

What is the connection between
performance art,
transgression
and
theological practices of the past?

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Introduction

In my thesis I will explore the concept of transgression in Bataille's writings as a means of approaching the divine. Furthermore, I will compare Bataille's point of view with different theological techniques such as fasting, chanting and others as described and interpreted by Aldus Huxley in his book *Doors of Perception*. Finally, I will put the two theories in the context of performance art with the aim of seeing to what extent, the two theories are compatible with each other and applicable in performance art practice.

It is normal for you to wonder why am I interested in this subject?

Well my story goes a bit like this. When I was young I started hanging out with a guy, he was very interested in theology, the divine and existence. I admired him very much, and started wondering myself whether we have a soul, why the universe exists, what the basis of reality and other issues of the same nature is. As we grew older we got more and more involved into our search of the divine within the self, through the exploration of our consciousness. We used different methods such as not sleeping, fasting, using violence and drugs, though love, pain, search of limits and experimentation I was introduced to my journey as a spiritual being. The guy went away but the questions within me continued to burn. I still enjoy reading and learning about that stuff, I guess this is just the way I was conditioned to grow up. It is a part of who I've become, it's a journey that took me to where I am now. Therefore, my subject is very personal and it is something that has been surrounding me ever since.

When I found out about performance art, I found a lot of artists being preoccupied with the subject that I'm trying to tackle. This added a whole new perspective to my search. Even though I have to say I'm not a performer, I find an intense interest in the field of performance dealing with borderline experiences. People who set themselves to find the limits of the human body and approach the divine power that exists within us all through their artistic practice. I see it as a modern practice of the religious aspect of asceticism.

How do we know ourselves if we do not know where our self ends? How do we find answers if we do not experience and learn from our actions? How do we get to know ourselves if we do not know what is like not to be ourselves? Or is it that we are ourselves throughout the whole experience?

So many questions, so few answers. Hopefully I can give an insight to my readers about two theories based on the intense nature of such experiences. And maybe motivate them to find out for themselves.

Furthermore, I was asked to talk about what the word divine means to me. I would like to explain it through some stories that go a bit like this.

Story #1

Man meets woman, man falls in love, man and woman get together and woman bears a child. Something is born.

Story# 2

Man loves god, but thinks other people do not share his beliefs, man decides to go on a mission to kill the none believers. Something is destroyed.

Story #3

Man from story number 2 kills a lot of people. Woman from story number 1 sees her husband die. She decides to enroll in the army to avenge her love for he husband. Something is destroyed.

Story #4

It was a warm summer afternoon, around 3 years ago, my friend and I were lost on a Greek island trying to find a beach to camp. Fortunately, on our wanderings we found a monastery, and when we went in we met a monk. The monk offered to take us to the beach we were looking for, and as the afternoon turned into night and we arrived at our destination, we invited the monk to sit with us on the warm sand engaging with him in a conversation about God. Even though me and the monk believed in different religions we had a lot of things in common in our beliefs about what the divine meant for us. We both believed that god is omnipresent and that god had something to do with love. I guess the concept of divine love is nothing new for most people. In my eyes divine love or simply attraction is what glues things together, from atomic particles like hydrogen and oxygen to form water, to people, animals, planets that orbit around other planets.

As I illustrated in my stories above love can be both constructive but also destructive; love can make someone angry and being in love can bear an agony if you do not know whether the feelings you have are mutual. In my eyes this law of attraction is the divine itself, it is something that we have in common with all the particles in the universe, it is a basic ingredient and around it everything else can grow. But if we were able to channel into the energy of our divine attraction, then we would understand that we are simply not any better than rocks, planets, animals or trees and therefore this is what makes god omnipresent.

There are a lot of ways we can tap into this divine energy and reach a state of feeling in line with all the things around us. Whether we decide to transgress or to just meditate, or chant a hymn, we are doing nothing but the same thing; reconnecting with the forces that make everything be; freeing ourselves from traditional concepts to experience transcendental states of oneness through understanding this key ingredient that lies within us.

I hope you enjoy my thesis.

Claire Bamplekou

George Bataille on transgression

In this chapter I am going to walk my reader through the concepts of taboo and transgression in Bataille's Philosophy. Later on we will explore their connection to the divine bearing in mind how Bataille presents it in his writings.

George Bataille was a French writer, social critic and scholar born in 1897¹, and was seen as the opposing writer of the French Surrealist leading writer Andre Breton.² According to the book *Undercover Surrealism*, While Breton idealized the unconscious mind as a place filled with hidden symbolism and divine associations³, (a romantic stand to what the unconscious was) On the other hand, Bataille posed an internal opposition within the surrealist movement, arguing that the unconscious mind was mainly a place where thoughts of violence, sacrifice and seduction were suppressed.⁴

Furthermore since our core subjects would be transgression we would first have to introduce a definition of the word.

According to Paul Hegarty transgression is viewed as the "breaking of a law or the breaking of a taboo"⁵. He additionally states that "transgression is usually the practice of an extreme state or behavior"⁶.

At this point I should maybe make clear what a taboo is. According to Bataille taboo is a social concept that lies between two worlds,⁷ the world of what is accepted and the world of what is prohibited. However the line between those two worlds is not always clear⁸, since the world of taboo does not apply to the world of logic and reasoning⁹ but rather has to deal with the realm of emotion (fear, desire, anger, satisfaction etc.)¹⁰. Someone might feel okay for an act that another person finds profane and therefore the line adopts a personal connotation for each case.

