

## Body Art: Insanity as Communication

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My first exposure to the genre of visual art known as body art came in 1975, when I viewed an exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago entitled, "Bodyworks." The catalog explained that these artists "use their own bodies as the material of their activity" (Prokopoff) and that artists' use of "their own bodies as their primary medium of expression" was a "significant artistic development of the 1970s" (Licht). Despite this introduction, I was not prepared for what I saw in the show. The works ranged from a photograph in which Bruce Nauman was shown squirting water out of his mouth into the air to a film depicting Rudolph Schwarzkogler as he appeared to cut off his penis inch by inch.

The works intrigued and repulsed, baffled and enlightened, and ultimately appealed to me, but I was unable to say why; I could not explain my response to these works easily. More so than many works of visual art, these were characterized for me by ambiguous and idiosyncratic references and the possibility of multiple meanings. After seeing more of these works and reading about them as well, I saw them as an opportunity to gain insight into how highly ambiguous messages with idiosyncratic, unconventional referents might function rhetorically. I was interested not in discovering the one meaning these works might be attempting to convey, but rather in learning how they challenge audience members to organize and interpret the works in some way so that they make sense at all—so that *some* possible meaning results for the audience.

Such messages are becoming increasingly common in our culture with the presentation of unusual and unconventional images through media such as MTV, "cult" films, and highly creative and innovative advertising on television. The audience for such rhetoric is asked to play a very active role in bringing to these rhetorical works some kind of framework or context so that they can be organized, categorized, and thus interpreted. In the analysis that follows, examples of body art are examined in an effort to suggest a perspective that provides a framework for responding to these works and that viewers thus might find useful in interpreting them.

### SCOPE AND HISTORY OF BODY ART

Because of the large number of works of body art that has been executed by many different artists, only a representative sampling of such work can be provided to illustrate its scope. One artist who has worked extensively in the genre is Vito Acconci; his work, *Trademarks*, was performed in September, 1970. This piece consisted of the naked Acconci trying to bite as much of his body as he could reach. He applied

printer's ink to the bites and stamped them on paper, the wall, and other bodies. "Theoretically," Acconci explained, "this is a secret activity, but the print is a possibility of revealing the secret and sharing it" (Nemser, "An Interview" 20).

Chris Burden's *Transfixed*, performed in Venice, California, on April 23, 1974, also exemplifies the kind of work that constitutes body art. Inside a small garage on Speedway Avenue, Burden stood on the rear bumper of a Volkswagen bug and lay on his back over the rear section. He stretched out his arms, and an assistant drove nails through his palms into the roof of the car. The garage door was opened, and the car was pushed out. After the engine was run at full speed for two minutes, it was turned off, and the car was pushed back into the garage.

On September 17, 1970, Terry Fox performed a work of body art, *Levitation*, at the Richmond Art Center in California. The equipment for the piece (which remained on view after the performance) included white paper that covered the floor and an eleven-foot-square mound of earth in the center of the room. From this mound radiated plastic tubes, each fifty feet long, containing blood, urine, water, and milk. For the work, Fox lay on the earth for six hours in darkness and attempted to levitate his body into the space above him. Fox described his experience during the piece: "I was trying to think about leaving the ground, until I realized I should be thinking about entering the air. For me that changed everything, made it work" (Foley 60). The result, according to Fox, was "the feeling for a while that I was out of my body" (Plagens 77). Four days after the work had been executed, the exhibition of the residue was closed down by city officials. Offended by the "crudity" of the exhibition, they declared that the paper that covered the floor was too much of a fire hazard for the public space.

Barry LeVa's work, *Velocity Piece*, performed both at the University Museum at Columbus, Ohio, in 1969 and in La Jolla in 1970, provides an additional example of the scope of body art. He ran back and forth, crashing into opposite walls fifty feet apart until he collapsed from exhaustion. The sounds of his movements were taped so that viewers were able to hear the sounds of his crashing after the event, as well as see the blood-spattered walls he had left. As one reviewer described the effect of this residue, "LeVa had truly become a ghostly presence, a body haunting space" (Nemser, "Subject-Object" 42).

