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Franko B and the Agitation of the Flesh

An Investigation into the Aesthetic, Cultural and Symbolic Significance of Franko B's Open, Fragmented and Bleeding Body

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Abstract

Franko B opens up his body. He opens it up again and again. He bleeds. It is unbearable. It is beautiful. We are in awe. Why does he do this? What does it mean to render the body open and vulnerable? What does a transgression of the corporeal boundaries of the human body mean for our social, cultural and political identities? This paper will explore the cultural significance of the open, fragmented and bleeding body, drawing in particular on the history of Christian theology, iconography and ritual bloodletting, and examining the work of Italian-born performance artist Franko B.

Key words: Franko B, performance, body, Christianity, iconography

This paper will analyse the performative and object-based works of the Italian-born performance artist Franko B, in order to interrogate the position of the symbolically charged open body in Western visual culture. Franko was trained at both Camberwell and Chelsea art schools in the 1980s and is now an internationally acclaimed performance artist whose work spans a variety of media: from drawing and installation to embroidery and performance. He gained notoriety for his controversial bloodletting performances in the 1990s, in which he explored the aesthetic and performative potential of the act of bleeding, drawing on elements of both primitive ritual and Christian iconography. These performances highlighted the materiality of the human body: both in terms of Franko's treatment of his body as a "canvas" and the spectator's visceral reaction to witnessing these bloodletting performances. Franko's exploration of the viscerally charged open body is echoed in Mary Richards' claim that despite the clinical approach to suffering in the modern world, "we still look towards the suffering body of the martyr as a body undergoing excruciating physical intensity, a body that has reached towards an altogether transfixing state of sublime unbearable ecstasy" (Richards, 2008: 114). This paper will consider Franko's work in terms of Christian rituals and iconography, in particular: the implications of witnessing the sacrificial body; martyrdom and the cult of relics; and the penetrated body of Christ as feminine "Other".

Bettina Bildhauer argues that during the medieval period, a complex system of taboos and beliefs sanctioned the human body as, "an unproblematic model of whole, assuring the coherence of social bodies formed in its image" (Bildhauer, 2006: 4). Blood and the physiological processes of bleeding played a crucial role in securing the wholeness of the body. The opening of the dermal frontier and the shedding of blood was thought to violate the unity of the enclosed body, rendering it open and vulnerable and giving blood a contradictory double function as both life (when it fills the intact body) and death (when it leaves the body) (Bildhauer, 2006: 3-5). According to Caroline Walker Bynum:

> "Blood is life and death. It is *sanguis* and *cruor*, for Latin shares with other Indo-European languages a distinction between inside blood (in some sense, life) and outside blood or bloodshed." (Walker Bynum, 2002: 705-6)

Bildhauer argues that this binary opposition between *sanguis* and *cruor* relies on and subsequently enforces a notion of the human body as a bounded entity. The seeming complexity of the contradictory double function of blood is based on the seeming stability of the bounded human body (Bildhauer, 2006: 3-6).

However, figuring the body as a perfectly enclosed container renders it vulnerable from external forces and internal physiological processes when its margins (the skin and its natural orifices) are penetrated, for example during birth, sex and death. These processes open the body up to the dangers of contaminating pollution and therefore the skin, the natural boundary of the body, represents the margin at which the body's material and spiritual integrity is most vulnerable, as Douglas famously argued in *Purity and Danger* (1966):

> "Any structure of ideas is vulnerable at its margins. We should expect the orifices of the body to symbolise its specially vulnerable points. Matter issuing from them is marginal stuff of the most obvious kind. Spittle, blood, milk, urine, faeces or tears by simply issuing forth have traversed the boundary of the body." (Douglas, 2002: 150)

Douglas went on to argue that the human body is a culturally constructed "symbol of society", and that the powers and dangers inhering in the social structure are therefore reproduced in small on the human body (Douglas, 2002: 142). This is the body politic: the site where "nature" and "culture" intersect (Campbell and Spackman, 1998: 58). If we assume Douglas' anthropological reading of the symbolic significance of bodily margins and the dangers of their transgression, then we can begin to appreciate the artistic possibilities afforded by the materiality of the body in twentieth-century performance art practices.

