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**Everything must come out through the body:  
Mental pain and b(lo)ody art**

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# Abstract

The research shows how mental pain can be represented and resignified through body and performance art. Theorists of pain studies like Scarry (1985) argue that pain has the characteristic of being unsharable since it escapes language.

With the comparative analyses of sets of works by Vito Acconci and Victoria Van Dyke – chosen for their formal similarities – I explored how body art, according to Jones (1998), has the potentiality to activate the viewer. If the representational techniques, embodiment and lived experience of mental pain are mutually entangled within the artworks, it is possible to establish an encounter with pain (Ahmed 2002) that has political and social consequences for the Other.

Since the beginning of the discipline of art history, discourses about art and mental distress have shaped the critical appraisal of artists and their works. These discourses are disputed through the questioning of Yayoi Kusama's self-representations as mad genius through the imagery of the disabled, and of Marina Abramović's moral and social prescriptions for artists to exploit their sufferings but to avoid mental pain (like depression). The analyses of their works show how there is much more in Kusama's artworks than her mental distress, but also there is much more in Abramović's practice than a "pure" artistic research.

Furthermore, embodiment and lived experience are crucial in the artworks by Bob Flanagan/Sheree Rose and Catherine Opie. To fight mental pain of Flanagan's physical disability and of Opie's social disability, these artists exploit the pain their BDSM practices entail. In this way, body art has thus the potentiality of forwarding mental pain through the bodies of the performers, defying its invisibility and challenging its unsharability. It also has the potential to escape the oppressive stereotypical imagery of mental distress, disability, gender and sexuality and to resignify their representations.

Moreover, the analyses of these artists' works stress political and ethical dimensions in the representations of mental pain and mental distress.

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## Introduction

As I think about how to start the introduction of my thesis, I flick through the pages of the last issue of the glossy magazine *Interview* (March 2012). I suddenly stumble upon the editorial *Strict Institution* photographed by Steven Meisel. It features the supermodels Karolina Kurkova and Crystal Renn dressed in white, in an abandoned building, playing, the former, the infamous trope of the blonde sadist nurse and, the latter, a transfigured and subdued mental patient. Long gone are the days when Crystal Renn reclaimed (and re-marketed as plus-sized) her new, post-anorexia nervosa body after her first book *Hungry: A Young Model's Story of Appetite, Ambition and the Ultimate Embrace of Curves* (2009), co-edited with Marjorie Ingall. Her body now is like the one of a “straight” model, but in this set it is portrayed as passive and sick. With the role she has been assigned in this photo shoot she seems to be paying for her past transgressions from the normative weight. Her body shows the torture of a mental disorder and of a mental institution, where the nurse performs restraint and “curative” ligatures of rope bondage.

Garland-Thomson argues brilliantly how fashion could be an arena for disability activism (Garland-Thomson 2011, p. 36). Images that refuse to normalize or hide disability are ways of ‘popular resymbolization [which] produces counter-images that have activist potential’ (Garland-Thomson 2011, p. 38). Therefore, it is crucial to represent invisible disabilities – like mental distress – and physical disabilities in ways that forward their resignification. This might be the case of the shoot *Fashion-able* by Nick Knight (*Dazed & Confused*, September 1998) which features Aimee Mullins – who is, amongst other things, a fashion model, a champion runner, and double amputee. As Garland-Thomson says, Mullins ‘uses her conformity with beauty standards to assert her disability’s violation of those very standards. As legless and beautiful, she is an embodied paradox, asserting an inherently disruptive potential’ (Garland-Thomson 2011, p. 39). Meisel’s images of fashion models, on the contrary, deploy the fantasies of sexual exploitation and lesbianism stereotypically conflated with BDSM practices, along with some of the classical photographic traits of disability that sport the medical imagery and coarse, scandalous depictions (Garland-Thomson 2011, p. 37). I am aware

of the double extent of the images of disabled fashion models: they are equally ‘complicit and critical of the beauty system that oppresses all women’ (Garland-Thomson 2011, p. 39). Conversely from Knight’s one, in Meisel’s photoshoot the critique from inside the consumer culture is not present.

The above example of the low-brow culture of fashion photography resonates with the high-brow culture of body art. Eiseland argues that in order to achieve a better quality of life and equality for people with disabilities it is necessary to work for cultural resymbolisation, along with legislative and economic improvements: ‘we must shift the way we imagine disability and disabled people in order for real social change to occur’ (Eiseland in Garland-Thomson 2011, p. 36). Art is a realm where the Other, the deviant body-minded subject, seems able to retain an active role and where resymbolization can happen.

Throughout this paper I will use the terminology “mental pain” in order to express the feelings of pain and struggle that could arise from mental distress and mental disability. I will also discuss the pain caused by the frictions between the various forms of embodiment and lived experience of such disabilities and the patriarchal society and culture. I will return in the following chapters to some of the physical and psychological aspects of pain, even if it is not possible in this work to go deeper into the investigation of all the aspects of pain. I will argue that mental pain is a bodily sensation like the one felt in a body part. As Aydede (2009) puts it:

‘Bodily sensations are typically attributed to bodily locations and appear to have features such as volume, intensity, duration, and so on, that are ordinarily attributed to physical objects or quantities. Yet these sensations are often thought to be logically private, subjective, self-intimating, and the source of incorrigible knowledge for those who have them. Hence there appear to be reasons both for thinking that pains (along with other similar bodily sensations) are physical objects or conditions that we perceive in body parts, and for thinking that they are not’.

Pain will not be treated as if it is something happening in a body part, hence mental pain does not mean to have “pain in the mind”, even if in mental distress there could be perceptual reports about pain. Let us think about panic attacks and how they involve the body with both somatic and cognitive features (American Psychiatric Association 2000a). The pain provoked by panic attacks is experienced similarly as the pain provoked by some of the symptoms of heart attacks: people report in both cases, for example, palpitations, shortness of breath, chills or hot flushes, chest pain or discomfort,

unusual fatigue, nausea or abdominal distress, lightheadedness or dizziness (American Psychiatric Association 2000a and Harvard Medical School 2010).

Aydede continues that pain could be reported in absence of any tissue damage or pathology because of psychological reasons (Aydede 2009). This corroborates the position of the International Association for the Study of Pain (IASP 1986 and 1994) when saying that ‘activity induced in the nociceptor and nociceptive pathways by a noxious stimulus is not pain, which is always a psychological state’ (Aydede 2009), and therefore I treat pain as not being strictly bound to the stimulus.

I argue that mental pain stems from peoples’ lived experiences, therefore I will depart from the medical model of mental pain. In the Twentieth Century, the form of control and exclusion exerted through the psychiatric institution has been implemented, enforced and/or replaced by biochemistry (Moncrieff 2008). The biological model of mental disease has reduced the person into a series of malfunctioning molecules, and put her in a vacuum. Moreover, many scholarly works have problematised and critiqued the concept of mental illness, most influentially Foucault’s 1961 *Folie et Déraison. Histoire de la folie à l’âge classique (History of Madness 2006)*, which constructs a genealogy on how, from the Seventeenth Century onwards, madness has been tackled as a disease through the discourse of medicine as a ‘gesture of *partage*’ (Foucault 2006, p. XV), exclusion and control exerted also with the creation of the medical category of mental illness in the Nineteenth Century. The psychiatrist Thomas Szasz (and other figures of the anti-psychiatric movement) defines the concept of mental illness as a myth or a metaphor (Szasz 1961). In his view, a diagnosis of mental illness refers to a description of atypical conduct. Thus, mental illness as a medical condition accommodates a disguised form of social control. Moncrieff (2008) demonstrates that today there is no evidence that psychiatric “symptoms” are due to a biochemical imbalance in the brain and that the medications currently dispensed do not intervene on the neurological basis of these symptoms. Much criticism has also been directed against the model of the genetic biological predisposition of psychiatric conditions and the enforcement by the medical model of a Cartesian split between body and mind. As a part of an ongoing work on depression she is undertaking, the paper *Organic Empathy: Feminism, Psychopharmaceutical and the Embodiment of Depression* by Wilson (2008) seems to reduce mental distress as a consequence of a series of molecules not working properly. To engage the materiality of the body in her study, she advocates for “the brain in the gut” model (Wilson 2004). Medical researchers have found that ‘the

greatest concentration of 5HT [serotonin] (90%) is found in the enterochromaffin cells of the gastrointestinal tract' and this class of molecules, among other functions, influences the mood (King 2012). This fails to explain the complexities of mental distress and seems to erase the consequences of mental pain and disability and their experiences. In Wilson's work the medical model of mental distress seems to return, albeit forwarded by material-feminist research on the importance of the body. The body does matter, but Wilson does not take into account how the pharmaceutical companies pilot the results of the research that they commission, as they do not permit the publication of 40 per cent of the clinical trials on mental "illnesses" that they fund (Kirsch 2010, p. 4). Kirsch (2010) analysed the results of both the published and unpublished data on antidepressant medications: his conclusion is that they do not have an active therapeutic effect. They work as placebos, but with serious consequences from the side effects they produce (Kirsch 2010).

As a discursive device to permit departure from the medical model of mental distress I will use the compound "body-mind" throughout the following chapters. It will be useful to deploy this wording in order to stress the tensions, the complexities, and the relations between these two elements, and thereby to reject the continuation of the Cartesian split between mind and body by refusing to view them as two *distinct* elements. The foundational dualism of the *cogito* portrays the mind as conscious, voluntary, active will, subject to change; while the body is passive, a bundle of involuntary physiological processes, fixed (Blackman 2008, p. 4). Since 'thinking through the body' might mean we need to be aware both of the bodily basis of thought and the cognitive component of bodily processes and vice versa, there is the necessity to rethink bodies as potentiality and processes, not inert substances (Blackman 2008, p. 5). As Manning says, 'bodies can be stratified, organized, categorized, even restrained, but they cannot be stopped' (Manning quoted in Blackman 2008, p. 110). Therefore the body escapes the dualism as much as the mind with, for instance, the formulation of the Freudian unconscious and the impossibility of a pharmaceutical chemical fix to control mental distress. That is why everything must come out through the body: the thesis' main title echoes a line written on the journal of the terminally ill Kathy Acker, *The Birth of the Wild Heart: Sing oh body for you are the lord, the lord lives in you*. The body-mind is an inextricable complex.

Therefore there is the need to problematise the reflections on representation (discursiveness) and on embodiment (materiality), in order not to erase the lived

experiences of the artists I will discuss, the experiences of the Others that live mental pain/distress/disability, and also to go beyond the nature/culture dualism of “the body *and* the mind” model. Haraway thinks of bodies as ‘material-semiotic generative nodes’ (Haraway 1991, p. 200), thus highlighting their agency in being generative and transformative of discourses and being constructed and influenced by them. This formulation shatters the thinking of the body as passive nature and underlines what bodies can do, and how bodies can bring resignification forward.

Feminist disability theory is particularly useful in attempts to contrast the biomedical gaze on the body and the medical model of mental distress because it analyses the material practices concerning the lived body (Garland-Thomson 2011, p. 22). As Garland-Thomson argues, ‘because women and the disabled are cultural signifiers for the body, their actual bodies have been subjected relentlessly to what Foucault calls “discipline”’ (Garland-Thomson 2011, p. 22). The scholar continues pointing out how this Foucauldian disciplining (1977) of the body and the mind has been perpetrated through medicine and health norms, but also through the culturally interrelated regime of appearance: they have consonant disciplinary objectives (Garland-Thomson 2011, p. 22). Garland-Thomson underlines how women and disabled people have been configured as ‘medically abnormal (...). Sickness is gendered feminine. This gendering of illness has entailed distinct consequences in everything from epidemiology and diagnosis to prophylaxis and therapeutics’ (Garland-Thomson 2011, p. 22). Moreover, cultural discourses (for example relating to aging and the policing of weight) and enforced practices (from 12cm heels to clitorectomy) function as disciplinary regimes for women’s bodies, disabling agency and, at the same time, augmenting and diminishing the intensity of discourses on femininity (Garland-Thomson 2011, p. 30). In addition, there are some disabilities that are particularly charged by the medical discourse: Garland-Thomson notes how ‘depression, anorexia, and agoraphobia are female-dominant, psychophysical disabilities that exaggerate normative gendered roles’ (Garland-Thomson 2011, p. 30).

In the following chapters I will explore other ways that the body-mind could experiment and live outside the medical model of disability and its aims of healing and controlling the deviant subject. Garland-Thomson writes how the “ideology of cure” does not solely characterise the medical realm, but also the entire cultural discourse regarding disability and illness (Garland-Thomson 2011, p. 27). Major investments in medical technology and not in other ways to improve the quality of life (e.g. in the

economic and environmental contexts) forward ‘the cultural conviction that disability can be extirpated; inviting the belief that life with a disability is intolerable’ (Garland-Thomson 2011, p. 27). As Garland-Thomson argues, disability is produced when the body is deemed ‘incongruent both in space and in the milieu of expectations’ (Garland-Thomson 2011, p. 33).

I would like to produce an oppositional analysis of how some artists might have found agency, empowerment, and relief in their ways of dealing with disability and pain, while restructuring its negative discourse. I want to investigate how body art also functions as a means of reappropriation of the body-mind. This reappropriation is enacted through the representation of the self as a performance about the disabled body-mind. I want to see how it is possible for some artists/Others to cope with, manage, and exploit mental pain through their art. In doing so, I want to escape the “overcoming narrative” of disability, because it is a narrative re-enforcing normativity. The normate, as described by Garland-Thomson, is ‘the figure outlined by an array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the norm’s boundaries’ and the ‘corporeal incarnation of culture’s collective, unmarked, normative characteristics’ (Garland-Thomson 1997, p. 8). On the contrary, I want to investigate and write on embodied, lived experiences of disability and pain. Following Garland-Thomson, ‘to embrace the supposedly flawed body of disability is to critique the normalizing phallic fantasies of wholeness, unity, coherence, and completeness. The disabled body is contradiction, ambiguity, and partiality incarnate’ (Garland-Thomson 2011, p. 42).

As Garland-Thomson notes, actual feminist debates use for their inquiries figures charged with political potential like Haraway’s cyborg (Haraway 1991), the monster in Braidotti’s *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (1994), and the grotesque in Russo’s *The Female Grotesque: Risk, Excess and Modernity* (1994); on the other side though, these metaphorical invocations lack the acknowledgment that ‘these figures often refer to the actual bodies of people with disabilities. Erasing real disabled bodies from the history of these terms compromises the very critique they intend to launch’ (Garland-Thomson 2011, p. 21). Therefore there is a need to approach these Othered bodies directly, using the epistemological key of pain. Besides, for feminist cultural and political purposes, it could be added that ‘a *feeling body* (...) presents a challenge to the kind of Cartesian dualism that produces the body as mere physical substance’ (Blackman 2008, p. 10). Scholars such as Aydede (2009), Ahmed (2002) or Scarry

(1985) acknowledge that people have exclusive epistemic mastery on pain and their reports are therefore irrefutable. Ahmed also takes into consideration the difficulties of knowing exactly the fabric of our own pain, stating that ‘the ungraspability of my own pain is brought to the surface by the ungraspability of the pain of others’ (Ahmed 2002, p. 24). Similarly, Scarry argues that ‘whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language’ (Scarry 1985, p. 4). She reflects just on physical pain but I will extend this characteristic of unsharability to mental pain as well. All shades of pain resist language, and in the folds of this resistance there might be the features of its political and ethical potentials. Ahmed sees in fact ‘the political process in terms of encounters between bodies that involve injury, hurt and pain sensations’ (Ahmed 2002, p. 26).

Expressing and exploiting (mental and physical) pain through body art might as well function as a possibility of an encounter with the Other and others, bypassing the difficulties of language. As Ahmed says, ‘pain encounters, or encounters with pain, are crucial to how we inhabit the world in relationship to others; pain encounters involve the animation of the surfaces that both separate us from others, and connect us to others’ (Ahmed 2002, p. 25). Contemporary art has been consistently concerned with the body. Ross argues that ‘there is no body in contemporary art that is not sexed, gendered, raced, or oriented relative to class, nationality, and health’ (Ross p. 380), and, I would add, in a more pregnant manner thanks to the embodiment of aesthetics. The first body artistic gesture might be attributed to the artist that has enlarged the field of aesthetics (Barilli 2005, p. 190): Marcel Duchamp with *Tonsure* (1919) is Dada in the radical and anti-pictorial way, when art co-penetrates life and goes beyond the artifact, the object. The testimony of the happening is left behind in the picture shot by Man Ray, which portrays Duchamp’s nape where his hair is shaved in the shape of a star. Dadaism and Futurism have offered many great works of performance and body art, and from the 1960s the seeds of Dada have grown afresh thanks to the renewed interest in bodies and performance. Jones’s phenomenological analyses, giving an alternative to essentialist and constructivist criticisms, stresses how body art ‘opens art-making and viewing processes to intersubjective desires and identifications’ (Jones 1998, p. 26). The body and pain in body art are potentially able to articulate and complexify meanings in a manner distinct from language. I find in body art the potentiality to forward mental pain in a way that politically promotes resignification of the body-mind and of mental distress, bound to what Ahmed names the ‘encounter with pain’ (2002). I argue

therefore, contrary to the above statement by Jones, that not all body art that involves pain is able to promote intersubjectivity and open a dialogue between the performer and the viewer. This is also because of the characteristic of epistemological unsharability that pain encompasses. The embodied encounter with pain and with the Other are possible whenever body art is able to activate the viewer. I borrow the term encounter from Ahmed because, as she states, it has the characteristic of ‘a meeting, but a meeting which involves surprise and conflict’ (Ahmed 2000, p. 6). The surprise is due to the nature of encounters because there is the possibility ‘*we may not be able to read the bodies of others*’ (Ahmed 2000, p. 8). A body art that can activate (through pain and through a series of material-semiotic interpellations and references) the viewer might help to open a relationship with the Other, with the Other’s pain, to render less obscure Other’s embodiment and forward resignification of mental distress. In addition, the encounter has an element of conflict since differences and Otherness are imbricated with a power differential (Ahmed 2000, p. 8), and some artists might be able to highlight and question it. Thus, in the first chapter I will evaluate how the possibility of body art to forward an encounter with pain might be frustrated or opened. In order to do this, in the first part of the chapter I will analyse Vito Acconci’s *Trademarks* (1970) and Victoria Van Dyke’s *Saw* (2001); in the second part, due to their resemblance, I will compare more closely Acconci’s *Adaptation Study (N. 3 Hand and Mouth)* (1970) with Van Dyke’s *Cannibal* (2001).

The focus is thus strongly placed on the embodiment and lived experience of the artist, which is pivotal to how they might be used in performance art to see how mental pain can be represented and dealt with. Discourses regarding art and mental distress have historically influenced the critical appraisal of artists and their works, and hence, it is important to take into account how artists themselves envision working with mental pain through art practice and how they represent themselves when they experience mental pain, distress and disability. In order to address these issues, the second chapter will analyse how the “grandmother of performance art” Marina Abramović takes into account mental pain in her prescriptions for the artist and how her ideas, discourses and workshops conditions might affect other artists and appraisals about them and their works, given her prominence in contemporary art. The primary focus will be *An Artist’s Life Manifesto* (n.d.), a manifesto that aims to function as a moral and social codex for artists. It stems from Abramović’s artistic investigation and, along with other predicaments, it also addresses suffering and depression. Then, the attention will shift

towards how Yoyoi Kusama represents herself dealing with mental disability and pain in her autobiography *Infinity Net* (2011), how her mental disability has been deployed in the appraisal of her works and what consequences might stem from this.

In the third chapter the focus will be on how artists might be able to use pain in their performances in order to fight pain. In doing so, I would like to investigate the results of exploiting physical pain to cope with and manage mental distress in the realm of representation and in forwarding resignification. This chapter's aim is also to tackle pain from a disability studies perspective. Siebers, in fact, points out the need for this kind of enterprise: 'the greatest stake in disability studies at the present moment is to find ways to represent pain' (Siebers 2001, p. 744). Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose will be the first artists I consider, while in the second part I will focus on some of the work by Catherine Opie. I will investigate if and how the artworks analysed are able to resignify the lived experiences of disability and pain. What causes them pain, physical and mental distresses are different types of disability: for Flanagan it is a physical disability, while for Opie a "social" disability (caused by society's exclusionary practices and oppression). Moreover, I have chosen to analyse their works because they all use BDSM in their art as well as in their day-to-day lives. Their pieces on BDSM will be the central foci where the reflection on pain pivots and develops, and it is expanded through the artists' other works, which are strictly related. I will examine more than one piece by Flanagan and Rose in order to have a better grasp of their whole *oeuvre*: while its fulcrum is performance involving the body and the lived experience, their *oeuvre* presents an unexpected unity of intentions despite the variety of mediums. Thus, the following works will be considered to different extents and with different depths: the performances *Nailed* (1989) and *YOU ALWAYS HURT THE ONE YOU LOVE* (1991), the poems *Why* (Flanagan and Rose 1997) and *Mop and Broom* (1994), the written piece *Superman* (1990), excerpts from Flanagan's journal *Pain Journal* (1995), the documentary directed by Kirby Dick *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist* (1996).

In contrast my analysis of the work of Catherine Opie will be more contained, focusing on a sort of triptych of self-portraits that are in strict communication with each other. More specifically, Opie's photograph that deals directly with BDSM is *Self-Portrait/Pervert* (1994) (fig. 17), which I will read in dialogue with *Self-Portrait/Cutting* (1993) (fig. 16) and *Self-Portrait/Nursing* (2004) (fig. 18).

After an introductory description of each artwork I will conduct my analyses intersecting feminist theory, disability theory, and art history. In addition, to engage extensively with artists' lived experiences and embodiments and their representations, I take into account more than one work for each artist and I highlight the mutual entanglements of different artworks. All pieces are not strictly ascribable to body art and those which fall outside the definition are selected as they have fundamental interconnections with the other works of the artist.

Through the analyses of the aforementioned artists and artworks, the ultimate aim of the research is to shed light on how something invisible like mental pain and mental distress can be brought into visibility and addressed through artistic representation.