The origins of such works of body art can be traced to several sources. The French artist Marcel Duchamp generally is considered to have begun its development in 1921 when he shaved off his hair in the form of a star, demonstrating that the creator and subject of art are the same. Other artists strove to create a closer union between their bodies and their works of art, as well. Yves Klein, for example, used nudes as "living paintbrushes" applied to canvas in 1960, and Ben Vautier went on sale as "a living, moving sculpture" in 1962 (Licht). The various creators of happenings in the Sixties also were working in this area, using their entire bodies to make their works of art. These early body artists, however, still viewed the body primarily as a prop to be moved about along with other inanimate objects.

By 1966, Bruce Nauman, realizing the full implications of body art, began to incorporate his body as an object and an activator into his artwork, exemplified in his photograph with water squirting out of his mouth, *Portrait of the Artist as a Fountain*. Richard Serra went beyond Nauman's piece in 1968 with his film, *Hand Catching Lead*, which was precisely the activity shown in the film. In this piece, the body in the act of creating the artwork simultaneously became the artwork: "Finally the actor and the acted upon came together, the processor became the processed, the verb and the subject were one" (Nemser, "Subject-Object" 40).

### RHETORICAL ELEMENTS OF BODY ART

This investigation into body art began with a delineation of its major rhetorical elements. At least three appear to be common to the genre of body art: (1) use of the body for self-violation; (2) use of familiar objects in unfamiliar ways; and (3) exhibition of a detached attitude on the part of the artists.

Body artists do not use traditional instruments as materials of the visual arts such as paint, canvas, steel, wood, stone, or clay. Their bodies are the primary medium for their art: "The weave of the canvas concedes its place to the epidermis, while the empty space of volume is found in the orifice of the mouth; brushes and colors are translated into spit, saliva and bites" (Celant 79). With the body as the material of the work, no surfaces thus are available with which to enclose the work—no frame as on a painting and no base as for a sculpture.

Not only is the body used as the primary source of the work, but the body is used for self-violation and self-destruction. While there are many examples of auto-involvements in the visual arts such as painting a self-portrait or serving as a model for a figure or mold, these artists go far beyond the usual conventions of such involvement. They appear to work against their own self-interests deliberately, often subjecting themselves to real physical dangers such as biting and crucifixion. They deliberately assume humiliating poses and allow others to see them that way, as Acconci did as he strained and stretched to bite himself. They contaminate themselves physically, defiling their bodies with their own bodily excretions as did Fox and with their own blood as did Burden, Acconci, and LeVa. They deliberately place themselves in situations that most of us would try to avoid.

A second feature of these works is that the artists make use of familiar objects from everyday life. Volkswagens and garages, teeth, dirt and milk, and a room are not foreign objects. In these works, however, objects and events that normally are unrelated are juxtaposed so that the viewer cannot rely on past knowledge of the common objects to convey conventional meanings. A Volkswagen, for example, is not an unusual object, but when someone is nailed to it, the viewer is confronted with new possibilities for meaning for the symbol. Similarly, dirt is a common substance, but when it is used for an attempt at levitation, the juxtaposition is somewhat startling. The boundary markers provided by these artists, then, do not delineate what they commonly do: A car does not suggest a road or a means of transportation, and dirt does not suggest nature, trees, and plants.

A third major characteristic of works of body art is the detached attitude exhibited by the artists. More traditional artists in our culture often are viewed as stars—they appear highly involved in and excited about their work before a public that acclaims them as elite and exclusive. The attitudes of artists such as Acconci, Burden, Fox, and LeVa, however, seem to be quite different. They assume an almost clinical attitude toward their work in general and their self-violation in particular, inflicting it with coolness, objectivity, and distance on bodies that seem not to be theirs. They engage in their works silently. There is no verbal conversation with the audience and no gallery opening or party at which these artists discuss their work.

The detachment of these artists violates not only expectations from a visual-arts perspective but expectations derived from one of physical danger, as well. They do not deal with physical pain and danger as human beings generally do—avoiding it or crying out. Although their bodies are their objects of work, these artists assume a depersonalized, objective attitude toward them.

