

"HYPERVIOLENCE AND HYPERSEXUALITY"

Paul Virilio interviewed by Nicholas Zurbrugg

Paul Virilio is one of the most influential European theorists currently discussing contemporary media, and is the subject of the recent Sage Press anthology, Paul Virilio: From Modernism to Hypermodernism and Beyond. In the following interview he discusses his increasing dismay before escalating 'hyperviolence and hypersexuality'



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NZ Viewed in this context, the French body artist Orlan is perhaps most interesting in terms of her subversion of these conventions. She challenges dominant standards of beauty by manipulating her facial appearance in satellite-broadcast surgical operation performances and systematically accompanies her exhibitions with public lectures or 'conferences' in order to guarantee discussion of her ideas, rapidly scandalizing audiences with unbearable video images and then instigating sustained debate. But I suspect you may have less enthusiastic reactions to her performances.

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I think there's now a kind of multimedia academy. When I write about 'pitiful academic art', it's because television art seems to have become an academic art with particular standards, rules, mannerisms and uniformities of presentation. For me the 'body art' of Orlan and other artists—and here, I'm not talking about the Australian artist Stelarc—contributes to the way in which the real body, and its real presence, are menaced by various kinds of virtual presence.

What disturbs me most in Orlan's work is the way in which it seems to have a kind of academic and multimediated quality, above all in terms of the kind of persona that she presents. Like Stelarc's performances, there's something pitiless about her work. It's at the very limits of torture—it's an art of torture, an art of auto-mutilation and torture! And yet I have the impression that Orlan is nevertheless a seductress, working across the media. Now I don't reproach her for being a seductress, but I reproach her for having recuperated mass-media models, or more specifically, a kind of academicism. These, at least, are my initial impressions.

NZ But doesn't your own writing run similar risks? It's full of different quotations, many of them academic, offering a kind of anti-academic criticism

resisting more traditional academic discourse, but at the same time nourishing itself upon the kind of writing that it rejects. One of the artist's or critic's key problems, in other words, seems to be that of extricating themselves from precisely the kind of dominant discourses that they most obviously critique.

PV Well, it seems to me that unlike Soutine, unlike Beckett, unlike the Viennese Actionists, unlike first world war expressionists such as Otto Dix, today's artists and writers no longer pursue violence to its extremes. This pitiless art, this modern art of the 'impitoyable', was born after all in 1914. It was born in the atrocity of Verdun, in the atrocity documented by Otto Dix, just as Breton's surrealism emerged directly from the first world war. These are people who saw Verdun and Auschwitz, and who, if they play with all of this, do so in full awareness of this kind of horror and abomination. By contrast, artists today seem unable to register this dimension of horror. Horror has simply become another effect, a seduction effect like any other, despite the fact that we still confront this dimension of horror in the recent massacres in Srebrenica and in Rwanda.

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couldn't cut himself off from the first world war, just as the Viennese Actionists of the sixties couldn't cut themselves off from Auschwitz. They were always fully aware of the terrifying and truly monstrous dimensions of our times. Whereas we've subsequently been living in a culture of dissuasion in which we talk about 'pure' warfare and 'clean' warfare. It's for these reasons that I like Stelarc, because his efforts to tear himself apart show the same sort of commitment as these earlier artists. Of all contemporary artists Stelarc is closest to the Viennese Actionists.

NZ But Stelarc and Orlan belong to another generation, and surely can't be blamed for lacking direct experience of the horrors of the early twentieth century? To be fair to Orlan, she also argues that her work consciously attacks the kinds of art and theory that she finds too commercial, too abstract and too academic. And although she endorses the way in which fashion models have used latex replications of the physical effects—such as the cheek implants in her forehead—that she has obtained through surgery, she's obviously not simply a plastic doll, but in the course of her operations has quite literally incarnated her critique of conventional identity.

PV All the same, one's not obliged to agree with her ideas. When I first met Orlan I told her that I didn't agree with her, and that I reserved the right to disagree! It's the same thing with Stelarc. Some aspects of his work interest me and others don't. There's no need for a kind of uniformity in the domain of terror.