Performance art practices in the 1960s and 70s rejected the commodification of the art object in favour of exploring the creative potential of the human body as a valid artistic material in its own right (Arya, 2014: 5). Artists such as Marina Abramović, Chris Burden, Joseph Beuys, the Viennese Actionists, Gina Pane and Stelarc pioneered this new form of "body art". In order to push their bodies to the very limits of human endurance and artistic representation they used materials such as bodily fluids, excrement, dirt and dead animals in their performances. One of the defining features of these works was their appropriation of Christian imagery in order to evoke themes of pain, suffering and sacrifice, sometimes to achieve "personal transcendence" and sometimes as a means of attaining a sense of collective catharsis for society (Keidan and Morgan, 1998). The 1990s saw a resurgence in ritualistic bloodletting performances, which were legitimised and popularised by the work of artists such as Franko B, Ron Athey and Kira O'Reilly.

The Franko B Archive is held at the University of Bristol Theatre Collection, and has provided the primary research material for this paper. Following on from an exhibition curated in collaboration with the Theatre Collection, I have been working closely with the archivists to begin research into the Franko B Archive. The richness and variety of this fantastic collection of objects, publications, press cuttings and an abundance of visual materials has provided the primary research materials for this paper and subsequently informed my research methodology. Franko's work is considered highly controversial and this presents an array of moral and ethical issues to take into account when engaging with his archive.

Witnessing the Intolerable: Transcendence, Sacrifice and Spectatorship

This section will investigate two key research questions. Firstly, to what extent does the breaking down of the integrity of the human body succeed in recovering the communicative powers of the physical body, thus echoing the nature of Christ's sacrifice? Secondly, to what extent does staging the traumatised body engender a form of spectatorial witnessing, in the religious sense of both testifying and enabling? I will also consider the implications of bloodletting performances on the morals and ethics of spectatorship, asking if audiences are ultimately employed as witnesses to these cathartic acts of sacrifice and redemption.

Christianity and the communicative function of blood

The margins of the human body represent a liminal zone in which the balance of cultural power is subject to flux and change. This is evident in Christian theology, in which the transgression of the material boundaries of Christ's human body during the Crucifixion functions as the site for divine intervention and communion. According to Christian theology, it was through Christ's bloody sacrifice that the divine channels of communication were reopened and humanity granted its salvation after the Fall. The theological origins of the Church can therefore be traced back to the blood that flowed from Christ's wounds during the Crucifixion, an act which cemented Christianity as: "one body united by a common blood." This belief was confirmed at the Council of Vienna (1311-12), which decreed that Christ suffered so that, "from the outflowing water and blood there might be formed the one, immaculate and holy virginal mother Church."[1] This is particularly evident in the miracles of concomitance and transubstantiation, which were established as doctrine at the Fourth Lateran Council in 1215 and are celebrated during the communion of Christian mass. They state that the Eucharistic host and wine are in fact transformed into the body and blood of Christ for consumption by the worshipper and in this way Christ's body belongs to all of his followers. Christ's blood therefore serves an essentially communicative function as Bildhauer notes: "sacrificing one's body for others is thus a way in which connections between individuals are created through blood" (Bildhauer, 2006: 141).

These connections are also arguably invoked in the bloodletting performances of Franko B. Mary Richards argues that by inflicting wounds upon the body, his performances: "open up a potent and intense channel of communication for themselves and their audiences, tapping into a bilateral desire for sublime experience" (Richards, 2008: 111). Furthermore, developing Mary Douglas's theory that the body's boundaries become a site of ambiguity and potential danger when broken, Richards argues that by deliberately rupturing the body's border Franko and his contemporaries shatter their own, as well as the spectators' sense of wholeness. She argues that the unique vulnerability of the liminal boundaries of the body is integral to the communicative function of blood, both for the wounded performer and the spectators that bear witness to their self-mutilation (Richards, 2008: 116).

