

1st VENICE INTERNATIONAL PERFORMANCE ART WEEK, 2012

INTERVIEW WITH FRANCESCO KIAIS (published on the web site of the event)

Francesco Kiais is an Athens-based Italian artist who spans a wide range of artistic practices of which performance art is a central component. However, not only is Kiais a performer and figurative artist, but he is also a refined thinker.

Performance Art Week features two of Francesco's works: a video entitled *[NOLI] ME TANGERE – [MH] MOY AΠTOY - [Do Not] Cling to Me* and an environmental installation with the highly evocative title of *Il Dionisio Dormiente (The Sleep of Dionysus)*, in which the *body* itself of the work plays the role of the performer, a slowly dying grass carpet. Francesco is present at the first edition of Performance Art Week as an artist exhibiting his works as well as a theorist, having written one of the commentaries in the exhibition catalogue, whose ideas are one of the mainstays of the exhibition itself. In this lengthy, dense interview Francesco Kiais expands on his work, as well as providing a fascinating, detailed analysis of the broad range of artistic practices expressed during this event, thereby shedding light on the ideological background to this Venetian Performance Art Week.



The installation *The Sleep of Dionysus*. Foto: M.Sobçak

Chiara: Your room opened the permanent exhibition of Performance Art Week, displaying two of your works: the installation of *Il Dionisio Dormiente (The Sleep of Dionysus)* and the video *[NOLI] ME TANGERE-- [MH] MOY AΠTOY- [Do Not] Cling to Me*. Could you tell us something about the latter work?

Francesco: Its interpretation lies in the title: *[NOLI] ME TANGERE*, which are the words spoken by Jesus after his resurrection, meaning "don't touch me". Removing "noli" from the phrase turns it into a positive imperative, "touch me".

The meaning of this wordplay derives from the fact that we have managed to gain access to the divine essence through our technological skills, to the extent of changing the nature of things (and of people). The transgender person who plays with me in this video is an expression of this on the one hand, and on the other a figure that itself combines other multiple figures: from the God of Genesis that embraces both male and female gender -like Adam before being separated from Eve-, to the hermaphrodite depicted in classical sculpture.

However, I try to use this to signify the forms I produce in the present, -not just to produce theories for their own sake-, and at the same time to re-signify the meaning of things that have characterised our history so far.

In the first two stages of the performance shown in the video I felt I had to get back to this formal path and thought, as it is the "root" I refer to, and I wanted to stress this.

In the third stage, the performative act is freer and introduces the theme of the limit. "Touch Me" is our relationship with our limit, which up to very recently was mediated by the sacred and divine, but now is up to us alone to mediate. The "limit" is the point reached by each generation and civilization in which the question of what lies "beyond" is posed. This limit is the boundary between life and death, human and divine, physical and metaphysical.

At this point the figure in the video "meets" the Dionysus of the installation. The figure moves in a kind of dance along a precarious and fragile path, just as we relate to each limit and each new age in our own fragile way. The limit of organic matter is its decay, while one of the features of performance art is its ephemeral nature. In our contemporary society of images, the digital parody of the moment crystallizes the 'real' and 'experienced'. Through the poetic act the performer *saves* the authenticity of the moment's happening, thereby confirming the impossibility to repeat or reproduce it.

C: In the text you wrote for the catalogue of the first PAW, *Hybrid Body-Poetic Body (Corpo ibrido-Corpo poetico)*, you provide an interpretation for the whole Venetian event, by highlighting its underlying concepts.

One of the most fascinating features of this PAW lies in the fact that observing the artists and their works some surprising similarities have emerged, which are revealed in a constant, fluid recall of stylistic features, themes and forms. In other words, performers who are seemingly far removed from one another, in terms of geography and culture, have come to express themselves on common ground. What do you think about this?

F: Meeting a performer means meeting a memory in movement, which is communicated through an act, a gesture carried out according to a *measure* and this *measure* is somatic. The *where* of the performer's body lives with the *where* of the spectators' bodies, a metaphysical place, a ground for exchange and sharing.

Nowadays, everything is shifting towards the Platonic dimension of the *cloud*. The whole spectrum of humanity's knowledge is migrating towards the metaphysical realm of digital memory. Thus, the concept of living in the world as we have known it up to now and the prospects of connecting to other places has been revolutionised. Now the *where* of communication is primarily a metaphysical *where*, filled with *absence* and characterized by *distance*.

