

*BLOOD UTOPIA. EXPERIMENTATION WITH BLOOD IN CONTEMPORARY
ART*

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Abstract: The present paper discusses the yet recent emergence of blood aesthetics in the field of art history, supported indirectly by partial aesthetics of the kind: disability aesthetics of the 20th century or aesthetics of ugliness of the 19th century. Based on the difference between the modern artistic representation (theme in itself) and the contemporary aesthetic product (the effect of the theme), the blood art of the present takes on the social burden of a precarious moral content in line with an aggravating human position promoted by postmodernism and the therapeutic condition embodied utopianly by the new art. If blood can turn into an aesthetic revelator despite the defilement and the desensitisation of the body, will remain the per se question of this study given the complete aesthetisation of the body and life nowadays.

Keywords: blood art, visibility, physicality, politics, medicine, contemporary vs. modern.

Up to the consummation of Modern art, specialists in visual arts considered almost unanimously that the most appropriate way to approach art history would be by chronological periodisation and by style: It is really in the 20th century that we see any break with these two principal preoccupations with author (artist) and form (style)¹. Hardly now, art has begun to focus on itself, not anymore on the past art in a favourable rapport or, much more often, unfavourable. The change of attitude towards the purpose of art and its specific means would be the headstone in considering art to the detriment of the artist along with the total relinquishment of the traditional approach of great art, consolidated mainly academically, in favour of socio-culturally grouped subjects, outside the academia. Thence, organising and interpreting art history in terms of an exhibitional and exponential blood culture until the 20th century would have been an abnormality, becoming at present a possibility of identification

¹ Dana Arnold: *Art History – A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, New York, 2004, p. 41

and categorisation, interpretation and description as viable as any other past manner. Into the support of this idea, comes the vast sample of representations and experimentations of sanguine kind, wherein the relevance of all this is firstly relationally decided, then individually as a partial abandon of the thematic relation.

Even though, universalist and essentialist standpoints are feckless in the treatment of a subject that expands mainly contextually, a certain art dynamics cannot remain unobserved, namely the fact that each artistic period finds its source of inspiration in an aesthetically unexhausted precedent or in an exhausted one but in actual need of negative re-evaluation. In this way, the contemporary age turns positively to modernity through the unexpected freedom of creation entailed by the latter, and negatively through the critique of its illusory integralism so well adorned with. More uncomplaining and more realistic, the contemporaneity does not legitimise itself only by aesthetics and politics of the fragmented (already overcome in the wake of modernity), but by aesthetics and politics of direct facing up to the fragmented with all its categorical implications of ugliness, death, violence and blood.

The assimilation of the aesthetics of ugliness, from the mid-18th century by the courtesy of the German philosopher Karl Rosenkranz (1805-1879), brings to the fore the striking difference between the theme as an object of the artistic representation and the product as a result of the artistic creation². Therefore, *The Study of Feet and Hands* (1817-1819) by Théodore Géricault or *Execution without Trial* (1870) by Henri Regnault are not ugly as a result in the same way the rough photographies of public decapitation from the beginning of the 20th century in China and Japan³ are, but as a theme of artistic representation, which is dismemberment and decapitation.

Rosenkranz demonstrated that the ugliness from nature finds its redemption in art, as the excess of blood from contemporary art would find its explanation in the precarious moral content of the last minute reality that it puts to the issue. The politisation of art during contemporaneity is not by far a novelty since the political nature, implicitly or directly, has been sighted out in the artistic production even from the 18th century, expressing its penultimate reverberations within the inter- and post-war art.

² Karl Rosenkranz: *O estetică a urâtului, între frumos și comic*. Traducere de Victor Ernest Mașek. Ed. Meridiane, București, 1984

³ See: *Some heads and some blood* (1920) and many more on : <http://beheadedart.com/> (accessed September 30, 2015)

In an artistic rebellion against the war from 2003 taking place in New York, on the occasion of Saint Valentine's celebration, and under the implied circumstances of commerce with feelings, the painter Joan Snyder (b. 1940) presented the work *Blood on our hands* in which she interlaces the floral effect, typical of her abstract style, considered by many critics feminist on the whole, with the reference of bloodshed in Bagdad. In other kindred works, she focuses on the constancies of our times that converge into scatter, bloodiness and the human gaping at death. With Snyder, Holocaust and AIDS are preferred political themes that she would engage in a retrospect at the Jewish Museum from New York in the year 2005. In contrast with other contemporary artists, the political content is sharply present in the Snyderian creation which seems to cry for help altogether.

