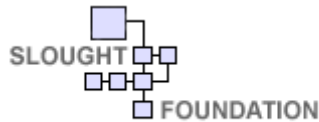




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Redemption through Blood: Hermann Nitsch's *Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries*
By Osvaldo Romberg, Senior Curator

Printed on the occasion of "Hermann Nitsch / Die Aktionen: 1962-2003", a retrospective exhibition at Slought Foundation (February 19-May 23, 2005) of pioneering Viennese Actionist Hermann Nitsch, featuring videos of his performances since 1962. For more information: <http://www.slought.org/content/11274/>

"But to make a fetish potent outside its cult is precisely the function of the aesthetic."
– Harold Rosenberg

How do we view the artistic blood orgies in Hermann Nitsch's performances over the last 40 years, in relation to the actual blood orgies performed today by militant terrorists in Iraq, Sudan, Chechnya, and other parts of the world? In this essay as in this exhibition, I hope to comment on this question by revisiting the immense body of work that Nitsch has completed in the field of theater, performance, and painting.

We might look to the period after the Second World War as the point at which the practice of art in America and Europe diverged. In America, painting developed along the lines of improvisation and surrealism (Jackson Pollock, Willem De Kooning, etc), and in Europe, painting developed along the lines of *art brut* and *Cobra* (Pierre Alechinsky, Karel Appel, Jean Dubuffet, etc). At the same time, other groups avoided painting and sculpture altogether as an unproductive *cul de sac*. These groups created events and actions that were often referenced as Happenings and Performances in America, and Actions in Europe, in which the interaction with the public was understood as more meaningful than any past aesthetic practice.

We have to understand that even today so much American art suffers from Greenberg-ism and a dependence on his ideas about aesthetics and sublimity. The European scene, however, has in the past flourished precisely because it was inspired by disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, and philosophy. The field of European performance emphasized dramatic and anti-aesthetic practices, and in a certain sense it could be said to succeed in addressing essential questions without being subsumed by popular culture and the allure of entertainment. In the field of performance, this difference is most evident in comparing the happenings and performative practices in America including those of Allan Kaprow, Jim Dine, and Claus Oldenburg, among others, with European practices such as Joseph Beuys, Wolf Vostell, and the Vienna School (founded by Otto Muehl, Günter Brus, and Hermann Nitsch).

Nitsch's art is best understood within this phenomenon of performance art after the Second World War. That Europe was culturally as well as architecturally destroyed by the war is not in question. It is important, however, to consider how this destruction manifests itself in the work of artists from Germany and Austria more generally, and in particular in the work of the Vienna school. It is simply not possible to consider art such as that of the *Viennese Actionists* developing and finding an audience in countries such as America following the war, or in many other countries even today. Their work makes explicit all the violence and atrocities that so many people tend to repress.

Perhaps it can be said that Nitsch abandoned the paradigm of beauty from the very beginning: he has always been ready to sacrifice aesthetic aspects so as to permit catharsis and purification in a participant fully enveloped within the performance and physically in contact with animal parts, blood, smells and music. The dramatic feelings that Nitsch's work calls forth in us can be understood in relation to 'the primal scream', a traumatic moment during development which later serves as a generator of creativity and facilitates artistic fantasy.

We cannot deny the enormous eroticism, and a certain sort of sadomasochism, which is always evident in the work of Nitsch. If we want to recognize ancestors or antecedents to Nitsch's practice beyond that of the history of painting or contemporary art, we might look to early Greek theater, the Roman Coliseum in which Christians were sacrificed in front of the public, or to Mayan games, in which the loser would be executed. Other ancestors might include the public executions in England and France in the 18th century and the way in which violence was exercised as a spectacle, which Michel Foucault examined in *Discipline and Punish*. We might also look to the writings of Sade and Artaud, in which our identification with sado-masochism is probed and encouraged, and the pseudo-logical and pseudo-scientific

explanations about blood, sadomasochism, and sex by Sigmund Freud that established modern psychoanalysis. Nitsch continues this trajectory, although in a very personal way, by creating artistic spectacles of a Wagnerian scale and duration (a sort of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, or total art work) that encompass purification, therapy, and an awareness of death through catharsis and participation. (It is possible here to also detect traces of JL Moreno's psychodramatic and group psychotherapeutic performances, which first and foremost sought to heal the participants).