NZ Are some of these reactions a generational phenomenon? If I mention Jimi Hendrix to my students they think of him as an historical reference rather than the kind of living presence that he still remains for my generation, and I probably react with similar indifference towards younger rock groups that seem more important to them. Perhaps for critics of your generation, the spectacle of an artist like Orlan undertaking surgical operations in a carnivalesque context is bound to appear more artificial than the work of earlier artists, such as the Viennese Actionists, who seem closer to earlier historical experience. To what extent is art relative to one generation or several generations?

PV I don't think that art is generational, whereas I do think that the concept of 'contemporary art' is far more interesting than that of 'modern art'. The notion of the contemporary is already more comprehensive and encompasses the generational. When one talks about generational art one's thinking about artistic fashion, and for me art is not a matter of fashion.

NZ Is theory a matter of fashion?

PV Not for me, not for me! It's a question of contemporaneity. Viewed in terms of a whole century, we all resemble one another. In Shakespeare's time, even if Shakespeare wasn't Marlowe, they resembled one another, they had something in common. And that's nothing to do with a generation—it's a social and an historical phenomenon. That's why, in terms of art, the whole twentieth century interests me, because it reflects my contemporaneity.

So when I consider what I think of as the 'impitoyable'—or pitiless—register of twentieth century art, I'm equally interested in the Cubists, the Surrealists, the Futurists, the Viennese Actionists, abstract artists, body artists and so on. That's what interests me, because we're all together in a time which has its own particular aesthetic colour. The twentieth century has its own particular colour, and it's the colour of shit!

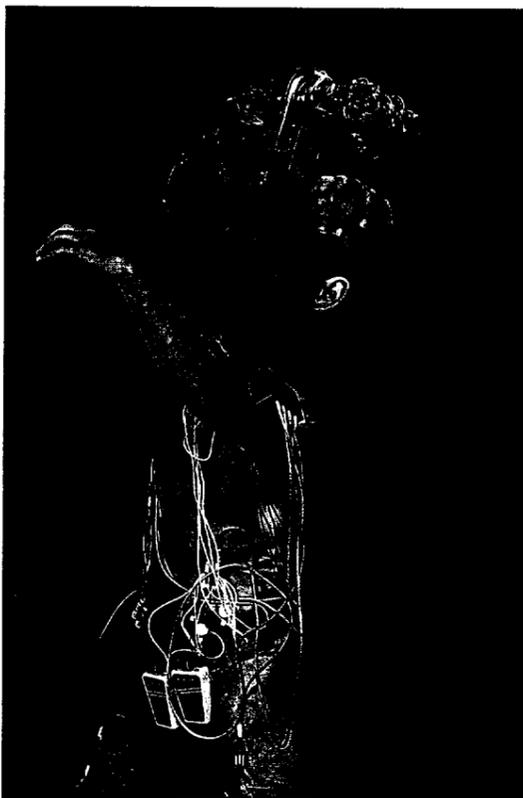
I agree with Camus—for me, it has been a pitiless, horrific century! It disgusts me! And yet it's my century! And I'm of this century and everything I write comes out of this particular time. And it's for this reason that it's not a question of judgement, or of saying this is good, this is bad, this is true, this is false.

No, it's a passionate response—in the sense of being 'passionnel'. The twentieth century is intrinsically 'passionnel'—it has no traces of reason so far as I am concerned. The twentieth century is a century without rationality, it's irrational, pitiless, unreasonable, not to say mad!

Otto Dix, *Self-Portrait as a soldier*, 1914-15.



When I write about 'pitiful academic art', it's because televisual art seems to have become an academic art with particular standards, rules, mannerisms and uniformities of presentation.



Stelarc, *The Third Hand, Tokyo*. Performance. Photo: S. Hunter. ARC ©.

