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Who is in Pain?

The transforming of symbol in performances of Marina Abramović

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Making a cut on the body fits in with the rhetoric of modification. According to Renata Salecl (2001: 33), it must be understood as either 'an attempt to find in the body a place of some stable identity', as is the case with clitoridectomies which are carried out across African cultures, or, it represents a challenge for contemporary artists; they must work with the idea that a body is no more than a 'basis for an identity'. Thus, cuts represent the dilemmas our personal identities face as we confront circumstances external to our bodies.

This point of view takes a similar stance to Marina Abramović's work, and also, interpretations of the five-pointed star in *Rhythm 5* (1974) and *Lips of Thomas* (1975). Abramović lived in Yugoslavia under the communist regime of President Tito, until she left aged twenty-four. The star, which represents the communist regime, featured in her first performance of *Rhythm 5* (1974). Within this performance, the star features ritual components and is constructed by wooden plates, soaked in 100 litres of petrol and eventually set on fire with Abramović lying in the middle. The star transforms into a cut on Abramović's lower abdomen in *Lips of Thomas* (1975) and, also, its re-enactment in 2005. In her study of this haunting star emblem, Kristine Stiles (2008: 52-57) claims it is 'a symbol of place and a marker of identity'. She views the cuttings as a 'rudiment of trauma and a source of the destruction of identity [...] a signature of capture that both designates and disguises identity'.

There is a compelling logic to support assertions made by Salecl and Stiles: the cut, which *marks* the body and is accompanied by physical pain, becomes a site where personal identity is invited, or denied. On one level, it can be said that writers belonging to this school of thought often use their analysis to foreground the social meaning of marking a body, rather than the bleeding wound that creates a visual affect and a physical pain. Yet, this vision is restricted in a politics of personal transformation: one struggles to negotiate with past experience and social ideology in order to emphasise or play with the identity. Using this argument as a point of departure, I aim to turn around this position with the following question: if only the function of inscribing is addressed here, how, then, can the bleeding cut itself be distinguished from other forms of 'marking' that do not necessarily involve ongoing physical pain when exposed (that is, for example, tattoos)? In this regard, my principle concern is that how with the incision the manner of transplanting a symbol into a bloody cut manifests pain as a transferable material, rather than representing the artist's inner pain.

Regarding the topic of pain, I turn away from the context in which the wound has been connected to the traumatised body of Christ, or *the* trauma which the artists suffer. Instead, I take my cue from the work of Veena Das. Das (1997: 69-70) appropriates Wittgenstein's example of how it is conceivable that 'one person should have pain in another person's body'.¹ She interprets the sentence 'I am in pain' as 'a claim

¹ 'Suppose I feel a pain, which on the evidence of pain alone, e.g. with closed eyes, I should call a pain in my left hand. Someone asks me to touch the painful spot with my right hand. I do so and looking around perceive that I am touching my neighbour's hand.' (69-70)



• Marina Abramovic *Lips of Thomas*, 1975. © Marina Abramovic. Courtesy: the artist and Sean Kelly Gallery, New York

² In the theory of Bennett (2005: 34), affect is not characteristic of 'emotion or expression of individual characters', but is simply generated as being 'subject to sensation'.

asking for acknowledgement', rather than an indicative statement (70). Two possibilities are introduced as Das explicates Wittgenstein's example of one's pain inhabiting the body of another: first, it is plausible that the pain shared among bodies only 'exists in imagination but is not experienced' and second, she postulates that 'the experience of pain cries out for this response of the possibility that my pain could reside in your body and that the philosophical grammar of pain is an answer to that call' (70). In relation to Das's theory, the statement, 'I am in pain,' functions as a conduit through which one can move out of 'an inexpressible privacy' (70). For me, the important feature in Das's argument is a call to collapse the conventional belief that pain is an unutterable 'inner object' which can only be *represented* at the site of pain (that is, at the wound) by stressing spatial nature and the iteration: 'I am in pain.' This breakdown allows for interpersonal transactions to occur. In other words, the claim of knowledge - 'which may be given or denied' - suggests that an obligatory response is required, and thus, the metaphor of conduit is given shape.