On a different continent, as well in the years 2000, protest art found under the label of blood art appears in Bangkok, as an anti-governmental address and supporter of the United Front for Democracy against Dictatorship (UDD), through the realisation of a giant artistic piece on which there were painted in blood (obtained from donations) poems, images and political slogans by Red Shirts. The quality of this artistic work is strictly politically determined with an immediate effect upon the status quo. Hence, the people of the new generation would know that the old generation sacrificed everything, including their blood – said the poet Visa Kantab at the exhibition site.

It either enters the logic of protest art and socio-political dramatic change, or it folds up with art for peace and it greets Red Cross projects, the blood imagery does not remain frailly anchored in the exuberance of the context, an important part of its projects inclining powerfully towards the aesthetic side. For instance, the artist of Italian origin Franko B (b. 1960), located in London and consecrated as a performer, succeeds to turn his own body into a canvas of visceral representation, in which the sacred and the beauty, the suffering and the loss, the love and the hate, the power and the human condition-related fears have found a place and a meaning⁴ – the way the artist himself put it. Making use of his own nudity dressed up in white pigment and the controlled wastage of blood, Franko B manages to draw with his body the drawing of his own fraught transiency. The only possible colour is therefore red on a white background sending to the beginning of life or of the world itself.

In the embedment of blood symbolism, contemporary art differs fundamentally from the modern one because blood is left to represent itself through visibility, whereas in the

⁴David Thorp, *Franko B*, on the site: <http://www.franko-b.com/text4.htm> (accessed September 30, 2015)

modern art it was accompanied by a personal code for deciphering and solving its riddle. In contemporaneity, the preceding stages of reception are melting within the phenomenon of reception itself – in fact equal to creation, since often enough the posthumous discourse is more complex and more exciting than the artistic act. Without this exclamation mark on reception and its implications, quite frequently sensory and voyeuristic, what still carries the name of art would turn into simplicity and stark repetition, not even at the level of art brut practised by amateurs. It is rather obvious that at present the sources of inspiration have grown less and they all channelled into fetish topics, but in a rapport of inverse variation with the dimension of shock or how would put it Cynthia Freeland, expert in art philosophy and film: The cynical assessment is that blood in contemporary art does not forge meaningful associations, but promotes entertainment and profit⁵. Growing to infinity the value of sensation and shock, the art that relies on the promise of catharsis through suffering and empathy not only that it grossly psychologises its means against the aesthetic, but at the same time it dislocates general symbols, usually religious, from the community that glorifies them. Art is not anymore the extension of religion as in the past through artefacts created for ritualistic purposes, but it has become the masquerade and baboonery of religion – also liable to different sorts of disruption through the way in which it promotes its own rituals: with deadness to the changing course of life. In such a state of affairs, the great risk – professor Freeland has fairly observed, is not being able to distinguish between the latest artistic release and a live show by Marilyn Manson who uses animal sacrifices on the stage with overtly satanic purposes.

Contemporary art as a ritual, from which a whole theory has sprung to legitimise it⁶, is in a great measure a fake type of art since the artist with the audience do not unanimously share its incorporated meanings and values. On this line, Nitsch's example is quite relevant: after his artistic shows, flush with animal blood, aiming at a total form of art, he was handed down more sentences, besides the general opprobrium of the Viennese community.

The repulsion towards the blood manipulator is patented through psychological unsettling on the one hand, and through social inadequacy on the other hand. The blood belongs to the doctor or to God; it is not supposed to be an aesthetic revelator, despite all the similarities with the colour pigment, unless within the framework of disability aesthetics as single source

⁵ Cynthia Freeland: *Art Theory – A Very Short Introduction*. Oxford University Press, New York, 2001, p. 3

⁶ The Cambridge Ritualists founded a school based on myth and ritual using the Classical texts that are to be considered an articulation of the Dionysian rituals (*Sparagmos*), most often closed up in omophagy. Otherwise, *ritual theory* explains the art that originates from sacrifice rituals, dismemberment and consumption of raw meat.

