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NUDITY AND TEXTUALITY IN POSTMODERN PERFORMANCE

Karl Toepfer

When people speak of nudity in theatrical performance, they tend to refer to actions in which actors expose their genital organs to the audience. Even to an entirely female audience, female performers who expose their breasts will appear more “naked” than male performers who expose their bare chests. Nudity in performance refers to the exposure of the most erotically exciting and excitable sexual identifiers of the body, with exposed genitals being the most complete “proof” of the body’s vulnerability to desire and the appropriating gaze of the Other. However, this view of nudity entails some difficulties in relation to theatrical practice. For instance, some performers have used flesh-colored body-stockings to simulate nudity, while others have used prosthetic genitals or breasts as part of a costume which in fact conceals the body of the performer. Consider also those theatrical scenes in which the spectator knows the actor is really nude but cannot see this nudity “sufficiently,” because clever light and shadow “veil” the body. Another device for “suggesting” nudity is to have the actor stand behind a screen upon which he projects his silhouette while he takes off his costume; when he finishes “stripping,” he appears naked to the spectator when he actually is not.

Let us assume that these conventions of theatrical practice entail a costuming or masking of the body and that nudity in performance refers to the unmasked genitals of the performer(s). A performer who wears a mask over her/his face and nothing else causes more “problems” of perception than a performer whose face is completely naked (without even makeup) while the rest of his/her body is completely clothed. In some forms of sadomasochistic performance in private clubs the bodies of performers appear completely costumed (or uniformed) *except* for the genitals, and such performers appear more “naked” than performers who wear nothing but shorts or bikinis (*Rubber Mistresses*). So: nudity in performance is complete only to the degree that the spectator sees, not the fact that the performer is “really” naked, but actions in which the “real” body of the performer is signified by the exposure of the performer’s genitals. Theatrical nudity thus awakens complicated “problems” concerning the “reality” of the performing body.

But even this view of nudity in performance is not without difficulties, for it assumes that nudity is above all a matter of showing and seeing; it assumes that the

body, the thing made naked, is an entirely visual phenomenon. However, the voice is as much a part of the body as any organ, and the capacity of a body to speak means that a completely *unclothed* body, with genitals exposed, can become “more naked” or signify even greater vulnerability by speech emanating from it, speech addressed to it, or speech about it. The voice connects language to the body and even makes language a “part” of the body. Language operates through texts in the sense that a text refers to the readability of a signifying practice. Even a completely improvised performance containing no speech is a text insofar as an audience reads it in relation to rules defining the manifestation of performance. Action, including speech, which follows a “script” is an effort to “write” the body through performance. In the performance of a text, an audience will read the performing body (the textuality of the body) in a manner distinct from the reading of an unscripted performance. The two modes of performance project two separate attitudes toward the relation between body and text. A question then emerges: how does each mode of performance construct a different meaning for nudity in performance, a different attitude toward the most complete “proof” of the body’s vulnerability to desire and the appropriating gaze of the Other?

Though it has become more frequent since the 1960s, nudity as I have defined it is still extremely rare in theatrical performance. This rareness is due to the pervasively assumed potential of the nude body in performance to produce severe “misreadings” of its significations. This potential of the nude performing body to “shock,” “incite,” frighten, disgust, or otherwise produce intense emotional turbulence in the spectator results from the tendency of the action to collapse distinctions between the “real” body of the performer and the “imaginary” body of a “character” textualized out of a theatrical code. It is an extreme form of realism which seeks to dissolve difference between reality and representation. Obviously the performer desires the spectator to see the body as it “really” is.

However, it is very difficult to see any nude body (especially one which desires to be seen) without considering the implication that an invitation to see the body entails an invitation to desire the body. For the theatre spectator it is not clear how the performance can fulfill his or her desire for the performing body itself, especially if the performance nevertheless preserves the conventional separation between itself and its audience. Since the 1960s, performances employing nude bodies have provided a complex range of responses to these problems. But I suppose the significance of any of these responses depends on the extent to which the performance exposes the “most naked” condition of the body, with “most naked” referring to an ultimate power of the body to intensify or depress the spectator’s desire to effect, appropriate, or reproduce the mechanisms of exposure. This desire operates in relation to the specific theatrical rhetoric (or “textuality”) by which the performance persuades or does not persuade the spectator that the “most naked” body is one which speaks. Of course, in just about everyone’s mind is an inclination to suppose that the “most naked” body offers the potential for a *pornographic* relation between speech and action.

Prior to the 1960s, *photographic* images of nude bodies tended to assume an ethnographic identity, insofar as censorship mechanisms permitted the public dissemination of such images because of their authority to equate public (camera documentable) displays of nudity with the performance of alien, “primitive” cultures intensely estranged from “civilized” control over the body. Ethnographic photos of nude bodies had the not always intended effect of associating nude performance with negative conditions of extreme “primitivity” or cultural otherness, and “art photos” of nude Western bodies only reinforced this effect by their perpetual encounter with legal restrictions against them and by their clandestine or marginal modes of dissemination. But a lingering effect of the ethnographic bias in much postmodern nude performance is still to identify nudity with the recovery of “primitive” being. Primitivity then acquires a new, positive value, but it’s not altogether clear that nudity itself has achieved a new value.

