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My Body Is Not a Cage

Tomáš Kubart

Mein Körper ist das Ereignis. Wiener Aktionismus & internationale Performance [My body is the event. Viennese Actionism & International Performance]. 6 March 2015 – 23 Aug 2015, MUMOK, Vienna, Austria. Eva Badura-Triska and Marie-Therese Hochwartner, curators.

[events]

‘My body is the event’,¹ wrote Austrian artist Günter Brus. His statement was used as the title of the exhibition by its curators Eva Badura-Triska and Marie-Therese Hochwartner. The exhibition, held at MUMOK (The Museum of Modern Art) in Vienna, tried to present the ephemeral nature of events by the Viennese Actionists through photographs and projections and relate them the international performance culture in the 1960s.

The desire for immediate experience resulted in an art, which crossed the boundaries of traditional forms of expression in the 1960s. In place of descriptive literature, illusionary theatre, realist painting and sculpture, artists begin to work directly and bewitchingly with the body, one’s own experiences and inner feelings. Processuality replaces artefact. The ambiguous nature of events becomes part of the artistic discourse of the time. This change in Austria was helped by Wittgenstein’s and Mauthner’s ideas of the philosophy of language, which also disrupted the semantics of visual arts.

In post-war Austria, the Vienna Group (*Wiener Gruppe*) was founded, a loose formation of friends interested in experimental poetry, which together with the Viennese Actionists, who were building up on their painting backgrounds (such as *art*

brut), stood at the beginning of a new cultural movement in Central Europe. ‘My body is the aim, my body is the event, my body is the result’,² commented Günter Brus once the opinions of artists body art and performance art began coming in waves.

The exhibition juxtaposes works (records in the form of photographs and projections of actions) of pioneers of Austrian body art and performance, Viennese Actionists and the Vienna Group (*Wiener Gruppe*) and the main *arteacts*³ of the international performance scene, such as works by Marina Abramović, Tomislav Gotovać, Ion Grigorescu, Natalie LL, Paul McCarthy, Ana Mendieta, Bruce Nauman, Yoko Ono, Neša Paripović and Carolee Schneemann.

Differences in political contexts disappear under pressure of the urgency and artistic strategies of action art and its liveness. The body did not become merely a new painting canvas and means of artistic expression in the 1960s, but also a tool for political and social protest. While in Western Europe, for example, in actions

1 ‘Mein Körper ist das Ereignis.’ (BRUS 1993: 259)

2 ‘Mein Körper ist die Absicht, mein Körper ist das Ereignis, mein Körper ist das Ergebnis.’ (BRUS 1998)

3 *Arteact* is defined by Czech theatre researcher Jan Roubal as an ephemeral result of the work of art, which is typical of performance, happenings and action art.

of Jean-Jacques Lebel in France, the movement of performance and body art became part of the socio-political revolutionary movement, the Austrian 1960s never experienced violent protests at universities, while social tensions in the younger generation imploded in Viennese Actionists activity.

The Australian (and, later, American) art critic and historian Robert Hughes described the action of the Viennese artist Rudolf Schwarzkogler as 'a Van Gogh of body-art' after he saw photographs of his action *Aktion 2* (1966). But the photographs did not show Schwarzkogler inducing injuries to his penis with a sharp knife; he did not die as an after-effect of a self-castration; moreover, it was not even Schwarzkogler, but his model and friend Hans Cibulka. Hughes' mistake is neither first nor the last to have contributed to the creation of a myth in the history of art. When Chris Burden had the .22LR calibre fired on himself in Santa Ana, California, on 19 November, 1971, he ignited the flames consuming the idea of the body as an untouchable temple. He created a space for the body as the universal sense, similar to touch, which is able to perceive time and space.

Only one statue, *Miss Vietnam* by Wolf Vostell, is seen in three exhibition halls of the exhibition *Mein Körper ist das Ereignis*. The reason may be the simple intention of the curators to avoid the threat that the remains of past actions could acquire the position of an independent work of art and artefact. The focus on videos and photographs prevents the establishment of a hierarchy between different works of art; for example, between Nitsch's spectacular and intensely staged event and Ewa Partum's sophisticated minimalist works. This

curatorial decision is logical. What is less understandable is the key to the selection of some of Badura-Triska's themes; from a group of facial grimaces, to the representation of childbirth, and to Schwarzkogler's shamanism in the style of Joseph Beuys. It is relaxing, but at the cost of clarity. And when it comes to the international context, it is surprising that the curators did not include significant achievements of Japanese artists in the field of performance art and happenings, for example the groups Zero Kai (1951), Gutai Bijutsu Kyokai (1954) or Tatsumi Hijikata's Ankoku Butoh.

Canadian band Arcade Fire, in the song *My Body Is a Cage* (2007; original by Peter Gabriel), present an opposite direction to Brus' statement; their body is paralyzed with fear, while Brus freed his from sense, returned it to animality. *Set my spirit free*, sing longingly the Canadian artists in their song. The Viennese Actionists and their colleagues had met their wishes many years before their laments: they had liberated the spirit by having driven sense out of the body. As if they had been saying, 'Mein Körper ist kein Käfig' – *My body is not a cage*.

To the weak points of the exhibitions: they do not include a contribution to actionism of experimental filmmaker Kurt Kren, who would certainly complement the mosaic of Vienna provocateurs; and they lack any mention of the debacle of Muehl's community in Friedrichshof, which deeply affected this lover of physicality in the 1990s. Nevertheless, the MUMOK exhibition, as a whole, is intriguing, from *Chicken Piece* by Ana Mendieta to barging through the streets of Belgrade with Tomislav Gotovač, and to the predecessors of parkour Neša Paripović.

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