

Karolina Lambrou: *A performance piece is very much affected by space, presence/absence of the audience and duration. How do these elements physically and thematically affect your actions?*

VestAndPage: In Performance art the context is everything. It is from the actual spatial configuration of the context that we start to analyse all the other aspects. Our work is mainly site specific. Even when we perform in the white box of a gallery, or the black one of a theatre, we need to stay there quite a long time to perceive the energy of the actual space, meet and talk with the people involved in the space, the technicians who work there, in order to be collaborative together to set up a piece that could be effective at its best. We need to inhabit the space, not simply enter it, and become part of it.

The durational aspect offers us possibilities to explore unknown territories, the ineffable, liminality, inner dialogues and inner silence, inner actions between ourselves and in relation to the audience. In a durational piece some patience from the audience is required: we know that we don't necessarily get this always, though we have met attentive and participatory audience quite always. Clearly anything here is mainly a matter of presence/absence. When we operate in a prolonged state of deep concentration, our beings (and bodies) transform likewise magnets. No matter the kind of action we're doing in a specific period of time, there will be always someone attracted by empathy, reacting, joining, and leaving, in this way contributing to aliment the energy we're spending, at different degrees. In a durational pieces, what for us is important is to reach in essence a condition of 'constant giving', letting the audience free of taking, receiving, comprehend, or let it go.

KL: *Do you think rituals should return back to our everyday lives as a means to express our violent impulses outside the community? Why are ritual forms so strong in your work?*

VAP: We thank you for this question Karolina, because it is crucial.

Human beings constantly have daily rituals in the everyday routine. Depending from the perspective from which someone wants to see at daily rituals, they can be seen as a way of shortening the leap between art and life; practices to softening the tension between control and chaos even through the disruption of regular, well-ordered patterns of the conventional; recoveries which reduce the senses into one, or “deadening the senses to promote familiarity and knowledge with the world that allows one to tune out essential information” as artist Scott Benefield beliefs.

And there is more, especially if we look at the mystery, which every person carries within him/herself. Rites and rituals have been studied from antiquity and in modern times have become objects of study in anthropology, ethnology, and sociology. The Gale Dictionary of Psychoanalysis, at the voice ‘Rite and Ritual’ says that a rite is “a well-ordered action or group of actions performed precisely and repetitively, where meaning and aims are generally opaque, and of no obvious practical purpose.” Rites and rituals are related to the sacred, and have always to do with a sense of pure healing, be they religious, magic, or, more simply, of everyday life. Also Sigmund Freud and Gustav Jung underscored the sacred character of these practices. They are ingrained in our human nature since ever. Therefore, we don’t think they should return back, as they have been always part of human existence and still are, only that we have to be able to recognize them as they transform with the becoming. And they are not just means to express our violent impulses outside the community, because rites and rituals were and are to build up a community, to gather people together in a condition of collective, mutual sharing.

In our performances, we often organize and use various rituals, be they in relation to nature, ancestral reminiscences, or our private sphere. Anthropologically, communities built through rites and rituals new ways of communication (with the others, and also the invisible). Rituals can offer also a possibility to approach and enter an archetypal state. In Celtic tradition some fest celebrations were used to reach a suspension of time. Even a rave party is a ritual basically: raves are likened to trancelike tribal rituals, where ravers (people) celebrate their unity and shared uplifted state, giving and receiving freely from one another. Dr Russell Newcombe wrote: “raving could be viewed as a transcendental mind altering experience providing psychic relief to

alienated people in a secular repressive and materialistic society.” Terence McKenna views the rave “as an explosive re-emergence of the repressed human drive to free consciousness from its unnatural ego-cantered state.” There are also a large variety of holistic practices that allow to reach a state of hyperconsciousness to see better through the configuration of things, and therefore healing the Self from the toxic clutches of the conventional that the systems exercise on us people. In conclusion, among different forms, the essence of rites and rituals has been always the same.

In Performance art, rituals can be surely seen as a moment of epiphany to supplement the performance, but actually, for us, the performance itself is a ritual, an anthropoetics experience.

KL: Performance art has reached the mainstream and is being acknowledged and appreciated now more. Why do you think that is?