Franko B: *I'm Not Your Babe* (1996)

This communicative function is particularly evident in Franko's early performances, for example *I'm Not Your Babe* (1996), which was staged in two parts and executed on consecutive days in December 1996. Part One began with Franko appearing on stage in a cloud of liquid nitrogen under a single harsh overhead light that resembled that of an operating table or the oculus of a Renaissance church, demonstrating the influence of both medical and religious imagery on his work. His outstretched arms were punctured with cannulas that dribbled rivets of bright red blood over his waxy white arms. Franko stood silently and bled for twelve minutes, evoking the iconic Christian image of Christ during the crucifixion. After this period the taps in Franko's arms were closed and in a state of exhaustion he descended to the floor and slowly began to writhe around in his own blood.[2] During Part Two of the piece, staged the following day, Franko silently extended his bleeding right arm towards the audience, delivering himself to them as a sacrificial offering. His mouth was gagged, further emphasising his powerlessness and therefore placing culpability into the audiences' hands. According to Fintan Walsh: "Moving downstage he lies on his front and reaches his hand over the stage edge in obvious address. When no one helps, he crawls away from the blood, seemingly in search of further assistance, but to no avail" (Walsh, 2010: 136-7). He attempted to stand up but fell three times, evoking the suffering of Christ during the Passion.

Witnessing and the traumatic gaze

These works are communicative in that they prompt the spectator to enter into an unspoken dialogue with the performer, engendering a mediation on the act of viewing itself and the implications of the reciprocal gaze. Dori Laub's definition of the act of witnessing is helpful in repositioning the role of the spectator in Franko's bloodletting performances. He states that: "[a] witness is witness to the truth of what happens during an event".[3] Furthermore, to witness an event is to testify: 'not simply to empirical historical facts but to the very secret of survival and of resistance to extermination.'[4] In addition, Lisa Fitzpatrick argues that the immediacy and subjectivity inherent in the process of witnessing implicates spectators as agents to the performative act, rather than as its victims (Fitzpatrick, 2011: 61). This disruption of conventional reception processes is particularly evident in the earlier works of Marina Abramović (*Lips of Thomas*, 1975) and Gina Pane (*Escalade Non Anesthésiée*, 1971), which arguably sought an active response from traditionally "passive" audiences.

However, Anna Harpin argues that the intellectual arrogance in presuming the passivity of the audience is a presumption that ignores the fact that "doing" is achieved not only in direct action but also in the simple act of looking (Harpin, 2011: 102-3). This is particularly true in the spectatorship of trauma, in which witnessing is marked: "not by a simple knowledge, but by the ways it simultaneously defies and demands our witness."[5] Harpin argues that to look is an ethical act in that it is inextricably linked to knowing. In this respect the palpability of the reciprocal gaze is integral to the dynamic possibility of live performance, as it can be argued that the simple act of witnessing is transformative in itself (Harpin, 2011: 103-4). This emphasis on the act of looking is arguably evident in Franko's focus on the visual in performative works, particularly his aesthetic preference for tableau over energetic action and image over the spoken word:

> "I work in a kind of tableau; I like that idea a lot. Every time I perform I am making a series of paintings. You're looking at an image, the light goes off, and I appear as something else. My work is not theatre! You're not expected to stop and say 'when does it finish?'"[6]

His interest in the painterly arguably accounts for the Christian iconography that pervades both his performative and object-based works, for example, his adoption of the *ostentation vulnerum* in *I'm Not Your Babe*, the tradition pose of the risen Christ with arms outstretched in benediction (Richards, 2008: 108). Furthermore, Franko has discussed his relationship with Christian iconography in an interview with Antonis Bogadakis:

> "I was brought up as Roman Catholic but although I am a non-believer now I am very sensitive to bring out and paint or create images and stills of wounds. Again I find some of these paintings, the *Rape of the Sabines* for example, that depict pain horrible, unbearable but beautiful in a way."[7]

The affective power of the image

Franko's experience of "unbearable" depictions of the wounded human body in Christian iconography reflects the emotional shock that Jill Bennett attributes to the contemplation of the religious imagery of suffering (Bennett, 2001: 10). She finds in the iconography of medieval naturalism an appeal to "sense memory", which brings to life images of suffering in the mind of the spectator. This "temporal dimension" positions the pictorial plane not as an extension of "real space" but as: "a mnemonic landscape in which certain passages or details achieve a heightened level of affective response" (Bennett, 2001: 5). Therefore, she argues that it is important to understand spectatorship in the medieval period not as a process of interpretation or cognition, but as: "an essentially transformative process in which the viewer is directly affected through a sensory encounter with the art object" (Bennett, 2001: 6). She draws on the Barthesian notion of punctum, the prick or shock that purportedly characterises our affective response to the photographic image. According to Roland Barthes, punctum, "is also: sting, speck, cut, little hole… that accident which pricks me (but also bruises me, is poignant to me)."[8] Bennett argues that the punctum of the devotional image cuts into the flat surface of the image in order to pull the spectator into "a direct affective engagement" (Bennett, 2001: 10).

