The Body *In Situ*, the Body in Crisis: From the Happenings of Allan Kaprow to the Vienna Actionists

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This paper explores the link between representation and power in the visual arts along the lines of Foucault and Artaud, and the aim is to highlight the way art is determined and affected by place, context, and time. It starts with the USA in the 1950s and the happenings of Allan Kaprow and other artists of the period, who decided that art should no longer be self-contained but part of life and continuous with it. These artists showed a particular interest in the material environment and a new awareness of the body. What emerges from this movement is the interaction between the body and space and between the artist and the spectator. The latter is an active part of the performance. He improvises, is influenced, and affected by his surroundings. With the Vienna Actionists, the body becomes the signifier, an object of experimentation and manipulation. Such practices lead to a questioning of the viewer's perception of his own body and reflect the preoccupations of other European artists in the post-war era. In this sense, art becomes a subversive act in a society which is felt to be repressive and inhibiting. The article ends with a few contemporary artists, like Jan Fabre, who continue to investigate the body/power dialectics and whose multimedia approach puts even greater emphasis on the link between body and language in our highly technologically-oriented society.

As suggested by the title, this paper aims at exploring the body not merely as concept but as a physiological, psychological, psychoanalytical, social and cultural entity. The juxtaposition, "The body *in situ*, the body in crisis," underlies a tension between the body—the artist's body as well as the beholder's body, submitted to various influences and pressures—and the spatial environment. Such a reflexion on the body as the locus of essence and identity will lead us to analyze it in its dual relation to the public and the private spheres: on the one hand, its link to power in its political sense, connoting hierarchy and authority, and on the other hand, its associations with the familiar and the intimate, the uncanny and the *other*.

Being both malleable and resistant, complex and enigmatic, the body has been an object of fascination ever since the dawn of humanity. Prehistoric cave painting, revealing anthropomorphic forms, colored in black or red pigment,

provides us with the tangible traces of a desire to communicate a sense of being, of presence, and a deep feeling of intimacy and mystery. The drawings are sometimes maze-like but they all have a spontaneous and fluid touch. Besides, very often the lines and shapes between human and animal features are indistinct, which testifies to the complexity of human nature and to a desire for transgression. Such a dialectics of limits – crossing boundaries between species, genders, between the outside and the inside, between different media – is what has always been fascinating about visual art. What is more, from the aftermath of World War II through the sixties and eighties until now, the body has been a constant object of investigation and questioning for artists all over the world. It has been used as interface in the interactive process between body and space, and/or medium and signifier, presented to the spectator in its fragility and vulnerability. The obsession with the body and its vulnerability in a society that is becoming more and more aggressive and violent is actually a recurrent subject among contemporary dramatists and stage directors (Edward Bond, Thomas Ostermeier, Rodrigo Garcia), and multi-media artists and choreographers (Samir Akika, Sasha Waltz, Jan Fabre).

The Body as Interface

The notion of boundary and transgression lies at the core of Allan Kaprow's book of essays entitled *The Blurring of Art and Life*, in which he defines his conception of art and examines the Happenings. This new art form emerged in the fifties in the USA, after World War II, a period of social, economic and political turmoil, an era of uncertainties, doubts and philosophical questioning. It developed in the sixties in America but also in Japan and in Europe. In Japan, it emerged from the traumatic experience of World War II and started with the Gutai group, as early as 1955, with painters like Kazuo Shiraga's *Making a Work with One's Body*. In this work, the painter is seen lying on the ground, crawling and fighting a patch of mud, a gesture reminiscent of action painting. In Germany, the art movement called Fluxus (literally meaning "flow" and "change") emerged out of dadaism. It promoted experimentation and was characterized by a mixture of social and political activism.[1] In France, Yves Klein, a member of The New Realists, experimented with a different type of art form called *anthropométries* or body paintings. Unlike the Japanese painters, Klein did not use his own body but his models' bodies. As he explained, his

1. Born in Germany, Fluxus spread to other countries in Europe, France, England, The Netherlands, Sweden, and the United States. The name was coined in 1961 in New York by George Maciunas, the founder of a magazine that advocated the dadaist principle stating that everything was art. Fluxus became an international movement producing mixed-media works, such as happenings, concerts, films etc.

models became "living brushes" and under his direction, "the flesh itself applied the color to the surface" (qtd. in Schimmel 33). In Austria, the Vienna Actionists' only concern and theme of investigation was the body which became a concrete projection surface, whether it be the painter's body or his model's.

