Performing Identity and Gender in Literature, Theatre and the Visual Arts

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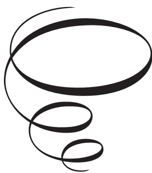
Edited by

Panayiota Chrysochou

Cambridge Scholars Publishing



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ABSTRACTS

Chapter One

The body – whether it is seen as being a material, substantive entity or dematerialised, semiotic sign, or even a technological abstraction – is always caught up in a discourse at the intersection of art, technology and body politics, where social and political structures are often (re)enacted and (re)produced through individual acts and practices. The machinic body, gendered body, historicised body, performing body, fragmented body, objectified body, phenomenological body and the body in pain all point to the ineluctable, historical discursivity surrounding the body, from a Western metaphysics of presence to a de-subjectified semiotics to a postmodernist revision of notions of embodiment, where the body (as well as identity) is relegated to fictive, dialogical or constantly emerging and shifting positions. This chapter aims to show how the artistic practices of the bodily-based performance artist Franko B, who theatrically has his body cut and refashioned in front of a large audience through the use of machinic and technological devices, attempt to stretch the body's boundaries and to collapse the material body into the abstract body-machine-image complex by merging life and machinic processes. It also points to the very real limits and challenges of using the body as a hermeneutical system, a political tool, and as a vessel for defining identity.

Chapter Two

The central role of gender in shaping the identity of women in the United States during and after World War II is reflected in literature in the novels of Carson McCullers. In exposing the fallacy of the prescribed gender binary, the writer resorts to the figures of the Freak and the Androgyne as liberating female alternatives to the constricting norms of Southern patriarchy. Throughout "The Ballad of the Sad Café," "The Member of the Wedding" and "The Heart is a Lonely Hunter," the role of femininity as traditionally understood in the South, under the guise of the Southern belle, is deliberately deconstructed, genders are intertwined and scrambled, and the resulting dysfunctional relationships fail as a sign of society's rejection of shifts in gender politics. Thus, McCullers' most

'feminine' characters are tellingly either not female or too young to pick a gender, temporarily inhabiting the gender of their choice as an experiment in establishing an identity. The results are grotesque: Cousin Lymon, an unattractive hunchback, adopts the attention-seeking, narcissistic, 'feminine' behaviour of the belle, just as Baby, Biff Brannon's five year-old niece, prances around town with salon-curled hair – a grotesque miniature of an adult woman. Teenage girls, especially, are confronted with the dilemma of deciding which gender to choose. An artificial construct ratified by society, femininity is a path not easily taken by the tomboyish Mick Kelly and Frankie Addams, who are aware that their options are either limited to renouncing their real nature and becoming respectable young ladies, or embracing their lack of femininity and being labelled as 'Freaks' (like the androgynous Miss Amelia Evans). Relying on Judith Butler's theory of femininity as performance, this chapter is concerned with highlighting the disparity between gender and sex, femininity and femaleness, in the Southern author's fiction.

Chapter Three

Hanif Kureishi's work focuses on the shifting and polyvalent manifestations of desire and sexuality within the social and cultural realms in Britain, opening up spaces in the cultural landscape to include – intentionally – the marginalised and politically disenfranchised, while interrogating at the same time hegemonic discourses pertaining to the formation of identities. Such an approach gestures towards a re-evaluation of desire which, in turn, can lead us to re-think identity as a constantly evolving, uncategorised and therefore politically powerful apparatus. After the publication of his memoir, *My Ear at His Heart* (2004), in which the reader is given insights as to how and why characters in the author's work were created, it seems that affective terms such as desire and sexuality can indeed be used to re-imagine the ways in which identity is experienced. Such an approach alludes to the complex constitutions of identity/ies apropos aesthetic or political concerns, and to how they can engage in a difficult and complex, yet fruitful relationship, avoiding what can be considered by the mainstream as 'socio-political abnormalities.' In that, I put forward that a retrospective re-examination of Hanif Kureishi's *My Beautiful Laundrette* (1985) is imperative, as it can help us understand how an evolutionary model of writing nods towards a sense of identity whose articulation has become distinctly polycultural, even post-racial. Such a revisiting of known texts can offer new insights on debates about identity and nation that transcend solipsistic and exclusivist diasporic

matters about 'myself' as they gesture towards the aesthetic. Indeed, my chapter invites the reader to conceive contemporary identity in affective terms and consequently as a space that surpasses the solipsism of cultural diversity, racial difference or narrow national exclusivity, thus inviting us to experience identity as a cultural instigator carrying socio-political possibilities.