Forms of communication change, but the need is always to get closer to others, to reduce a distance. What has really changed is the *cosmogony* of the context, which has provided humans throughout history with a physical and philosophical model in order to live in harmony with reality. Thus, we need to understand what the new reference points are, given that the old *cosmogonies* are no longer adequate, in order to produce a form, a formal synthesis that can withstand the new contents, to provide reliable guidance.

When **Lee Wen** emerges from a tree during his performance, while **Marcus Vinicius** comes out of a hole in the wall, they are both relating to a logic of *living* which tends to be alienating, to which they react by creating a strange hybrid (human-tree, human-wall) and they stress an increasing need for a *citizenship of the body and of the individual* in relation to their environment which surrounds, protects and limits them (nature; large cities).

When **Boris Nieslony** and **Yoko Ono** perform acts that are seemingly opposed to each other, whether filling a space with *absence* (slaughtered bodies) or with a *presence* (bodies wrapped up in fabric), they still both provide a balance between *void* and *mass* that denote the space that *surrounds our existing* not only in the moment of the performed act, but also in our century, society, and in the intimacy of sharing pain (Nieslony) or joy (Ono).

Whether voluntarily or not, four different performers have raised issues about the physical and metaphysical limits of individual and body space, and how it is possible to share (communicate) such issues.

So communication is not just transferring information from A to B in the historical present, but being able to *touch* the other in something which is intimate, or even immemorial, archetypal, and so leaving him/her different as they are in their distance and in their *where*. We are touched by our coming closer, not superimposing or blending with each other.



Still from the performance for the videocamera [NOLI] ME TANGERE— [MH] MOY AITTOY-
[Do Not] Cling to Me.

C: If you take the whole of this Performance Art Week into consideration, you can see that a specific kind of aesthetic taste prevails, displayed through a broad range of performances. Including also your own work, I would like to know what you think of the value of what "beautiful" means in this context, which theory often represents as solely dedicated to meaning, at the expense of form.

F: We seem to be surrounded by the *beautiful* in this age, while we are usually wrapped in an aesthetic veil that filters a reality which tends to be appalling. The seemingly aggressive nature of some of the performative acts is in fact a tear in this well-refined aesthetic veil in which we are shrouded.

This reminds me of Fontana's *cuts*, which were lacerations revealing an existential void that cannot be represented. They were scandalous because of the scandal that was revealed beyond the gesture in itself.

Likewise, the *slashes* produced by certain extreme performative acts do not declare themselves, but rather they *reveal* and *uncover*. Eros, death, sensations and feelings – usually compressed in the form of news or consumer objects – in the performance are like an act that can be shared and experienced, and not like an aesthetic surrogate transmitted solely through the gaze.

Our *skin* represents the final inviolable limit of individual intimacy and identity. Flaying is a gesture having a relative aesthetic sense, recalling intense iconographical images and a regenerated mythological memory, such as the martyrdom of the Saints and the punishment of Marsyas. So I would distinguish between the taste (*flavour?*) of the gaze and the sentiment of the *beautiful* as an emotional echo triggered by a gesture.

So I would say that if aesthetic taste lies in the effect produced by the use of certain media, the meaning of *beautiful* lies in the unstable harmony between the extreme fragility of form, often reduced to the minimum, and the crushing gravity/lightness of its contents. The media serve the form, enhancing it even when it is lacking or hidden, and when form withdraws in art, it is usually to defend itself.

Likewise, performance is somehow a withdrawing, a removing of the self and *form* from the speed of contemporary life, which is faster than the speed of dreams and imagination.

The performer lives in a void, which is the innermost void that each age seeks to conceal from itself. In this void the performer beckons to us, creating a space for sharing..it is a recreating of the meaning of Tragedy, a catharsis that is not theatrical, but poetic, a synthesis of collective emotions (joy, drama, guilt, and comedy) through the act (sacrifice?) of one or more individuals.

C: Keeping to the same theme, the aesthetics of performance, can you give us some more detailed examples regarding the artists that have taken part in Performance Art Week?

