wound experienced by Athey, never fully 'feel as he feels'.[22] (Figures 11, 14 and 15) Viewing this work (twice), I could only, out of my own fear and remembered hurts, feel like I 'know how he feels', but this could occur only when I let fall away my tendency *to resist*: after all, most of us would instinctively try to *avoid* feeling the lacerating personal pain his self-wounding evokes in us by pricking us to remember our own, metaphoric or literal, penetratory soul-flaying wounds. I have written elsewhere, in fact, with embarrassing openness about just these wounds that I felt pierce me in watching Athey impale himself in this way.[23]

As suggested, in order for Athey's self-wounding to provoke such a response, the fear it inspires must be accepted rather than disavowed or repressed: if the act of wounding is marginalized or erased from public consciousness it can fail to provoke *affect*, or this affect can be repressed, and so the work can fail to have political *effects*. However, such an erasure of signification itself – for example, the vehemence and contempt with which Athey's work has been systematically rejected, censored or ignored, particularly in the US – points to the power his work sustains in relation to dominant models of bodily comportment and of aesthetics. Thus during the 1990s 'culture wars' in the US, Athey was one among a group of artists whose works were lightening rods for the right wing's attempts to cancel public funding and/or put in place direct censorship to erase the work entirely. In her 1998 book *Between the Body and the Flesh: Performing Sadomasochism*, Lynda Hart makes this point vis-à-vis the right wing's refusal in the US to allow the work of s/m performances such as those by Athey to signify by identifying them as *not* art, *not* significant and *not* worthy of funding; this refusal to allow signify, as Hart points out, in turn paradoxically exposes how threatening Athey's work is to their 'Symbolic Order'.[24]

When allowed expression in the public arena, the wounds in confrontational yet aestheticized s/m works such as Athey's tend to provoke perceptions that, on the part of each individual spectator, trigger painful memories and thus difficult feelings. (Figure 16) If accepted rather than disavowed, these feelings in turn have the potential to inspire in us a visceral empathy the effects and meaning of which depend on the context in which we experience the wound and our porousness to its effects (our memories and projections, which relate to the extent of our own wounding and thus of our capacity to bond with the wounded body sympathetically or empathetically).[25]

This effect of the wound as pivoting around our own fear of experiencing it (an empathetic fear, linked to anxiety about our own mortality) points to the fact that the political effect of the wound is thus predicated on the profound narcissism that constitutes our relationship to others at all times – but also indicates that this narcissism is not inherently selfish or unproductive. If, as the asylum seekers surely recognize, our narcissistic fear of being hurt (of literally being *silenced* through mutilation of our lips), causes us to react in ways that might urge us to instigate political change – perhaps by writing a letter or joining a protest in front of the embassy, or by inspiring us (as with Mike Parr) to enact a similar wounding in an art world context – then the narcissism becomes a productive opening to the other.

This is clearly not the entirely self-absorbed narcissism of Ovid or Freud but rather the radical narcissism of psychologist Heinz Kohut and psychoanalytic cultural theorist Didier Anzieu – a narcissism forged through an inadequate differentiation between self and other, rather than through a forgetting, disavowal or erasure of the other.[26] Or, again as Cartwright puts it, a recognition that 'I do not necessarily feel the other's feelings or imagine myself in his or her place [ . . . ], but rather recognize and even *facilitate* the otherness of the other'.[27] This is a narcissism linked to a sense of self that is contingent on the other, opening out what Rosi Braidotti has recently called a *radical relationality* between self and other, in which 'the ethical ideal is to increase one's ability to enter into modes of relation with multiple others'.[28]

For Anzieu, the *skin* is the (non)boundary through which this narcissistic interrelational meshing of self and other potentially takes place. The *penetration* of the skin in acts of wounding then activates the most profound fears that are repressed in normative culture: fears of the ultimate lack of cohesion of the 'skin-ego', and thus of the mythical unified self, in which we find ourselves compelled to believe in order to survive: 'one is not a person', Anzieu writes, 'if one does not believe in the identity and continuity of the self'.[29] In order to function in the world, I have to imagine that I am an 'I' who can act as if I am coherent; at the same time, as Cartwright's notion of moral spectatorship and Braidotti's concept of radical relationality suggest, I must challenge my sense of coherence every moment in order to remain open to the other.[30]

## The wound as signifier

Kurt Krens has noted: 'No wound ever speaks for itself'.[31] As Krens and others have noted, wounding, which produces pain effects in the wounded subject, *requires an other to take effect*, to gain significatory potential. Elaine Scarry argues this point in her acclaimed 1985 book *The Body in Pain*, when she notes that a metaphoric or indexical displacement of the wounded body's pain into the representational regime is crucial to the identification of pain *as* pain – that is, as something that comes to have personal but also, via communication, social meaning:

> If the felt-attributes of pain are [ . . . ] lifted into the visible world, *and if the referent for these now objectified attributes is understood to be the human body*, then the sentient fact of the person's suffering will become knowable to a second person [ . . . ].[32]

Fundamentally, the wound *makes pain, and the body itself, into a representational field*. That is, it makes the painful experience of the other 'readable' to the spectator. As I have suggested here vis-à-vis aestheticized enactments of wounding, pain can only be communicated to others, then, through visible or audible acts of wounding and/or suffering which are experienced through sensory and neurological processes. It is useful to turn briefly to Henri Bergson's 1896 philosophy of 'matter and memory' to elaborate how the wound is felt, enacted and apprehended by both the sufferer and her witnesses. Bergson draws on then current neuroscientific research to suggest that embodied processes of experiencing and conveying the signs of pain are

themselves representational. Their initial experience and their apprehension by a spectator are both, in turn, given meaning through memory: sensory input sparks paths of neurons that fire according to previous experiences, their specific patterns informed by individual and collective memory as enacted in the body.[33] This reiterates on a different register my earlier point: the way in which the wound comes to mean is contingent on the particular bodies that perceive and process its effects through their own past experiences, as traced synaptically in neurological patterns that are activated in and through the body.

In this way, the perceived identifications of the apprehended body and the modes of pain it suffers are key to how it comes to mean individually, socially and politically. For example, when I view Athey on the judas cradle, his penetrable male body opens to my sense of feminine vulnerability: I am allowed 'in'; I imagine I 'know' what the wounded, penetrated man *feels*. In turn, for women body artists, the performance of pain is often thus explicitly oriented towards women's suffering. Pane described her self-harming piece *Sentimental Action* in terms of activating her body into a signifier of women's suffering: 'The red rose', Pane wrote, 'transformed into a vagina by a reconstitution in its most present state, the painful one'.[34] Pane articulates through self-wounding what many feminist artists making vaginal or 'cunt' art stated they were attempting to convey in the 1970s: the pain of being female can be viewed as signified through the female body, felt but also *signified* as open and bleeding. Making this bleeding hole visible and public is a way of politicizing the suffering of oppressed bodies in a patriarchal culture – as with Judy Chicago's visceral 1971 *Red Flag*, which makes a striking counter image to the iconic photographs of Athey's *Solar Anus*, such as Opie's unique Polaroid version, *Pearl Necklace* (2000).[35] (Figures 17, 18 and 19)

In fact, I'd like to suggest, as an aside, that it is a 'feminine', *feminist* and (per Athey's work) *queer* act to point to the ways in which the body is not somehow before, or more authentic, than the sign but itself experienced *and* readable as always already wounded. Through acts of self-wounding, which expose the body's readability as a signifying field, the spectator is linked to the body of the other through empathy or distanced through repulsion. Artists who enact agony call up both the viewer's own fears of pain and penetration and by extension, through such individual connectedness, also communal experiences of suffering, making personal wounds speak to others and thus giving them social and political valence.[36] To activate explicit personal-cum-political associations of the bleeding wound with a specific aspect of feminine or queer experience, as Pane and Athey have done, is to trace socially recognizable determinations of femininity and queer masculinity *visibly on the body* and to enact them, again, through a pain that calls out to be acknowledged and demands that its political implications be grappled with.[37]

Expanding on this point, as I have begun to suggest, what matters in terms of what the wound means is determined by the extent to which the viewer experiences affect and in particular *empathy* in relation to the suffering body. Hart's point on the silencing or erasure of Athey's body-in-pain points to the only way in which such acts of wounding can be rendered completely harmless to dominant structures of power. This erasure functions to dehumanize Athey, to construct him as what Judith

Butler has called 'ungrievable', a mode of construction Butler argues to be common in war zones where the possibility of grieving the other is suppressed in order to facilitate his or her annihilation. This construction as ungrievable precludes empathy and thus allows for violent acts to continue to be perpetrated on the body of the other.[38]

What is required, then, for the wounded body to signify in a politically useful way (a way that might galvanize those who perceive it to take action to avoid future acts of wounding) is for the body to be understood as grievable, as '*like me*'. The 'like me' is the opening to empathy, which thus requires a relation of relative equivalence: we feel empathy when we experience the other as an equal.[39] For the wound to have potentially progressive political effects, it must be understood as occurring on/in a body that could just as well be *mine*. Even though I do not relish or seek s/m experiences, nor to I find myself penetrable in the same exact ways as Athey, nor do I have an anatomically identical body, I still feel his suffering as *like mine*, or at least as pointing to aspects of my experiences that make me aware of my fear of finding myself cored and flayed as Athey seems to seek out in his work.