In the 1960s, nudity in performance tended to dramatize a tension between the body and textuality. Nudity signified a release or “freedom” of the body from “oppressive” constraints imposed on it by texts, language, communication codes which “clothe” the disclosure of an “authentic” level of being or reality. In the 1970s and 80s, the limitations of this attitude became evident and new strategies for the deployment of nudity in performance appeared. My purpose is to present a comparative analysis of nine such strategies and show how they perceive nudity, not as a transcendence of textuality, but as a disruptive mode of textuality which compels the spectator to “read” the body in some new way.

Mythic Nudity, as exemplified by the work of Carolee Schneemann and *The Living Theatre* (1960s), treats the nude body as a signifier of a primordial human “innocence” that “democratically” transcends all mechanisms of difference between persons, including those defining and motivating erotic desire. Here language has limited or marginal value in exposing the “most naked” condition of the body. In relation to her performance piece *Ice Strips* (1972), in which she undresses and dresses in the dining car of a speeding train, Schneemann asserts that language is a “disguise,” and it is above all the naked body that gives any authenticity to the perception of identity as a condition of *exposure*. For Schneemann, nude performance often required non-theatrical performing spaces, such as galleries, railroad cars, woodland groves, and lecture halls; nude performance then becomes a strategy for “exposing” the mythical identity of physical/social reality.

In *Naked Action Lecture* (1968), for example, she gave a lecture on art history, during which she stripped for the purpose of asking the question, “Can a woman have public authority while naked and speaking?” But perhaps the most significant feature of Schneemann’s nude performance aesthetic is her presentation of the body as a “collage.” Collage nudity celebrates the materiality of the body by linking nudity to enhanced sensitivity to surfaces and textures. Thus, Schneemann was fond of inviting spectators to join her in smearing their bodies with glue so that when they rolled around on the floor extraordinary formations of debris would adhere to the flesh and thus construct bodies covered by their own “natural” power to attract

the material world rather than by the socially-determined codes of fashion. In one piece from 1973–74, she suspended herself nude in a rope sling; swaying back and forth, she used crayons to inscribe lines and words on the three walls and floor of the performing space. The idea, apparently, is that nudity transforms space or leaves its “mark” on it to the extent that the body “touches” the space it inhabits in an utterly materialist manner (Schneemann).

Mythic nudity proposes that the condition of being naked is in itself a salvational action. Nakedness projects an abstract value which is independent of the bodies exposed. Indeed, nudity in this mode functions to level all differences between bodies. Such apparently was the objective for the nudity in The Living Theatre’s production of *Paradise Now* (1968), in which nude performers sought to dissolve all inscribed or “scripted” differences between social roles: when you get rid of clothes, you get rid of names, and when you get rid of names, you get rid of scripts, textualizations of identity which breed oppressive differences between You and I, rich and poor, educated and uneducated, men and women, teacher and student, employer and employee, buyer and seller, parent and child, performer and spectator, life and art. Mythic nudity “transcends” the desirability of bodies, for desires and desirability exist only to differentiate bodies and establish themselves as the strongest mechanisms of difference—they divide people, they do not unite them.

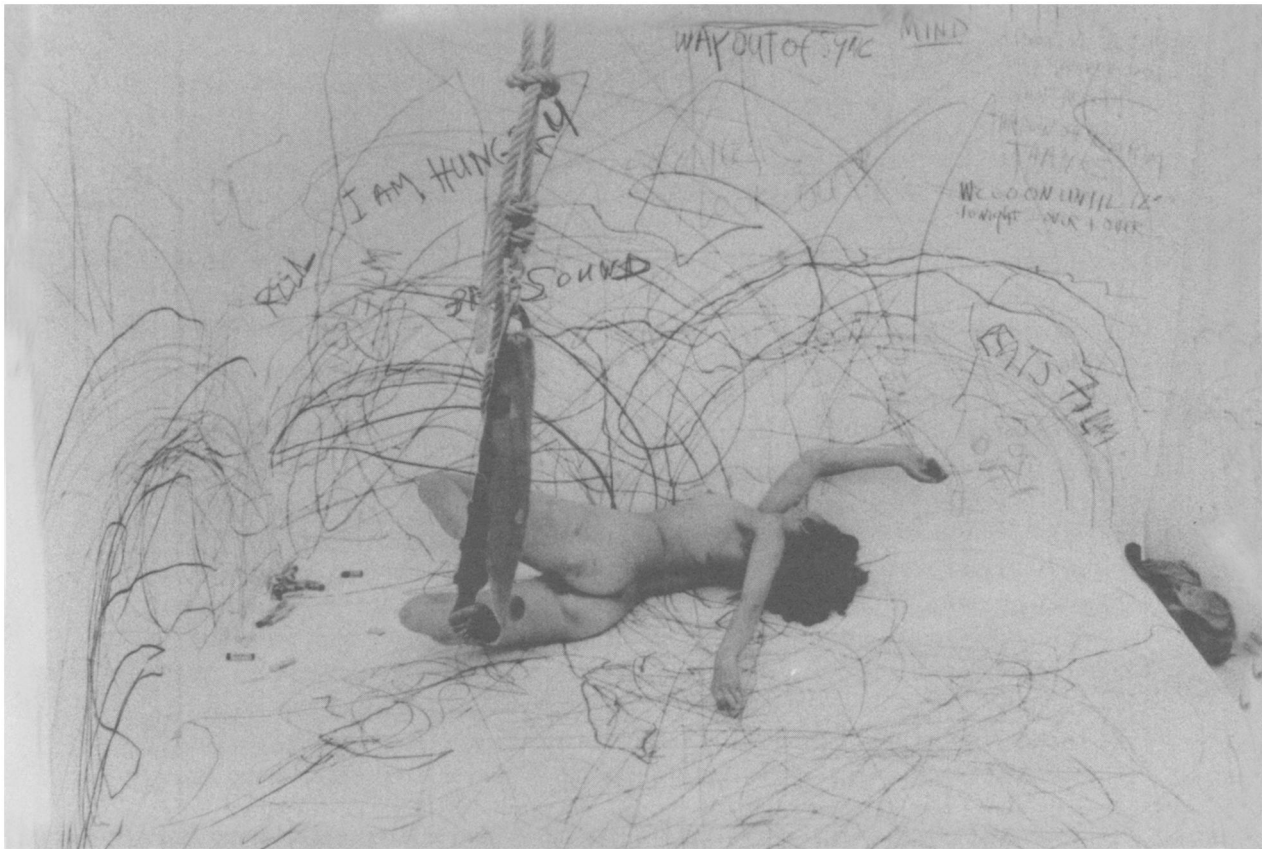
Detached from the desirability of bodies, mythic nudity invites the spectator to emulate, without “anxiety,” the naked identity of the performer: all bodies become “the same,” since it is the condition of nakedness, not the condition of bodies, which becomes the dominant sign of salvation. But this attitude must also necessarily “transcend” any serious connection between nudity and erotic feeling, a point, however, not grasped at all by forces of censorship with their own determination to see all bodies as sources of “indecent” desires. Yet it was precisely the legal controversies initiated by nude performances in a mythic mode in the 1960s which disclosed the naivete of the mode.

