

# Sacrificial Simulacra from Nietzsche to Nitsch

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*Hyperion*, Volume III, issue 3, June 2008

HYPERION

On the future of aesthetics

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## SUMMARY

This paper explores the sacrificial rite as the quintessential mythopoetic gesture (in the absence of myth). Kristeva's understanding of sacrifice as socially and symbolically foundational is consistent with the findings of social anthropology, but is contrary to the explorations of sacrificial imagery as an antidote to the modern condition. Nietzsche collapses the ontotheological signifiatory system through the sacrifice of its transcendental signified. After a brief overview of sacrifice in Nietzsche, discussion turns to how this informed Bataille's understanding of the sacred, as well as the failed sacrifice of his *Acéphale* project. The paper concludes with a discussion of sacrifice in Hermann Nitsch's *Orgien-Mysterien Theater* as decontextualized ritual.

## TEXT

Perhaps no act better represents modern civilization's supposed other, the savage, than the ultimate mythopoetic gesture, the ritual of sacrifice. As Julia Kristeva claims in *Revolution in Poetic Language*: "sacrifice designates, precisely, the watershed on the basis of which the social and the symbolic are instituted" (1984: 75). But for the myth-less modern man (who equates myth with lie), the bloodless death of Socrates and the crucifixion of Jesus render the barbarity of such rites obsolete, clearing the way for a more pacified sense of the holy than the horrifying means of religious communication among peoples (and, perhaps, the divine) offered by more archaic sacred sensibilities. In the Euro-American conflation of the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian, the ontotheological signifiatory system, the violence of sacrifice is discharged with the symbolism of the Mass, and then ignored altogether in the progressive name of reason. It is with the transgressive words of Nietzsche, "God is dead," that this signifiatory system is itself sacrificed. My purpose here is to explore how Nietzsche engages with the simulacra of sacrifice as an antidote to the modern condition, how his exploration of this thematic motif is understood by Georges Bataille, whose theoretical obsession with this theme involved attempts at ritual practice, and how the ultimate status of contemporary post-theological sacrifice as decontextualized ritual is perhaps

best exemplified by Das Orgien-Mysterien Theater of the Viennese Actionist, Hermann Nitsch.

The first stirrings of Nietzsche's diagnosis of the absence of the sacred at the heart of modernity are found in his first work, *The Birth of Tragedy* [*Die Geburt der Tragödie*] where he notes that myth "is already paralyzed everywhere" (1968: 111). Arguing that tragic myth must be the response to this paralysis, and that this can only be done through an artwork that brings Apollinian structure to Dionysian insight, he concludes the book in the fictitious voice of an "old Athenian [. . .] with the eyes of Aeschylus," who encourages the reader to, "follow me to a tragedy, and sacrifice with me [*opfere mit mir*] in the temple of both deities" (1968: 144). This closing image, this first shift from the author's voice to the voice of another (a shift to drama), leaves the reader to question: what will be sacrificed?

In *Human, All Too Human* [*Menschliches, Allzumenschliches*], Nietzsche returns to the question of the sacrificial when he contemplates an archaeological display of sacrificial utensils (in section 112). The sight causes him to note the difficulty for the modern mind to appreciate the "combination of farce, even obscenity, with religious feeling" (1984: 84). What had been held sacred is now identified with the profane, the reconstitution of the sacred as holy recognized as a historical loss. Taking an objective position on the sacrificial objects and their decontextualization, Nietzsche observes that, "some feelings are disappearing: the sensibility that this is a possible mixture is vanishing; we understand it only historically that it once existed, in festivals of Demeter and Dionysus, at Christian passion plays and mystery plays" (1984: 84). Nietzsche associates the sacrificial objects with celebrations to the feminine deity and the feminized male deity—the chthonic and the tragic—as well as the theatre and drama of medieval Christianity. Even though these dramatic works share in the Christian, anti-Dionysian worldview, there remains a trace of the Dionysian in their theatricality. It is difficult to determine if this passage is a lament, comment, or celebration. Are we to look forward to the time in which this blend of sacred and profane is no longer understood or have we cooled off too much, the fire in need of rekindling?