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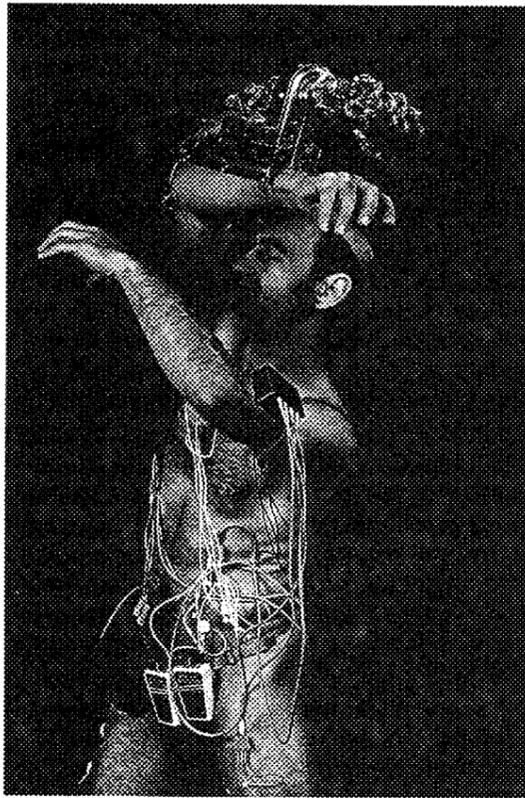
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Stelarc, *The Third Hand*, Tokyo Performance, Photo: S. Hunter. AFRIC ©.

And the only person who anticipated the twentieth century was Nietzsche! Because he was mad! What's crucial with Nietzsche is not to deny his madness, but to affirm it! And it's by virtue of his madness that he anticipated everything! Like Kafka! Kafka is one of the great ones for me—he's the writer of the twentieth century just as Nietzsche is the philosopher of the twentieth century! It's not Heidegger, it's not Husserl, it's not Deleuze, it's Nietzsche! Nietzsche, in terms of the pitiless character of his vision. Nietzsche and Kafka—there are only one or two like that! That's my real concern! It's not a question of 'I like this' or 'I don't like that'.

NZ It's a question of intensity?

PV Of intensity! This has been a tragic century. I sense this quality of tragedy in the work of Stelarc, just as I sense it in the performances of Viennese Actionists such as Herman Nitsch and Rudolf Schwarzkogler and in the painting of Francis Bacon, but I don't feel it in the work of Orlan. Perhaps this is just an emotional response, but you don't have to justify an emotion. An emotion justifies itself. If I experience a feeling of repulsion I don't have to judge it.

Nevertheless, to be objective, it's certain that the fact that Orlan is a woman, as opposed to Stelarc, changes my point of view. A man's attitude towards a woman isn't the same as his attitude towards a man. Why? Because man is always an executioner. For my generation, man is an executioner and a potential source of death. Let me explain—my generation consists of men who went to war. Women didn't go to war, although things have changed, of course. In other words, the profession of death was a male profession, the profession of horror and of death—as depicted by Dix—was a male profession. And suddenly to see a woman addressing these issues—that's something very rare, and perhaps it's that which disturbs me in Orlan's work—the fact that it's produced by a woman! Perhaps that's the reason.

NZ Do you think that pitiless or 'impitoyable' sensibility is changing into something else as we enter the new millennium? Are we witnessing new kinds of 'pitiless' iconography or sensibility?

PV In my opinion, the new 'impitoyable' is to be found in pornography. Pornography is no longer simply the display of sex, but aligns itself with torture. Pornographic videos have gradually assimilated snuff movies—pornography now invades death—and that, for me, is the new 'impitoyable'. And nobody speaks about it! It's astonishing that there are not more articles about snuff movies. For twenty

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years we've had video cassettes depicting adults and children being tortured, initially sexually, and finally to death, to final orgasm. Why? That's the real 'impitoyable'.

Somehow Actionism and Auschwitz crossed paths, and now it's in art. Snuff movies are Auschwitz as art. In Auschwitz artworks were made from human skin and torture became an artform. And much of contemporary art's exhibitionism is not far from that. It's like bullfighting. Bullfighting is an art, an art of death—a pitiless artform like the Roman circus—and this art need not simply involve animals.

But when this pitiless quality infiltrates art, it has to provoke reactions—poetic reactions and ethical reactions! Otherwise, Auschwitz is vindicated, and with it Adorno's claim that there can be no poetry after Auschwitz. We need to reconsider the whole question of the 'impitoyable'—of the pitiless—in a new way, and the word 'pity' needs to become an artistic word. Not in terms of pity in the academic sense of 'pitiful', but of pity in a vaster, more tragic sense. I always examine things at their most tragic extremes!

NZ Perhaps the problem is that our culture is reluctant to admit that in many respects there have been many kinds of Auschwitz after Auschwitz? There's a sort of collective dream that all of that has somehow finished, rather than acknowledging that in popular television, film and video cultures one finds the same tastes, the same instincts—not least perhaps at the level of the bullfights broadcast in Europe by Spanish television.