Ritual Nudity, as represented by the Viennese Actionism of Hermann Nitsch and Otto Mühl (1961–1989), urges the body to recover its mythic innocence by releasing and exposing, in Artaudian fashion, what is “inside” it: the body is “most naked” when we see coming out of it what causes us to fear it: sweat, blood, sperm, excrement, urine, vomit, “mysterious” cellular activity. Thus, in numerous “actions” he has staged since the early 1960s, Nitsch calls for the crucifixion of nude male or female bodies, which he drenches with the blood of sacrificial animals, entrails, visceral slime. Although he accompanies these lengthy rituals with elaborately designed soundtracks or “symphonies” of intense music, distorted noise, and sometimes screams, speech plays almost no role in moving either the performer or spectator to the desired state of purity. Until 1971, Mühl’s “action commune” performed monstrously scatological orgies for the European public in an effort to make the most “private,” yet “necessary,” bodily functions, such as ejaculation, urination, menstruation, excretion, the subject of spectacle.

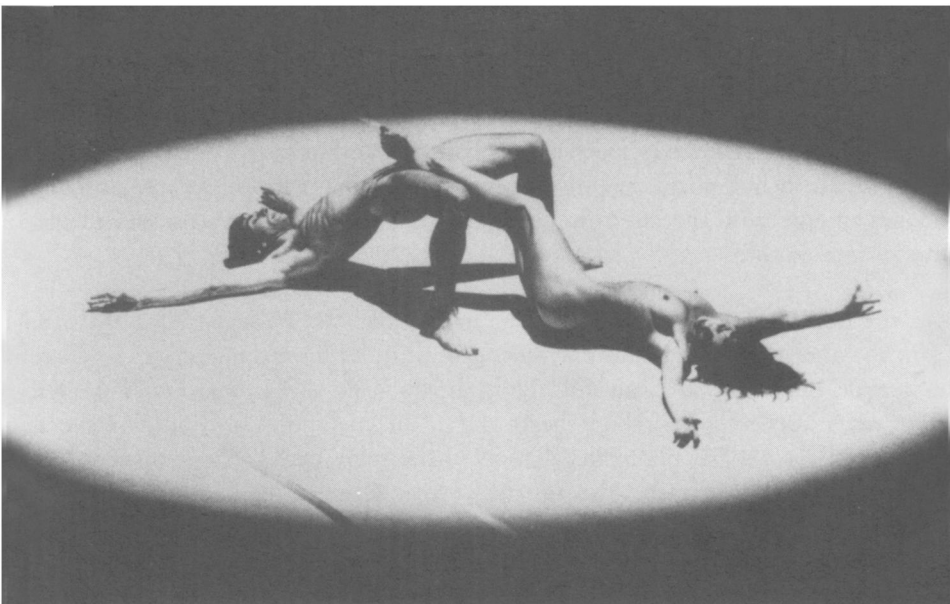
As spectacle, the actions presumably dissolve the spectator's fear of the "dark" modes of transformation at work *inside* the body. Nudity is incomplete until the body secretes what the flesh hides; but what comes out of the body always in some sense desecrates the body and expresses the ominous fragility of human physiology before a turbulent "inner" darkness. However, the documentation of audience responses indicates that while this category of nudity has considerable power to shock audiences and inspire legal action against it, spectators never seemed aroused by the performance. Ritual nudity apparently has no value as pornography, as a configuration of desire, at least for the spectator, any more than mythic nudity, although some of the luxuriously packaged documentation suggests, especially in the case of Mühl, that the performers may experience great sexual excitation during the performance (Leiss 454–483; Gorsen 159–188; Nitsch; Klocker II).