Furthermore to illustrate how the concept of taboo has to deal with emotions I will present an easy example. It would be the example of violence. On the one hand we do not want to be violent because social norms (taboos) tell us that this is not an acceptable civilized behavior and we fear the consequences that violence might bring upon us and the punishment that might come after a violent act¹¹. Yet we feel the need

¹ Undercover Surrealism George Bataille and documents, Hayward Gallery Southbank center London, MIT press, p.11

² Undercover Surrealism George Bataille and documents, Hayward Gallery Southbank center London, MIT press, p.11

³ Undercover Surrealism George Bataille and documents, Hayward Gallery Southbank center London, MIT press, p.11

⁴ Undercover Surrealism George Bataille and documents, Hayward Gallery Southbank center London, MIT press, p.11

⁵ George Bataille: Core cultural theorist, Paul Hegarty, p. 125

⁶ George Bataille: Core cultural theorist, Paul Hegarty, p. 125

⁷ Erotism, George Bataille, p.63

⁸ Erotism, George Bataille, p.63

⁹ Erotism, George Bataille, p.63

¹⁰ Erotism, George Bataille, p.64

¹¹ George Bataille: Core cultural theorist, Paul Hegarty, p. 125

to be violent when we are angry or frustrated¹². In this case, the taboo is trying to restrain our emotions, and as Foucault would argue we would not transgress the law or taboo because we fear the consequences that would have to do with us breaking the law/ taboo.¹³

The law/ taboo and its transgression is what makes society what it is.¹⁴

What would we be without this line between what is acceptable and what is not? Without the line of prohibition wouldn't we just be animals after all?¹⁵ Animals do not have morals or a sense of what is right or wrong. Without the restraining character of the law/taboo, and without the sense of righteousness and wrong, we would all turn to animal violence.¹⁶

Hence transgression does not oppose the taboo/ law, it completes it.¹⁷ The law and its transcendence go together hand in hand, without the one there is no other.¹⁸ No matter how many times the taboo is transgressed, it does not affect the integrity and stability of the taboo¹⁹. If it were to do so then all society would break down to primal emotions and behaviors as stated above.

Sometimes transgressing the law/ taboo is allowed. This happens due to a certain economical view of emotional values. We might not break the law / taboo due to a negative emotion overcoming us, but rather be lead to the violation of the law/taboo by a positive emotion²⁰. For example in a state of war we violate the taboo of killing since the emotion of succeeding, staying alive, honoring our country overpowers the negative emotions followed by the murder of another human being. This economical viewpoint might suggest that the taboo is suspended.

Moreover Bataille argues that this act of transgression opens a new state of being that exists beyond the norm/ laws. It puts us into a transcending state beyond the limitation of prohibition.²¹

This state of being exceeds the fear of breaking the prohibition of the taboo/law that makes our society functional²² and leads the transgressor to a state of wonder and fascination.²³ The act of transgression automatically connects us to the notorious feeling of the sacred and the divine.²⁴

¹² Erotism, George Bataille, p.63-64

¹³ George Bataille: Core cultural theorist, Paul Hegarty, p. 125

¹⁴ Erotism, George Bataille, p.65

¹⁵ Erotism, George Bataille, p.64

¹⁶ Erotism, George Bataille, p.65

¹⁷ Erotism, George Bataille, p.63

¹⁸ George Bataille: Core cultural theorist, Paul Hegarty, p. 125

¹⁹ Erotism, George Bataille, p.65

²⁰ Erotism, George Bataille, p.64

²¹ Erotism, George Bataille, p.67

²² Erotism, George Bataille, p.68

²³ Erotism, George Bataille, p.68

²⁴ Erotism, George Bataille, p.69

In everyday life prohibition is followed to make man a more productive man through work. However during religious festivities whatever was earlier forbidden it is now allowed.²⁵ A lot of times our faith towards God is tested by whether or not we would transgress our everyday laws.²⁶ Often we kill for our beliefs, and in the older times we used to sacrifice animals in the name of God.²⁷

In such a sense the divine opposes the law/ taboo²⁸. Additionally, religion is the moving force behind the breaking of the law/ taboo.²⁹ Even though the taboo gives the sacred a negative notion,³⁰ people still want to transgress the prohibition since behind it, the sacred hides, magnetizing them to transcend and overpass the law/ taboo in order to be able to grasp it.³¹

Bataille further claims that taboo is the force that makes society move forward³². Through the taboo we suppress the feelings that might be harmful to our society such as sexuality and violence, in a sense the taboo comes in dispute with transgression, while transgression reconnects us to the very feelings we are trying to deny such as sexuality and violence, the taboo is the denial of those feelings in the first place. Through this suppression and opposition towards the primal urges, we validate our instinctual feelings such as violence and sexuality.³³

By transgressing the taboo, we reconnect with those urges, and make ourselves part of a whole. Through the act of transgression we are no longer divided, we have exceeded fear and nausea and we finally feel reconnected to the divine power that connects all things together.³⁴

Finally, Bataille continues by saying that religion is based on feelings of fear and fascination.³⁵ As a natural outcome we find ourselves confused over the dual nature of the divine³⁶. On the one hand religion is reaffirming the taboos (eg. “thou shall not kill”) and on the other hand it feeds from the burning spiritual energy that unites us with everything around us in order to break the taboo.³⁷

Through the transgression of the prohibition we transcend the emotions of fear³⁸ we overpass the emptiness and enter the space of awareness of the act itself, a state of reconnection with the burning energies that have been denied.³⁹ Spiritual ecstasy

²⁵ Erotism, George Bataille, p.68

²⁶ Erotism, George Bataille, p.63

²⁷ Erotism, George Bataille, p.63

²⁸ Erotism, George Bataille, p.68

²⁹ Erotism, George Bataille, p.69

³⁰ Erotism, George Bataille, p.68

³¹ Erotism, George Bataille, p.68

³² Erotism, George Bataille, p.69

³³ Erotism, George Bataille, p.69

³⁴ Erotism, George Bataille, p.69

³⁵ Erotism, George Bataille, p.69

³⁶ Erotism, George Bataille, p.68

³⁷ Erotism, George Bataille, p.69

³⁸ Erotism, George Bataille, p.68

³⁹ Erotism, George Bataille, p.69

begins after the transcendence of fear and within the celebration of the transgression making more acute the sense of union with the irresistible powers that bear all things before them.

