

I walk back and forth from the concert hall to the water fountain. Each time I have to remind myself “slow down”. I’m trying to find a sustainable rhythm. I count seconds as I breath in—one, two, three, four, five, six, seven—and as I breath out—one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. Some friends are smoking cigarettes outside. They see me through a window crouching by the door to the back stage of the concert hall, focusing on my rhythm. Two of them start jeering me playfully. They’re each here to watch and here me scream until I lose my voice. No one knows how long this will take, including myself.

I’m not sure when I decided I wanted to re-enact Marina Abramovic’s *Freeing the Voice*. I have been engaged in re-enacting “classic” performance art pieces from the 1970’s for a couple of years, and at some point started reinvestigating her work with looking for something that I could do. My first thought was to re-enact her piece *Rhythm 10*. In this piece the performer kneels on a large sheet of white butcher paper with ten knives laying in between them and the audience. There are two tape recorders to either side of the performer. The performer presses record on one of the machines. S/he then takes one knife and starts stabbing between her/his fingers as fast as possible until s/he accidentally cuts her/himself. S/he sets the knife down, picks up the next knife, and repeats the process. This continues until s/he has cut her/himself with each of the knives. S/he stops the recording, rewinds it, plays it back, and tries to memorize the rhythm. Next, s/he presses record on the second machine and play on the first, and tries to recreate the first round cutting her/himself at the same place in the same rhythm.

I was interested in this piece for several reasons. First, because it’s so musical. This is true not just because sound is so important to the piece, but also because of the relationship between sound, body, and memory. The piece is to me, and this is probably true for many musicians, an analog to the practicing that we do every day. Second, I love how this piece turns mistakes into material. Most any musician that works with recorded sound knows how isolating and amplifying the “mistakes” on a recording can generate exciting unpredictable results, that whole creative processes are based on this.

Here, however, the mistakes become ideals—they resist isolation, and their repetition becomes a farce. Third, that the line of knives also represent a sort of “count down”, where the audience and performer are constantly reminded of how much more pain they have to get through, covering the unpredictability of the mistakes with an ominous sense of eventuality. The moment of the cut and the moment of the entire piece have the same visceral weight.

However, simply wanting to do a piece is not enough for me. I need to be convinced that *I* am bringing something to the piece, that *I* am expanding the discourse. As I thought about how gender would play out in my re-enactment of *Rhythm 10*, it became clear that I could never perform this piece. One important element of her version of the piece is that it was a woman re-enacting a hyper-masculine Balkan game. If I, as a man, were to re-enact her performance it would, on some level, cancel out the power of the re-enactment that happened in the original performance. This would not be productively subversive but an emasculating misunderstanding of the piece.

This is about when doing a re-enactment of *Freeing the Voice* occurred to me. I read Abramovic's description of the piece: “laying backwards with my head facing the audience I scream until I lose my voice.” This piece offered to me the same things that I found interesting in *Rhythm 10*: musical connection of sound, body, and memory through repetition; losing control over the voice would turn “mistakes” into material; a simple, painful, physical process that produces a suffocating atmosphere of ominous eventuality. But to add to all of that, my gender brought something new to this piece. When a man screams until he loses his voice does that amount to the forfeiture of his imaginary phallus? Does it amount to castration? Could my re-enactment be subtitled *Freeing the Phallus*?

Mladen Dolar, in his book *A Voice and Nothing More*, examines the voice as excess, the human leftovers in the reproduction of meaning. He does this by tracing the voice through linguistics, metaphysics, physics, ethics, politics, and especially psychoanalysis. Throughout this tracing of vast terrain, Dolar is still able to return to a central concept: that the voice lies in between us and the world. “The voice stems from the body, but is not its part, and it upholds language without belonging to it, yet,

in this paradoxical topology, this is the point they share.” (Dolar, 73) “We can say that the subject and the Other coincide in their common lack embodied by the voice.” (ibid, 103) Dolar sees the voice as a sort of immaterial glue that holds languages and bodies, people and reality, together. And this is why your psychoanalyst gets you to talk until you don't make sense: “the constant slipping of the signifier on the voice; to hear the 'hearsing' in the 'hearsay.' This is the stuff of unconscious formations and the work of desire, and the analyst, as the hearer, returns the message back to the sender.” (ibid. 161) And all of this is what led me to wonder about castration.

I will return to Dolar as I explain the interpretive decisions I made while preparing to perform *Freeing the Voice*, as I describe my experience in performance, and as I investigate my approach to re-enactment in general. I will also be extending through Dolar to some of his primary sources, most notably Jacques Lacan. The aim of my investigation is twofold: First, how might this piece, and performance pieces in general, be read as representing complex psychoanalytical concepts; and second, what can these concepts tell me about my desire to re-enact these pieces. But first, on to my decisions.

As I watched the video of *Freeing the Voice* for the first time, I was immediately transfixed by Abramovic's original staging. She was laying on her back—her body amorphous and limp—on top of a mattress. Her head was upside-down, pointed out in the general direction of the camera so that the bottom side of her jaw ran parallel with her chest. She was wearing all black—a loose fitting pair of pants, and a long sleeved shirt, both without visible seam or button. Her posture is relaxed to the point of over-determination—she seems a sack rather than a body. Her mouth and eyes remained open and static. In the entire seventeen minutes of the excerpt I she closes her mouth only once. The black and white film amplifies the resonance between the black of her costume and the black hole of her mouth.

I began to fixate on this open black hole that was projecting screams at me from behind/within it. At first I was simply curious to see how long it would take her to close her mouth and swallow. I soon found, however, that my curiosity had led me into a trap. The insistent repetition of the drawn out downward glissandos of each of her screams seemed to be slowly massaging me towards the static

object of her body. The screams of pain were transforming into beckoning calls, the black hole of her mouth from bull-horn to cave. This beckoning from some inner resonance became so powerful that I had the distinct sensation of my body being sucked towards the opening of hers. Mladen Dolar describes having the same experience with a painting that I was having with a video:

One of the emblematic images of modernism is Munch's *The Scream* (1893). It has been subjected to many illustrious analyses, and I can only add a footnote here: we see the void, the orifice, the abyss, but with no fetish to protect us or to hold on to. Many interpreters (including Munch himself) have seen the distorted landscape in the background as the effect of the scream spreading through nature, but we could also read it in the opposite direction: as the landscape which eddies into the black hole of the mouth, as if the scream would suck the background into the orifice, contract it instead of expanding through it.
-Dolar, 69.