PV Exactly, the same taste for death and the same taste for suffering.

NZ In other words it's something that has never gone away and has just been brushed under the carpet. Once again, art faces the dilemma of losing its impact and reality as it aestheticises—and one might say, virtualizes—reality.

PV In French we have the saying, 'On ne fait pas de bonne littérature avec de bons sentiments'—'Fine

literature can't be made from fine sentiments'. My response is, 'Yes, that's true. But can one make fine literature from bad sentiments?' It's a major question! But let's consider it in the alternative perspective of the academy and the 'pitoyable'—the pitiful. We've talked about modernist culture and the 'impitoyable'—the pitiless. Let's consider the extent to which academic art can be said to be pitiful.

Why is academic art pitiful? Because it's chosen the beautiful, the good, the angelic and a certain pre-Raphaelite sensibility in order to create an allegedly 'sacred' art where everything is beautiful, everything is benign, everything is charming and it's all terrible! But can't one also see the same process in reverse, in an art that flourishes in the most extreme, the most disgusting and the most diabolic and most terrifying horror! And isn't this equally a pitiful art? A pitiable art?

NZ But couldn't one argue that great art at least sometimes reveals the horrific and the revolting with significant finesse, force or grace?

PV But wait a minute! Artists and authors have less and less real power! And why is this? Because they have been mediatised. That's to say they have become trapped within media systems which can only function by means of hyperviolence and hypersexuality. The problem with mediatisation is that the individual is no longer really free but is conditioned by the media, by television programmes, by news broadcasts and so on. And this kind of information increasingly veers towards greater and greater atrocities. Think of cinema, for example! What's left of cinema now, save for a few directors like Godard and Ken Loach? What's left? Hyperviolence and hypersexuality!

Personally, I can no longer go to the cinema as I used to—I walk out—I can no longer tolerate it! When I see a bull collapse in a pool of blood in the bullring at least there's some kind of art there. But in contemporary cinema everything consists of special effects—everything is faked and everything plays upon an excess of sensation and an excess of emotion. It's all terrorism, hyperviolence and hypersexuality! That's what I see everywhere contaminating



Hermann Nitsch, 43rd Action, 15/1/1974. Modernes Theater, Munich. Photo: D. Meller-Marcovicz. Courtesy Francesco Conz.



Rudolf Schwarzkogler, 3rd Action—Untitled, Verano 1965. Vivienda Cibulka, Vienna. Photo: L. Hoffenreich. Courtesy Francesco Conz.

the media! That's mediatisation! And that's why I distance myself from performances utilising the media.

NZ But aren't there also certain exceptional artists working with evolving media who can be said to refine the power, beauty or individual quality of their work? In such cases, the artist can surely be said to become more authentically, rather than less authentically themselves, by using new technologies?

PV Yes, but media are not the same thing as technology. Media are the system, media are 'entertainment'! For Italians and half-Italians like myself, 'entertainment' consists of *commedia del arte* and cinema and all kinds of conventional spectacles. That's what I mean by media.

NZ Isn't this a problem of cultural deprivation? Those nourished on mass-mediated entertainment are almost inevitably going to be ignorant of more substantial kinds of technological experimentation and deprived of the kind of extreme, 'impitoyable' sensibility that you associate with great modernist art, but surely this doesn't mean that all traces of such art have either necessarily or wholly disappeared?

For example, at the 'Re-Thinking the Avant-Garde' conference in Leicester recently, where both

Orlan and Stelarc presented their research, many of the audience seemed totally unprepared for the impact of the performances by somewhat less notorious sixty and seventy year-old avant-garde veterans, such as the English sound poet Bob Cobbing, the French sound poet Bernard Heidsieck and the Swedish text-sound composer Sten Hanson, and appeared virtually unaware of the multimedia poetic practices of the last three decades. This widespread public—and one might add, academic—ignorance of vital contemporary cultural currents is surely one of the most disturbing aspects of mass-media culture today.

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NZ Or can it only survive in new forms, or in extreme states of isolation?

