

**Jean-Paul Martinon, "Fact or Fiction?," in Adrian George, ed., *Art, Lies & Videotape* (Liverpool: Tate Publications, 2003), 40-51, © Tate Publications, 2003.**

Is it really possible to distinguish fact from fiction? This exhibition appears to present a series of facts: artists cutting or mutilating themselves, leaping into the void, castrating themselves, drawing blood from their bodies. These records of performances are clear enough: we believe what we see. And yet can we really assume we are looking at facts? How can a fact truly be recorded? Two factors contribute to this uncertainty:

The first relates to the archives of these performances. The often inaccurate witness accounts of these events and the vague evidence found in the archival material left by the artist are never quite convincing. For example, even with the publication of Peter Weibel and Valie Export's book on the Viennese actionists in 1970, no one has a truly reliable source of information on Brus, Muehl, Nitsch or Schwarzkogler. The material still consists of an irregular spectrum of facts, half-truths, rumours and polemics.<sup>i</sup> The same is true of Yves Klein: we do not even know the date of the leap: 16, 19 or 25 October 1960. Instead of establishing a truth, the archives generate instead more doubt and uncertainty. The second factor relates to the fact that in this exhibition, like in many previous group exhibitions, facts and fictions are always shown indiscriminately side by side with the result of confusing the viewer. The reason for this carelessness is simple: the works are always grouped thematically and not for their ability to conform with the true course of events.

These two factors lead the viewer to question the photographs, these ruins of performances: Could Franko B's powdered belly be fake and full of stage blood? Could Schwarzkogler have replaced Heinz Cibulka's penis with some other elongate thing?<sup>ii</sup> Did Klein's photographers, Shunk and Kender, really alter the image to give the illusion of a suicidal leap?<sup>iii</sup> Did Sheree Rose really help the 'longest living survivor' of cystic fibrosis, Bob Flanagan, fight 'pain with pain' in these masochistic images?<sup>iv</sup> And can we really trust Hayley Newman? She wants us to believe that she only presents us with fictions because she wants to question the validity of the conventions of performance description from the 1970s; but how to believe that she is not in reality, like Bob Flanagan, a super-masochist?<sup>v</sup>

The question will always remain: even with some historical veracity, can we really decide between fact and fiction and if yes, on what grounds?

In order to address this issue, I have to put forward the idea that, deep down, all these photographs ask an identical question: what is an event? How to understand that which happens here and now, there and then? This does not refer to the symbolic contents of the performances which we can debate to infinity, but to the apparent fact that it is 'taking place'.

To announce that all these photographs ask the same question is to assume firstly, that these artists deliberately presented images made into questions, questions for which they knew no one could find answers. Like the iconography of the Virgin Mary, an iconography that perpetually asks whether or not the Virgin really was a virgin, these images refuse the certainty of knowledge. They waver between a 'yes' and a 'no' answer to the question, between belief and scientific evidence. The same is true of Franko B's adoption of a pose long been commonplace in the religious art of the West (with palms held upwards), which asks the impossible question of the resurrection. In both cases what is at stake here is the mystery of the event. By evading the certainty of knowledge, these images suggest instead that something happened and that one cannot explain it.

This mystery or this essential question *behind* the symbolism of the image has the form of a spectre. It is the spectre of a question *in* the image. These images of performances all put forward the essential, but invisible question, that of the possibility of its occurrence. In an attempt to contextualise the death of Marxism, Jacques Derrida analysed the presence of the spectre in Marx's writing. He understood the notion of the spectre as the 'visibility of the invisible. And invisibility, by its essence is not seen, which is why it remains... beyond the phenomenon or beyond being. The spectre is... what one imagines, what one thinks one sees and which one projects.'<sup>vi</sup> As the prime cause of belief, the spectre *in* the image is therefore what makes us waver between certainty and doubt, what reveals itself under the guises of what is hidden.

To attempt to rationalise the spectre in the picture, what haunts it—in other words, to try and answer its spectral question—is to kill it, to annihilate the very question *in* the image. If I say Klein only leaped onto a large tarpaulin placed over a pile of mattresses or Schwarzkogler wrapped a sausage in gauze instead of Cibulka's penis, I 'kill' the possibility that the question might be answered differently, that both Klein and Schwarzkogler were mystics and that they really did leap into the void.<sup>vii</sup> If I say Joseph made love to Mary while she was asleep, I discredit the possibility of the immaculate conception. By answering the question, I kill the spectre, that is I rationalise the myth, I reject fiction and suppress the possibility of (dis)belief.

However, no one can kill a disembodied spirit easily, no one can prove once and for all that these were only pranks. The Madonna has to be pure to be worthy of worship. Klein's mysticism has to remain irrational in order for it to have value. Flanagan's masochism has to retain the appearance of martyrdom and be characterised by misfortune for it to enter the museum. Even Newman's secular sincerity has to retain the whiff of mystery in order for it to have artistic value: what the viewer sees first is the image, not the label on the wall. This priority of the visual over the written preserves the spectre *in* the image: the question remains (did this really happen?) *until* one reads the label. Furthermore, the artists have deliberately left behind open archives from which scholars and curators are left free to sex up dodgy evidence and spin any story that would suit their scholarly or curatorial interests. This openness of the archive also allows the spectre to perdure and avoid being killed.