of artistic valuation. The political dimension comes into question again because this type of aesthetics that was theorised by professor Tobin Siebers (b. 1953) in the work *Disability Theory* (2008) and afterwards in *Disability Aesthetics* (2010) runs counter to the human perfection cultivated bombastically by the Nazi art. The cultural war initiated by the Nazis against Modern art and against all the shapes that are unfamiliar, irregular or polychromatic, arrests the attention to the blank coldness, propagated by the healthy corporeality and overbid on its turn by them. Using a term of medical origin such as degeneration, Hitler attacked Modern art as degenerate from the position of biology, not aesthetics: ...the Nazi rejected the modern art as degenerate and ugly because they view it as representing physical and mental disability⁷. Any reference to the perfectly robust and healthy body that the Nazi art militated in favour of becomes then impossible since on the strength of it each body seems inherently imperfect.

The defining of human disability aesthetics as a study of the way in which some bodies make other bodies feel (against the traditional aesthetics defined as a branch of philosophy approaching the nature of beauty, art and taste) – in Siebers' own terms, is impeccably in tune with a cultural legacy which contemporary art would not be able to absolve from unless traumatically. The denial of harmony, corporeal integrity and perfect health, gathered within the framework of art amputation and man disqualification, begins emblematically during modernity. Consequently, contemporary art cannot be discussed without this major antecedent that seems to be in a permanent updating, and referring to the equation politics-artistic influence, Siebers would give an answer: The political unconscious will always be in force, influencing conceptions of identities and bodies, both individual and collective, but because it is constantly shifting, social change is possible⁸. Herein, we should subsidiarily read that the artistic change and proliferation become possible if there are enough variations in terms of political regime and social attitude.

The new art, as Siebers calls it, relies on the display of human conflict, wherein the artists do not embody anymore the Artist in the traditional sense: They are more like janitors involved in mop-up operations or like reporters sent to the scene of a crime to record the violence and confusion and beauty of human effort⁹. The quality of this art relates to norms of construction, integrated strategies of interpretation, in which physicality is both technique and

⁷ Tobin Siebers: *Disability Aesthetics*. The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2010, p. 5

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 82

⁹ *The Body Aesthetic. From Fine Art to Body Modification*. Edited by Tobin Siebers. The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2000, p. 217

medium. After the consummation of the spiritualist medieval era, interested in the inner self, the pathos for the suffering of the flesh and the erotica of Christ's blood, passing through the anatomical Renaissance – also textually regardful of antiquity in the taste for human form, giving way to the abstract modernist wildwoods, the physicality in the contemporary age advances a conglomeration of historical references which recognizes itself better than anything it may generate on the way. An art without finality and without product, about which Siebers has to say the following words: Art is no longer made. It is done. It is done, and then it is gone. Artists come upon art. It happens to them, like an act of terrorism or a brush with an angel¹⁰.

Probably the matter that prejudices the most art history is the one-way understanding and interpreting of it, which is through a single phenomenological eyeglass. If in the absence of the body there is no perception, it seems that in the absence of the blood there is not more than one perception to the detriment of itself. The visual culture and the visual studies put all their effort in including into their visual arsenal more and more possibilities of interpreting the acts of artistic creation. In the same way the first scenes of hunting, representations of day-to-day life, could have been the work of some shamans found under the effect of hallucinogens and compliant with the rights of subconscious, the first contemporary projects that exhibit to the fullest the ancestral primitivism can be the work of our passing through life in what the human being possesses as the most delicate and the most brutal. The way Tobin Siebers has fairly observed the basic and founding elements of art result from the human body and because of that, any return of recognition and revalidation is justified: Human blood is the first paint, human skin, the first canvas, human skeleton, the first sculpture, human lament, the first poetry, human cadaver, our first and only object¹¹. Putting aside the obvious, the blood can be reconceptualised at present as pigment by the agency of the inherent desire of art for changing human nature. After all the modern artists' primitivism, either romantic, emotional, non-western or subconscious, aims at the same thing since the exhaustion of academism and of institutionalised art. As far as the contemporary artists are concerned, they want more than a change of style, namely they want a change of attitude: the feminist theories, queer or postcolonial ones bear witness to exactly this appetite quite trenchant.