Aldous Huxley on religious practices

In this chapter I'm going to illustrate the beliefs of Aldous Huxley on the religious practices of his present and the past as they have been described in his book *Doors of perception* and especially in the second part *Heaven and Hell*.

Huxley was a British writer born in 1894.

His interest in mysticism has been debated within the intellectual world. Some critics argue that Huxley's interest in mysticism was sudden and happened around 1939 after he settled in California⁴⁰, so they divide his work into early works (the works written before 1939) and the works written after. However there are other critics, such as Ethel Margaret Fulton, who argue that Huxley's interest is rather gradual and can be seen throughout the totality of his writings.⁴¹ Nonetheless he has dedicated a lot of his essays and books (especially the ones written after 1939) to the subject of mysticism.

In the beginning of his essay, *Heaven and Hell* he focuses on describing the world of the "antipodes of the mind" a term that is also closely related to the "other world" as he additionally names it. People can tune into this world through experiencing visions or psychedelic experiences. According to Huxley the antipodes of the mind bear a great resemblance to nature⁴² and they are composed of vivid colors and complex radiant shapes⁴³. One of the basic characteristics of the antipodes of the mind is the experience of an inner bright light⁴⁴. For a lot of people, visions have a religious connotation, as they believe that through those visions they approach the divine⁴⁵.

In the antipodes of the mind there also exist creatures, who the well-known writer William Blake calls Cherubim⁴⁶. Huxley argues that those creatures who have an essence of being and not doing (passive rather than active) are depicted in a lot of cultures as Buddhas and Gods.⁴⁷ According to Huxley they are always depicted sitting or standing still firstly because of their nature and furthermore because as humans we find static figures more imposing than active ones.⁴⁸

Within the realm of visions exists a dichotomy. Two kinds of experiences may occur; positive ones and negative ones. Positive visions are usually accompanied by the feeling of flying through your body and away. On the other hand negative visions are supplemented by a feeling of being trapped and grounded in the body. One feels like

⁴⁰ Aldus Huxley: The progressive interest in mysticism shown in his prose works, University of British Columbia, Ethel Margaret Fulton, 1960, p.6

⁴¹ Aldus Huxley: The progressive interest in mysticism shown in his prose works, University of British Columbia, Ethel Margaret Fulton, 1960

⁴² *Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell*, Aldus Huxley, p. 120

⁴³ *Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell*, Aldus Huxley, p. 94

⁴⁴ *Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell*, Aldus Huxley, p. 86

⁴⁵ *Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell*, Aldus Huxley, p. 141

⁴⁶ *Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell*, Aldus Huxley, p. 113- 114

⁴⁷ *Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell*, Aldus Huxley, p. 113-114

⁴⁸ *Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell*, Aldus Huxley, p. 114

they become heavier and heavier within the body.⁴⁹ In the cases of negative visions all the wonder of the antipodes of the mind turns into hell, the ground becomes disgusting and things that would once create awe now seem repulsive and fill the visionary with terror.⁵⁰ An example of a negative psychedelic experience is schizophrenia where the person can no longer escape from the bright light of the antipodes of the mind.⁵¹ Psychological factors play a crucial role on whether the vision is going to be positive or negative. Emotions such as fear and hate can block out the positive outlook of the experience leading the visionary into a living hell.⁵²

But how are these visions, these experiences induced? Huxley points out that there are two main ways to prepare the ground for a psychedelic experiences/visions, primarily through the use of drugs and secondarily through the use of psychological techniques.⁵³

We are now going to explore some of the psychological techniques discussed by Huxley in the second part of his book.

Looking at a shiny object of any kind can bring a viewer to experience a vision.⁵⁴ The church has long used this technique to bring their visitors into ecstasy⁵⁵, introducing stained glasses and shiny stones into their chapels.⁵⁶ The Victorians argue that this happens because the intensity of the light, looking at a shiny object, paralyzes the nerves behind the eye leading to nervous exhaustion.⁵⁷ Huxley continues by saying that looking at any object from close by or really far away can cause a vision.⁵⁸ He justifies this by saying that on both microscopic and macroscopic scales, objects become abstract reminding us of the structure like shapes emerging from the antipodes of the mind⁵⁹.

Another way in which a person can be lead to experience visions is through uninterrupted chanting or praying. Huxley believes that this happens because of the concentration of CO₂ in the blood stream and the brain.⁶⁰ Naturally this leads to a deficiency of oxygen causing the boundaries of the brain to loosen up, giving away the sense of oneself and creating space for what he calls the free spirit to emerge.⁶¹ This can also happen when someone holds his breath for a long time or tries to control his breath as some people do in yoga.⁶²

⁴⁹ Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell, Aldus Huxley, p. 126

⁵⁰ Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell, Aldus Huxley, p. 125

⁵¹ Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell, Aldus Huxley, p. 124

⁵² Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell, Aldus Huxley, p. 127

⁵³ Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell, Aldus Huxley, p. 83

⁵⁴ Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell, Aldus Huxley, p. 102

⁵⁵ Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell, Aldus Huxley, p. 100

⁵⁶ Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell, Aldus Huxley, p. 104

⁵⁷ Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell, Aldus Huxley, p. 100

⁵⁸ Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell, Aldus Huxley, p. 118-119

⁵⁹ Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell, Aldus Huxley, p. 118-119

⁶⁰ Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell, Aldus Huxley, p. 132

⁶¹ Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell, Aldus Huxley, p. 133

⁶² Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell, Aldus Huxley, p. 132

Fasting is another technique that induces visions. In the older times, during the winter, there was very little food around.⁶³ Therefore in the beginning of spring a lot of people suffered from a deficiency of fat, vitamin C and vitamin B⁶⁴. These vitamins are crucial for the organism to function properly, and their deficiency loosens the up the brain letting once more the free spirit to emerge⁶⁵ and eventually cause visions.⁶⁶ Fasting has likewise been introduced by the church as one of its practices.

