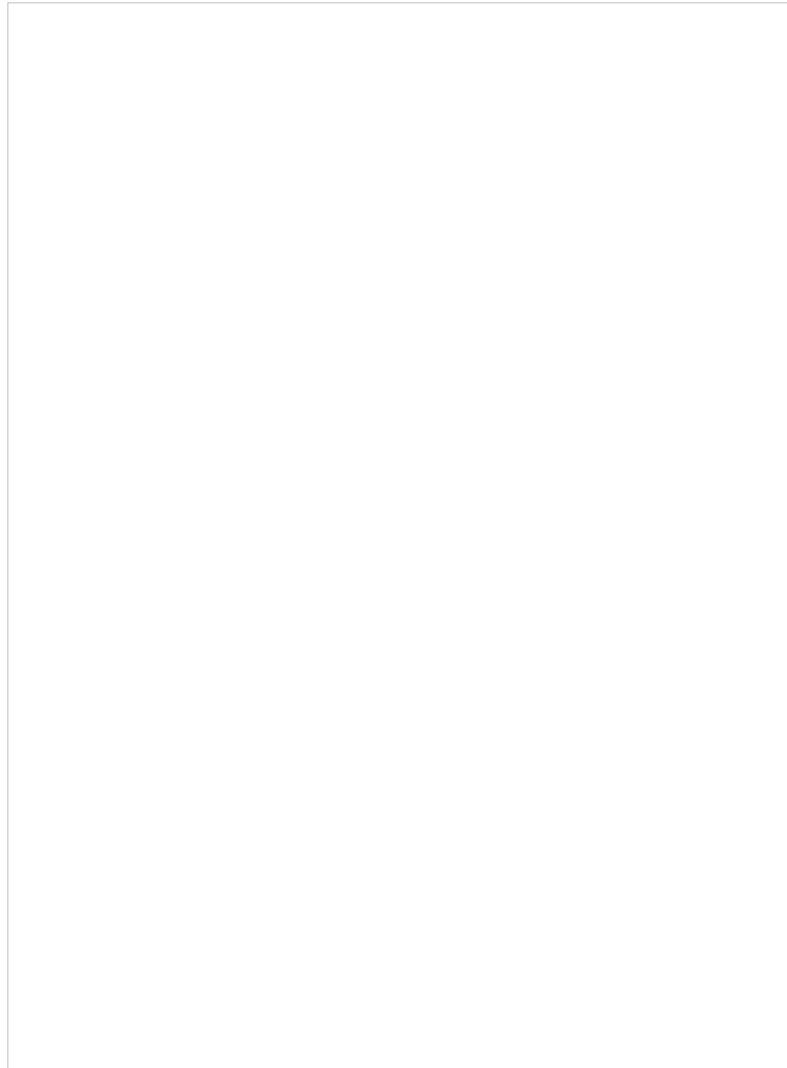


The Informe Body.

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Tracey Warr



Vagina Painting. Photographer: George Maciunas. Courtesy of The Gilbert and Lila Silverman Fluxus Collection

Victor Turner's notion of liminality is a state of 'betwixt and between, a fructile chaos, a storehouse of possibilities' (1982). Other writers have also described some kind of position outside binary thinking, a state disruptive of unity and closure.

Georges Bataille invented the term *informe* - referred to in the title of this article - in his 'Critical Dictionary' published in the French journal *Documents* (1929). The 'Critical Dictionary' was a paradoxical project - a disordered pile of non-definitions of non-words. *Informe*, according to Bataille, has no definition but is performative, like an obscene word. It performs the operation of creating taxonomic disorder and a perpetual maintenance of potentials.

In *Purity and Danger* anthropologist Mary Douglas discussed pollution taboos concerning the unassimilable waste that is outside the constitution of things that are defined (1966). And the Brazilian artist Helio Oiticica argued that art has no autonomous object state, but is instead a searching process, a constructive nucleus, an enactment (1969).

Whilst Turner's limen is the threshold and a striving after new forms and structures, Bataille's *informe* is an inchoateness through which meaning briefly emerges, and Douglas describes pollution and dirt as a 'fearful generative site'.

Of course there are many differences between the ideas sketchily outlined above, but the focus of this article is a perception of a shared notion in liminality, *informe*, pollution and process art of an oscillating flux that does not halt. This is an idea that is also present in contemporary scientific developments in chaos theory and quantum physics. This article discusses this oscillating flux in relation to a range of visual artists using their own bodies in their artworks - in performance, painting, sculpture, photography, film and video.

Visual artists using their own bodies as the site for art wreak havoc with categorisation from several angles. The artist's body is an art object that will not stay put and fixed in its role, it is contingent and gets up and walks back into the artist's life. As art object the artist's body is always ephemeral.

