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Indeterminate Identities: Body art, ritual and the subject.

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Psychoanalysis has been a potent tool for interpreting the relationship between body art and concepts of identity and subjecthood. Since the 1970s body artists have interrogated the experience of subjecthood, undermining the concept of subjectivity as stable and cohesive through a number of strategies, such as the presentation of the body in performance and the use of violent and transgressive acts. US art critics Amelia Jones and Kathy O'Dell and Australian art theorist and historian Anne Marsh argue that body art demonstrates the foundation of identity on lack and loss by recovering what is repressed and (re)presenting the split-self of psychoanalysis in performance. On the other hand, the frequent use of violent and transgressive acts in body art is reminiscent of strategies employed in the enactment of rituals. According to the French intellectual Georges Bataille and the US anthropologist Roy Rappaport participation in ritual offers the possibility of transcending one's experience of subjectivity and achieving an experience of union with others, with the universe and possibly even with spiritual beings. This paper will explore the seemingly contradictory approaches to subjectivity that are addressed in body art and ritual, proposing a potential solution through British anthropologist Victor Turner's theory of the liminal and the liminoid.

Key words: Body art; ritual; psychoanalysis; subject; identity

Introduction

When thinking about the relationship of body art to identity and subjectivity, a number of authors have already addressed the topic through the lens of psychoanalysis, but few, if any, have attempted to approach these same ideas through the lens of ritual. In fact, most authors writing about ritual and body art have focused on the question of whether body artworks can achieve the level of true ritual. In this presentation, I aim to show that, irrespective of whether body art can be said to achieve the level of true ritual, the relationship between body art and ritual can be productive for the topic of identity and subjectivity in body art.

Before I talk about the relationship between body art, ritual and identity, however, I'd like to begin by providing a brief background of the relationship between body art, psychoanalysis and identity, starting with the relevant psychoanalytical theories and how they relate to body art. Then, in section 2 I will discuss the relationship between body art, ritual and identity, and finally, I will discuss the conflict between the subject in ritual and the subject in body art, with British cultural anthropologist Victor Turner's theory of the liminoid providing a possible solution.

Psychoanalysis

According to the French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, all children begin life in the realm of the Imaginary, a pre-verbal state of infancy in which they do not yet distinguish between themselves and their surroundings. In the realm of the Imaginary, the child feels itself to be a unity with the Mother and with the world. As each child grows and develops, however, it undergoes a series of splits, learning to recognise that it is separate first from its mother and later from the others in its life. These splits are painful for the child, each feeling like a rupture of its very being, but they are necessary for the child to be able to take up its position as a speaking subject within the social world of language which Lacan calls the realm of the Symbolic. The mirror stage, first theorised by Lacan, is a particularly important step in this development and is often seen as a threshold between the Imaginary and the Symbolic. (Marsh 1993, 129)

Taking place when the child is approximately 6 to 18 months old, the mirror stage begins with the child's first recognition of its own reflection in the mirror. In that moment the child sees a vision of itself as whole, a vision that it desires, but which contradicts its lived experience. Instead of wholeness, the child's experience of life so far has been marked by disintegration, firstly through the split in its imaginary unity with the Mother and others, but also in the child's experience of its own body as fragmented due to its lack of physical coordination and control. The reflection in the mirror presents the child with an image of itself as a unified subject, but the child is also confronted with the realisation that the image is ultimately an external representation and not the real thing. This is another split, contributing to what is called the "split-self". In the later mirror stage, however, as the child is moving into the realm of the symbolic, it begins to repress these painful splits by identifying itself with the image of unity in the mirror. The identity of the child is formed on the basis of this imaginary relationship to a representation of wholeness. (O'Dell 1998, 31-2) Consequently, the identity of the child, according to psychoanalysis, is founded on lack and loss - the loss of the imaginary wholeness with the Mother and the loss of the object of the self reflected in the mirror. This lack is repressed through the acquisition of language and through entry into the social realm of the Symbolic, but the repressed returns in body art.

Psychoanalysis and Body Art

The psychoanalytical theories of Jacques Lacan have informed the work of many body artists as well as theoretical writings about them. In particular, body art refers back to the split-self of psychoanalysis in three main ways: through the presentation of the body in performance; through masochism; and through the transgression of taboos.