Beyond fasting and chanting stimulating wounds through whipping was another technique mentioned by Huxley for creating visions. The chemical reaction that takes place in the body where there is a wound plays a crucial role. Primarily a big portion of adrenalin and histamines are released by the act of whipping, as Huxley explains, Adrenaline in big amounts can cause hallucination, histamines on the other hand put the body in a state of shock. When the wounds get infected a lot of toxins start flowing into the blood stream, this is the byproduct of the breaking down of proteins on the surface of the skin. Those toxins affect the enzymes responsible for healthy brain functioning.⁶⁷ This leads to the transcendence of self⁶⁸ and the experiencing of visions.⁶⁹

Throughout time religious festivities contribute to the experience of a state of “non self”,⁷⁰ as they allow people to experience a vital state that exists under the sphere of personal and social identity.⁷¹

A lot of religious people consciously try to induce a chemical imbalance in their body through not sleeping, chanting, fasting and whipping themselves in order to be able to reach that other state of being.⁷²

Nowadays knowing that visions are evoked by chemical imbalances a new age visionary can find new ways to create visions, with the help of pharmaceutical drugs, Neurology, Physiology, psychology and Psychiatry.⁷³

⁶³ Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell, Aldus Huxley, p. 136

⁶⁴ Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell, Aldus Huxley, p. 138

⁶⁵ Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell, Aldus Huxley, p. 136

⁶⁶ Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell, Aldus Huxley, p. 138

⁶⁷ Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell, Aldus Huxley, p. 139-140

⁶⁸ Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell, Aldus Huxley, p. 138

⁶⁹ Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell, Aldus Huxley, p. 139-140

⁷⁰ Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell, Aldus Huxley, p. 117

⁷¹ Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell, Aldus Huxley, p. 117

⁷² Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell, Aldus Huxley, p. 141

⁷³ Doors of perception, Heaven and Hell, Aldus Huxley, p. 142

Marina Abramovic

A perfect example of how transgression can be combined with religious practices is seen through the art of Marina Abramovic.

Marina Abramovic is a performance artist from former Yugoslavia⁷⁴. Born in Belgrade in 1946⁷⁵ she experienced a very strict communist upbringing⁷⁶. In her interview with the newspaper *Independent*, she reveals that she was introduced to religion at an early age, as she spent the first years of her life living with her religious grandmother.⁷⁷ After graduating from the academy of fine arts in Belgrade she started engaging her body as a medium for her art.⁷⁸

Throughout her work, Marina has long explored the limits of her body and mind, by pushing the boundaries till she often fainted while performing her pieces. But could this be a case of transgression and how does it link with the theological practices mentioned earlier?

Rather than explaining it myself, I think it is more interesting to hear what Marina has to say about it in a book named after her. In this book she explains exactly her connection to both transgression and religious rituals by saying: “*When I went to Tibet, met the Aborigines and was also introduced to some Sufi rituals, I saw all these cultures pushed the body to the physical extreme in order to make a mental jump, to eliminate the fear of death, the fear of pain and all of the body limitations with which we live. We in the Western society are so afraid. Performance was the form for enabling me to jump to that other space and dimension*”⁷⁹.

Abramovic’s claims are supported by numerous examples of work that she has made founded upon the pushing of limits. Often her work can be violent and self-destructive and such an example is the work she made in 1997 named “*Spirit House-Dissolution*” where she whips herself until she can no longer feel the pain.⁸⁰

In Western society tendencies of being self-destructive are looked upon as signs of mental instability. However as Bataille mentions earlier, such “taboo” behaviors, can be praised in the context of religious festivities. In my opinion, through the act of whipping Marina overcomes the fear of pain and reaches a mental state where pain and the fear of experiencing pain do not exist anymore. I believe that this mental jump happens precisely because she defies fear and manages to overcome pain, by doing

⁷⁴ <http://www.skny.com/artists/marina-abramovi/>

⁷⁵ <http://www.skny.com/artists/marina-abramovi/>

⁷⁶ Marina Abramovic: The Artist is present, 2012 (movie)

⁷⁷ The Independent, issue of Saturday 31 of May 2014, Karen Wright

⁷⁸ <http://www.skny.com/artists/marina-abramovi/>

⁷⁹ Marina Abramovic, Kristine Stiles-Klaus Biesenbach-Chrissie Iles, p.65

⁸⁰ Description of the performance, Marina Abramovic, Kristine Stiles-Klaus Biesenbach-Chrissie Iles

the act herself. As expressed in the quote mentioned previously, she does put her body under extreme conditions to achieve this goal⁸¹.

Likewise; Huxley would argue that because of the amount of adrenaline that is released in her body she can no longer feel the pain and enters in what he calls the realm of visions. Solely through the act of self-harm, another state of mind is reached and a mystic experience is revealed to her. Could this actually be what Marina means when she mentions a mental jump taking place in her performances? Unfortunately I haven't found evidence connecting Huxley's realm of visions with what Marina means by a mental jump. Perhaps they mean the same thing and perhaps they don't; but from my perspective there is a resemblance between the two notions.