VAP: As Jorge Mitchell wrote few years ago about a performance of ours, younger generations (thus not only), now even more consciously, probably have been starting to understand the essential: “the representation on a support is out-dated. The image comes to life and goes to the world. Now it is directly inscribed on the bodies of those who watch over the living flesh.” It seems becoming mainstream, but still is cutting edge. We hope that it remains so, because this is what determines its ‘vitalogy’.

Performance art emerged fully already many years ago, during an historical period of huge socio-political crisis, then a decline followed, but since few years we are witnessing a new burgeon, almost everywhere, probably because the whole world is heading towards a new dramatic global crisis unknown before.

KL: Do you consider your performance pieces as teaching situations?

VAP: They are learning situations for us. We consider ourselves as learners.

KL: Do you consider that language makes narrative less pure? Is performance art for you a visual language in its purest form?

VAP: It depends how you adopt and use it. There is importance in each thing said. If someone want to make a narrative performance, it is fine. The narrative aspect is another material to conceive a performative piece. Every human being has a beautiful story to tell, an experience to share with the others, no matter how, or with which chosen tool/media, but it must be done well, as Oscar Wilde already indicated.

Performance art is for us primarily a practice, which means more than a visual language in its purest form. That is that we consider Performance art prior to any label, etiquette and whatsoever statement. 'Visual' in this case sounds like an adjective too reductive, as 'purest' too absolute. We consider the performance a lived experience, where the ephemeral is qualitative, where all the senses are well activated, and so the spirit, the mind, the memory. Already Laurence Wiener in 1969 said that an artwork is never squared, but it continues to shape and transform into the mind of the fruiter.

KL: *Do you repeat any of your work? If yes is it affected and developed by new events in your life?*

VAP: It happened that we have been asked to repeat a particular performance piece. For instance, last year in Taipei we have replied *Panta Rhei V* three days in a row, because the event organizers wanted so for audience reason. The performance came out technically better day by day, but honestly we disliked the feeling of 'mechanical reproduction' of the piece: it was like feeling loosing progressively the freshness of action into us, and more the unexpected, which in Performance art are among the most important factors. Also *Balada Corporal I*, *Balada Corporal IV* and *Speak That I Can See You* have been repeated quite several times, in different periods, spaces and countries, with different settings due to the necessity of responding at the best to the various hosting sites, places and locations. And yes, it is true, new events in our lives affected those pieces, but it is also true that at a certain moment we felt also that these works have came to their end: there was nothing to discover anymore for us. We usually prefer to work in a mood of constant creative process, along with the becoming, likewise saying that each performance we conceive and present is the consequence of

the previous one, and the anticipation to the next one, that's why we like to work mainly on performance cycle projects.

KL: What sort of reactions do you get from the audience?

VAP: When we perform we don't have any expectation. We enter in a state of deep concentration and full awareness always: this is our first concern. It happens then that at a certain point of the performance, we feel empathy with the audience: we perceive somehow their energy, inner reactions, positive and negative feelings. It is something special and unique, like a wave, triggered by an invisible force, which operates between them and us. We surely know that someone may find us cryptic, but is always the emotional fact 'that which' that counts the most, both for us and for the audience, at least in our performances, and for it we work. We give, and in the moment we give fully, we also receive something. We are deeply thankful for it, to the ones that come to watch us, or to experience together with us. It is a blessing, no matter in which part of the world we are to perform. We are aware that there will be also always someone who won't like, agree with, or appreciate what we do, but this is part of the game.

KL: Do you base some of your concepts in philosophical theories? Do certain philosophers inspire you?

VAP: We 'update' ourselves continuously. We study and read always: essays of different kinds, philosophy, science, literature, anthropology, politics, sociology, and art in general. It is a constant training, as anything can become source of inspiration. Then the world is our studio, where to learn directly, confronting ourselves with, and practice. All our performances are however also based on precise philosophical concepts, as we believe necessary to forge a theoretical armature to enforce the art actions, which then in part can be seen as a rendering of those same concepts. For example, for the performance cycle *Panta Rhei* we looked firstly at Heraclitus; the movie trilogy *sin ∞ fin* has been primarily inspired by Peter Sloterdijk's analysis on the subject 'spheres'; for the performance cycle *Thou, Twin of Slumber*, of which here in

Cyprus we presented 3 chapters (*Cocoon II, III, and IV*), we took at first inspiration from Shakespeare and then from psychoanalytical studies on the concepts of Hypnos (Sleep) and Thanatos (Death).