It could be argued that Franko's performances replicate the spectatorial response of awe and wonder prompted by the medieval contemplation of iconic images of the abject and bleeding Christ. The staging of the sacrificial body arguably signals a desire for the intense and personal connection conventionally associated with the contemplation of religious images of suffering. This informs Franko's performative practice, in which he encourages spectators to imaginatively engage with the materiality of his bleeding body, therefore evoking an intense connection with his wounding (Richards, 2008: 108-9). His work demonstrates Stephen Di Benedetto's definition of the strategies of visceral performance:

> "Aesthetic performances orchestrate a visceral response from attendants so that they actually might experience the violence and abuse of the disturbing images, actions, or events that transpire in front of them." (Di Benedetto, 2010: 183-4)

In this respect, audiences take on a share of the responsibility and thus share in the cathartic and transformative sacrifice enacted by the artist. This connection is significant in the context of late-capitalist, post-industrial Western society, in which, according to Richards, communicative exchange is fraught with ambiguity (Richards, 2008: 108). This is reflected in Franko's belief that:

> "Society, people are obsessed with being articulate, always being able to express yourself… Why should you have to be articulate? How is it possible to articulate the sense of having lost something, whether it is love, people, your parents, or your innocence?"[9]

In response to this inability to articulate himself, Franko returns to the bleeding body is a site of representation in which he can communicate via this own bleeding flesh. The communicative function of Franko's body is literally figured in a still from his performance of *Mama I Can't Sing: Part 3* in April 1996 in which the words "Protect me" are carved in child-like letters into the skin of his back.

There is therefore evidence to suggest that the transformative potential of Franko's bloodletting performances can be considered in light of Christian rituals in which blood is considered to have an essentially communicative function. Furthermore, the ritualised and penetrated human body engenders a form of spectatorial witnessing, in the religious sense of both testifying and enabling. Building on the active form of spectatorship demanded by performance artists such as Pane and Abramović, the audience of *I'm Not Your Babe* were positioned as witnesses to Franko's performative actions, in a process that arguably highlighted their own sense of subjectivity.

Containing the Sacred: Investigating the Performativity of Franko's Relics

This section will read Franko B's performative and object-based works in terms of Christian hagiographical practices in in order to answer two research question: firstly, to what extent is the nature of medieval Christian relics and the cult of saints reflected in Franko B's investigations into his own materiality and corporeal boundaries? And secondly, to what extent is the tactile nature of the cult of relics reflected in the threat of contamination explored in Franko's bloodletting performances? Drawing on three of Franko's performative works, *Mama I Can't Sing* (1996), *Oh Lover Boy* (2001) and *I Miss You* (2003), this section will argue that Franko's blood and the "relics" that it creates simultaneously fascinate and shock, creating a sense of awe and disgust that reflects the nature of the medieval interaction with bodily relics.

The fragmented body of the martyr

Throughout the late first until the early fourth centuries AD, Roman officials arrested Christian leaders for practicing a religion that threatened the authority of the state. These early Christians were required to renounce their faith in Christ and when they refused they were condemned to death. Christians believed that they were granted salvation in heaven and that as a result they were able to intercede with God on behalf of those who addressed their prayers to them (Kruger, 2011: 6-7). The material remains of the martyr's fragmented body were sanctified through physical contact with the sacred person. Cynthia Hahn defines relics as: "a physical object understood to carry the *virtus* of a saint or Christ, literally 'virtue' but more accurately the 'power' of a holy person." The most obvious relics were comprised of bodily remains however, tertiary relics or "*brandeum*" were objects that had touched a relic and therefore carried the "'contagious,' *virtus*" of the saint (Hahn, 2012: 8-9). This slippage of sacred power from God to saint to relic to worshipper is indicative of Emile Durkheim's exploration of sacred contagion in *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912). In developing a theory of social integration that distinguished between the individual and society, Durkheim argued that the rules of separation were the distinguishing marks of the sacred, in opposition to the profane. Mary Douglas argues that in explaining why the sacred is inherently contagious, Durkheim referred to the fictive, abstract nature of religious entities:

> "They are merely ideas awakened by the experience of society, merely collective ideas projected outwards, merely expressions of morality. So they have no fixed material point of reference. Even the graven images of gods are only material emblems of immaterial forces generated by the social process. Therefore they are ultimately rootless, fluid, liable to become unfocussed and to flow into other experiences. It is their nature always to be in danger of losing their distinctive and necessary character." (Douglas, 2002: 26-7)

Therefore, the boundaries of the sacred are in constant need of guarding with taboos and prohibitions and in this way the sacred must always be treated as contagious and mediated by the danger of crossing forbidden boundaries. According to Derek Kruger, during the medieval period: "Matter gained holiness through contact with other holy matter, like a secret contagion. Such matter might, in fact, gain its holiness through mere proximity to holy places where holy events had occurred" (Kruger, 2011: 5).

Relic veneration was not established as an official Church practice until the fourth century AD, however, there are accounts of the practice extending back to the mid-second century. After the martyrdom and cremation of the bishop of Smyrna, Polycarp, around 156 AD, his devoted followers:

> "Took up his bones, which are more valuable than precious stones and finer than refined gold, and deposited them in a suitable place. There gathering together, as we are able, with joy and gladness, the Lord will permit us to celebrate the birthday of his martyrdom in commemoration of those who have already fought in the contest."[10]

The material nature of bodily remains and *brandeum* as, "more valuable than precious stones and finer than refined gold" is one the defining characteristic of the cult of relics. Kruger argues that Christian relics provide material evidence for religion as the practice was premised on the basic confidence that matter, whether bodily remains, oil, water and even pieces of stone and dust, could contain and transmit spiritual power (Kruger, 2011: 5). Therefore, it is evident that these relics did not exist in a vacuum; their success was contingent on a strict consecrating system of faith and belief. Hahn argues that an object's status as a relic was dependent on the recognition of the worshipper of its sacred power. She argues that a combination of miracles and institutional affirmation upheld this power, without which a relic was simply bone, dust, or scraps of cloth. The Christian worshipper was therefore indispensable in authenticating, validating and containing the sacred nature of the relic (Hahn, 2012: 9). In this sense the relic can be understood to have an essentially performative function.

Artistic relics and the consecration of the art object

This is also characteristic of the history and practice of relics pertaining to the body of the artist, which is sanctified not by God, but by creativity. In the twentieth century, artists began to produce artworks comprised of their own bodily remains, highlighting the position of the artist and the fetishisation of creativity in modern society. In *Fountain* (1917), Marcel Duchamp succeeded in creating a work of art in which the body is simultaneously completely absent and wholly present and in which the art object becomes immaterial. Furthermore, Alexander Nagel argues that Duchamp's readymades were a revival of the medieval cult of relics in that they were ordinary, and often commercially produced, objects that were consecrated as something extraordinary. He argues that instead of drawing its sanctity from religion, these works were consecrated by the cult of art:

> "If the medieval relic drew its significance from its link to sanctity and from its provenance, as argued above, both categories established by the church, Duchamp used the art system as a readily available (in fact a readymade) consecrating mechanism." (Nagel, 2011: 217)

He argues that the process of consecration is accelerated as, "the object does not live through a history linked to a saint, but is arbitrarily designated, as it were, retroactively, by the artist and consecrated by the art gallery" (Nagel, 2011: 217). Piero Mazoni's *Merda d'artista* (1961) also referred to the absent body of the artist through its abject bodily functions. The work is comprised of ninety cans of the artist's own excrement, each numbered from 001 to 090, which were sold individually for the current price of gold. The work therefore relied on the complicity of the audience in order to complete its conceptual premise and in this way is implicitly performative. This argument is supported by Jean-Pierre Criqui's claim that Mazoni's work was based on the notion of art as an active process: "an activity whose resulting art work is only the trace or the remnant of it, its witness but also its mourner."[11] The protocols of relic worship are the same but that they are now firmly under the management of the artist (Nagel, 2011: 215).