Let's now go through a performance of hers that was performed in 1975, "*Freeing the voice*", in which Marina screams until her voice is lost. The performance overall lasted 3 hours and is another case in which normally unacceptable behavior becomes acceptable in the context of art (we are confronted with the conclusion that certain behavioral transgressions become acceptable within the context of art). Throughout the pushing of boundaries Marina explores her physical limits as a human being. This practice is reminiscent of the practice of long lasting chanting, to reduce the amount of oxygen in their brain in order to be more prone to visionary experiences, but in this case Marina takes the performance to another level, since she doesn't just chant but screams until she has no voice left. From this act we can clearly see that she wants to make a visible transition, from having a voice to not having a voice. As I mentioned earlier the reduction of oxygen in the brain when chanting or screaming for extensive periods (according to Huxley) leads to visions. I cannot certainly say that this is what she intended with this performance. Nonetheless I could argue that by reaching her limits as a human being she nears that other state of being. By watching Marina scream, the viewer engages with the tone of her voice and sees her struggle to keep up with what she started.

Another example of where Marina also pushes herself to the limits takes place in the performance "*rhythm 5*", in 1974. In this performance Marina has constructed an outline of a five-pointed star and then lights it up with gasoline. During the performance Marina cuts her hair and throws it in each end of the star, she does the same with her fingernails and her toe nails, in the end she goes and lies in the middle of the burning star, the lack of oxygen causes her to lose consciousness, the performance ends when a member of the audience drags her out from the middle of the star. Apart from the autobiographical clues that this work contains, where the star represents the five pointed star of the Communist Yugoslavian flag⁸², this performance also tests the boundaries of her human body. How much can her body endure under the absence of clean air? Marina practically suffocates herself in the center of the five-pointed star by breathing in big amounts of carbon dioxide. The interesting part is that her audience is engaged and even when she loses her senses, the performance keeps on going until the interruption of a probably quite worried member of the audience who marks its ending. As Marina stated in her film "*The artist is present*" the loss of her consciousness does not mean that the performance is over. By saying this, she wants to underline that losing her senses is part of the whole picture. We also see at certain performances that the interference of the audience

⁸¹ Marina Abramovic, Kristine Stiles-Klaus Biesenbach-Chrissie Iles, p.65

⁸² Marina Abramovic, Kristine Stiles-Klaus Biesenbach-Chrissie Iles, p.52

either ends her performance or functions as part of the performance, and hence makes her performance interactive.

Her latest works usually involve her audience participation in focus exercises such as counting grains of rice from a big pile or her audience standing still in an empty room. Such were the works that were exhibited in the Serpentine Gallery in London back in 2014. Her performance consisted of an amount of exercises that her audience had to go through. In the first exercise one needed to count grains of rice from a big pile, this demands a lot of concentration for the viewer to carry the task assigned so that he doesn't lose count of the grains of rice. In the second assigned task one needed to stand still facing the wall wearing earplugs. With this task one becomes aware of the stillness that they physically experience, making them aware of the constant chain of thinking that goes on even if the body is still. Personally I have often tried to see what happens if I stand still for a long period of time and what impact stillness has on my mind, concluding that the stillness of my body, makes my thoughts become more apparent and lead to a deep introspection on the nature of my thoughts. Therefore I believe that indeed in some of her latest works she does try to communicate directly such experiences of an altered state of mind with her audience through trying to make them aware of simple practices such as focusing and staying still which are often used as meditative practices. However, the intensity of these recent works of hers, specifically the Serpentine Gallery exhibits, seem as something completely different from her earlier works where the exploration of the limits of her own body and mind stands out in those aggressive moments where things actually happen and change the whole view of her audience. In my opinion we humans have a tendency to empathize with each other and through this empathy the overall experience of her and her audience is reinforced. The thin line between life and death is underlined, and the mortality of our being becomes transparent. I find that the use of transgressive means used in her earlier works, in which she does lose consciousness and she does challenge herself physically and mentally, are very strong statements (such are the examples of those works that I explained earlier in the text). Nowadays the roles have changed and from a student Marina, now she feels more like a teacher Marina taking a step back and letting other people get a glimpse of the experiences that she has gained by participating in her performances.

Hermann Nitsch

The second artist I chose to talk about is Hermann Nitsch.

Hermann Nitsch was born in Vienna in 1938.

He is mostly known for being a member of a radical art group formed in the 60's called the Vienna Actionists.⁸³ According to Palko Karasz, writer of the *New York Times*, the Vienna actionists were preoccupied with the role of Austria in the Second World War, tackling a big taboo of post war Austria.⁸⁴

The use of the body in their work is crucial, and their performances often involve blood, sex and violence.⁸⁵ Therefore the questioning of taboos in their performances or “Acts” as they usually refer to them, plays a central role in their works as a collective.⁸⁶

Hermann Nitsch is best known for his performative work, however he also makes paintings.⁸⁷ His early performances involve his own body, nonetheless in 1963 he started adding more elements to his practice such as carcasses of dead animals.⁸⁸ Slowly his performances grew to become big happenings that often include a group of performers, naked or wearing white robes, crucified often passively laying but other times actively participating in ritualistic performances that include blood, carcasses, intestines, wine, fruits, genitals and other elements.