The question becomes more problematic with the next section (113) of *Human, All Too Human*. Reacting to the sound of churchbells, he questions the persistence of Christian belief in an age of reason. Like the sacrificial utensils, "the Christian religion is surely an antiquity jutting out from a far-distant time" (1984: 84). As he makes a list of tenets of faith he perceives as absurdities, he cites the sacrificial core of Christianity: "a justice that accepts the innocent man as a proxy sacrifice; someone who has his disciples drink his blood [. . .] the figure of the cross as a symbol, in a time that no longer knows the purpose and shame of the cross. [. . .] Are we to believe that such things are still believed?" (1984: 85). Nietzsche seems here to share in an

Enlightenment view of the sacrificial as a barbaric embarrassment from the all-too-dark (sub)human past. In the light of scientific progress, he appears to suggest, how can anyone shun the better conscience of reason and believe in such uncivilized superstition? One imagines that these two sections call for an end to all religious sensibility, that the appetite for sacrifice should become as useless as an appendix, from an evolutionary standpoint.

However, a far different view of the sacrificial is offered in section 138. Imagining a state of extreme excitement and tension, directed outside oneself at another (an enemy), Nietzsche touches on a theory of catharsis. Man, when “brought into a state of extraordinary tension,” is faced with the possibility of not only destroying the other but himself as well: “Under the influence of the powerful emotion, he wants in any event what is great, powerful, enormous, and if he notices by chance that to sacrifice his own self satisfies as well or better than to sacrifice the other person, then he chooses that. Actually, all he cares about is the release of his emotion; to relieve his tension” (1984: 96). This desire for catharsis finds its ultimate release in the willful transformation of not only a subject for an object, but one’s subjectivity given over to object-ness. While the sacrificial may be what is “great, powerful and enormous,” the sacrifice of one’s self is what is most great, powerful and enormous. Nietzsche goes on to say that, “a divinity that sacrifices itself was the strongest and most effective symbol of this kind of greatness” (1984: 96). He is careful here to use the past tense. His awareness or concern for the efficacy of a symbol becomes problematic when one compares his earlier comment in *Human, All Too Human* on the symbolism of the cross with this comment on auto-deicide. What divinities does he have in mind here as “the strongest and most effective” symbolically? His earlier mocking comment on the symbolism of Christian sacrifice relates to the ignorance of adherents to the associations of humiliation and shame when the cross was employed as an instrument of capital punishment. Nonetheless, Nietzsche couldn’t argue that the Christian reconstitution of the symbolism of the cross has been ineffective. Its efficacy is undeniable but, Nietzsche would argue, its effects are in a state of deterioration. The sacrificial deity that (for Nietzsche) symbolizes greatness, Dionysus, does so through an affirmation of life, rather than its metaphysical denial.

The sacrificial trail that runs through *Human, All Too Human* reaches its conclusion in section 620, with the statement, “If there is a choice, a great sacrifice will be preferred to a small one, because we compensate ourselves for a great sacrifice with self-admiration, and this is not possible with a small one” (1984: 257). But what great sacrifice does Nietzsche have in mind?

In *The Gay Science* [*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*], he gives a suggestion, with the declaration of the death of God. Rather than a statement of simple atheism, his madman claims, “We have killed him—you and I. All of us are his

murderers” (1974: 181). This sacred violence of the death of god brings about a ritual necessity, as the madman asks: “what festivals of atonement, what sacred games will we have to invent?” (1974: 181).

It is perhaps odd that sacrifice, the quintessential religious act, should play such a prominent role in the thought of one whose work seemingly negates the religious instinct. But the announcement of the death of God does not render the symbolism of Christianity (reconstituted metaphysically by the Church) null and void; on the contrary (as he suggests in a fragment published as section 874 of *The Will to Power* [*Der Wille zur Macht*]), it frees the image, for with the spread of Christianity throughout the Roman Empire, “an image of God was spread which was as far removed as possible from the image of the most powerful—the god on the cross” (1954: 440). Collapsing this signficatory system recovers the most powerful symbol, using the most powerful symbol against its static simulacrum, for the crucifixion mimetically seals the sacrificial from its threat of contagion, the Mass a solemn parody of the most mythpoetic rite, killing myth.