The difference between media being experienced by Dolar and myself is significant here. That I am watching a video means that I can hear Abramovic, while the painting is mute. That I am watching a performance means that I can see Abramovic as a subject with a history and a gender, while the figure in the painting is afforded an ambiguous alien anonymity.

Considering these differences it seems that if we were to compare the power of the suck-scream effect in both pieces, that *Freeing the Voice* would have the cards stacked against it. It is precisely the genderlessness/specieslessness of Munch's creature that deprives its voice of its fetish aura. To use a Lacanian explanation, the radical otherness of the being deprives us viewers of projecting our ideal image onto its surface to protect us from the real:

Between the enigmatic signifier of sexual trauma and the term it comes to replace in a current signifying chain, a spark flies that fixes in a symptom—a metaphor in which flesh or function is taken as signifying element—the signification, that is inaccessible to the conscious subject, by which the symptom may be dissolved.

And the enigmas that desire—with the frenzy mimicking the gulf of the infinite and the secret collusion whereby it envelopes the pleasure of knowing and of dominating in jouissance—poses for any sort of “natural philosophy” are based on no other derangement of instinct than the fact that it is caught in the rails of metonymy, eternally extending toward the *desire for something else*. Hence its “perverse” fixation at the very point of suspension of the signifying chain at which the screen-memory is immobilized and the fascinating image of the fetish becomes frozen.

-Lacan, *Ecrits*, 431.

The above quote comes from Lacan's paper *The Insistence of the Letter in the Unconscious*. In this

paper he is focusing his theory that the unconscious functions like language by showing how desire can be traced according to the rules of metaphor and metonymy. Desire is constantly moving along a signifying railway with “rails of metonymy”, and line junctions of metaphor. Natural philosophers run into enigmas because they believe that desire is driven by instinct, a relationship that Lacan rejects. Instincts produce satiable needs like hunger and thirst. Desire, on the other hand, is never fulfillable, it must remain in constant motion. There are, however, “points of suspension” where desire travels over gaps in the signifying chain. At these points, the subject is threateningly close to the trauma of the real—which doubles as the repression of the scene separation from the (m)Other, and the death drive—and so the subject, in a moment of desperation, throws up a screen to hide the horrible threat beneath. This screen is Lacan's version of the fetish, and this threat is what Dolar claims we are denied protection against in Munch's painting.

An attractive young woman, laying on a bed, with her mouth wide open toward you—anything but the denial of a fetish. In her essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative in Cinema' Laura Mulvey used Lacan as a starting point to argue that cinema produces a fundamentally male gaze where woman is the object of said gaze. When the voyeuristic gaze of the camera combines with narrative solely from the point of view of the male protagonist, women are reduced to objects of the narrative and this results in the spectator necessarily adopting the gaze of the male protagonist. (Mulvey, 1975) If we follow Mulvey, the video version of Abramovic's performance of *Freeing the Voice* forces the spectator into a voyeuristic position by virtue of the camera, no matter how transparent a role the cameraman has been chastised into.

However, there is no male protagonist. Is this why a 12 year old girl, interviewed for part of a New York Times article on Abramovic's recent MOMA retrospective, said that this video footage of *Freeing the Voice* was the most unsettling work she confronted that day “because you couldn't see what was going on and you couldn't tell why she was screaming”? (Kennedy, New York Times, March 20, 2010) Is Abramovic, laying open to the gaze of the voyeur, screaming for no reason because there's no

male protagonist narrative perspective to explain why? Perhaps this is precisely where the Abramovic version is able to transform into the suck-scream: the voyeuristic gaze denied its typical gender leaves the spectator suddenly threateningly close to the real.

I wonder whether my sensation of being sucked towards the opening in her body was my attempt at compensation for this denial, whether I was desperate for a camera zoom to screen over the horrible impossibility of subjective completeness that I was confronting at that moment. In his book *The Metastasis of Enjoyment: Six Essays on Woman and Causality* Slavoj Zizek riffs on Lacan's analysis of courtly love. Late in his career, Lacan became interested in the tradition of lyrical poetry practiced by the troubadours of the renaissance because he could read it as a symbolic system of narcissistic idealization. What's at stake in the term "narcissistic idealization" is Lacan's shocking discovery: these knight-poets of the early renaissance were proto-masochists. The knightly duties the poet demanded that his lady demand of him worked to transform his lady into "an inhuman partner in the sense of radical Otherness which [was] wholly incommensurable with [his] needs and desires; as such, she [was] simultaneously a kind of automaton, a machine which utters meaningless demands at random." (Zizek, *Metastasis*, 90). While on the surface these poets were idealizing their ladies as examples of spiritual purity, their ulterior motive was to make the threat of radical otherness invisible by turning their ladies into mirrors onto which they projected their own narcissistic idealizations. But, as Lacan points out, these mirrors have a double function:

The mirror may on occasion imply the mechanisms of narcissism, and especially the dimension of destruction or aggression that we encounter subsequently. But it also fulfills another role, a role as limit. It is that which cannot be crossed. And the only organization in which it participates is that of the inaccessibility of the object.
-Lacan, quoted in Zizek, *Metastasis*, 90-91)

Here we come back to Dolar and the black hole of the mouth. The mouth that would normally bring sense, project meaning into the world, be filled with words, is, in both the case of the Abramovic and the Munch, a limit. But in Abramovic's performance the open gap of the mouth is literally and figuratively a black hole:

If men are to project on to the mirror their narcissistic ideal, the mute mirror-surface must already be there. This surface functions as a kind of 'black hole' in reality, as a limit whose Beyond is inaccessible.
-Zizek, *Metastasis*, 91.