F: Well, **Suka Off**, for instance, displays a radical upheaval of the communicative and perceptual process: the couple exhibit themselves as objects of a kind of contemplation, where the *beautiful* lies in laying bare our gaze as spectators of their idea of what *beauty*

means (namely their pleasure in what they do). Here form defends itself in the short-circuit of the relationship between the two bodies, which excludes all the rest. Indeed, the space that they allow us to have is reduced and entails a distance, the same distance that generally exists between (artistic) representation of the *divine* and the viewer. Actually, the mattress on which the hermaphrodite splits into two is the altar of a liturgy during which it is the *skin* that covers our gaze that is slashed, uncovering on the one hand an enlightened gaze mindful of a certain iconographic, literary and mythological tradition and, on the other hand, flaying a gaze that by now has resigned itself to the realm of the replica, and which is able to destroy the real and the memory itself of the real, which we *re-generate*, however.

In **VestandPage** I have seen a *skin* which joins and separates; a membrane which will never be enough to contain us, which disintegrates. I perceive a cultural identity that does not recognize itself in an aesthetic standard or ideal, but rather in metamorphosis, in the development of constant process and exchange.

As the *skin* stretches until it tears, the aesthetic product that ensues crystallizes into an eruption, in a slow, enlightened explosion, where the bodies eventually support an image traced in the air, in an unrepeatable form which vanishes as soon as it is accomplished.

Andrea and Verena try to seize the authenticity of the moment as much as possible before it passes and fades away, leaving us at the mercy of the fast-too-fast becoming of things around us. I consider it as a long goodbye, like the conscious separation from an old garment (much worn and loved), in order to be able to keep on living and *loving*. We change so that we can regenerate the meaning of our own lives, constantly, moment after moment. We change *skin* in order to protect our substance.

In my installation of *The Sleep of Dionysus* it is the ephemeral nature of organic matter which determines the duration and experience of beauty. In the life cycle, which also includes decay of organic matter, we rediscover our quality of beings that cease to exist, but that leave a memory, whose presence or absence brings about a change in other people's existence. We are organic and we should identify ourselves with the organic, whereas we commit ourselves totally to a technological superpower which distinguishes us in a discordant way from the rest of the natural world to which we belong, thereby gradually becoming denatured. One of the key aspects of this process, which characterizes the philosophical flattening out of our culture in everything we do, is the *flight from death*. So that we produce a "beautiful" which is *ugly* because it lacks a spherical view.

C: Getting back to your text on *Hybrid Body-Poetic Body*, it introduces the concept of *limit* as a space in which both the performance and the performer dwell. Could you expand on this?

F: I'd like to start by citing Pasolini who spoke of the body as ... "a land not yet colonized by power".... although this is no longer true, in part.

However, to understand if and to what extent this is still true, nowadays we must try and identify the standard used to define the quality and space of the corporeal and incorporeal, of individual living and perceiving and of the collective lived and perceived.

Thus, I'd also distinguish between an internalized or externalized limit, an imposed or experienced limit...because the *limit* is precisely this domain of exchange and, during this exchange, of the metamorphosis *of and between* two or more distinct "*where*" (performer,

onlookers). However it is also a way of finding ourselves at the limit with questions of an existential nature in universal terms. In this sense writers come to mind such as Leopardi, with his *hedge* and *sea of sweet shipwrecking*, or else Rimbaud's drunken boat ...a way of letting oneself drift away from common meaning in order to find a renewed meaning for language and communication, one facing the other in moments of fast-too-fast and ultimately radical changes.

So everyone certainly associates with a limit that concerns them intimately, and in a subjective and broader cultural sense.

I was interested in how **Jill Orr** uses this cultural "place" (see her work *The Promised Land*), overturning the meaning of the journey (and of the Promise). She has symbolically collected images in the presence of various *limits* (between what is solid and liquid, and between man-made and natural), and then goes on to deliver them to us during the performative act and in the displayed series of images. So the *place* that Jill questions is no longer the place of arrival, but the point of departure. The place to which the artist invites us becomes the *Land of Promise*. It provides room for a promise, depicting a path that is going in the opposite direction to the ruthless, devastating and *unethical* one taken by our civilization.

Drawing on Jill's title, we could say that this leading us to the limit is *the* promise or a possible re-definition of the *promise*. The promise of an acceptable definition of living space, which is perceptible *αισθητικά* (aesthetically = in a sensorial and emotional manner) and not only virtually, according to a scale that nowadays is the only one that is authentically credible and viable for everyone: the scale of the body.