# 1. The Possibilities for Encounters with Pain: Vito Acconci and Victoria Van Dyke

## 1.1 Introduction

In this chapter I will analyse two sets of works respectively by Vito Acconci and Victoria Van Dyke. Acconci's *Adaptation Study (N. 3 Hand and Mouth)* (1970) and *Trademarks* (1970), and Van Dyke's *Cannibal* (2001) and *Saw* (2001) portray each solitary subject performs on her/himself similar masochistic actions. In spite of a time difference of thirty years, I have chosen to focus on these particular pieces because at first sight their minimalism and use of a black and white photographic medium make the performance's recorded actions seem even more akin to each other. My aim is to explore how these images of self-inflicted pain stem from different premises and put forward different results in the realms of body art and signification. I will start the investigation with *Trademarks*, which will be followed by *Saw*, and I will conclude with a reading of *Adaptation Study* and *Cannibal*. I would like to reflect with this analysis Ahmed's arguments about pain and its political and ethical potentialities. According to Ahmed: 'pain encounters, or encounters with pain, are crucial to how we inhabit the world in relationship to others; pain encounters involve the animation of the surfaces that both separate us from others, and connect us to others' (Ahmed 2002, p. 25). The modes of pain encounters carried out in the body art works analysed in this chapter matter for signification, as pain in itself does not guarantee it due to its characteristic of unsharability, as Scarry has pointed out (1985). Thus, I will argue how the potentiality of pain to forward an encounter with the other/Other is frustrated by Acconci and encouraged by Van Dyke. This is because Acconci's status as solipsistic, transcendental great male genius his performances support, and because of Van Dyke's signification of her embodied, lived experience and how she rearticulates it through the web of interrelations and interpellations her art carries.

## 1.2 *Trademarks* of the Great Male Genius

Vito Acconci is an American artist of Italian descent born in New York in 1940. He has worked with many media such as poetry, performance, body art, public sculpture, installation, film and video. Then he shifted his interests towards public space, design and architecture with the Acconci Studio's projects.

Acconci's works seem to fail to reflect on his lived experience. Salle argues that the dynamics in Acconci's work is that 'the relationship (...) about the artist and the audience to become one identity: we are him' (Salle quoted in Linker 1994, p. 7). To Acconci, his art is 'about the presentation of a self – a person, not about my life' (Acconci quoted in Linker 1994, p. 9). This self, thus, seems to be unanchored to any sort of connection to his embodiment. Ultimately it is a self that is 'constructed in the world, rather than natural' (Linker 1994, p. 8). His very beginning was focused, according to Linker, on the questioning of the modernist self inherited from abstract expressionism (Linker 1994, p. 8). Linker states that in her book she has not given 'attention to the notorious sexism of the artist's work in the early 1970s' and continues by saying that 'although Acconci's early art registers the masculinist abuses of the heroic modern self, the displacement of that self within the social surround offers a counter to its domination' (Linker 1994, p. 9). It seems a rather contradictory critical position, which also has the effect of placing some of his artistic outcomes in a sort of separated vacuum. The very employment of practices of body art from the late 1960s-early 1970s onwards has been potentially more attentive toward embodiments and lived experiences than the outcomes of pictorial objects produced by the heroic modern self of abstract expressionists, but the qualities and openings of these practices cannot be left unproblematically outside the reading. Historically, in the 1960s and 1970s body art takes place in a period of great social struggles and activism against the features and the privileges of the normative Western subject. As Jones says, many body artists 'participated in this dislocation of normative subjectivity, reconfiguring identity politics (the ways in which the subject comes to meaning in the social) and the very parameters of subjectivity itself' (Jones 1998, p. 103). The performances by Acconci I will analyse are located in this period, while their outcomes do not support the questioning of normative Cartesian subjectivity, but they purport the transcendental figure of himself as the great male genius.

*Trademarks* (fig. 1) is a performance dated September 1970 that consists of ‘activity/photo piece/ink prints, variable number of photographs, and ink prints’ (Acconci in Ward 2002, p. 22). The artist describes the work as follows: ‘sitting naked on the floor, and biting myself: biting as many parts of my body as my mouth can reach. Printer’s ink is applied to each bite; bite-prints are stamped, like fingerprints’ (Acconci in Ward 2002, p. 22). Some of the black and white photographs show the full figure of the artist biting himself, others the close-up of the marks of his teeth and saliva, while some white papers are imprinted with the negative memory of such marked, printed skin. The action is simple, minimalist the outcome and the traces left behind. Almost everyone would be able to experience the pain of her/his own teeth on bare skin. To Linker this represents ‘the erosion of the inflated romantic image of the artist as a creator of unique and valued objects; instead, Acconci presents himself as the maker of banal and iterative events’ (Linker 1994, p. 22). I argue that this feature of his work has not prevented him from being acclaimed as another romantic artistic genius. In respect to this, Parker and Pollock (1981) analyse how creativity has been assigned to the realm of high arts and how society has produced the Romantic discourse of the artist as the great male genius. They show how the ideological ground underpins art, which is neither objective nor neutral: ‘it is a particular way of seeing and interpreting in which the beliefs and assumptions of art historians, unconsciously reproducing the ideologies of our society, shape and limit the very picture of the history of art presented to us by art history’ (Parker and Pollock 1981, pp. xvii-xviii). Parker and Pollock (1981) illustrate the historical process as follows: before the Eighteenth Century the term artist was applied to a person that displayed taste, hence also to what it is called today an artisan. In the Renaissance there was a shift from craftsman with manual skill to artist with intellectual and creative abilities. In the rhetoric of the time the great master is compared to divinity. During the Sixteenth and Seventeenth Centuries the artist’s intellectual status was acknowledged and assured through education in the newly established academies, with the consequence of the professionalisation of the practice. Then in the Eighteenth Century, a period of wide-ranging economic, social and ideological changes, the artist came to be defined as a creative individual with specific characteristics of strangeness, eccentricity, exoticness, imagination, creativity, unconventionality, and solitude. The distinguishing factors that elevated him from the masses were believed to be both social and genetic, and created new myths (the prophet and the genius) and new social figures (the Bohemian and the pioneer). During

Romanticism the artist acquired a semi-divine role, near to God as the Creator. In the Nineteenth Century bourgeois femininity was consolidated through reproductive and domestic roles, and the schism between woman and artist was further deepened as the figure of the artist embodied anti-domestic and anti-social outsidership. In the Twentieth Century being an artist meant being born a special person. Twentieth Century avant-garde movements questioned the Romantic myth of the artist, adopted new practices and engaged different relations between spectators and artworks. Though, the crucial agent of the reception of art was the critic. The ideology still operates nowadays through the critic's discourse (Parker and Pollock 1981, p. 136). For Acconci then, ideology operates through the critic's discourse and it is also reinforced by what the artist states about himself and his work.

Regarding *Trademarks*, Acconci says that the biting of his body is performed in order to 'build up (...) a biography, a public record' (Acconci quoted in Jones 1998, p. 125). In this period of Acconci's activity, it could be seen that he reflects on 'the notion of the body as a "starting point" (...) and the need to act as "the doer", to "present my own person"' (Linker 1994, p. 22). In this way, his body is seen by Acconci himself as a neutral tool used to show himself as an artist, with no insights on to the specificity of his embodiment and lived experience and no connections with the pain of his performances. Linker states how this first – I would say void – self-reflexive activity serves to 'zero in on and define the person of their maker. In aesthetic terms, the actions are all syntactic derivatives of a single utterance, "I make art"' (Linker 1994, p. 22). Hence, all the outcomes of the performances by Acconci are reduced to syntactic solipsistic movements around the concept of the artist as Creator. In works of the early 1970s like *Trademarks* emerges the artist as 'the maker of marks' (Linker 1994, p. 22). As Parker and Pollock state (1981), the role of the art critic is crucial in transmitting certain ideologies, for example the *ars gratia artis* trope that resonates in the self-contained and abstract "I make art" stated by Linker. Linker thus supports a self-reflexivity in Acconci that forwards the Romantic status of "artist as Creator" through a formalist discourse<sup>1</sup>. As stated before, it is a discourse that has a long history and it could be connected to Greenberg's discourse on the superior heroic qualities of an artist such as Jackson

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<sup>1</sup> In fact, the formalist critic judges works of art through 'a disembodied vision and according to supposedly pure relations of form (with the object understood as autonomous from its social, political, personal, and other context)' which should put forward "disinterestedness" (Jones 1998, p. 76). Thus, the "universal" authority of the art critic and the art historian is confirmed through it (Jones 1998, p. 76). This is the '*pure judgement of taste*' of the Kantian aesthetic model (Jones 1998, p. 76).

Pollock who is seen as able to elevate abstract expressionism ‘as the triumphant climax of great European modernism painting’ through ‘his denial of the body, of subjectivity, of sensuality and desire’ (Jones 1998, p. 74), in total autonomy and away from any entanglement with embodiment, lived experience, politics or sociality. This discourse resonates in Linker’s aforementioned disregard for how in practice Acconci would have been able to move away from the formalist features with which, for example, Jackson Pollock has been invested. In *Trademarks* the starting point of Acconci’s body is also the end of the performance itself, a self-contained circuit where the Other/others remain firmly at a distance and cannot enter in contact. Pain retains its characteristic of unsharability (Scarry 1985). In this work he performs his own attacker ‘using his own self-aggression to confirm his selfhood once again through the leaving of traces of his action’ on himself and on paper (Jones 1998, pp. 125-126). Through the assertion of his subjectivity as the great male genius ‘maker of marks’ (Linker 1994, p. 22), pain and violence on his body/self do not forward a dialogue with the Other and do not claim the Other’s pain and body to enter in relation to his own.

This piece calls in and frustrates at the same time the Other’s body, pain and subjectivity. About this piece Acconci writes that ‘finding myself (...) the attempt is to reach, mark, as much of my body as possible./Turning in on myself (...) a way to connect, re-connect my body (...)/Stake claim on what I have’ (Acconci quoted in Jones 1998, p. 126).

These photographs appeared with a text by the artist in the 1972 fall issue of the magazine *Avalanche*, featuring only Acconci’s work and his own perspective on it. The end of the text accompanying the eight pictures is as follow:

‘Reasons to move: move into myself—  
move around myself—move in order to  
close a system.

Reasons to move: show myself to  
myself—show myself through myself—  
show myself outside.

Make my own outside—send my inside  
outside (I can slip outside, then, because  
I am still moving inside)’ (O’Dell 1998, pp. 19-20).

Since potentially body art ‘enacts or performs or instantiates the embodiment and intertwining of self and other’ (Jones 1998, p. 38), here it performs the status of the

great male genius in the art discourse through the frustration of body art's potentiality of encounter of the other through the self. As Acconci's artistic statement shows, the conceptual and material movements of this performance begin, develop and end inside itself through a body that fails to recognise his embodiment, giving way to a transcendental discourse about the artist and precluding further movements towards the viewer.

In an interview Acconci stated that he didn't see his early works as being masochistic:

'I might have wanted to deny those masochistic elements...[T]here are ways of reading [this work]...which I might not have intended but which I can't deny. They imply funny notion of artist as sacrificial victim. I thought I was doing exactly the opposite, thought I hated the notion of artist as priest, art as religion, art-work as altar. I think, now, my work was confirming those notions in a lot of ways whether I wanted it to or not' (Acconci quoted in Jones 1998, p. 132).

Nevertheless, I will argue for other artworks such as the ones by Bob Flanagan and Catherine Opie that masochistic elements and pain can forward a different notion of the artist through a different use of intersubjectivity in the art practice that in *Trademarks* is not present.

As the aforementioned interview demonstrates, Acconci is aware of some of the issues the outcomes of his performances have. Ward points out how 'after 1974, Acconci attempted to distance himself from the "cult of personality" that grew with his art-world visibility, by removing himself and his image from the situations he set up' (Ward 2002, p. 45). Thus, paradoxically, in his performances and videos he used his voice as disembodied: by removing his body he provokes, amongst other things, says Ward, an effect similar to the one of ideology (Ward 2002, p. 45). He seemed unable to escape the solipsistic status of great male genius, to assert his immanence through his embodiment, to encounter and confront the public and their lived experience with his own lived experiences: instead, he resorted to disembodied transcendence through the illusion of a voice from nowhere and everywhere at the same time. I would like to recall what Haraway argues about the claims of relativism and objectivity, which are both ways of seeing everything from nowhere and everywhere, they are both "god tricks" that 'make it impossible to see well' since they deny 'location, embodiment and partial perspective' (Haraway 1988, p. 584). Thus, in these works and in *Trademarks*, Acconci assumes the transcendental state of Romantic genius and fails to critically assert a

location, an embodiment, a partial perspective in order to signify his pain in his performances and, through it, open the possibilities of an encounter with the Others.

His performance on pain precludes the intersubjective potentiality of body artistic practices by obscuring the immanence of his body and transcending his flesh with a circular movement that leads again to the Cartesian subjectivity of the great modernist artist. Acconci's body is veiled by this solipsistic performance that precludes intersubjectivity. This performance puts his self, paradoxically, through immanence by the use of his body to make his work, into transcendence, reaffirming the figure of the great male genius and his status of divinity. In the visual economy of patriarchy transcendence is a feature of the artistic genius, who is male, white, heterosexual, able-bodied, upper middle class. This is a normative figure that has exclusionary power over all the Others (for example women, the disabled, the non-heterosexual, the not white) who do not fit the grid of what Garland-Thomson calls the unmarked, non-deviant body of the normate (Garland-Thomson 1997, p. 8). I will therefore analyse whether an artist like Van Dyke who embodies the Other is able to bring forward an encounter with pain through an artwork that entails performance similar of the one presented by Acconci in *Trademarks*.

### 1.3 *Saw*: the Other

From Acconci's transcendental status of great male genius that precludes the possibility of encounter, I will move to the analysis of an artwork that brings forth the possibility to deploy pain for an open dialogue with the viewers and the Other. I do not intend to mythicize the Other and her embodied experiences, nor to elevate and use her "sacrificial wounds" as useful for my/some purposes. The readings of Van Dyke's works and embodied experience are performed for the ethical and political potential that these entail, particularly the encounter with pain. I agree with Haraway about the possibility of the vantage point of the subjugated when she says that 'vision is better from below the brilliant space platforms of the powerful' (Haraway 1988, p. 583), but remaining aware that 'to see from below is neither easily learned nor unproblematic'

(Haraway 1988, p. 584). Van Dyke's embodied objectivity (Haraway 1988) of the body-mind in pain is important because it is potentially generative of knowledge and projected towards a political outcome. It needs to be highlighted that 'the standpoints of the subjugated are not "innocent" positions. On the contrary, they are preferred because in principle they are least likely to allow denial of the critical and interpretive core of all knowledge' (Haraway 1988, p. 584). Moreover, the positions of the subjugated must be examined critically as well. Alongside the need for an embodied objectivity Haraway also points out the importance of embodied knowledges and forwards 'an argument against various forms of unlocatable, and so irresponsible, knowledge claims. Irresponsible means unable to be called into account' (Haraway 1988, p. 583). Unlike Acconci with his disavowal of location I find that it is possible to call Van Dyke and her work into account through her focus on her lived experience and her embodiment, her steadfast expression of her locatedness.

In order to see how Van Dyke relates with her embodiment and lived experience in her works, I will proceed with an analysis of the artist and the series *Saw* (2001) (figg. 2-7). Victoria Van Dyke (\*1976) is a Canadian feminist lesbian artist, whose favourite mediums are collage, photography and poetry. The works I will analyse seem effectively able to call into question others and the Other through their masochistic elements and, also, through her embodiment as a survivor of rape and psychiatric institutionalisation.

Jones states that the possibilities of an 'embodied visual practice' through body art are, for example, made by 'activating the viewer, positing sexual and gender identities as fully contingent and intersectional with class, race, and other aspects of identity' (Jones 1998, p. 22). In order to investigate Jones's claim, I will look at Van Dyke's intersubjective engagements with the public through her body art, her autobiography, her statements about cannibalism, and the longing for an Amazon-like embodiment.

In 2001 Van Dyke shot with a 35mm camera several black and white portraits of a model called Kat 'to create art pieces about cannibalism, censorship and sexuality' (The Lilith Gallery, n.d.). The model is pictured most of the times naked in inside, dark and bare settings, using a rather low-fi approach. I will focus on two of the series produced in 2001 that are called, respectively, *Saw* and *Cannibal*. In the first the woman

in front of the camera has a saw in her hands and in each picture she mimics the amputation of a part of her body: a leg from the knee in *Saw #1* (fig. 2), *Saw #3* (fig. 4), and *Saw #4* (fig. 5); an arm in *Saw #2* (fig. 3); and her right breast in *Saw #5* (fig. 6) and *Saw #6* (fig. 7).

In *Saw#5 (I Want To Be An Amazon)* (fig. 6) and in *Saw #6* (fig. 7), the artist puts into action, with the masochistic weapon of pain on the body, the wish to retrieve the myth of the Amazon. Some information on the body of the Amazon is provided by Strabo at the beginning of the first century A.D. when he says that, in order to use weapons like the javelin with a freer use of the arm, ‘the right breast is seared off in infancy’ (Hardwick 1990, p. 22). Defiant of the rigid gender norms of ancient Greece, Amazons are ‘a female people who fight’ (Blok 1994, p. 134). The earliest trace of this attribute is in Homer, who classifies them with the epithet *ajntiavneirai*, which means “equivalent to men” in the sense of “potential equals of the male hero”. This epithet incorporates the trait of ‘hatred of men’ (Blondell 2005, p. 189), but this hostility is expressed only through military violence (Blondell 2005, p. 190). Blondell points out that ‘though the equals of Greek heroic males in certain respects, the Amazons are also radically alien in virtue of their rejection of conventional gender norms’ that pertain to the Greek *oikos* (Blondell 2005, p. 189). Therefore they are a threat to the “civilized” life, especially because they do not have ‘domestic interest in men. Their “masculinity” and separatism are in turn made possible by a lack of any sexual need for the male’, except for the infrequent reproductive necessity (Blondell 2005, p. 190). Blondell argues that, since they are a danger for the “civilized” social order, their conquest came to be seen as part of his civilizing mission’ that is enacted, through physical and/or sexual domination, ‘by the cream of Greek manly heroism—Heracles, Theseus, Achilles, even Alexander the Great’ (Blondell 2005, p. 190). The menace perceived by the Greeks, according to Hardwick, is twofold. One is represented by ‘the related themes of geographical remoteness, “otherness”, and implicit or explicit rejection of Greek norms of female behaviour and therefore of social structure’ (Hardwick 1990, p. 18). To Hardwick the second menace lies in their political threat as invaders and as representatives of an alternative society (Hardwick 1990, p. 19), with ‘attitudes and life style which could be self-sufficient and neither submissive nor aggressive without provocation’ (Hardwick 1990, p. 34). The desire of becoming an Amazon through the mimicked action of the model sawing her breast and performing a painful action on herself is linked to the artist’s lived experience and embodiment.

Van Dyke's auto-biography (Van Dyke in *The Lilith Gallery* n.d.) tells us that she identifies as a lesbian. The reappropriation of the myth of the Amazons is typical especially of lesbian feminism: one paradigmatic example is Monique Wittig's novel *Les Guérillères* (1969). Van Dyke seems to conduct an operation similar to that which Wittig relates in her novel, where 'lesbians, who have refused to become or to remain "women", must write the new world with their bodies as well as their tongues' (Griffin Crowder 1983, p. 131). Therefore she restages mythology because 'to eliminate masculine hegemony over discourse, which has been internalized by women, she must reappropriate Western culture for women' (Griffin Crowder 1983, p. 130). Cultural myths, according to Barthes, have a reactionary function since they disguise ideology as natural (Griffin Crowder 1983, p. 131). With the use of the figure of the Amazon in a reappropriative fashion, like in Wittig, the artist asks the audience to 'reexamine the masculinist bias underlying our literary and cultural heritage' (Griffin Crowder 1983, p. 131).

The reappropriation is due to the heroic artistic *topos* of these women with their legendary accomplishments. The modern day-to-day usage of the word is somehow focused on qualities that have a halo of threat and abnormality, but the ancient deployment of the myth presupposed 'an additional element, Amazons as a subject for artistic and poetic interest' (Hardwick 1990, p. 14). Moreover, the Amazons are the 'emblem of Otherness in its many guises' (Blok 1994, p. vii), since the Greeks modelled their Other also in mythical representations: they transmitted them via oral tradition and maintained them through writing and visual representations.

Blok argues that the specificity of being female heroes 'both underscores and destabilizes the masculine heroic quality of the Greek heroes who face them' (Blok 1994, p. x). Therefore, the figure of the Amazon acted out in Van Dyke's work both highlights the rationality of the Cartesian self (the male hero in the patriarchal society) and undermines it by being the Other (a woman, a lesbian) who calls out the others, an embodied alternative to the values and the practices of the patriarchy.

The model and the artist are not compliant with the standard patriarchal prescriptions of femininity. The model seems to want to harm her body by amputating it with a saw in order to eliminate her excesses, acting on her body the internalised violence that patriarchy enforces on all women. The big saw in the pictures alludes to the scalpel of the (plastic) surgeon. Power and discourse, in the Foucauldian sense,

entail constraint as well as resistance, *potestas* as well as *potentia* (Rabinow 1984). As Garland-Thomson points out ‘the twin ideologies of normalcy and beauty posit female and disabled bodies, particularly, as not only spectacles to be looked at, but as pliable bodies to be shaped infinitely so as to conform to a set of standards called normal and beautiful’ (Garland-Thomson 2011, p. 24); therefore, in order to fabricate a body that is unmarked and disciplined

‘what is imagined as excess body fat, the effects of aging, marks of ethnicity such as supposedly Jewish noses, bodily particularities thought of as blemishes or deformities, and marks of history such as scarring and impairments are now expected to be surgically erased’ (Garland-Thomson 2011, p. 24).

Here the saw beats the scalpel with a use of pain that can function as a means for collective politics: like Ahmed says, pain ‘matters insofar as the experience of pain is precisely about the bodily life of the process of harm and being harmed (violence involves a relationship of both force and harm). (...) Pain is not simply an effect of a history of harm; it is the *bodily life of that history*’ (Ahmed 2002, p. 27).

Returning to Van Dyke’s work, at the end of the series the girl in the pictures decides to cut her right breast in order to be able to fight in a more effective way. By saying ‘I want to be an Amazon’ in the fifth picture, she summons the heroism and the strength of the Amazons through her embodiment. She counteracts the violence of patriarchy by taking control of her body through self-inflicted pain. This action maintains and augments the excesses and the “Otherness”, it works with them using a masochistic violence to counteract the culture that sees a woman’s body-mind both as excess and lack. The phenomenological experience of woman in patriarchal society has a history of mental and physical distress. As Garland-Thomson says, for Aristotle women are Others, ‘monstrosities’ for having an ‘improper form’, ‘mutilated males’ (Garland-Thomson 2011, p. 18). Since Aristotle, Western thought has supported this conception and ‘conflated femaleness and disability, understanding both as defective departures from a valued standard’ (Garland-Thomson 2011, p. 18). Garland-Thomson points out that recently feminist theorists argued that ‘female embodiment is a disabling condition in sexist culture’ (Garland-Thomson 2011, p. 18). For example, Young analyses how ‘enforced feminine comportment delimits women’s sense of embodied agency’ (Garland-Thomson 2011, p. 18), concluding that in a sexist society women are ‘physically handicapped’ (Young 2005, p. 42). The visual and discursive

representations of all subjugated bodies are of lack or excess (Garland-Thomson 2011, p. 21). Garland-Thomson says that ‘what Susan Bordo describes as the too-muchness of women also haunts disability and racial discourses, marking subjugated bodies as ungovernable, intemperate, or threatening’ (Garland-Thomson 2011, p. 18).