## Concluding thoughts on political effect/affect

In conclusion, then, the choreographed violated bodies of Pane, Abramović and Athey call upon us, as Robert Jay Lifton has argued, to 'transmut[e] … pain and guilt into responsibility'.[40] In this way, at its most effective the wound has the capacity to defy the absolute binaries of self/other and real/representation. It exposes the impossibility of the self and other being the *same* (paraphrasing Cartwright, I can never 'feel as Athey feels') and yet also of their being complete opposites (I do relate to Athey's pain and I do to some degree feel that I 'know how he feels' and be moved to 'feel for Athey'). And it rehearses the impossibility of maintaining a firm separation between the 'real' and the 'representation': the cut or suture in the body is itself a signifier of pain, an otherwise unrepresentable experience. In wounding himself, Athey makes himself visible *as grievable*.

The model of engagement I articulate here, it is important to stress, insists on particularity: the performative act of wounding, whether live or documentational, by definition engages each participant in a particular setting by activating *specific* modes of identification – per Bergson, specific memory paths encoded in specific bodies. In closing, to emphasize this point, I explore how a similar or almost identical act performed on the same body but at a different time and in a different place can have radically different effects.

Marina Abramović's original performance of *Lips of Thomas*, for two hours in a gallery in Austria in 1975, with a small audience and crude tools to wound and cut a star into her body, had a completely different effect from her durational (seven hour long) redoing of the piece at the Guggenheim Museum, New York City, in 2005: performed by an older and far more famous Abramović, in the center of the global art world, advertized through a massive public relations campaign, viewed by large groups of glamorous art world aficionadas and documented copiously with slick

professional photographs, a large book and a film produced by performance cinematographer Babette Mangolte. (Figures 20 and 21)

The 2005 *Lips of Thomas* has been seen, circulated and promoted all over the world as a major keystone in the recent rethinking of performance histories. However, the potential for affect – for empathy and thus for political traction – is, for me, vastly reduced in this recent reenactment, which took place in the cavernous central hallway of Frank Lloyd Wright's famous building, with Abramović far away from audience members and framed as both a heroic genius of classic performance art, and an object of rather traditional theatrical display (removed on a large proscenium of sorts).

The difference between performative woundings that become simply spectacular and those that retain the sharp edge of political agency is never inherent. It lies in their capacity to provoke empathic identification in specific viewers – and thus is in large part contingent on viewers' own sets of references and potential to open themselves to the act of wounding. To some degree, as this last example suggests, it lies also in the degree to which the signifying body remains (in Boltanski's words) aestheticized, removed from everyday examples of suffering, but at the same time resists being reduced to the level of a signifier without a referent (which makes it available primarily as spectacle and commodity and thus reduces its capacity to make me *feel* along with the suffering body). Pain itself cannot be commodified, and the act of wounding only *works*, I want to argue, if it retains the refusal of pain to be represented and apprehended, paradoxically through the wound's own turning of the body into a sign – but *a sign of something larger than the spectacle of the suffering body*.

Athey's works exemplify body art practices that strategically cross over identification and the impossibility of identification in just this way; these are acts that retain an aspect of irreducibility that makes them representational and yet material, signifying and yet not reducible to spectacle, visibly readable (albeit in myriad ways) and yet profoundly overdetermined in their stubborn refusal to sever the link with the emotionality of the subject in pain. It is by the active production of a body in pain through which artists can thus solicit a response that is itself also embodied and so irreducible to the flows of capital.

Braidotti's notion of a radical relationality between self and other that aims at 'affirmative empowerment', increasing 'one's ability to enter into modes of relation with multiple others', parallels the models examined here by Cartwright, Boltanski and other theorists who have begun to explore a radically relational self/other bond that can be activated in relation to cultural presentations or representations of suffering. Braidotti's model also links directly to the ethical interpretive potential I have sketched here in relation to the wounded body.[41]

Athey's works encourage just this kind of opening into 'modes of relation with multiple others', most often in highly uncomfortable ways that force us to acknowledge our own capacity for to experience but also to inflict pain and hurt. At their most potent, these works call us to them, exhorting us to take on this kind of ethnical responsibility precisely because we are deeply, psychically, affectively attached to Athey's visible signs of pain. Like the more obviously political acts

of asylum-seekers sewing their mouths shut, Athey's wounded body points to the myriad of ways in which he, and we, are pierced and ruptured by forces that constrain or violate our sense of completion. In so doing his works of wounding function through a radical relationality, calling for us to embrace rather than disavow our incoherence in order to provide a potential opening for a politics of change. This generous act of opening us to our own pain and mortality aims to reduce the forces of violence that scar every aspect of living in the world as it is today.