So the main axis and common feature of this international art movement was *the body* although the approaches were different, even among the Vienna Actionists. All the painters shared the common desire to free themselves from the weight and constraints of tradition and society. As far as art is concerned, they wished to break away from the traditional modes of representation. Therefore, they moved from a fixed and rigid medium, traditional painting, to an unstable and heterogeneous medium, the body. For all those painters, the body was part of the work or was the work itself. It was variously used as material, as surface and texture, revealing its complexity and fragility, the porous limit between the outside and the inside, the skin and the flesh. For the most radical artists, working with the body or on the body as projection surface or signifier, meant unveiling a society in "crisis," thereby liberating the individual that lived in such a society. Furthermore, it was a means of giving form to man's repressed and latent desires.

In the United States, the "new concrete art," to quote Allan Kaprow (*Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life*), was first of all a reaction against Abstract Expressionism and formalism, as advocated by the famous art critic, Clement Greenberg. Kaprow's views were based on the pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey who had stated in *Art as Experience* that the sources of aesthetics were to be found in everyday life. Art was not separate from experience; it was a process of interaction, a term which combines the idea of reciprocity and the word "action," reminiscent of Action Painting, from which the Happening is derived. Indeed, Hans Namuth's photographs of Jackson Pollock are the best visual proof of the performative dimension of the act of painting. The American artist is seen working in his studio, splashing, dripping, squeezing paint all over the canvas that has been rolled out on the floor. The painter is physically involved: he enters the diegesis, moves in and out, backwards and forwards, from one side to the other, sometimes trangressing the limits of the rectangular frame. Furthermore, since the canvas is so huge, he is literally forced to be "inside" his work. He is caught within the entanglement of painting, caught in a frenzied and rhythmical performance. The painter's body is active and forms a continuum with the work of art. His paintings become *environments* which wrap in the spectator. In his famous article, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," Kaprow explains: "Pollock's choice of great sizes resulted in our being confronted, assaulted, sucked in" (*Essays* 6). Nevertheless, here the viewer is not physically part of the performance; only in his or her imagination does he or she participate in the process.

It is different with the happening, a flexible and fluid experimental art form which came into being in 1952 at Black Mountain College where the composer and artist John Cage organized an action including music, painting, dancing and poetry, entirely based on improvisation. Allan Kaprow was one of John Cage's students and he was fascinated by the idea of creating a total work of art (a view that had been shared by the Dadaists and by the German artist, Kurt Schwitters, with the *Merzbau*). He also felt the liberating effect of such events on the audience. Still in the article, "The Legacy of Jackson Pollock," Kaprow expands on the artists' new approach in the context of the late 1950s:

> Pollock, as I see him, left us at the point where we must become preoccupied with and dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life, either our bodies, clothes, rooms, or, if need be, the vastness of Forty-second Street. Not satisfied with the suggestion through paint of our other senses, we shall utilize the specific substances of sight, sound, movements, people, odors, touch. Objects of every sort are materials for the new art: paint, chairs, electric and neon lights, smoke, water, old socks, a dog, movies, a thousand other things that will be discovered by the present generation of artists. Not only will these bold creators show us, as if for the first time, the world we have always had about us but ignored, but they will disclose entirely unheard-of happenings and events, found in garbage cans, police files, hotel lobbies; seen in store windows and on the streets; and sensed in dreams and horrible accidents. An odor of crushed strawberries, a letter from a friend, or a billboard selling Drano; three taps on the front door, a scratch, a sigh, or a voice lecturing endlessly, a blinding staccato flash, a bowler hat—all that will become materials for this new concrete art. (7-9)