Therapeutic Nudity entails nudity which works to deconstruct "idealized" (over-determined) perceptions of the body that inhibit the "healthy" formation of erotic desires. With this strategy, the spectator invariably reads the body as a source, rather than object, of desire. Since the mid-1980s, Annie Sprinkle has given lecture-type performances during which, nude, she *talks* relentlessly about sex in a cheerful, poised, candid, but not especially seductive manner. She treats her nudity as a sign of an "honest" or "liberated" sensibility and urges her audience to inspect her, to probe her. She enjoys herself so much that her desire to appear naked seems much greater than any desire of the audience to see her naked. She reverses the normal trajectory of desire produced by a striptease, in which the naked body is the object of the spectator's desire. Sprinkle's apparent indifference toward her capacity to attract desire has the odd effect of compelling the spectator to *disclose* himself or herself more fully than the normal performance of a striptease allows, and this disclosure is "healthy" because it frees the spectator from the inclination to regard the body as something which should be seen only to the extent that seeing does not expose the seer's identity. In making the nude body a sign of desire's origin, rather than end, Sprinkle privileges being seen over seeing as a condition of pleasure (Sprinkle).

Butoh, the Japanese dance-theatre cult, frequently employs nudity in a therapeutic mode, but in a manner quite different from Sprinkle. Here, the nude body, occasionally covered with a white powder, interacts, in rather minimalist fashion, with blatantly theatrical effects: masks, colored lights, or extravagant props, such as a parasol, a large swath of cloth, or a transparent sphere. Before exposing their bodies, male performers often wear dresses or feminine-type gowns, veils, and hats. Female performers sometimes shave their heads bald. The movements of Butoh dancers project an eerie, grotesque aura in which the nude body achieves expressivity through a repertoire of spasms, convulsions, twitchings, sputterings, whirlings, slitherings, stampings, crawlings, and plant-like convolutions of limbs, torso, and head. The body appears as a strange, alien being, an organism which is far less "familiar" than the audience supposes. The idea is that the spiritual or emotional health of humans depends on restoring the body's primordial, harmonious connection to nature, but nature always entails a submission to impulses and rhythms



Carolee Schneemann, *Up To and Including Her Limits*. Photo: Courtesy Henrik Gaard.



Mutations, choreographed by Hans van Manen and Glen Tetley, Netherlands Dance Theatre. Photo: Courtesy Anthony Crickmay.

which are strange, irrational, deeply embedded in energies that institutionalized constraints on bodily expression strive to marginalize or suppress.

However, by so austereily detaching perception from “familiar” exposures of the body, Butoh actually promotes a further detachment of desire to or for bodies and thus situates its therapeutic effect within a “higher” aim of “transcending” erotic drives (Haerdter; Viala). Butoh is almost opposite Sprinkle in adopting therapeutic nudity, for Sprinkle’s aim is to present her own body in an exuberantly personal, friendly, cozy, “familiar” way to spectators for whom the body as such has become an oppressively strange, foreign organism.

Model Nudity, as suggested by the work of the German artist Barbara Heinisch and the American artist Hannah Wilke (1970s and 80s), makes nudity function as an “ultimate” critique of the relation between the body and the gaze of the Other, for whom the body is a “model” of his or her desire to see or be seen. With this strategy, nudity is “complete” only to the extent that it exposes the conditions under which one body, that of the spectator, exerts a “power” to read itself into another body. Heinisch, for example, produces paintings in a theatrical manner which explores relations between artist, model, and spectator. Behind a large, diaphanous cloth screen poses a nude male or female model. As the model assumes different poses behind the screen, Heinisch tries to “capture” or freeze the image of the body with her expressionist painting style. A single nude body motivates the screen-size image of other bodies or a body whose image undergoes violent metamorphosis. Heinisch conducts an unrehearsed dialogue with the model while creating the image. At an agreed upon moment, the model breaks through the screen, the image, and approaches the audience. Thus, the nude body of the model exerts a power over the image which the artist cannot and wishes not to contain within her perception of it. “Real” nudity breaks through the image of nudity, as if penetrating a membrane, or, as Heinisch herself puts it, the desire to capture the body as an image “gives birth” to an other body than the one the artist sees in silhouette. While Heinisch’s paintings are in themselves spectacularly complex and intensely emotional achievements, their turbulent effect upon perception intensifies with the awareness that the images emerge from speech, from dialogue between the clothed artist and the nude model (Heinisch).

On the other hand, in the work of Hannah Wilke, the artist herself is the model with the aim of exposing culturally-encoded attitudes toward narcissism in relation to female desire for a “beautiful” body. In *So Help Me Hannah* (1985), Wilke appeared nude except for high heels and re-enacted poses and actions she had performed for a 1978 photo installation of the same name. She composes satiric advertisements for herself. She squats, crawls, lounges, coils against very bare backgrounds or against “unaesthetic” settings, such as a toilet, a pump, or a deteriorated wall; for some “advertisements” she manipulates curious props, like little Mickey Mouse dolls and toy guns. She further captions the “advertisements” in a self-consciously unsexy manner: “Exchange Value,” “Beyond the Permissably Given,” “What Does This Represent?” Part of the performance consists of two men

videotaping her, and monitors project their ways of viewing her, so that the performance spectator sees how the “narcissism” compelling the artist to become the model undermines unity of perception in relation to the female body. (Wilke prefers only male camera operators because female camera operators hesitate to focus the camera on more than Wilke’s feet, hands or head.)