Notes

[1] In the film, three actors play the artist, one as a boy, one as a young man and in this scene Nigel Terry plays him as an adult.

[2] See Ilana DeBare, 'San Francisco Art Institute Halts Exhibition Showing Killing of Animals', *San Francisco Chronical*, 30 March 2008, <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2008/03/29/BAGNVSRME.DTL> [12/03/2009].

[3] The piece is described by this first-person caption and a video clip is available on 'Media Art Net', <http://www.medienkunstnetz.de/works/talking-about-similarity/video/1/> [26/03/2009].

[4] As Kathy O'Dell has pointed out, Pane was also enacting personal pain to point to the horrors of the politically induced pain caused by the Vietnam war. Pane pushed viewers to recall their own pain particularly in relation to 'the representation of the injured body on the news', leaving them in a space in which 'they could operate *critically*'. From Kathy O'Dell, *Toward a Theory of Performance Art: An Investigation of Its Sites*, Ph.D. thesis, The City University of New York, 1992, p.57.

[5] Wojnarowicz's image of himself with lips sewn shut was included in the movie about AIDs activism, *Silence = Death* (1990; directed by Rosa von Praunheim); Flanagan and Rose's piece, documented as *Video Scaffold*, was performed in 1992; Athey's piece, *A Nurse's Penance*, was performed at Los Angeles's Club Fuck the night David Wojnarowicz died from complications of AIDS (22 July 1992) in homage to the New York artist (Athey actually had his lips laced shut by 10 hypodermic needle tips with black embroidery thread; I thank Athey for sending me this information in an email, 1 April 2009); Franko B.'s lip-sewing performance addressing issues of silencing and censorship took place in several different places, including the Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA), London, in 1995. Flanagan had his lips sewn by Rose in one of their s/m engagements addressing, among other things, his bodily pain as a sufferer of cystic fibrosis; Franko B. and Parr also had someone else sew their lips shut. The most brilliant work on the affective and erotic connotations of the work of Ron Athey, Franko B. and David Wojnarowicz is that of Jennifer Doyle; see her book *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006); and her essay 'Queer Wallpaper', in *Companion to Contemporary Art Since 1945*, ed. Amelia Jones (Oxford: Blackwell Press, 2006), pp.343-55.

[6] On the Australian refugee-seekers' action see Joseph Pugliese, 'Penal Asylum: Refugees, Ethics, Hospitality', *Borderlands* e-journal, 1:1 (2002), <http://www.borderlands.net.au/vol1no1_2002/pugliese.html> [29/03/2009]. On Mike Parr's *Close the Concentration Camps* (2002), a durational work in which he empathetically aligns himself with the detainees at the Woomara refugee camp in Australia, I am indebted to the work of Ed Scheer and Christine Stoddard. See Edward Scheer, 'Australia's Post-Olympic Apocalypse?', *PAJ: Journal of Performance and Art* 88, 30:1 (2008), pp.42-56; Christine Stoddard, *Becoming Anxious: Bodies, Time and the Performance of Pain*, PhD thesis, University of Manchester, forthcoming (2010). I am particularly indebted to Stoddard, whose brilliant analysis of pain in performance has shifted my framework in this paper from its original form (in 2005) to the arguments currently shaping it. See also Michael Young, 'Mike Parr: Decapitations and Protestations – Cut, Burn, Stitch and Draw', 2008, *Arts Asia Pacific*, <http://www.aapmag.com/62features3.htm> [26/03/2009].

[7] Mary Richards discusses at length acts of lip-sewing by asylum seekers (including very recent protest by Shahin Portofeh in Britain) in relation to those by performance artists; see her 'Sewing and Sealing: Speaking Silence', in *Art in the Age of Terrorism*, eds Graham Coulter-Smith and Maurice Owen (London: Paul Holberton Publishing, 2005), pp.34-47. Richards notes that Amini was specifically protesting the Home Office's appeal of the decision to grant him refugee status; when the Home Office dropped the appeal, he continued his performative act in order to protest against the treatment of other asylum seekers; see p.37.

