

**BLOODLINES
PAINTINGS BY HERMANN NITSCH**

Foreword by Adam Lerner

With essays by Simon Zalkind and Patrick F. Greaney and interview with the artist

MUSEUM OF CONTEMPORARY ART DENVER

HERMANN NITSCH'S DISCIPLINED EXCESS

BY PATRICK F. GREANEY

In a 1971 essay, Hermann Nitsch imagines being asked to say what is new about his "action art." He offers this answer: In his *Aktionen*, "art has penetrated into life. no longer is anything acted out, represented, simulated or interpreted. there are no actors playing roles, paint and color are no longer arranged to illustrate anything and aren't even arranged on a surface. everything happens in reality, it's life itself."¹ "The most important thing about my theater," Nitsch tells filmmaker Jonas Mekas in a 1968 interview, "is that the things in it really happen. . . . The objects that I use are real—animals, blood, sugar. They are not symbols for something else, like in the old theater . . . I have here this dead lamb, and I pour blood into it, and I give it away—it all happens. I want to make theater where everything really happens."²

Nitsch's is a "direct" art that eschews representation in favor of enactment.³ A key aspect of his theater is the reduction of spoken language to an absolute minimum. His works include music, singing (of the vowel "A," for instance, in Nitsch's *First Abreaction Play* of 1961), and screaming, but rarely text with words that the actors recite.⁴ But this is not to say that Nitsch's works are non-linguistic. He writes detailed scores that dictate every gesture and sound, even as he insists on the importance of chance.⁵ Although Nitsch might seem to ban language from his *Aktionen*, close attention to passages like this reveals that he is only limiting its role: "negation of the word, this regression to the ecstasy of the scream is communication with the unconscious, a conscious and analytic plunge into the unconscious. one gives oneself over to the intoxication of vegetative and often feverishly dynamic laws."⁶ Words are supplanted by other linguistic phenomena: communication, analysis, laws. Even in Nitsch's theater of immediacy, mediation is center stage.

It is worth dwelling on this coincidence of immediacy and mediation because it establishes Nitsch's oeuvre as a field governed by tenacious struggles. Nitsch often functions in art historical and literary critical accounts as the high priest of presence, as a straw man to be played off against other artists and writers of the Viennese avant-gardes who, these accounts claim, pay more attention to the problems of representation. A reconsideration of Nitsch on his own terms reveals a body of work that is richer and more complex than these accounts have been willing to recognize. His *Aktionen* should be seen as carefully circumscribed sites in which conflicts are played out between myth and enlightenment, repression and liberation, nature and culture, animality and humanity, organization and chance.

Just as there is no naive attempt by Nitsch to reject language, there is also "no sentimental 'back to nature,' " "no return to animality" or "retrieval of the past" in his theater, Nitsch writes.⁷ He aims for extreme, intoxicating experiences, but also to "tame" and "master" intoxication, even to transform it into a "discipline."⁸ He stages violence so that participants and spectators might, through catharsis, be liberated from it: Nitsch's "ORGIES MYSTERIES THEATER carries forward, scientifically, humanity's idea of salvation. humanity will free itself from the mythical, a regenerated humanity will come to know itself in its most intimate play."⁹ His works are scientific operations. And his rites are always also theoretical: "if one views my project as an organism, the practical realization is the flesh. theory is its blood."¹⁰

Theory courses through Nitsch's projects even when they seem to resist it. Jacques Derrida's writings on Antonin Artaud, perhaps Nitsch's most important precursor, help to elucidate this discord in Nitsch. In Artaud's theater of cruelty, Derrida writes, "speech will cease to govern the stage, but will be present upon it. Speech will occupy a rigorously delimited place, will have a function within a system to which it will be coordinated. . . . Everything . . . will be prescribed in a writing and a text whose fabric will no longer resemble the model of classical representation."¹¹

Derrida closes one of his essays on Artaud by describing what he calls Artaud's "fatal complicity" with metaphysics: "Through this complicity is articulated

a necessary dependency of all destructive discourses: they must inhabit the structures they demolish, and within them they must shelter an indestructible desire for full presence, for nondifference."¹² Nitsch's works are marked by a similar complicity: a desire for presence and identity that persists despite attempts to destroy everything associated with them.