An Apple Shrine by Allan Kaprow was presented at the Judson Gallery in New York in 1960. Here the actor/spectator physically experiences space: he is invited to walk within a sort of maze-like corridor crammed with paper from floor to ceiling. The heavily-textured work is made up of junk materials, wire, pieces of cloth, and mainly paper protruding from the wall or hanging down from the ceiling and the general impression is one of disorder and instability. Space is confined and the audience members have to make their way out of the oppressive and claustrophobic labyrinth and to interact with the objects and the other people walking in and out. So participating in this case means being physically active and crossing boundaries, spatial but also psychological boundaries between the *self* and the *other*.

Yard was part of an exhibition entitled *Environments, Situations, Spaces* shown in the courtyard of the Martha Jackson Gallery in New York in 1961. It is an outdoor installation, a sort of "all over" composition. This time, the participant is requested to walk on piles of tyres. His body exerts a pressure on

the tyres and is affected by and submitted to his own physical movements. Besides, he can feel the weight and the texture of the object under his feet.

Words was created in 1962 at the Smolin Gallery in New York. It occupied two rooms and in one of the rooms, the visitor could read words on pieces of paper that covered the walls. As he walked along, he could also write words or messages on the sheets of papers or put on some music. By adding new words, the participant then changed the meaning of the work or completed it; therefore he directly participated in the elaboration of the work. In fact, the body "produced" it. The work "*in situ*" is indeed a direct experience which, nevertheless, loses its immediacy and meaning once the actor/spectator leaves the environment.

So the aim is to shift the position of the viewer from a passive state to an active one, hence to destabilize him by making him change his perception of the work of art and of his familiar environment. For the artist, it was a way of bridging the gap between himself and the spectator, between the work of art and the spectator, and finally between the spectator and the official art institutions.[2] Such a view was in keeping with Allan Kaprow's open conception of art as being all-encompassing, an idea that was shared by other artists, Jim Dine and Claes Oldenberg. Like Kaprow, those artists used ordinary, ephemeral, junk materials, which is another means of underlining the interelationship between art and life. At the same time, the use of such a medium underlies a critique of the prosperous consumer society. However, as Julie H. Reiss has explained, artists, namely Dine, Kaprow, Oldenburg, and Robert Whitman, in the post-McCarthy era, did not openly express their political opinions: "There was no explicit political content in the Environments of Kaprow, Oldenburg, and Dine" (16). She adds that those artists left the gallery when it became more involved with political issues (25). Nevertheless, it is worth noting the challenging works of the politically active painters of the late 1960s, Carolee Schneemann,[3] Jon Hendricks or Jean Toche, whose aim was to remind the audience of the atrocities of the Vietnam War and the race riots in America. Besides, it is rather surprising to read that in one of his writings (in which he states the different rules of the happening), dating from 1966, Kaprow only briefly alludes to the political issues of his time. What the spectator is likely

2. Kaprow admitted that such an approach corresponded to democratic ideals. Exhibiting works ouside the gallery, in warehouses or decrepit places, was another sign of the artists' desire to create an art form that was close to ordinary people. Allan Kaprow never presented his environments in a museum.
3. In 1962 Carolee Schneemann presented a performance entitled *Meat Joy* in the church of the Judson Memorial in New York in which the performers, whose bodies were splattered with ox blood, were writhing on stage.

to remember about this marginalized art form is its game-like and ritualistic dimension:

> But the importance given to purposive action also suggests the Happenings' affinities with practices marginal to the fine arts, such as parades, carnivals, games, expeditions, guided tours, orgies, religious ceremonies, and such secular rituals as the elaborate operations of the Mafia; civil rights demonstrations; national election campaigns; Thursday nights at the shopping centers of America; the hot-rod, dragster, and motor; and, not least, the whole fantastic explosion of the advertising and communications industry. (64)

