

Thinking Praxis and Theory Inversely

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Fig. 1. Cut it Out! Performance and Installation at Kapelica Gallery, Ljubljana, 2007. Still © Kapelica

Body and space are the main themes of my investigations. With my artwork, I have introduced a series of discussions relating these two elements to each other and have continued the discussion by combining artistic practice with theory and historical research. I noticed that this method of interweaving theory and praxis has not only helped me, but also others with the reception of my art, with its extreme images and the several layers that form my work. I also realized that the interplay between transgression and transcription appears as a constant in my investigations.

Still during my architecture studies in Brazil, I started an intensive analysis of the human body and the space it inhabits. First I began to document the body modification¹ scene, made up of groups of people who participate in rites and practices of body transformation and experiment with the transgressive aspect of their bodies, not only physically, but also within society. Parallel to this documentation, I designed forms and structures in architecture inspired by the deformation of the human body (when submitted to body modifications) and spaces created for a specific user and with a particular function. However, it was only when I started to place my own body as a central theme for my investigations that my work started to

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shift: With a series of artworks, including self-portraits and studio performances, I – as an artist, a feminist, and a theorist – questioned the social and political implications of my body. In these studio performances I re-enacted different rites of body modification – situated them in historical and cultural contexts – and experimented with transcribing bodily and spatial perceptions with video, later presented in the form of installations. In 2007, I began a series of performances and experimented with various venues as the place for simultaneous production and presentation of the video works. Additionally, I started to include the audience as an integrative element of my work and explored the implications of performing for varying groups of people arranged in different forms.

Cut it Out!, *Lights Out!*, and *6teen Stitches*, or what I call *The Dress Trilogy*, inaugurated my experiences with performing for audiences. For *The Dress Trilogy* I researched the nineteenth-century feminist movements of dress reform to develop a critique on the ideal of female bodies and on the rites, such as debutant balls, for introducing young women in western society. In collaboration with fashion designers and a piercer, I created dresses inspired by the ‘Bloomer costume’.² These dresses were adjusted by needles that were also pierced through my skin, as a metaphor for the construction and deconstruction of femininity. All the performances were site-specific and were divided into three steps: The *construction of the dress* was performed in the studio and showed images of sewing machines, scissors, cutting or tearing of fabric, etc.; the *transformation of the dress* was performed partially for the audience and referred to the piercing and adjustment of the dress to my body; finally, the *destruction of the dress* was when I removed the needles and was performed fully for the audience. For each performance a new dress was uniquely produced and was then pierced to different areas of my body: In *Cut it Out!* the dress was a faithful reproduction of the bloomer costume and was adjusted to my waist; in *Lights Out!* I challenged Austrian designer Danijel Radic to re-contextualize the bloomer and his view of a ‘contemporary feminist dress’, which was then adjusted to my hips; in *6teen Stitches* I cut my mother’s 1960s debutant dress between the legs, separating the skirt part of the dress into two sections (as if trousers would be made), which were both then pierced to my legs as pants and then tied together.

Besides the dresses, what distinguished these three performances from each other was the fact that each one of the performances occurred in unique room situations with different architectonic solutions. In addition, the amount of people who attended the performances – and who eventually affected the final configuration of space – was, as the performance itself, unpredictable.

In March 2007, I initiated the trilogy with *Cut it Out!* at Kapelica Gallery, in Ljubljana, Slovenia. [Fig. 1. *Cut it Out!* Performance and Installation at Kapelica Gallery, Ljubljana, 2007. Still © Kapelica] Kapelica Gallery is internationally acclaimed as being a platform for art projects involving corporeality and technology and has collaborated with renowned artists like Orlan, Stelarc, Franko B., Ron Athey, and many others. Kapelica seemed to offer me the perfect opportunity for a debut. The gallery had only one room, which was not very wide and rather long in its shape and with a stage built at the back. To avoid the use of the stage, I decided to create a set of multiple areas separated by two projection screens: One was placed in the back directly above the stage and showed the *construction of the dress* video, made in the studio –and another built screen was positioned a couple of meters in front of the stage and level with the floor where the *transformation of the dress* was broadcast live, simultaneous to the performance. The space between the two screens was dedicated to the piercing process, to the camera, projectors, and light, leaving the area in front of the screen to the public and to the *destruction of the dress* –when I performed the removal of the needles as

a metaphor for liberation and freedom. However, the second screen did not entirely isolate the performance space and led to the question: Would anyone attempt to cross this flimsy border and look at what was happening behind it?