Blok underlines how the very use of a myth is telling of ‘the result of human inability to translate important experiences into rational discourse’ (Blok 1994, p. 14). Some scholars argue how the use of myth and symbolism are a ‘consequence of the chasm separating language from experience’ (Blok 1994, p. 14). The lived experience of Van Dyke (for example as a woman, a lesbian, a rape survivor, a former patient of a mental institution) is merely stated in her words, but it is transposed and radically embedded into her art. To help the rearticulation of the lived body, the Amazon comes to the front.

Young points out that ‘only among lesbians is there an effort to affirm in public the possibility of a positive one-breasted woman’ (Young 2005, p. 96). The recalling of the myth of the fierce and heroic Amazon is an example of this. Young underlines how ‘in the total scheme of the objectification of women, breasts are the primary things’ (Young 2005, p. 77), therefore in *Saw*, by gaining control of her breasts, the woman tries to fight against the objectification that has its roots in Plato and Aristotle and continues, enforced by the Cartesian system (Young 2005, p. 78). In the picture the woman takes back her subjectivity by embodying an Amazon. Young points out how breasts are most likely ‘the symbol of feminine sexuality’ (Young 2005, p. 77) and how ‘male-dominated society tends not to think of a woman’s breasts as hers. Woman is a natural territory; her breasts belong to others – her husband, her lover, her baby’ (Young 2005, p. 80). Escaping this logic, the model is taking back her sexuality through her breasts as well, choosing the body she wants for herself. Her identity is a central aspect because, as Young says, ‘phenomenologically, the chest is a center of a person’s being-in-the-world and the way she presents herself in the world, so breasts cannot fail to be an aspect of her bodily habitus’ (Young 2005, p. 94).

In *Saw* the woman calls the other/Other with her Othered body as a woman, as a lesbian, as an Amazon, she questions the system of the *cogito* with her embodiment and engages with the spectatorial relations carried through her body artistic performance. Encounters through pain are thus possible since Van Dyke’s body art has real potential for ‘dissolving the metaphysical idealism and the Cartesian subject (the artist as heroic

but disembodied genius, the transcendent “I” behind the work of art)’ (Jones 1998, p. 37) that Acconci’s works support. The comparative analysis will now tackle two other works formally even more similar in order to see if and how they elicit different outcomes.

#### 1.4 The Solipsistic *Adaptation Study* and the Encounter with the *Cannibal*

I will consider two other works by Vito Acconci and Victoria Van Dyke: *Adaptation Study* and *Cannibal*. They will be analysed to see how a man and a woman, thirty-one years apart, perform the same – simple yet extreme – body artistic action of putting their whole hand in their mouth and come to different result.

Acconci’s *Adaptation Study* (*N. 3 Hand in Mouth*) (fig. 8) is a silent, black and white, Super-8 film that lasts 3 minutes. This piece is a part of the three *Adaptation Studies* recorded in June 1970: one (*N. 1 Blindfolded Catching*) featured the blindfolded artist trying to catch a little rubber ball thrown at him multiple times by ‘anticipating the time when the next ball would be thrown’ (Linker 1994, p. 26); in the other one (*N. 2 Soap and Eyes*) Acconci pours soapy water on his face, temporarily blinding himself and trying to adjust his vision just by exercising his eyes and not by removing the soap with his hands (Ward 2002, p. 42). For the third work, Acconci reports: ‘I’m pushing my hand into my mouth, I’m pushing my hand in so far that I’m choking, I’m coughing, my hand pulls out of my mouth...I’m pushing my hand in again, deeper, again, it gets harder each time, sooner or later I wouldn’t be able to do it again...’ (Acconci in Ward 2002, p. 43). As Linker says, the series resonates with the behavioural studies of the period ‘with their attention to “training exercises” and “learning sessions”’ (Linker 1994, p. 24). Linker highlights that the *Adaptation Studies* ‘show the artist’s body responding to situations in which varying degrees of physical stress were applied. (...) external pressure was applied to a “system” until its boundaries were strained and, finally, exhausted, so that the closure of the system was ruptured’ (Linker 1994, p. 26). The body, once again, is considered by the critic as a neutral, objective, universal system.

Taking himself to an exhaustion stage, according to Acconci, would make him 'more vulnerable to a viewer' (Acconci quoted in Linker 1994, p. 34). With this work, Acconci is aiming to enter the space of the audience: 'I'm closed off from the viewer (I'm taking myself in), the viewer is an outsider – when I choke and cough, I break my closed circle, slip into the viewer's region, lose my stance' (Acconci quoted in Linker 1994, p. 34). Despite Acconci's intentions, Ward points out that 'what was exhausted, or denied, was the one-to-one, eye-to-eye relationship with the artist that the work initially seems to have promised (Ward 2002, p. 41). The intersubjective engagement of body art seems to be negated. The focus, the centre point, is him alone, as he says in the 1972 interview for the magazine *Avalanche* (Ward, Taylor and Bloomer 2002, p. 85). The outcome of the action is, once again, self-contained and solipsistic, frustrating the possibility of encounter. It starts and ends with a unity of the disembodied subject, where the painful stressor does not really question either the artist or the viewer. The boundaries of the body remain intact, despite the effort for adaptation to the actions performed. The territory of the audience is not entered by a body that is a scientific, uniform, neutral tool. The result is the frustration of the possibility of the encounter through pain. Barbara Smith considers the body art of the same period by taking as her empirical reflection the body of artists such as Acconci, Nauman and Burden, and says, in fact, that their involvement 'was with a focus on its behavior and permutations. They used their bodies as tools for self-discovery with a kind of self-disengagement. It seemed to me that they were exploring things in a quasi-scientific way but not really exploring maleness' (Smith quoted in Jones 1998, p. 151). Acconci seems to be interested in body art because it would permit him to 'objectify his body through extreme concentration', to follow the conceptualist effort of wearing down 'the art object through attention to its subject' (Linker 1994, p. 28). Despite his endeavour, the subject remains untouched in his Cartesian heroism.

In contrast in Van Dyke's *Cannibal* the Cartesian subject and his disembodied heroism are questioned by pain and by an unsettling encounter. *Cannibal* is a series of four pictures shot by Van Dyke in 2001. It is very similar in the execution with the other series of the same year: the shots are black and white, minimal, with a low-fi quality, a little bit blurred, the same model naked and performing simple and violent actions on herself.

*Cannibal #1* and *#2* (fig. 9) show the model biting her arm, while *Cannibal 3#* (fig. 10) and *4#* record her inserting her hand in her mouth. She seems helpless, she cannot do otherwise: a primal instinct tainted with anger seems to prevail. Her eyes are fierce, looking at us in a disturbing way: alone or paired with the title of the series, and with the artist's statements and biography they drag us in an uneasy territory of taboos, forbidden desires, ancestral anguish and danger. In this way, Van Dyke's works 'distance as well as seduce various spectators to various effects' (Jones 1998, p. 29).

Van Dyke asserts that cannibalism is both her philosophy and her art (Van Dyke 2002). She claims that eating the flesh and the blood of other humans would make people stronger (Van Dyke 2002). She bluntly states: 'headhunters, cannibals, vampires...whatever you call them, I want to be one. The only problem it's not legal. I'm not allowed to eat people'. She continues:

'this is why I've confined myself to a mental institution...Maybe I can find someone there I would seriously consider killing and drinking their blood. And eating their brain too, while I'm at it. And if I kill someone in a mental institution, I can definitely plead insanity, right? How logical is that?' (Van Dyke 2002).

Under this text, she placed the picture of *Cannibal #2*. The picture reinforces the words by embodying the threat. It seems an artistic manifesto, which brings us back to the lived experience of the artist. Therefore, it is useful to read an excerpt of her autobiography:

'I'm feeling sane today.

Maybe I always was, but I didn't know it. The mind plays tricks on you sometimes.

When I was very young (13), I was sexually abused and RAPED by two men I thought were my family. I didn't come forward about it until I was 18. By that time it was too late. They both got away with it and have never seen time in jail.

The sheer frustration, the self-doubt and the depression. That is what drives a young woman to think thoughts she knows is unnatural (i.e. cannibalism, suicide).

And so I had myself committed to a mental asylum.

Strange how it's the victim who ended up behind bars, but whatever' (Van Dyke n.d.).

Nicki reports that 'much psychiatric disability is closely linked to trauma. Many people who suffer from mental illnesses that force them to seek help are survivors of childhood abuse' (Nicki 2001, p. 80). A study conducted by Herman highlights that '50-60 percent of psychiatric inpatients and 40-60 percent of outpatients report childhood histories of physical or sexual abuse or both' (Herman quoted in Nicki 2001, p. 80). Van Dyke, as she affirms in her auto-biography, has stopped to trust her mind: like many other Others who have been subjected to gender-based violence, she has been 'experienced as so infuriatingly "other"' (Nicki 2001, p. 91). Nicki says that for gender-based violence survivors 'achieving unpleasant dispositions such as anger and callousness toward their abusers may be necessary for their survival and moral growth' (Nicki 2001, p. 98) and that 'symptom-management and recovery may require the realization of values outside mainstream morality' (Nicki 2001, pp. 82-83). Therefore the coping mechanism of the art and philosophy of cannibalism could be apt for Van Dyke. She states that 'my art and poetry was originally meant as therapy, but I have since realized that there are many more women like me (1 out of every 3 women are sexually abused) and that my work has become inspiration for others' (Van Dyke n.d.). Phallogocentrism does not allow any ways of being and ways of representations outside the domain of language. It does not acknowledge pain (mental and physical) because it cannot be expressed through its language. In order to avoid this silence, the embodiments that are named as Other in this order might find a solution in creativity. Regaining voice through creativity is ultimately regaining power. According to Cixous, in order to escape the oppressions of phallogocentrism, women must express themselves through an *écriture féminine*:

'Woman must write her self: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies (...) Woman must put herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement' (Cixous 1976, p. 875).

However, Cixous adds that 'to be signed with a woman's name doesn't necessarily make a piece of writing feminine. It could quite well be masculine writing, and conversely, the fact that a piece of writing is signed with a man's name does not itself exclude femininity' (Cixous 1981, p. 52). This could be interpreted as that every Other could benefit from this kind of writing about themselves, through their bodies,

transgressing the limitations of the Law. Women also are being able to create much else outside the typographic medium and deploy other tools, since ‘women’s imaginary is inexhaustible, like music, painting, writing: their stream of phantasms is incredible’ (Cixous 1976, p. 876). This possibility is shown by Van Dyke’s performances on her lived experience of mental pain.

Van Dyke uses cannibalism as a creative divide to express and problematise pain and trauma originated from gender-based violence exploiting its status of taboo. Cannibalism is, as Diehl and Donnelly say, ‘embedded deep in our collective psyche’, incorporated in the earliest oral narratives and passed down in myth, legend, folklore and fiction (Diehl and Donnelly 2008, p. 3). The first physical evidence of the practice dates back 500,000 years (Diehl and Donnelly 2008, p. 12). There are different forms of cannibalism. In endocannibalism a dead family member (or a friend) is eaten by the other members as a ritual act of respect and honour, and inviting someone outside the family would be sacrilegious (Diehl and Donnelly 2008, p. 6 and p. 19). In exocannibalism the enemy is eaten after being killed in battle or in a ritual sacrifice: it is believed that ‘the prowess of an enemy is absorbed by the victor’ or it is used ‘as a means of inflicting one final insult on a fallen enemy’ (Diehl and Donnelly 2008, p. 19). Therefore in many cases cannibalism has been institutionalized as an acceptable part of the culture by the societies who practiced it. There are cultures that reject anthropophagi, which is committed in order to fight starvation or because of the taste of human flesh (Diehl and Donnelly 2008, p. 19).

It has been a strategy typical of feminist aesthetics to deploy taboos in art practice – like childbirth, internal organs, or menstruation – since the 1970s with a political purpose (Korsmeyer 2008). As Korsmeyer points out, the use of taboo topics by women artists ‘challenge the traditional aesthetic values expected in the female body, with disturbing emotional effects that make the audience question those values and their comprehensiveness’ (Korsmeyer 2008). In *Totem and Taboo*, Freud claims that the passage from totemic to taboo moral and religious systems strengthens patriarchal authority as the foundation of culture. The taboo is therefore instrumental to patriarchal societies and the internalization of the rules that taboos entail render societies “civilized”. The society is grounded in the law of the father entangled with violence, with women considered objects and not political subjects. Van Dyke’s use of the taboo of anthropophagi is political as she pinpoints: ‘please remember that I only believe in eating rapists’ (Van Dyke n.d.). Her claim is made to fight against one of the

manifestations of patriarchal culture. Much more than just an extreme way of showing hate and insulting him, eating the enemy is a tool for the restoration of an order, an anthropophagic practice that once was happening in institutional contexts and regulated by official justice. She goes even further by comparing the mental institution with the version of cannibalism that in our modern Western world is performed by diseased criminals and flatly condemned. She also warns her audience: ‘when riding the subway, always remember to look around to see if you can spot the weirdest person on the subway. When you do, don’t stare. They might be a cannibal like me’ (Van Dyke n.d.). This is a reminder of the ‘taboo breakers’ that are still present in our society (Diehl and Donnelly 2008) and the audience is made aware of their own body and the risk they can face. By contrast, it is also a reminder that people who performed gender-based violence can pass as “normal”, while the victims suffer the physical and psychological consequences, like Van Dyke, of the violence and trauma. This enforces the appeal of cannibalism as taboo, violently interpellating the viewer of her artworks. Why is anthropophagic violence considered as taboo, while gender-based violence is not considered as much immoral?

## 1.5 Conclusion

Acconci and Van Dyke, despite producing artworks with formal similarities, bring about different results. Acconci’s performance in *Adaptation Study* is unable to forward an encounter with pain. Body and pain are conceived as neutral tools for a disembodied self-contained exercise. Instead, in Van Dyke’s work embodiment and lived experience are entangled with the performance that is able to project meaningful interrelations and defy the unsharability of pain that Scarry, for example, laments (1985). The encounter with Van Dyke’s mental pain is therefore possible since her body art is able, as Jones argues (1998), to activate the viewer.

Despite being ordinary and repetitive, Acconci’s performances and their criticism support a view of the artist still as the great male genius with transcendent connotations of the divine, which precludes and frustrates encounters with others/Others

and still forwards the Cartesian subject. There is split between the body and the mind, a body that performs painful actions that are elevated with the discourse of the great male artist (for example, as the “maker of marks” with *Trademarks*, supported by the printed bite marks that become objects alienated from the experiences of pain) thanks to the transcendental status of that figure. Acconci does not take into account his lived experience and his embodiment in his performances and in his discourses. Acconci is not able to disrupt the boundaries between himself and the viewer in order to forward an encounter through pain. There is no questioning through pain, no dialogue with the Other, because there is no involvement with his embodiment, but just the reaffirming of the solipsism of the artist with his disembodied Cartesian self. Van Dyke, on the contrary, questions the viewer using her embodiment and her lived experience. There is not a separation of the body and the mind (like in the Cartesian subject), since her body art uses pain to forward her lived experiences of mental pain. In this way, as Other through her embodiment she draws a web of interrelations, engaging the viewer through the myth of the Amazon. In addition, she engages with her lived experiences and addresses the viewer with a disquieting encounter with pain throughout the figure of the cannibal, which she deploys to fight patriarchal society with its gender-based violence. Hence, through body art Van Dyke succeeds in representing her mental pain and activating the viewer for the encounter with pain that Ahmed advocates (2002).

Van Dyke is able to address and represent mental distress in her artworks, but in art history discourses about mental distress have been used to impinge the evaluation of artists and their works. In addition, artists themselves have been using narratives and imageries of mental distress that result oppressive and discriminatory. Thus, in the following chapter I will analyse how two prominent contemporary artists who work with body art like Marina Abramović and Yayoi Kusama use these discourses.

## 2. Mad Alice and the Suffering Fairy Godmother? Yayoi Kusama and Marina Abramović

### 2.1 Introduction

In order to continue the inquiry about the importance of embodiment and lived experience in artworks about mental pain shown by the comparative analyses of Acconci and Van Dyke's works, this chapter will problematise the exploitation and the disregard of embodiment and lived experience of mental distress in art discourses. Hence, this chapter will offer a reflection on the entanglements of art practice, artists' embodiments and the art discourse and it will analyse the works of two protean artists that have worked with body art: Marina Abramović and Yayoi Kusama. The analyses will focus also on the conflation between the myth of the mad artist and mental distress.

The scholarly discourses about art and mental distress have shaped the critical appraisal of artists' works. I find these discourses problematic because their representational outcomes have material-semiotic consequences (for example discrimination and oppression) in the discourses about mental distress and in people's lived experiences. Pollock points out how discourses about art are embedded with ideology:

'art history works to exclude from its fields of discourse history, class, ideology, to produce an ideological, "pure" space for something called "art", sealed off from and impenetrable to any attempt to locate art practice within a history of production and social relations' (Pollock 1980, p. 57).

These have consequences for what and how art represents and how artists are represented. Moreover, discourses about art swing between not taking into account embodiment – the *ars gratia artis* or "art for art's sake" discourse – and exploiting the lived experiences (such the one of pain and distress) of the artists through the

mythologisation of the mad artist (usually a celebrity artist) or the labelling “outsider art”.

There is a vast body of literature in the arts and in medicine which supports the link between creativity and mental distress. There are several consequences stemming from these discourses and here, for the overall purpose of the chapter, I will focus on just one of the many examples present in art history. The discourse about artists and madness seems to be rooted at the beginning of art historiography, carrying instrumentally certain effects. One of the first instances about how the discourses on mental distress have been used to impinge the aesthetic critique on a visual artist's work is the criticism written in 1568 by Giorgio Vasari about Pontormo (1494-1557). Vasari's *The Lives of the Artists*<sup>2</sup> has been considered important for art historiography since its appearance and appreciated not only by his contemporaries and it 'quickly became the single most important secondary source in the history of Italian Renaissance art' (Bondadella and Bondanella 2008, p. i). This collection of monographs on the lives and works of artists from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance, rich with anecdotes and details, has often been considered literally. To forward his argument, Vasari highlighted and stressed Pontormo's attitude, making him the prototype of the tormented, introverted, melancholic artist. As Britton demonstrates, Vasari and many others Sixteenth Century scholars purported that melancholy (madness) charges with 'a genius for the fantastical and grotesque' (Britton 2003, p. 653) the artistic outcomes of painters. In Pontormo, it was particularly the frescoes in San Lorenzo, conducted – according to Vasari – in an eremitic uninterrupted seclusion because of the artist's neurosis, that were 'so melancholy and bizarre that they threatened to drive the spectator crazy' (Britton 2003, p. 662).

Pontormo had a great fortune in Florence amongst his contemporaries and in the court. Through the times, a lot has been said about him, also relying consistently on the Vasarian canon. For example, in 1684 Del Migliore, retrieving Vasari's critiques, explained the extravagant perspectives and agitated shapes of the figures in the frescoes in San Lorenzo as direct outcomes of Pontormo's alleged madness. Independently from the intrinsic stylistic fortunes or misfortunes of the *Maniera Moderna* through the

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<sup>2</sup> Giorgio Vasari (1511-1574) published the first edition (the Torrentino) of *Vite de' più eccellenti pittori, scultori e architettori italiani, da Cimabue insino a' tempi nostri* in 1549-1550. In 1568 the second revised and expanded edition (the Giuntina) was published. *Life of Iacopo Carucci Pontormo* was added in the second edition.

centuries, the aesthetic judgement about Pontormo could have been more favourable if disentangled from this highly charged representation of the artist's personality that Vasari mirrored in Pontormo's work. Therefore, it might be possible that the preservation – critical favour has always been crucial for the attention on the conservation of art through the centuries, through conservation or restoration – and later critiques of the *oeuvre* of Pontormo could have been different. The Vasarian critique of Pontormo is just one example amongst the innumerable art discourses around mental distress and art that, for different reasons and with different nuances, hide the ideological ground they stem from and provide impinged and monofocal accounts of artists and artworks, devoid of a larger vision that assesses the formal, historical, social, and political factors of art research. For instance, *Born Under Saturn* by Rudolf and Margot Wittkower (1963) might represent the epitome of the scholarly discourse about the conflation of the artist with madness, carried from ancient times to the French Revolution. Such discourses are present in contemporary art, including performance art, as well. This chapter will proceed by assessing how some of the articulations of the discourses about madness, genius, the myth of the suffering artist are present in Abramović's vision for how an artist should conduct her/his life and in Kusama's self-representation in her autobiography. The unpacking of this myth is productive for feminist scholarship about embodiment and disability. In addition, this critique is pivotal for producing non-discriminatory and non-oppressive assessments about artists, especially women, who have been particularly neglected in art history.

## 2.2 Marina Abramović's Recipe for the Artist

The drive to write this chapter comes from the contradictions arising from the artistic manifesto written and performed by one of the most influential contemporary performance artists, Marina Abramović (born in 1946 in Belgrade), the self-proclaimed “grandmother of performance art”. Her works – both the performances and the objects – engage with the human body (Abramović in Kaplan 1999, p. 19). Abramović has a clear vision about the importance of performance art for the future of art practice and she

declares the obsolescence of the planar artwork: ‘I really believe that the two dimensional object will be lost, that actually it will be just about the transformation and transmission of energy itself and this is the idea of 21<sup>st</sup> century art’ (Abramović in Carson 2012). Her *An Artist's Life Manifesto* (appendix B) is not prescriptive about what kind of art practice the artist should focus on, but it highly invests and binds the artist’s life with her/his creativity and work. This might lead to different qualitative appraisals of works in respect to the lived experiences of the artist. It is not the task of this chapter to analyse in depth this manifesto in its entirety, but some parts will be assessed in order to see how embodiment, pain and art practice might interact in Abramović’s prescriptions for artists.

The MoCA’s (the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles) annual fundraising gala held on the 11 November 2011 was staged as a controversial performance called *An Artist's Life Manifesto* and Abramović combined the reading of her manifesto with other performances. The choice to conceive a manifesto has been reported as the need to provide artists with a compendium about what is morally and socially mandatory for them: ‘Artists rarely made manifestos anymore, she said, referring to the gala’s title, adding that they were necessary in these troubled times to establish a “codex of moral and social behavior”’ (Yablonsky 2011). Abramović feels the urge to clarify what the conduct of an artist should be nowadays.

The manifesto is deeply intertwined with, and stems from, Abramović’s lived experience and art practice. One of most pertinent examples that highlights this connection is her statement about the artist’s relation to silence:

‘An artist has to understand silence  
An artist has to create a space for silence to enter his work  
Silence is like an island in the middle of a turbulent ocean  
Silence is like an island in the middle of a turbulent ocean  
Silence is like an island in the middle of a turbulent ocean’ (Abramović n.d., appendix B).