An example in which carcasses of dead animals were used is his 84th “Action” in Printzendorf. This action begins with music being played. Slowly, the classical music gives its place to an unmelodic symphony of sounds, while 3 men dressed in white enter the room and approach a white canvas. Above the canvas there is a carcass of a lamb hanging, as if crucified. The man in the middle steps forward and undresses. Though his eyes are banded so he cannot see, he approaches the carcass of the dead

⁸³ International New York Times magazine, Arts section, Issue of June 24 2014, Palko Karasz, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/24/arts/international/all-about-the-body-in-vienna.html?_r=0

⁸⁴ International New York Times magazine, Arts section, Issue of June 24 2014, Palko Karasz, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/24/arts/international/all-about-the-body-in-vienna.html?_r=0

⁸⁵ International New York Times magazine, Arts section, Issue of June 24 2014, Palko Karasz, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/24/arts/international/all-about-the-body-in-vienna.html?_r=0

⁸⁶ International New York Times magazine, Arts section, Issue of June 24 2014, Palko Karasz, http://www.nytimes.com/2015/06/24/arts/international/all-about-the-body-in-vienna.html?_r=0

⁸⁷ Blood Orgies: Hermann Nitsch in America, Contributions by Adrian Daub, Lorand Hegyi, Susan Jarosi, Jean-Michel Rabaté, Michèle Richman, Osvaldo Romberg, and Dieter Ronte, p. 30-31

⁸⁸ Blood Orgies: Hermann Nitsch in America, Contributions by Adrian Daub, Lorand Hegyi, Susan Jarosi, Jean-Michel Rabaté, Michèle Richman, Osvaldo Romberg, and Dieter Ronte, p. 30-31

lamb and holds it with both his hands. Holding glasses containing blood in his hands, Nitsch approaches the man and starts pouring it down the blindfolded man's back. The man stands as if crucified in front of the dead animal and then takes a glass of blood and drinks it. He lays down and while he is laying Hermann Nitsch places animal brains on his genitals and he is once more given some blood to drink.⁸⁹

This is one example that illustrates the connection with religious symbolism (the white robes, images of crucifixion, communion through the act of drinking blood instead of red wine) that can be found in Hermann Nitsches work. Additionally we can also understand the ritualistic aspect of the performance itself, since it is indeed structured as a ceremony with a beginning a middle point and an ending.

His performances can often become very disturbing for the viewer, due to the amount of blood and animal organs that are shown often mixed with sexual references. One example of his early works that is quite unnerving for me is his "Action" in Munich that took place in 1970. In this "Action" the viewer watches a naked woman tied to a cross, Nitsch gives her some animal blood to drink, then pours some of it over her genitals and then starts penetrating her with a rubber dildo.⁹⁰

As he stated in his interview with Jonas Vogt he never really intended to shock with his artwork, and this should not be seen as the goal of his art pieces.⁹¹ Rather he wants to take his viewer through a state of catharsis with his Actions.⁹²

Personally I see a close connection between Hermann Nitschs' work and the writings of George Bataille, since Nitschs' work, with his ceremonial performances passes the line of what is acceptable and what is not. From the breaking of sexual taboos (penetrating a woman with a dildo in front of an audience), to his extensive use of animal blood that the performers often have to drink and to the occasional use of animal intestines rubbed on his performers genitals (such is the case in both the "Actions" Maria, a Conception 1969 and Das Orgien Mysterien theater 1989 and numerous more). Cf. R. Goldberg suggests that through transgressive acts, often of a religious type, one experiences the highest point of catharsis⁹³.

However, when I watch his performances on video documentation, I do not feel that catharsis achieved in my case. However I do feel that his performances can provoke an experience of transgression as I cannot get over the literal imagery of what I am watching; this imagery brings me to a point where my stomach gets quite upset, and what I see through my screen shocks me, because I'm not used to seeing things like that at any point in my everyday life. Nonetheless, this doesn't stop me from seeing

⁸⁹ <http://www.zhurnal.ru/staff/gorny/english/nitsch.htm>

⁹⁰ Blood Orgies: Hermann Nitsch in America, Contributions by Adrian Daub, Lorand Hegyi, Susan Jarosi, Jean-Michel Rabaté, Michèle Richman, Osvaldo Romberg, and Dieter Ronte, p. 1

⁹¹ Interview of Herman Nitsch, Jonas Vogt, November 1 2010, <http://www.vice.com/read/hermann-nitsch-595-v17n11>

⁹² Blood Orgies: Hermann Nitsch in America, Contributions by Adrian Daub, Lorand Hegyi, Susan Jarosi, Jean-Michel Rabaté, Michèle Richman, Osvaldo Romberg, and Dieter Ronte, p. 30-31

⁹³ Performance Art from Futurism to the present, Cf. Goldberg R., London: thames and Hydson, 1990, p.163-164

the religious connotations in his work through the use of the cross, the slow movements of the actors and the references to sacrifice through the use of dead animals. Overall, I personally find his performances very brutally provocative and I find it hard to overcome the negative emotions that I experience when watching his pieces.

Danny Devos

Another relevant artist I want to explore is Danny Devos.⁹⁴

In this part of my thesis I will give a brief overview of his work. Additionally I will add some examples of his work and try to interpret them through the theories of Huxley and Bataille.

Danny Devos was born in 1959 in a small town in Belgium. He is a multimedia artist who is most known for his performances. According to Jos van der Bergh, Danny Devos tries to find the link between crime and art through his practice⁹⁵; often testing the limits of his body and mind with his practice by harming himself while performing.⁹⁶ The origins of his work are to be found in Punk, New wave and industrial culture.⁹⁷

According to Danny Devos in his interview with Jacoba Bruneel, an important element of his work is the underlying tension that is created between him and his audience⁹⁸ while he cuts his finger or holds a knife for example.⁹⁹ This instinctive value, as he calls it, is what makes his performances differ from more theatrical pieces.¹⁰⁰

However not all of his performances have an audience.¹⁰¹ Sometimes the Act itself is sufficient and therefore there is no need for an audience. He describes these works as more “icon like” works.¹⁰²

One example of a performance that did not need an audience was his work “*Secret Punk*”.¹⁰³

In “*Secret Punk*” Danny Devos pierced himself with a safety pin and walked around wearing it under his shirt, for eleven days. No one except himself knew the existence of the safety pin at the time the performance took place. In my opinion this