A similar conflict can be seen in the role of clothing in Nitsch's actions and paintings. As Nitsch and his actors carry out the actions prescribed by his texts, they wear what Nitsch refers to as "ritual garments," which he often includes in his paintings, as in the *Schüttbild mit Hemd* included in the exhibition. As painter and participants clean their hands on their shirts, they register the "hieroglyphs of chance" and "seismographically" record the "passion and rebirth of the creaturely."¹³

But these garments are not immune from the tensions that run through Nitsch's project as a whole: although they may be intended to recall ritual vestments, they also resemble hospital, prison, and asylum uniforms (fig. 1).¹⁴ His actors seem to be at once ritual celebrants and institutional functionaries or inhabitants. Nitsch's Aktionen contain elements of the "great rituals" that Michel Foucault identified as essential to pre-Enlightenment political systems, in which "punishment is carried out in such a way as to give a spectacle . . . of imbalance and excess."¹⁵



Figure 1: *Schüttbild mit Hemd*, 1998

Intoxication is, however, always part of a training regimen for Nitsch, and the garments' institutional aspect corresponds to the carefully organized aspect of his spectacles. They thus also point to how Nitsch's works belong to the regime of disciplinary power that Foucault describes in *Discipline and Punish* as "fixing, dividing, recording" human behavior and creating what Foucault calls "knowable man."¹⁶ Nitsch may aim for the participants in his Aktionen to have an "experience of fundamental excess" (*grundexzesserlebnis*), but the goal of this experience is the overcoming of repression and the development of participants' "ability to experience."¹⁷ Participants submit themselves as docile bodies and carry out prescribed gestures and acts as they engage in a process of "self-discovery" and develop "something that is present in [them] but that has been neglected."¹⁸

Nitsch is thoroughly modern in his harnessing of the body's forces in pursuit of knowledge. His Orgies Mysteries Theater can be considered both an *ars erotica* ("an absolute mastery of the body, a singular bliss, obliviousness to time and limits, the elixir of life, the exile of death and its threats") and a *scientia sexualis* (oriented according to the "infinite task of extracting from the depths of oneself . . . a truth").¹⁹ Nitsch's theater is about power, the development of his participants' capacities through a meticulously staged theater of excess.

It might seem that Nitsch is a dramatist and not a visual artist, but in fact all of Nitsch's Aktionen are part of an expanded painting practice. Inspired by Jackson Pollock and the *tachistes*, Nitsch began a temporalization and "spatialization of the painterly process."²⁰ In these predecessors, Nitsch saw a kind of painting that had abandoned representation and reduced itself to events taking place on the canvas. His Orgies Mysteries Theater extends this reductive process into performances that turn bodies, sheets, clothes, ritual objects, and walls into surfaces for painting with animal blood, meat, egg yolks, and other materials.

Painting on canvas is still a central part of Nitsch's practice and is intended to be as multidimensional and multisensory as his theater is: "painting should activate, synaesthetically, the five senses trained by the *gesamtkunstwerk* [of the o. m. theater]; it should transport us into a state of intense life. in the o. m. theater the participant is confronted with tastes and smells, tonal colors, visually perceptible

colors, and tactile impressions: the paintings' colors, color temperatures bear within themselves these synaesthetic relations: the colors should be tasteable, smellable, tactile; they should convey themselves as sound: the haptic remains essential."²¹ Nitsch's canvases attempt to communicate with all five senses, and especially the senses of touch and taste. According to Nitsch, taste is the root of all the senses, and "the grasping of a painting must descend into the depths of tasting."²²

Although this synaesthetic conception of painting highlights the extreme immediacy of taste, the paintings in the exhibition are run through with the same tensions that characterize Nitsch's project as a whole. The poured paint and blood are meant to represent nothing more than the act of painting, yet through this reduction they point to this act; they become indexical marks of the painting process. As a poured painting, *Schüttbild (6-Day Play)* makes the act of painting present; as remnant of the *6-Day Play*, it refers to an event that has already taken place, elsewhere. The grids in these paintings are, like many modernist grids, "antinatural, antimimetic, antireal," and thus reinforce Nitsch's nonrepresentational vision of his theater (fig. 2).²³ But they also belong to Nitsch's insistent conception of his painting as part of a pantheistic festival in which viewers "taste" the paintings "like the flesh and blood of god, which acts in us as the essential substance of the universe and nourishes our being."²⁴ The grids lay the groundwork for this experience and indicate the simultaneously material and existential aspirations of the Orgies Mysteries Theater.