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It is important to consider how Nitsch's work significantly departs from work by other members of the Vienna school. While Nitsch's early actions of 1962 feature his own body, by Action II of 1963 he already began to include bowels and the carcass of a lamb, which amounts to a significant change in subject matter from his previous work and that of his colleagues. Nitsch's subsequent work over the last forty years has consistently addressed not only the human body and the metaphor of crucifixion, but also the animal world and the role of the human body in that world. It is my position that we can interpret this development as one in which man is reintroduced and reintegrated to the spirit of the animal world through a sort of quasi-religious ritual and public ceremony.

Although this exhibition exclusively focuses on his Actions as documented in video format, it must be emphasized that he has a parallel practice as a painter in the tradition of performative gesture painters such as Jackson Pollock, Yves Klein, Georges Mathieu and *Tachism* in general, and this practice is often integrated into his performances.

If today Nitsch has become a sort of high priest of performance and ritual, we must also recognize that his *Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries* ("Das Orgien Mysterien Theater") has become increasingly sophisticated over the years, to the degree that he often composes very personal music as an ambience for his performances. More than the history of painting, or even our inherited history of art, Nitsch's art seems to take as its primary inspiration the ludicrous game of life and death. The complete works also connect a number of interrelated points: the crucifixion of Jesus, the murder of Dionysius, the killing of Orpheus, and the idea of resurrection. Evidently, he uses art as a form of redemption bringing about an awareness of our sheer mortality, as opposed to the eternal substance of nature and life.

The subject matter that he takes for his art is, in a sense, the subject matter of every myth and religion in the history of the world. The idea of catharsis is perhaps emphasized the most (as is often the case in work of the Vienna school). It is also important to note the presence of large crowds in his work, participating over an extended period of time. In a sense, the large crowds and the duration of the performance provoke the destruction of individual ego and lessens the individual's psychological resistance. Here I see a big difference between the narcissism evident in performances by Joseph Beuys and his disciples, in which the main participant is the artist, and the work of Hermann Nitsch, in which the actions of the participants are even more notorious than those of Nitsch.

Most of the criticism against Nitsch is based on his denial of the symbolic consequences of his actions, or his apparent disregard for animal rights and the desecration of animals in his performances. Evidently, the public is also sometimes mesmerized by the cult of blood, and the executions (or simulated executions) of human beings and animals. Rather than answer to these specific criticisms or experiences, which seem to hold the arts to a higher standard, and deny the prevalence of these very practices in contemporary life, it is important to emphasize that a work of art permits people to receive their own existential experience, according to their own past. Nitsch's project is very rich and extreme in that sense and the sheer diversity of responses to his work should be embraced.

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Now it is time to return to the question posed at the beginning of this article, concerning how Hermann Nitsch's performances should be viewed today in relation to the actual blood orgies performed by militant terrorists in Iraq, Sudan, Chechnya, and other parts of the world? How should we view Nitsch's project, and how will his work survive, in a world of real cruelty and liturgical fundamentalism, and the everyday encounter with images of extreme and bloody genocide and natural disasters (in Sudan, Indonesia, and South East Asia, for example, or even in movies such as Mel Gibson's recent blockbuster *The Passion of The Christ*)? After many years of viewing Nitsch's work as provocative, now, more than ever, it sadly seems like a kind of prophesy and has taken over the world around us.

Does the ferocity and degree of provocation and cruelty in Nitsch's work diminish when juxtaposed with current geopolitical developments in which Islamic fanatics behead innocent civilians through the medium of cable television? These activities by militant terrorists must also be seen as performances with their own political and social implications, targets, and agendas.

The ability to remove ourselves from Nitsch's work is an important quality which differentiates the domain of art from the domain of reality, and in particular the domain of terrorism. During Nitsch's performances, one receives catharsis without risking one's life, either by voluntarily participating as an actor, or by experiencing intense feelings as a viewer. It is the possibility to escape, however, that differentiates this art from its ceaselessly violent other. The absence of fear is what permits the ludic pact for Nitsch, which is so thoroughly contrary to the actual executions taking place right now in Iraq and broadcast on cable television.

While Nitsch mainly calls forth the forces of *eros* (life-affirming drives), he also flirts with *thanatos* (death drives). The forms of militant terrorism and fundamentalism that we see today in Iraq and other countries present us with a world marked exclusively by *thanatos*. And that is an enormous difference that needs to be recognized. I believe that art is to art, as life is to life. These are two different domains that never meet completely. If one day these two domains lose their singularity, perhaps one of them will disappear.