[8] James Thompson, Professor of Drama at University of Manchester, is the director of the 'In Place of War' project and I am grateful to him for mentioning this case and the play to me. On Israfil Shiri, see also Debbie Grue, 'In Memory of Israfil Shiri 1973-2003', 07/09/2003, *The Blanket: A Journal of Protest and Dissent*, <http://www.NOTES/Body&BodyArtNotes/IsrafilShiri.html> .

[9] Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering: Morality, Media, and Politics* [1993], trans. Graham Burchell (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), p.48.

[10] Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*, p.115. Boltanski is clearly referring to the Freudian concept of sublimation as a means of displacing the base, libidinal qualities of being human, as articulated in the latter's *Civilization and Its Discontents* [1929-1930], trans. James Strachey (New York: Norton, 1961); Freud writes, the '[s]ublimation of instinct is an especially conspicuous feature of cultural development; it is what makes it possible for higher psychical activities, scientific, artistic or ideological, to play such an important part in civilized life' (p.44). See also discussions of Boltanski's aesthetic mode of spectatorship in Scheer ('Australia's Post-Olympic Apocalypse?', p.50) and Stoddard ('Towards a Phenomenology of the Witness to Pain', in *Becoming Anxious*, chapter 2).

[11] Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*, p.115.

[12] See Christine Stoddard, 'Towards a Phenomenology of the Witness to Pain', ms. p.8; and Lisa Cartwright, *Moral Spectatorship: Technologies of Voice and Affect in Postwar Representations of the Child* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2008).

[13] Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*, p.116.

[14] See for example the glossy coffee-table book, Manuel Vason, *Encounters: Performance, Photography, Collaboration*, ed. Dominic Johnson (Bristol: Arnolfini, 2007).

[15] *Art, Lies, and Videotape* explored the complex links between live performance and documentation. The showing of Opie's photographs at the exhibition was controversial – they were originally mounted with captions that did not mention Athey's name, thus reassigning authorship of his performative woundings to Opie and taking the works away from Athey's live practice completely, mitigating the wounding by completely aligning it with the aesthetic. Once contacted, however, Opie immediately agreed that the captions should include information about Athey's practice, and they were then amended. See also the reproductions of six of her Polaroids of Athey in Jennifer Blessing and Nat Trotman, *Catherine Opie: American Photographer* (New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, 2008), pp.162-65.

[16] Ron Athey, 'Becoming Total Image', in Manuel Vason, *Encounters: Performance, Photography, Collaboration*, ed. Dominic Johnson (Bristol: Arnolfini, 2007), p.209.

[17] I witnessed the live performance of *Incorruptible Flesh* in May 2007 at the Custard Factory in Birmingham, sponsored by Chelsea Theatre and the Fierce! Festival; and I viewed Opie's photograph at the Guggenheim retrospective of Opie's work in 2009.

[18] Luc Boltanski, *Distant Suffering*, p.23.

[19] In a related article, I discuss at length the effects of 'fake' acts of wounding in relation to this and other works; see Amelia Jones, 'Rupture', in *A Performance Cosmology: Testimony from the Future, Evidence of the Past*, eds Judie Christie, Richard Gough and Daniel Watt (Aberystwyth: Centre for Performance Research and London: Routledge Press, 2006), pp.71-78.

[20] Lisa Cartwright, *Moral Spectatorship*, p.2; she is citing the work of Arne Johan Vetlesen from his *Perception, Empathy and Judgment: An Inquiry into the Preconditions of Moral Performance* (State College: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1994), and Heinz Kohut's *How Does Analysis Cure?* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1984).

[21] Lisa Cartwright, *Moral Spectatorship*, p.2, 34.

[22] I was able to view both the excerpt of *Judas Cradle*, which premiered at the Aksioma Festival, Castle Codelli, Ljubljana, Slovenia; and the full version performed at the Contact Theatre at University of Manchester, 2005 (this latter version traveled to other venues).

[23] See Amelia Jones, 'Holy Body: Erotic Ethics in Ron Athey and Juliana Snapper's *Judas Cradle*', *TDR ( The Drama Review: The Journal of Performance Studies)*, 50:1 (Spring 2006), pp.159-69.

[24] Hart argues as follows: '[the real] produces a confusion between the very boundary that is presumably the only one that remains unassailable – life and death. [ . . . ] [I]t is their own refusal to allow these acts to signify that has produced the return of the Real in the fantasia of the dominant order's Symbolic. Foreclosed from the Symbolic, they return in the Real – as the real. As "life" that is death – death to the coherency of a Symbolic Order that constitutes itself as whole by producing its own constitutive outside within.' In Lynda Hart, *Between the Body and the Flesh: Performing Sadomasochism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), p.163.