**INSANITY AS A PERSPECTIVE ON BODY ART**

Because body art is non-discursive and is particularly idiosyncratic and unconventional in the referents it suggests, such art is likely to yield numerous readings of the works and to make available a number of perspectives or frameworks with which the viewer may interpret it. Depending on factors such as audience members' past experiences with their knowledge about art, they might choose to see these works from perspectives such as theater—because of the works' performance aspects; religion—in the case of Burden's *Crucifixion* piece, for example; or adventure—in the subjection of the artists to physical dangers.

Another perspective with which these works could be viewed, however, and one that helped me explain my own reaction to them, is that of insanity or madness, "the loss of vital contact with the reality that constitutes one's own surroundings or environment" (Grassi and Lorch 22). The rhetorical elements that characterize body art suggest that a context of insanity provides a useful organizing perspective by which to view these works. I cannot say, of course, whether or not body artists intend to create such a framework through their selection of rhetorical elements, nor do I see the viewer necessarily selecting the context of insanity in which to place these works. Given the similarity between these artists' behaviors and what the viewer is likely to know of insanity and mental institutions, however, the link seems to be one that might be suggested to a viewer. The major elements that characterize these works have their counterpart in behavior in the mental asylum, suggesting a possible iconic relationship between the actions of the body artist and those of the insane.

The process of mortification or self-destruction exhibited by these artists, for example, is commonly encountered in mental institutions and among the insane. A mild form of this self-destruction can be seen when the mentally ill do not take advantage of, or are not provided with, the usual arrangements for insulating themselves from their own sources of contamination. Unclean food, messy quarters, soiled towels, dirty bathing facilities, and various other sources of physical contamination have been reported by Goffman, Foucault, and others in their studies of mental institutions; Goffman, for example, cites cases in which mental patients "drink water they have themselves first polluted" (82). Body artists seem to cultivate such conditions.

More extreme, aggressive acts against their own bodies are also engaged in by these insane; Goffman provides examples of such behavior: They "rush headfirst against the wall; they tear out their own sutures after a minor operation; they flush down the toilet false teeth, without which they cannot eat and which take months to obtain; or they smash eyeglasses, without which they cannot see" (82-83). Menninger supplies additional examples of such behavior by those who are mentally ill: a man thrusts his arm into machinery, amputating his hand; patients gnaw "off every vestige of nail from every finger," some actually gnawing the fingers themselves; and others dig out chunks of flesh from their bodies with their finger nails (231-32, 236, 240).

In the jargon of psychoanalysis, such phenomena are labelled focal suicide—self-destructive activity or self-mutilation that is concentrated on a limited part of the body (Menninger 229). Menninger explains that the unconscious motive for such attacks of self-mutilation is often related to the expression of resentment or hostility toward someone or something in the environment, where hate directed against that external object is turned back upon the self (233). It also may represent the surrender or repudiation of the active role, accomplished through the physical removal or injury of a part of the body that allows for or is required for a particular activity (283).

The artists' use of familiar objects for unfamiliar purposes and in strange contexts also is similar to practices that are common in mental hospitals. In these, the deprivation of many objects that might be considered necessities requires the employment of objects in a manner and for a purpose not intended. For example, radiators might be used as dryers for wet clothing, newspapers or shoes for pillows, towels for rugs, radiators for urinals, and cups for ashtrays (Goffman 208-09). Certainly, such irregular uses of objects are not limited to those in mental hospitals. Most of us, at some time or another, have used objects for purposes for which they were not intended when the normally used object was not available. While the iconic relationship between this element of body art and the insane asylum, then, points less clearly to the particular context of insanity, a link still is evident here between body art and a practice common to insane asylums.