Interview with Hermann Nitsch

Selections from Nitsch: Works from the Essl Collection, Kunst Der Gegenwart, 2003

Reprinted on the occasion of "Hermann Nitsch / Die Aktionen: 1962-2003", a retrospective exhibition at Slought Foundation (February 19-May 23, 2005) of pioneering Viennese Actionist Hermann Nitsch, featuring videos of his performances since 1962. For more information: <http://www.slought.org/content/11274/>

Karlheinz Essl. *You were one of the main protagonists of Vienna Actionism. How did you meet the other artists in that group, such as Brus, Schwarzkogler, and Mühl and, later, Rainer?*

Hermann Nitsch. In 1958 I had already had the idea of my *Orgien Mysterien Theater*. That was a festival which was to take six days. When I developed the idea I wanted all participants in the festival to experience all sensory impressions. I was not concerned with people remembering certain sensory experiences, but about the immediate experience, that is to say the taste of salt or the smell of jasmine or incense, and the sensation of touching raw meat. I stopped writing plays in which the actors play roles – someone plays King Lear or Faust – I wanted to stage real events, and that was actually the start of my theatre. The first drafts going in the direction were created 1958. Then I spent my whole time working on my theatre. It involved the spilling of liquids, for instance, on stage or in the audience. We spilled vinegar, water, wine, blood – that is to say liquids with a distinct smell. I still remember, it must have been in 1959 or 1960, there was a large-scale international exhibition of Informal Painting at the *Künstlerhaus*. It was there that I first saw a Tàpies, a Mathieu, a de Kooning, the Americans, Sam Francis and others. I was impassioned by this gestural painting. I then immediately took up Informal Painting and the pouring of paint on surfaces. That was the beginning of my *Aktionen* (action performances). At first it was only a concept and later on I actually realized it. At the time of Vienna Actionism I also worked permanently on my theatre. Mühl made informal Sculptures out of waste, Brus painted very, very good informal paintings. Their results were similar to mine. They had all seen my work. I think I was the instigator for all of them. The instigator who made them take up *Aktionen*, too. It was important to me that I worked very intensively on my *O.M. Theater*, also during the time of Vienna Actionism. All the things I showed were actually only extracts and preliminary studies for my great oeuvre.

[...] At the time when I was developing and realizing my work, a wave of *Aktionskunst* (action art) went around the world. In America, there was the Happening movement, and all the artists were concerned with transcending their respective medium in the direction of a *Gesamtkunstwerk* and with developing real Happenings, which can be experienced via the senses. The *Gesamtkunstwerk* I am referring to is not simply adding up different things, e.g. poetry and music and a stage set, as in classical opera. Things do not add up but interact in a chemical bonding, like an alloy. The artist automatically involved all the five senses. He has to be able to deal with them and handle them. Therefore he is a painter, composer, poet, dramatist, choreographer. This is a completely new understanding of art – unity develops out of real events.

K.E. *To what extent have you and your painter friends such as Brus, Schwarzkogler and Mühl been influenced by the Happenings movement in the US?*

H.N. I think the Happenings movement was more of a confirmation for us than an influence, because we did something different, something even more profound and radical to my mind. Because we took depth psychology into account, which has shaped us. What did actually influence us was the emergence of Action Painting, Abstract Expressionism, but especially Tachism. In this particular aspect we have probably all been influenced by the Americans. Jackson Pollock first of all, a great deal of de Kooning, and also Sam Francis, Matthieu and Michaux. For us young Austrian artists Arnulf Rainer was very important. He has influenced me greatly. He was the big importer who actually knew all these things already and brought them to us.

K.E. *How did you get to know about American Action Painting, that is, how did the information come to Austria?*

H.N. Very sparingly, actually. Through the “documenta,” as far as I’m concerned through an exhibition in the *Künstlerhaus* or through some kinds of art journals. There were a few painters who had become somewhat established at the time, who were interested in that direction; they were Rainer, Prachensky, Mikl and Hollegha. They had become somewhat accepted at the time. When we, who were ten years younger, appeared on the scene, we had difficulties standing up to them.