The artist's desperate plea to keep the work a mystery and this deliberate focus on the 'potentially inexplicable' could explain why the events recorded by these images always look like elaborate and carefully orchestrated eye-catching and dramatic spectacles. To create an image that will arrest the viewer's attention, the artist has to come up with a spectacular event: a castration or a mutilation, a sacrifice or a resurrection, in other words with something that is utterly remote from daily life and is characterised as sensational in the extreme. I will point here to the similarity between a spectacle and something spectral. Both words share the same etymological root *spectare*: 'to behold'.

A spectre is an act of revelation. It is a spectacle: something hidden that suddenly and momentarily reveals itself (for example, the spectre of the commendatore in the opera Don Giovanni). A spectacle also has a spectral quality: it is an act of revelation: the curtains part and a performance is momentarily revealed. Finally, the spectator, he or she who beholds the event, can also be characterised as having spectral qualities: his or her short existence is an act of revelation between a birth and a death. More prosaically, the coming together of an audience under one roof to attend a performance constitutes in itself a spectacle, a temporary, but revealing display of people. Thus, on the one hand behind the spectacle always lies a spectre and on the other, a spectre is always a spectacle. In both cases what is revealed is the fact that something is beheld, that there is an event.

In this game of spectres/spectacles the issue that really confuses things is the one put forward by the slice of time captured by the camera, that is, its re-presentation. Even with the scientific qualities of modern cameras, can one truly re-present an event—spectacular or not—in space and time?

Contrary to what is commonly believed, I will argue that the photograph does not fetishise the event, the performance or the spectacle as such. It fetishises instead the spectre, the ghost: the question that the artist put forward and begs to have answered. This process of 'fetishisation' of the spectre is essential for such photographs to acquire or maintain a mythological status. Otherwise these images would be of no interest. There has to be an irrational reverence for and an obsessive devotion to the spectre-question. The length to which the artists go to emphasise the importance of the spectre-question in the image is enough evidence of this fetishistic process: their (sado)masochistic performances all seem to ask the same question: can the worst pain really confirm that there is an event, that I am alive? These extreme measures are fetishistic manoeuvres to find an answer to the mother of all questions: are we really alive? If I bleed to death, will you notice that I was there, an event?

In a way, perhaps all photographs that fetishise the spectre, that is that *apostrophise the viewer with an unanswerable question* are always calls to the future: they are *for* the future:

the promise of an answer, that a leap into the void is possible, that one day we will understand the immaculate conception and the resurrection, that a martyr's soul is really destined for paradise. As Derrida remarked, 'At bottom, the spectre is the future, it is always to come, it presents itself as that which could come or come back in the future...'<sup>viii</sup> Perhaps this explains the enduring appeal of these images: they give us for ever the possibility of imagining the invisible, what is always to come.

Overall, these extraordinary images, like the iconography of Christianity, push the thinking of art history to its limits: they force us to think the event of our existence, the event of the spectacle, that of which there is no knowledge, *the impossible*. In a way, they force us to think (at) the border of thought: an undefined border between historical accuracy and fiction, belief and knowledge, the visible and the invisible: belief that Klein did leap into the void, knowledge that he did land on a pile of mattresses.

To the original question, 'fact or fiction?', I can now put forward a suggested answer: that in the case of representation, we can only choose fiction. As the etymology of the words spectacle and spectre has shown, fiction is necessary when one addresses the issue of what cannot be accounted for, what is spectral and can never be pinned down as being *there*. Fiction helps us make sense of the spectre behind the spectacle, the question *in* the image, the event. Without using the mode of fiction, no event can be properly addressed. Indeed, how can an event be represented other than by addressing that which suspends our (dis)belief, that which makes us believe in what is not there, i.e. time suspended, the presence of the present, a present captured in a snapshot? Fiction, whether that of novels, films or photographs, allows us to see what cannot be perceived by the senses alone, that which is constantly shifting, which essentially does one thing only: to come: the density of being *there* in pain or simply alive.

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<sup>i</sup> See Malcolm Green, *Brus, Muehl, Nitsch and Schwarzkogler, Writings of the Vienna Actionists*, Atlas Archive 7, London, 1999

<sup>ii</sup> See *Rudolf Schwarzkogler, Leben und Werk*, ed. by E. Badura-Triska and H. Klocher, Klagenfurt, 1992

<sup>iii</sup> See *La peinture comme crime*, ed. by Régis Michel, Le Louvre, Paris, 2001, p. 252-3

<sup>iv</sup> See the film documentary *Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan, Supermasochist*.

<sup>v</sup> See Hayley Newman, *Live Culture*, Tate Modern and Live Art Development Agency, London, 2003

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vi Jacques Derrida, *Spectres of Marx, The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* [1993], translated by Peggy Kamuf, Routledge, London, 1994, p. 100-1

vii Schwarzkogler is said to have committed suicide by leaping out from a window in an attempt to enact Klein's fictional image.

viii Derrida 1994, p. 39