From this point of view, an examination of *Lips of Thomas* (1975) suggests that Abramović creates a shocking scene - or what Jill Bennett

(2005: 35) calls 'affective imagery' - that radiates the message 'I am in pain.'² This is done by means of carving the five-pointed star on her body: the artist marks herself with an oozing gash; the spectators, faced with the bleeding image, are forced to either go into the imagery or turn away from it. I would add to this argument that any attempt to equate sorrow or traumatic events (conjured up by the symbol of star) with the sentence, 'I am in pain,' is problematic. That is to say, the pain that is expressed in this utterance should not simply be understood as a corresponding object to whatever the star signifies for Abramović in her personal experience. In so doing, there is a return to the stale formulation: the cut/star is nothing more than a representation of traumatic memory. Thus, the 'affective imagery' is once again relegated to a sideshow while the socio-political interpretation of marking the body takes centre-stage. In order to illustrate how the 'affective imagery' operates in contemporary performance, Bennett makes a powerful statement regarding *Lips of Thomas* (1975): 'one cannot perceive the star except as wounding process' (38). Although my view point is generally in line with Bennett's, I go further in my examination; at the core of this mechanism of

transforming the five-pointed star - which was the emblem featured on the stamp of her birth certificate and, also, the Yugoslavian flag - into a bleeding imprint, is the capacity for pain, which is, in the words of Das, a 'conduit'.

Since Abramović has stated that, 'pain is like a door' and you 'have to enter through the pain into that other space' (Biesenach 2008: 22), I propose that the pain residing in the incised star is, in effect, a response to the 'claim' made by the artist; thus following the logic of Das. This is achieved by registering an image to accompany the words 'I am in pain'; a scene that is constantly 'beseeching' (Bennett 2005: 48). In light of the shifting feature that is uncovered by Das - 'my pain could reside in your body and that the philosophical grammar of pain is an answer to that call' (70) - it is reasonable to assume that pain is felt as a result of the incised star upon the artist's body, and, at the same time, the bleeding star sends out a message - 'I am in pain' - that asks for acknowledgement. Whether or not any acknowledgement is received, the scene is transmitted to spectators, or, the 'affective imagery' impacts upon them. That is to say, the injured person's pain at this exact moment is also *found* in the audience's 'body'. The pain, as it is *leaving* the artist's body, now overcomes the spectators as 'the philosophical grammar of pain' that 'is an answer to that call' (70). In order to understand how the imagery of a bleeding star operates in terms of Das's claim-responses model, it is important not to pass over the symbolism of traumatic memories; indeed, symbolism must be considered along with awareness of the potential dynamic of pain, which is capable of travelling between the physical wound itself and the 'body' of spectators through the 'register of imagery' (86-87). With the intention of widening the spectrum of understanding vis-à-vis the cut of a five-pointed star on Abramović's stomach, I claim that the cut is not merely a mark of trauma - a point from which the artist's pain as an 'inner object' can project outwards - but is also a channel through which the 'experience of pain' and the 'philosophical grammar of pain'

encounter one another.

A transplant of a symbol - existing in the tradition of 'universal communism' (56), in the collective memories in relation to Yugoslavia as well as the intricate emotions in which the artist is entangled, into a form of bloody cut, is required in order to complete the process of transforming the star as a traumatic signifier into a signified of itself. That is to say, following my argument above, the cut should not be seen as an ostensive mark that conveys layers of meaning, but rather as a space where the experiences of pain can get in and out, namely, a vanishing point, which creates the dimension of pain (that is, Das's allegory of 'conduit'). Another aspect of this idea can be explored by virtue of the speculation of Phelan's reading of Caravaggio's painting, which will be discussed in the following paragraph. In spite of the divergent theoretical genealogies between Das and Phelan, it seems to me that Das's analysis of transitive pain is not inconsistent with Phelan's account of 'stand-in'. Or, alternatively, a further investigation of what has occurred in the act of cutting the five-pointed star cannot take place without a corresponding discussion about the drama of stand-in, which is enacted by both closing-up after the first performance and re-opening the old wound at the Guggenheim Museum in New York in 2005.

In the opening pages of *Mourning Sex*, Phelan (1997: 5) touches upon the 'experience of loss' as 'the central repetition of subjectivity' since human kind are 'cast from the womb' and 'enter the world as an amputated body whose being will be determined by the very mortality of that body'. In reflecting on loss through representation in art, she insists that 'there is a hole in perspective, a philosophy of the limit of the body in representation' (33). In order to elaborate on the 'hole in perspective', Phelan argues that the wound on Jesus Christ's body, in Caravaggio's painting, *The Incredulity of St Thomas* (1601), represents 'the physical mark of the separation between one and the Other [and] as beckoning lure and unbreachable threshold' (32). Phelan interprets that Christ, by allowing the touch, is

asking Thomas, 'Do you love me?' Since the resurrection of Christ 'cannot be authenticated by God: Thomas must play this other part' (33). In other words, Christ relies upon Thomas's finger so as to 'make him believe the part he played in his father's script was "real"' - that is to say, that he is the redeemer and he is loved by his father. Phelan seeks a hidden dialogue in Caravaggio's painting and intends to reveal the hole (wound) as a 'vanishing point' (33); when it becomes visible, it allows the viewers of performance to penetrate the spaces which were inaccessible for its viewers.