Chapter Four

Identity, as being 'individual, ethnic, national,' is problematized by the multiplicity and instability that is potentiated in transnational movements and relocations. The breaking apart of identity is, furthermore, accelerated by exile which Edward Said declares as 'the unhealable rift forced between a human being and a native place, between the self and its true home: its essential sadness can never be surmounted' (*Reflections of Exile*, 173).[1] A questioning of identity is symptomatic of the exile who attempts to reconcile the loss of nationality by writing the hyphenated identity into being. The social ecology of displacement necessitates a reconstitution of identity as former identity constructions endure disruptions that defer, or negate, the continuation of its performances. By remaining in ontological transit, the exile experiences a dislocation that is at once physical and metaphysical; it is, Dubravka Ugresic testifies, 'the restless process of testing values and comparing worlds: the one we left and the one where we ended up' (*Thank you for not reading*, 128).[2] In this chapter, I argue that the negotiation between worlds is realized in exilic literatures which moderate the ways in which language, despite the multiplicities of meaning it engenders, may be used as a self-reflexive testament of exile. My analysis will focus on David Albahari's "Bait," Dzevad Karahasan's "Sarajevo, Exodus of a City," and Dubravka Ugresic's "The Ministry of Pain." All expatriates of former Yugoslavia, these authors' texts represent the transitioning between identities and the trauma that provokes it. I will examine how each text employs a language of reification whereby the experiences of identity and displacement are portrayed through the instability of dislocated languages and subjectivities as a means to authenticate these experiences in the written artifact. These literary curations reify the authors' trauma of dislocation, thus establishing an episteme of the 'essential sadness' of exile.

Chapter Five

Performance art positions itself as potentially contestable, democratic and open to and curious about disagreement. Its ephemeral and often erratic character seems to be exemplary for any description or scrutiny of the dynamics of contact. Most of these contacts of the performer's body, identity and intention with an audience in a specific space and time have occurred within the ambit of a genuinely art-friendly community – galleries, museums or city centres. Here, artists have challenged boundaries of perception and taste, control and behaviour. The audience's reaction has thus been able to be read as an indicator for societal orientations – most impressively conducted in Marina Abramović's latest work "The artist is present" in 2010 and the accompanying photographs of Marco Anelli which evoke a society of highly individualized faces and emotions. Yet, rarely has performance art been so consequently conveyed to different audiences and localities as in the work of South African artist Steven Cohen. In Steven Cohen's work the rather positive connotation and dialogical structure of contact is saturated with ingredients of confrontation when he transfers 'Eurocentric drag' to the African province or 'Patriotic drag' as the Jewish princess Menorah to a white right-wing rally in Pretoria.

Apart from the contact that happens on his very body – when Cohen applies to it objects of various provenance and not only undermines with them hegemonic images of masculinity but also bristles against conventional modes of travesty – he exposes his bodily image to its seemingly antithetic reality. The responses to Cohen's performances extend from the objectification of his body through ambivalent desire, hate and disgust to the body's glorification through amazement and joy. In my chapter I would like to investigate first the audience's reactions to his projects "Chandelier" (2001-2002) and "Limping into the African Renaissance" (1999-2000) both in Africa and Europe and with it the translocal dynamics that contact entails. I would like to ask if different reactions occur when Cohen, dressed as a chandelier, enters an informal settlement in Johannesburg or stages the same performance at a festival in Annecy and how these reactions not only reflect unexpected statements on an audience's affective potential but also the oscillation of Cohen's body when being exposed as 'spectacularly white' or the 'proximate other' in respective localities. I secondly would like to ask about the relationship between authenticity and theatricality of performance art which in Cohen's work seems to merge when he, on the one hand, declares that he disguises himself 'in order to be able to express' himself and, on the other hand, was

criticized by the gay community for 'presenting his queer self in such a monstrous fashion.' I would like to argue that the expression of such a monstrous fashion can be perceived as both authentic and theatrical at the same time.

Chapter Six

The plays of British dramatist Sarah Kane (1971-1999) confront the problem of subject identity in a postmodern fragmented world in a radical and unsettling way. Within a reality that widely negates the traditional ways of experiencing identity (as well as its representation) in relationship, narration, or in notions such as character and continuity, her *dramatis personae* are endangered by a dispersal of self. Seemingly recurring to a Cartesian idea of a strict dichotomy between body and mind, Kane shows her characters as driven by a strong desire to overcome the same. This aim, however, proves to be obtainable only in rare moments of suffering and in drastic 're-enactments' at the threshold between life and death. Applying Julia Kristeva's theory of abjection as well as Victor Turner's concept of liminality in ritual performance, this chapter sets out to explore Kane's concept of identity, especially focusing on her second play, *Phaedra's Love*. Analysing the protagonist Hippolytus' radical and repulsive crave for authenticity within a consumerist society of spectacle it discusses the importance of the abject as a realm of self-encounter with the experience of disgust and nausea as a means of self-perception. Furthermore, the chapter argues that although in the corrupt society depicted in Kane's play the idea of ritual has become distorted and dysfunctional, in voluntarily adopting the role of a perpetrator her protagonist (becoming the victim in a cruel performance) experiences identity, albeit in the moment of utmost torture and, ultimately, death. On a larger plane, Kane's plays open up possibilities to theatrically overcome the fragmentation of the subject in the acceptance of its abject condition as 'mortal and speaking' and for audiences to perceive identity through the means of performance on stage.

Notes

[1] Edward Said. *Reflections on Exile and Other Essays.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2002.
[2] *Thank You For Not Reading: Essays on Literary Trivia.* Translated by Celia Hawkesworth and Damion Searles. London: Dalkey Archive Press, 2003.

INTRODUCTION

Intertwining Identity with Performance

This book collection presents a mélange of chapters which focus on the ways in which performance and gender are inextricably bound to identity. The main axes revolve around gender, performance and identity as a tripartite schema and how this schema plays itself out in various genres and styles, and in different contexts, in order to illumine the fact that identify (or even gender and performance) is an ever-changing, and never static, category.