In section 53 of *Beyond Good and Evil* [*Jenseits von Gut und Böse*], Nietzsche makes it clear that he reconstitutes the religious experience, and that the death of God promotes its renewal: “It seems to me that the religious instinct is indeed in the process of growing powerfully—but the theistic satisfaction it refuses with deep suspicion” (1968: 256). This refusal is described in section 55 as the last step in a “great ladder of religious cruelty” (1968: 257). Nietzsche distinguishes three stages in this ladder, beginning with “human beings to one’s god, perhaps precisely those whom one loved most. [. . .] Then, during the moral epoch of mankind, one sacrificed to one’s god one’s own strongest instincts, one’s ‘nature’ ” (1968: 257). The sacrifice of human beings, the finest and most beloved, was replaced during the reign of the ontotheological signficatory system with the destruction of that part of one’s self that is most intimately connected with the earth. By annulling one’s physicality, one sought to identify one’s self with spirit. Nietzsche’s deicidal words mark not only the end of that epoch, but the next stage in a sequence:

“

Finally—what remained to be sacrificed? At long last . . . didn’t one have to sacrifice God himself and, from cruelty against oneself, worship the stone, stupidity, gravity, fate, the nothing? To sacrifice God for the nothing—this paradoxical mystery of the final cruelty was reserved for the generation that is now coming up: all of us already know something of this. (1968: 257)

Here we see most clearly how for Nietzsche the announcement of the death of God bears witness to a sacrifice of the highest proportions, for the “final cruelty” is a world-epochal event of sacred violence.

We may mythologize Nietzsche and cite his descent into madness in the Turin square as his own sacrifice. This is reinforced by the names with which he signed his letters shortly thereafter, “Dionysus” and “The Crucified” (1996: 345). Still, the question from *The Gay Science* remains: what sacred rites must be invented to atone for the final cruelty?

A sincere attempt to respond to this question can be found in the work of Georges Bataille. Although Bataille began reading Nietzsche intensely in the early 1920’s, this influence did not appear in his writing until the 1930’s, especially in the journal *Acéphale*, which was the mouthpiece for a secret society that was, as he later described, “religious (but anti-Christian, and essentially Nietzschean)” (Hollier 1988: 387). In “Propositions,” an essay published in the second issue of the journal, he links the group with Nietzsche’s deicidal conception: “The *acephalic man* mythologically expresses sovereignty committed to destruction and the death of God, and in this identification with the headless man merges and melds with the identification with the superhuman, which IS entirely ‘the death of God’ ” (1985: 199). The methods used by the group to attain this tragic goal remain a subject of speculation. Little is known of the collective, for, as Maurice Blanchot claims in *The Unavowable Community*, “those who participated in it are not certain they had a part in it” (1988: 13). In his introduction to Bataille’s *Visions of Excess*, Allan Stoekl notes that, “There was even talk of an actual human sacrifice being performed, but it was never carried out” (1985: xx). The sacrifice remains an enigma, a point of contention among readers of Bataille who dare approach the subject. In his biography of Bataille, Roland Champagne mentions the group simply *en passant*, claiming “the group performed strange rituals, including the sacrifice of a goat (none of the members would volunteer to be a human sacrifice)” (1998: 13). Patrick Waldberg’s account supports this view, as he recalls:

“

At the last meeting in the heart of the forest, there were four of us and Bataille solemnly requested whether one of the three others would assent to being put to death, since this sacrifice would be the foundation of a myth, and ensure the survival of the community. This favour was refused him. Some months later the war was unleashed in earnest sweeping away what hope remained. (Brotchie 1995: 15-16)

Sylvère Lotringer offers an alternative view to that of Bataille as an all-too-willing sacrificer of others, as he attempts a more detailed explanation of this act that defined the community as its project and as its impossibility:



The little sect . . . met secretly at dusk, in the forest of Marly, near Paris. [. . .] It was agreed that their secret community would be sealed by a symbolic act, violent, irreversible, collectively shared, a “section” executed with implacable rigor that would separate them from the rest of society and raise them to the level of myth. This was the essence of the sacred. It was only recently [. . .] that the “sacred conspiracy” was finally disclosed: Bataille himself had volunteered to be murdered. But no one in the group offered to do the deed . . . (1999: 76)

The question is one of performance: what exactly was the rite and (why) was(n't) it staged?