This predicament about the importance for the artist to understand and incorporate silence in artworks is exploited in some of her performances. For instance, the endurance piece performed at MoMa called *The Artist is Present* (2010) featured Abramović sitting in the atrium of the museum during the opening time from March to May and the visitor was invited to take a seat in the chair in front of the artist for as long as desired, while they both remained in silence. The centrality of silence and the ignitions of different channels of communications were restaged from another painful

durational work called *Nightsea Crossing* (staged 90 times from 1981 to 1986 in different cities) performed with Ulay<sup>3</sup>. The two (at that time a couple in life as well as in art practice) sat at the ends of a long table in stillness and silence facing each other for usually seven hours (the time of the opening of the gallery). The task was to experience the “here and now” (Richards 2010, p. 95), their condition of presence. In both works, the duties of the artist ‘to understand silence’ and ‘to create a space for silence to enter his work’ presented in the manifesto are fully embraced.

Before the performance of the manifesto at the Smithsonian’s Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden of Washington in 2011, Abramović stated that the manifesto is supposed to be performed by an uneven number of people (from very small to very large) to form a huge chorus. She added that every artist is entitled to perform it and she underlined that the manifesto is ‘really about moral conduct in an artist’s life, which we always forget it’s important’ (Abramović 2011). Then, she continued by reading the manifesto to the audience of the museum. The public reacted with laughter when Abramović pronounced that, in relation to his love life, ‘an artist should avoid falling in love with another artist’ (Abramović 2011). Abramović, after the amusement, broke the performance pathos, looking at the public, adding ‘I made it twice’, and then went on with the rest of the performance, giving the proof of being a person capable also of recognising her contradictions. The same reaction was caused by the following precept about an artist's relationship with depression:

‘An artist should not be depressed  
Depression is a disease and should be cured  
Depression is not productive for an artist  
Depression is not productive for an artist  
Depression is not productive for an artist’ (Abramović n.d., appendix B).

The public, aware of the moments of depression Abramović suffered in her adult life, responded with irony to the frictions arising between the claims expressed in the manifesto and the experiences<sup>4</sup> of Abramović. Why a manifesto that stresses the relationary status of an artist with the world and her/his self-awareness should deny potentially a part of the lived experience of the artist? In addition, depression is not seen

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<sup>3</sup> Ulay is the pseudonym of the German artist Frank Uwe Laysiepen (\*1943). The two artists performed together from 1976 until 1988. For an overview of these works see Abramović 1998 (pp. 129-311).

<sup>4</sup> There is a vast bibliography on the artist, a great amount of interviews and movies that present also her private life.

as distress, but simplistically dismissed as an illness to be cured. The contradiction becomes even more evident because Abramović emphatically highlights suffering in the part preceding the one about the artist's relation to depression:

‘An artist should suffer  
From the suffering comes the best work  
Suffering brings transformation  
Through the suffering an artist transcends their spirit  
Through the suffering an artist transcends their spirit  
Through the suffering an artist transcends their spirit’ (Abramović n.d., appendix B).

Abramović states how suffering is productive for the artist because it leads to excellent work, to transformation and to the transcending of the artist’s spirit. Therefore the artist ‘should suffer’.

Abramović went for the first time to a psychoanalyst while she was divorcing, hence in deep distress. In her reflection about this moment of her life she comments also on the role of suffering in an artist’s life:

‘I always thought the more fucked-up childhood you have, the better artist you get, because you have more material to work with. I don't think anyone does anything from happiness. Happiness is such a good state, it doesn't need to be creative. You're not creative from happiness, you're just happy. You're creative when you're miserable and depressed. You find the key to transform things. Happiness does not need to transform. I really had a difficult background, so I've done all my work using this. But when my husband left, and we were divorcing, it was something I couldn't deal with. I really wanted to understand what went wrong. So I went to this psychoanalyst’ (Abramović in Vollmer 2012).

This interview excerpt reinforces the contradictory position of Abramović towards suffering, pain and mental distress, reflecting also the contradictory nature of the manifesto. Moreover, creativity for Abramović is entwined with suffering, but there are tensions about which pain the artist should deploy in her/his creative process. Are the stories of pain from – a sort of mythical<sup>5</sup> version of – the artist’s childhood worth more

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<sup>5</sup> Abramović’s childhood and family relations are well known and seem to form a kind of mythical narrative about the artist early struggles that fits the stereotype of the artistic genius. For example, in various biographies she and critics (e.g. Abramović 1998) have underlined her parents’ status of national heroes, the difficult relationship with her mother and the struggles of her childhood. In addition, also the theatrical performance *The Biography* (1992) delivers an image of myth surroundings the artist both by her reading of her biography containing the aforementioned narrative and by her performance in the guise of a goddess, since ‘the association with the Minoan goddess was made aware that the suspended cross-shape and the writhing snakes stood for more than the artist’s “action”’ (Stooss 1998, p. 10).

than the artist's present pain? What about the artists who do not possess such childhood experiences (or do not arrange a mythical narrative for their lived experiences), do not want to use their experiences – past or present – with pain, or want to deploy their present pain to engage with their creativity? What about the artists who wish to engage with others' pain and not their own? What about the artists who do not want to engage with pain? Moreover, why envision a mono-dimensional engagement with creativity? Abramović's conceptualisation of creativity connects once again with the myth of the suffering artist that shines against all odds, silencing the vast reality and diversity of lived experiences, not considering the formal research the artist undertakes or the system of production. The myth of the artist as suffering male genius is a discourse of oppression and exclusion. It has a history that dates back to Pliny and has been reinforced with Romanticism, as Nochlin pointed out (Nochlin 1988). The discourse of quality and "greatness" is embedded in this myth. In Battersby's terms of the re-evaluation of the female artist as genius (Battersby 1990), Abramović might be included in such a kind of myth. Nevertheless, it is the very category of genius that is radically problematic because it dwells on and perpetuates a discourse of exclusion. This myth conceals the material-semiotic conditions of art practice such as, for example, the systems of patronage, production, ideologies and knowledge-making, and their power relations and inequalities. The myth of the great male genius has been exclusionary not just for women, but for all the Other embodiments that resist the re-absorption under the myth or one of its variations.

Furthermore, according to Abramović, there are different ways of doing performance, but all have the common denominator of the artist that has to work on herself/himself. In a recent interview she states again how it is forbidden for artists, amongst other prescriptions, to experience depression:

'We can't have any more artists who are depressed, overdose, who are drunk, do drugs. We have to find a way to really take the body as a miracle and create the centre of your own energy which you transmit to everybody. I'm so disturbed about Mike Kelley, who committed suicide recently (...) I really believe that it's not allowed for an artist to be like that, because I really believe we have work to do, it's almost escaping...artists right now have so much work to do. One of the main jobs of the art is to lift the human spirit and not to bring the human spirit down...and we have to be examples of optimism, (in order) to do that' (Abramović in Carter 2012).

I agree with Abramović when she argues for the role of the artist to be crucial in both social and political ways, and for this reason it is problematic for the artist to be

prescribed to embody the overcoming narrative of mental distress, trauma and pain. Overcoming narratives enforce discourses of normativity and the figure of the normate, as outlined by Garland-Thomson (1997). In this case, there are contradictory implications in Abramović's prescriptions for the artists, who is able to use certain pains and escape others, and that reinforce the artist as a mythological figure with features exceeding the human. It is a process of political and social relevance to decide which lived experiences and forms of embodiment are worthy of narration and representation, and how, both through representation and through the figure of the artist. What about the artists who cannot cope with mental distress and who resist the art discourse which conflates madness and genius?

Contradictions are present also in the ways Abramović engages with mental distress, pain and embodiment in her performances. Therefore, I would like to read against the grain one of Abramović most daunting performances, *Rhythm 2* (1974) (fig. 11). The *Rhythm* series is a group of works performed in the mid-1970s. Abramović undertook an exploration of the body which involved high risk, self-mutilation and that questioned the issue of control, both personal and political, of an artist working in Tito's communist Balkans. One of her aims was to enact a 'deliberate exploration of the limits of the physical body' (Richards 2010, p. 84). With this series, Abramović pushed the boundaries of performance art, developed a reflection on the passivity and activity of the audience of performances, and on the relationship between artist and audience. In *Rhythm 2* and in other pieces of the series the kind and intensity of risk appeared to be neither entirely calculated nor completely predictable (Richards 2010, p. 86). Abramović takes a pill after another pill to make her different, to change her state and play with her consciousness, in order to deliberately explore how she could incorporate in performance art the body beyond consciousness (Richards 2010, p. 86). The work was held in the Gallery of Contemporary Art in Zagreb. Richards tells how the artist acquired the necessary material for the piece:

'in order to obtain the medication she wanted to use in this performance, she went to a hospital for people with mental health issues and seduced one the doctors so that he would give her one drug used to calm and another drug used to treat people who experience catatonic episodes' (Richards 2010, pp. 86-87).

In the gallery, the artist sat in front of the audience. The first part of the performance began with Abramović taking the medicine for catatonia. For fifty minutes her body moved violently and painfully without control, while her mind, she reported (Abramović 1998, p. 70), stayed lucid. When the effect of the first pill wore off, in an interlude of fifteen minutes the artist made the audience listen to Slavic folk songs from a radio that Abramović tuned randomly. Then, the second part of the work consisted in Abramović ingesting the other pill (designed to treat schizophrenia) that had the opposite outcome: she remained sedated for six hours, sitting on the chair smiling. The effect wore off and she was not aware of the time passed when she was not mentally present. Abramović commented on this piece saying that ‘there was this opposition, first not controlling my body, then controlling it’ (Abramović quoted in Richards 2010, p. 87). I agree with Richards (Richards 2010, p. 87) when she points out how actually this statement might be not correct, because Abramović had no real control on the effects these two different substances might have had on her body and on her state of consciousness. In addition, the artist could not know the amount of time the substances would actually take to produce visible and/or not visible results, or the possible interactions between the two drugs, especially if consumed one after the other in such a short period of time. She might have opted for some other kinds of substances to provoke similar effects in her body and her mind, but the choice was for psychiatric drugs. Exploring how consciousness might function during a performance, Abramović eventually experiences how the medicalisation of the mind comes out through the body, with the awareness of the inextricability of the two. This performance was an early investigation and the early stage of a journey that Abramović undertook in order to study the connections between the mind and the body, and that led her to many parts of the world, including Tibet, Brazil, Sri Lanka and the Australian desert. For example, her research is evident in her *An Artist’s Life Manifesto*, when she stresses the importance for artists to follow some Buddhist principles about compassion and material possessions.

In the semi-public – and also protected and privileged – sphere of the art space, the artist experienced something that is usually removed from the public eye. The effects and side effects of the medical treatments of mental distress are not usually rendered visible because the person might fear the stigma attached to mental distress (therefore, whenever possible, they are lived silently in public, or lived in the privacy of the house) or because the person is regimented in the closed, removed spaces of mental

institutions and hospitals. The performance highlights not just the limit of the body, but also how the mind is bounded to, constitutive of the body.

I would like to extend Abramović's own reflection on the exploration of altered states of consciousness in her performance art in order to highlight the potentiality of this performance in a sense that could invest and reach disability art. *Rhythm 2* might be neither disability art – Abramović misses the political dimension<sup>6</sup> of it – nor art of the disabled – because she might not be considered disabled. Nevertheless, this performance raises important questions about mental distress and the wholeness of the body-mind. There is the potentiality in *Rhythm 2* to create a productive link with her lived experience, but the opportunity seems missed. *Rhythm 2* could point out the toll of the medicalisation of mental distress and how much consciousness has been medicated in order to produce “normalcy”. Furthermore, it could also highlight what have been the consequences on Othered embodiments of women, those which patriarchy has pathologised with the category of madness, whose bodies, minds and pain have been heavily medicalised, controlled, regimented, silenced. This could highlight the ethical dimension of the medicalisations of mental pain. The performer's body-mind in pain could show that it is not a diagnosis or a disease present in front of the audience, something that is forgotten when the medical model of mental distress prevails.

McEvelley states how *Rhythm 2* and the other performances belonging to the same group bring forward a position of passivity of the performer: ‘she aggressively subjected herself to an ordeal which involved her assuming a stance of complete passivity’ (McEvelley 2010, p. 244). McEvelley stresses the painful nature of the group of performances where *Rhythm 2* belongs and how they bring forward the motif of passivity. I would argue differently, since this performance itself demonstrates how the body of the performer is not a passive entity and the mind an active one. The piece hence demonstrates a complexity of the performer as body-mind.

Artists such as Hannah Wilke (1940-1993) and Jo Spence (1934-1992) reflected about their lived experiences – of lymphoma the first, and breast cancer the latter –

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<sup>6</sup> Allan Sutherland points out the importance of disability art: ‘I don't think that disability arts would have been possible without disability politics coming first. It's what makes a disability artist different from an artist with a disability. We don't see our disabilities as obstacles that we have to overcome before we try to make our way in the non-disabled cultural world. Our politics teach us that we are oppressed, not inferior. (...) That's why we can have disability art: because we realise that our disabilities give us something important to make art about. And I'm not talking about tales of personal tragedy. Art has to be measured in terms of what it values. And stories about how dreadful it is to be disabled value being able-bodied, not disability’ (Sutherland 1989, p. 2).

through their art, helping to render public and visible the lived experiences of illness, trauma, pain and their political and social implications. Similarly, disabled performers of all disciplines are creating and performing more and more. Phelan argues that performance should have an aesthetic distance: ‘without a robust sense of “life” as something other than art, the terms collapse into one another and we are left with an all-performance-all-the-time reality, a reality that risks making art nothing more than a mode of documentation’ (Phelan 2004, p. 571). Within this aesthetic distance, there is the need to render more visible and to reappropriate the representations of mental distress, to highlight the lived experiences, and the political and social implications of mental pain. It is highly problematic when Abramović “prohibits” the artist from being depressed, since it precludes the possibility of the artist voicing her/his lived experience through aesthetic representation, to address it, to have tools to deal with it, to redress the artistic representation of mental pain, to render the public aware of it, and also provide the public with the tools to deal with it as well. In a recent interview, Abramović states that ‘art should have political, spiritual, and surprising elements. It should try to find new language of communicating in order to give awareness to the public. Then every society can use the layer it needs at the moment’ (Vollmer 2012). Once again, I have sympathy for the artist’s opinion on the political importance of art, and therefore I claim that this assertion should apply to art and mental distress too.

Abramović has been teaching workshops for artists and students since 1979 and she considers teaching crucial for transmitting what she has learned and experienced (Kaplan 1999, p. 18). She believes in a certain holistic approach in making art and these workshops are also composed of rituals of preparation and purification for the body and the mind. These practices and exercises should permit the performer to be ‘truly receptive and responsive to the flows of energy necessary for the creative process’ (Richards 2010, p. 114) and it must be noted that the exercises are ‘not to develop a particular performance style or method of making performance work, but are designed to attune or re-attune you to your own creative energies and ideas’ (Richards 2010, p. 118).

The first condition for participation in one of the workshops called *Cleaning the House* is as follows: ‘Participants should be in good health, not suffering from any mental or physical disorders, anorexia, or bulimia; they should not be pregnant and should not be using any prescription medications’ (Kaplan 1999, p. 20). This clause has

implications that go beyond the preoccupation with safety for people with delicate conditions to undertake the days of fasting or strenuous kind of exercises that Abramović's workshops entail. There are a huge variety of mental and physical disorders or prescription medications. This direction contains a normative dam for people who can progress in their art investigations (through study and practice, in the case of the prestigious workshop with a prominent artist), and for people who are not fully entitled. In addition, the explicit mentioning of anorexia and bulimia as exclusionary for the participation connotes the clause as discriminating in an even more marked gendered perspective, since the two have an estimated incidence of 10-15% in males (Camargo 1997).

Going beyond the reasoning concerning the safety and the practicality of the workshop, the artist's prescription functions as an exclusionary practice that impinges on the access of some artists (also with their different lived experiences of pain) to what is considered to be "a good artist" and disciplines who can take their embodied experiences and lived bodies into their performance, and who cannot.

Despite the differences that might be present in their artistic research, contemporary artists such as Bob Flanagan (who worked with performance with his body and had cystic fibrosis), Ron Athey (whose performances involve his body and who is HIV positive), or Vanessa Beecroft (who had suffered from eating disorders and whose art also concerns the body) would be excluded from Abramović's workshops.

Abramović purports a view of the artist that is invested in a responsibility because she/he 'is a servant to society' (Abramović in Kaplan 1999, p. 18). According to Abramović some lived experiences (like depression) must be eluded by the artist, while suffering is a compulsory part of artistic greatness. But can the artist serve a society that she/he does not represent, in the sense that some lived experiences are for her/him precluded?

Moreover, Abramović chooses to deem – in a contradictory and reductionist way – as incompatible with art practice depression and eating disorders, overlooking her own lived experience with mental distress like depression. Consequently, one of the most influential artists working today with body and performance art assumes the role of the gatekeeper for other artists. Abramović's discourse around how an artist should morally and socially conduct her/his life in order to be considered a good (or great) artist enforces normativity of the body-mind. It also excludes art practice from dealing

with the lived experience of mental pain. In the second part of the chapter I will instead explore how the centrality of lived experience of mental pain is used by Yayoi Kusama in her self-representation and in the qualitative appraisal of herself as an artist.

### 2.3 Yayoi Kusama's Self-Representations

In order to proceed with the analysis on mental pain in discourses about the artist I will shift the focus from what an artist represents how artists should be to how an artist represents herself. I have chosen to focus my attention on Yayoi Kusama, who, like Abramović, is an influential woman in contemporary art who has had a long, prolific, diverse and successful career. In the critical examination of her work, the artistic persona of Yayoi Kusama (\*1929, Matsumoto City) seems to oscillate between the status of the mad artist, the outsider artist and the artist. These discursive representations are partly responsible for the qualitative evaluations of her works throughout her career, for instance by psychiatrists like Dr. Nishimaru in 1952 or critics like Asada in 1999.

As many scholars, disability rights activists and disability artists<sup>7</sup> argue (e.g. Sutherland 1989, Barnes 1992), it is necessary for disabled people to take part in the production and control of the cultural imagery of disability. Kusama can be taken as an example of how an artist produces and controls part of her own representation. In her autobiography *Infinity Net* (2011) she reports how she began around 1941 (the year she entered high school) to have visual, auditory and aural hallucinations. As Siebers argues, autobiography is also an autoethnography because:

‘it opens focus beyond the individual life to examine the culture in which it is embedded, and in the case of disability especially, autobiography has the power to expose how dramatically social representations determine the nature of the disabled body and the forms of selfknowing attached to it’ (Siebers 2001, p. 737).

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<sup>7</sup> Sutherland defines disability art as ‘art made by disabled people which reflects the experience of disability’ (Sutherland 2005). Sutherland adds that ‘there have always been disabled people who made art’, but some of the greatest artists with disabilities ‘treated their disability as an impediment to their work’ (Sutherland 2005). Therefore they cannot be considered disability artists (Sutherland 2005).

In this sense, some stereotypical and oppressive representations of the disabled which are present in society, media and culture return in her autobiography, where it appears that one of the main drives behind Kusama's prolific production is the visions she has been experiencing since childhood. Being lost in her art is one of the strategies she has been following to cope with her psychological distress. She writes: 'I am pursuing art in order to correct the disability which began in my childhood' (Kusama quoted in Taylor 2012, p. 17).

It seems that this self-narrative presents Kusama's own lived experience of functioning (Siebers 2001, p. 750) and thriving due to her art practice. She openly addresses the hallucinations that impaired her:

'recording them helped to ease the shock and the fear of the episodes. That is the origin of my pictures. All I did every day was draw. Images rose up one after another, so fast that I had difficulty capturing them all. And it is the same today, after more than sixty years of drawing and painting. My main intention has always been to record the images before they vanish' (Kusama 2011, p. 62).

This account is problematic because it neutralises the formal artistic research that is present in Kusama's work. Even in some of the earliest pieces, before leaving Japan for the U.S.A. in 1957, the artist, not satisfied with the *Nihonga* style<sup>8</sup>, pursued research in European and American art. The *Nihonga* style was re-introduced in the art schools she attended in Kyoto in January 1942 with the replacement of the painting teacher specialised in the Western-style (called *yōga*): 'just a month after Japan's attack on Pearl Harbour of 7 December 1941, this personnel change reflected the state policy of deploy culture to create fanatic nationalism' (Yamamura 2012, p. 169). In 1952 Kusama had her first solo exhibition in her hometown in a genre called *kosai*, a style used by artists as a 'political response to *Nihonga*'s conservatism' (Yamamura 2012, p. 170). The artist pursued a personal study that led her to approach in her pictures, for example, elements of Surrealism (e.g. in *Lingering Dream*, 1949), Juan Miró's biomorphism (in 1954's *The Coral Reef in the Sea*, among others) or Paul Klee's graphical elements (e.g. in *Rain in the City*, 1952). In 1952, Kusama had her second solo exhibition where she presented watercolours that sported bold lines similarly to Miró's works that also 'often bore repetitive "dots" and some elements of "nets", which would later become her signature pictorial components' (Yamamura 2012, p. 173). A psychology professor of

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<sup>8</sup> *Nihonga* is a Japanese modern style of painting which has the characteristic of incorporating elements of east and west and it deploys water-soluble mineral pigment bound by deer-glue (Yamamura 2011).

the Shinshū University, Nishimaru Shihō, visited the exhibition and made Kusama and her work, that to him had the signs of her cenesthopathy<sup>9</sup>, the centre of his research (Yamamura 2012, p. 173). As Yamamura tells, ‘he specialised in analysing the brains of geniuses and in detailing artists’ pathographies as a way of studying their works’ and in 1952 ‘he presented a scientific analysis on her art at the annual conference of the Kantō Psychiatric and Neurotic Association, held at the University of Tokyo’ (Yamamura 2012, p. 173). Kusama reports:

‘at the opening of this second show something happened that was to prove extremely important in my life. Dr Shiho Nishimaru, Professor of Psychiatry at Shinshu University in Matsumoto, who had been treating my illness, saw my pictures and declared me “a genius”. This led to my works being presented at a national psychiatric conference and becoming more widely known’ (Kusama 2011, p. 77).

Therefore, her account recognises how the qualitative appraisal and the circulation of her art have been made possible also through the discourses about genius and madness. Along these lines, there have been reductionist readings of her early works that bind the artist’s outcomes solely to her mental distress. Kusama, Yamamura reports, has always been interested in psychology and the Japanese surrealist poet and critic Takigushi Shūzō (who in 1949 brought the art of Miró to Japan and was personally acquainted with many European artists) introduced her to Surrealism and its concerns about the exploration of the psyche, the so-called art of the primitive and art of the insane (Yamamura 2012, pp. 173-174). Consequently, the artistic development of Kusama might be seen as a complex and intricate system of artistic research, artistic influences, encounters, social and political reflections, and much more beyond her lived experience of mental pain and disability and the need to use art as a strategy to function.