KL: In some cases performance artists adopt the concept of sacrifice in order to eventually cancel out sacrifice. Hence, their performances can be seen as the re-enactment of sacrifice to re-imagine the social contract otherwise, beyond scapegoating and beyond the idea of re-birth. I find that this is a concept related to your work. Can you elaborate on this?"

VAP: If you have noticed this aspect in our work, we thank you for it. For us, it is actually this "trying to go beyond..." which we mainly search for, in our own personal way of course. A brilliant dissertation on this topic can be read in the journal of *Anthropoetics*, 5, no. 2 (Fall 1999 / Winter 2000) 'The Sacrificial Aesthetic: Blood Rituals from Art to Murder', written by Dawn Perlmutter. And also the recent book of Maggie Nelson 'The Art of Cruelty-A Reckoning' is very illuminating in this sense, as "cruelty defines the limits of the human and can be found within the human nestled right up alongside love" (J.Halbertsam).

Now, our questions are: in Performance art (some) is cruelty a necessity? And must the use of (personal) sacrifices always be soaked by some kind of cruelty, or there's more beside and beyond this?

In her essay, Dawn Perlmutter quotes Georges Bataille, when he wrote that '...sacrifices are to bringing life and death into harmony, to give death the upsurge of life, life the momentousness and the vertigo of death opening onto the unknown ... if we now consider the similarity between the act of love and the sacrifice. Both reveal the flesh.' I see in this last sentence something very pertinent and revelatory at the same time, at least for us.

Undoubtedly, in Performance art, each artist have had/has specific necessities and different urgencies in adopting forms of so called violent/cruel rituals or sacrifices, which are due to their own life experiences and ideals, historical periods in which they operated, and personal *Weltanschauung*. But one may rightly ask 'what for?' Again Perlmutter, taking into account the works of artists such as Gina Pane, Hermann Nitsch, Abramovic, Stelarc, Fakir Musafar, Orlan, Genesis P-Orridge, Bob Flanagan, Ron Athey and others, is very clear: 'There is no

reason to doubt an artist's claim that acts of self-mutilation and violence in their work provide a personal transformation for them. What becomes questionable is the decision to practice these violent rituals in the context of Performance art, which is then further complicated when the intention is to redeem or transform the audience'. I think she's right also here, because – as Oscar Wilde already said – with the best intentions you'll may end to make the worst work of art, and the intention of wanting to redeem or transform the audience if for some artists could be desirable, for others it could be seen as an aberration, an act of presumption, likewise the artist undress from his/her cloths to wear the ones of the priest or the hero, hence de-positioning him/herself from his/her actual role. There is a form of seduction in all this, and a form of narcissism too, which no artist can escape from, and the audience is there, attending. To admit this is a matter of responsibility, intellectual honesty and sincerity, which I see necessary, to be respectful to the audience, to the others. We cannot hide this human factors with well organized statements; if what we claim is maybe right, there is also the other side of the coin to take also in account and show/tell it to people. If I remember well, from what I read, it was Orlan one of the first artist to courageously open up with the question of narcissism in Performance art, a question that, however, it is not negative at all, as it can becomes in turn creative material as well.

So then, trying to reduce the factor 'intention' at the minimum degree (as you can't avoid it, because it is always present), and having well clear that in presenting something to the public always some forms of narcissism and seduction are sooner or later activated, I can now venture in telling you what our actions of rituals/sacrifices are for us: they are not re-enactments, they are instead always renovated, as they were in origin, to try to re-establish a renovated close relationship between us two, and then, possibly, with the audience. Nonetheless, behind this, there is something more personal and profound: an act of reconciliation with my blood line, trying settling and resolving something that I couldn't before, and that affectively brings me to accept the changes occurred in my life. It is also to try to reconcile my way of thinking and feeling with the ones of Verena, and then of the others (audience). I see in all this a way to become compatible, consistent, no longer opposed and friendly after a sense of estrangement and abandon, a place where to settle my interior conflicts with the external apparent differences, re-establishing a friendly relation between my Self and its opponents. Finally, it is also to accept that something can be

difficult, if not inaccessible, because, paying tribute to Socrates, I need always to remember that are actually the beautiful things the most difficult ones.

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