Human remains: the memorial function of Franko's material relics

Therefore, the bodily remains from Franko's bloodletting performances can be considered in the tradition of both the Christian and the artistic cult of relics. Franko's relics are created out of the canvas that he bleeds on during his performances and have been transformed by various fellow artists and fashion designers into an assortment of objects and garments, including a pair of roller skates, a handbag and a suit. These relics are part of a cyclical process in which Franko's blood is recycled and reintegrated into the body as a form of talismanic clothing:

> "So I really like that kind of creative circle: it's like it comes from the body, it comes from the canvas, then the canvas becomes something that you wear, which came from the body in the first place. So I really like that kind of connection that in a way I created a colour and the colour came from the body. You know, it's very natural!"[12]

Furthermore, for Franko these relics exist independently as "a piece of art on their own." In addition Franko states that the blood on the clothes is still a living element in that it is intimately connected with his body: "Yes it is to certain extent but you can't wash the clothes. If you watch them the blood washes off, so at the end of the day blood is like water, it is alive."[13]

In this respect, Franko's relics function in exactly the same way as medieval relics in that they are a product of a slippage in symbolic meaning. The only difference is that Franko's relics have been ordained by art and the complex notion of the 'liveness' of performance, rather than the supreme power of a religious deity. Furthermore, the sense of 'liveness' that is retained in Franko's work arguably reflects the function of relics during the medieval period as tangible mementos and a prompt to religious contemplation. The memorial function of relics echoes the genre of the *passio*, the stories of the suffering of the saints and martyrs (Brown, 1982: 80). Read at the great festivals of the saints, the repetitiveness and melodrama of these *passio* made real

the suffering of the martyr or saint for the assembled worshippers. I can personally attest to the memorial function of Franko's material relics, as during my research in the Franko B Archive I came across a scrap of Franko's canvas relic unexpectedly as I turned the page of the magazine that it had been stapled into. I touched it without recognising what it was and as soon as I realised my hand recoiled in shock, even though it was safely in an archival glove, demonstrating that the relic retained part of the shock of the original performance.

Touch and the threat of contamination

By the first half of the fourth century AD, Christians were beginning to make pilgrimages to Jerusalem and the Holy Land in order to see with their own eyes and touch with their own hands and lips the things and places that Christ had touched and lived in. Holger A. Klein notes that later pilgrims such as the pious Egeria, who visited Jerusalem in the 380s AD, stressed the importance of direct physical contact with these places and relics, especially those that related to Christ's Passion (Klein, 2011: 56). This was due to the belief that physical contact, whether seeing, touching, kissing, or in some cases ingesting, with relics conveyed holiness from the body of the saint to the body of the worshipper, with Basil of Caesarea writing that: "Those who touch the bones of the martyrs participate in their sanctity."[14] Furthermore, Richards notes that this desire for physical contact with the body of Christ and the saints was often a subversive political statement as much as it was a private devotional act during the medieval period, in that it represented an outward demonstration of allegiance to Christianity at a time when any threat to the hegemonic powers of Rome was a potentially perilous act (Richards, 2008: 111).

Touch as a potentially dangerous act is also explored in Franko's performative works in which contact with blood is positioned as a contaminating threat, in the context of the AIDs epidemic of the 1980s and 1990s. This is particularly evident in Franko's performances of *Mama I Can't Sing* (1996) and *Oh Lover Boy* (2001), in which the audience is threatened with contact with Franko's bodily fluids. According to Stephen Di Benedetto's account of *Mama I Can't Sing*:

> "We remember not knowing what Franko B was spraying in the air when we saw his *Mama I Can't Sing*, and were afraid of coming in contact with the red mist floating in the air. After having seen the rest of the effluvia smeared on his skin, and the vials and flasks of blood and urine on stage, we feared that he was spraying blood into the air. We did not want to come into contact with bodily waste or contaminated blood. That fear of blood was directly related to the tactile." (Di Benedetto, 2010: 84)