... I walk on stage in pitch black darkness. There are two 4x5 feet mirrors waiting in the middle of the stage, one parallel to the floor and raised two inches by some bricks underneath, the other perpendicular and down stage, facing the audience, making an "L" shape with the first mirror. I lay down on the first mirror with my head, up-side-down, over its edge facing *away from the mirrors* and towards the audience. The flat mirror has transformed into a refracting L, in counterpoint to the flattening of the usual 90 degree angle between my chin and chest. I take three long breaths, counting, feeling my slow rhythm. I let out my first scream and immediately two white spotlights one foot away from my shoulder burst on. I am wearing all white. The bright light of the spotlights is blaring off of me and the mirrors and out into the audience ...

Talking About Similarity, the 1976 Ulay/Abramovic performance piece, opens with Ulay sitting in front of the audience with his mouth wide open. There are some saliva sounds played. The sounds stop and he closes his mouth. Next, he literally sews his mouth shut. He sits in front of the audience, silent. He leaves. Abramovic emerges and sits in the chair that Ulay was sitting in and offers to answer questions from the audience in Ulay's place. She answers questions until she makes a mistake by answering for herself. Kathy O'Dell theorizes this piece using Lacan's mirrors:

Talking About Similarity raises questions about the formation of individual identity in psychoanalytic terms—its impossibility during the oral stage (metaphorically suggested by Ulay's suturing of his mouth) and its possibility in the oedipal scenario or Lacanian symbolic (metaphorically suggested by Abramovic's use of language). But for all the seeming emphasis on those two psychic phenomena, Abramovic's attempts to mirror Ulay's identity suggests that the real corollary for this performance is the mirror stage.
-O'Dell, 31.

In other words, Ulay represents the earliest phase of childhood development. For Lacan this happens between 0 and 6 months of age. The infant does not yet distinguish itself from the mother or the world immediately around it. This is the closest we ever will be to the Lacanian *real*, or the materiality of

existence. However, this phase is never stable. Already the infant is discovering its body as fragmented with specific erogenous zones (the mouth, anus, penis, and vagina) that speak louder than others. Simultaneously, the infant is beginning to identify elements of the mother as separate (her breast, voice, and gaze), and this separateness is becoming the sense of lack that will accompany the infant, at a fundamental psychic level, for the rest of its life.

Abramovic, on the other hand, represents represents the third stage of early childhood development: the acquisition of language. For Lacan, this happens between 18 months and 4 years of age. This phase is the entrance into the Lacanian *symbolic order*, where the infant completes subjectivization by reducing the self to the signifier “I” within the unfathomably vast network of differential signifiers that is language, or the Other. This eventual mode of perception that functions on the logic of “I/not-I” is what constitutes the Lacanian *reality*, which is clearly distinguished from the *real*.

In between the two stages, and two performers (which is what is so exciting about O'Dell's reading), is Lacan's mirror stage. According to him this happens between 6 and 18 months of age. In this stage the child identifies itself with its own image, or, what Lacan terms, the ideal ego. It's important to remember that the mirror is not a literal mirror here, but a metaphor for all of the paradoxes inherent in the problem of self-referentiality. This stage is the process of the infant beginning to identify with the signifier “I”, what Lacan terms *alienation*. This creation of the ideal ego also establishes the Lacanian *imaginary order*, a network of fantasies of the self and the object of desire, and the root of narcissism.

O'Dell's use of Lacan is a re-enactment of *Talking About Similarity*. It had a radical impact on my reading of the piece, but also inspired me to read the metaphors slightly differently than O'Dell. The impossibility of the formation of individuality is not found in the suturing shut of the mouth but rather in the open mouth not yet overflowing with meaning. The sounds of saliva are not Ulay's, but the sounds of the pure immanence of the material world, the (m)Other, exchanged across his lips.

Therefore, the simultaneous closing of the mouth and muting of the sounds represents the end of the oral stage. The suturing of the mouth thus represents the impossibility of return. The overall narrative direction of Ulay's portion of the performance is pointing forwards towards the mirror stage.

Abramovic's role is much more complicated. She is clearly functioning within the symbolic order, for she must evaluate her own performance based on a differential criteria. But she is also functioning within the imaginary in that all of these evaluations are based on fantasies of what Ulay might say. And, as O'Dell points out, this functions metaphorically on a much less abstract level in reality:

Abramovic carries out a subtle form of everyday masochism often seen among women—self-effacement. She denies difference from her male partner, resisting constructive alienation between herself and Ulay. But *Talking About Similarity* ends when Abramovic feels her ventriloquism slip and she begins to formulate her own answers to questions posed by the audience.

-O'Dell, 34.

O'Dell brings up three things here that stand to be developed further: the audience, designed failure, and ventriloquism.

In this act of *Talking About Similarity* there is an important character that O'Dell does not fully recognize: the audience. But it's not just any audience, it's an audience that has been given the privilege to speak. A certain presumption of etiquette has been lifted, and the unprepared audience politely inches forward. Members of the audience respectfully take turns asking questions, but while the audience is made up of multiple people, each of the questions orbits around one topic—Ulay's mouth—and, in the end, it comes across as one voice. The audience also feels a sense of suspension. Question-and-answer rituals are coded as the afterwards, they signify a dramatic break. Ulay closes his mouth, and Abramovic “opens up” for questions. While the performance certainly is continuing, it is also starting to bleed at its edges. As soon as the audience gets a sense of control over the performance, Abramovic pulls that sense of control out from under them, cleaning up the edges. A multifaceted sense of suspension (of a post-piece within a piece, of her eventual slip back into herself, of never knowing Ulay's pain) is like a deceptive cadence: a withdrawn sense of return.

Though the audience is a character in this act of the piece, Abramovic is never really in dialogue with them. Her real dialogue is that of the bared subject in front of its mirror. Her image of Ulay takes the place of her ideal ego. Or, to be more precise, since they were a couple at the time, her ego ideal takes the place of her ideal ego. O'Dell hints at this metaphor when she writes that “the twinlike nature of the artists' relationship, manifested in Abramovic's echoing or mirroring of Ulay's identity, satisfied a need for a symbiotic device.” (O'Dell, 37) So this section, this act, this half of the piece, is her mirroring Ulay, and it's over when the mirror is broken. While the first section of the piece is a narrative that points forward in time toward the traumatic scene of the subjectivizing mirror, the second section is a narrative that points backwards in time towards that same scene. And so the Lacanian mirror shows up on a formal level.