Moreover, a reductionist account of the artist as mad genius raises the question about those artists who cannot cope with mental distress through their works. This account affects also the people who suffer mental pain and/or are disabled who are not endowed to call themselves artists, or have not been invested with the myth that conflate creativity and madness/suffering, and who cannot therefore use art as a strategy to help them to function.

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<sup>9</sup> Cenesthopathy is a sense of general ill-being and/or localised discomfort and/or pain that are not related to any illness or disease that might affect the body.

The reductionist account of the artist as mad genius emerges also from the artist's self-representation. In Kusama's auto-biography the following passage is notable for its evocative quality in describing the first time she experienced hallucinations and it functions as a potent self-representation:

'from a very young age I used to carry my sketchbook down to the seed-harvesting grounds [her family owned wholesale seed nurseries]. I would sit among beds of violets, lost in thought. One day I suddenly looked up to find that each and every violet had its own individual, human-like facial expression, and to my astonishment they were all talking to me. The voices quickly grew in number and volume, until the sound of them hurt my ears. I had thought that only human beings could speak, so I was surprised that the violets were using words to communicate. They were all like little human faces looking at me. I was so terrified that my legs began shaking. I struggled to my feet and ran as fast as I could, all the way back to the house. I was almost there when our dog took up chase, barking at me – in human words. Astonished, I tried to say something, but now my voice was a dog's voice. I dashed inside the house in a state of panic, thinking: What's going on? What's happening to me?' (Kusama 2011, p. 62).

The combination of delicate and poetic, yet frightening and disturbing images of flowers and animals that have been populating her visions support her self-proclaimed status of a modern "Alice in Wonderland"<sup>10</sup>, which gained prominence through a recent re-edition of Lewis Carroll's well-known book, which includes her illustrations (Carroll 2012). Kusama's identity as a person who practices art has been knotted with the representations of her disability. Her disability has been connoted with different narratives forwarded by the artist – like the personification of the character of Alice – and by the critics. Her autobiography supports some features pertaining to the disabling imagery that in this case is conflated with the stereotypical narrative of the mad artist as genius.

The compulsion of making art was propelled by the need to cope with the mental distress caused by her disability, by the need to defend herself from the external stressors of difficult family relationships and of the 'oppressive, imperialist zeal indoctrinated during the war years' (Kusama quoted in Taylor 2012, p. 17). Especially in the second part of her auto-biography called *Before Leaving Home. Awakening as an*

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<sup>10</sup> The comparison between Kusama and Alice in Wonderland seems to form a leitmotiv in Kusama's self-representation and it is highly connected with her work. Another example is the advertisement for one happening in 1968 in Central Park: 'featuring me, Kusama, mad as a hatter, and my troupe of nude dancers. How about taking a trip with me out to Central Park...under the magic mushroom of the Alice in Wonderland statue. Alice was the grandmother of Hippies. When she was low, Alice was the first to take pills to make her high' (Kusama 2011, p. 123) (fig. 12).

*Artist. 1929/1957*, the self-representation outlined by Kusama recalls both the image of the ‘disable person as pitiable’ (Barnes 1992, p. 6) and the one of the suffering genius that overcomes every struggle life entails and achieves artistic success. For example, she reports the gender restrictions she had to suffer in society and in her family. As Taylor points out, it is in fact remarkable for a girl coming from a small town to have attained ‘the degree of artistic attention she garnered at such a young age, and during a period in which Japanese women were bound by the strictures of feudal, patriarchal conventions’ (Taylor 2012, p. 17). What Kusama emphasises most are the conflicts with her mother and her only consolation was to seek refuge in her art: ‘both a gifted child and a “bad girl”, burdened with layer upon layer of problems, I was thrust into the midst of raging storms from infancy on: the protracted gloom of the never-ending war, the constant bickering of my mother and father’ and ‘the only thing I lived for was my artwork’ (Kusama 2011, p. 70). She continues by saying how her family reacted as she was experiencing her distress: ‘I came to be seen as an even more unmanageable, “useless” child’ (Kusama 2011, p. 70). This interestingly echoes Abramovic’s representations of the sufferings of the artist/genius during childhood, especially regarding her life narrative.

Kusama’s narratives about the first part of her life focus on impairments and not ‘on disability – the cause of disabled people’s oppression’<sup>11</sup> (Barnes 1992, p. 6). Her whole childhood tainted with suffering is presented in a way where she might want to elicit, through the myth of the disable person as pitiable, ‘feelings of sentimentality’ (Barnes 1992, p. 8) because of her unhappy difficult childhood. Yet, not enough attention has been paid to the cultural and social reasons where her distress has been disabling during her childhood in Japan and how her oppression was worsened by the material-semiotic discriminatory conditions her gender has been subjected to.

This representation as the disabled artist as pitiable due to all the struggles she has to endure because of her impairments in some parts give the way of the disabled as ‘the super cripple’ (Barnes 1992, p. 6). As Parker and Pollock point out (1981), the myth of the suffering artist entails a narrative where the male genius faces great distress especially in his early years, but having astonishing qualities, at the end he is able to succeed. Therefore, the image of the ‘super cripple’ is conflated with the one of the mad genius through how the accomplishments in the art field are portrayed as extraordinary. For instance, Kusama says: ‘people called me an art maniac and a workaholic. When

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<sup>11</sup> In the social model of disability impairment is a mental and/or physical condition, while disability is a form of social oppression towards people with impairments.

you are engrossed in art, the days of your life just seem to fly by' (Kusama 2011, p. 201). Through Kusama's narrative it seems to be enough for the artist to be absorbed with art, in a self-sufficient state with no recognition of – in Haraway's terms – the material-semiotic conditions that allow artists to thrive. In other sections of the book, Kusama supports her status as successful artist with other artists and critics' analyses and appraisals of herself and her work. An example that enforces the vision of the mad artist as super cripple with a focus on the discourse of art for art's sake is the following assessment by Asada: 'Yayoi Kusama has emerged gloriously victorious in the battle she has been fighting for more than half a century. (...) [Kusama's] self has been transformed into an unindividuated space where a battle is being waged against illness and death' (Asada quoted in Kusama 2011, p. 224). Again, the connections with the material-semiotic elements (such as artistic influences, and economic and environmental factors) that have played a role in her path to achieve the results she has had in her artistic career are not mentioned. Moreover, the super cripple stereotype is reinforced by discourses present in art criticism and art history. Thus, the super cripple excels despite the battles she has to fight and the result is the attainment of qualitatively outstanding works of art. Asada, talking about the 1999 retrospective at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Tokyo, continues praising the victorious artist that is 'not mental patient but artist – and an indisputably great one...' and her pieces that are 'worthy being called Art' (Asada quoted in Kusama 2011, p. 224). According to Asada, greatness in Kusama's art is achieved because 'there is no personal life there' (Asada quoted in Kusama 2011, p. 224). This argument is in tension with what other critics and Kusama herself have asserted about the drive behind her artistic production.

Barnes points out the dangers of this representation of the disabled as super cripple:

'by focusing on a disabled individual's achievements such imagery encourages the view that disabled people have to overcompensate to be accepted into the community. The negative psychological implications for the majority struggling to cope in a largely hostile environment are clear. Finally, by emphasizing the extra-ordinary achievements of disabled individuals (...) implies that the experiences of "ordinary" people – disabled or otherwise – are unimportant and irrelevant. Hence nondisabled people view super cripples as unrepresentative of the disabled community as a whole and the gulf between the two groups remains as wide as ever' (Barnes 1992, p. 13).

Kusama employs a narrative that emphasizes individual artistic greatness and does not take into account properly the material-semiotic, therefore being potentially detrimental for other disabled or non-disabled people.

In Kusama's autobiography there is also the self-representation of the disabled as sexually abnormal, a narrative also supported by the discourse around her artworks, such as the soft sculptures and the role she has in her happenings and performances. Barnes affirms this stereotype:

'Misguided presumptions about disabled people's sexuality have been a common theme in literature and art since ancient times. Moreover, the vast majority of these images are about male experiences – there has been little if any exploration of disabled women's sexuality. (...) disabled people have, with few exceptions, been portrayed as incapable of sexual activity' (Barnes 1992, p. 16).

In the book, the artist argues that her distress links to her artistic development and results in phallic soft sculptures: 'the result of the unlimited development of this obsessional art was that I was able to shed my painter's skin and metamorphose into an environmental sculptor' (Kusama 2011, p. 39). The phallic soft sculptures appeared in Kusama's art around 1961 and proliferated from then on in a variety of modes covering the surfaces of different objects. She also explains that the drive to make such objects is due to the need to exorcise her fears about sex, which have roots in her education and in the environment in which she grew up, leading her to produce what she calls her Psychosomatic Art (Kusama 2011, pp. 39-45). This artistic endeavour features the appropriations and proliferation of the objects that caused her anxiety and fears, in order to conquer them (Kusama 2011, pp. 39-45). Thus, the mental pain is related not just to the motives in her art, but also to her artistic evolution.

Most importantly, through the descriptions of her happenings and performances (which began in 1965, and flourished from 1967 to 1973 particularly in the U.S.A.), she portrays herself in the sacred artistic role of the "priestess of polka-dots". Kusama explains the self-obliteration process through polka-dots as follows:

'artists do not usually express their own psychological complexes directly, but I do use my complexes and fears as subjects. (...) by covering my entire body with polka dots, and then covering the background with polka dots as well, I find self-obliteration. Or I stick polka dots all over a horse standing before a polka-dot background, and the form of the horse disappears,

assimilated into the dots. The mass that is 'horse' is absorbed into something timeless. And when that happens, I too am obliterated. Here, the ground – or the mesh of the net – is negative, and the polka dots placed upon the ground are positive. (...) And that is when I achieve obliteration' (Kusama 2011, p. 47).

It seems that as Kusama deals with her mental distress with the polka-dotted repetition, proliferation, accumulation, and final obliteration, everything comes out through the body (Acker 1997), on her body and the bodies of her performers and reverberates on the environment (fig. 12).

As stressed earlier the source of her rejections of sexual activity is trauma and mental distress, and this refusal is entwined with what she makes of herself as an artistic persona in her performances, but also how she narrates her private life. Her performances (1967-1974), influenced by the 1968 U.S.A. climate of social and political upheaval, aimed at spreading a sexual revolution. While these happenings have strong sexual components (featuring the naked bodies of the performers as well as sexual acts), she portrays herself as having the role of the holy, chaste ritual figure of the creator and the choreographer (Kusama 2011, p. 111). Such a figure also resonated with the stereotypical discourse of the artist as figure of "God as creator". She also reports that her collaborators and performers called her and considered her a "Sister" (Kusama 2011, p. 111), stressing a peculiar status between a hippy and a nun, purporting the contradictions of a figure of sexual abnormality. Her happenings strived to change sexual mores, and their trademarks were the polka-dots (Kusama 2011, p. 102) that covered every surface of the surroundings with a particular attention to the naked bodies of the performers. She explains how the traumas experienced in her childhood brought about the mental distress and the attitude about sex, and how this is strictly connected with the desire through her performances to change the sexual mores that discriminated against women; for example she recalls about Japan that:

'the menfolk were practitioners of unconditional free sex, while the women had to sit in the shadows and bear it. Even as a child I was angered and repelled by the injustice of this, and it has had a great deal of influence in shaping my thought. My intense hatred for and fascination with the naked human body, and in particular the male and female sex organs, are almost certainly rooted in these childhood experiences' (Kusama 2011, p. 112).

Her performances, thus, are not only characterised by the obsessive urge of psychosomatic art, but are also entwined with a gender perspective that adds to the

‘infinity politics’ of her work (Nixon 2012, p. 185). Nixon points out how these political dimensions invested her works (particularly the ones made in New York), related to the features of proliferation, accumulation, repetition and obliteration that have been read merely through the lens of mental distress. As Nixon (2012, p. 185) says, Kusama is a complex artist and the political side (e.g. the anti-war and anti-capitalist stances) of her art has been overlooked.

Regarding her personal relationships, the important romantic involvement with the artist Joseph Cornell (1903-1972) is described as a mostly platonic one (Kusama 2011, pp. 163-177), where Cornell, suffering as well with mental distress, is portrayed by Kusama (2011, p. 175) with the trope of the disabled man as impotent (Barnes 1992, p. 17), and the one of the – extremely eccentric – mad genius as well. Hence, in multiple and intertwining ways, Kusama and Cornell’s personae are invested with similar imageries: the artist as mad genius, the artist as sexually abnormal, and the mentally distressed as sexually abnormal.

In *Infinity Net*, Kusama represents herself using the disability imagery of the disabled, producing a stereotypical, diminutive and damaging account of her lived experience of mental distress. Moreover, the narrative about her impairment merely hints at the disabling factors (e.g. the gender-biased environment) responsible for her disability. Along with doctors and critics, she deploys the narrative of the mad genius and the overcoming narrative of disability to qualify the entwining between her mental pain and her artistic production. In doing so, the artistic research, the artistic influences, the social, economic and historical factors that are also responsible for her artistic production are downplayed or erased in the appraisal of her work.

## 2.4 Conclusion

In Abramović and Kusama the (self-)representations of the artist are overflowing with tensions and contradictions. Abramović’s contradictions between the lived experience and the prescriptions and discourses on the artist, and the stereotypical imagery of the artist as suffering genius and Kusama’s self-representation as the mad artist, reinforced

by the disability imagery of the disabled as ‘pitiabile’, ‘super cripple’, and ‘sexually abnormal’, disregard the material-semiotic entwining of art and of the status of the artist.

Reading artworks through the stereotypical lens of the pairing of mental distress and artistic genius is a simplistic move where the medical model returns, once again, reductive and dismissive. It is a disabling narrative for the people with mental distress that happen not to be invested with the overcoming narrative of healing and success (even if posthumous) through art practice. It is dismissive of the people that experience mental distress as an integral part of their everyday lives. It is damaging and reductive for the people with mental distress that are pursuing artistic research because it does not take into proper account their efforts in formal artistic investigations. Thus, I argue that there is much more in the artworks of Kusama than her mental distress, but also there is much more in Abramović’s practice than a “pure” artistic research.

In the following chapter I will assess – without downplaying their embodiment and their artistic research – the works of Flanagan/Rose and Opie, who use pain to express their lived experiences of mental distress and disability. They escape the narrative of the artist as suffering genius deployed by Abramović and the disability imagery used by Kusama. Instead, like Van Dyke, they are able to forward an encounter with pain with the audience.

## **3. Fighting Pain with Pain: Bob Flanagan/Sheree Rose and Catherine Opie**

### 3.1 Introduction

The previous chapter left open the question about how artists are able to represent and resignify mental pain in a non-oppressive and non-discriminatory way while highlighting their embodiment, lived experience and artistic research. Thus, to pursue such an investigation, in this chapter I will tackle mental pain throughout the at times intersecting artistic strategies of Bob Flanagan/Sheree Rose and Catherine Opie. Flanagan/Rose and Opie are involved with pain and sadomasochistic practices in their work as well as in their lives. To quote Flanagan, they both ‘fight sickness with sickness’ (fig. 13), they try to cure ‘pain with pain’, with different nuances, aims, and for different reasons. I have chosen to investigate some of the works of these artists because, like the works of Van Dyke, they enable ‘encounters with pain’ (Ahmed 2002) with the deployment of their lived experience through artistic representations that activate a relationship with the viewer. Encounters with pain are also possible because the “improper” non-normative bodies of these disabled artists are not ‘closed and invulnerable’, characteristics attributed to the white male body by the modernist discourse (Shildrick 2000, p. 217). What emerges from Flanagan is the need to fight the pain of a physical disability and the mental pain it implicates, while for Opie there are different types of disability and pain at stake that are caused by the social environment. Following their lived experiences and their works, the engagement with disability, mental distress and pain will be explored in order to take into account social and material causes. I begin by analysing some of the work and lived experiences of Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose, while in the second part of the chapter I will discuss some of Catherine Opie’s works.

### 3.2 Bob Flanagan/Sheree Rose: Supermasochist Challenges

Bob Flanagan (1952-1996) and Sheree Rose (\*n.d.) worked together from 1980 onwards, until the death of Flanagan from cystic fibrosis. Their work consists of performance, text, and video and investigates sensitive issues like illness, sex and death. Flanagan and Rose's work is shaped by Flanagan's lived experience of disability and by the lived experience of their 24/7 S/M relationship<sup>12</sup>.

Originally Flanagan had a background as a poet and worked with stand-up comedy and folk music, artistic elements which have been incorporated in some of his performances and visual artworks. Rose is a photographer, video artist and performance artist; since 1980 she has photographed the underground communities involved with piercing and S/M. Rose is not only Flanagan's partner and pain-giver dominatrix, but she played an important part in his artistic development and in their artistic activity since:

'her photographs and videotapes are central to their installation works, and her role as a visual artist clearly informed Flanagan's move from poetry to the visual arts; furthermore, her feminism deeply influenced Flanagan and changed the way he thought about gender and sexuality' (Jones 1998, pp. 325-326).

As a result, in several performances involving Rose and Flanagan, in Flanagan's spoken words, in interviews or texts, public/private spheres are hybridised, and gender roles and sexuality challenged through a poetic of BDSM. For instance, in *Mop and Broom* (1994), a spoken word performance about the romantic relationship with Rose, Flanagan states how this is his 'Cinderella's fantasy-come-true' and how he wishes he could be Cinderella, but before the ball and the aid of the 'Fairy Godmother, who ruined everything with her hocus pocus and happily ever after' (Dick 1996). Here, the patriarchal dream enforced on young girls is appropriated and twisted. In the patriarchal society, submission seems normative for the heterosexual couple, but here it is happily embraced by the man and not the woman. Flanagan's appropriation of the fairy tale of Cinderella is not the only move that questions heteronormativity. In day to day life, Flanagan is slave to Rose and he takes on the stereotypical feminine role in the house

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<sup>12</sup> In the BDSM jargon, a 24/7 SM relationship is a "play" that virtually and ideally never ceases and it is carried on twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week.

(cleaning, cooking for Rose and her two kids, and so on) practicing, in his own words, a 'gender demolition' (Flanagan quoted in Jones 1998, p. 233). The private and the public spheres are mingled through the master and slave dynamics of S/M conducted in performances too. While he is in full control<sup>13</sup> of every action of the performances through the pre-scene negotiations that render the practice consensual, in their works 'the S/M confusion of passive and active positions becomes a confusion of gender polarities as well' (Jones 1998, p. 233).

Thus, Flanagan and Rose play with masculinity and femininity, questioning them through their S/M practices. As Silverman highlights, masochism is:

'an accepted – indeed, a requisite – element of "normal" female subjectivity, providing a crucial mechanism for eroticising lack and subordination. The male subject, on the contrary, cannot avow feminine masochism without calling into question his identification with the masculine position. All of this is another way of suggesting that what is acceptable for the female subject is pathological for the male' (Silverman 1993, p. 37).

Pain is used by the artists to interrogate these normative gender roles and the normative sexuality in daily life and in sadomasochism. Flanagan's male body is at the centre of the artistic practice, simultaneously as supermasochist superhero and disabled man. The poem *Why* (presented also during some performances) explains:

'because it flies in the face of all that's normal (whatever that is);  
because I'm not normal;  
(...)  
because, as somebody once said, HE'S GOT MORE BALLS THAN I DO;  
because it is an act of courage;  
because it does take guts;  
because I'm proud of it;  
because I can't climb mountains;  
because I'm terrible at sports' (Flanagan and Rose 1997, p. 59).

Normative masculinity is contradicted: at the same time that he can take the pain of the illness and of S/M "like a man", and he cannot play sports or do other stereotypically manly activities. It must be noted that disability 'in mainstream literature, film, and theatre, disability often serves as a metonym for emasculation' (Sandahl 2000, p. 97).

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<sup>13</sup> In the BDSM community the debate on who possess the control (for example via safewords, pre-scene negotiations, or in the dynamic of the relationship) is still open. For an example, see in the British online community Informed Consent one of the board post called *Debunking D/S #1 - subs are always in control* (Informed Consent 2012).

Usually, this emasculation could lead to a deficit of masculinity and power, but also could invest the protagonist as a temporary painful rite of passage: both feature male disability as ‘powerlessness, asexuality, masochism, medicalization, and infantilization’ (Sandahl 2000, p. 97). Flanagan openly confronts this scheme of disabled masculinity by showing the power and sexuality of the disabled, when society and studies on disabilities/sexualities/gender tend to neglect the issue and/or consider it as absence for different reasons (Shakespeare, Gillespie-Sells and Davies 1996). The poem, thus, highlights the contradictions that Flanagan embodies with his mixture of stereotypically stoic masculinity and a body that is far from the one ascribed to hegemonic masculinity.

Hegemonic masculinity, along with patriarchy and heteronormative pleasure, are challenged through pain. Hegemonic masculinity ‘embeds physical strength, endurance, youthfulness, and an absence of messy bodily functions’ (Hladki 2005, p. 275), qualities that are overall contradicted by Flanagan. Performances like *YOU ALWAYS HURT THE ONE YOU LOVE* (1991) (fig. 14) where he nails his penis to the stool he is sitting on and telling jokes, or *Nailed* (1989), where he sews his penis inside his scrotum and then he nails it to a wooden board (amongst other self-inflicted mutilations) illustrate how Flanagan sees castration as ‘the ultimate extreme of everything I do or fantasize about. It’s the ultimate way to go’ (Flanagan quoted in Jones 1998, p. 234). His economy of pain and pleasure shatters the penis/phallus with the metaphors of normative masculinity, promoting the recognition that other embodiments of – joyful – masculinity exist and are lived within complex dynamics. Moreover, the ultimate consequences of using the lived experience of disability, corporeality, and desires are not just the questioning of hegemonic masculinity, but also of the stereotype of the male artist.

Flanagan’s artistic practice involves his illness through-and-through. Cystic fibrosis is a genetic disease that causes mucus to accumulate in the lungs and the digestive system, and it is a highly disabling chronic disease. The average life span is increasing over the years, and location has an influence on the life expectancy and the quality of life. Flanagan is one of the people with CF that has lived longer for his time and country. In 1995, when his illness began to manifest itself in a more and more severe way, Flanagan wrote in his *Pain Journal*, recording the medicine he had to take to manage his illness and his depression, along with his response to them. For example, in February he wrote:

‘I don't know when the last time was that we had sex. I say that because I'm watching two people fuck on TV. Sheree and I are close, yeah-closer than ever, in some ways-but physically we don't know where to start. Anti-depressants? Maybe. Good excuse. But I still can't shake my depression’ (Flanagan 1995a).