However, all this deconstruction of female beauty does not subvert the perception that the body of Hannah Wilke is beautiful, an erotically provocative object. Wilke “helps the viewer to see the indispensable power of beauty,” the “dangerous” authority of a beautiful body to sustain its beauty, to sustain desire, independently of the “captions,” poses, or devices for representing it (Frueh 57, 101). The naked beautiful body is the dominant subversive force, not the processes for deconstructing the “myth of feminine beauty.” The Swiss artist Manon, who was a high fashion model in Paris, has pursued a somewhat similar critique of narcissism in her performances of the mid-1970s to mid-1980s, but her focus is on the way in which articles of clothing, hairstyles, makeup effects, furniture, or lighting modulate, fragment, or convolute responses to a body which is always and *absolutely* beautiful “in itself” (Manon).

Balletic Nudity, appearing in the work of Hans van Manen, Flemming Flindt, and Pina Bausch (1969–1983), suggests the redemptive value of the naked body depends on its rigorous textualization within a complex, highly institutionalized signifying practice (ballet). Here nudity exposes or “objectifies” the rhetoric of erotic communication dominating all relations between bodies: the performance shows that the “most naked” body is one which displays the “most perfect” command over those institutionalized, bodily signifying practices that “construct” desire, sexual difference, and distinctions between audience and performance. In works such as Glen Tetley’s *Mutations* (1970), Flemming Flindt’s *Salomé* (1978), and Pina Bausch’s *Le Sacre du Printemps* (1977), the potential of the nude body to incite or excite audiences depends entirely on the capacity of performers to display the idealizing rhetoric of ballet (Pastori 55–72). Nudity excites insofar as it embodies extraordinary physical virtuosity, superior mastery over a complex movement code that is just as “difficult” to perform naked as not.

However, this category of nude performance seldom accommodates the voice, although Johan Kresnik, in Bremen, and Tanztheater Himmunculus, in Vienna, have attempted balletic nudity with crude vocal utterances by the dancers themselves. Balletic nudity is extraordinarily controversial for aesthetic rather than the usual (and tiresome) moral/sociological reasons. Ballet culture sets very demanding standards of movement virtuosity, but only an extremely narrow range of bodies can accommodate these standards. Balletic movement does not make bodies beautiful, but beautiful bodies can arouse passionate feelings by performing balletic movements. The point of ballet is not that movement redeems the body; rather, it is that beautiful bodies in movement redeem a world in which the body generally suffers constraint from all sorts of rules, conventions, and regulations imposed by institutions such as ballet itself. Ballet movements performed by nude dancers may

function as a critique of social identities or “roles,” as in the work of Van Manen and Bausch, but they can *never* be a critique of the physical beauty expected of the dancers who perform the movements in the nude, for ballet allows *only* “beautiful” bodies to appropriate its distinctive rhetoric.

Thus, the overriding effect of balletic nudity is to show how beautiful bodies achieve maximum expressive power independently of the social roles associated with costume or “characterization,” but not independently of the complex movement rhetoric which defines the beauty of bodies. More than any other performing art, ballet focuses perception on the desirability of the performer’s body (as opposed to the desirability of an imaginary “character”), but desirability always remains aligned to a highly exclusive ideal of beauty: for a body is desirable not just because it is beautiful “in itself,” but because its beauty is powerful enough to accommodate the “demanding” movement rhetoric of ballet. Of course, this ideology produces intensely ambivalent feelings in the vast majority of spectators, even those who adore ballet. But that is why I believe it is probably the most haunting or “profound” manifestation of nudity in performance.

Uninscribed Nudity appears perhaps less often than it should in the work of numerous postmodern theatrical directors. In 1982, Fernando Arrabal directed in Paris a strange production of Racine’s *Phèdre* (1677) in which all the actors performed their roles nude. In this strategy, actors perform nude in old plays which do not prescribe any nudity. Here the nude body functions as a sign of historical tension between then and now. The spectator sees that the “immediate” body and its power to attract desire are constructions of the past, history, memory. The “most naked” body is one which deconstructs the authority of language to distance us safely from the “remote” past. History is in *the body*, not just in *the fashion*. Obviously, uninscribed nudity questions the “intentions” which motivated the text; nudity exposes aspects of the text which otherwise remain invisible or clearly subordinate to some dominant historicizing objective. It produces an “estranging” effect similar to cross-gender or cross-cultural casting.

Years ago I saw scenes from Maurice Maeterlinck’s *Pelléas and Mélisande* (1892) performed (in English) by an entirely nude cast in the garden of a private estate in Los Angeles county. Although the actors plainly lacked experience, it was astonishing how the mere act of performing in the nude made Maeterlinck’s pseudo-archaic language sound lusciously vibrant and shimmering, and it was as if, instead of watching a murky medieval fantasy, the audience beheld some strange, futuristic mutation of life in sunny California suburbia; indeed, most spectators did not realize that the text was a creation of the previous century.