[25] For Henri Bergson, in *Time and Free Will: An Essay on the Immediate Data of Consciousness*, trans. F.L. Pogson (Montana: Kessinger Publishing Company, 1910), sympathy binds us to the other through our identification with his or her pain. See also 'Henri Bergson' (2003/ rev. 2008), *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <http://plato.stanford.edu/entries/bergson/#Bib> [24/08/2008].

[26] See Lisa Cartwright, *Moral Spectatorship* on Kohut's work; and Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, trans. Chris Turner (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1989), especially pp.123-24.

[27] Lisa Cartwright, *Moral Spectatorship*, p.2.

[28] Rosi Braidotti, 'In Spite of the Times: The Postsecular Turn in Feminism', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 25:6 (Fall 2008), pp.1-24.

[29] Didier Anzieu, *The Skin Ego*, p.131.

[30] See also Antonio Damasio's neuroscientific arguments about the necessary illusion of the self as coherent and how this functions on a neurological basis. He notes: our experiences 'tend to have a consistent perspective, as if there were indeed an owner and knower for most, thought not all contents. I imagine this perspective to be rooted in a relatively stable, endlessly repeated biological state. The source of the stability is the predominantly invariant structure and operation of the organism, and the slowly evolving elements of autobiographical data', in *Descartes' Error: Emotion, Reason, and the Human Brain* (New York: HarperCollins, 1995), p.238.

[31] Cited by Michaela Poeschl, 'Let's Make it Halloween. Get Out Your Knife, Carve me Like a Pumpkin, and Then Let's Fuck', unpublished paper, 1997, ms p.25.

[32] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p.13, 16.

[33] See Henri Bergson, *Matter and Memory* (1896; translation from fifth edition of 1908), trans. Nancy Margaret Paul and W. Scott Palmer (New York: Zone Books, 2002).

[34] Gina Pane, cited in Lea Vergine, *Body Art and Performance: The Body as Language* (Milan: Skira, 2000), p.197.

[35] See also Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro's influential article 'Female Imagery', where they pose the query, 'What does it feel like to be a woman? To be formed around a central core and have a secret place which can be entered and which is also a passageway from which life emerges?'; they note the painful aspect of this centered orientation later in the essay: 'to be a woman is to be an object of contempt, and the vagina, stamp of femaleness, is devalued'. Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro, 'Female Imagery', *Womanspace Journal* (Summer 1973), p.11, 14. Much of Chicago's own art work around this time was oriented towards reversing this negativity by making vaginal or cunt imagery that referenced the female body in positive ways, but a few of her pieces – such as *Red Flag* – present the potentially messy, bloody and painful dimensions of female experience.

[36] It must be noted here that my interpretation of how pain functions in this work is not ultimately consistent with Boltanski's arguments, which pivot around a conception of the aesthetic which is quite old-fashioned (that is, the idea of the painter, say Caravaggio, as agent translating the pain of an other through sublimation). My argument is polemical and insists on the conflation of the body of the sufferer with that of the agent: in Athey's work, he performs his pain on his body as an aesthetic act.

[37] As film theorist Laura Marks puts it, glossing on Bergson, '[p]erception takes place not simply in a phenomenological present but in an engagement with individual and cultural memory' as activated through the body. Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), pp.146-47.

[38] Judith Butler, 'Frames of War', paper given at University of Manchester, 5 February 2009.

[39] This point was made to me in conversation by Jonathan Katz, 22 March 2009.

[40] Cathy Caruth, 'An Interview with Robert Jay Lifton', in *Trauma: Explorations in Memory*, ed. Cathy Caruth (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1995), p.138.

[41] Radical relationality is a concept linking back to Boltanski's concept of suffering eliciting an empathetic intentionality and Cartwright's elaboration of 'empathetic identification'. It also parallels the arguments of a number of other scholars – including Laura U. Marks (*Skin of the Film*), Kaja Silverman and Jill Bennett – who, since the 1990s, have attempted to articulate models of affective or empathetic connection to visual cultural works that counter previous, avant-gardist models of spectatorship that devolve around Freudian concepts of distance, fetishization and identification as the metaphoric placement of the self in the position of the pictured other. Silverman thus in 1996 argued for an 'ethics of the look': 'Instead of assimilating what is desireable about the other to the self, and exteriorizing what is despised in the self as the other, the subject whose look I am here describing struggles to see the otherness of the desired self, and the familiarity of the despised other. He or she attempts, that is, to grasp the objectivity of the *moi*, and to recognize him – or herself precisely within those others to whom he or she would otherwise respond with revulsion and avoidance.' Kaja Silverman, *The Threshold of the Visible Word* (New York and London: Routledge, 1996), p.170. And, amplifying this dynamic through a model of 'empathetic vision', Jill Bennett argues that particular kinds of