K.E. *Were the extreme action performances, which culminated in the Aktion at the University, a kind of power on the part of you, the younger artists, against the more established artists in the “Galerie St. Stephan” group?*

H.N. I would say that the artists who were part of that need to give you their own interpretation of this. Of course they were all protesting, Brus, Oswald Wiener, Mühl, as we were all protesting against something. When we came together all that political fuss got on our nerves, that tremendous hypocrisy, that conservatism. Actually we always protested without being politically oriented. And then there were these *Aktionen* where everyone protested in some form or other although none of them was actually a political person. I tend to see it this way: that particular *Aktion* at the University, although it came in a political disguise, was simply an outcry, carried by a strong need for artistic expression. What is even more credit to this cause was the fact of an inmost, profound existential despair. I would not like to reduce it to the political level. I would see a great deal more in it. But maybe Brus will see that differently, or Oswald Wiener, Weibel or Mühl. I was not there myself, but I know the colleagues who were involved in it very well.

K.E. *How did your relationship with the other representatives of Vienna Actionism develop?*

H.N. I met Brus in 1962 through an exhibition which he then had at the *Junge Generation*, the same goes for Frohner, then a certain Niederbacher, who was not so prominent later on. Brus and I did not connect very well at first. Brus was always like a hungry wolf and rather wild, and started out by being offensive to everybody; but later on, I developed a very deep and warm friendship with him. The first one I met was actually Schwarzkogler, then Mühl and Frohner, and then Brus.

K.E. *One of the first spectacular Aktionen which also raised public attention was the Einmauerungsaktion (walling-in).*

H.N. Well, at the *Einmauerungsaktion* [in 1962] there were Mühl, Frohner, yours truly and Dworak as a theoretician and psychoanalyst. I do not call it a real *Aktion*, because it was actually an exhibition and an installation and there was no action going on. It was not one of the performances that were exclusively conceived as an *Aktion*.

K.E. *It was the first time that the public took note of the Actionists. It immediately triggered tremendous protests.*

H.N. True, it was a very novel thing that we did. We propagated a very aggressive type of art, not a cozy art, but an art that displayed tremendous power and intensity. And the thing with the dead sheep dismayed people greatly, of course.

K.E. *What were the protests like and what were you reproached with?*

H.N. A question that is hard to answer. There was an enormous amount of projection. People accused us of what they had in themselves; they saw us as men who tortured animals, as predators and aggressors. People looked in the mirror and perhaps saw a little bit of themselves.

K.E. *As far as I know you have been sentenced twice.*

H.N. The first time was at the occasion of the *Aktion* in Perinetgasse in Vienna’s 20th district. It was the *Aktion de psycho-physischen Naturalismus* (action performance of psycho-physical naturalism), where Mühl and I had planned two *Aktionen* independent of each other. So it was not a community *Aktion*, but each of us was to carry out his *Aktion* there.

K.E. *Did it take place in a gallery or in a public space?*

H.N. It was in Mühl's studio, a sculptor's basement where he worked. There were many people from the world of art, Rainer was there, Logothetis was there, Prantl the sculptor was there, and, I believe, Abraham, the architect and Brus. Many people were there; the entire art scene of Vienna.

K.E. *And why did the police intervene, how did they know about it?*

We had printed the programme that we wanted to perform on sheets of paper and distributed them. So this is how the police knew what was going to happen. The whole thing escalated, they were suddenly there and stopped the *Aktion*. At least I was able to carry out two-thirds of what I had planned. Mühl was not. He wanted to throw a cupboard filled with jam, symbolic of all the bourgeois stuff, out of a second floor window. That would have been his *Aktion*, but unfortunately it was not to be.

K.E. *And how did your first action performance go, what was the concept?*

H.N. It was the first of the classical action performances where I used entrails. Meat and blood with a passive performer and the carcass of a slaughtered sheep. By the way, this *Aktion* was scrupulously described in the police record. The police record was published everywhere, including in the *Spiegel* magazine. It was a sensation at the time.

K.E. *And how did the police interfere? How did this happen?*

H.N. They just stopped the *Aktion* and then we had to dispose of the things we used. We did not eat the sheep because we were so much under pressure and were scared of doing it. We then threw it in the Danube Canal – I still remember it very vividly – we put it in a sack. Brus took it, he was ecstatic, and ran off. He dragged the sack along and then kicked it into the Danube Canal. That must have been between *Friedensbrücke* and *Augartenbrücke*. From the council house windows people were screaming: "Murderers, murderers." We hopped in the car and drove off. We then all met at Mühl's place to discuss what had happened. Suddenly the police came: they had been called about a murder. We tried to explain that we had just disposed of the lamb. We got three days arrest for it, Brus, Kari Bauer and myself.