In retrospect to the formulation of Das I outlined above, what is fascinating is that there seems to be a parallel between the accounts of Das and Phelan: an interactive relationship is addressed in respect to the experience of pain, or the location that pain itself may inhabit. As Das has suggested that 'this sentence ["I am in pain"] is the beginning of a relationship, not its end' (78), an enforced response is also required in the interpretation of Phelan. Das's reading of Wittgenstein best exemplifies Phelan's fantasy of 'Do you love me?' To borrow Bennett's scheme of 'empathic vision' (21), it is reasonable to translate the question 'Do you love me?' to the tone of beseeching: 'I am in pain,' as Das may say. In another word, the cut Abramović operates around her navel works in the same manner of the hole in Caravaggio's painting, that is, as an imagery of a call for acknowledgement.

The theme exposed in Phelan's performative reading of Caravaggio's painting is two-fold: first, the resurrected Christ appears to play the role of a stand-in for the God in whom Thomas believes, while Thomas also becomes a stand-in for the father of Christ. Phelan concludes that 'Thomas is Christ's God at least as much as Christ is Thomas [...] - they are each one another's Other' (33). Second, Phelan indicates that a perversion reverses the positions of Thomas and Christ in orthodox Christianity; Christ transforms Thomas into God the Father because he needs Thomas to confirm that he is the redeemer (39). Hence, the perversion is 'a disavowal of singular perspective in favor of mutative, transforming

identifications' (39). In attempting to open up possibilities of understanding the five-pointed star which is inscribed upon Marina Abramović's stomach, I take the notion of perversion as my starting point. The title of her performance, *Lips of Thomas*, leaves some room for readers/the audience to weave Phelan's reading of *The Incredulity of St Thomas*, into our analyses: it is *Lips of Thomas* rather than *Lips of Christ* or *Lips of Abramović*.

Marina Abramović slits her skin before the spectators in the same way that Caravaggio's Christ opens up his body to the curious fingers of Thomas. This makes their reciprocal transformation possible; the cut, whether upon the surface of a canvas or the skin, functions as a vanishing point for Phelan as it tempts the spectator's gaze towards - and even into - the gash. However, there is a fundamental difference between the static wound on the canvas and the opening that is oozing blood or being penetrated. In other words, just as the penetrating finger tears the surface of the flat painting, the blood does the same to the skin. The 'unbreachable threshold' (32) is breached; hence, the perversion becomes possible and the relations between Christ and Thomas, the artist and the audience, are shifted. As the title, *Lips of Thomas*, suggests, the witness as a representative of 'Otherness', now becomes the subject.

To put it further, the crucial feature of this viewpoint is that it places the possibility of transforming the wound into 'a returning regard' (35), and of blurring the boundaries between bodies within a nexus of reciprocal relationships. What is essentially addressed in Phelan's interpretation is 'a drama of what it is to look at bodily penetration' (34). She continues to assert that 'in looking at the penetrated orifice, the viewer begins to sense what a body unbound by skin might feel like' (35; my emphasis). It is thus this image of penetration recalling the experience of pain that lures the trauma, of Christ or Abramović, to reside in the cut. By the same token, pain may leave the cut to be *sensed* by another body.

Centred on the thought of Phelan is a sense of profound mourning for the impossibility of synchronous communication between the message giver and its interlocutors, resulting from the very nature of our distraction: an endless desire to examine the surface and search for something hidden under the skin:

The one to whom we ache to speak is always the one who has already left and [...] because they sense our distraction, our looking over their shoulder, under their skin, in the hidden orifices of their most intimate cavities for someone, something, else (32; my emphasis).

I apply this ever-deferred conversation to the idea of Das: 'the pain of the other not only asks for a home in language but also *seeks a home in the body*' (88; my emphasis). For Phelan, the failure of conversation between a speaker and the other is caused by the depth revealed in Caravaggio's painting. That is to say, the penetrated hole located on Christ's body, functioning as a vanishing point, brings about 'the depth of the drama of the human body' (32).

Rather than representing their own trauma, the artists dealing with penetrated/penetrating cut provide a body for the pain which has long lingered around. From this point of view, I would conclude that the crux of Abramović's transplanting a historical emblem of a star into a

bloody cut is what creates the possibility of transferring pain, instead of representing it. Therefore, the cut must be considered as the more imperative answer to the claim for recognition - 'I am in pain' - rather than the pain itself.

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Rhythm 5, 1974
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