artwork can activate 'sense memory', which 'is bound up in a dynamic encounter with a structure of representation, so that it becomes, in Gilles Deleuze's phrase, a question of putting "an outside and an inside into context" [...]. [I]t is this notion of the interface – of a point of contact to be negotiated – that is central to understanding the experience of sense memory'. See Jill Bennett, *Empathic Vision: Affect, Trauma, and Contemporary Art* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2005), p.31.

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## Images

1. Caravaggio, *Doubting of Thomas*, 1602-03. Stiftung Preußische Schlösser und Gärten Berlin-Brandenburg. Photograph Gerhard Murza. © SPSG, Verwendung nur mit Genehmigung und Quellenangabe.
2. Marina Abramović and Ulay, *Talking about Similarity*, 1976. Image documenting performance of Ulay with mouth sewn shut, facing Abramović. Photograph courtesy Marina Abramović.
3. Gina Pane, *Sentimental Action*, 1973-74. Photograph documenting performance from the collection of Musée National d'Art Moderne (Centre National d'Art Contemporain Georges Pompidou). © Photo CNAC/MNAM.
4. Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose, *Video Scaffold*, performed in 1992 for video. Photograph courtesy Sheree Rose. The image shows Flanagan's face and Rose's hands.
5. Franko B., *Mamma I Can't Sing*, 1990-97. Still from video of performance. Courtesy Franko B.
6. Mike Parr, *Close the Concentration Camps*, 15 June 2002. Image documenting 6-hour performance at Monash University Museum of Art, Melbourne, Australia. Photograph by Paul Green. Courtesy Mike Parr.
7. Iranian refugee Abas Amini in protest against the British government's refusal to grant him asylum, May 2003.
8. Ron Athey, *Suicide Bed*, 2000 (from '4 Scenes'). Photograph by Catherine Opie. Unique Polaroid. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles. © Catherine Opie.
9. Ron Athey, *St. Sebastien*, 1997. Photograph of performance. Courtesy Ron Athey.
10. Ron Athey, *Solar Anus*, 1996/2006. Photograph of performance. Courtesy Ron Athey.
11. Ron Athey and Juliana Snapper, *Judas Cradle*, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 2004. Photograph of performance by Manuel Vason. Courtesy Manuel Vason.
12. Ron Athey, *Incorruptible Flesh*, 2006. National Review of Live Art, Glasgow. Photograph courtesy of Manuel Vason.
13. Daniel J. Martinez, *Fifth Attempt to Clone Mental Disorder, or How One Philosophizes with a Hammer/After Moreau and Cronenberg*, 2000. Photograph courtesy Daniel J. Martinez.
14. Ron Athey performing in *Judas Cradle*, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 2004. Photograph by Manuel Vason. Courtesy Manuel Vason.
15. Ron Athey performing in *Judas Cradle*, Ljubljana, Slovenia, 2004. Photograph by Manuel Vason. Courtesy Manuel Vason.
16. Ron Athey, *Self-Obliteration 1: Ecstatic*, Donau Festival, Krems, Austria, 2008. Photograph by Florian Wieser. Courtesy Dominic Johnson.
17. Judy Chicago, *Red Flag*, 1971. Photolithograph (51/94). 20 × 24 inches. Printed from aluminum plates by Sam Francis in his personal workshop. © 1971 Judy Chicago.
18. Ron Athey, *Solar Anus*, 1996/2006. Photograph of performance. Courtesy Ron Athey.
19. Ron Athey, *Pearl Necklace*, 2000 (from 'Trojan Whore'). Photograph by Catherine Opie. Unique Polaroid. Courtesy Regen Projects, Los Angeles. © Catherine Opie.
20. Marina Abramović, *Lips of Thomas*, 1975. Photograph of performance at Galerie Krinzinger, Innsbruck. Courtesy Marina Abramović.
21. Marina Abramović, *Lips of Thomas*, 2005. Photograph of re-enactment at Guggenheim Museum, New York. Courtesy Marina Abramović.