The month after the last issue of *Acéphale* was published, at le Collège de Sociologie, Bataille claimed that, “men more religious than others cease to have a narrow concern for the community for which sacrifices are performed. They no longer live for the community; they only live for sacrifice” (1998: 252). An attempt at creating the sacred games desired by Nietzsche’s madman is thwarted not only by impending war, but also by the inability of the group to commit to the sacrificial rite, which would give birth to their myth. Bataille’s interest in sacrifice was greater than any community that the rite would ensure.

Far from dismissing the rite as impossibility, his first work after the group’s dissolution reaffirms his commitment to a Nietzschean conception of sacrifice. In *Inner Experience* (the first volume of *La Somme athéologique*), he explains: “That ‘God should be dead,’ victim of a sacrifice, only has meaning if profound” (1988: 133). The reduction of the phrase “God is dead” to mere statement of atheism reduces it to banality. The destruction of the concept of God is the refusal of its utility, its safeguard against temporality, that is, existence. To surrender its signficatory status is to sacrifice signification itself, collapsing the object that grounds all subjectivity and fixes all identity. This is the ultimate destiny of the Western will-to-knowledge: “the supreme abuse which man ultimately made of his reason requires a last sacrifice: reason, intelligibility, the ground itself upon which he stands—man must reject them, in him God must die; this is the depth of terror, the extreme limit where he succumbs” (1988: 134). All of thought’s metaphysical comforts are lost, for this Nietzschean inversion of a Hegelian *Aufhebung* accomplishes the finite transcendence

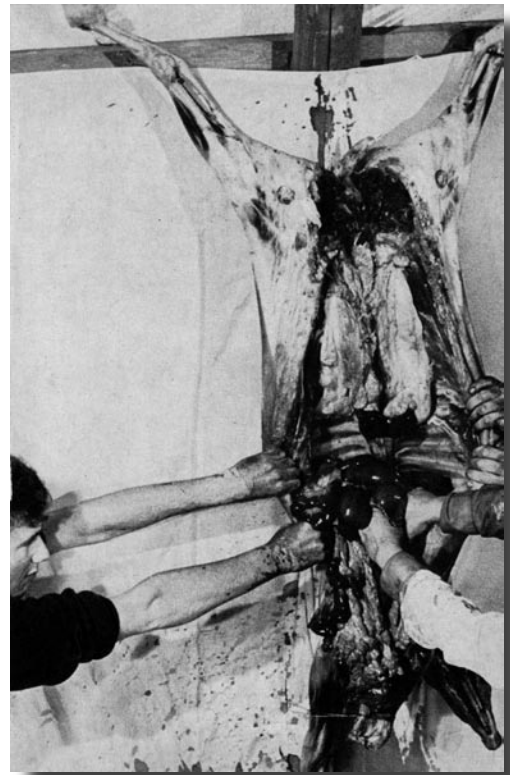
of tragic ecstasy as historical necessity, re-exposing consciousness to time as wound.

Perhaps by way of a justification for the failure of an Acéphale sacrifice, Bataille contends that if sacrifice is reviewed, "it is in image form" (1988: 135). Rather than continue with his pursuit of a new/old rite which would atone for the death of God, he takes recourse to a method of meditation he terms "dramatization," using, for instance, photographic images like those of an attempted assassin's torture by dismemberment (*Leng Tch'e* photos) he obtained from psychoanalyst Jacques Borel to provide him with the mimetic provocation to ecstatic states of consciousness. But this drama does not dare stage itself beyond the imaginary.

It is the work of Hermann Nitsch that best responds to the call for new rites in the wake of the death of God. His work has long reflected the influence of Nietzsche (in fact he spoke on Nietzsche at the Institute of Philosophy at Vienna University two weeks prior to this conference). I will avoid an overview of his career and focus briefly on two of his first "actions," performed in Vienna in 1962, his reception at the campus of the State University of New York at Binghamton in October 1970, and his latest, the *Six-Day-Play*, performed at Schloß Prinzendorf in lower Austria, from August 3<sup>rd</sup>-9<sup>th</sup>, 1998.

His "painting action" of 4 June 1962 was part of an exhibition entitled "The Blood Organ" [*Die Blutorgel*], held in conjunction with Adolf Frohner and Otto Muehl, in Muehl's cellar apartment in the Perinetgasse. After secluding themselves for three days, one of the cellar walls was knocked down to allow the public to visit. What they witnessed from Nitsch was a slaughtered and flayed lamb nailed head down, as if crucified, on a wall. Red paint was tipped and sprayed over a white canvas, and bloody innards and intestines placed on a white tablecloth, which Nitsch poured blood and hot water over, trickling down across the tablecloth and on to the floor (Green 1999: 131). Though this was his seventh painting action, it marked the first time that he poured blood on a canvas.