The first way that body art refers to the split-self of psychoanalysis is through the presentation and representation of the body in performance and through the documentation of performance. US art critic and feminist theorist Amelia Jones writes in *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (1998) that the presentation of the body in performance points to the representational status of such work. Body art's "play within the arena of the symbolic", refers back to the child's discovery of its own representation in front of the mirror and the imaginary unity constituted through identification with this reflected representation. (Jones 1998, 33)

The second way that body art refers to the split-self is through the use of masochistic acts such as self-inflicted violence or the performance of feats of endurance. In *Contract with the Skin: masochism, performance art and the 1970s* (1998), US art critic and historian Kathy O'Dell argues that the pain experienced by the artist in masochistic performance art refers back to the pain experienced in the different stages of psychic development, such as the pain of separation from the mother in the oral stage or the recognition of the split-self in the mirror stage. This pain, O'Dell writes, is repressed by the child's entry into the Symbolic where their identity is rendered inflexible. It is through the enactment of masochistic actions, however, that the artist can (re)present the split-self in performance. (O'Dell 1998, 9)

The third way that body art refers to the split-self is through the transgression of taboos. In *Body and Self: Performance art in Australia 1969-1992* (1993) Australian art theorist and historian Anne Marsh argues that transgressive actions and abject materials are employed in body art as a reference to what has been repressed. Typically, Marsh refers to repressed sexuality but, as we have already heard, the split-self was also repressed through entry into the Symbolic and it is precisely the split-self that Marsh believes is represented through body art. (Marsh 1993, 80)

Before we move on, it's worth pointing out that although, I have presented masochism and transgression as separate strategies in body art, Anne Marsh points out that they are, in fact, intimately connected:

"In regard to body art, it is evident that the infliction of pain upon the body presents the audience with a masochistic act, however, this is also an act of transgression which is often motivated by an urge to resist repressions of polite society. Likewise the abject reactions of the artist, those which brought bodily fluids into the clean space of the gallery, can be seen to be violent disruptions of social codes." (Marsh 1993, p107)

In other words, masochism is a form of transgression and the transgression of social codes is a form of violence.

To briefly recap, then, each of the three strategies mentioned above refers to the split-self of psychoanalysis in some way. The presentation of the body in performance refers to the representational nature of subjectivity, masochistic actions refer to the pain of splits and ruptures experienced in the oral and mirror stages, and the transgression of taboos in performance refers to the recovery of what has been repressed, including the split-self of the mirror stage.

Interestingly, these same three features of body art which make it so suitable for talking about subjectivity through the lens of psychoanalytical theory are also important features of the relationship between ritual and body art.

Ritual and Body Art

The first feature of body art which connects it to psychoanalysis, its presentation of the body in performance, is also a fundamental feature of ritual. As the distinguished US anthropologist Roy Rappaport writes in *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (1999), "Without performance there is no ritual" (Rappaport 1999, 118). Implicit in that statement is the related point that without performers there can be no performance. Therefore, ritual, like body art, relies on the unveiling of the body in performance.

The second and third features of body art which connect it to psychoanalysis, its use of masochistic or violent actions and the transgression of taboos, are also features closely linked to the origins of ritual according to the French intellectual Georges Bataille.

Beginning in the late 1920s until his death in 1962, Bataille published writings on a wide variety of topics, including literature, philosophy, anthropology, economics, sociology and the history of art, but he is perhaps best known for his writings on abjection, transgression and eroticism. In *L'érotisme* (1962), Georges Bataille explains ritual in terms of taboo and transgression. According to Bataille, so-called "primitive man" invented the taboo as a response to the

frightening spectre of death. The goal of prohibition was to protect man from the threat of death by eliminating violence and violent impulses which he perceived as its cause. In addition to protecting against violence and death, the taboo allowed for the establishment of the world of work, a world that is orderly, rational and productive. Taboos shielded the world of work from the disruptions and disorder brought about by death and violence through the repression of man's irrational and violent impulses, but this repression was never entirely successful. Not only did the taboo fail to suppress man's violent tendencies, but the very creation of taboos tempted him to break them. The prohibition that was meant to drive man away from violence simultaneously drew him to it with a renewed fascination. This fascination with the breaking of taboos led to the establishment of organised transgressions, otherwise known as ritual license. (Bataille 1986, 27-71)