⁹⁴ <http://performan.org/>

⁹⁵ Artforum magazine, Jos van der Bergh, Sunday 1st of May 1994, United States

⁹⁶ Muhmur, Steve, Sunday 27th of May 2012, United Kingdom

⁹⁷ Performance and Beyond, Interview with Jacoba Bruneel, Danny Devos 160 Performances, Performan DDV 1979-2011, p.309

⁹⁸ Performance and Beyond, Interview with Jacoba Bruneel, Danny Devos 160 Performances, Performan DDV 1979-2011, p.306

⁹⁹ Performance and Beyond, Interview with Jacoba Bruneel, Danny Devos 160 Performances, Performan DDV 1979-2011, p.313

¹⁰⁰ Performance and Beyond, Interview with Jacoba Bruneel, Danny Devos 160 Performances, Performan DDV 1979-2011, p.313

¹⁰¹ Performance and Beyond, Interview with Jacoba Bruneel, Danny Devos 160 Performances, Performan DDV 1979-2011, p.306

¹⁰² Performance and Beyond, Interview with Jacoba Bruneel, Danny Devos 160 Performances, Performan DDV 1979-2011, p.306

¹⁰³ <http://performan.org/performances/secret-punk/>

performance has to do with personal experience and the exploration of identity through culture. Nowadays, it is really common for people to pierce themselves for aesthetic reasons, though this concept of piercing has its roots in the punk culture around of 1970's¹⁰⁴.

I find Devos's work very symbolic and it could be argued that the experience he has with the safety pin resembles the world of visions that Huxley describes. Just like a vision, it is something personal that he does not share with other people. In the description of the performance he does not go into further detail of how or why he did it. The piece itself bears a mystery that resembles a ceremony, something mystical that he alone knows of and experiences. It has a set beginning and an end, throughout the first experience of pain from the pinching of the safety pin to the concealment of the act and finally to the revealing of the act after it is gone. I personally wonder about his journey with the safety pin, it is a piece that fills me with questions. In his interview with Jacoba Bruneel, he states that his pieces are not pieces that can be reproduced, precisely because of what he calls their instinctive value. He explains that the moment a piece is performed, he experiences something unique through the tension that is created while performing it.¹⁰⁵ This makes me wonder whether there is a connection between this tension (the instinctive value) and Batailles transgression. I believe that this is something that could be further researched since I could not find anything written on it while I was researching about Danny Devos's work.

It is my belief that there is a connection between the concealment of the safety pin and the concealment of a taboo, taboo being a topic or an act that we avoid mentioning in our society. I find that in the same way that Danny Devos does not reveal the act of piercing himself until the end of the performance, the taboo is not revealed or talked about until the end of the act. I wonder whether he meant for me to question the integrity of the taboo with his action of concealing something that was not so grotesque so as to need concealing. Nonetheless, whether he intended it or not I do question what the concealment of the act might have symbolized regarding our society's views on taboo (or whether it was even meant to symbolize anything at all). As I mentioned earlier in my text, his work often explores the connection between art and crime, and since crime is a taboo in our society, people are afraid to talk about it. Furthermore, since his art often explores the relationship between those two subjects, and he also says that he is interested in exploring the tension that is created between his artworks and his audience I am still wondering whether the notion of a taboo plays a crucial role in the formation of this tension; and whether by concealing the act of piercing himself he intended to criticize our relationship with the subject of taboos.

A work that lies between having an audience and not having an audience is his piece "*Illegal*"¹⁰⁶ performed in Antwerp in 1980. In this piece Danny Devos mails all his friends that he will be hiding in the *International Cultural Center* of Antwerp. He takes no food or drinks with him just a pack of sleeping tablets and three days later he is found by a friend of his in the building. Even though I have not read an interview or

¹⁰⁴ Cultural Encyclopedia of the Body (2 volumes edition), Victoria Pitts-Taylor, p.450

¹⁰⁵ Performance and Beyond, Interview with Jacoba Bruneel, Danny Devos 160 Performances, Performan DDV 1979-2011, p.313

¹⁰⁶ <http://performan.org/performances/illegal/>

a text that connects Danny Devos work with theological practices, or transgression I find it relevant to draw the line between those two and his practice. I could not help myself but find the connection where Danny Devos (possibly) unknowingly, is using one of the techniques that Huxley mentions in his book "*Doors of Perception*" where he deprives himself from vital nutrients. Since those nutrients are crucial for healthy brain functioning, staying a long time without them can induce visions. Even though this work has an icon-like quality to it, as DDV describes it, I see it as a two folded work. Primarily it serves as an image and additionally, it is an experience. Again the mystery surrounding the performance is crucial to the work, since we do not know what happened to him during those 3 days he spent without food or water, we can simply assume that he took a bunch of sleeping pills and slept his days away; however there is still a lot of room for doubt in this argument. His performance is a transgressive act since common sense tells us that if we all went around without food or water ready to be found by familiar faces, we would probably all die awaiting for our rescue. His dedication to his work shows a religious-like approach, because in my belief no one would do that without having faith that at the end of the day he would be rescued. DDV assumes that his friends care about him to end his performance, but we cannot avoid thinking this man is willing to jeopardize his life and put it at risk in order to remain committed to the outline of his performance.

Another very interesting work of his is the performance, "*I am Suffocating*"¹⁰⁷, performed during a Simpletones (band) concert in 1980. In this performance Danny Devos puts a plastic bag around his head and breathes within it for 15 minutes. This performance is one of the pieces that was performed in front of a live audience. It is another case of a transgressive act since suffocating oneself is not something commonly accepted in our society and through this act he pushes the physical boundaries of his body and tests his endurance. In this performance he also follows another technique mentioned by Huxley, the deprivation of air that also might cause visions as Huxley calls them. For the viewers the terror of seeing such a performance we could say is visible, since they start fearing for the performers life. And in this piece the tension created between Danny Devos and the audience is clearly present.