The detachment in attitude evidenced by the artists in their works is similar to a detachment exhibited by those who are insane. At two points, in particular, Goffman asserts, is such behavior likely to occur. One is when the mental patient first has been admitted to the hospital and does not want to be known to anyone as a person who has been reduced to such circumstances. The patient "may avoid talking to anyone, may stay by himself when possible, and may even be 'out of contact' or 'manic' so as to avoid ratifying any interaction that presses a politely reciprocal role upon him and opens him up to what he has become in the eyes of others" (146). A similar attitude is evidenced when the patient wishes to convey ritual insubordination: "There is a special stance that can be taken to alien authority; it combines stiffness, dignity, and coolness in a particular mixture that conveys insufficient insolence to call forth immediate punishment and yet expresses that one is entirely one's own man" (318).

The attitude of detachment is recognized by Menninger as generally accompanying acts of self-mutilation or self-destruction by the insane. In such acts, the "self is treated as though it were an external object" and not a part of oneself (32-33). Menninger describes cases in which the insane bear their self-destruction and its treatment "without tears or struggle"—with complete indifference to the physical sensation accompanying their self-punitive acts (237).

The major rhetorical elements evident in body art—self-violation of the body, use of familiar objects in unfamiliar ways, and exhibition of an attitude of detachment—suggest a frame of insanity as one perspective from which to view these works. These rhetorical elements allow comprehension or partial understanding of body art in the metaphorical terms of insanity. When viewers conceptualize body art in terms of concepts for the experience of insanity, these concepts provide a coherent structure for the more foreign experience of the art, highlighting important aspects of it and diminishing the significance of others. Through such classification and focus, in other words, viewers are able to categorize the experience and comprehend it in some way.

At first glance, the perspective of insanity as a principle around which to organize the experience of body art seems to lack utility simply because of the many negative connotations associated with the insane and mental institutions in our culture. "If you want to debase what a person is doing," points out Szasz, "call his act psychopathological and call him mentally ill . . ." (*Myth of Psychotherapy* xix). Those who are insane are seen as not sharing in, and as excluded from, the symbolic structure of the society, as Brummett explains: "Participation in shared meanings are [sic] requisites for participation in society: madness is by definition an inability to share conventional meanings" (31). In general, the insane individual is seen as having nothing of significance to contribute to a culture, as Foucault points out in his description of the insane individual in the Middle Ages:

His words were considered nul [sic] and void, without truth or significance, worthless as evidence, inadmissible in the authentication of acts or contracts, . . . [T]he madman's speech did not strictly exist. . . . [His words] were neither heard nor remembered. . . . Whatever a madman said, it was taken for mere noise. ("Discourse" 217)

Certainly, a connection exists between art and madness in that a number of well-known artists, including Van Gogh, appear to have been insane, but this connection alone lacks the strength to support the perspective of insanity as valuable for the interpretation of body art. I will argue, however, that this perspective is, indeed, a useful and valuable one from which to view works of body art.

### VALUE OF THE THE INSANITY PERSPECTIVE

Two characteristics of the insanity perspective make it a useful one for the interpretation of body art. It functions as an idiom in which both artist and audience can communicate, and it encourages the viewer to assume the role of therapist or guide and thus to alter the focus of the work.

#### **Insanity as an Idiom**

When two individuals do not speak the same idiom or language and wish to communicate with one another, messages must be translated from one idiom into another. In the case of body art, a form of communication is being used that, while it has the capacity to elicit multiple meanings, may be almost incomprehensible to audience members who have no clear framework or context in which to place it—no idiom, in other words, in which to understand it. Such viewers do not speak the language of the artist and thus may experience body art in much the same way as when someone speaks to them in a language they do not know. The message is not understood and goes nowhere; the listener has no way to comprehend and respond.

Because non-discursive symbols such as those of body art do not lend themselves well to translation into discursive forms, what is needed for the translation is some kind of language system that retains the non-discursive elements of the original message but that is more familiar to, and thus can be more readily decoded by, the audience. Such a system should allow the communicants to achieve some overlap in the meanings attributed to referents so that they have grounds on which to relate to each other. This is one important function of the insanity frame. By "translating" the acts they see in body art into a perspective of insanity, viewers are able to work with a more familiar idiom that is less foreign to them; their experiences with body art thus are more coherent and comprehensible as they are given a means by which some kind of communication with the artist is able to occur. As a language to be learned to communicate with someone who speaks a different language, a perspective of insanity encourages the viewer to see body art as a valid idiom with its own structure, terminology, and organizing principles.