Alan Sonfist has bequeathed his body to the Museum of Modern Art after death, Orlan is planning to leave her mummified body to a museum and Bob Flanagan left instructions for art projects after his death including a video link into his grave that would allow access to the sight of his decomposing body. But until delivery of a corpse is taken the artist's body will always walk off, leaving only its imprint or trace in gelatin, paint, microchips or its relic in cast objects, its indexical mark or stain, or simply its memory burnt on the retina and the cortex.¹

Artists leave their trace behind - in the body prints that Yves Klein made in *Anthropometries 2*, in Francesca Woodman's enigmatic photographs of herself as an almost insubstantial body in flight through a world of materiality, or in Ana Mendieta's imprints of her silhouette in mud, grass and ash.²

The artist's body does not allow its audience the luxury of an academic, objective stance - it commands a bodily as well as an imaginative empathy from its viewers. It employs the shared ontology of the body. Antonin Artaud had argued that 'metaphysics must be made to enter the mind through the body' (1974: 76). The audiences for artists' body work are compelled to look with their own bodies, as well as their eyes, to feel on their pulses as well as rationalise and interpret.

Artists' body work emphasises how the body is at once subjective and an interface with the objective world, how it is a conscious thing and how it is a mess and flux of viscera on its way to death.

Jayne Parker held a dress of knitted entrails up against her naked body in her film *K* (1989).

I bring my intestines up out of my mouth and let it fall in a pile at my feet. I take the end and proceed to knit, using my arms in the place of knitting needles, until I have knitted the whole length....I make an external order out of an internal tangle (quoted in Export & Justenssen, 1996).

In her performance *Warm Milk* (1972) Gine Pane drew a razor blade across her cheek and forearm. These artists ask us to remember the guts and bone beneath the skin. This is a consciousness vividly evoked in Keith Douglas' poem, *The Prisoner* written in 1940 (Graham, 1979: 67)

Today, Cheng, I touched your face
with two fingers, as a gesture of love,
for I can never prove enough
by sight or sense your strange grace;...

but alas, Cheng, I cannot tell why,
today I touched a mask stretched on the stone-

hard face of death. There was the urge
to escape the bright flesh and emerge
of the ambitious cruel bone.

The body has one foot in the camp of material, defined, bounded matter and one foot in the camp of the amorphous and dedifferentiated. Whilst the body - like all matter - looks and feels real and solid enough, it is in fact only its patterns that are stable, not the material itself. And within this flux of matter, consciousness is shifting at a vertiginous velocity across 80,000 synaptic endings in one half of the brain alone.

A lot of theory discusses 'the body' as if it could be considered in isolation - but the artist's body is self-evidently self-reflexive. Because the artist's body is a sentient presence, consciousness must be part of the package presented and received. As Willoughby Sharp pointed out, a corpse is an object but a live body must be both subject and object (1970: 16).

Adrian Piper's performance series, *Catalysis* (1970-71) included her walking around New York wearing a t-shirt reading WET PAINT. 'Making artificial and nonfunctional alterations in my own bodily presence of the same kind as those I formerly made on non-art materials.... I exist simultaneously as the artist and the work' (1976: 167). In body art the artist's body is an ephemeral, contingent art process that is both absent and present.

From the 1920s on performative and multidisciplinary approaches in the work of the Dadaists and Surrealists began to incorporate time, space and the body into art (see Melzer, 1994). The Action artists of the 40s, 50s and 60s continued this impetus, in Jackson Pollock's drip paintings, Georges Mathieu's action paintings and Kazuo Shiraga's paintings made with his feet and his sculptures made by diving into a mound of mud and wrestling it. In the work of the Happenings

artists including Allan Kaprow, Jim Dine, Claes Oldenberg and Wolf Vostell, a real space or the unboundaried real world replaced the framed canvas. The Happenings artists added bodies, junk, the audience, time, fragments of words and music to their palettes. Rather than an autonomous object, art could be events in time co-created by audience, material world and artists.

Brazilian artists Oiticica and Lygia Clark explored the tangency of bodies and objects. They perceived form - whether in the material world around them or in their own bodies, as neither autonomous nor stable. Bodies and objects engage in a dynamic loop of mutability and reciprocity in their work. Their objects adumbrate bodily functions - breathing and pulsating. These objects only come into existence through their animation by the spectators' or artists' bodies. At a recent exhibition at the Whitechapel Art Gallery, *Inside the Visible*, Clark's objects lay around like deflated balloons waiting for someone to insert a bodily part into them (see de Zegher, 1996). With works such as Oiticica's *Parangoles* series (capes designed for particular wearers, many of them inhabitants of Rio de Janeiro's impoverished favela district) and Clark's *Bichos* (Animals) series, rubber geometric shapes that perch in trees, these artists cajole a geometric art language into speaking of the pulsing body.

