

A curator and art critic, Lea Vergine has written several noted publications on contemporary art, including *Il corpo come linguaggio/ Body Art (The Body as Language)*, 1974; *L'Arte in gioco (Art in Play)*, 1988; and *Ininterrotti transiti (Uninterrupted Transits)*, 2001.

Having to sum up what took place, I could say that Body Art is a movement born in the '60s in Austria; it has had exponents such as Urs Lüthi, Gina Pane (French but of Italian origin), Gilbert and George (still very active), and many others. In the early '70s, the movement exploded across Europe and the United States; in the '80s its power was diminished – not uncommon with movements that begin with a great *force de frappe* – then it reemerged in the '90s, thought with some differences.

*Mystical body* and *social body* are two constant threads in the study of Body Art, increasingly discernible in the last decade.

Gina Pane, for example, at a certain point no longer did performances. She was no longer able to utilize her living body in public performances, cutting herself with blades or piercing herself with rose thorns: it became an unsustainable practice, either for physiological reasons or simply because, as gestures, they were only an end in themselves; to repeat them infinitely becomes pleonastic and pathological.

During the last years of her life, Gina Pane produced what she called “partitions.” These were structured like musical partitions – a partition as an act of dividing material form, but also an act of division in a musical structure. It is substantively the same discourse as the language of the body, but through different means that have permitted other dimensions of intent and communication: my body/your body, a kind of variation. On the walls, brought to life like existential screens, Gina Pane used drawings made specifically for a given wall and juxtaposed them with a series of photographs of actions already executed, physical traces of past works, toys, and contemporary references – creating a kind of installation, an abstract work. The body, as such, doesn't disappear but is missing. This is a dimension that has continued in recent years and still persists today.

In this way, psychological and real places can arise where absence is proclaimed. Paradoxically, we *look* at this invisibility – we watch the disappearance of the body. I remember another work by Pane that was dedicated to the saints: of Saint George's body, for example, there remained only footprints – constituting an enigma of the body – a small piece of red felt, photographs of blood, and a small stained glass: these items were within the sphere of the corporal, but were at the same time *elsewhere*.

To give another example of the *mystical body*, we might quote Fabio Mauri

who, from the '70s through the '90s, has staged a figurative theater made from double and triple scenic spaces. A work like *Via Tasso* (1993), realized in an atmosphere reminiscent of where the Nazi's tortured the Jews, is exemplary of his artistic practice. Common to all Mauri's performances and installations is the depiction of the individual condemned to mortifying tasks, as in *Ebrea* (1971), where a child must undress in a specific way that reveals the Star of David, and must endure a thousand other acts of abuse.

In the '90s, the use of the body is diffused throughout literature, cinema, theater, and even fashion – although used “in another fashion.” Furthermore, we have seen the emergence of phenomena such as mutating identities, technological contaminations, and hybridism. If we consider para-artistic phenomena like those of Orlan or Stelarc, the body returns to occupy spaces of considerable importance at a distance of thirty years from the initial appearance of a different Body Art, in search of love, self and human contact.

In more recent research on the body there is more pathology and less romanticism. One wonders how much of this makes sense, and how much – this process that must necessarily be culturally mediated or else it doesn't give poetic results, this desire to experience these fragmented personalities, carriers of uneasiness – it has to do with art.

Certainly these artists and their works are not unique in contemporary art, but they are emblematic, in that they rise to the challenge with the impossible: one thinks back to performances by Fura dels Baus, Marcel Lì. Antúnez Roca, or to Janine Antoni's early works. Today when we speak of the body, we must not forget that image-research on identity has also been undertaken by artists who have been recognized by art history, such as Cindy Sherman; Jenny Holzer with her writings on the thorax and skin of the entire body; or the sculptures of the venerable and now finally-recognized Louise Bourgeois.

This use of the body, resuscitated under various guises, continues to be proposed in a variety of declinations: from the minor works of Ron Athey, an artist who in this sense still belongs to the *vieux stile*; to the extraordinarily visceral (if at times Wagnerian and a little comic) films of Matthew Barney; to the works of Yasumasa Morimura, concerned instead with the displacement of identity, not unlike others from the '70s.

These disguises, this camouflage, encompasses not just art but life: our being, our day, our confrontation of a whole series of problems. It could be that some of the contemporary practices using the body are a means of accessing religious experience, a need felt mainly in recent years due to a lack of sufficient ideologies to sustain us; many artists feel the need for the sacred. People often wonder how it is we have arrived at all this pain and horror – they shudder at the idea of making art with the body, or at a series of enigmas presented by all manner of expressions today. Perhaps it is because we follow the

evanescent shadow of love: art is an attempt to represent it, often destined to provoke only melancholy, because it carries within it the absence or loss of our one and only total and continual aspiration.

*If we consider the Body Art of the '70s to be the first wave of a new artistic expression, and the '90s as the second wave, do you believe that in the next few years we can expect to witness a third wave of physical and primary utilization of the body?*

The themes that have emerged from the new use of the body are numerous, and such that it is difficult to imagine them ending; they will continue in other forms that will touch our existence. Today the use of the body is one of many expressive modalities, as it was in the '70s, when it asserted itself at the same time as the explosion of Land Art: on the one hand there was the omnipotence of wanting to modify the world, and on the other hand there was one's own body; these are the two traditions: omnipotence and *egolatria*.