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NZ But there again, if new media like satellites or the internet broadcast the isolated or private activities of the artist, and if this kind of isolated or private performance constitutes the artist's work, couldn't

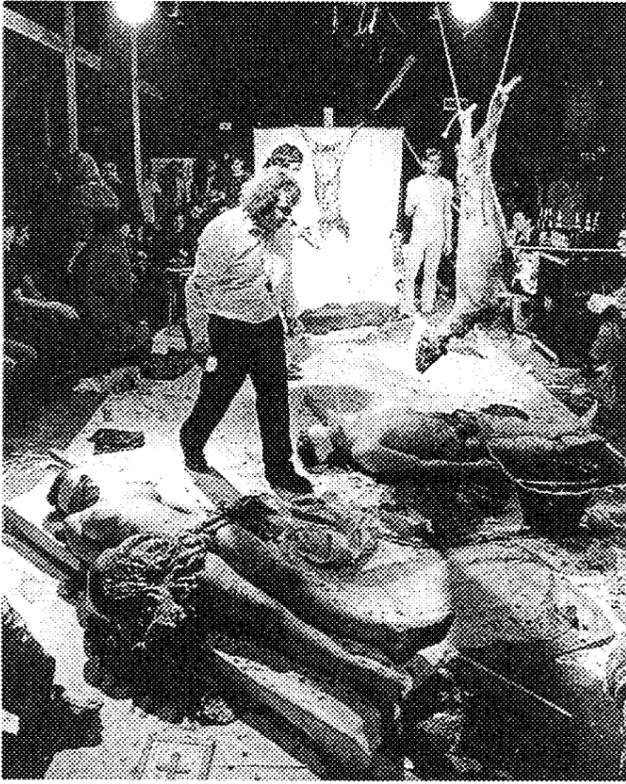
one claim that in certain circumstances new media offer significant new bridges between artists, authors, performers and a wider audience?

PV When this object known as the internet has become more banal, we will perhaps be able to do something with it. For the moment it is far too romanticised, it is far too much of a publicity object. But the day when it becomes as banal as a bicycle or a telephone, perhaps at that moment something will come of it. But for the moment it's a kind of all-purpose machine.

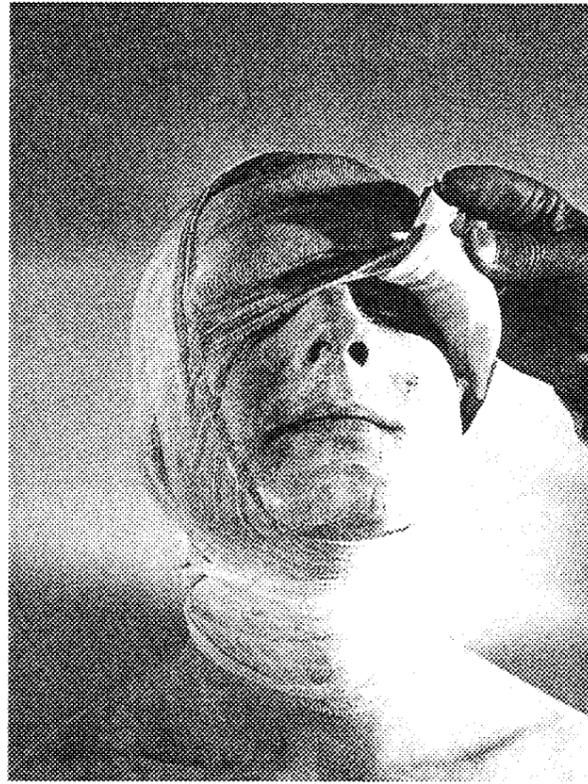
NZ The same things might have been said about the early days of silent cinema, but even then, weren't there clear exceptions such as Charlie Chaplin's films? At their beginnings, don't all new media have the potential advantage of being richly open creative fields?

PV It's possible—it's possible. We'll have to wait and see.'

Paris: 11 January 1999
Translation © Nicholas Zurbrugg
Nicholas Zurbrugg lectures in Humanities
at De Montfort University, Leicester.



Hermann Nitsch, *4th Action*, 15/11/1974, Modernes Theater, Munich. Photo: D. Meller-Maronovitz. Courtesy Francesco Conz.



Rudolf Schwarzkogler, *3rd Action-Untitled*, Verona 1985, Vivivenda Cibulka, Vienna. Photo: L. Hoffenreich. Courtesy Francesco Conz.

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