The mirror is not the image of the ideal ego, it is the stuff in between, the void, and this is where ventriloquism comes in. Abramovic must simultaneously play the puppet and ventriloquist in her act so that she hear her own performance, recognize the moment of failure when her “ventriloquism slips” and and the section. But, as Dolar puts it:

Every emission of the voice is by its very essence *ventriloquism*. Ventriloquism pertains to a voice as such, to its inherently acousmatic character: the voice comes from inside the body, the belly, the stomach—from something incompatible with and irreducible to the activity of the mouth. The fact that we see the aperture does not demystify the voice; on the contrary, it enhances the enigma.

-Dolar, 70.

Voice is simply unlocatable. What does it mean to free something that is already unterritorialized?

The voice does not only function to send our inner subjectivity into the outside world, but also to relate our inner experience of our bodies to the outside world and vice versa. This became clear to me during the performance as the experience of my body became a complex one where sensations of certain regions were amplified while other regions seemed to disappear altogether. As the voice was “freed” from my physical control, it reoriented the understanding of my own body into a state of intense disorientation.

As my vocal tract became progressively inflamed, I began to feel the inside of my body. What began as a tickle in my glottis ballooned and eventually spread all of the way down my trachea, leaving me with the sensation of a rough, pulsating glow that connected my lips to my lungs. The loud tactility of this sensation led me to envision my vocal tract topographically. As the inflammation progressed I could feel the topography of the surface tissue literally change. Through this change, my vocal tract was given voice.

This topography became a site for the voice to perform an unpredictable dance of vibrational energy. It wasn't just that I had become acutely aware of this region as a whole, but also that its surface became acutely sensitive to change. The voice seemed to gain a mind of its own as I lost control of my vocal apparatus through fatigue. At times it (the voice) would cling to my head, suddenly jump down into my chest. It would crawl slowly up or down the tract, the direction of which would not necessarily correlate to direction in pitch space. At first, I tried to stabilize the location from where it was resonating, but eventually accepted this new presence inside of my body.

This dance wasn't just playing out on my vocal tract, but was playing out on my vocal tract as it lay horizontally. When I watched Abramovic in the video I thought the the opened chest and making parallel of chin and chest amounted to no more than a visual representation of the expunging voice, I had no idea how significant the positioning of the body was to the experience of the performer until I was inside of the piece. My horizontal body combined with my up-side-down head to lead to states of intense disorientation during which I lost my sense of up and down.

We spend nearly 100% of our time talking, singing, crying, whistling, whispering, screaming with our bodies up-right. Because of this we develop a fundamental psychical correlation between sonic frequency space, the space of our bodies, and the physical space of our environment where up/down=up/down. If we sing a glissando from the bottom of our individual range to the top, we experience the resonance of our voice move from the bottom (chest) to the top (head) of our vocal tract. This combines with our understanding of our immediate environment as we hear our voice bounce

back to us and map ourselves onto our surroundings. In other words, our conceptions of the physical laws of the universe are reinforced and, in some ways, determined by our embodied experience and vice versa; and the voice, as the atmosphere to the planet of our body, is implicated in this determination.

Obviously, laying horizontally with your head upside-down and screaming for an hour and a half is not an everyday understanding of speaking. Because of the positioning of my body, a sung glissando from the bottom to the top of my range, from my chest to my head, what used to be upwards in the physical space of my surroundings, was now horizontal and then downward in the physical space of my surroundings. This produced a deep psychosomatic dissonance that manifested in an vestibular disorientation. For most of the second third of the performance I remember being totally confused as to whether I was looking at the wall or the ceiling. It's not that the wall became the ceiling and vice versa, but that I couldn't distinguish between them. As this state continued I went deeper along this trajectory to a point where I lost all sense of up and down.

The de-mirroring of the correlation between up/down in the voice and up/down in the world is not the only factor that brought about this severe change in physical reality. The entire time that we are speaking upright, we are also circulating upright. As blood pooled into my head over the course of the performance, my bulbously enflamed face became sharply sensitive to the pressure of each scream to the extent that it seemed to become a second diaphragm. I am convinced that this is the result of the combination of the pressure of blood in my head with my psychosomatic understanding of the function of the diaphragm to produce the voice via pressure from below. So, this sense of psychosomatic dissonance comes not just from a decorrelation between embodied space and environmental space but also from the sensation of organs trading places. This switch would not happen had I been laying in the same position but not not screaming, because, for the switch to sustain itself, the organs need constant stimulation.

The process of the piece opened a perceptual horizontal axis around which my relation to my

vocal tract was unpredictably flipped and rotated. As I began to experience the unpredictability of this oscillation as the form of the piece, it played counterpoint against the a → b process of the piece. At no moment did I reach a point where up/down=down/up, rather, as I approached a certain limit, up/down was constantly confused, flickering, and fluctuating. However, this uncanny spritely dancing, a freeing of sorts, was only spoken by one region of my body. Each aspect of my vocal apparatus from my diaphragm to my head became physically loud, and their interrelationships became confused and redefined. Meanwhile, the rest of my body laid still. I sensed my vocal tract as mobile while the rest of my body was static.

If the narrative position in *Freeing the Voice* is not that of the male protagonist, then what is it? Abramovic offers a narrative—the statement that I took as *score*—that is in the first person: “Laying with my head facing backwards I scream until I lose my voice.” It is interesting that there is no mention of the audience here, no thing towards which she projects her voice. She writes “backwards”: a word that determines her positioning with respect to her own body, as opposed to “upside-down” which would determine the positioning based on the perspective of the gaze. The audience is, however, left implied in the narrative—after all, it is a performance piece.