But uninscribed nudity does more. When Arrabal did his production of *Phèdre*, he used lots of green lights, and he had the actors move out of the proscenium frame into the audience, so that nude actors spoke their lines while sitting next to spectators or even on their laps. In other words, uninscribed nudity has a tendency to undermine the representational stability of the text. Uninscribed nudity urges the

production to question the inscribed scenic, spatial, or architectural context for the action. The idea is to show the power of the naked body to undermine the regulatory, stabilizing forces of text, narrative, theatrical “order,” and historicity of signification. And it does seem that when a body appears nude on stage contrary to the author’s intention, everything else seems “out of place,” even though it purports to conform precisely to the author’s intentions. Uninscribed nudity utterly subverts authorial intention, yet it is supremely efficient at exposing the distinctive signifying power of an author’s language (as opposed to an author’s story or “vision”), which is a more interesting achievement, for the expressive authority of language depends much more on the material reality of the sign than on the imaginary “world” evoked by the referent. But of course, this sort of indifference to intention is pervasively controversial for many people who feel more comfortable with themselves and their culture by keeping judgments confined to intentions rather than actions

Inscribed Nudity, as evidenced by such plays as Francis Warner’s *Lying Figures* (1974), occurs when a literary text prescribes nude performance by the actors. This strategy tends to assume that a body is not “completely” nude until it rationalizes its nudity through speech. But embedded in the rationalization is the assumption that the nudity is a kind of mask which language (speech) unmasks. Language, not the body, which is a type of illusion, is what “determines” desire. Inscribed nudity was more prevalent in the 1960s than in subsequent decades, perhaps because, back then, actors and producers depended upon the moral “authority” of a text to justify nude performance. But since the early 1970s, the literary dramatic imagination has contributed very little to exploring the possibilities of nude performance. Dramatic writers have shown themselves incapable of harnessing the complex expressive powers of postmodern performance technologies and aesthetics, and as playwriting becomes increasingly superfluous to innovative theatrical performance, it seems unlikely that inscribed nudity will become more significant.

Writing plays is the most accessible way of feeling “in control” of performance, but the pleasure of postmodern performance results from shifting loci of control within it, so that liberating surprise depends on instability or “dynamics” within the mechanisms of control. It is a “theme park” or “mall-oriented” model of performance. But you can’t bring naked bodies into this “out of control” performance mentality—to use an exaggerated phrase—without appropriating the other modes of nude performance described here, all of which are hostile to the authority of written texts to justify (or rationalize) nudity. In 1969, John Lahr, surveying a large number of New York play productions involving nudity, concluded that “Off-Broadway playwrights are trying to face this repression [of the body], understanding where they must go, yet curiously unable to get beyond the middle-class inhibitions at the core of their rebellion” (Lahr 56). I think, however, that it is *writing itself* which is the inhibiting force, not a class morality. But this does not mean that nude performance fails to pursue a powerful relation to language. On the contrary, language becomes as “naked” as the body only when the naked body speaks language which escapes the power of writing to “determine” or stabilize its authority. In short, when you’re naked, your speech “means more” when you don’t have a script.

Obscene Nudity, as exemplified by the performance art of Karen Finley (1986–1989), produces an extremely violent clash between the body and speech of the performer. The nude performer presents her body as a lurid object of desire, but her incredibly filthy language roots the desire to see her and her own desire to be seen deeply in contradictory moods of disgust, degradation, defilement, and desecration. One can't become "completely" naked until one has "tested" the desire of the spectator to see "everything," including the monstrous "mess" the body makes of our desires, our emotions. Desire becomes a form of excretion, viscerally linked to processes of ingestion and elimination. Speech itself becomes a violent spewing of desire at the audience by the naked, food-smearred body of an "unsocialized" woman. Stripped of institutionalized or gendered controls on desire, the speech of the naked performer appropriates zones of subjectivity which seem beyond the authority of her exposed sexual organs; thus, in her rap piece *Yam Jam* (1986), Finley speaks as if, from sentence to sentence, her language mutated her from female to male, from female heterosexual to female homosexual to male homosexual, from incestuous sister to incestuous mother to incestuous grandmother, from a female who says what she wants the male to say to a male who wants to be the "dirty" female she is: "I've got a clit; I've got a cock . . . I'm swimming in my piss . . . I'm going to take a hot, steaming shit on you, bitch . . . Suck my clit, suck my cock . . . Let me suck your dick, suck my clit, let me suck your clit . . ." (Finley, band 3).

In 1981, Finley collaborated with Brian Routh on a shocking performance in Cologne. They appeared as Eva Braun and Adolf Hitler. On a stage littered with animal carcasses, they spoke about "anti-Semitic incidents they had witnessed in Cologne," but Routh "goose-stepped and saluted, naked from the waist down," while Finley defecated into a bowl, from which Routh, after singing a Johnny Mathis song, "lapped up the shit" in addition to "toy sharks stuffed with hot dogs and sauerkraut hung from" Finley's body. Not surprisingly, the huge audience became so disturbed that many spectators attacked the stage (Carr 126). Here is an interesting example of obscene nudity in which the speech of the performers is not obscene, but juxtaposed with that further juxtaposition of eating and defecation to produce an intensely visceral reaction in the spectator. Nudity isn't obscene unless it transgresses some threshold of shock, but shock is possible only when performance uncovers the power of *desire* to violate bodies and expose the spectator's capacity for pleasure in bodily disgust.