Figure 2: *Schüttbild (6-Day Play)*, 1998



These paintings are emblematic of Nitsch's attempts to make his works two things at once: nothing more than mere material objects, and nothing less than vehicles for experiencing the "tragic suffering of being." The blood in Nitsch's paintings could be read (and to read it, to interpret it, is already to move away from life itself, from the conception of a direct art) as the trace of the struggles that tear them in these two directions.

¹Hermann Nitsch, "versuche zur geschichte der aktion" (1971), in Hermann Nitsch, *Das Orgien Mysterien Theater: Manifeste, Aufsätze, Vorträge* (Salzburg and Vienna: Residenz, 1990), 46-47 (hereafter cited as *Manifeste*). Quotations from Hermann Nitsch's writings retain their lack of capitalization.

²Nitsch, "Interview with Jonas Mekas," *Orgien, Mysterien, Theater = Orgies, Mysteries, Theatre* (Cologne: März, 1969), 13 (hereafter cited as *O. M. Theater*).

³Unattributed phrases in quotation marks are from Nitsch's remarks in the interview in this volume. ⁴Nitsch, *The First Abreaction-Play* (1961), in *O. M. Theater*, 84-124. Some of his early scores contain texts spoken by participants. In *The First Abreaction Play*, Esos shouts, "Catch me!"; in *harmating, ein fest* (1972), Nitsch includes the texts of songs to be sung as well as texts that are to be distributed and read aloud.

⁵A bilingual selection of scores for his actions can be found in Nitsch, *O. M. Theater*, 83-329.

⁶Nitsch, *The First Abreaction-Play* (1961), in *O. M. Theater*, 85.

⁷Nitsch, "behauptungen und beschreibungen zum projekt des o.m. theaters" (1978) in *Manifeste*, 121; and Nitsch, "der geschissim im o.m. theater" (1985), in *Manifeste*, 128-29.

⁸Nitsch, "behauptungen und beschreibungen zum projekt des o.m. theaters" (1978) in *Manifeste*, 117; Nitsch, "farbige bilder" (1990), in *Manifeste*, 167; Nitsch, "behauptungen und beschreibungen zum projekt des o.m. theaters" (1978) in *Manifeste*, 117.

⁹Nitsch, "das o.m. theater" (1962), in *Manifeste*, 10. In Nitsch's theater, "all the hidden, forbidden, unsavory, shameless, sadistic, masochistic instinctive needs are torn out from inside us and through art are transposed aesthetically into form, made conscious and visible. (The human element frees itself from the 'bestial')." Nitsch, *The First Abreaction-Play* (1961), in *O. M. Theater*, 118.

¹⁰Nitsch, "gedanken zur theorie des aktionismus und des o.m. theaters" (1989), in *Manifeste*, 161.

¹¹Jacques Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), 239.

¹²*Ibid.*, 194.

¹³Nitsch, "farbige bilder" (1990), in *Manifeste*, 168.

¹⁴See Nitsch's remarks in the interview in this volume.

¹⁵Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York: Vintage, 1977), 49.

¹⁶*Ibid.*, 305.

¹⁷Nitsch, "behauptungen und beschreibungen zum projekt des o.m. theaters" (1978) in *Manifeste*, 122-23.

¹⁸Nitsch "vorwort" (1990), in *Manifeste*, 6; and Nitsch, "der gesichtssinn im o.m. theater" (1985) in *Manifeste*, 129. Brigid Doherty speaks about dutiful bodies in Nitsch in Brigid Doherty and Hal Foster, "On Body & Performance" (discussion), Slough Foundation, Philadelphia, March 3, 2005, available as an MP3 audio file at <http://slought.org/content/11264/>.

¹⁹See Foucault, *History of Sexuality, Volume I: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage, 1978), 58.

²⁰Benjamin H.D. Buchloh, "1962b," in Hal Foster et al., ed., *Art Since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism* (New York: Thames and Hudson, 2004), 464. Thomas Dreher sketches out Vienna Actionism's historical contact with Abstract Expressionism and tachisme in *Performance Art nach 1945: Aktionstheater und Intermedia* (Munich: Fink, 2001), 163. Nitsch's account of his contact with tachisme is in Hermann Nitsch, "die entwicklung des o.m. theaters," *O.M. Theater Lesebuch*, ed. Gerhard Jaschke (Vienna: Freibord, 1985), 127-28.

²¹Nitsch, "farbige bilder" (1990), in *Manifeste*, 167.

²²*Ibid.*

²³Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1985), 9.

²⁴Nitsch, "farbige bilder" (1990), in *Manifeste*, 167.