The outcome was that people placed themselves at a distance from the projections during the performance and, besides the photographer who was hired by the gallery, nobody else dared to approach the screen and the space behind it. Although the stage was not used, the space – very organized and structured by both screens and the audience – still acquired the characteristic of a classical performance plateau.

In September 2007, with *Lights Out!* [Fig. 2 *Lights Out!* Performance and Installation at Kunstraum NOE. Vienna, 2007. Still © Roberta Lima] I was given the opportunity to reformulate the questions left behind in Ljubljana and to experiment with a less physical and defined border between the audience and the performance and all its elements. *Lights Out!* was performed in Vienna, Austria at Kunstraum Noe and in a completely opposite room situation: The room was very wide and instead of building the screens the decision this time was to use all the surrounding walls as projection surfaces. The transition between performing partially and fully in front of the audience was solved by using illumination: The transformation of the dress was performed in the dark with the only source of light coming from a small head lamp worn by the piercer. The room was planned for an audience of approximately 50 to 60 people and should have allowed them to be able to move around in the dark and slowly discover the room, the projections, and eventually come closer to the corner I chose to perform. When nearly 250 people turned up at Kunstraum Noe this was no longer a possibility. In reality, the room was filled with a mass of people who could hardly move. However, from this new configuration distinct perceptions emerged: Some who had managed to rush into the room saw the performance from very close, some saw the performance from the projections and identified the spot from where the images were being broadcasted, some only saw the projections, others didn't see anything at all and did not even have the chance to figure out what was going on. As for my perceptions, this time I was the one to be surprised: The destruction of the dress was planned to happen in the middle of the room and under a spot of light. It was only when the light went on that I realized the size of the audience and the way they took over the space. I walked towards the light, forcing myself into the crowd. Despite the limitations, people moved to form a circle around me.



Fig. 2 *Lights Out!* Performance and Installation at Kunstraum NOE. Vienna, 2007. Still © Roberta Lima

Having experienced the importance of audiences for consolidating spaces and relationships what still remained were the questions regarding people's behavior: Would anyone in the audience ever interfere with the work in progress or would they continue posing merely as observers?

In March 2008, *6teen Stitches* was performed in Krems, Austria at the annual music and performance event, the *Donau Festival*. [Fig. 36teen Stitches. Performance and Installation at Donau Festival. Krems, 2008. Photo © Ami Han] This year's programme included performances by Ron Athey, Bruce LaBruce, Paul Poet & Ensemble Jean Louis Costes, and Ann Liv Young. The festival venue was divided into two rooms with a common area where the entrance, merchandizing, lounge, bars and restaurants were located joining these two spaces. Halle 1, with the capacity for approximately 1500 people, was arranged with a big stage where most of the headliners and musicians performed. Halle 2 was a closed room with a smaller stage and public area, partially with seats, for approximately 200 people.

I have always thought of my work as being shown in small venues, off-spaces, following the concept of the 1960s and 70s performances. The PhD questions, specially the one focusing on the size, types of audience and place for performative arts, led me to seeing the *Donau Festival* as an opportunity to perform in a completely new context. Since I was offered the chance to perform *6teen Stitches* anywhere at the festival's venue near Halle 2, I chose to experiment with two different audience and room situations on the same occasion.

The performance was announced and scheduled to take place in Halle 2. Shortly before the scheduled time, the audience was let into the closed room and they immediately oriented themselves to face the stage (where the pre-recorded video of the *construction of the dress* was being projected). What the audience did not know at first was that one of the walls of Halle 2 was in fact a projection screen. Additionally, I began the performance outside of this room, in the lounge area of the festival. Inside Halle 2 people noticed, through the shadows on the screen, that I was outside the room and that I was not going to perform on stage. They turned themselves towards the screen and slowly started to reorganize themselves in the space. In the meanwhile outside in the lounge area, I was facing a very distracted audience and the performance acquired almost a street-like characteristic. In this new context and at midnight when people were already drunk, the *transformation of the dress* began. I was sure this time someone would interact with the work. But once again the press was the only one who really came closer to me. As a matter of fact, unlike in Ljubljana, the press at the *Donau Festival* was extremely invasive – partially disturbing the work. I got various reactions from the audience located in the lounge: Some were focused, some just happened to be passing by, others were drinking and chatting, and a few laughed and screamed – but only from a distance. Due to the strong spotlight that was directed on me in order to create the silhouette on the projection screen, I could hardly see people, but made slight notice of them. After my legs were tied together, the piercer cut the screen surface and I finally left the lounge area and entered the closed room through the screen. The transition between two different spatial configurations was impressive. Inside Halle 2, I walked towards the audience and realized their arrangement in a semi-circle, configuring the space as a kind of arena. I also noticed that many people were sitting on the floor and some were very near to me. Then I started to slowly remove the needles, placing them one by one inside a wooden box. When the lights went out, I put the needles in the wooden box on the stage, took off the dress, hung it up, and left the room.