The liminal, the *informe*, the abject and the taboo undo the work of rationalisation. According to French Fluxus artist Ben Vautier, art is dirty work but somebody has to do it. And 'messy' body artists such as Carolee Schneemann, the Viennese Actionists and Paul McCarthy certainly bear him out. Janine Antoni washed and painted a gallery floor with her hair in the performance, *Loving Care* (1992). Cheryl Donegan made prints of shamrocks with her green paint-smearred buttocks in the video *Kiss My Royal Irish Arse* (1993).

Critic Ralph Rugoff has described Paul McCarthy's work as depicting 'a body whose borders were collapsing, whose insides seemed to be gushing out as though its thin bag of skin had ruptured.' (Rugoff, 1996). In his performances McCarthy's body is obliterated by a messy deluge of images, constructs and spectacles as well as a lot of tomato ketchup, bandages and hot dogs.

Gilles Deleuze's analysis of Francis Bacon's paintings emphasises their depiction of the human body as 'meat' (1981: 197-198). Talking about the effect he wanted in his paintings Bacon said, 'I would like my pictures to look as if a human being had passed between them, like a snail, leaving a trail of the human presence and memory trace of past events, like the snail leaves its slime' (cited in Chipp, 1968:

In an often unsavoury vision, many visual artists present to us their visceral and leaking bodies. Marcel Duchamp's *Sinning Landscape* (1946) was made with semen on black velvet. Piero Manzoni's *Artist's Shit* (1961) is ninety 30 gram tins of the artist's own excrement. Carolee Schneemann's 1964 performances *Meat Joy* were orgies of flesh, fish and meat. Shigeko Kubota's *Vagina Painting* (1965) was a performance in which she crouched over a large sheet of paper on the floor and painted with a red-daubed paintbrush attached to her knickers.

In the Viennese Actionist group of artists, Otto Muhl made chaotic, orgiastic tableaux, painting with dirt and food stuffs; Herman Nitsch's *Aktions* were bloody catharsis drawing on a blend of dionysian, catholic and depth psychology influences and Gunter Brus took himself apart, dissecting the individual body and psyche and the body politic in acts that critic, Hubert Klocker has described as 'psycho-archaeological existentialism' (Klocker, 1989). Andreas Serrano has made sumptuous photographs of bodily fluid - *Piss Christ* (1987) and *Untitled XIII (Ejaculate in Trajectory)* (1989). Kiki Smith creates life-size sculptures of human bodies full of pathos, with their blood, muscle, body fluids exposed on the surface. Matthew Barney's wounded, seeping, birthing, excreting objects are made from wax, lubricants and petroleum jelly. Janine Antoni uses lard, lipstick and chocolate to reference the body. Cindy Sherman's photographs explore the non-boundary between inner and outer, form and informe, human and thing. Marc Quinn's self-portrait is a refrigerated cast head made with eight pints of his own blood - *Self* (1991).³



Marcel Duchamp, Paysaf Fautif - Courtesy of Galerie Tokoro, Tokyo

Chilean artists Diamela Eltit and Raul Zurita made performances in the 80s using their own bodies, protesting against inhumanity in an oppressive regime. Critic Nelly Richard comments on their work,

The threshold of pain enables the mutilated subject to enter areas of collective identification, sharing in one's own flesh the same signs of social disadvantage as the other unfortunates. Voluntary pain simply legitimates one's incorporation into the community of those who have been harmed in some way - as if the self-inflicted marks of chastisement in the artist's body and the marks of suffering in the national body, as if pain and its subject could unite in the same scar (1986: 66, 68).

Critic Cindy Nemser commented that 'due to the unpleasant nature of the content of body art, the public may refuse to read it intelligently' (Nemser, 1971:

42). But whether we like it or not visual artists working with bodily fluids, decay, death and visceral flux are endemic. They present the body as a consuming, excreting, conceiving, transforming conduit. This view of the body is still largely taboo in Western culture. Filmmaker David Cronenberg has described the basis of horror as the fact that we cannot comprehend how we can die (cited in Kaufmann, 1998). At the same time medical, scientific and technological advances relating to the body's health, reproductive function and death, seem to make the body's functions increasingly conceptual and euphemised.