The notion of identity is clearly a controversial topic. Whether it is fictive or real, (de)politicized and/or aesthetic, gendered or engendered, identity is often seen as being a powerful political tool and an essentially social construct. It also allows individuals to define themselves. In a sense, we perform our own identities everyday – or, perhaps, we perform a wide range of different identities at any one time. We implicitly live in a society which constructs various definitive identifications, and which often sees the rigid maintenance of hierarchical systems and exclusive ideological constructions of gender, identity and sexuality, or what Judith Butler defines in her work *Bodies That Matter* as an "exclusionary matrix."[1]

As Judith Butler points out sex cannot – and should not – simply be seen as a kind of voluntary performance of gender and prescribed gender roles. She reiterates that sex is to be construed "no longer as a bodily given on which the construct of gender is artificially imposed, but as a cultural norm which governs the materialization of bodies."[2] Biological models of sex are no longer adequate and the heterosexual matrix of gender and sex norms prescribed by society no longer holds.

According to Butler, this matrix is a "hegemonic discursive/epistemic model of gender intelligibility" which is socially constructed, naturalizes bodies, desires and gender and "assumes that for bodies to cohere and make sense there must be a stable sex expressed through a stable gender (masculine expresses male, feminine expresses female) that is oppositionally and hierarchically defined through the compulsory practice of heterosexuality."[3]

This has often resulted in the displacement of any discursive systems which resist these exclusionary systems.[4] As such, this edited book

collection seeks to address this by bringing together a wide range of issues which give voice to discursive systems which have so often been overlooked or displaced by exclusionary systems of identification. The main exclusionary focus in culture and the arts has often been on the white, heterosexual and supremacist male (or female). To rectify this oversight, this collection has sought to address any works of art and culture which are directly and explicitly related to the performance of identity from a different standpoint – that is, one which is not exclusively heteronormative and heterosexual.

Identity (as well as gender and performance) is not a fixed or static social construction but a fluid one which constantly fluctuates semantically, conceptually and contextually. As an extension of this, even gender identity itself is performative. In various ways, the chapters in this book address the concept of identity as a performative and political tool and/or as a site of political resistance and change; identity as a fluid and shifting construct in the theatre, the performing arts and literature generally; cultural and literary works or works of art which resist fixed identifications and engender performative meanings/ways of "reading"; gender and identity formation; the abject as a site of identification; and, finally, sexuality as a performative and identificatory construct or mode of identification.

It is thus clear by now that identity itself is one of the crown jewelleries in the kingdom of "contested concepts." The idea of identity is conceived to provide some unity and recognition while it also exists by separation and differentiation. Few concepts are used as much as identity for contradictory purposes. From the fragile individual identities as self-solidifying frameworks to layered in-group identifications in families, orders, organizations, religions, ethnic groups, regions, nation-states, supra-national entities or any other social entities, the idea of identity always shows up in the core of debates and makes everything either too dangerously simple or too complicated. Constructivist and de-constructivist strategies have led to the same result: the eternal return of the notion of identity.

Some say we should drop the concept, some say we should keep it and refine it, some say we should look at it in a dynamic fashion while still others say that identity is the reason for resistance to change. Yet, if identities are socially constructed and not genuine formations, they still hold some responsibility for inclusion/exclusion – self/other nexuses. Looking at identities in a research oriented manner provides explanatory tolls for a wide variety of events and social dynamics. Identities reflect the complex nature of human societies and generate reasonable comprehension

for processes that cannot be explained by tracing a pure rational driven pursuit of interests. The feelings of attachment, belonging, recognition, the processes of values' formation and norms integration, and the logics of appropriateness generated in social organizations are all factors relying on a certain type of identity or identification. Multiple identifications overlap, interact, include or exclude, conflict or enhance cooperation. Identities create boundaries and borders; define the in-group and the out-group, the similar and the excluded, the friend and the threatening, the insider and the "other."

Beyond their dynamic fuzzy nature that escapes exhaustive explanations, identities are effective instruments of politicization of social life. The construction of social forms of organization and of specific social practices, together with their imaginary significations, requires all the time an essentialist or non-essentialist legitimating act of belonging; a social glue that extracts its cohesive function from the identification of the in-group and the power of naming the other. Identities are political. Multicultural slogans populate extensively the twenty-first century, yet the distance between the ideal and real multiculturalism persists, while the virtues of inclusion coexist with the adversity of exclusion. Due to the confusion between identities and identifications some scholars demanded that the concept of identity should be abandoned. Identitarian issues turned out to be efficient tools for politicization of a "constraining dissensus," while universalizing terms included in the making of the identities usually tend or intend to obscure the localized origins of any identitarian project. Identities are often conceptually used as rather intentional concepts: they do not say anything about their sphere but, rather, defining the sphere makes explicit the aim of their usage. It is not "identity of" but "identity to."