I read this absence of a target of supplication in several ways. First it is a practical solution to the problem of whether the piece can retain its conceptual integrity after it crosses mediums and is performed as video playback. If she had written “backwards towards the audience” the concept would not allow for the absence of audience and/or the plurality of audiences that the video confronts. Second, the demonstrative language of this narrative puts the spectator/audience somewhere between watching a clinical operation and a freakish circus act: a surgeon says (through the mask covering his mouth covering his mouth) “next I will carefully remove the voice by way of incisive repetition”; and a freak master advertises (from underneath an overgrown handlebar mustache covering his mouth) “step right up and watch this freak scream until it loses its voice”. Both of these narrative possibilities put the body of the performer into the position of the abject. This is a fascinating turn because, in this line of

reasoning at least, the absence of the spectator/audience results in the transforming of the “I” of the narrative into an “it”. Third, the absence of the addressee in the narrative leaves open the possibility of surrogates for that spectator position. The literal reading of this piece requires no audience because of the self-contained structuring of its narrative. However, as soon as the piece is performed, the reading becomes figurative for audience *and* performer alike. There is a hole left where the “you” should be, and, as Lacan might say, we are always already covering up that gap. In other words, she isn't necessarily screaming towards the audience. Fourth, there is a sense of masochistic etiquette to the narrative. By leaving the spectator implicit in the narrative, Abramovic implicates their choice to watch. In other words: “[You watch me] laying with my head facing backwards [as] I scream until I lose my voice [or until you can't take it anymore].” It is this fourth reading, that of the narrative of the piece as a masochistic contract between performer and audience, that I am going to focus on next.

In her book *Contract With the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art, and the 1970s* Kathy O'Dell analyzes performances from this era as forms of the masochistic contract theorized by Gilles Deleuze's in *Coldness and Cruelty*, his introductory essay to Leopold von Sacher-Masoch's novel *Venus in Furs*. In making masochism distinct from sadism—ie) not a simple inversion of the other—Deleuze writes that:

[In the work of Masoch as compared with that of Sade] we are no longer in the presence of a torturer seizing upon a victim and enjoying her all because she is unconsenting and unpersuaded. We are dealing instead with a victim in search of a torturer and who needs to educate, persuade and conclude an alliance with the torturer in order to realize the strangest of schemes. This is why advertisements are part of the language of masochism while they have no place in sadism, and why the masochist draws up contracts while the sadist abominates and destroys them. The sadist is in need of institutions, the masochist contractual relations.
-Deleuze, 20.

In the novel, Severin struggles to convince Wanda to become his master, at which point the relationship is consummated by a contract drawn-up in collaboration to which the two are legally bound by their signatures. In this sense the master and slave are equals in that they are both mandated and measured by the same document of the law. In an attempt to put this all into Lacanian terminology: the

determining power of language—the big Other that speaks desire through us—remains intact while the two subjects use the (typically disturbing) arbitrariness of signification to reposition their roles within language. O'Dell, who also makes Lacanian psychoanalysis central to her argument, would agree that this abstraction of masochism to a re-enactment of desire through the manipulation of signifiers within language is useful in that it is analogous to certain art practices in the era she discusses.

Pane, Acconci, Burden, and Ulay/Abramovic all investigated the self as a subject through the mechanism of fantasy but never really moved beyond seeing the body as a material object with symbolic potential. Thus, they rooted themselves in the fundamental art historical notion that the overriding value of art lies in its play within the arena of the symbolic, its representational status, and its reliance on metaphor.

-O'Dell, 9.

This is part of the obsession for me. Re-enacting this work seems the ultimate challenge to my own subjectivity. But re-enactment also has to do with a working through of my own past. Laura Mulvey, in the same essay mentioned above, puts the problem of Woman in cinema as follows:

But in psychoanalytic terms, the female figure poses a deeper problem. She also connotes something that the look continually circles around but disavows: her lack of a penis, implying a threat of castration and hence unpleasure. Ultimately, the meaning of woman is sexual difference, the absence of the penis as visually ascertainable, the material evidence on which is based the castration complex essential for the organization of entrance to the symbolic order and the law of the father. Thus the woman as icon, displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look, always threatens to evoke the anxiety it originally signified. The male unconscious has two avenues of escape from castration anxiety: preoccupation with the re-enactment of the original trauma (investigating the woman, demystifying her mystery), counterbalanced by the devaluation, punishment or saving of the guilty object (an avenue typified by the concerns of *film noir*); or else complete disavowal of castration by substitution of a fetish object or turning the represented figure itself into a fetish so that it becomes reassuring rather than dangerous (hence over-valuation, the cult of the female star).

-Mulvey, 13-14.

My use of the term “re-enactment” overlaps with how it is used here in several important ways. In Lacanian terminology “masculine” and “feminine” are symbolic constructions and, therefore, are not biologically determined. These constructions form at the scene of castration, which is also a symbolic process. This is one of the most important differences between Lacan and Freud: for Freud the castration complex begins at the moment the subject realizes that he/she does/doesn't have a penis; for

Lacan, on the other hand, castration isn't the cutting off of a penis but the severing of the child from the stage of mutual desire/pleasure with the mother. The subject comes into being at this traumatic moment of fundamental loss. The “masculine” and “feminine” are then to modes of symbolic construction that cover over this loss.

I must cut off this Lacanian aside here because it has already edged out beyond the limits of what is immediately useful to me. What is important to my argument is that in the above framework it is completely possible for us to masculinize and/or feminize all kinds of things—not just subjects—in order to escape castration anxiety.

In reading any history of performance art one cannot avoid the feeling of “what would it have been like to be there?” I first confronted this feeling as an undergraduate when my composition teacher described to me a Chris Burden performance he had attended: the audience waited while a rope hung from the ceiling in front of them; Burden entered, naked, accompanied by another man who sat at an up-right piano and began to play old rag tunes; Burden used a piece of chalk to draw a circle on the floor so that the rope hung over its center; Burden climbed the rope and hung by his feet, up-side down, with his head about five feet from the floor, holding a hand-held video camera; he hung there for a while; suddenly the piano stopped playing and Burden let himself drop straight onto his head, splitting it open; people screamed, someone vomited. I wished I could have been there.

To this day I have not been able to find any documentation of this performance. I don't know what the piece was called, and I'm not sure where or when it was performed. Searching through the archives of performance I find plenty of shooting, crucifying, water-breathing, fire-lighting, body-through-glass dragging, but no rag-time-head-dropping/birthing. This one escaped the canon! Does that make it the only successful Burden piece (that I know of). Then again, I'm not so sure how much I trust my old teacher's memory (he is a great story teller). And all of this doubt and mystery seems to drive my desire even more. I wish I could have been there.