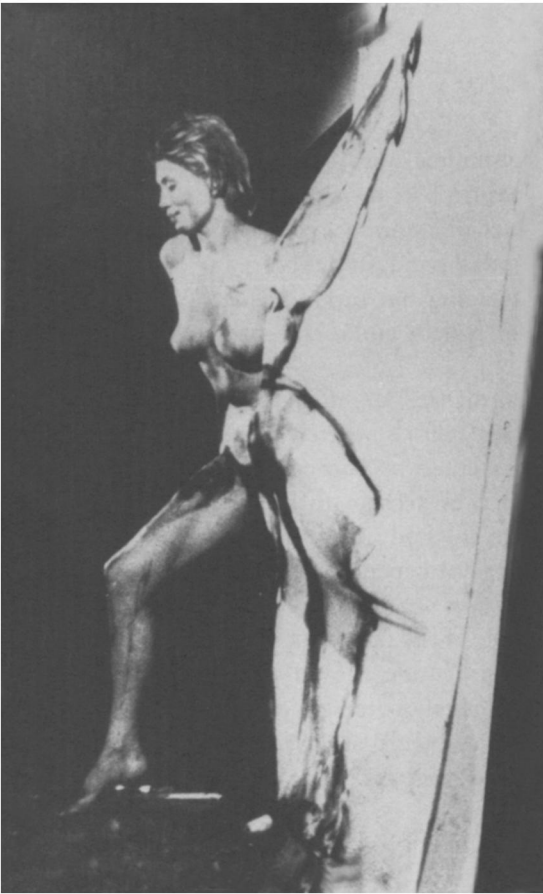
In *The Tears of Eros*, Georges Bataille described in lavish detail (with documentary photo supplement) the hideous public torture and mutilation of a naked Chinese woman, suggesting that obscene nudity can achieve unimaginably disturbing manifestations (Bataille 204–207). But this example of obscene nudity belongs more to premodern than postmodern forms of performance. Postmodern obscene nudity is always a transgression of distinctly "modern" constructions of desire. Finley's work indicates how categories of nude performance are not mutually exclusive and may embed themselves within each other. She might argue (as possibly she does, now that she has abandoned this mode of performance) that her work is not obscene nudity at all, but ritual or therapeutic nudity, except that her

performances completely lack the grandiose, communal aura of “mystery” that Nitsch obsessively cultivates and her notion of “healthy” seems completely focused on seeing all the juices the body releases as evidence of emotional corruption, as if looking at dirt somehow makes us clean. On the other hand, in her on-going cycle of Butoh dances, *Eros* (1989–1995), Maureen Fleming has produced decorative nude performances which blur distinctions between balletic and therapeutic nudity.

Pornographic Nudity appears most often in performances at underground (non-public) sex clubs, such as I have described in some detail elsewhere (Toepfer 144–156). All the other categories of nude performance could be pornographic if they sexually excite the *spectator* (not just the performer, as perhaps in ritual nudity), although some categories, by their attitudes toward the body, obviously make this possibility quite remote. A pornographic effect does not depend on nudity. A fully clothed woman can have a pornographic effect on a man or another woman without even knowing it, and I suppose some men are capable of the same unknowing effect on women. And some types of fetishism reveal the curious power of particular objects (shoes, panties, combs) to provoke stronger genital excitement than the sight of a naked body. Nevertheless, pornographic nudity assumes that the naked body is the most powerful source of sexual excitement in the spectator.

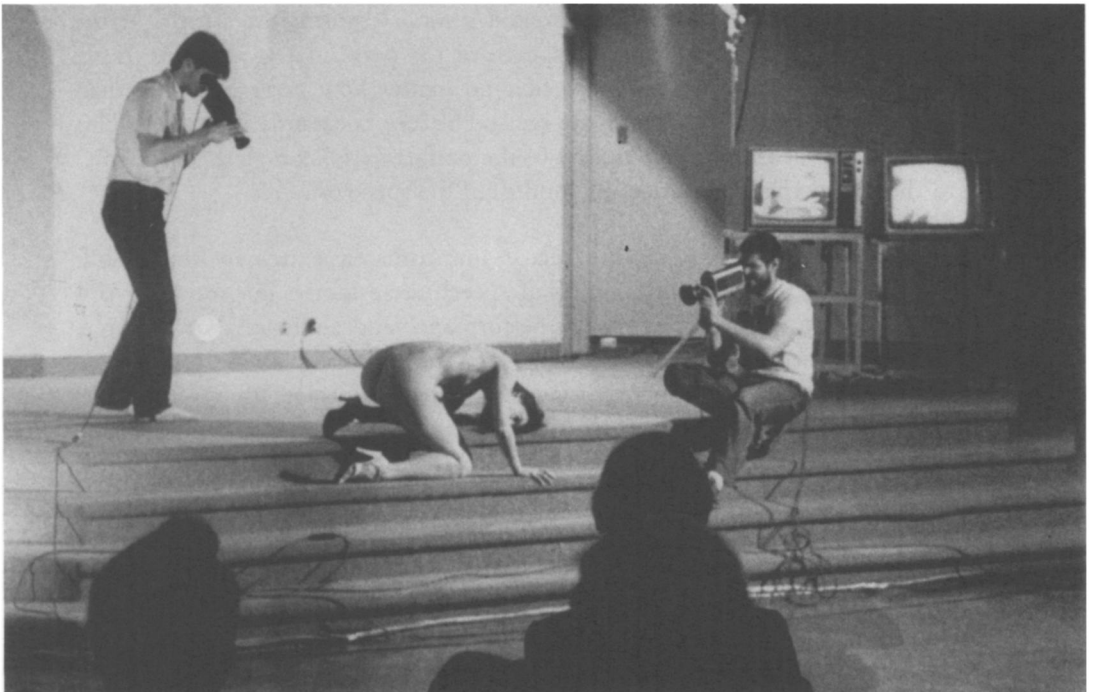
Moreover, pornographic nudity excites the spectator because the performer is also sexually excited. What excites the performer is the presence of the spectator. But what excites the spectator is not necessarily the exposure of the performer’s sexually excited genitals, since it quite possible to see sexually excited performers without becoming sexually excited. What excites the spectator are distinctive, perverse forms of speech which justify and motivate the nudity and sexual excitation of both the performer and the spectator. Sexually excited genitals confirm the “truth” of the speaker’s words and feelings. Here the speech of the performer(s) strives to make naked bodies appear “more naked,” so that no matter how *perverse* (rather than “messy”) the body becomes, the desire to see and be seen constantly intensifies. This strategy is orgiastic insofar as the nudity of the performer is “complete” (orgasmic) only to the extent that it produces the nudity of the spectator.