Thus, since the question of identity is often linked to gender and performance, this edited collection seeks to ask big questions regarding identity. As such, it would appeal to both literary scholars and researchers in gender and/or performance studies and identity politics, as well as to anyone interested in identity formation and the visual arts. Its definitive aim is to scrutinize the state of the art in collective identities research, to bring once more into debate the processes of identity making, and identity building in both constructivist or de-constructivist dimensions. It attempts to open the floor to dynamic multi-dimensional and inter-disciplinary understanding of identities today.

Notes

[1] *See* Judith Butler, *Bodies that matter: on the discursive limits of "sex"*. New York: Routledge, 1993.
[2] *Idem*, 2-3.
[3] In Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*. London and New York: Routledge, 1990, 151.
[4] Claire Stocks refers to the tendency in Western tradition to delimit and construct identity as a singular, monolithic entity. In her article 'Trauma Theory and the Singular Self: Rethinking Extreme Experiences in the Light of Cross-cultural Identity,' in *Textual Practice* 21.1 (2007), 71-92, Stocks argues that psychoanalysis falsely predicates its assumptions on Western notions of identity as being coherent and whole. Thus 'the shared emphasis on the reintegration of a consciousness fragmented by an unassimilable event assumes the pre-existence of a state of perceived psychic unity that 'healing' aims to restore' (74). As Stocks illustrates, 'fragmented identity' is not 'deemed healthy or desirable' in Western culture (77). Thus it must be expunged and it is often seen as the task of trauma theory to do so by integrating the fragments. Thus trauma theory in and of itself 'implicitly reinforces ethically weighted distinctions between 'good' Western, healthy conceptions of self and 'bad' pathological, fragmented 'others.' Furthermore, these distinctive 'categories are mutually exclusive and function to reinforce the boundary between self and other which confirms the belief in individual integrity.'

CHAPTER ONE

BLOOD PLAY AND SECOND SKINS: VIEWING THE CUT IN THE BODY AND 'SPLATTER' IN FRANKO B'S PERFORMANCES

PANAYIOTA CHRYSOCHOU

In Franko B's performance *I'm Not Your Babe* (1996), performed at the Institute of Contemporary Art in London, the Italian artist Franko B has his body painted white like an achromatic ghost or cadaver. Standing stark naked before his audience like a mute canvas or body-object, he strikes a beatific posture and kneels as a catheter in his arm drains his blood to the canvas floor. Some of his own blood, drained prior to the performance, is also poured onto him. More cuts are made onto his body by invisible hands off-stage "as (the) blood wells from the 'stigmata' of his wounded forearm" and drips down onto his body canvas and the stage. He then lies down in a pool of his own blood. Finally, "he is bound and suspended upside-down" in the posture of an inverted crucifixion as the audience watches him in stunned silence.[1]

Not surprisingly, the performances are taxing on Franko B and thus carefully regulated, with only three to four performances taking place every year. Before his performances roughly three pints of blood are removed from his body at four to six week intervals in order to be used in his performances. The temporal interludes also give his body the necessary time to regenerate more blood. As Simon Grant points out in a feature article for *The Independent* the whole process of the performance is in itself 'staggering' and Franko B ends it in a state of 'near collapse from loss of blood' (par. 1).[2] Franko B says of his performances that they are not intended to provoke sympathy for him or induce shock therapy: "It's not my intention to freak people out. I just want to create beautiful images

and *survive* them, like life – make the bearable unbearable [*sic*]" (par. 3, italics mine).[3]

In other words, the whole performance is geared towards the end result – the ultimate survival from the vicissitudes of art and life. The performance itself becomes a process of personal therapy, an event which is lived through to the very end and whose bloody outcome ensures that Franko B will emerge out of it rejuvenated and alive, as having persisted to the very end of his own self-martyrdom. According to his own evaluation of his work, the cutting and opening out of his body in order to push the limits of his own corporeality and self-endurance is an act of survival, an ecstatic moment of jouissance which "goes beyond sexual pleasure, beyond pleasure itself" and almost tips over into "psychic dissolution."[4] (Benstock 16). As he notes of his own work:

> For me, the value, the point of the performance is surviving it. Once it's over, it's freedom – I've done what I set out to do, I achieved it – surviving the pressure – my mind, my body – it's not a macho thing – it's like, it makes me stronger. It's very quick, it's quite amazing, you come back to the place you were before, but now there's a purity in the fact – I get up and I walk off, so what – I get up and walk off.[5]

As Nietzsche's famous quotation goes, what does not kill you makes you stronger. Yet the seeming nonchalance with which Franko B dismisses the pain involved in his performances in order to get to the end result is certainly suggestive, perhaps even disturbing. In a pre-emptive move, Franko B casually dismisses the pain – both psychic and physical – involved in attaining this state of "purity" he attests to. The declarative repetition of "I get up and I walk off" – together with the coupling of "so what" – is a blatant refusal, a downright denial of the pain involved in his own bloodletting. Like a snake which has just shed its own skin, Franko B emerges seemingly "unscathed" from his performances and just gets up and walks away.