Furthermore, in his 2001 performance of *Oh Lover Boy* Franko B lay, naked and painted head-to-toe in thick white paint, with cannulas in his outstretched arms on a large tilted square canvas frame. The audience was positioned below the canvas on a floor that echoed the tilted incline of the frame that Franko's body was mounted on. According to Richards this design emphasised the potential flow of blood from the canvas into the audience as numerous lines of blood began to trickle down towards the spectators. This in addition to being "touched" by Franko's reciprocal gaze when he sat up and stared out at the audience at the end of the piece arguably engendered a fear of contamination and contact with Franko's blood (Richards, 2008: 113-6). The threat of blood in Franko's performances draws on the history of performance works in which effluvia and other bodily fluids were placed in close proximity to the unwitting audience. In 1994, it was reported in a Los Angeles newspaper that Ron Athey, a HIV positive performance artist, had exposed his audience to HIV-positive blood by winching blood-soaked bandages across a clothesline strung above their heads. This was of course untrue, but the story reflects the clamour of paranoia that accompanied the AIDs epidemic during this period and is an issue that Franko arguable engages with in his bloodletting performances (Di Benedetto, 2010: 84). These performances seem to consciously enact Douglas' theory that: "Feared contagion extends the danger of a broken taboo to the whole community" (Douglas, 2002: xiii).

Something Other: The Formlessness of the Penetrated Male Body

This section will argue that the penetrated body of Christ is often presented as feminine, particularly in his role as the mother of humanity. Christ's body can be seen to exist in a liminal state of formlessness and ambiguity that challenges the distinct categories of male and female, culture and nature, form and matter. I will argue that Franko's penetrated body takes on a similar, obscure status during his performances and that, as an openly homosexuality artist, he dissolves the discrete gender binaries of male/female.

The penetrated male in western visual culture

Katherine Park locates the origins of dissection, which she defines as "the artificial cutting and elucidation of things that are concealed in the hidden body", in thirteenth century Italy. She notes that the fixation of this gaze was on the uterus, which had acquired the status of "privileged object of dissection in medical images and texts" in late medieval Italy.[15] Julia Gallego therefore argues that the anatomist's cut is strongly driven by the heterosexual male gaze, with the incision providing the ideal substitute for the vaginal orifice in order to facilitate, "viewing, managing and the production of knowledge." This is evident in the early printed images of the dissection of a uterus in which the incision extends the natural opening of the vagina up to the sternum. Gallego notes that the shape of the slit flows with smooth curves at the sides like parted labia, a common practice in medieval and early Renaissance illustrations of anatomical incision (Gallego, 2014: 75-6). In this image, there is a conflation between femininity, passivity, and openness. The dissected body is figured as passive in hetero-feminine terms, and its insides identified with the womb:

> "The incision, by association with the vaginal orifice, functions like a marker of gender difference, and thus the action of dissecting the body marks it as symbolically "female". The cut as latent vagina functions to mark the body as feminine, passive and penetrable, with negative connotations." (Gallego, 2014: 77)

Furthermore, Jonathan Kemp argues that a complex system of taboos govern the traditional understanding of the penetrated male body, which associates it with a "pejorative femininity". He states that the penetrated male body exists as a site of ambiguity, "hovering behind the protocols of representation that govern its emergence" (Kemp, 2013: 1-2). The feminisation of the penetrated male can be found in the convergence of the parallel discourses of medicine and religion, which informed the medieval understanding of the body. For example, in Batholomeus Anglicus' 'Illustration of the viscera man and the birth of Eve' from *De proprietatibus rerum* (1485), the viscera man stands with his hands extended in the *ostentation vulnerum*, the traditional pose of the risen Christ showing his wounds. In addition, Gallego compares Christ's wounds to the vagina, and particularly the *menstruating* vagina, arguing that:

> "It appears that because menstruation and childbirth can be perceived as proof of creative and sacrificial power, they need to be repressed and re-articulated into highly symbolic male versions. Dissection and sacrifice are characterised as male and they involve exalted technical and ritualistic skills, which constitute them as superior and in opposition to the natural world, the body and femininity." (Gallego, 2014: 79)

The theme of male rebirth also plays a key role in Christian theology, particularly with Adam's "birthing" of Eve via an opening in his side. Gallego argues that in this sense a markedly male artificial wound substitutes the female and her vagina, with God acting as an elevated mother/father figure with similar creative birthing powers. During the birth of Eve, the vagina's creative powers are usurped, and in Christ's wounds, the sacrificial power of the menstruating female body becomes re-articulated by the male body (Gallego, 2014: 78).