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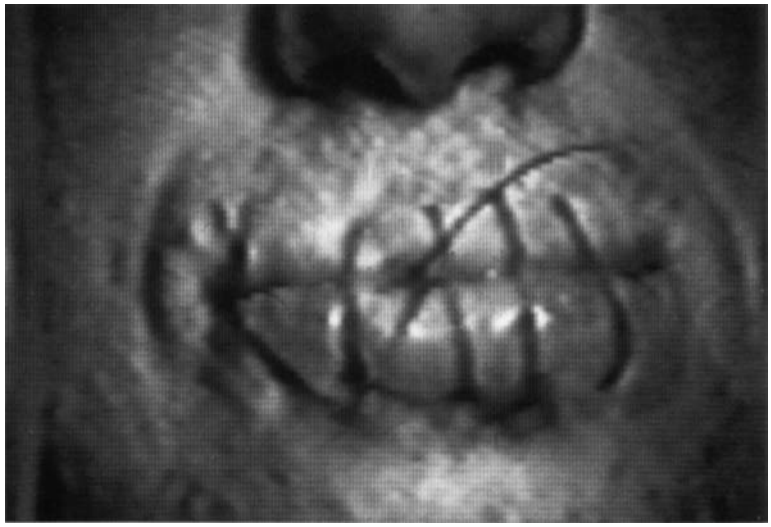

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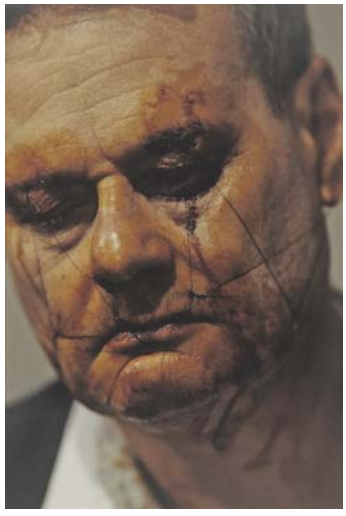

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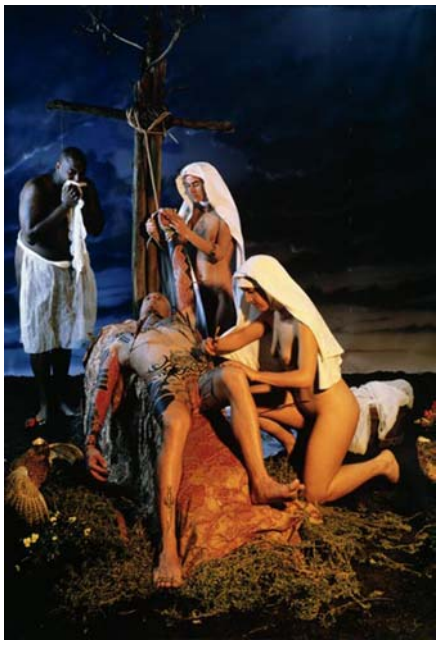

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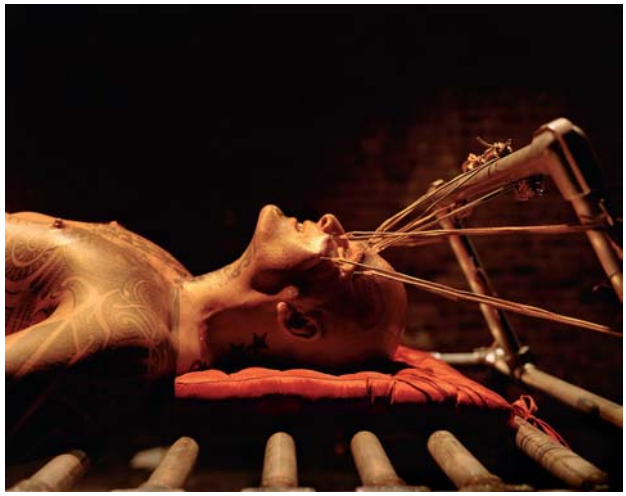

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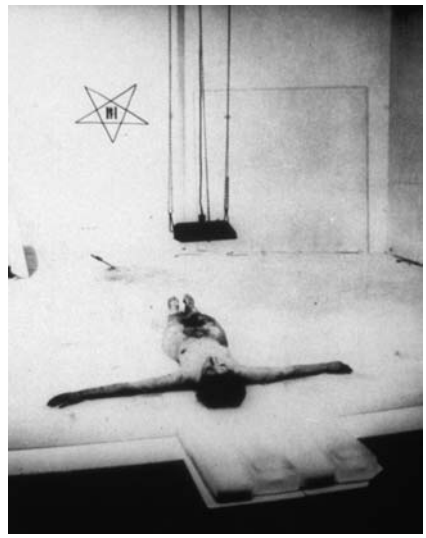

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