In effect, Franko B's performance works on two levels; it is an act of cleansing or purification which points towards an accession to transcendence at the same time as it paradoxically shatters the possibility of its attainment. As Amelia Jones notes in "'Corporeal Malediction': Franko B's Body/Art and the Trace of Whiteness" (2006), Franko B's body becomes "an over-exaggerated signifier of a purity gone awry." His performances showcase the white male body and promise a kind of ritualized transcendence from "brute corporeality" at the same time as they consign this body to the "continual never-ending failure to transcend."[6]

Every attempt at transcendence strips the flesh of its identity. As Rachel Armstrong points out, "his flesh is stripped of all means of identity. By creating an impersonal body, Franko creates a painful vision of what the body is, rather than what it is dressed up to be."[7] In practice, this notion of creating an impersonal or "abstract" body is painful to watch – even frightening. Yet while it has been claimed that the horror derives from the fact that Franko B enacts and re-enacts the ominous threat of the uncontainable body only to surpass it, I would like to suggest that it is his ambivalent life-in-death status and his failure to escape his own body's limitations which pose a greater threat to audience sensibility.

While some critics have claimed, in fairly clear-cut terms, that Franko B refuses to offer the audience a kind of cathartic release, the ease with which he ends his performances and his putative attainment of a state of purified "grace" make the question of catharsis a rather moot point. Rather, it is his brief flirtations with death before he "gets up and walks away" which are unsettling. He ambivalently wavers between life and death like a living corpse, a life-in-death zombie which serves to remind the audience of his inevitable mortality, and theirs too. As a visual artist, Franko B makes the audience confront the possibility of death on stage. Indeed, it was theatre, for Herbert Blau, which "stinks most of mortality."[8]

It is precisely this ambivalent wavering between life and death which induces spectatorial horror. As Franko B lies inert like a corpse on the canvas stage in a pool of his own blood, he becomes the perfect signifier of the abject. For Kristeva the abject refers to "that which revolts me, which makes me flee into my own skin, which sets my boundaries."[9] Paradoxically, the subject attempts to expel the abject from outside only to realize that it lies hidden within:

> If it be true that the abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, one can understand that it is experienced […] when that subject, weary of fruitless attempts to identify with something on the outside, finds the impossible within; when it finds that the impossible constitutes its very being, that it is none other than abject.[10]

Thus the audience attempts to identify with Franko B's corpse by expelling it only to realize that the abject lies inextricably within. Recognition of the self as corpse may provoke anxiety or even induce horror. At the same time, however, Franko B's survival in the face of death can be a positively liberating experience for him and for his audience. In her analysis of Marguerite Duras's work, Karen Piper uses Kristeva's notion of abjection in order to liberate the signifying possibilities of the corpse. Within certain realms such as "love or anarchy,

the corpse is a figure of liberty, of satiated sexuality, of the 'waiting period' after the scream, in the space of the unspeakable dismemberment of society"[11] (111).

There is something frightening about Franko B's silent endurance towards pain. At the same time, his work attests to the violence inherent in society and operates within "the space of [its] unspeakable dismemberment." It is extremely significant that Franko B says of his work that it is profoundly about relationships. In this sense, his bloodletting is not simply a narcissistic ritual. Franko B gives himself up to the audience "and invites us to experience the work as not only autobiographical in terms of the artist, but relational – soliciting a personal, emotional, and narcissistic investment from the spectator" (Doyle).[12]

Such emotional investment is often hard to achieve when the audience is already desensitized to the horror of violent events. Franko B's silent and bleeding body may be soliciting some kind of personal response from its spectators, but the violent spectacle of his inflicted injuries and the bloody gore and "splatter" it unleashes, creating a parallel as it does with freak shows and the genre of the horror film (where bodies splatter all the time), could actually lead to an anaesthetized stance, "the corpse-like anarchy of doing [and feeling] nothing."[13] As Jennifer Doyle illustrates, this sense of anaesthetization is problematized by artists in their work: "Artists who make the management of feeling and the daily alienation of people from their emotional selves the subject of their work often draw to the surface the difficulty of having feelings at all."[14]

According to Doyle, there is a "risk" involved in feeling, or feeling *too* much, because "we have been so deeply trained [by society] to expect to feel nothing." We live in a fast-paced capitalist and consumerist world "criss-crossed by globalised networks of communication and identification, informational circuits traveling at warp speed" (Jones, par. 3).[15] We are constantly bombarded on all sides by the media with often violent images of human suffering. Thus, although the visibility of Franko B's suffering body can elicit an emotional investment from its spectators, more often than not it causes emotional alienation. In "The Ecstasy of Communication" Baudrillard takes this a step further by obliterating the distance between the spectacle itself and the subject through communicative and informational networks. There is no longer any sense of "the dramatic interiority of the subject" because we no longer live as actors "but as a terminal of multiple networks."[16] Thus for Baudrillard alienation has become a thing of the past in the simulated and hyperreal world we now live in:

> We are no longer a part of the drama of alienation; we live in the ecstasy of communication. And this ecstasy is obscene. The obscene is what does away with every mirror, every look, every image. The obscene puts an end to every representation. But it is not only the sexual that becomes obscene in pornography; today there is a whole pornography of information and communication, that is to say, of circuits and networks, a pornography of all functions and objects in their readability, their fluidity, their availability, their regulation, in their forced signification, in their performativity, in their branching, in their polyvalence, in their free expression…
>
> It is no longer then the traditional obscenity of what is hidden, repressed, forbidden or obscure; on the contrary, it is the obscenity of the visible, of the all-too-visible, of the more-visible-than-the-visible […][17]