The Dress Trilogy is a good example of a method in which theory and praxis support each other. In addition, after the performances, the images continued to be projected, all objects remained in the space, arranged as an installation. Besides expanding the questions of my thesis, these installations – with a focus on the use of video loops – reinforce perceptions (both mine and the observer's) leading to a review of the work over and over again, and to a rediscovery of its elements and various meanings.

In my early studio performances I contrasted Foucault's ideas of discourse about bodies as a mechanism of control and "bio-politics of the population"³ with bodies in art—the body of the artist, which is opened, breaks taboos, and incites the revision of established rules in society. I also researched the relationship between the grotesque and the carnivalesque, and came to Bakhtin's definition of the "grotesque body"⁴ as transgressive, which ignores the impenetrable surfaces that close and limit the body displaying inner features, such as blood, organs, etc. Additionally, I experienced performance as a very instant form of starting discussions.

For my MFA work, entitled *Inversion*, I anticipated the discussions around scholarly work, as well as the implications of the emerging 'Practice-based PhD', which has been discussed in great depth over the past couple of years at several events, including the *The State of Play*. The initial idea of *Inversion* was to perform a body suspension,⁵ to situate it in a certain scenario, and analyze my perceptions concerning body and space. The work developed into a theoretical exploration when I chose to investigate its elements within the context of circus and sideshows and when I decided to diversify my method of research: firstly, with an overview of the history of circus and the sideshow; secondly, by interviewing and photographing international female sideshow performers; thirdly, by recognizing body and space not only physically, but also socially, culturally and in terms of gender categorization; and lastly, with my own experience of one-day lessons at an English circus school, documented with video and photographs.

I performed the suspension at Semperdepot, one of the buildings of the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, within the context of a video production. Three video cameras were placed strategically in the room and towards my body's position. Many of the expectations and questions I had prior to the performance changed during the process of *Inversion*'s production and contributed to the revision of and reconnecting to theories that had emerged during the research phase. As a result, these various phases converged allowing me to present the work as a homogenous interplay between form and content, rather than as simple artistic re-enactment.

Up until *Inversion* my discussions were situated on a micro-level, the focus was on my body, on my perceptions, which were later transcribed into video language and presented to the viewer. The space was conceived beforehand, planned and limited to that of the white cube. Although in this project I proposed to open up the field of cultural performance by situating my work in the context of alternative practice and spaces – such as circus, sideshows, burlesque, etc. – *Inversion* was in the end presented as a video installation and a book. This project marked the transition between discussions based on a micro-level and the proposal for a new debate that expanded into a larger sphere and resulted in some of the main questions I am currently exploring.

After earning my MFA in 2007, I began research for my PhD in Philosophy at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna. My project is entitled *Rethinking Space through Action*. I search for the relations between performative arts and spaces where it occurs. Although my PhD studies are not based on artistic practices and should instead be entirely theoretical, I proposed to continue using the method I used for *Inversion*: to think theory within the context of my artistic practices and vice-versa.

I began my research by initially posing these following questions:

- Where do performative arts take place? What are those places like?
- What is the difference between studio and live performance?
- What are the implications of live performance in spatial and bodily perceptions?
- What is the role of the audience?