The postmodern mortification and the culturally based self-mutilation are creating the feeling of impossibility not experienced by art before. An amputated Venus with tracks of

¹⁰ *Idem*

¹¹ *Ibidem*, p. 239

blood by René Magritte, deformed and tortured flesh by Francis Bacon, a bullet macrocosmically piercing the microcosmic materiality of the head in a photograph by Mat Collishaw can be considered artistic pederstries in comparison with the mind blowing of performance art from the seventies. The programmed vandalism of the body in search of the soul is so desperate that no matter how much blood would flow, it will not be enough to settle down all the upside-downs of contemporary life.

Consequences

The whole utopia of contemporary art, willing to solve social inequities or to heal traumas, appears as a consequence of its hybridisation with medicine and politics. Entering the emergency zone, its scopes grow wider day-by-day to such an extent that art does no longer rely on itself as an autonomous domain, but on the random dispositions of the present moment. Photography reproduces and simulates violence of all sorts, from mutilation to self-evisceration (Daniel Joseph Martinez); painting brings to our attention deformed figures, caught in surgical acts, opened up as bloody fruits (Mark Gilbert); sculpture reinvents itself towards horror examples of the lack of human measure (John Isaacs); performance attacks everything and the artist, most of all, lets himself attacked by debunking any kind of limit and by numbing any bodily point. Blood is as necessary for life as for blood art – contemporary art manages to prove it by cynically promising the elimination of physical imperfections, the DNA permanency and cloning, the cancellation of social pressures on gender, the fabrication of identity, the instauration of a corporeal universal religion of vitalist inspiration and many more, as in the end this art to get away from its own utopism.

The therapeutic character that art has been assimilating in the last decades should not be confounded with the notion of brute art (art brut) coined by the French artist Jean Dubuffet in 1945 to designate the art which is created outside the official culture by institutionalised people in psychiatric hospitals, so contemporary art addresses itself in a prophylactic manner to the society on the whole and the artists are not institutionalised. This politics of responsabilisation blended with the preventive medicine may be exemplified most adequately by the exhibition *Tree of Life* from 2002 that encompassed five years of preparation: The anatomy of the blood supply, the structure, power and stamina of the heart muscle, the importance of normal blood flow and the damage caused to muscle by diminished blood flow

resulting from coronary artery disease, are all considered. Angina and the features of a «heart attack» are also included¹². Bringing together eleven adult artists and four children with creations from various materials, the exhibition represents an example of body and life aesthetisation. One of the artists, Peter Layton – born in Prague and brought up in London, illustrates the theme through a glass work, a roundel with hearts called Strange Fruit, which incorporates the open symbolism of the motor of life as both value and meaning. The internal transparency conferred by the glass resumes in fact the knowledge level reached by science and the destructive abnegation experienced by man. Indeed, our hearts are some strange fruit, not for eating or contemplating, but for intercepting within the dualism they denote along with blood. It is quite clear that heart problems cannot be solved through art, but the getting on the inside may detour some of the harmful paths already trodden by half.

If the employment of artistic aplomb in the service of medicine generates aesthetic queries, the anatomical and medical victories gliding into art will guarantee a fertile field for ethical debates. It is a noble high-toned gesture of art to embrace medicine by making available its own services, but medicine to come down to artistic contextualisations is reprehensible not only to common sense, but also to the scientific one. Looked upon with suspicion, anatomical art (living anatomy) based on plastination¹³ and defined as an instructive and aesthetic display of bodily interiors, represents the late concoction after the official closing of public anatomical theatres of the Renaissance and their transformation into dissection rooms for students, respectively into autopsy rooms for pathologists. The replacement of blood with reactive plastic and the removal of the soft tissues over the veins make for a technological operation of great finesse, equally medical and artistic. The anatomical cadaver that accomplishes its mission once the dissection is over becomes through plastination an artistic cadaver: dry, inodorous and positioned as veridically as possible in everyday natural postures. Unsurprisingly, the ethic apologies and disappears in aesthetic, whilst medicine hides behind art, in proof of the fact that in the name of art financed by science everything is possible nowadays. It is not so much a matter of dosage and measure, as a question of discursive promptness, and this goes for all contemporary art that justifies itself in terms of body and blood metaphors.