All this visibility is subsumed under these networks of communication and information. There is no more room for affectivity or even for private decisions and deliberations, "only for reception and push-button control."[18] And, what is more, these systems of visibility endlessly reproduce themselves as they are absorbed by the subject. This would explain, perhaps, why such visible performances such as those of Franko B can even have the opposite effect of their original intention. Instead of sensitizing its audience to "the [violent and] unspeakable dismemberment of society," Franko B's performance could have its audience sadistically clamouring for more gore and blood. Judith Palmer notes how "Franko B found the crowd literally baying for his blood after a performance" given in 1995. Apparently the performance had not been "outrageous" or violent enough, even though "Franko's performance had left him so bruised he couldn't walk for a week."[19]

Such spectatorial responses attest to the sadistic pleasure, even thrill, many people obtain in watching others suffer. Filmmakers of horror and "splatter" films are aware of this and bank on it in order to ensure that their films achieve commercial success, using various techniques to manipulate and generate the desired responses in their audiences. As Halberstam aptly notes, "monsters" achieve immortality due to avid consumerist demand for them: "The undead, the monsters who threaten to live forever, find eternal life in the circularity of consumption and production that characterizes Hollywood."[20] One example of this circularity is the manifestation of endless sequel upon sequel documenting tales of horror, serial killings and splattered gore and carnage.

Franko B's performances feed into this circuitous system, sustained as it is by sadomasochistic tendencies and drawing on scopophilic/fetishistic

drives.[21] Society often displaces these tendencies onto other systems which are judged to be neither heterosexist nor heteronormative. As Campbell and Spackman make clear:

> So much in our society, Franko B. reflects, *is* violent, but our quotidian exposure to mediatized images of war, famine, and cruelty both desensitizes our responses and implicates us in a sadomasochism that society conveniently displaces behind the closed doors of the gay underworld.[22]

In other words, Franko B is aware of the fact that he is implicated, as is his audience, in a social system which attempts to maintain its exclusive ideological constructions of gender and sexuality by displacing any discursive systems which resist them into an abject and sadomasochistic underbelly. By using his body as the site of the abject, as a body that attempts to radically perform its own presence, Franko B "can allegorise the ultimate impossibility of maintaining these typically exclusive and heteronormative systems as such."[23] His body confronts us with the frailty, or rather the instability, of our heteronormative systems which proscribe certain normative sexualities and illegitimize others.

As Harradine reminds us, however, this reductionistic process can only be supported and maintained by reference to its "aberrant" obverse: "This process of reduction necessarily institutes a structure in which such nominally 'normal' sexualities can only be conceptualised through correlative notions of those designated 'perverted or 'aberrant', against which this putative 'normality' is defined."[24] Franko B uses his work to show that sadomasochism and gay culture are the obverse side of the social coin, deeply ingrained as they are in our visual culture and everyday lives as much as we try to dispel them:

> …for me it's normal. And when people go on about S/M, I think S/M is an inevitable thing in society, it's a general thing in society, it's the way we grow up, it doesn't matter if you're a Muslim, a Roman Catholic, whatever – there's this strong S/M element in life. When people go on about S/M and gay culture – I think, but it's the way people behave everyday. For example, what I call S/M is someone sitting in their living room, making a cup of tea, switching the telly on and getting very excited by images of people dying and starving in Ethiopia. To me getting off on those images is S/M. You pay to be entertained, you send money – bang, bang, bang: you're paying to take away your fucking sorrow, your miserable life, your loneliness at the end of the day. So you focus on somebody else's misery.[25]

The triple "bang" at the end of Franko B's formulation is the pivotal point where he forcefully drives home that even a simple gesture as watching visual images of suffering on TV and "getting off on those images" is a form of side-tracking which serves to displace our own suffering by focusing on that of others. According to Franko B, we are all implicated in a regulative system which attempts to consolidate its hegemonic power by disavowing, or rather by displacing, the pervasiveness of S/M and gay culture onto other identifications. As Butler powerfully suggests in *Bodies that Matter*, it is precisely this heterosexist imperative, constructed as it is by social norms, which "enables certain sexed identifications and forecloses and/or disavows other identifications."[26] Via the operations of an "exclusionary matrix" through which subjects assume their sexed identities, another domain is simultaneously produced, "a domain of abject beings" who are not yet "subjects" in a representative sense "but who form the constitutive outside to the domain of the subject." Thus the abject is seen as "designat[ing] here precisely those 'unlivable' and 'uninhabitable' zones of social life which are nevertheless densely populated by those who do not enjoy the status of the subject."[27]

Yet what characterizes these sexed subject positions is their apparent fluidity and motility "against the rigid continuity and fixity of humanist constructions." As Harradine forcefully suggests, any performed embodiment of abjection "begins to productively guarantee the revelation of the constitutive instability and inevitable collapse of these systems of division and difference; of oppressive and restrictive (and impossible) 'identities.'"[28]