Mircea Eliade writes that, 'The archaic and Oriental cultures succeeded in conferring positive values on anxiety, death, self-abasement and upon chaos' (1960: 14). But in Western culture death and the body as flux is still a taboo vision. Most critiques of this type of body art cannot get past the Western cultural obsession with the central, terminal, cumulative self - the individual ego, to see beyond to a use of the self as universal. Talking about Dada dance, Hugo Ball commented that 'Dance ... is very close to the art of tattooing and to all primitive representative efforts that aim at personification' (1996). With his use of the word 'personification' Ball seems to be getting at a notion of the individual body inscribed, carrying the weight of collective ideas, rather than the individual engaged in self-expression.

In complete contrast to the visceral artists, however, many other artists have used their own bodies to try to lift invisible aspects of consciousness into the visible world. Aspects such as the operation of hopes, desires and aspirations, being, the liminal spaces of sleep, dream, meditation, hallucination, intuition, vision and somatic or non-symbolic thinking. So in their performance, *Nightsea Crossing* (1981-86) Marina Abramovic and Ulay sat opposite each other across a table for a total of 90 days, not moving, not speaking and fasting. The complete performance was undertaken over several chunks of time in different cities around the world. Their longest continuous presentation lasted 16 days. The artists presented themselves as embodied consciousnesses, in the process of being. For Abramovic the job of the artist is to reveal the mystery of existence and to act as a transmitter of energy. 'The deeper you go into yourself, the more universal you come out on the other side' (quoted in Pijnappel, 1995).

In Terry Fox's performance *Levitation* (1970) he lay on a pile of soil in a San Francisco gallery for six hours trying to levitate (see Fox, 1982 and Sharp, 1971). In 1972 Chris Burden spent 22 days in bed in a gallery in Los Angeles, not speaking or interacting with gallery visitors or staff. 'They had to deal with me simultaneously as an object and a person.... My days were full, rich and purposeful.' (1975) Susan

Hiller's *Draw Together* (1972) was an experiment in telepathy and *Dream Mapping* (1974) was an experiment in group dreaming. Hiller describes art ideas as existing below a verbal recognition level where artists grab on to them (see Einzig, 1996). James Turrell's work experiments with perceptual psychology, light and states of being. He has remarked that art is about bringing images back from the dream world to here. Shelley Sacks' *Thought Bank* (1994) was based on the idea that water remembers and that thought can be imprinted on water. In live performances Bruce Gilchrist has attempted to externalise images and sounds from the interior of his sleeping body (*Divided by Resistance*, 1996) (see Keidon, 1996 and Warr, 1996). Working with a BBC Outside Broadcast Unit, a group of mediums, a thermal camera and sound equipment, Kathleen Rogers' *PsiNet* (1994) set up a parallel between psychic transmission and reception and technological transmission and reception (see La Frenais, 1994).



Janine Antoni, *Loving Care*, 1992, Performance at the Anthony D'Offay Gallery, London.

Photograph: Leslie Haslam, Courtesy of the Artist

The body itself is liminal - between material thing and immaterial consciousness, a shifting interface between subjectivity and the world, a seemingly solid reality that is nevertheless a flux of viscera, time, consciousness and space. Anthropological studies have been a fertile source for visual artists interested in exploring an alternative semantics of the body.

Speech has been over-emphasised as the privileged means of human communication, and the body neglected. It is time to rectify this neglect and to become aware of the body as the physical channel of meaning. (Douglas, 1978: 298)

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Notes

1. For further information on the artists' body works referred to in this article see Warr, Tracey (ed.) (2000) *The Artist's Body*, London: Phaidon. See also Brett, Guy; Klocker, Hubert; Schimmel, Paul; Osaki, Shinichiro; Stiles, Kristine (eds.) (1998) *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object 1949-1979*, Los Angeles/London: Museum of Contemporary Art/Thames & Hudson.
2. Most of Klein's *Anthropometries* body prints were of course made by his paint-daubed femal models. In his article 'Assisted Levitation' he stated,

Personally I would never attempt to smear paint over my own body and become a living brush; on the contrary, I would rather put on my tuxedo and wear white gloves. I would not even think of dirtying my

hands with paint. Detached and distant, the work of art must complete itself before my eyes and under my command. Thus as soon as the work is realised, I stand there, present at the ceremony, spotless, calm, relaxed, worthy of it, and ready to receive it as it is born into the intangible world (cited in Rosenthal, 1982: 124).

However, despite this disingenuous statement, some of the body prints – in *Untitled Anthropometry Male and Female Figures*, 1960 - for instance, are probably Klein's own.

3. For rewarding and more detailed discussion of 'unpleasant' body art see Jones (1994: 546-84; Pluchart (1978:80-82: 39-40); Richard (1986: 64-73); Stiles, Kristine (1992: 74-102); Kaufmann, Linda (1998) and O'Dell, Kathy (1998).

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