I often find that in Danny Devos' work, transgressive acts are complementing theological practices of the past that may cause someone to experience visions. I find that through the pushing of boundaries and the exploration of the limits of the human body additionally to the questioning of taboos through self-harm (such as not eating and suffocating oneself) he manages to unite the two theories of Huxley and Bataille. He often provokes his audience with crude acts while at the same time preparing the ground for personal experiences that could cause visions to occur during his performances.

That said, I do not believe that DDV's primary goal is to provoke vision like experiences with his artwork, due to the lack of evidence that would directly connect his practice with religious practices. In most of the things I managed to read about him there is no emphasis on the experience that might have been generated by his performances, however he usually emphasizes in the shock value and the tension that is accompanied by shocking his audience with his acts.

¹⁰⁷ <http://performan.org/performances/im-suffocating/>

Personally I am a big fan of his work since I find that there are a lot of layers that can be explored. Often I feel confronted by his acts but not to the extent that I become upset. This facilitates space for thought over his performances that I am not able to do when thinking about the work of Hermann Nitsch. I become curiously engaged with his work, I want to find out more than what there is on the surface of what I can see. Moreover, the fact that there is a mystery surrounding his performances makes me even more curious to explore and understand or find my own meaning in what he does within his artistic practice.

Conclusion

In my thesis, I primarily gave an explanation of transgression and theological practices through the eyes of Bataille and Aldus Huxley and further on I tried to explore their theories through the work of Marina Abramovic, Hermann Nitsch and Danny Devos.

Indeed I was able to connect transgression and theological practices to the work of my three artists of choice. Marina Abramovic's early works were the most successful examples of the exploration of her boundaries and limits through her performance practice. Often her performances are literal adaptations of theological practices used in the past, like that of whipping herself in the performance "*Spirit house dissolution*". Likewise, what she does is like an indirect reference to practices of the past in the performance "*Freeing the voice*", which closely resembles the essence of chanting in mysticism. Within her work the two theories are combined, the use of transgressive means leads her to experience altered states of consciousness and to overcome fear as she mentions in the book, Marina Abramovic¹⁰⁸, dedicated to her and her artistic practice.

On the other hand, not all of my artists focus on creating vision-like experiences, and such is the example of Hermann Nitsch's work. Clearly, Nitsch's artistic practice focuses rather on unraveling the symbolism used by the church and connecting it to transgressive acts (crucifixion has been used elaborately throughout his work as well as the symbolism of communion which is turned into the literal drinking of blood). Hermann Nitsch might give an intense experience to his audience and this ability to reverse symbolism and bring it back to what he believes to be its original meaning is, has been of great value, and should be recognized for this. Even though his performances can often be provocative, I find that it is important to be reminded that when certain religious symbols stop being symbols, it is indeed a horrific experience. Such is the example of communion where the Christians drink wine that represents the blood of Christ and eat bread that represents the body of Christ. If we hypothetically took the symbolism away and drank blood while eating the body of God's son, no matter how sacred this body might have been in my opinion it would still count as cannibalism. Therefore I can see a connection between Hermann Nitsch and the concept of transgression of George Bataille as his ceremonial performances pass the line of what is acceptable and what is not and his work has been interpreted as transgressive acts. With his art Hermann Nitsch makes us understand the necessity of such symbolism used in religious ceremonies that are carried out around the globe.

On a different note, Danny Devos has never openly showed interest or agreed that there is a connection between his work, religious practices and transgression. Even though his work deals with the connection between art and crime, and crime is very close to the notion of prohibition and hence of the taboo, DDV has not openly

¹⁰⁸ Marina Abramovic, Kristine Stiles-Klaus Biesenbach-Chrissie Iles, p.65

expressed the presence of a spiritual side to his work. By drawing my own conclusions from the nature of his performances (e.g. “*Illegal*” and “*Suffocating*”), I could effortlessly find links between his work, transgression and theological practices due to the nature of his performances. I find that when dealing with the subject of prohibition it is inevitable not to question the nature and the effect of certain taboo subjects on an audience. Within his performances lie the use of theological techniques mentioned by Huxley. Nowadays, it seems absurd for someone to undergo such practices as depriving oneself from vital nutrients or suffocating oneself (which have similar effect to those of chanting) without the a priori knowledge of why they would do something like that. And people lacking such knowledge are unable to reason with those practices and find a meaning for those acts. I personally find that DDV plays with something seeming absurd in order to provide his audience with an experience heavy with feelings of agony and fear and finally to create this tension of which he talks about in his interview.

There is no doubt that my subject has a lot more possibilities of exploration either through in-depth research and discovery of culturally-bound theological practices such as the voodoo ceremonies of the Caribbean, African rituals and their connection to performance art and transgression, or through the discovery of more artists that use transgression and theological practices in performance art.

Additionally, I feel that however much I research to support my argument, the core of my research should be tested in practice rather than read in theory, because I feel that my subject deals more with the realm of subjective experience rather than an objective overview of such experiences.

Finally I want to close my thesis with a quote from Evelyn Underhill explaining the importance of experiencing religious practices.

*“Mysticism is the art of union with Reality. The mystic is a person who has attained that union in great errorless degree; or who aims at and believes in such attainment.”*¹⁰⁹

*Because he has surrendered himself to it, 'united' with it, the patriot knows his country, the artist knows the subject of his art, the lover his beloved, the saint his God, in a manner which is inconceivable as well as unattainable by the looker-on.”*¹¹⁰

Kind regards,

Claire Bamplekou

¹⁰⁹ Evelyn Underhill, *Practical Mysticism*, London, J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1914, p.3

¹¹⁰ Evelyn Underhill, *Practical Mysticism*, London, J.M. Dent and Sons Ltd., 1914, p.4