Furthermore, Caroline Walker Bynum argues that during the medieval period, Christ's flesh was also seen as female, lactating and giving birth, drawing on his role as the "mother" and saviour of mankind. She argues that medieval theologians saw the wounds in Christ's sides as breasts and emphasised the bleeding/lactating flesh of his penetrated body as a symbol of his humanity (Bynum, 1992: 82). This dissolution of gender binaries can be seen in St. Paul's hope that the new Christian society would be neither male nor female: "baptised into Christ, you have put on Christ: they can be neither Jew, nor Greek, nor bond nor free,

there can be neither male nor female, for you are all one man in Christ Jesus' (Gal. III. 28). Christ therefore embodies the feminine "Other" in that he exists in a state of liminality between the realms of the divine and profane, male and female. Christ's human/divine duality is arguably reflected in Franko's naked, exposed, and bleeding body, in that it is at once male (his penis is visible) and female (he bleeds/ is penetrated). This is evident in Franko's recollection of a performance that had to be cancelled at the last minute due to the controversial nature of the bloodletting content:

> "I don't take it personally you know, I mean, I was just disappointed, of course. I was about to give birth and I'm not allowed to, I am sorry, after working on this thing for months, but that is not an issue, you know because in a way I think the most important thing is to remember that this can still happen."[16]

Franko's liminal feminine status is reflected in the aesthetics of his performances. By choosing to cover himself in white paint, his male body adopts a purity generally associated with female virginity. In addition, his wounds bear an arguable resemblance to female genitalia, particularly in his 2001 performance of *Oh Lover Boy*. Furthermore, the presentation of a body that transcends the categorical binaries of male/female, form/matter and subject/object may go some way to providing Franko's work with the "emotional shock" that Bennett described as the distinguishing feature of medieval contemplation of religious images. Furthermore, the jolt provided by the image of Franko as a Christ-like feminine figure could be interpreted as an affirmation of Christianity, drawing on Beth Williamson's theory that images such as Andreas Serrano's *Piss Christ* (1987) reinvigorate tired images of Christ's suffering with a renewed sense of shock, through the use of abject bodily fluids normally antithetical to the experience of the sacred.

Conclusion

This paper has established that Christian iconography pervades the work of Franko B and provides the visual and symbolic framework for his exploration of the self, which is mapped onto the contours of his own body. Furthermore, the influence of Christianity is discernible in his work in three key ways. Firstly, in the theology surrounding the essentially communicative function of the sacrificial and bleeding body of Christ, which Franko employs in order to enact a transformative, cathartic and visceral reaction in the spectators, highlighting their own sense of subjectivity and implicating them as witnesses to the traumatic staging of his suffering. Secondly, the influence of Christian hagiography and the cult of relic worship are arguably reflected in Franko's creation of object-based performative works, which arguably retain an element of the 'liveness' of Franko's performance, echoing the memorial function of medieval relics. Thirdly, the influence of the Christ-like mother is discernible in Franko's performative dissolution of the categorical binaries of form/matter, subjectivity/objectivity and male/female. Franko's bloodletting performances disrupt the traditional assumption that the body has to be wholly anything: male/female, whole/broken, sacred/profane, open/closed, dead/alive, by challenging the assumed integrity of the traditionally bounded body. They are simultaneously unnerving and beautiful and provide the visceral shock that encourages us to rethink our relationship with our own bodies and the bodies of those around us.

About the author

Alice is in her first year of PhD study at the University of Bristol. Her interdisciplinary project is entitled: 'Fragment of Presence: Towards an Ekphrastic Mode of Performance Art Documentation' and she is being supervised by Professor Simon Jones and Dr Dorothy Price. She has also curated an exhibition in collaboration with the University of Bristol's Theatre Collection: *Setting Out to Shock: Selected examples of radical and deliberately shocking productions from the archives of the University of Bristol Theatre Collection* (2015).

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