Jane Blocker, in her book *What the Body Cost: Desire, History, and Performance*, follows a

very similar argument about the relationship between performance, history, and desire. Rather than using a Lacanian model of desire, she uses Roland Barthes' model from his *A Lover's Discourse*. The two models are actually quite similar in that desire must sustain itself by never being fulfilled. What is different in Barthes' model, and what Blocker finds so useful, is a discourse of desire based on the "scenography of waiting". Blocker applies this to how we understand the body:

To say that narratives of the body are a lover's discourse means a discourse in which the body is the long-awaited lover whose absence is mourned and yet continually secured. Moreover, that discourse is part of the politics of hope, which suggests that the body is much more useful as a thing that is hoped-for than as a thing already obtained.

-Blocker, 62.

Blocker is setting herself up here to make a convincing and virtuosic argumentative move: we desire the body in the same way that we desire the utopia promised by the avant-garde. The artistic avant-garde of the west in the first half of the twentieth century sustained itself with the promise of a not-yet-achieved total change to the way we see the world. But the second half of the twentieth century brought the extreme commodification of late capitalism, and with that doubt—things were not, in fact, getting better. And this is the awkward historical context onto which Blocker places performance art of the 60s and 70s: "The body just out of reach and painting not quite dead."

I grew up surrounded by nostalgia for "the 60s". I later found out that it wasn't the entire decade that people were fetishizing but the second half of it and a couple years at the beginning of the 70s, which turned out to be the basic era of performance art I am interested in re-enacting. I've always had a complicated relationship with other people's memories of this era. I still have a simultaneous sense of melancholic longing and sarcastic disregard for the hippie utopianism of Timothy Leary. When I hear baby boomers say about the Iraq war (and they say this less now that a democrat is in office) "back when I was your age I would have been in the streets," I simultaneously think "I wish we were in the streets"/"Why don't you go get in the streets, yuppie?" When I read Jacques Attali, I want to believe that music is the harbinger of radical social change, and that the musical avant-garde (non-capitalists) possesses the vision of the future, but I also find myself chuckling my way through parts of it.

Blocker would tell me that I am a classic example of Catherine Belsey's paradox of postmodern

love:

Subsumed in commodity culture, where consumption is trained to follow desire and desire is never requited, we inevitably seek something beyond the commodity itself, something all the more desirable because of its definitive impossibility. [...] Love, in this sense, is the desire for something beyond commodity, which leads to the paradoxical habit, described by Belsey as postmodern, a simultaneous seeking and doubt.

-Blocker, 1.

I would respond to Blocker “yes, that pretty much fits the bill.” But I want to push this a little further.

It's totally possible in Lacanian logic, where desire is the desire of the Other, that I could be substituting the modern/postmodern rupture for the original trauma of castration. This even makes sense on very transparent personal level. My mom was very politically involved while I was growing up. She was particularly invested in W.A.N.D. (women's action for nuclear disarmament), a commitment that would require her to take frequent extended trips, leaving us kids at home with dad. How much more above the surface can the connection between the atomic bomb and separation from the (m)Other get?

I realize that I am flirting with with the edge of a slippery Lacanian slope here, where the opaque novelty of his terminology can lubricate your way to a position where “Lacan explains everything.” The edge is the point you cross when you stop using Lacan (or any text for that matter) to question something, and start using it to explain. I am not trying to explain my interest in performance art from the sixties and seventies here, but I am asking these questions: Am I fetishizing the piece? Am I fetishizing Abramovic? Am I fetishizing the voice?

To answer these questions, Blocker might even go so far as to call attention to the ascetic quality of the pieces that I choose to re-enact to connect my paradox to the lover's discourse:

Barthes explains that “Askesis (the impulse toward askesis,” which is another feature of the lover's discourse, “is addressed to the other: turn back, look at me, see what you have made of me. It is a blackmail: I raise before the other the figure of my own disappearance, as it will surely occur, if the other does not yield.” [...] [you, Clint,] seem to be engaged in a performance of [your] own disappearance. [You] stage asceticism to show that [you] are worthy of the elusive “life” for which [you] long.

-Blocker, 100.

Indeed, why do I seem to only be interested in re-enacting performance pieces that involve extreme pain and privation? Why didn't I choose to re-enact Hannah Wilke's *Waiting* for example? That piece would have filled the role of being taken from the appropriate era, and I would be placing my white male body inside of a piece conceptualized by a woman. And even if you did decide to do the Wilke, isn't that still an ascetic position? Performance is always a performance of your own disappearance, but does the act of re-enactment multiply this disappearance onto another plane?

These are precisely the questions I wanted to be asking myself and my audience in the re-enactment of *Freeing the Voice*. These questions are about the creative voice. Where does it lie? Can we even pin it down? And in order to keep these questions alive I felt the need to complicate things with other voices. In my re-enactment I wanted to stage my own disappearance and reappearance simultaneously. I wanted to be saying “look what you have done to me”/“look what I have done to you.” To achieve this, I had to be both literal and figurative. I am seeking the literal physical experience that I can only imagine by looking at the score, while, through my performance in front of an audience, I insert my body into the place of the piece in the symbolic network. It is this excess figurative layering that makes what I do re-enactment, as opposed to re-performance: I aim to use something found to trigger new symbolic sequences.

For Blocker, the ascetic in performance art doesn't end there. In her discussion of the 1969 avant-garde exhibition *When Attitudes Become Form* she demonstrates that “the refuse in the exhibition [fat, sawdust, dirt, water] comes to stand for the body's attractive impurity, which ironically helps art purify itself of the object's taint.” (91) Traditionally, in the east and the west, ascetic practice is directed inward. Through self-denial practitioners aim to isolate the self so that they may improve and/or transcend it. When the ascetic is performed, things get complicated. What is voiced by this inward journey?

Cults tend to crop up around ascetic practice. Sociology contrasts the cult with the sect, the latter being a division within a larger religious framework, while the former exists on the margins of

religion. In his 1977 article (the same year that Ulay/Abramovic premiered *Imponderabilia*) *Clarifying the cult* Colin Campbell attempts to specify the sociological definition of the cult by invoking Ernst Troeltsch's church-sect typology and focusing specifically on the formulation of “the religion of mysticism”:

When mysticism realizes that it is an independent religious principle [contrasted with established religion]; it sees itself as the real universal heart of all religion, of which the various myth-forms are merely the outer garment. It regards itself as the means of restoring an immediate union with God; it feels independent of all institutional religion, and possesses an entire inward certainty, which makes it indifferent towards every kind of religious fellowship...Henceforth union with God, deification, self-annihilation, become the real and only subject of religion.