These responses are entwined with his reactions and reflections on his inability to engage with sadomasochism anymore. Both the diary entries and some parts of the documentary *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist* (1996) (fig. 15), directed by Kirby Dick (with footage by Sheree Rose) highlight the distress of not being able to take sadomasochist pain anymore because of mental (depression) and physical pain (from the terminal stage of cystic fibrosis). In March he wrote:

‘[I] found myself mulling over why it is I don't like pain anymore. I have this performance to do on April 1st, and I'm shying away from doing or having S/M stuff done to me because pain and the thought of pain mostly just irritates and annoys me rather than turns me on. But I miss my masochistic self. I hate this person I've become’ (Flanagan 1995b).

He is not able to identify with the person who has lost the grip on the pain because of illness and depression and cannot perform sadomasochism to engage with pleasure through pain. Having control over one's own body is central in this excerpt of the entry written in April:

‘Felt disoriented and depressed through most of it [a performance], as I feel disoriented and depressed through most everything these days.(...) I want her [Sheree Rose] to put dozens of alligator clips on my dick and balls, but I don't know if I'd freak out or not. I can put a couple on myself. It hurts like hell but most of the time I can hold on until the pain subsides and I get kind of a rush. But can I take it when she's [Sheree Rose] in control? The ultimate question’ (Flanagan 1995c).

As he said, the masochist must ‘know his/her own body perfectly well and being in full control of their body in order to give it to control to somebody else or to give control to pain, so the masochist is actually a very strong person and I think some of that strength is what I use to combat the illness’ (Dick 1996). All his performances are, in one way or another, driven by the urge of coping with the physical and mental pain caused by disability. In *Superman* (a piece written in 1990 that echoes his epithet of supermasochist) he writes as, through the role of slave, in reality in S/M performances

he is playing the master with his disease: ‘in a never-ending battle not just to survive but to subdue my stubborn disease, I've learned to fight sickness with sickness’ (Flanagan 1990). It might seem a discourse tainted with the overcoming narrative of disability, but instead I see Flanagan using pain against pain in order to function, a word that he uses himself in Dick’s film. Siebers (2001, p. 750) too uses tentatively the verb “to function” as pivotal for the life of disabled people, which entails knowing their/our disabilities and bodies in order to be able to live their/our lives. Losing the knowledge/control of his own body and disability, Flanagan is questioning (along with Rose in the last part of the film) his masochism.

The last part of Dick’s documentary shows Flanagan dying. In a particular sequence he suffers unbearable pain and confusion caused by the imminent reality of his own death and he is saying, sitting on his hospital bed and barely breathing, ‘Am I dying? I don’t understand it. What is going on? This is the weirdest damn thing’ (Dick 1996). This is one of the most unsettling moments of all Flanagan’s *oeuvre*, along with the film sequence where Flanagan painfully coughs and with the diary entries. These moments might be even more transgressive than the S/M performances *per se*. This is because the corporeality of disability and pain confronts everybody’s lived experience. Siebers reports that ‘only 15% of people with disabilities are born with their impairments. Most people become disabled over the course of their life’ (Siebers 2001, p. 742). In fact, disabled people might refer to non-disabled as TABS, which means Temporarily Able-Bodieds (Wendell 1996, p. 61). Flanagan belongs in this 15% because of the genetic condition he was born with. He confronts the viewer with his own pain, with his own disability and the ways he represents them as his lived experience. He addresses the viewer with illness, disability, pain, death: there are not many things as uncomfortable as the reality of pain, disability and the social stigma attached to the disabled body.

As Siebers says ‘the prospect is too frightening, the disabled body, too disturbing’, but ‘the cycle of life runs in actuality from disability to temporary ability back to disability’ (Siebers 2001, p. 742). Following Siebers’ problematisation of social constructivism and new realism in disability studies (2001), I agree that the corporealities of disability can provocatively question that ‘the disabled body represents the image of the Other. In fact, the able body is the true image of the Other’ (Siebers 2001, p. 742) because of the immanent and material reality of illness, pain, disability of

the body-mind. With the documentary and with the journal, Flanagan, Rose and Dick produce works about disability with the use of methods that are:

‘deliberate and detailed, as if they are trying to get people to see something that is right before their eyes and yet invisible to most. The testimony of sufferers of disability includes gritty accounts of their pain and daily humiliations - a sure sign of the rhetoric of realism’ (Siebers 2001, p.747).

In a metaphorical sense, Flanagan is also part of the other 85%, because of the “acquired sickness” (the “perversion” and pain of S/M). The normative discourses on sexuality stigmatise and pathologise BDSM (American Psychiatric Association 2000b). He reclaims it as a way to cope with his sickness (the disabling chronic illness). He embodies the questioning of the boundaries between ability and disability, pleasure and pain, the inescapable materiality of the body, the consequences of biopower on the body and the practices of resistance against biopower. Rose and Flanagan play with and question the social stigma – which creates discriminations and inequalities – attached to sexual practices and the stigma attached to illness and disability. The tool used to question stigma is pain: the performances with S/M that deploy pain and the representation (through Dick’s documentary film, video, photos and texts) of physical and mental pain.

Flanagan shows the sexuality of the disabled through the reappropriation of the discourse of illness and the medical and cultural discourses of sexual deviance. Reverse discourses are also practiced through the reappropriations of words used in derogative ways. Flanagan reclaims the words “sick” and “sickness” both from the angle of the chronic illness-induced disability and the one of the BDSM community. These reappropriations carry socio-political value and counter-normative purposes. With these reverse discourses, disability and sadomasochism, as Foucault would argue, start to ‘speak in [their] own behalf, to demand that [their] legitimacy or “naturalness” be acknowledged, often in the same vocabulary, using the same categories by which [they were] medically disqualified’ (Foucault 1978, p. 101).

In *Sick*, there is a telling conversation between Flanagan and his brother, where the latter states how in shock was the whole family when they discovered Bob’s S/M sexuality, which made his brother’s homosexuality seem conventional. The shock was mainly caused by the disabled Flanagan playing with harmful and potential deadly practices. Since ‘representation itself [is] a primary ideological force’ (Siebers 2001, p. 739), the reappropriation of the representation of the freak, the sick, the strange is a

conscious political move. Flanagan shows the life and death and pain and joy of the disabled. He shows his lived experience, he demands that his viewer deal with it. Garland-Thomson argues that ‘disability is the unorthodox made flesh’ because it refuses ‘to be normalized, neutralized, or homogenized’ (Garland-Thomson 1997, p. 23). Therefore the reappropriation of the discourse of sexual minority practices like BDSM as “sickness” has a political and cultural implication of confronting (in a way, more than his brother’s homosexuality) the supposedly normative, penetrative, genital sexuality of heterosexuals, the obliterated sexuality of the disabled, and the representation through reappropriation of the sexuality of the disabled seen as deviant.

Flanagan transgresses the boundaries of what is supposed to be lived in private and what is apt to be lived in public: the feminist anthem of the “personal is political” resonates with his *oeuvre*. His representation forwards the notion of the pain of the disabled as eminently political, and not just as individual and private. There is the need to pinpoint first, that not all disabled people are in pain; second, that, as studies on pain report, ‘pains are said to be *private* to their owners in the strong sense that no one else can epistemically access one’s pain in the way one has access to one’s own pain, namely by feeling it and coming to know one is feeling it on that basis’ (Aydede 2009); and third, that there are not two people with the same kind of disability that ‘have the same medical problem or political interests’ (Siebers 2001, p. 743). As Siebers says,

‘The struggle for civil rights is completely different from the usual process for people with disabilities because they must fight against their individuality rather than to establish it – unlike political action groups based on race and gender. Consequently, the greatest stake in disability studies at the present moment is to find ways to represent pain’ (Siebers 2001, p. 744).

Flanagan is representing his pain through his lived experience of a man with cystic fibrosis, whose life has been subjected to recurrent hospitalisation, medicalisation of his body and his mind, several threats of imminent death. This confronts the audience openly, not asking for compassion, but asking to question their own lived experiences of pain and illness, or lack thereof.

As I have stated before in the analysis of Flanagan’s masculinity, Flanagan and Rose destabilise the conventions of heteronormative masculinity and femininity. Rose does not embody the stereotype of femininity as care, submission, fragility neither in the

performances nor in the day-to-day life with Flanagan. She embraces the role of dominatrix in the S/M relation, challenging the conflation of femininity with submissive behaviour. In the documentary *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist* (1996) when Flanagan is overwhelmed by the pain of the illness and does not want to engage with sadomasochism with her, they are both aware of the toll that disability is taking to their relationship and Flanagan, for example in the excerpts quoted above from the *Pain Journal*, acknowledges Sheree's distress. In the documentary, Rose's reaction might seem rather uncommon when she says to him: 'if you still love me you'll submit to me'. However, she is performing properly her role by trying to stimulate the masochist to engage with pain. It could be seen as a sort of "ethic of care of the dominatrix" through helping the disabled partner regain the submissive role that has been crucial for dealing with his pain. Originally, the ethic of care was been praised, for instance, for stressing the human reality of interdependence (Gilligan 1982), but it has been criticised for essentialising womanhood, for being heteronormative (as the site of care is assumed to be the heterosexual nuclear family), and oppressive for carers (paid and unpaid) and cared for (disabled and elderly) (Lister 2003). In this particular case, this reading against the grain of the ethic of care might be suitable to see how it is possible to regain agency, control and independence through interdependence. Rose does not grasp nor share her partner's physical and mental pain, but she is willing to come in his direction, she is willing to take on again the role that makes him feel alive and in control through S/M's pain. It is undeniable that their relationship is made stronger by S/M.<sup>14</sup> She is seeking an encounter with his pain, the unbearable pain of the cystic fibrosis that is killing him, through the pain of S/M. Ahmed says 'pain encounters, or encounters with pain, are crucial to how we inhabit the world in relationship to others; pain encounters involve the animation of the surfaces that both separate us from others, and connect us to others' (Ahmed 2002, p. 25). She wants to help him to get away from the solitary confinement of his disabling pain and the way she does it troubles the normative prescriptions of femininity.

Moreover, Flanagan and Rose trouble and expand representational regimes. Siebers argues that 'the disabled body changes the process of representation itself. Blind hands envision the faces of old acquaintances. Deaf eyes listen to public television.

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<sup>14</sup> Recent scientific studies have made the claim that positive hormonal changes might occur in couples engaging in consensual sadomasochistic activities and this results in an increased closeness and intimacy of the relationship (Sagarin, Cutler, Cutler, Lawler-Sagarin and Matuszewich 2009).

Tongues touchtype letters home to Mom and Dad. Feet wash the breakfast dishes. Mouths sign autographs' (Siebers 2001, p. 738). Flanagan and Rose might add to this linguistic and representational challenge: supermasochists with cystic fibrosis and their dominatrixes "pleasure" pain and 'FUCK THE SICKNESS' (Flanagan and Rose 1997, p. 58).

Garland-Thomson (2001, p. 358) questions Flanagan's self-representations as appropriative of the exotic (or transgressive) mode of representation. It is one of the four modes of representation (along with the sentimental, the realistic and the wondrous) that she highlights as being used in the visual rhetoric of disability in photography and popular culture by modern capitalism for various purposes (Garland-Thomson 2001). The exotic mode, to Garland-Thomson (2001, p. 358), serves to 'counter unequivocally the rhetoric of sentimentality and renounce even the admiration of wondrous'. Sentimentality is seen as the 'manifestation of suffering' which inspired the Nineteenth Century bourgeois feelings that led to the infantilisation of the disabled (Garland-Thomson 2001, pp. 341-342). The wondrous mode, instead, displays the 'extraordinariness of the disabled body in order to secure the ordinariness of the viewer' (Garland-Thomson 2001, p. 341), for example through the tropes of the monster or the prodigy.

Unlike Garland-Thomson, I find this exotic and transgressive mode of self-representation as functional for political purposes through the reappropriation of the body of the disabled as freak. His self-representation is akin to grotesque realism, where the grotesque body is 'open, protruding, extended, secreting body, the body of becoming, process, and change' (Russo 1997, p. 325). Flanagan's image of his body is ultimately grotesque as it 'displays not only the outward but also the inner features of the body: blood, bowels, heart and other organs. The outward and inward features are often merged into one' (Bakhtin 1984, p. 318). As Garland-Thomson (2001, p. 358) argues, Flanagan 'fuses the cultural figures of the invincible superman, the porn star, and the sick person, he combines cape, chains, piercing, and the oxygen mask characteristic of cystic fibrosis to discomfort his viewers' (fig. 13). Moreover, his performances augment, through their conflation, the excesses of the disabled body and non-normative sexuality through the grotesque body. A body, his lived body, that secretes mucus, desires cuts, spills blood, opposes the asphyxiation of the disease by desiring it for pleasure, laughs and lets you laugh at his own death, disease and pain. Or is it your own death, disease, and pain you are laughing at? The discomfort is functional

for Flanagan's embodiment and lived experience because, as Siebers says, 'different bodies require and create new modes of representation' (Siebers 2001, p. 738). There is the need to engage with different representations of Other bodies in order to contest normativity.

Garland-Thomson also finds that the main outcome of the exotic mode of the photographic representation of disability is distance (Garland-Thomson 2001, p. 358). However, I find that Flanagan's performances have, instead, complex effects, because if the visual characteristic of the performance could be a strange spectacle – both fascinating and repulsive – for the normate viewer, the humour (in the jokes, the facial expressions, the songs and so on) he uses in some of his performances does not distance the public, but draws it closer. The humorous effect is augmented as well by the contrast that is created from the union of the tragic and the joyful, like in the ditty he sings to the tune of Mary Poppin's *Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious* (1964) in a performance:

'Supermasochistic Bob has Cystic Fibrosis  
He should've died young but he was too precocious  
How much longer he will live is anyone's prognosis  
Supermasochistic Bob has Cystic Fibrosis

I'm dili-dili, I'm gonna die  
I'm dili-dili, I'm gonna die

When he was born the doctors said he had this bad disease  
That gave him awful stomach aches and made him cough and wheeze  
Any normal person would've buckled from the pain  
But SuperBob got twisted now, he's into whips and chains

I'm dili-dili, I'm gonna die  
I'm dili-dili, I'm gonna die

Years have come and gone and Bob is still around  
He's tied up by his ankles and he's hanging upside down  
A lifetime of infection and his lungs all filled with phlegm  
The CF would've killed him if it weren't for S&M!

Supermasochistic Bob has Cystic Fibrosis  
Supermasochistic Bob has Cystic Fibrosis  
Supermasochistic Bob has Cystic Fibrosis' (Dick 1996).

The dark humour of the lyrics about illness and death is mitigated – but also enhanced – by the catchiness of the song, which transports immediately to the elated, innocent,

positive, encouraging mood of the original. This atmosphere might help to keep the audience closer in order for disability, pain and non-normative sexual practices not to be overlooked because they are perceived to be too intimidating or disturbing. It also might draw the public closer to the complex lived experience of the artist, to function as an encounter with the pain of the Other through humour. Thus the involvement in comedy by the disabled is also important because through history humour has been negatively extracted from impairments (Clarke 2003). Therefore, the supermasochist's humour has a political potential: 'an important part of the [disability] movement has been to reclaim humour – to laugh at disabled people not as victims but as role models' (Hasler 1993, p.2). This type of humour has a moral character and thus it is in accord with the grotesque since 'the object of mockery is a specific negative phenomenon, something that "should not exist"' (Bakhtin 1984, p. 306). The value of his comedy is similar to that of other Others (like women, black people, and homosexuals) as Barnes argues, because it is able to 'makes sense of the senseless and, most importantly, satirises without rubbishing individuals' (Barnes 1992, p. 15). Moreover, Flanagan as Other asserts something that seems to escape to the symbolism assigned to the disabled. Wendell brilliantly states: 'I have concluded that I am always sick and often happy, and that this seems very peculiar in my culture' (Wendell 1996, p. 63). Therefore, establishing such representations might help reconfigure the discourses on the disabled and the lived experience of disability.

Flanagan exploits the pain of BDSM in order to fight the mental and physical pain coming from his chronic illness. His own body, embodiment and live experience are deployed in his performances that defy the stereotypical representations of the disabled, reconfigure the representation of the sexuality of the disabled and resist the medical discourse of non-heteronormative sexuality like sadomasochism. In addition, Flanagan and Rose are able to question normative heterosexuality and normative masculinity and femininity with their lived experience of BDSM that their performances highlight. Ultimately, the representational techniques used by Flanagan activate the viewer for an encounter with pain and confront pain's unsharability.

In the following part of the chapter, I will look at how Opie is able to use the pain of sadomasochism to fight mental pain and produce a series of interrelations that questions the disabling patriarchal society who causes such pain.

### 3.3 Catherine Opie: *Pervert* Confrontations

I would like to go from Flanagan's lived experienced of pain to the one of Catherine Opie's, shifting from physical disability to social disability and analysing how she uses pain to fight pain. Catherine Opie is a lesbian photographer, born in Ohio in 1961, and currently living and working in California. She has been working for three decades, becoming one the most influential artists of her time photographing America's social and geographical configurations. She explores the concepts of identity and community, how they interconnect and how they influence each other. One of her main works is the series *Girlfriends*, shot from the mid 1980s throughout the 2010s. Friends and lovers are the subjects for her camera, through which she documents LGBTQ, BDSM, and artistic subcultures in a profoundly intimate and honest way. The settings and the compositions are informal and spontaneous, revealing how much Opie is a part of those cultures. The more recent shots of the series are of famous iconic lesbian figures of American popular culture such as the singer K.D. Lang, the DJ Samantha Ronson, the actress Katherine Moening, and the DJ and feminist musician JD Samson. This work is in very close conversation with the one picturing the San Francisco's BDSM community in the 1980s, where the vitality she captures is able to engage the viewer to look closer in order to see beyond stereotypes. One example is *Capp St. House* (1994), a BDSM group scene where the participants are captured laughing and relaxing, with a richness of emotions that warms the black and white of the picture.

In 2008-2009 the *Catherine Opie. American Photographer* solo mid-career survey was exhibited at the Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum in New York. The specification of the title as American photographer recalls some of her great American predecessors and influences, like 'Walker Evans' 1938 *American Photographs* exhibition at MoMA and Robert Frank's 1958 book *The Americans*' (Zellen 2009, p. 76). Zellen argues of the subtitles that 'not only do they point to photography's American roots, but to something like the equivalence between America and photography as a whole, bathing even the least image with a certain telling immediacy' (Zellen 2009, p. 76). The portraits' series of communities and individuals (which are not limited to the queer scene but comprise also, for instance, football players and surfers) remind one of photographers like Walker Evans for the attention to American

subcultures, and August Sander and Bernd and Hilla Becher for the approach of the typological catalogue (present also in her landscapes, freeways and minimalls series). In fact, she says how her photography has always been informed by the need to document, describe, catalogue: ‘since a very young age I’ve had this drive to describe...to document. (...) It’s just this intense desire to catalogue and archive the people and the places around me’ (Opie in Reilly 2001, p. 87). In addition, she brings into play art history with mastery: ‘there’s a seduction that happens, (...) I use all of the classical tropes of art. They allow people to enter the work, and to look at something they might not otherwise look at’ (Opie quoted in Dykstra 2008, p. 132). This strategy is particularly evident in three self-portraits that in the exhibition are set in a small space of the Guggenheim, an ‘alcove’ as Dykstra reports (Dykstra 2008, p. 132), and that are in dialogue with one another. She, thus, deliberately adopts Hans Holbein’s visual strategies in order to give authority and formal decorum to unconventional subjects through the saturated monochrome backgrounds and stylized formality. The purpose is to shift towards a more traditional portraiture (compared to the *Girlfriends* series, for example), and, in order to achieve this, she resorts to Holbein as an ‘influence behind the color and the gaze’ (Opie in Reilly 2001, p. 90). Recalling her own lived experience, she says ‘my own experience of being bald, tattooed, and pierced was that people were scared of me’ (Opie in Reilly 2001, p. 90). Therefore, she tries to represent the Other differently – the SM community, transsexuals, transgenders, gays, lesbians, transvestites and so on – in order to defy stereotypes and regain a certain representation that gives the respect and dignity that have been missing in society. To do so she resorts to some of the strategies adopted by Renaissance painters, while, in the meantime, she highlights – rather than renders diffuse – the identities of her sitters. This representational strategy is present also in her self-portraits.

In *Self-Portrait/Cutting* (1993) (fig. 16), for example, there is a reminiscence of the tradition of the female nude seen from the back, and, through the rich damask background and the solidity of the figure, the great Sixteenth Century painters of official portraits of royals and eminent personalities. On Opie’s bare back blood is still dripping from the cuts that draw the simple, stick-figures pictures of two women holding hands, with, in the background, a house with a smoky chimney, and sun, a cloud and birds in the sky. It recalls children’s pictures of a happy family portrait through its sweetness and innocence. Opie’s head is positioned at the meeting point of

two of the festoons of fruit and flowers weaved on the fabric of the background: this expedient establishes symmetrical rigor that leads to a calm and firm sensation of the composition; this choice of sombre coloured background with the abundance of such fruit and flower decoration symbolically mirrors the subject's desire for a prosperous union that has been frustrated. The emptiness of the composition of the photography is a stylistic device used by Opie in various series in order to symbolize loss with different purposes (Opie in Reilly 2001, p. 94). The desire for kinship and the pain for the loss of it emerge on the skin of the subject through the use of physical pain. In fact the picture was shot when the relationship with her former girlfriend ended and Opie questioned herself and her longing for a family and for marriage (Dykstra 2008, p. 132).

I would like to elaborate on the personal, lived experience of Opie's pain and distress, in order to embrace the communitarian and identitarian sense that all Opie's series intimately possess. The lived experience of the LGBT community has been affected and shaped by the difficulties, the distress and the struggles of fulfilling also intimate desires such as kinship, marriage, family and children. The picture reminds viewers vividly of the lack of the legal rights to form a non-heterosexual family in most parts of the world. In this sense, patriarchal society is disabling, it causes pain, a pain that is borne by the body of whoever does not fit the heteronormative prescriptions not merely virtually – everyone is not coherently able to embody the heterosexual norm without any contradiction – but critically – the queer embodiments that critically fail to approximate such norm (McRuer 2006, p. 30). Rich points out how 'social relations of the sexes are disordered and extremely problematic, if not disabling, for women' (Rich 1980, pp. 632-633). Moreover, the scholar states that compulsory heterosexuality is a system 'through which lesbian experience is perceived on a scale raging from deviant to abhorrent, or simply rendered invisible' (Rich 1980, p. 632). Homosexuality, until 1973, has been classified in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association 1973) as a mental disorder. The legacy of this classification still continues. In fact, Meyer says that:

'this heritage has tainted discussion on mental health of lesbians and gay men by associating – even equating – claims that LGB<sup>15</sup> people have higher prevalences of mental disorders than heterosexual people with the historical

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<sup>15</sup> The diction in Meyer (2003) is "LGB" and not "LGBT". Transsexuality is still considered nowadays (American Psychiatric Association 2000) a mental disorder and classified as gender dysphoria under *Gender Identity Disorders*. The medical model of transsexuality is highly contested.

antigay stance and the stigmatization of LGB persons' (Meyer 2003, p. 674).