The Body as Signifier

At the same time, in Europe, mainly in France, Germany and Austria, the situation was totally different as artists took on a radical position. For example, Jean-Jacques Lebel's first happening, the *Anti-Trial*, which took place in Paris, Milan and Venice in 1960, can only be understood in the critical, historical and political context of the sixties, namely the spirit of revolt and opposition to the Algerian War. Such an atmosphere of rebellion was pervasive at the time. In one of his texts, "Theory and Practice," in which he gives the theatrical background of the happenings, Jean-Jacques Lebel speaks of "this exploiting society, with its slave-owning brutality and with its irremediable culture" (23). He also clearly stresses the French artists' different approach from that of their American counterparts, although he admits that there is no precise definition of the happening, as this art form encapsulates a multiplicity of meanings. Nevertheless, he points out his disagreement with Allan Kaprow who, in 1964, explained in *Art News* that the artist was now deprived of "his classical enemy, society" ("Should the Artist Be a Man of the World" 35). Still in his article, the French painter and poet reminds the reader of the origins and development of happenings from dadaism, surrealism, Artaud's Theatre of Cruelty, and absurd drama, namely the influence of Ionesco, Genet, and Beckett. It is undeniable that affinities can be found between the happenings of the 1960s and Artaud's conception of the new theatre or "total theatre" encompassing a variety of practices: light effects, movement and gestures of the body, sounds, shouts, any form of language that might provoke a physical and emotional response in the spectator. Artaud insisted on dramatic experimentation and wished for a new type of theatre associated with danger, violence, and cruelty that could unsettle the viewer and help him release the dark forces of his unconscious. Jean-Jacques Lebel's happenings were not only fraught with political overtones but they were also sexually-oriented, partly based on Freud's definition of

prohibition and on Georges Bataille's concept of eroticism.[4]

In Vienna, as in Paris, happenings emerged from the political situation, this time from the trauma of Fascism and the context of destruction and annihilation of the individual brought about by World War II. In the post-war era, a deep sense of loss was experienced. As the American art critic, Harold Rosenberg explained in his book *The Anxious Object*, just after the war, artists did not know who they were, what art meant, and how they were to function. Likewise, Theodore Adorno, asserted that writing poetry was no longer possible, an idea that found expression in the metaphor of the empty page or the blank canvas.

For the Viennese artists, Otto Muehl, Günter Brus, Hermann Nitsch or Rudolph Schwarzkogler, the only possible medium in art was the body that had physically and psychologically registered the wounds of an oppressive and repressive regime. What they shared with Lebel, Kaprow, Dine and Oldenburg was the desire to reintroduce art into life and to go beyond the physical limits of painting.[5] The aim was to extend art into life. However, they resorted to photography, hence fixing or stabilizing the action performed in a conventional form, which was paradoxical, and totally unlike Kaprow's conception of the performance that could never be repeated. In addition, most of the time, the Vienna actionists organized private performances, aimed at a limited audience who did not participate. Their actions involved elements of reality and the human body viewed in "terms of its thingness as the subject, material and surface for performance" (Brus et al. 12). The body became a source of exploration and a vehicle for expressing the destructive and devastating effects and influences of power on the individual, which the other European artists also strongly felt concerned with. Such a view has Nietzschean echoes and is close to Michel Foucault's power/knowledge paradigms and the idea that all the institutions in a society are instruments of power. In other words, there is no escaping the repression and the discourse of power. Taking up Nietzsche's theories on the body, Foucault demonstrates in *Discipline and Punish* and in *The History of Sexuality* the underlying mechanism at work within the power structure, and the annihilating consequences on man who is but an object of manipulation. In

4. They included drugs, alcohol, and eroticim. In one of his texts, "Theory and Practice," Jean-Jacques Lebel harps upon the notion of prohibition by calling to mind the legacy of Freud and Georges Bataille. He states that "all language turns on violation, and all art is founded upon unveiling. The dialectical, supremely ambivalent nature of violation can never be sufficiently stressed. Violation is at once birth and unbirth, the going-beyond and the return, accomplishment and death." He adds, "All transmutation begins with a rape, with a reversal" (Lebel 16-17).
5. Most of the Viennese artists had started as painters and become aware of the constraints imposed by the medium.