That insanity is particularly useful as an idiom in which communication between artist and audience can occur more readily receives support from three characteristics of that idiom. First, insanity is attention getting in a way that many other idioms that might be used are not. Bizarre behavior compels our attention and interest simply because it is unusual, and a perspective of insanity capitalizes on our attraction to such behavior. But perhaps more important, the insanity idiom is one familiar to most viewers. Whether from films, books, academic knowledge, or perhaps even

personal experience, a viewer is likely to have gathered images of the insane and of mental institutions that can be recalled and utilized in such a perspective. Identification already exists to some degree, then, between the viewer and this framework. This identification alone, Burke asserts, is sufficient to create a measure of persuasion (*Rhetoric* 55).

In addition, the idiom of insanity functions to enable the viewer to approach body art with some measure of sympathy. In this culture, we generally believe that those who are weak, disabled, ill, or suffering should be the objects of sympathy and that those who are able should care for them. While viewers may be horrified or repulsed by the actions of body artists, the language of insanity also enables them to see the artists as individuals who are suffering and who deserve our attention and concern. It tends to diminish the effect of the audience's knowledge that these artists deliberately place themselves in the circumstances that are causing the pain. Such an attitude, as a result, makes viewers more likely to "stay with" a work of body art and to seek to understand it instead of dismissing it immediately. Acceptance of the artists' view of reality is more likely as a result.

### Viewer as Therapist

A view of body art through the perspective of insanity serves yet another important function. It encourages viewers to serve as therapists or guides who facilitate the drawing of particular conclusions about, and perspectives on, body art. Perhaps this role of the viewer best can be explained by turning to Burke's notion of form. Form, according to Burke, "is the creation of an appetite in the mind of the auditor, and the adequate satisfying of that appetite" (*Counter-Statement* 31). "A work has form," he suggests, "in so far as one part of it leads a reader to anticipate another part, to be gratified by the sequence" (*Counter-Statement* 124). Through form, a rhetorical work induces tensions or expectations with which the audience identifies. When the tension is resolved and some sort of resolution is created in the work, the audience views the work's resolution as its own.

In works of body art, expectations are established in viewers who see possible similarities between the artists and the insane. These viewers then come to expect to see bizarre activity such as that exhibited by the insane and to feel the sympathy they normally would for these individuals. At the same time, the works create tension as the viewer wonders what the result of the self-destructive, painful behavior was or will be for the artist and who or what ended or will end the piece. The tension is resolved when the viewer is assured of a context or rationale that makes the artists' actions seem appropriate, meaningful, and necessary.

This resolution of the tension is achieved for viewers when they assume the role of therapist, "guiding" the artist out of the quagmire of insanity and into a state of wholeness and sanity.<sup>1</sup> This is accomplished by viewers when they transfer the self-destructive acts of the patient/artist to a more significant target. Just as a primary step in psychoanalysis or psychotherapy for many who are mentally ill is to redirect self-destruction away from the self to a more proper target (Menninger 423-24), so viewers may come to see that the artist ultimately should not be the focus of their attention but rather that these artists are attempting to destroy something other than themselves. Only when such a transference is made can the viewer see a purpose and value to acts that otherwise might appear senseless, meaningless, and insane.

As this transference occurs, viewers cease to be confined within the arena of body art and concern for the artist and begin to examine the rules or framework in which

art itself is operating. The therapeutic process, in this case, involves a focus on rules of art, not the particular works of body art.<sup>2</sup> After undergoing therapy—the rhetorical exchange with the artist—viewers operate in terms of a different set of rules concerning art and are able to question its nature and see it in new ways. Viewers of body art, then, as a result of their role in the rhetorical process, are encouraged to question the assumptions, expectations, and values of art.