Nitsch published his "O.M. Theatre Manifesto" to coincide with this exhibition. In it he claims that his disembowelment of a dead lamb is "an 'aesthetic' substitute for the sacrificial act" in which "histrionic means will be harnessed to gain access to the profoundest and holiest symbols through blasphemy and desecration" (Green 1999: 132). Using a blend of Freudian and Jungian psychoanalytic theory, he explains his conception of sacrifice



as an “abreaction” that provokes both a release of tensions and a collapse of individuality in which the subject ceases to identify with the ego but with existence itself. The influence of Nietzsche is suggested when he notes: “the dionysian signifies the need for abreaction, whose awakening leads, with a relentless inevitability that stems from the economy of inner urges, to orgiastics, to the longing for pain, sacrifice, the cross” (Green 1999: 134). This need is met through the staging of actions that re-present mythical scenes, as listed at the end of the manifesto as:



the analytic leitmotif of the orgies mysteries theatre, concerning situations stemming from the primal excess

I. transubstantiation, last supper (behold, this is my flesh, this is my blood)

II. mount of olives

III. crucifixion

IV. orgiastics and sacrifice of dionysos, his rending

V. killing of orpheus

VI. adonis’s mutilation by the boar

VII. isis and osiris

VIII. attis, agdistis

IX. blinding of oedipus (castration symbol)

X. ritual castration

XI. animal sacrifice in general (animal sacrifice as a substitute for human sacrifice and as object of identification)

XII. totemic meals (the rending of the totemic animal)

XIII. the primal excess (the evisceration of the lamb in the o.m. theatre is an allegorical substitute for the primal excess experience), likewise liturgical painting penetrates to the primal excess (Green 1999: 134)

This list blends ancient Egyptian and Greek myths with those of Christianity in a manner that decontextualizes all. The desire to stage actions based upon these thirteen myths and rites creates a theatrical necessity that was not met by this exhibition, which presented the results to an audience.

Six months later, Nitsch staged his first “proper” action, in which a living moving body is employed, rather than simply inanimate (or ex-animate) objects. *Action 1* was staged at Muehl’s flat at Obere Augartenstraße on 19 December 1962. Nitsch himself, dressed in a white habit (to emphasize his priestly role) was tied to the wall of a room in a crucifixion position. Blood was then poured and squirted over his head, the results of which were captured by photographs, the bloody shirt transformed into a relic/*objet d’art*. The mechanical reproduction of these radically singular events becomes another feature of Nitsch’s work, presenting a challenge to Benjamin’s notion of the withering of aura in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1968: 224). Nitsch noted after the action that he was “particularly impressed after seeing the photographs” (Green 1999: 135). Indeed, photographic and cinematic documentation of the O.M. Theatre play a fundamental role in not only familiarizing the public with Nitsch’s work, but the spread of his taboo imagery, like a contagion, in a way resembling the effect the *Leng Tch’e* photos had on Bataille.

It is then interesting to note that the arrival of the O.M. Theatre at the campus of the State University of New York at Binghamton (SUNY) in October 1970 was at the invitation of the Film Department (rather than the more obvious programs in theatre, art history or comparative literature). There, Nitsch (and the films of Peter Kubelka) caused a great stir, with students, faculty and the local community arguing (in the pages of the student newspaper, *Pipe Dream*) over the relative brilliance or perversion of the O.M.T. (Givliano 1970: 11; Klempner 1970: 5; Rachlin 1970: 7). The event (promoted as a precursor to an eventual six-day-play) on 14 October involved a dead lamb, hung in a crucifixion position, then disemboweled and stomped on by the audience (several of whom consumed it after the performance). Among the charges against Nitsch and the SUNY authorities were accusations of animal killing, though, in keeping with the Manifesto of 1962, Nitsch only used animals that had already died of old age or had to be put down. But this raises a significant obstacle to the full realization of what he came to term the “primal excess”: since the corpses that were employed were already dead, the most powerful element of the sacrificial rite was missing, the death of the other. The very thing that his most vehement opponents had accused him of was that which he had not (yet) dared to do.