Discipline and Punish, he presents the genealogy of the modern man as a docile and muted body, a belief that was widely shared by the Viennese Actionists who all sought strategies for liberating the alienated body. They all agreed that the history of power had always implied the history of power on the body and that dominating man has always meant dominating his body, hence the dialectics of subject/object that underlies their performances. So their intention was to work on the material that belonged to that society, the body, which they perceived as the only possible object of investigation. They probed it, skin and flesh, to bring out its fears, needs, obsessions and unconscious desires. Adolf Fronner, another member of the group, said in 1962: "I had to get what was inside me onto the painted surface" (*Von der Aktionsmalerei zum Aktionismus: Wien 1960-1965* 182).

Otto Muehl was the first to carry out actions[6] in Vienna. His first action took place in 1963 in front of his studio and it was public. One year later, in march 1964, the action happened in his apartment without any audience, only with a photographer. *Crucifixion of a Male Body* consists of a series of 12 black and white photographs showing the painter splashing paint all over the body of his model, the artist Hermann Nitsch, who was bound and tied to a crucifix fixed on a white wall. Unable to move, the model's body is submitted to various manipulations: the painter has covered his head with a headdress made of hemp and he can be seen weaving small strings around the model's head, trunk and thighs. The model looks tense and contracted under the heavy weight of materials, including the paint itself. The action hinges around the dialectics of torturer/victim, an obvious echo of the Nazi persecutions but also an indictment against Austrian society perceived by artists as being repressive and inhibiting. In other actions, Muehl's apprehension of the body is more aggressive and violent, as the painter indulges in ritual-like performances exposing the body to degradation and sacrifice. As RoseLee Goldberg points out in her book on performances, those ritualistic actions were a means of freing the repressed energy of the body and, as a result, of purifying it through suffering and pain.

Günter Brus also questions this society by inflicting pain on his own body, the body that has been suppressed and repressed by a political system and the right-thinking Austrian society of the post-war era. In 1966 he explained: "My

6. "Action" is the word most commonly used to describe the works of the Viennese artists. In an essay entitled "Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions," Kristine Stiles explains that the term "action" is to be understood in the social and political context of the 1950s and 1960s when the body as material became the new medium in the visual arts. She writes: "I have long contended that the body as material in art after 1950 was deeply tied to the need to assert the primacy of human subjects over inanimate objects, and was a response to the threatened ontological condition of life itself in the aftermath of the Holocaust and the advent of the atomic age" (Schimmel 228).

body is the aim. My body is the event. My body is the result" (259). In his writings, he also used the military image of the "armoured" body, to hint at the fascist ethics. He performed most of his actions on his own body (sometimes using his wife as model), desperately trying to remove that heavy armour imprisoning the self. By working on the outside, on the surface, he intended to remove the protective but also fragile layer of the skin so as to get closer to the flesh. As with Otto Muehl, his performances hinge on the subject/object dialectics. His purpose was first of all to liberate the body physically, to let the body's fluids run (what society had repressed), to let the body "extricate itself," to quote Julia Kristeva in *Powers of Horror*. As Kristeva explains in her book on abjection, to become a subject, it is necessary to abject the maternal function: "I expel *myself*. I spit *myself* out. I abject *myself*" (3).

In December 1964, Günter Brus carried out an action, entitled *Self-painting* consisting of three parts: 1) Hand-painting, 2) Head-painting, 3) Total head-painting. It was presented in one of his friend's studios. The painter, entirely dressed in white, is standing against a white wall. His head, his neck and his forearms are smeared with heavy white paint, like the background. With his right hand, Brus paints a black vertical line over his face and up along the wall, thereby making his body become one with the background, dividing it into two parts. This pictorial gesture is symbolic of a split between the outer art of the body and the inner part, but also between the self and the other. It also suggests that the body has become alienated from itself. The body is severed, which is backed up by the open scissors hanging on the wall whose sharp edges are clearly visible and turned towards the painter. Sharp instruments (a saw, a razor blade, an axe) are present in other photographs as well and they either frame the body or touch it. Here an axe (the executioner's axe?) seems to have penetrated and wounded the flesh, as a heavy patch of black paint is running down the painter's nose, like clotted blood.