I have mentioned before the relevance of art as means for posing questions, provoking debates. Inversely, with the PhD, a set of artworks resulted from the initial questions – which then continue to generate even more questions: If my art provoked questions before, now my questions generate art and this in turn continues to provoke further questions. Although in my thesis I refer to my artwork, the final product of my PhD in Philosophy must be presented as text only, unlike the Practice-based PhD, which is a combination of text and an art show. I developed the concepts for *The Dress Trilogy* firmly based on the questions previously listed. The main idea was for the performances to happen parallel to the research – not after it. In fact, with these performances I propose a ‘crossing research’, where I intend to expand the borders of traditional theoretical research to include a physical inquiry into the role of the artist’s body (my body), other bodies (the audience) and the space as subject and object. With *The Dress Trilogy*, I opened up the studio’s doors in order to explore the diverse connections between art production – its performative and transmedial aspects – and the spaces where art is made and received.

In the book *Raumsoziologie*⁶ Martina Löw (German author and professor of Sociology at the Technical University of Darmstadt) traces the genealogy of spatial sociology, referring to significant positions, such as those of Henri Lefebvre, David Harvey, and Edward Soja, to think spaces as “relational”. According to Löw, “[t]he constitution of spaces takes place through (structured) ordering of social goods and people in places. Spaces are created in performative action by synthesizing and relationally ordering objects and people.”⁷ Löw’s statement reminded me of my practical experience as a performer: In the studio there were people (the performer, the piercer, the camera crew, etc.) and objects (the needles, the ribbons, the trapeze, the suspension structures, the cameras, etc.), and the space was configured through the positioning of objects in the room and towards the bodies. The perceptions were transcribed into video and later presented to the observer and the relationships occurred on a micro-level. When the doors of the studio were opened and with the inclusion of the audience, the spaces were expanded, relationships were increased since they needed to happen immediately. Supported by Löw’s theories on relationality and the associations I made with my experience as a performer, the main thesis of *Rethinking Space through Action* emerged: “The constitution of space can be seen analogically to that of performative arts and its elements, and performative arts create relationships between people and form the spaces where it takes place.”

The role of the audience, tested in the cycle of performances I have already described, was proven to be an essential element for creating social relationships. Live performance required communication with the viewer and video was the language chosen: The performances were captured on video and simultaneously projected. The video production – which included the cameras and all people involved in the process of making and showing the images – was performative per se and integrated the work as a whole.



Fig. 3 6teen Stitches. Performance and Installation at Donau Festival. Krems, 2008. Photo © Ami Han

After this period of research and after the extensive production of artworks, I have recently entered the phase of writing my thesis. I have begun with a chapter entitled “The introduction of video in the performative arts and spaces”, in which I refer to events, artists, and periods in art history in order to map the origins of the use of video as media, its connections to the performative, its influences in spatial and bodily perception, as well as the implications of its emergence within the arts environment and society in general. The next chapters will deal with the different media used for documentation and presentation of performances as well as with the connections between analog and digital media. This is also the subject of my next performance, a collaborative work with Austrian artist Dorit Margreiter that will be presented at the Cairo Biennale, December 2008 to February 2009. From April to June 2009, while residing in Beijing, China, I plan to carry on with the ‘crossing research’ method by analyzing urban spaces and the effects of art and socio-political events in China, as well as their influences in people’s environment. I plan to defend my thesis at the end of 2009. Subsequently, I prefer to think of my PhD not as conclusive or proof for a methodology, but rather as a consolidation of all the things I have developed over the years. Whether in art or architecture, in the studio or at a music festival, in disorder or structure, I will continue to think of art and theory as relational, interdisciplinary, as a combination of various elements.

¹ Body modification is the voluntary modification of the human body. For example: tattooing, piercing, cutting, branding, amputation, etc. The body modification scene, supposedly understood as sub-cultural, has its structure mainly in the form of Internet sites and forums, with bmezine.com being the largest online community. The origins of body modification are in the so-called “Modern Primitives”, a term created by American piercer, Fakir Musafar, which originated in the 1960s and 70s from the incorporation of Native American rites in his performances.

² Elisabeth Smith Miller was the American originator of the ‘bloomer’ or ‘Turkish costume’, a famous combination of a short dress and pants, but the costume was named after Amelia Bloomer, who was responsible for campaigns at *The Lily* – a magazine that emerged at the meeting in Seneca Falls and by 1849 it was the first American publication owned and run by a woman.

³ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume I: An Introduction*, translated by Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1990).

⁴ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, translated by Helene Iswolsky (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1996).

⁵ Suspension is a ritual, or rite where a person hangs from flesh hooks put through (normally) temporary piercings.

⁶ Martina Löw, *Raumsoziologie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001).

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 204.