-Troeltsch, quoted in Campbell, 381.

There are clear similarities here to the modernist avant-garde utopianism that Blocker characterizes. For many of the artists, curators, and theorists of the 1960s, the performance/painting binary came to represent larger struggles between reality and commodity, life and illusion. She cites Allan Kaprow's famous 1958 article 'The Legacy of Jackson Pollock':

That article has been read and reread by an unbroken stream of artists and critics who recognize in it a “scene of language” in which is staged the very birth of performance in the United States, a birth that is occasioned by a mythical death. Kaprow, eulogizing Pollock who had died two years earlier, claimed that Pollock “created some magnificent paintings. But he also *destroyed painting.*” (italics original)

-Blocker, 73.

Here, Blocker is already beginning her deconstruction of Kaprow's text down to the life/illusion binary.

She proceeds by quoting Kaprow at length:

[Pollock] left us at the point where we must become preoccupied with and even dazzled by the space and objects of our everyday life, either our bodies, clothes, rooms, or, if need be, the vastness of Forty-Second street. Not satisfied with the *suggestion* through paint of our other senses, we shall utilize the specific substances of sight, sound, movements, people, odors, touch.

-Kaprow, quoted in Blocker, 73.

Before I continue with Blocker's deconstruction of Kaprow I would like to call your attention to the mystical imagery that Kaprow applies to Pollock. What is paint here if not Troeltsch's “outer garment”? What is a life of creating “some magnificent paintings. But also destroying painting” if not ascetic self-

annihilation? Kaprow's Pollock is a visionary who martyred himself so that “we” may see the way beyond paint to “specific substances”. Blocker's reading of this passage is complimentary to mine:

As we have seen before, the artist is urged to work in the realm of “everyday life” rather than in the realm of painterly illusions. We might see in Kaprow's statement a parallel between painting's “suggestions” and the inauthenticity of theater. Painting and theater are arts of calculated falsity, whereas performance, in dogged pursuit of what is before theater, is an art of “specific substances.”

-Blocker, 73

By earlier calling our attention to Kaprow's “scene of writing” and his “staging of a mythical death” Blocker reveals a fundamental contradiction in Kaprow's text: he must use theater to get rid of theater. She places Kaprow in the lover's discourse, endlessly longing/waiting for the desired other—“life”.

There is a loud resonance here with Abramovic's opposition of theater and reality. I want to return to that quote here to find a better understanding of the mystic in her thinking.

To be a performance artist, you have to hate theatre. Theatre is fake: there is a black box, you pay for a ticket, and you sit in the dark and see somebody playing somebody else's life. The knife is not real, the blood is not real, and the emotions are not real. Performance is just the opposite: the knife is real, the blood is real, and the emotions are real. It's a very different concept. It's about true reality.

-The Guardian, July 20 2010.

In this quote we can clearly find all of our binaries that are fundamental to the ideology of avant-garde utopianism: reality/commodity and life/illusion. What isn't immediately clear, and what I find most interesting about this quote, is how she switches subject positions from audience member to performer half way through her statement. This switch coincides with her switch from theatre=commodity=fake to performance=body=real. Coincidence or not, Abramovic aligns the experience of the performer with the real and the experience of the audience with the fake. Then again, she doesn't say that performance “*is* true reality”, she says that “it's about true reality.” In other words, it's not about finding but seeking. If we take Abramovic's binary from the logic modernist avant-garde ideology and insert it into Catherine Belsey's framework of “postmodern love” where performance aligns with seeking and audience aligns with doubt.

By maintaining the binary between seeking and doubt, and not letting them occur

simultaneously, Abramovic places the performer into the same mystical ideal that Kaprow places Pollock, and the audience into the position of doubting painters stuck in a time calling to be overcome. The performer is presented as the artistic mystic seeking the heart of all art, fueled by an undeniable faith—after all, how else could someone put themselves through such pain. Doubt, by implication, is something to be overcome:

You must confront your own fear. If you're afraid of pain, you have to do to [sic] find out what pain is. When you open the door to pain, you'll find that you actually might be able to control it. You'll be free from the fear of pain—which is a great feeling.
-Abramovic, in *Marina Abramovic: The Artist is Present*, 211.

Who is this “you” to whom this ascetic knowledge is directed from the other side of pain? This is not the sterile narrative of the surgeon, nor is it the exploitative narrative of the freak master. This is the narrative of the mystic religious leader. This all adds up to a fetishizing of the performance artist that is simultaneously an overvaluation of the performative act as an avenue to devalue pain, and a reinforcement of the performers star status in the art-world economy.

It has not been my aim to discredit Abramovic. Good art is filled with interesting contradictions, and here, as with my re-enactment, I am playing some of them out. I still find her work just as engaging and vital as I did before I began this analysis, if not more so, because it is a set of ideas in the world. This is what is at stake in the demystification of re-enactment. The aim is not to pull these pieces out of the archive, dust them off, zap life into them and then put them back onto the shelf. Re-enactment is an interrogation of these pieces that forces them to speak their problems, not claim their mystical status. This is a delicate process. Any good interrogator is also a student of psychoanalysis, and knows that to get a confession one must leave ample space for the analysand to speak:

[...] if the analyst's silence serves as the backdrop for the flourishing of *lalangue* and its infinite interpretation, it is also something which keeps bringing it to a halt and sets a limit to it. The analyst is the agent of the Other, but not merely as “the subject supposed to know”—at the same time (and we cannot separate the two) it is the Other in which the voice resonates and “takes place,” the support of the alterity of the voice takes the value of event, of a break.
-Dolar, 161.