With Rudolph Schwarzkogler the bruised and wounded body disappears under several layers of gauze bandages although the instruments of mutilation are still visible. In *Action III*, 1965, the model's body is all wrapped up in bandages that also cover his eyes, ears and mouth. The body is hidden behind several layers of white texture that call to mind a white shroud and evoke the presence of a corpse. The figure is blind, a sign which, according to Freud, is associated with castration. The body is deprived of its organs, of its living functions. What is left is an inert mass. The model is huddled, withdrawn into himself, retreating from the outside world. A razor blade, several dots of paint and patches of plaster can be seen on the bandages. They are reminders of the wound that has been or is to be dressed. The mutilated, mummified, and muted body has found refuge in a confined space. Language can no longer find an outlet. It is reduced to a silent

sound or cry that is deep inside. We are far from Allan Kaprow's happenings or Jean-Jacques Lebel's performances relying on improvisation and movement, or even Otto Muehl's violent actions. Here there is little action; the body is static. What is active is invisible: it is the silent language of the unconscious. The model "performs" in front of a very small audience, which consists of the artist and some friends. Schwarzkogler is present, yet he is not visible. He is behind, directs, corrects, takes pictures (he only works on his own body in *Action VI*). Like a god-like figure, he controls everything in that closed and cloistral world, an idea that is reinforced by the framing of the model and the high-angle shots.

Such a withdrawal of the figure into claustrophobia has to be perceived in relation to the painter himself. Indeed at that time, Schwarzkogler had become more and more isolated, hardly communicating with his friends or his family. Three years later, in 1968, he suffered from severe hallucinations and in January 1969, he fell from the window of his apartment, this time experiencing Yves Klein's *Leap Into the Void*, a work he had become obsessed with.

From the United States to Japan and Europe, the shift is from an open, flexible, and spontaneous collective movement to a radical and restricted circle of masochistic, narcissistic, and claustrophobic painters who waged a real battle against power by means of the body. What they all prized was freedom which, in the 1950s and 60s, meant liberation from totalitarian ideologies and, for New York artists in particular, liberation from the tutelage of European art history. Nevertheless, whether process-oriented or conceptually-oriented, the performances by the Gutai group, the New Realists or the Viennese actionists are above all the sign of a void and deep existential *Angst*.

The Body in Contemporary Practices

With the development of Body Art, the body is once more an object of intense investigation and the support of performances, as evidenced by the works of Hannah Wilke, Marina Abramovic or Gina Pane. For example, in her videotaped performance, *Gestures* (1974-77), Hannah Wilke manipulates and distorts her face in various ways, stretching, folding, creasing her skin. In *Rhythm O* (1974), Marina Abramovic shows her body bearing the traces of razor cuts and being threatened by a gun to suggest the reification of the female body. Gine Pane (for example, *Partitions* in the late seventies) and French feminist-artist Orlan in the nineties have both inflicted physical pain on their bodies to highlight the violence of society, calling to mind the tortured bodies of saints and martyrs. Orlan even goes so far as to make her own body experience plastic surgery operations with a view to rearranging it and making it comply with the canons of feminine beauty.

Likewise, Anvers-born visual artist, Jan Fabre, (also choreographer, stage-

director, and poet) has been concerned, ever since the seventies, with the question of metamorphosis and transmutation, though his approach is different. Following the tradition of the Viennese Actionists and the Body Art movement, he has focused on the vulnerability of the body submitted to ever-increasing threats in our present society. His blood drawings and his performances, like *I Am Blood* (2001) are self-explorations and self-sacrifices reminiscent of the rituals conducted by Michel Journiac or of the crucifixions of Otto Muehl. They are also part of a long tradition in Flemish art, reminding the spectator of Brueghel's and Rembrandt's paintings. For Fabre, such performances are a means to liberate himself from death, guilt, and the evils of society but they also act as an initiation to life.