As we have already seen, Franko B's performances attempt to strip the skin of its own identity. At the very least, they are performances which stretch the boundaries of the skin and body in an effort to show that they are not bounded systems of representation but open and permeable. Franko B makes us feel uncomfortable in our own skins because he uses his own to show that skin can be torn, stretched and even stripped away. Skin "is the most fragile of covers and also the most sticky. [It] becomes a metaphor for surface, for the external; it is the place of pleasure and the site of pain; it is the thin sheet that masks bloody horror" as well as being "the destination of the gaze" and "the violated site of visual pleasure."[29]

And Franko B will not let his spectators forget that his performances are also a skin show in which he sheds his flesh. As Amelia Jones points out in her description of Franko B's corporeal work *I Miss You* (2003), in which he walks several times across a "bloodied catwalk" in Tate Modern's Turbine Hall, "his feet stick to the blood after the first traversal, making a strange snapping, sucking sound as he extricates them." This

"sucking sound" is an acute reminder of his embodiment and reified bodily presence, his "thereness," at the same time as his live body becomes exteriorized and "staged like the objectified bodies in a fashion show, their agency evacuated by their production as fetishes 'over there,' rendering the models 'absent' subjects."[30]

Fig 1-1: *Franko B, 'I Miss You'*, 2000. Photo by Manuel Vason. Copyright. Reprinted by permission of photographer.

Franko B's fashion show becomes a skin show which implicates his audiences. Apart from his explicit desire to reach out to his audience, his performance is like a mock-fashion show which parodies the objectification of the subject on the catwalk. As Doyle points out, "the blood splattered canvas Franko leaves in his wake is used to make unwearable, or at least, un-marketable haute-couture, to mummify household objects, and to make pocket-sized souvenir paintings."[31] Such live art is reminiscent, perhaps, of the performances by the Japanese artist

Yoko Ono. In her *Cut Piece* (1965) performance at Carnegie Hall in New York, Ono gave the audience scissors and allowed each of them to trim a portion of her dress until it was completely cut to shreds – a striptease in reverse. Her final performance was symbolically performed in Paris, the fashion capital of the world. Instead of marketing a proper dress, Ono allowed her audience to tear it apart as a blatant demonstration of the objectifications enacted in and through consumerist and capitalist culture. Although Ono manages to modestly cover his breasts, her body remains naked and exposed. The voyeuristic aspects involved in such live performances can hardly be downplayed or ignored.

Nakedness is often linked to degradation, shame, vulnerability and even the state of otherness or abjection. One of the first references to nakedness occurs in the Bible in Genesis, when Adam and Eve become aware of their nakedness and use fig leaves to cover themselves. Ironically, however, although it is Franko B's white body which stands naked and exposed, it is his own nakedness which leaves the audience emotionally vulnerable. As Doyle astutely notes:

> When an artist successfully overrides the self-consciousness and the inhibitions that settle on us in places like galleries and classrooms, it comes as a shock – finding ourselves overwhelmed with actual emotion – finding ourselves crying, laughing, afraid, disgusted, aroused, outraged – can leave us feeling a bit naked.

Particularly in masculine Western society, affective and emotional responses have often been frowned upon as being shameful and effeminate. We are ashamed of showing emotion, "too much" emotion – of showing our own tears. As early as the fifth century, Plato saw the fearful dangers of plays which unleashed uncontrollable grief in their spectators. As Taxidou points out, female lamentation was banned "around the sixth century BCE," yet it does not vanish, becoming "one of the most significant impulses behind the creation of tragic performance conventions." Significantly, it is the banning of female lamentation in the Athenian *polis* which allows it to filter "into the civic, political and discursive world of [its] male [citizens]" by way of theatrical conventions and public death rituals or funeral orations.[32]

Via recourse to tragedy, the stage and public sphere can allegedly get rid of melancholy and institute pathos and didacticism in its place. Taxidou points out how the chorus in Ancient Greek tragedy is often seen "as a simple interface between the individual and the collective, between form and content." It functions as a mediating force which channels female lamentation into knowledge and "a pedagogical experience."[33] She

quotes Benjamin, for whom "the chorus of tragedy does not lament. It remains detached in the presence of profound suffering; this refutes the idea of surrender to lamentation."[34] Yet, as she very astutely points out, "choruses from *The Persians* to *The Bacchae*" show clearly that "they can be unruly, lamenting, and highly subversive."[35]

With all due respect to Benjamin, the life of the mind and speculative knowledge, there is something unsettling – I would even venture to say callous – about responding analytically to the humanity of dramatic actors (and the characters they embody) who physically come to life before us on stage and in performance. The very physical presence of the actor ensures that such responses are obviated, or at least watered down. Rush Rehm makes a compelling case for the lively engagement of spectators with Greek tragedy. His argument is worth quoting at some length:

> If a distanced, scientific, objective response were all that was intended in Greek tragedy, then we would expect a different kind of writing and a different mode of presentation. As Aristotle points out, the great advance that tragedy made over epic was the appearance of characters as "living and moving before us" (*Poetics,* 1448a.24-25), that is, characters as embodied. The physical presence of the actor defined the earliest drama, and the actor remains the irremovable obstacle in the path of those who view Greek tragedy (or the theatre in general) as a sophisticated playground for mental conundrums, as opposed to a place of live, and lived, human experience.[36]