Among the assumptions about art that might be questioned by viewers is the boundary between art and life. Art often is seen as a separate, special field of life in which works of art are produced, but in body art, boundaries between art and everyday life, between representation and the thing represented, have been dissolved. The use of familiar objects and activities that one could do insures that these art pieces lack the elitist quality of the traditional fine arts. Rather than making their lives artistic, body artists' works have become life, a concept Acconci has explained as doing art livingly (Nemser, "An Interview" 23). This view that no distinction exists between art and everyday life may suggest two corollaries for the viewer, one dealing with the nature of the art object and the other with the role of the artist.

The first corollary that the viewer may come to recognize is that the nature of the artwork itself changes dramatically in body art. The object itself is not particularly important; objects are not ends in themselves. The artists are more interested in what they are doing than in what comes of their activity (Ames 39). Because bodily actions are art, they are impermanent and cannot be preserved, except through photographic records. Burden's description of his piece, *Shoot* (1971), in which an assistant shot him in the arm, exemplifies this transitory quality: "I was able to do a piece of sculpture . . . that was over in a split second and that basically existed by word of mouth. And that's, I think, what attracted me— . . ." (Rubinfien 80).

With its impermanent nature, body art may encourage the audience to question whether art can be viewed as an investment or speculative commodity. It cannot be made into an article of merchandise, nor can the art lover be made into an investor (Moulin 128). This view of art results not only from these works' impermanence but also from the use of ordinary materials, including the body. As one reviewer explained about German body artist Joseph Beuys' work, "It is as though Beuys had searched far and wide for some substance(s) which could never be of much value to bourgeois society" (Kuspit 82).

A second corollary to the notion that art is not distinct from life is that every person is an artist. Viewers of body art may be led to question the distinction between the artist and the audience because these artists' actions do not require any particular artistic talent and involve objects that are common and familiar. For the notion of artist as elite, special, and exclusive may be substituted the idea that "every living creature is an artist" (Price 52). In this view, the "death of art means that the power of creation is restored to everyone. . . . 'Art doesn't exist. Art is you'" (Fermigier 56-57).

The perspective of insanity, then, creates tensions and expectations for viewers that can be resolved when they assume a role similar to that of the therapist. By recognizing a larger context in which body art can be placed—the questioning of the nature and rules of art in general—the works of body artists are given new meanings, and audiences' perspectives on art are changed. The content of the perspective of insanity is important largely in that it establishes a form that then becomes the message itself—a questioning of the nature of art.



## CONCLUSION

In discursive rhetoric, words have their various possible meanings narrowed down by the influence of the words that accompany them. In a similar process, we have seen, non-discursive rhetorical systems such as those of the visual arts appear to operate similarly to enable the audience to derive meaning from them. Various rhetorical elements combine in a context in body art to enable the viewer to organize, categorize, and thus to formulate some means for the interpretation of the experience of the art.

Not only does the context of insanity provide a useful way of viewing and interpreting such works meaningfully, but it also explains why a viewer might feel such paradoxical responses to the works. While the insanity framework repulses and baffles due to the nature of the activity that takes place within it, its capacity to move viewers beyond the confines of that perspective and to examine the nature of art in general is likely to elicit responses in them such as fascination.

Works of body art, however, have the capacity to go beyond simply enabling a viewer to discover a framework with which to interpret; they also have the capacity to be persuasive. Because the insanity perspective provides a means for communication that is somewhat familiar to, and attracts the concern of, the viewer and because it involves the viewer actively in looking beyond concern for the particular artist and work, it creates grounds on which persuasion to a new view of reality may occur. Whether or not we derive from the work a message that is similar to the one envisioned by the artist, we are more likely to be persuaded to question and inquire by such work:

It stirs us, shakes us. We immediately feel we are attacked. And whether we like it or not, whether we are disarmed or not, our way of life is shaken and we lose our assurance. . . . The work itself asks us questions and makes us question ourselves; it is constructed like a question. It denies what has preceded it, it denies the other works around it; it questions its own meaning (Lascault 14).

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>I am adopting here Szasz' view of psychotherapy as rhetoric. He sees psychotherapy as a conversation in which patient and psychotherapist speak and listen to each other (*Myth of Psychotherapy* 11, 207).

<sup>2</sup>This shift in psychotherapy is described by Bateson (191-92).

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