¹² *Tree of Life. Exhibition on the beauty of the human heart and its blood supply*. Photography by Chris Rose. Edited by Dr. Geoffrey Farrer-Brown. Ditchling Press Ltd., 2002, p. 4

¹³ The plastinated body, according to Gunther Von Hagens' definitions, from *Körperwelten – Fascination beneath the surface*. Catalogue on the exhibition. Translated by Francis Kelly. Institute for Plastination, Heidelberg, 2001, is a human or animal specimen, whose cells were infused and strengthen with reactive plastics.

In a theoretical series of return to art and its cardinal relations with publicity, death, success, home place, invention, laughter, obscenity, science, sex, surveillance and war, starting from the premise that art counts in every facet of life, the demonstration of direct or indirect capacity of art to challenge and change the world comes to the fore: ...contemporary art is crucial to our understanding of, and relationship to, the world in which we live¹⁴. The one that stages the frivolity and shocking character of art is the popular press, but the researcher is in duty bound to understand the deep matters that are at stake in the artistic discourse. Siân Ede, the artistic director of Gulbenkian Foundation and the author of the volume *Art and Science* wants to demonstrate that it is easier to get to science than to art owing to the compulsoriness arisen by its intrinsic meanings, while in art all compulsoriness is replaced by eeriness put forward by the intensity of the meaning.

If science today is the new art propagated by artistic channels to ensure its success in the face of a wider audience could be one of the fundamental questions regarding the future and the mission of yesterday art. Looking back to the first artistic attitudes towards body and its internal mechanisms, along the Renaissance there was no clear difference between medical and artistic since the human body is not and never was only the object of scientific dissection. More recently, at the beginning of the 20th century medicine and art shake hands again through the appropriation of Freudian psychoanalysis by the Surrealism: The theme of unconscious sexual desires served to reintroduce imagery of the «medical body», whilst at the same time relegating the representation of women to a ghetto of unresolved references, consistent with the Surrealists' unashamedly chauvinist view of women¹⁵. As a reaction to this positioning of art, white, masculine and occidental, dominated by the absence of the body as a gender catalyst, there appear postmodern trends of the presence of the body, anti-authoritarian and militating for democratisation.

Today, contemporary art seems to keep revelling in the consequences of the violation of the corporeal taboos from the beginning of the sixties, but in a fugitive and interested manner: A fair amount of blood and gore, served with a good dose of cynicism and irony, are, at one level, functional for any display that courts publicity¹⁶. The interest shown towards the blood visibility integrates into a general interest for the body, but not so much in the form of

¹⁴ Siân Ede: *Art and Science*. I. B. Tauris, London • New York, 2005

¹⁵ Martin Kemp, Marina Wallace: *Spectacular Bodies. The Art and Science of the Human Body from Leonardo to Now*. Hayward Gallery Publishing and University of California Press, Berkeley • Los Angeles • London, p. 151

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, p. 155

subordination as integrant element, but in the form of contempt as vital and autonomous element – this latter illustration being exploited by art, contrary to medicine, which favours the former.

In a competition with life, contemporary art does not cease to be a critical exercise of the world in which we all live, testing around the body, cultural, philosophical and social questions, on the edge of scientific and technological research. Referring to its ménage with medicine and science, the cooperation can be inquired and researched, but not from the position of disciplinary purism – a totally lingering approach from the point of view of understanding, but from the position of interdisciplinarity and dialogue, unavoidable nowadays: Art is not a luxury, it is part of life. Life without art would be poorer, life without medicine would be shorter, and so it seems that both are essential to us¹⁷. If during the pre-modern times the omnipresence of the soul used to dictate that dissection is a form of soul defilement by means of the body, also fostered by the church animosity towards the body, stepping into modernity, the omnipresence of the body gets down to its defilement in search of the lost soul.

At a conference dedicated to pharmacologists from 1959, the reputed writer Aldous Huxley cynically envisioned that the next generation would produce a pharmacological method to make people love their servitude: deprived of freedom, they would be satisfied, being distracted from any rebellion wish against propaganda and brainwash. Although, the pharmacological method was not necessarily invented, the corporatist, technological and social methods fall into the same tearless dictatorship anticipated by Huxley. Only in the anecdotic light of this prevision, the role of contemporary art can be appropriately grasped. Based, more than ever, on constant suspicion and the promotion of freedom, art does not fall under the social and political charm emitted by the governments and the research centres of the world, not even when it seems to periodically adhere to their utopism.

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