Similarly, Franko B demands our response, our emotional investment as his cut and "leaking" body bleeds. His performances cannot be summed up analytically via recourse to speculative thinking alone.[37] This is because his live performances attest to the physical presence of the body, the body as a material entity, as lived and embodied. It is all very well to attempt to uproot it from its pre-ontological status and ground it in some abstract framework of theoretical givens, but as Harradine reminds us the body, the performing body, always performs "its own material status." The body is produced and informed by complex "ideological and discursive systems." In and of itself, the body forms "the locus of complex processes of ideological construction" which "materialise the body itself in and through discourse, and that reveal the body as only the *apparent* base from which notions of 'identity' (such as 'race' 'sex' 'gender' 'class' or 'sexuality' [*sic*]) can be read."[38]

This is precisely why Franko B refuses to associate his work with gay culture since the very notion of "gayness" would seal off the interpretative field through a formative construction of identity which reads his body as

gay. At the same time, however, it is impossible to do away with such ideological constructions as gender, race and sexuality entirely. Franko B's body is white – indeed, it is even painted white to stress its very "whiteness" – as opposed to being black. As Amelia Jones very aptly suggests, Franko B's work points to the absence of what Frantz Fanon identifies in *Black Skin, White Masks* as "the corporeal malediction," the malediction of blackness as constitutive of identity. She refers to black paintings which "serve as a kind of obverse of Franko B.'s signature whiter-than-white body (literally painted in glossy white makeup), enacted in his performance works."[39]

In the same way as Harradine stresses that "normal" sexualities can only be conceptualised through their opposite, via recourse to correlative notions of those which are designated as aberrant or deviant, Jones makes the pertinent point that the presence of Franko B's white body is a racial marker; his body can only be defined in relation to the absent black body, against which this putative whiteness – his race as a marker of identity – is defined. By having his body cut up, however, and then offering it up to the audience as a sacrifice, he performs – in Christ-like fashion – the "elegiac body of sorrows: Christ doloroso as icon of the ambivalence of twenty-first century white masculinity."[40]

Franko B's performances are thus embodied performances of race as well as gender. There is really no essentialist notion of gendered identity because Franko B performs his gender constantly through the complex ways in which performative acts and processes of subjectivization impinge upon and (re)inscribe his body. At the same time, it could also be argued that each performance is a repetitive act in which he performs his gender differently, thus paving the way for a critical reworking of gender norms in and through the very act of performing the body. According to Judith Butler, performativity and gender identity are ritualized and socially constructed acts which are constantly being re(enacted) and interrogated. She says: "As in other ritual social dramas, the action of gender requires a performance that is repeated." What is more, "[t]his repetition is at once a reenactment and reexperiencing of a set of meanings already socially established; and it is the mundane and ritualized form of their legitimization." The "action" of gender is thus a public action as much as it is individually "stylized into gendered modes."[41]

In terms of gender politics, then, gender is at once both a "thing done" to the subject through a pre-existing and oppressive matrix of socially established categories of signification, and a "doing" of the subject, a performance which constantly attempts to disrupt and destabilize these social categories. At the same time, since performance is an exteriorization of

the body, it points to the potential ways in which the body can be "manipulated" and made to "signify in politically useful and suggestive ways"[42] (Harradine 75). For Josette Féral the very act of performing the body marks its conspicuousness as a body which is always already repressed – the body-in-pieces:

> The body is made conspicuous: a body in pieces, fragmented and yet one, a body perceived and rendered *as a place of desire*, displacement, and fluctuation, a body the performance conceives of as repressed and tries to free – even at the cost of greater violence.[43]

Through performance the body "tries to free" itself (or rather to *flee*) from its own repression and the social strictures imposed upon it. Franko B enacts and performs the fluidity and permeability of the body as an attempt to escape such strictures. He turns the social system on its head by refusing the textual and ideological strictures it imposes on his body and by refusing to have his body "read" as a closed system of signification. At the very least, his performances raise interesting questions about how the body can be viewed in performance and how it encodes itself into a kind of "text through which embodied subjectivities can be enacted."[44] Additionally, his performances raise the problem of maintaining essentialist notions of socially/discursively constructed and sexed identities.

The problem is further compounded by Franko B's ambivalent status as performer-as-subject and/or sacrificial object, an indeterminacy which paradoxically allows him to liminally occupy both positions at the same time. In Christ-like fashion, Franko B offers himself up as a scapegoat for society's ills and asks his spectators to mourn for him as he proffers them his tormented and bloodied body, and even to identify with the painful disruption of its seeming "boundedness" and unity. As Staten compellingly reminds us: "The phenomena of the dialectic of mourning all arise out of the affect of self-attachment that we could describe in Freudian terms as the narcissistic libidinal cathexis of the boundary of integrity of the self." Physical pain and death disrupt this boundary. In effect, death, or "the thought of death" can be seen as being "the ultimate psychic pain, the ineliminable gap that keeps the circle of the self from closing against the intrusion of the not-self."[45]

As we have seen, Franko B's performances are stark reminders to the audience of their own mortality. They are skin shows which perform the fluidity of the body as abject; the audience is privy to a performance in which a leaking body, in corpse-like fashion, is being stripped of its flesh and is literally falling to pieces. What makes the performance even more compelling is the fact that Franko B is not the one who is making the cuts