Despite these apparent similarities between body art and ritual, a number of critics, including Anne Marsh, have argued that body artworks cannot, in fact, achieve the level of true ritual. In *Overlay: contemporary art and the art of prehistory* (1983), US art critic Lucy Lippard, put forward two main reasons why body art should not be considered ritual. Lippard's first objection is that ritual requires repetition, whereas performance art tends to be a one-off event, re-performances notwithstanding, and her second objection is that ritual requires the involvement and participation of a community as well as their shared belief in the power and efficacy of the ritual. (Lippard 1983, 160-2)

One idea which I am currently pursuing in my research is that Bataille's theory of the origins of ritual provides us with another possible perspective to think about body artworks as ritual. In *L'érotisme* (1962), Bataille argues that the harnessing of licensed transgression for socially productive uses was a later development of the original ritual phenomena. It may be that body art is not ritual as we know it, but, in fact, something more like proto-ritual. Unfortunately, time constraints preclude a more lengthy discussion of this possibility here. (Bataille 1986, 113)

Having addressed the relationship between body art and ritual, we may now consider the question of what ritual has to say about identity and subjectivity by looking at the theories of ritual put forward by Georges Bataille and Roy Rappaport, before comparing them to the psychoanalytical theories of Jacques Lacan.

Ritual and Psychoanalysis

In *L'érotisme* (1962), Bataille describes the underlying tension between the establishment of taboos and their licensed transgression in ritual in terms of "continuity" and "discontinuity". According to Bataille, each person feels themselves to be an individual, separate and distinct from the other persons around them. It is as if there is a boundary between us and others, or a gulf that separates us. This is what Bataille calls discontinuity. Continuity, on the other hand, is an experience that transgresses the boundaries of our discontinuous existence, or even dissolves those boundaries completely. Bataille argues that this experience of continuity can be achieved through licensed transgression in ritual, but the most complete and most final form of continuity is achieved in death when our consciousness is dissolved and our bodies become inanimate matter, once again united with the rest of the universe. Bataille writes that one part of us yearns to overcome the gulf of separation that marks us as discontinuous beings, to achieve an experience of continuity. Struggling against that desire for continuity, however, is the desire that we should escape death and persist indefinitely in our discontinuous state. (Bataille 1986, 27-71)

In *Ritual and Religion in the Making of Humanity* (1999), Roy Rappaport describes a similar phenomenon to Bataille's discontinuity, in terms of divisions between people, and also within them, which he attributes, at least in part, to the acquisition of language. According to Rappaport, the semantic distinctions of language divide the world up into categories, classes, oppositions and contrasts. These distinctions serve as the basis for meaning, but they also create barriers and boundaries, both between people and within our individual psyches. Rappaport claims that it is through ritual, through an experience he terms the "numinous", that the divisions of language can be overcome. (Rappaport 1999, 262) As with Bataille's "continuity", Rappaport describes the numinous as an experience which bridges gaps and unites or reunites separated parts. It is experienced as oneness with others and oneness with the universe or the spiritual powers, but the numinous also represents an experience of internal unification, a reunion of separate parts within the individual's psyche which Rappaport argues has been split through the divisions of language. (Rappaport 1999, 219-20)

If we compare the ritual theories of Bataille and Rappaport with Lacan's theory of the Imaginary and the Symbolic we find some interesting parallels – particularly the oppositions between division and unity, and fragmentation and wholeness. Bataille's concept of discontinuity and Rappaport's argument about the divisions of language are particularly reminiscent of Lacan's realm of the Symbolic, where the development of the ego is finalised and the individual identity of the subject is rendered inflexible through the repression of the split-self. On the other hand, the experience of unity and wholeness evoked by Bataille's continuity or Rappaport's numinous is strikingly similar to the imaginary unity that the child experiences with the Mother and with the world in the realm of the Imaginary. In fact, in his explanation of the numinous, Rappaport actually raises the possibility that the experience of unity with something greater than oneself, such as God, could be equated to, or perhaps even directly related to, the pre-verbal infant's

experience of its mother. (Rappaport 1999, 390) It would seem, then, that ritual takes us back, in some way, to our primordial experience of unity with the Mother/God and at the same time it takes us forward to our eventual dissolution in death and unification with the world of inanimate objects.