The life-death duality underlies Jan Fabre's latest performance entitled *Angel of Death,* which combines choreography, video, music, and textual elements. It is based on a text that reads like a poem written by the artist himself and inspired by Andy Warhol, an androgyne, as indicated by the note at the end of the text. The performance celebrates the return to life after death ("I'M BACK FROM THE DEAD" are the first words). Fabre introduces here an environment in which the human body and technology are in constant interaction. The work resonates with various sounds that call each other: the off-stage voice reading the poem, the choreographer's movements and sounds (her body contracting, stretching, twisting, revolving, breathing, screaming, laughing, her tongue clicking, emitting a series of onomatopoeia). The spectator is part of the interactive space as she/he sits in between the dancer and the saxophone player walking stealthily behind him. He is required to move his head backward and forward, downward and upward to follow the dialogue that is going on between the two figures while seeing and hearing words projected on four video screens. The words are pronounced by choreographer William Forsythe who dances, appears and disappears in the halls of a natural history museum.

Angel of Death exemplifies the *Flesh Made Text Made Flesh* problematic as it celebrates the interconnectedness of body and language. The word "angel," etymologically meaning "messenger," reinforces the permeability and mobility of contemporary artistic discourse and practice. Jan Fabre uses the archaic term "concilience" when talking about his work, which is an adequate term to point to the blurring of boundaries. Like Artaud, he believes that art cannot be conceived or defined in a restricted way. He is a multi-faceted artist who relies on the tools provided by our highly-technologized society which is saturated with images. Yet his work cannot be reduced to its visual dimension. It encapsulates the organic (he is also fascinated by insects, a recurrent image and a metaphor for the transformation of the body and of life) and the inorganic, the material and the linguistic. Jan Fabre is aware of the power of words and

the pressure of society and political discourse. However, compared to the seventies, his position today tends to be less radical, more distant and universal. With Jan Fabre, we are far from the nihilistic vision of the Viennese actionists although some of his productions, like *Flemish Warriors*, are bitterly ironic. *Angel of Death*, for example, is both a celbration of death and of life. What emerges from Fabre's drawings, performances, and installations is a growing interest in what is not immediately perceptible, an interest in the slow process of change and metamorphosis. The artist is concerned with universal issues, like the passage from life to death, and the question of life after death, key issues that artists and spectators from all over the world will ever keep wondering about.

Following the footsteps of Marcel Duchamp, all these artists have produced works that have created perceptual disorientation, although they have worked during different periods, in different countries and contexts. Today it may sound outdated to talk about Allan Kaprow; yet he is a leading figure in the twentieth century art world and can still be regarded as the intellectual mentor of a whole generation of contemporary performance artists. Not only is he remembered for his open conception of art that introduced a new artist-audience relationship, but also for his thought-provoking philosophy and his desire to unleash the suppressed forces of the ordinary caught within the confines of a society impregnated with Puritan morality. This idea takes on a deeper resonance in the post-war era of the Austrian context with the Vienna actionists who adopted a radical, aggressive, and subversive approach. Their medium was the body and they believed that by acting on the outer body, they could reach the inner body, thereby releasing man from the grip of power. However, their art turned out to be an individual and solitary experience, a process of self-analysis and self-objectification. To them, words failed to express the ineffable; only a language of repressed screams and bodily functions could be given full expression. Contemporary artists like Rodrigo Garcia or Jan Fabre also address the problem of power and are fully conscious of the fact that dominating man implies dominating his body. In their view, art is closely related to desire and resistance but meaning cannot be reduced to a bodily language. It arises from an interaction of various mediums, verbal and non-verbal, graphic and techonological, and of the artist/audience/space triad.

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