Then the pathologisation of homosexuality continues both in the medical field and in the social imaginary. Meyer (2003) elaborates a variant of the social stress theory through many sociological and social psychological theories, called minority stress. This model illustrates 'the excess stress to which individuals from stigmatized social categories are exposed as a result of their social, often a minority, position' such as the LGB population' (Meyer 2003, p. 676). It purports 'a continuum from distal stressors, which are typically defined as objective events and conditions, to proximal personal processes, which are by definition subjective because they rely on individual perceptions and appraisals' (Meyer 2003, p. 677). The conclusion of Meyer's study is that the LGB population has a higher rate of mental disorders and distress than the heterosexual due to social stress (e.g. discrimination, prejudice, stigma, internalized homophobia). As Meyer says, policymakers should effectively intervene, along with health professionals, in order to have 'effective prevention and intervention programs' (Meyer 2003, p. 675). Policymakers should also intervene with legislations and initiatives that implement, support and promote equal rights for all. The debates around same-sex marriage are still very active.

The picture carved on Opie's back could lead in different directions towards different positions in the LGBT community itself, not just in society at large, on the issues of marriage and parenting. McRuer highlights how 'indeed, many people considering LGBT rights at the turn of the century (including many LGBT people themselves) are still surprised to learn that queer communities have actually been deeply divided over the issue of gay marriage' (McRuer 2006, p. 79). There are mainly at stakes the "equality" discourse, embarked through the politics of assimilation; and the "diversity" discourse, that rejects the assimilationist stance. Early lesbian and gay rights activists endorsed category-supportive politics, where same-sex desire built an immutable and essentialist quasi-ethnicity, mutually implicating homosexuality and heterosexuality, while excluding bisexuals and transsexuals (Gamson 1996). From the 1980s queer activists, on the contrary, have been fighting to deconstruct such binarism because it is seen as the basis of oppression; identities are historicised and contextualised, and seen as fluid and unstable; moreover, bisexuality, transsexuality, and gender-crossing are seen as disruptive of identity categories (Gamson 1996).

Therefore there are other threads at stake in the lines dripping blood on Opie's skin: the pain stemming from the disabled condition of not having equal rights, the pain rising from the divisions inside her own LGBT community, the pain and distress of struggling for other configurations of kinship and society, the pain of sacrificing live experiences and embodiments by entering the normalizing mould of marriage in order to advocate for equal rights and equal treatment. Normalisation is one of the weapons of power (Foucault 1979, p. 184), therefore same-sex marriage for the LGBT community portrays, not just the fulfilment of a human right, but the risks connected to endorsing forms of social control. Cott (2000) argues how the history of (Christian-modelled monogamous) marriage in U.S.A. is imbricated in the formation of America as a nation and of its values. Cott states that marriage is both a private and public establishment and that the state uses this institution to accomplish its own aims<sup>16</sup>. Historically, the roles of husband and wife have shaped their citizenship: marriage is a tool 'through which the apparatus of state can shape the gender order' (Cott 2000, p. 3). The result of this shaping has detrimental and discriminating consequences for women.

*Self-Portrait/Cutting* is a reflexion in embryo that precedes the later *Domestic* series (1999), where she travels around the U.S.A in a RV to photograph lesbian couples in their homes. It is an experience for Opie to ponder about what a family is. One of the outcomes of the deep learning experience this project gives her, apart from the renewed compelling interest in her own lesbian community, is that 'the lesbian domestic couple doesn't necessarily have to be based on the heterosexual model' (Opie in Reilly 2001, p. 87). Rich would argue further by saying that 'lesbian existence comprises both the breaking of a taboo and the rejection of a compulsory way of life' (Rich 1980, p. 649). The breaking with the heterosexual matrix is taken further by Other ways of embodying relationships and Opie's representation of that is a powerful one. Another series that progresses the meditation on same-sex couples and parenting and that documents the lived experience of kinship is the autobiographical *In and Around Home* (2004-2005). In these pictures she portrays the day-to-day life of her family (her partner and her two children) in her home, and glimpses of the political election and social and political debates have a part in the representation. In 2006 she comments upon this series:

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<sup>16</sup> One example Cott makes regards Native Americans: 'both political and religious officials assumed that native American's assimilation had to be founded on monogamous marriage, from which would follow the conventional sexual division of labor, property, and inheritance' (Cott 2000, p. 26). Also, the history of marriage and the history of slavery and civil rights of African-Americans in the U.S.A. are mutually involved (Cott 2000).

‘Should I be complacent at this point because I’m living my American Dream? And I feel that as an artist it’s my responsibility not to be completely complacent, to try to create a weave of complexity through images and looking at the world, and ideas of the history of photography as well as the history of culture...and to still stay really aware of that and give that back to an audience’ (Opie quoted in Guggenheim n.d.).

The complexifying intentions and the refusal of complacency are present in *Self-Portrait/Pervert* (1994) (fig. 17), along with a confrontational attitude. In it, Opie is sitting quietly on a chair in front of another rich and finely decorated background. She is wearing leather hood and pants, on her bare chest the word “pervert” is carved with an elegant script that matches the elegance of the backdrop, on her arms are forty-six symmetrically inserted needles. The composition is minimal, but the curve of the lines is controlled and balanced, not dissimilar to the one of an official portrait of a Renaissance master painter, conferring dignity. *Pervert* recalls the aforementioned series of the BDSM community and incorporates the formal elements of other more formal portraits like *Cutting*. The solidity, symmetry, and dignity of the subject remind indeed of Holbein the Younger (c. 1497-1543). It especially has consonance with the *Portrait of Charles de Solier, Lord of Morette* (1534-1535) for the frontal disposition and the sultry quality of the blacks, but also the solidity and strange calm displayed by the portraits of Henry VIII. The simple draping of the textile on the background reinforces the elegant symmetry of the whole composition. As said before, the references to Holbein reinforce the sense of solemnity and power of the representation.

Opie commented on the making of *Pervert* as ‘an anguished reaction to the AIDS epidemic, as well as a cry against the “normalizing” of gay and lesbian communities’ (Dykstra 2008, p. 132). The bareness of the composition that does not include anything else except for the subject and the background reinforces the sense of loss – a feeling present in many series – that her community and her generation has experienced from the AIDS epidemic (Opie in Reilly 2001, p. 94). This is part of the minority stress theorized by Meyer (2003) suffered by the LGBT community and its members. They have been accused, stigmatised and discriminated for the disease. In addition, they have been suffering the pain of losses of family, friends and members of such community, but also the lack of appropriate (medical, social and political) care and support for the sufferers of HIV and AIDS.

The artist reports how the mainstream lesbian community does not fully accept the S/M scene, and that her self-portraits as well as her studio portraits are meant, also, to ‘expand the idea of lesbian identity’ (Dykstra 2008, p. 132). The portrait is a statement of identity and a way to counter effects of the distress and the pain of being stigmatised in one’s own subculture, and not only in society at large. She regains positive control over the representation of lesbian and S/M sexuality using the efficacy of the reverse discourse, seen also in Flanagan. The word “pervert” is cut on the skin to embody the reappropriation of the word by the BDSM community. As said before, the LGBT community has a painful history of medicalisation and discrimination. In addition, the control of sexuality has also been exerted through the medical classification of certain practices as deviant. Practices like sadism and masochism are still defined as paraphilias in the *Sexual and Gender Identity Disorder* chapter of the *DSM-IV-TR* (American Psychiatric Association 2000b). This definition as mental pathology is inherited by Freud and Kraft-Ebbing’s views of S/M. While in the *DSM-III* (American Psychiatric Association 1987) they are classified as psychosexual disorders *per se*, the *DSM-IV-TR* defines S/M as pathological when the related ‘fantasies, sexual urges, or behaviors cause clinically significant distress or impairment in social, occupational, or other important areas of functioning’ (American Psychiatric Association 2000b). In the end, with the *DSM-IV-TR* the medical model of those sexual practices does not shift consistently in order to avoid discrimination and stereotyping; moreover, there is no mention of the difference between a consensual and voluntary practice, and a violent and abusive one. A clear political measure has been taken in 1995 by the Danish government when it expunged S/M from the list of disease diagnosis (Revised F65 n.d.), being the first European country to do so. This political statement is effective in lessening discrimination, stigma and distress for the individual and for the community, and also lessening the control the state has on bodies and minds, and augmenting the awareness over legitimate sexual practices.

Through the stylistic and compositional devices of the picture, Opie also tries to give a new legitimate dignity to her own lived experience as a lesbian and to BDSM, using pain to reappropriate her own sexuality and her own body on her own terms, away from the heteronormative matrix, and away from the dictates of a lesbian community that seems to endorse just one possible embodiment of lesbian identity and sexuality. Lesbians and feminists are divided on the topic of sadomasochism, because many of them consider it as a replica and reinforcement of the ‘major epistemological and

behavioral structure of male dominated societies' (Hopkins 1994, p. 116). Lesbian feminist sadomasochists and other sadomasochism activists defend their sexual activity as an issue of private matter, but also as concerning 'political identity, spirituality, and epistemology' (Hopkins 1994, pp. 117-118). The part of the LGBT community that favours assimilationism for political purposes downplays and tries to withdraw from the different embodiments that could enrich politically, culturally, spiritually, sexually and epistemologically the whole movement. Contesting lesbian sadomasochism because it reproduces the power dynamics and the violence of patriarchy is, I would suggest, showing the lack of knowledge of the practice itself, whose motto is "safe, sane and consensual". I do not claim that BDSM is the absolute and ultimate practice for gender and sexual subversion, but I argue that it could be of use to interrogate gender, sexuality, the encounter with the other (through pain or not), and expand their boundaries. For instance, BDSM could teach simple, practical things that could be of benefit to all kinds of sexual practices:

'vanilla sex [conventional sex] is as much about trust as leather folks attribute to S/M. In fact, I use safe words and I keep clear boundaries of do's and don'ts. The vanilla community should get hip to the fact that just because it's vanilla doesn't mean that safe words aren't necessary' (Hopkins 1994, pp. 135-136).

Therefore, Opie's reappropriation of the representation of BDSM and lesbian identities can forward positive effects by easing minority stress suffered by the lesbians who conform neither to the assimilationist stance, nor to the BDSM community.

The self-portrait that might be seen as completing a triptych with the aforementioned two is *Self-Portrait/Nursing* (2004) (fig. 18). Opie is sitting on a big chair in front of bright red damask backdrop, her shoulders and chest naked, and nursing her son Oliver. The lived experience of lesbian maternity is the focus of the composition, which retains the solidity and dignity of the other two portraits. Another distress suffered by the LGBT community is the lack of recognition, rights and representation of their parenting. Normative maternity seems instrumental to serve just the heteronormative economy, and the invisibility of lesbian maternity is consistent to this purpose. The Western patriarchal culture is saturated by the representations and the prescriptions of the Christian maternity, the only one that seem to be valued. Opie reappropriates and exploits the Christian iconography (which has Ancient Egyptian and

Byzantine origins) of the *Madonna Lactans*, the nursing Virgin. Studies show the political and social implication of the development of this iconography in Tuscan Renaissance (Miles 1986 and Holmes 1997). The artist uses politically such iconography to refocus the viewer on the lived experience of the Other. There are some renditions of the *Madonna Lactans* in popular culture imagery and in art photography. For example, in Cindy Sherman's *simulacra* of the series *History Portraits* there are the *Madonna Lactans* of the *Untitled #216* and the *Untitled #223*, which rely on different qualities and have different outcomes to Opie's photograph. In her self-portrait with her son, Opie's lived experience is functional for the expansion of the kinds of representations for lesbian and queer embodiments. The sweet closeness of this representation of mother and child opens up the possibilities of kinship. In addition, breastfeeding is still much debated nowadays. Carter's study examines how 'breast feeding is an overwhelmingly heterosexual subject' (Carter 1996, p.116). Representing breastfeeding in lesbian maternity is a counter-normative political move. The lack of abundance of representations in popular culture and in the arts of the variety of lived experiences of lesbians augments the minority stress and impinges upon the political and social processes that promote equality. Opie is ultimately a political artist in her series that portray the lived experiences of the LGBT community.

This is also evident in her recent filmic project. Opie and Lisa Udelson have collaborated in the production of *Same Difference* (2011), a film starring children of same-sex couples, like Opie's and Udelson's. The work aims at giving voice to these children, who have been completely left out of the debate on Proposition 8<sup>17</sup>, the anti-gay marriage bill in California. The lived experiences of same-sex parenting and same-sex couples' children are brought up in order to question the void of representation and consideration for their rights, their distress and their wishes. Reiterating her commitment to represent same-sex families, she is asserting the importance of her work on communities that are discriminated and deprived of their rights and how her country deals with those issues. In the end, she is an American photographer: she documents American's diverse communities, but, moreover, she commits politically to re-

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<sup>17</sup> In California the actions against Proposition 8 have taken the legal route of the *Perry v. Brown* (formerly *Perry v. Schwarzenegger*) court case: in February 2012 the verdict has deemed Proposition 8 unconstitutional. Meyer testified the psychological and mental health harms of being devoid of the right of marriage and explained the minority stress effects. Cott testified on the history of marriage and how the union of marriage has never been universally defined as between a man and a woman (Prop 8 Trial Tracker 2012).

representing the diversity – think, for example, of the concept of melting pot – on which the nation was founded.

Opie uses her body, her embodiment and lived experience in the triptych-like self-portraits in order to fight the mental pain and minority stress that the LGBT community experiences and that stem from the disabling heteronormative society and the medical discourse on homosexuality and BDSM practices. On her flesh and skin, the carving of the reappropriative word ‘Pervert’ in *Self-Portrait/Pervert* (1994) questions the normative current of the lesbian community, heteronormative sexuality, and representations of lesbian and BDSM sexualities in patriarchal society and in the medical discourse and represent the mental pain that these entail. In *Self-Portrait/Cutting* (1993) the mental pain stemming from the frustrated longing for (non-heteronormative) kinships and the lack of legal rights for marriage same-sex couples comes out on Opie’s skin through the cutting of the drawing of a lesbian couple. The triptych is completed with the performance of lesbian maternity in *Self-Portrait/Nursing* (2004), a lived experience painfully unrecognised by patriarchal society. The formal qualities taken from the style of the official Renaissance portraiture give the photographs dignity, solidity and symmetry, which ultimately render powerful and eloquent the representation. The representational techniques facilitate the sharing of mental pain because it comes through the body of the performer.

### 3.4 Conclusion

A patriarchal and disabling society creates pain and distress in the Other, the non-normates. To Garland-Thomson, in such a society the normate is ‘the figure outlined by an array of deviant others whose marked bodies shore up the norm’s boundaries’ and also ‘the corporeal incarnation of culture’s collective, unmarked, normative characteristics’ (Garland-Thomson 1997, p. 8). Flanagan and Opie question normative boundaries and try to subvert them. In the artworks analysed, Flanagan/Rose and Opie – with and without the representation and reappropriation of the discourse of S/M –

question normative prescriptions of gender, sexuality, body and embodiment. At the same time, they question through their art practice and representational techniques the unsharability of pain, its resistance to language underlined by theorists like Scarry (1985). They both deploy effectively their non-normate bodies and lived experiences (S/M, disabling chronic illness, relationships, desires, pain, distress, lesbian identity, LGBT community, lesbian maternity), in reappropriative and reverse discourse techniques in order to fight pain, mental distress, stigma, and discrimination.

## Conclusion

One of the premises for this enterprise was Jones' belief in the potential of body art to be able to activate the viewer and highlight identities (Jones 1998, p. 22). Therefore, body art is a means apt to forward not only representations of mental pain, but their reappropriations as well. Moreover, body art through the representation of pain can facilitate encounters with pain. Ahmed underlines the political and ethical dimensions of encounters with pain (Ahmed 2002, p. 25). Since pain appears to have the characteristic of epistemological unsharability (Aydede 2009) because of its resistance to language (Scarry 1985, p. 4), body art might further encounters with pain.

The purpose of the first chapter was to assess how encounters with pain are possible through body art. For this task I chose to analyse and compare two sets of works by Vito Acconci and Victoria Van Dyke because they displayed similar formal characteristics. Despite the centrality of the use of the body, similar actions and masochistic pain by both performers, the possibility of an encounter with pain is frustrated by Acconci and forwarded by Van Dyke. Acconci eludes this encounter because *Trademarks* (1970) and *Adaptation Study (N. 3 Hand and Mouth)* (1970) are works that entail a solipsistic movement and foster an understanding of the artist as the great male genius. Acconci, in conformity with the visual economy of patriarchy, escapes embodiment and intersubjectivity through the transcendence represented by the attribute of "God as the creator" and reaffirming the split nature of the Cartesian subject. Van Dyke, on the contrary, is able to use body art to trace a web of interpellations through pain that make encounters conceivable. Her representations are particularly convincing in *Saw#5 (I Want To Be An Amazon)* (2001) and *Cannibal* (2001), when she deploys feminist strategies by evoking the figure of the Amazon and the taboo of the cannibal. Van Dyke's approach is enhanced by the way she joins the physical pain of the performances, the aforementioned representational strategies, her embodiment of feminist and lesbian, and her lived experiences of mental pain, as a gender-based violence survivor, and as a psychiatric institution survivor. Using the body

and physical pain to represent mental pain is thus possible through interconnections that have their pivotal point in the artist's embodiment and lived experience. Hence, if in body art the body and physical pain are not used as mere tools, as objects separated from lived experience and from embodiment, but they are engaged with them in defiance of Cartesian subjectivity and its separation of the body and the mind, I argue it is possible to forward intersubjective encounters with pain. In this sense, body art activates an encounter with pain if it is carried out as an embodied visual practice, which is dialogic and interrelated through lived experience.

Since the first chapter highlighted the importance of the lived experience and the embodiment of artists who deal with mental pain and distress both in their life and in their works, the second chapter began with a brief reminder of how discourses about art and mental distress have impinged – but also have been used instrumentally to affect ideologically – the critical assessments of artists who might deal or have dealt with mental distress and mental disability. These discourses are embedded in the whole history of art and they range between different positions: one using the *ars gratia artis* trope while not taking into account embodiment and lived experience and not locating art practice inside 'a history of production and social relations' (Pollock 1980, p. 57); and the other the exploited myth of the link between creativity and mental distress, which overlooks the material-semiotic implications of art practice with the misuse of artists' lived experiences, creating, among other things, the myth of the mad genius. The two artists' (self-)representations I analysed in the chapter proved to be rich in tensions and contradictions. Despite her artistic research with performance art deeply engages the human body and mind, Abramović's aim in *An Artist's Life Manifesto* to set a social and moral codex for artists fails to take into account the entirety of an artist's embodiment and lived experience, or even her own lived experience. In doing so, both in the manifesto and in interviews, she exploits the myth of the suffering artist, while dismissing mental pain like depression. Her position reverberates in the workshops she teaches for artists when she puts the condition for participant not to have any kind of physical or mental disorders. Some of the material-semiotic consequences arising from her standpoints are that Abramović functions as a gatekeeper for other artists, forbidding artists (disability artists, artists with disability and artists in general) who engage with their mental distress and produce their representations, which could be potentially useful against discourses of oppression and discriminations about mental distress. The reading against the grain of her performance *Rhythm 2* (1974) could

potentially defy Abramović's dismissal of some of the lived experience of the artist and the outcome of the piece underlines the inextricability of the body and the mind, but also the toll of the medicalisation of the body-mind in pain and distress through psychiatry and psychiatric drugs. The second part of the chapter analyses Kusama's self-representation as the mad artist in her autobiography *Infinity Net* (2011), build up with the disability imagery of the disabled as 'pitiable', 'super cripple', and 'sexually abnormal'. I demonstrated how her works has been read and critically appraised through the lens of her lived experience of mental distress with the myth of the mad genius and with the overcoming narrative of disability through art practice. Such narratives disregarded, for instance, how she attained important achievements in formal research with various media (including body art and performance) or her artistic influences. Moreover, these discourses are oppressive and dismissing for who experiences mental distress and disability.

In the third chapter I looked at how Flanagan/Rose and Opie used physical pain to tackle mental pain stemming from their different disabilities: for Flanagan the physical disability of his chronic illness, and for Opie the social disability of her sexual orientation. Their works and their lives are strongly interconnected and the divide between private and public is blurred – the personal becomes political. Engaging with their embodiment and lived experience of disability and pain through pain and body art, their works are able to forward an encounter with pain whilst not endorsing oppressive disability discourses or imageries, defying the stereotypes of the great male genius, the mad artist and the suffering artist. They are able to do this because of their representational strategies, how they use their embodiments and lived experience. Through them they interconnect the works that express pain directly through BDSM with the rest of their works and they succeed in fighting pain with pain. In addition, Flanagan and Rose are able to complicate gender and sexuality through the use of BDSM and the redefinition of pain and pleasure. The outcome of their performances and their other works focused on the dynamics of their 24/7 S/M relationship is the questioning of hegemonic masculinity and normative femininity. The reappropriation and exploitation of medical and cultural discourses about illness and sexual deviance questions heteronormative sexuality and problematises the obliteration of the sexuality of the disabled. Troubling and expanding representational regimes in their works, Flanagan and Rose put forward the corporeality of disability to show something invisible and that escapes language like pain. Similar to Flanagan and Rose, Opie with

*Self-Portrait/Pervert* (1994) is able to trouble representation and use pain to fight pain that comes from LGB minority stress provoked by discrimination and oppression. Also, she contrasts through reappropriation the stereotype that conflates sexual deviance, homosexuality and BDSM. In order to achieve all this, the triptych-like self-portraits that are in dialogue with each other deploy the influence of the history of photography and the formal qualities of the official portraiture of Renaissance paintings. Moreover, she opposes and problematises the normalising currents in the gay and lesbian community – marriage and kinship in *Self-Portrait/Cutting* (1999) – and expands the idea and the representation of lesbian sexuality and identity – especially lesbian motherhood in *Self-Portrait/Nursing* (2004). Thus, through representational strategies that are entangled with the use of her embodiment and her lived experience, Opie is able to address mental pain through her work.

To further the line of research carried out it would be useful to analyse how other artists work on mental pain and mental disability. As Siebers (2001, p. 744) argues, nowadays a great challenge for disability studies is to research and acquire ways to represent pain in order to forward different representations and assist political activism and social change. In this sense, disability artists who represent something that is non-visible like pain – but also non-visible disabilities – become crucial.

Focusing on mental pain, mental distress and mental disability in disability studies could broaden the field of inquiry that seems to overlook pains that are not bound to physical disability and therefore seem even more invisible. Mental disability and mental distress should gain more prominence in the actual debate around disability studies and feminist theory, either with studies that have at the core the social model of disability or the ones that are grounded on new materialism.