This leaves us in something of a bind, however, as the qualities ritual referenced in body art seem to be in direct conflict with our interpretation of body art through the lens of psychoanalysis. How can we reconcile the impulse of ritual to return to the wholeness and unity of the Imaginary with body art's presentation and representation of the split-self or with Amelia Jones' claim that, "Body art splinters rather than coheres the self"? (Jones 1998, 51) One potential solution may be found through the identification of body art with liminoid performance, as opposed to liminal ritual. In order to understand the difference between liminal ritual and liminoid performance we need to refer to the writings of one last theorist, the British cultural anthropologist and co-founder of performance studies, Victor Turner, in particular his theories of structure and anti-structure as well as the liminal and the liminoid.

Liminal Ritual and Liminoid Performance

For Turner, "structure", like Bataille's world of work, represents the normal cultural operations of hierarchical society in which biological, economic and social needs are seen to. On the other hand, Turner argues that ritual is a form of "antistructure" which, in contrast to the rationality and order of "structure" is characterised by ambiguity and lability. During periods of anti-structure, the conventional order and hierarchy is temporarily upended or inverted, but ultimately structure is re-established. Just as Bataille claims that the establishment of licensed transgression in ritual makes the world of work possible, Turner argues that the state of antistructure in ritual ultimately reaffirms the established order of structure rather than undermining it. For Turner, the very ambiguity and indeterminacy experienced in antistructure suggests that without a return to the conventional order, "frightening chaos" would be the prevailing state of affairs. (Turner 1969, 96)

Turner also describes the period of antistructure in ritual as "liminal", from the latin word "limen" meaning threshold. And just as the Mirror Stage is the threshold moment between the Imaginary and the Symbolic, the liminal in ritual can facilitate transition from one state to another. For example, when an initiate in a "so-called" primitive society undergoes rites of passage, he or she is stripped of their former status and represented as ambiguous or indeterminate through images of death, invisibility or being in the womb. At the end of the liminal phase, however, the initiate is imbued with a new normative identity and incorporated back into the society, once again reaffirming the conventional order.

In contrast to the liminal, Turner proposed the existence of a state he called "liminoid". The liminoid, like the liminal, is a feature of anti-structure and as such it upends or inverts the conventional order and structure of ordinary life. Unlike the liminal however, the liminoid does not challenge the conventional order only to reaffirm it. Where the liminal is typically a feature of communal ritual, and particularly of rites of passage, the liminoid is a feature peculiar to complex modern industrial societies in which the same sort of general cultural affirmations of conventional structures are no longer possible. Liminoid performance is subversive and critical, it can suspend the conventional rules of everyday life in order to critique the prevailing power structures and hierarchies in the hope of generating and perhaps even achieving new ways of seeing, doing and being.

Turner's theory of liminoid performance seems perfectly suited to describe body art which is playful and open-ended and does not re-affirm the status quo, but subverts it and critiques it. As Anne Marsh puts it:

"[T]he difference between ritual [...] and performance art actions which appear ritualistic, is that the latter, by virtue of being an incitement or an injunction, does not seek resolution as such. The aim is to puncture or rupture, to attempt to bring in aspects of the real: the original trauma". (Marsh 2014, 181-2)

Like liminal ritual, body art generates ambiguity and indeterminacy. But, instead of seeking a resolution or a reaffirmation of the conventional order, it generates possibilities without conclusions. As in the liminal phase of rites of passage, the participant in body art may be rendered ambiguous, indeterminate, dead, or invisible, but there is no new normative or conventional identity for them to assume and their performance does not reaffirm the status quo. (Fischer-Lichte 2008, 176) The split-self is the indeterminate identity that may be presented in body art, the self characterised by the tension between continuity and discontinuity, between the Imaginary and Symbolic. As liminoid performance, body art does not offer a resolution for this tension, but rather simply an opportunity to explore it.

Conclusion

I'd like to conclude by showing you a picture of one of my own performances from the Sydney Festival of Death and Dying, where I attempted to occupy this liminoid space by being buried alive. In this work I become indeterminate:

Invisible yet still visible; dead yet still alive. My performance was not meant to represent the final dissolution of identity in death, but to present the creative possibilities of little deaths in life.



Regardless of whether body artworks can be said to achieve the level of true ritual, or even some kind of Bataillan proto-ritual, the relationship between body art and ritual and body art as liminoid performance perhaps offers a strategic way of thinking about the presentation and representation of identity and subjectivity in performance. Ritual offers us an experience of wholeness in the numinous or in continuity, but body art as liminoid performance allows us to recover a sense of the tension between our desire for wholeness and our desire to persist as discontinuous beings. This tension is best exemplified in the split-self as destructured and indeterminate with all the creative possibilities that such a state entails.

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