I did not reach a state of out-of-body experience, nor was my post-performance state that of

cathartic exhaustion. This comes from the imbalance of bodily investment called for in the piece. One of the results of the conceptual minimalism of the piece that I did not expect was a dissonant dividing of my body. Trance practice is necessarily synesthetic and synsomatic overdrive—reaching a state of trance requires total sensory and bodily charging through dancing, yelling, smelling, the heat and rhythm of others. *Freeing the Voice*, on the other hand, calls for an asymmetrical distribution of energy in the body (similar to playing any musical instrument) where some regions are filled with energy past their threshold while others are starved. This focusing of energy on one part part of the body is intensified through the existential isolation of the performer. In other words, the piece would be totally different were it an ensemble piece rather than a solo. I lost sense of my limbs: a neurological connection being freed that could have brought about an out-of-body experience. But I was sucked into and/or drowned by the intensity of what was happening on/to my vocal tract. It was as if the possibility of escape was constantly being presented and denied. This was all a painful reminder that it wasn't *my* spirit that I was freeing, but *the* voice.

It happened suddenly. Scream after breath after scream after breath after scream after... And then, for the first time, I could feel it falter. Falter in a way I had never felt before. It wasn't the strain of a voice crack, or wind of a dry throat. It felt as if my vocal chords were relaxing, which was so bizarre because I was pushing just as hard as I had been for the last 70 minutes. I knew that I was in the last section. As I continued, the length of my exhales remained the same, but the amount of time that I could sustain a sound during that exhale became progressively shorter. Until there was a slight, fleshy rattle. End then nothing.

I stopped. I sat up and immediately realized that if I stood I would fall. I sat there for nearly five minutes. No one made a sound. When I finally felt that I could stand up I tried. People started clapping. It was the weirdest applause I've ever heard. I sat down again. Rested. And then invited several people from the audience to speak with me on stage.

I really wasn't sure what to think at first...um... One of the things that I was thinking. I was

thinking about torture. About people being tortured. Screaming. And for a while I was thinking “is that the feeling that I want to connect with? Is that really what he is experiencing.” I was just curious. “Is that really how much pain he is in?” And I kept thinking “he's in control.” And in a weird way, and I don't mean this as an insult, it ended up being less painful than I wanted.... There were elements of it that were even funny, because when your voice cracks, when anyone's voice cracks its kind of funny, but at the same time its kind of funny... I was thinking about torture, I was thinking about people who would allow someone to just. And I was thinking that maybe you were being electrocuted... I could imagine that you weren't in control even though I knew that you were[...] And I began to think about what type of people would let this go on. And then after about thirty minutes it sounded like you were just getting warmed up[...] After about an hour your pitch went up and up and up, and there's something to that. In that case it felt like you were reaching some sort of, not a musical climax, but reaching a point where you wouldn't be able to push any further. And from there it was this precipitous decline. And that was the most was painful. And your face was just agonizing [...] It was easy to just listen to the sounds in a sort of analytical way and hearing whatever formants or whatever and just enjoying that as like a pd patch or something. And certainly there were many changes that were interesting: it would go to a different register for a while. And then I just felt like “is that what I want to be doing while I'm here? Just listening to the frequencies in this? Is that what this is about?” I mean I have no idea what this is about. I almost didn't come. I'm glad I did. But you know I was thinking am I gonna have nightmares or should I feel sorry for him? [...] There was an element of sadness that I could have connected to but I chose not to. [...] it's easy for me, and I think for a lot of people, to disconnect. And start to think about well what's actually happening, but at the same time there's still this painful element that a person can choose to focus on more and more. And it's hard to make a choice that you're comfortable with or that you're uncomfortable with.

-Mark

I'd like to ask you some questions. First of all what did it feel like when you finished? [...] Was it euphoric at all, a sense of catharsis, of spiritual growth? [...] Would you ever consider doing this again in order to change the lighting or the staging in order to change the experience for yourself? [...] I felt that the effect of having your head upside down that you can't from the audiences perspective your face is so distorted from being upside down that you have no facial recognition, and I would sort of turn my head a realize how much pain you were in and then turn my head back around and sort say “ok.”

-David

There was a point when your body started shaking, at first it seemed like you were in control but at that point I had no way of knowing whether you were in control or not [...] I started to listen to the partials and harmonics and things. And then I started to feel guilty [laughter] like somehow enjoying it. [...] There was one moment when I spaced out. It happened often. And I relate this. I don't want to use the word guilty but I didn't like it that I could space out so easily. Maybe because I was watching someone who wanted to do it and was in control, but still these things came to mind [...] in the beginning it sounded like you were following a score. At the end the sounds became more and more [...] there were some endings of your screams at the end that, if I were more sensitive, that would have given me feelings of nausea.

-Bruno

a lot of my thoughts were kind of about the incredible disparity between the ease of being disconnected from a human being suffering and the incredible difficulty with which you faced in disconnecting your voice. Another thought was: from where are you freeing your voice [physiologically]? [...] there was something very beautiful about the pain and how it was increasing, and that made me let me come back into it. [...] it was very easy to tune out or just focus on the sound [...] or how it was easy to hear sections [...] or it was kind of a relief when the changes started to become predictable. [...] how much you say that the pain shaped the transition from performance to non-performance? Basically it's just resistance right? There's pain and you have to overcome it with each scream. How much did it actually shape? Was it always a head on thing? Or was it like ok I'm gonna wait this much longer this time or I'm gonna go falsetto here? [...] Really, so your thoughts didn't veer at all? [...]

-Bob

Can I see your throat? [...] it's like blood red [...] I think that I experienced what everybody else touched on. From the outset I was thinking well it's Clint he's performing clearly. And it was interesting to hear you just talking about focusing on a single pitch, because that what struck me at first. I was like why doesn't he just go like blaaah like I've heard you do before. And then I was thinking maybe its more meditative thing that your deliberately choosing this one threshold and focusing on it to psych yourself into it a little but. And then towards the at one point at about the hour mark it started to change I started to become more concerned that you would hyperventilate. Because you'll lose your voice, whatever, it'll come back. But I was more concerned because it seemed very clear that the blood rushing to your head and the pauses between the sounds that was more terrifying than the sounds themselves because it was taking longer and longer for you to catch your breath. [...] You became helpless to a point where I felt inclined to help you but I didn't want to in a way. I felt confined. Like with your arms and when physically the rest of your body became involved it became very clear that you were no longer in control, and the pace that the air was going to come and go was really the master. And that was kind of beautiful but really awful, awful in a wonderful way. Like you, Clint, had nothing to do with it like you were just grasping for air it seemed to me. [...]

-Leslie