K.E. *So how did that invitation to perform in America [in 1968] come about, and where was the Aktion held?*

H.N. Peter Kubelka had been invited to the USA to show his films. He was also librarian at the film archives of the United Nations. He was very successful in America and Jonas Mekas supported him greatly. Kubelka had always been a great fan of my work and told Jonas Mekas about it. And this is how the invitation came about. Kubelka intimated that I had no money at all, and this is how I then ultimately received that fated ticket that made the trip possible for me. I was told that everything was paid for and that the *Aktionen* had been prepared. On top of that I was offered a fee of 400 dollars, which was a sizeable amount of money at the time. I used the money to pay my rent arrears.

K.E. *What sort of Aktionen did you give there?*

H.N. I did two *Aktionen* in Wooster Street in New York City. One *Aktion* was in a church, and another big one at the University of Cincinnati. All were very successful. The media attention was tremendous, and I was very nicely received by the famous American artists, who appreciated my work.

K.E. *Did these Aktionen involve blood, excrements and entrails?*

H.N. Actually, I have never used excrements. The *Aktion* involved animal carcasses, entrails, blood and human bodies. There was an orchestra, a screaming choir with many performers.

K.E. *How did the Americans receive that? Were there any scandals?*

H.N. Not at all, they were thrilled. Just in Cincinnati they wanted to prohibit the whole thing. But the ban was then lifted again, and the *Aktion* was a great triumph for me.

K.E. *Actually it is surprising that puritan America accepted your Aktionen so calmly. Could the reason be that Happenings, i.e. similar action performances, were already known in America?*

H.N. Happenings and, quite generally, *Aktionen* that did not involve a stage were already known from American artists. What the Americans didn't know was this expressive type of action performance – that was new for them and greatly surprised people, in a positive sense.

K.E. *Animal activists accuse you of cruelty to animals. What is your opinion of these accusations?*

H.N. I do not understand why they call me a torturer of animals when I do nothing else but show a slaughtering process that would otherwise take place at the slaughterhouse. I show on-farm slaughtering where the animal is not mistreated, because the slaughter is executed by certified butchers under the supervision of veterinary officials. I therefore show a process which is happening somewhere else anyway, and to my mind that has nothing to do with being cruel to animals.

K.E. *What does making the slaughter process visible have to do with your artistic intention?*

H.N. I am a dramatist, see myself in the tradition of dramatic poets and they have always dealt with death. Since I'm showing real events, I would like to show the process of killing which is going on all the time anyway.

K.E. *Is provocation a part of your understanding of art, in the sense that extreme statements and shocks snap people out of their lethargy and force them to interact?*

H.N. I'm often asked this question, and my answer is always the same: I have never wanted to provoke anybody with my work. I just want to reach a certain level of intensity, of which I obviously know that it can provoke people, but being provocative is not a prime motivation for my work. What is important to me is the intensity of my art, which I want to fully get across to the recipient. It is sufficient for my own theatrical understanding to say that I do not intend to provoke, particularly not in any blatant way. But I'm not against provocation either.

K.E. *To what extent do religious rites play a role in your art?*

H.N. I started very early to take an interest in the religions of all peoples and periods, and that includes all forms of rituals. Through my studies I realized increasingly to what extent art is related to ritual and ritual to art, the two are inseparable. The earliest forms of cult were supreme works of art in terms of dance and ritual. I would say that there is a close relationship between ritual, cult and art.

K.E. *What is your attitude to Catholicism?*

H.N. There are many things in Catholicism that I find intriguing. It includes powerful symbols which originated in other religions, the issue of death and resurrection, for instance, the commandment of love or the mystery of transubstantiation. These aspects hold incredible fascination for me. But there are also things in Catholicism which I see critically. The lack of affirmation of life, for instance, seeing life merely as preparation for the beyond and, particularly, the hostile attitude towards sexuality. Through reading Nietzsche I have been very much led towards an affirmation of life and towards stressing the "here and now;" and that hostility vis-à-vis sexuality makes it difficult for me to completely embrace or pursue Catholicism.

K.E. *Do you see any danger for artistic freedom?*

H.N. Artistic freedom has been and will be endangered again and again. A discussion about it would not be necessary, if everyone had the greatness to understand the nature of art. Luckily, art has a certain leeway – showing murder is a long way from actually committing murder – there is a whole tradition of this: in Greek tragedy or in Shakespeare plays, murders are committed, but only on stage. Similarly in my theatre: although it contains many terrible, expressive, abominable scenes, no one is ever hurt by the artist. Whenever I deal with the flesh of animals, these animals were not killed by me, but by the society which has animals killed in order to use their flesh as food.