Furthermore, it might be apt to continue to investigate artworks on pain along the lines of McRuer's crip theory (2006), which offers a productive intersection between queer theory and disability studies. As scholars like Samuels (2003) point out, there are similarities – apart from sharing an analogous history and reality of oppression and the still present burden of the medical discourse – between the condition of invisibility of non-visible disabilities and gay and lesbian identities. My research addressed through Opie's problematisation of the lesbian identity and sexuality with BDSM the tensions inside and outside the lesbian community that Samuels (2003) approaches with the conjoined analyses of femme invisibility and non-visibly disabled

people. Thus, it could be useful to see how the invisibility of pain and mental distress are approached by queer disability artists, how they address pain, how other axes of intersectionality are present, and what consequences are brought about through their artistic investigations on queerness and disability.

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## **Appendix A**

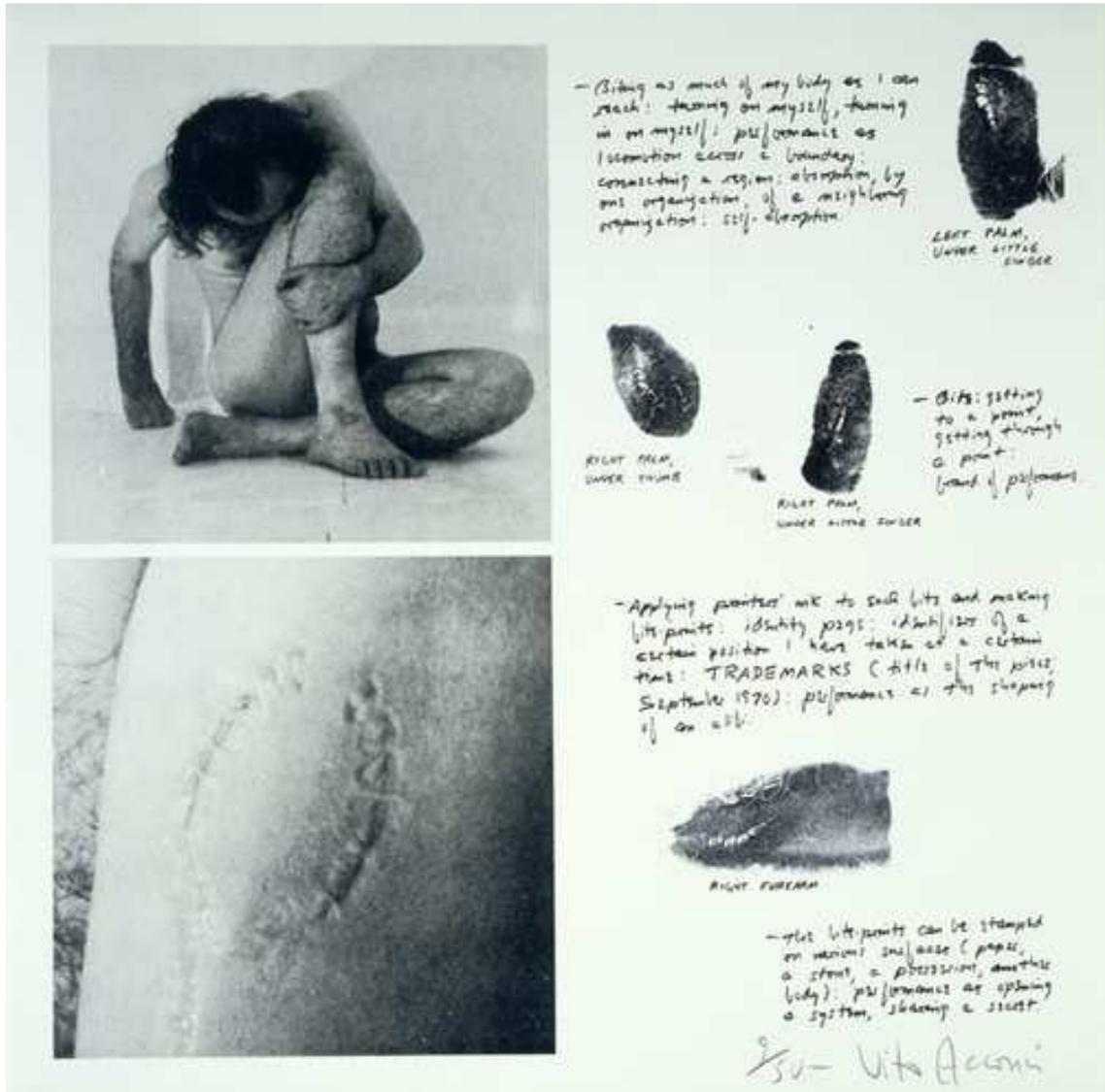


Fig. 1 Vito Acconci, *Trademarks*, 1970.



**Fig. 2 Victoria Van Dyke, *Saw #1*, 2001.**



**Fig. 3 Victoria Van Dyke, *Saw #2*, 2001**



**Fig. 4** Victoria Van Dyke, *Saw #3*, 2001.



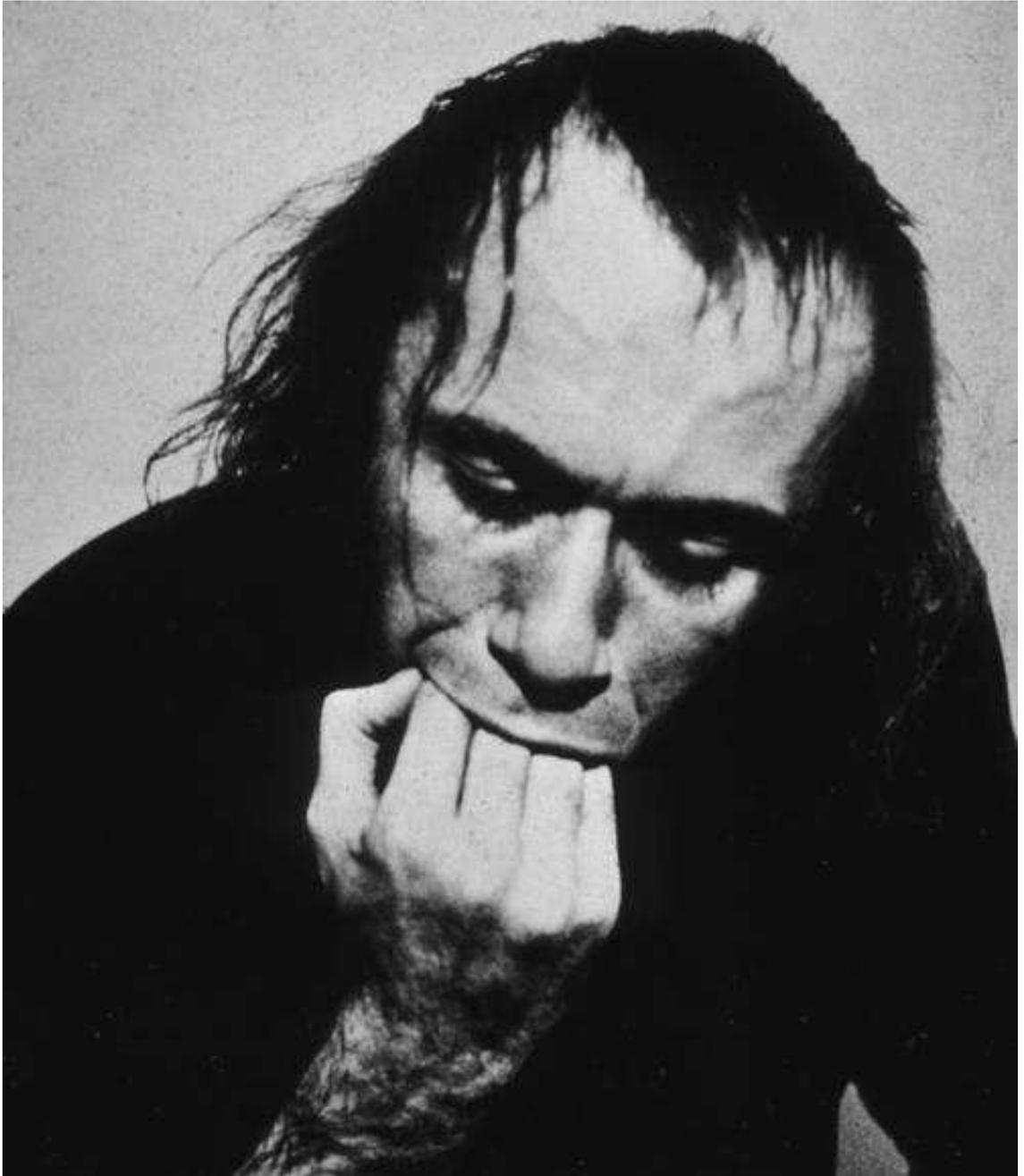
**Fig. 5** Victoria Van Dyke, *Saw #4*, 2001.



**Fig. 6** Victoria Van Dyke, *Saw #5 (I Want To Be An Amazon)*, 2001.



**Fig. 7** Victoria Van Dyke, *Saw #6*, 2001.



**Fig. 8** Vito Acconci, *Adaptation Study (Hand in Mouth)*, 1970.



**Fig. 9** Victoria Van Dyke, *Cannibal #1*, 2001



**Fig. 10** Victoria Van Dyke, *Cannibal #3*, 2001.



Fig. 11 Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 2*, 1974.



**Fig. 12** Yayoi Kusama, *Anatomic Explosion* happening in front of Alice in Wonderland sculpture in Central Park, 11 August 1968.



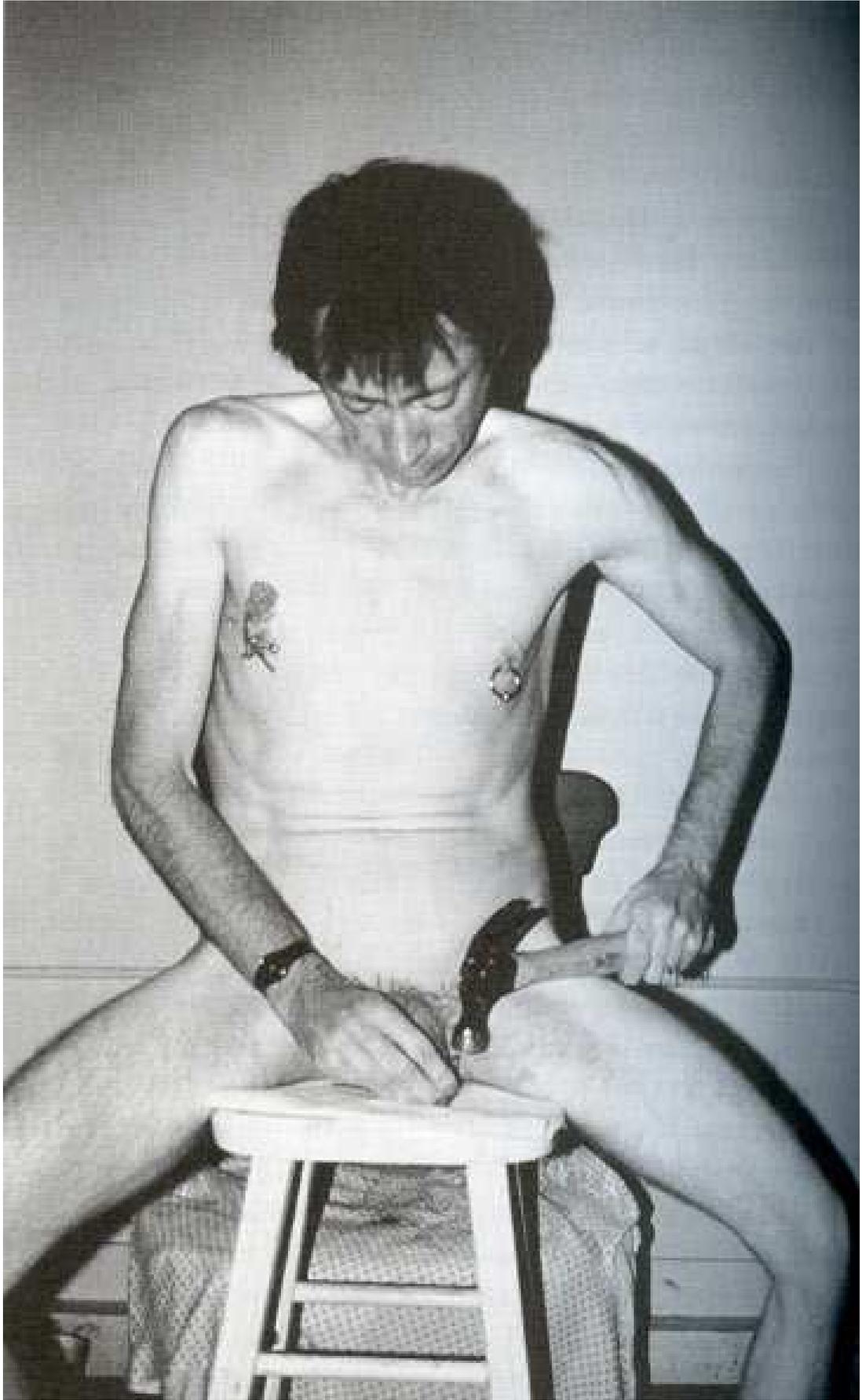
**Fight Sickness  
With Sickness**

**VISITING HOURS**

An installation by Bob Flanagan in collaboration with Sheree Rose  
September 23 to December 31, 1994

**Exhibition Hours:** The New Museum Store and Galleries: Tuesday, Friday and Sunday, 12:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m.; Saturday, 12:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m.; Admission at the Museum is free on Tuesdays between 12:00 p.m. and 5:00 p.m. *Visiting Hours* was organized in partnership of The Center for the Study of Art and its study center for the presentation of the New Museum (in partnership with) from the American Foundation and The Museum of Modern Art. This program, consisting of several hundred artists, has been made possible through the support of the National Endowment for the Arts. Partial support for this exhibition was provided by the National Foundation and by the New York State Council for the Arts and the New York City Department of Cultural Affairs.

**Fig. 13 Bob Flanagan/Sheree Rose, Poster for the exhibition *Visiting Hours*, 1994.**



**Fig. 14** Bob Flanagan, *YOU ALWAYS HURT THE ONE YOU LOVE*, 1991.

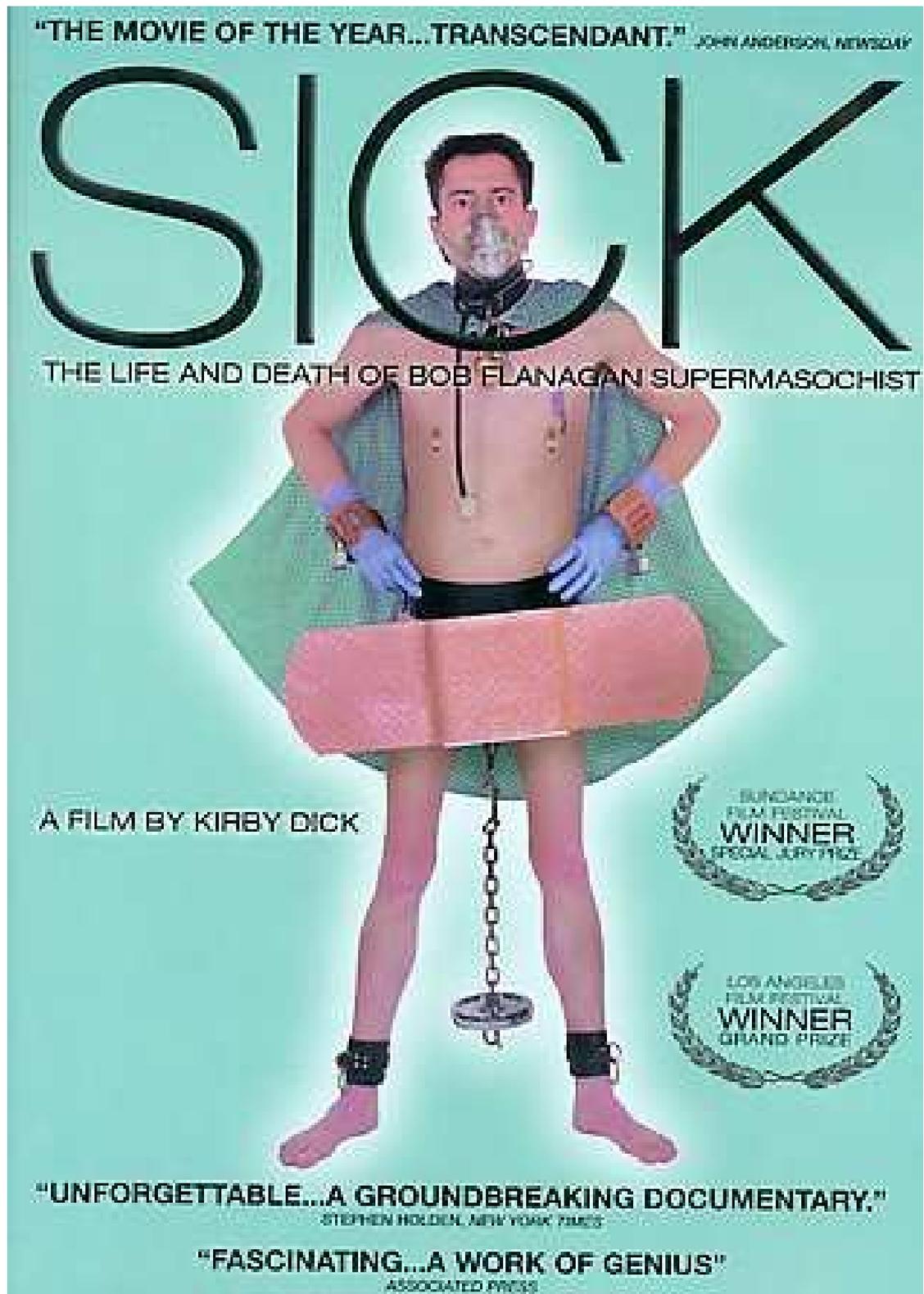


Fig. 15 Poster for Kirby Dick's film *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist*, 1996.



Fig. 16 Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Cutting*, 1993.



**Fig. 17** Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Pervert*, 1994.



Fig. 18 Catherine Opie, *Self-Portrait/Nursing*, 2004.

## **Appendix B**

# **Marina Abramović**

## ***An Artist's Life Manifesto***

### **1. An artist's conduct in his life:**

An artist should not lie to himself or others  
An artist should not steal ideas from other artists  
An artist should not compromise for themselves or in regards to the art market  
An artist should not kill other human beings  
An artist should not make himself into an idol  
An artist should not make himself into an idol  
An artist should not make himself into an idol

### **2. An artist's relation to his love life:**

An artist should avoid falling in love with another artist  
An artist should avoid falling in love with another artist  
An artist should avoid falling in love with another artist

### **3. An artist's relation to the erotic:**

An artist should develop an erotic point of view on the world  
An artist should be erotic  
An artist should be erotic  
An artist should be erotic

### **4. An artist's relation to suffering:**

An artist should suffer  
From the suffering comes the best work  
Suffering brings transformation  
Through the suffering an artist transcends their spirit  
Through the suffering an artist transcends their spirit  
Through the suffering an artist transcends their spirit

### **5. An artist's relation to depression:**

An artist should not be depressed  
Depression is a disease and should be cured  
Depression is not productive for an artist  
Depression is not productive for an artist  
Depression is not productive for an artist

## **6. An artist's relation to suicide:**

Suicide is a crime against life  
An artist should not commit suicide  
An artist should not commit suicide  
An artist should not commit suicide

## **7. An artist's relation to inspiration:**

An artist should look deep inside themselves for inspiration  
The deeper they look inside themselves, the more universal they become  
The artist is universe  
The artist is universe  
The artist is universe

## **8. An artist's relation to self-control:**

The artist should not have self-control about his life  
The artist should have total self-control about his work  
The artist should not have self-control about his life  
The artist should have total self-control about his work

## **9. An artist's relation with transparency:**

The artist should give and receive at the same time  
Transparency means receptive  
Transparency means to give  
Transparency means to receive  
Transparency means receptive  
Transparency means to give  
Transparency means to receive  
Transparency means receptive  
Transparency means to give  
Transparency means to receive

## **10. An artist's relation to symbols:**

An artist creates his own symbols  
Symbols are an artist's language  
The language must then be translated  
Sometimes it is difficult to find the key  
Sometimes it is difficult to find the key  
Sometimes it is difficult to find the key

### **11. An artist's relation to silence:**

An artist has to understand silence

An artist has to create a space for silence to enter his work

Silence is like an island in the middle of a turbulent ocean

Silence is like an island in the middle of a turbulent ocean

Silence is like an island in the middle of a turbulent ocean

### **12. An artist's relation to solitude:**

An artist must make time for the long periods of solitude

Solitude is extremely important

Away from home

Away from the studio

Away from family

Away from friends

An artist should stay for long periods of time at waterfalls

An artist should stay for long periods of time at exploding volcanoes

An artist should stay for long periods of time looking at the fast running rivers

An artist should stay for long periods of time looking at the horizon where the ocean and sky meet

An artist should stay for long periods of time looking at the stars in the night sky

### **13. An artist's conduct in relation to work:**

An artist should avoid going to the studio every day

An artist should not treat his work schedule as a bank employee does

An artist should explore life and work only when an idea comes to him in a dream or during the day as a vision that arises as a surprise

An artist should not repeat himself

An artist should not overproduce

An artist should avoid his own art pollution

An artist should avoid his own art pollution

An artist should avoid his own art pollution

### **14. An artist's possessions:**

Buddhist monks advise that it is best to have nine possessions in their life:

1 robe for the summer

1 robe for the winter

1 pair of shoes

1 begging bowl for food

1 mosquito net

1 prayer book

1 umbrella

1 mat to sleep on

1 pair of glasses if needed

An artist should decide for himself the minimum personal possessions they should have

An artist should have more and more of less and less

An artist should have more and more of less and less

An artist should have more and more of less and less

**15. A list of an artist's friends:**

An artist should have friends that lift their spirits

An artist should have friends that lift their spirits

An artist should have friends that lift their spirits

**16. A list of an artist's enemies:**

Enemies are very important

The Dalai Lama has said that it is easy to have compassion with friends but much more difficult to have compassion with enemies

An artist has to learn to forgive

An artist has to learn to forgive

An artist has to learn to forgive

**17. Different death scenarios:**

An artist has to be aware of his own mortality

For an artist, it is not only important how he lives his life but also how he dies

An artist should look at the symbols of his work for the signs of different death scenarios

An artist should die consciously without fear

An artist should die consciously without fear

An artist should die consciously without fear

**18. Different funeral scenarios:**

An artist should give instructions before the funeral so that everything is done the way he wants it

The funeral is the artist's last art piece before leaving

The funeral is the artist's last art piece before leaving

The funeral is the artist's last art piece before leaving