*Does this include the tragic panorama defined by some artists and critics, who see a future in which man's identity is erased by a practice of brutal transformation?*

The situation in which the planet finds itself is catastrophic. However, the task is not finding space for a few extreme forms of body use; the possibilities for using language do not always coincide with those of the body. The fanaticism, the "monogamy" of the critics has always existed, and it can be used corroboratively and creatively: fanatics like Carmelo Bene, Antonin Artaud, Saint Francesco... We could make an infinite list of writers that have generated interesting things.

*You spoke about a group of people, artists and saints, that use their own body with a pleasure that overlaps into masochism; you've neglected, however, those that use their own body to give pleasure, like porn stars for example. In this sense there seem to be some representatives within art already...*

If pornographic images are introduced into art, the images remain as such and it is art that goes elsewhere. The use of the body, at that moment in which cultural and emotional concerns are bypassed, moves outside our field of interest.

*How much does technology, applied to our body, traumatize the artist? Can we still think that artists are able to foresee this phenomena?*

Artists warn of the trauma of technology, but so far there don't seem to have emerged any extraordinary responses. Artists have always perceived all manner of phenomena in advance of their being diluted within the social.

*Can you reflect for a moment on the art-life dichotomy?*

The art-life dichotomy is a slightly pharisaic way of moving the problem; since it is true that on certain occasions the two elements are absolutely tied, it is just as true that the solution to the problem, the argument, the impulse that concerns art, cannot be used, redeemed, resolved, or treated in the same way that we treat life's concerns. Art-life is a dichotomy that was born more than a hundred years ago and has continued throughout the decades until the emergence of Arte Povera. With that came the premise that affirmed that there was no noble material, preferential or privileged situation, and that everything that is part of our perception and everyday use can be seen with different eyes, offering the possibility of *seeing* things that we merely looked at before.

In attempting to resolve this shortcoming we rack our brains until the final chemotherapy. How to come to terms with the art-life problem? For many it suffices to eliminate art, which is not so indispensable after all.

*In your mind, what are the most obvious differences between the current art system and that of the '70s?*

One determining factor is numerical: in the 1970s there were half as many of us. This simplified matters considerably and even allowed younger emerging artists to receive more attention and assistance. Although young people (and everything considered juvenile) also have greater visibility today – just as the imbeciles say. Young galleries work only for the young. The art market has changed enormously and operates on principles similar to the bookmaker and the stock market. This is in contrast with the '70s, when there were crazy people within the reach of art dealers or museum directors, who could fall in love with certain ideas and put them into practice.

There were few museums in Italy, although two or three of these functioned well enough. Whereas now there are about twenty, all of which are in somewhat disastrous condition, with a few exceptions: it is the usual history of Italy, where the cultural politics of the colony still function with the money of the colonized.

However, all things considered, it seems to me that there are infinite opportunities that didn't exist before. Naturally the battle is difficult, because numerically, your numbers have increased to biblical proportions.

*Do you consider the mystical body to be also the kamikaze body? How do you evaluate Stockhausen's declaration after September 11<sup>th</sup>, that, according to him, he had seen the greatest work of art in history?*

Stockhausen absolutely didn't want to make a joke (in the style of Berlusconi); from the figurative point of view, September 11<sup>th</sup> had a certain beauty, like many other tragic events, like the eruption of a volcano. One can-

not refer to art as anything that is violent or cruel or that affects us; these are bigots, pathological acts by people that are infatuated and without any contact with the truth, and they allow themselves to be dragged into these unthinkable acts. There are cultures and pathologies that do not have recourse to the mediation of art. Let us not forget that there is always the need for mediation when negotiating culture. It's like saying that past wars, or those of today, are theatrical *mise en scène* that are restaged for Artaud: No. In the kamikaze there is fanaticism and mental illness, which have also always existed in art, but we have to make a distinction.

*Which relationship bridges the disappearance of the body and the social body?*

When I speak of the absence of the body, I speak of the traces left there to represent it. This is a specific aspect of the way we use objects, from Gina Pane to Mona Hatoum: the objects make our blood run cold. Just as some places/non-places delegated to suffering, torture, or to the curing of people, once photographed, articulated, and presented in a certain way, give the sensation of someone having left, that in that moment the body has disappeared but the apparatus has remained intact....

*When one speaks of "body" in art, it is the theatricality of the human body that is always intended, never a more substantial vision, as we find in the writings of Merleau-Ponty, where the body is an authentic experience of the other, a perceptive and reflective experience of something outside itself...*

Body Art (historically and currently) does not exclude the whole dimension of the extension of the self into the other, of which Merleau-Ponty speaks. Generally there are manifestations that enormously enlarge this field of transmigration between the self and the other. It is the same thing that one finds, for example, in Barthes' when he recounts everything that happens when he decides to write – the way of picking up the pencil, the effect of the sound on the paper – and he explains that writing is also a corporal fact.

One shouldn't think of the body as an organism: the body, as such, is a unity of things that obviously contains all our forms of perception and communication; it is not an organism that medicine cures, forgetting that there is also a body. It's the same difference between theater and spectacle. The theater implicates a communication, an indispensable *du ut des*, while spectacle does not.

*The absence of the body is a modality of directional meanings specific to the '90s?*

I believe that the disappearance of the body is a reflection of these last years. Having directly used the body for representation for a long time, the shock has also exhausted itself: it is the gestures that count, and these cannot be

repeated ad infinitum. The so-called absence of the body is a more interesting phenomenon because it leads to a gamut of reflections that embrace our daily lives: the concept of absence, as such, refers back to twenty or more centuries ago. In this sense, if we then look at the Flemish paintings, those of Cranach, Memling, or Vermeer, we find an infinite series of details that speak of absence: we were conscious of this even in the past.