My experience of this mode of performance is, unfortunately, extremely limited, but it seems to me that very specific modes of speech are essential in producing this orgasmic collapse of difference between performance and audience. For example, pornographic nudity probably achieves pornographic effect because, no matter how many bodies constitute the seductive performance, the performers use speech which *directly addresses the audience*. The performer treats the spectator as a sexual partner. Moreover, pornographic speech does not consist simply of redundant graphic descriptions of bodies and sexual acts; it excites because it “makes naked” otherwise “invisible” magnitudes of desire and pleasure, rapturous emotional states. With pornographic speech, speakers and listeners want to know the limits of their power to excite other bodies, and this “knowing,” through language, is exciting in itself. Few people seem to realize how close genuine pornographic speech is to the expression of romantic feeling. Speakers invariably rely on favored sets of rhetorical



Barbara Heinisch performing as model for one of her action paintings. Photo: Courtesy Werner Zimmer.

Hannah Wilke, *So Help Me Hannah*. Photo: Courtesy University of Missouri Press.



devices which supposedly possess “seductive” authority, such as invitations, commands, questions, or “poetic” displacements of subjective voice.

For example, some women can become violently excited when they and their sexual partners refer to their vaginas as a cock or penis, so that “Suck my cock” means “Perform cunnilingus on me,” although neither men nor women seem to feel much excitement in referring to the penis or any other part of the male anatomy as a vagina—even if the male body is the object of female penetration. Both men and women seem peculiarly vulnerable to variations on the questions: “And then what would you do [to show how much I excite you]?” “And what would you say to them [to make them believe that no one excites you as much as I do]?” “And what else?” Speakers want to know how “wild” they can make their listeners and push them ecstatically “out of control,” yet the language of questions and answers is the optimum measure of this knowledge.

The rhetorical devices adopt a format, but you really can’t script the language, because pornographic excitement depends on saying exactly what you didn’t expect yourself to say. It is similar to the way in which sexual talk “normally” operates between sexually engaged bodies, except that pornographic nudity self-consciously treats sexual pleasure as a “performance,” or rather, sexual excitement intensifies the more it becomes “objectified” as performance. Pornographic speech is invariably perverse, but it can never be comic or humorous, because laughter is the great inhibitor of sexual excitement. As Finley’s work implies, we just drift into obscene nudity when the so-called “dirty talk” of nude bodies strives to satirize, ridicule, or demean its object. Nor is it by any means clear under what conditions a person becomes more excited by *speaking* rather than *hearing* pornographic speech.

But we need far more evidence of this sort of performance before we can move beyond the realm of speculative fantasy. John Preston gave an elaborate analysis of homosexual orgies at a club called The Mineshaft in New York City, without, however, describing the speech dynamics of the performers. He adopted the attitude of an ethnographer reporting on a strange tribe, which means that he focused more on subcultural political codes than on the performance mechanisms of pleasure—anthropology instead of aesthetics. Jill Dolan has contended that “the explicitness of pornography seems the most constructive choice for practicing cultural disruptions” (Dolan 272). But her notion of “pornography” is very weakly theorized and completely confined to publicly institutionalized gay and lesbian performances which critique culturally-defined (heterosexual) attitudes toward sexual difference or sexual orientation. The performances she favors (all of which are *plays*) don’t even contain nudity, and it’s difficult indeed to see how any of the gender-bending devices she endorses opens up the subjectivity of the audience on a pornographic level.

Pornography isn’t interested in social critique; it’s obsessed with creating an ecstatic utopia out of naked bodies. Yet I think Dolan is right in asserting the superior power of pornography to “disrupt culture.” Pornographic nudity is unique among all other categories of nude performance by its exposure of sexually excited bodies. The sexual

excitement of the performer entails the collapse of difference between performer and spectator, and this collapse is possible because the performer's excitement is the sign of *desire* for collapse within the spectator, the exact opposite of the situation (Finley, Nitsch, Mühl) in which spectators attack a performance that is so virulently critical or suspicious of their desires. It is hard to imagine a more severe "cultural disruption" than this orgiastic collapse of difference between performer and spectator, for this collapse is not possible without precipitating the collapse of many other structures of difference which cover up the body with "identity." But while pornographic speech is essential in confirming the sexual excitement of the performer, especially the excitation of the female body, by far the most "disruptive" feature of any nude performance is exposure of the erect penis. As a sign of desire and pleasure, the authority of the erect penis over perception greatly surpasses in "nakedness" any other performance gesture. It is because the spectacularization of the erection is so "disruptive" that it appears so rarely in live performance, for it's very, very hard to look "objectively" or rationally at desire made this naked.

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