Another *limit* (another *promise*), explored by the Latin American and English performers according to two, different perceptive and communicative states, is the skin. The former display a shell-skin that can resist any external stimulation, while the latter display a porous skin, which enables the individual, internal world to filter outwards, and vice versa.

While in Jill's work the limit is externalized, other performers do just the opposite. The body's surface is transformed in its protective outer limit which allows access to personal identity which we simply call *skin*, but which is actually the outer limit of a *Temple*, namely individual identity, which radiates from the body and becomes an architecture of air and light. The limit internalizes itself to defensively trace the boundary of personal existing or else it turns personal existing into the vehicle for a shared, imaginative universe. In short, the limit is *mobile* and relative, concerning the way of approaching the hybrid ground of sharing, of the crossing between different cultural and individual positions, of the *where* mentioned earlier, paying attention to the metaphysical (or almost *sacred*) aspect of a silent, collective experience.

C: In conclusion I would like to ask you what you think of the current attitude towards art in Italy and what you think of the place an event such as this, which is exclusively dedicated to performance art, could have in this country which is certainly unaccustomed to such exhibitions.

F: The problem is not so much a question of being accustomed or not to something innovative coming from another geographical or cultural place, as of being ready or not to

generate something *new* out of what one is.

Since WWII we have been suspended between deep, cultural origins and the invasive tendency of a different cultural model, namely consumerism, which has overwhelmed us, as well as overwhelming all cultures with profound origins and *ethos* for decades. So the *problem* is the cultural model of reference.

In the Western model, classicism understood in an academic sense has always synthesized the interweaving between art and the established order, between the state of things and the possibility to express a form, a cultural synthesis, since each kind of established order always seeks to express itself through an aesthetic canon to pay tribute to itself.

Nowadays it is economic power that dominates, identifying and expressing itself in a particularly transgressive and prevaricating way.

Transgression and aggressiveness have become the criteria for current aesthetic taste that permeates our daily life at all levels, reflecting a society no longer used to reflecting, but only to narcissistically self-reflect, relinquishing any attempt to give meaning to anything that exists beyond itself, thus trapped in a self-contemplative short-circuit.

For instance, Lady Gaga wearing a meat dress or Damien Hirst's diamond-studded skull in this context have effaced any differences, becoming both *classics* (in the academic sense) and are akin to the *established order* precisely because they resemble and replicate it, so becoming conventional and decorative, (recalling Marcuse's concept of *repressive tolerance*).

So the artist can choose whether to act according to the era's stylistic features and be decorative, or to "shift" towards a more authentic limit of possible expression.

Ilija Soskic illustrates extreme consistency with this unconventionality and impossibility to become *decorative* (I have mentioned Soskic as an example, but I could also include Nieslony, Ono and Export...). For example, his encounter with radical Feminism in the late 1970s (which he discussed in his talk) is highly symbolically charged in this sense.

If you read Euripide's *Bacchae*, it expresses the determination of an archaic society not to succumb to the Law of the *Polis*, -a society still close to Nature and to a freer and magic realm-, but to have an *emotional relationship* with the Law itself. Similarly, Soskic in his historical present supported the radical feminists who totally opposed the invasiveness of the Law of the *Polis*, like the *bacchae* denying its authority.

Nowadays, I believe that although the ideological dimension has become obsolete, we still have to redefine the contours of the Law. In other words, whether it should resemble the *demos* (δῆμος=people) – the mass of individuals and *emotional sensitivity* – or should rather mechanically serve this geographically and digitally extended *Polis*.

In this sense, the performance is disorienting because it goes counter to the entropic expansion of today's *Polis*.

As one model's standardisation sweeps through society, conversely individuals are curbed, fractured and differentiated. Individual biographical memory counteracts all-embracing digital memory, carrying with, in and on him/herself a personal past and shared memory, slices of History and *stories*, *Culture* and experiences, both local and universal.

In my opinion, this is what was expressed in PAW, whose curatorial insightfulness consisted in providing the opportunity for various generations of artists and public of different geopolitical and cultural backgrounds to interact and share ideas, taking a step forward while looking back. In other words, not looking back at the past by viewing it in a historical perspective, but involving it in a contemporary process and reinterpreting it.

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Still from the performance for the videocamera *[NOLI] ME TANGERE— [MH] MOY ΑΠΤΟΥ-*
[Do Not] Cling to Me.