Among the appeals of the manifesto of 1962 are the closure of Vienna’s Burgtheater and the expropriation of its state funds for the development of a permanent home for the O.M.T. in Prinzendorf. This dream of a permanent theatre there was realized in 1971, when his (now, late) wife Beate purchased the Schloß there with her inheritance. This would allow him not only the freedom to experiment and perform without complications from various authorities, but to stage his ultimate creative fantasy, a six-day play (*Das 6-Tage-Spiel*).

This did not occur until August 1998, from the 3<sup>rd</sup> through the 9<sup>th</sup>. In addition to 100 actors and 180 musicians, materials used included “1,000 kilos of tomatoes, 1,000 kilos of grapes, 10,000 roses, 10,000 other assorted flowers, and 1,000 litres of blood” (“6-Tage-Spiel Overview” 1998: website). Numerous pigs and sheep were disemboweled, killed at a local slaughterhouse. However, the limit that others had accused him of crossing was, at last, crossed with the sacrifice of three bulls, the first at sunrise of the first day, the other two on the third and fifth days “by professional butchers under veterinary control” (“6-Tage-Spiel Overview” 1998: website).

The fundamental *raison d'être* for the O.M.T. remains the same since the manifesto of 1962, the language altered only slightly. The list of the “analytical leitmotif” becomes the “mythical leitmotif,” modified to set of twelve:



transubstantiation, communion  
the crucifixion of jesus christ  
the rending of dionysos  
the blinding of oedipus  
the ritual castration  
the murder of orpheus  
the murder of adonis  
isis and osirus [sic]  
the emasculation of attis  
the ritual regicide  
the killing of the totem animal and the totem animal feast  
the sado-masochistic primal excess, fundamental excess  
(Nitsch 1998: website)

In his “Provisional, Non-Binding Overall Conception of the 6-day play,” Nitsch claims that through the use of:



mythical leitmotif and suitable sequences of actions, the dramaturgic attempt will be made to plumb the depths and trace the path from the symbolic, sublimated eucharistic

sacrifice of the christian church back to the early forms of religion, of excessive totemism. This exploration is in the sense of an archeological analysis of religion. (Nitsch 1998: website)

Video documentation (available on the nitsch.org website and displayed at various galleries, such as White Box in Manhattan, from 7 October 1999 – 22 January 2000) depicts the various actions of the play. Perhaps the most startling is that of blindfolded actors strapped to crosses, paraded through the festival crowd to a sacrifice, where they are covered by the blood and entrails of a bull as it is disemboweled. Such actions are designed to lead the participants to a discovery of “the condition of BEING, the intoxication of being” (Nitsch 1998: website). Through the use of the most powerful symbol, reconstituted from its various manifestations in diverse mythological systems, Nitsch attempts a revelation of the grounds of being in a manner that language could never approach, necessarily, for the signifier employed—bereft of any stability afforded by a socio-cultural signified—exposes the receptor to a pre-significatory state, the condition for all signification.



The work of Hermann Nitsch provides us with a uniquely appropriate example of exploration of the dramatic powers latent in sacrificial imagery in this post-theological contemporary context, in the wake of the declared death of God, which now at the century’s cusp seems—perhaps—not so radical and revolutionary as it was and more a statement of cultural fact, as the O.M.T.’s performances have become a cultural artifact, with relics framed in museums and citations in histories of art and performance (even a reference in the liner notes of the 1995 David Bowie concept album, *Outside*). Indeed, Nitsch’s actions are arguably not as shocking now as they once were for, as Roselee Goldberg points out, “In the early days, the police often stopped the deeply unnerving events; thirty years later, they are watched with the reverence accorded to art works of historical significance” (1998: 116). Surely if the performances of the O.M.T. are no longer shocking, there can scarcely be anything left to shock. For four decades, Nitsch has ritualized this simulacra in a way that—following Nietzsche and Bataille—engages with the most powerful sign as empty signifier, denying its transcendental signified as guarantor for any mythological construct, even that which identifies itself as non-mythical. Doubtless, this transgressive trail from Nietzsche to Nitsch presents a unique challenge to semiotics.

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## **EDITORS' NOTE**

This paper was first presented at the conference Myths, Rites, Simulacra: 10th International Symposium of the Austrian Association for Semiotics. Vienna, 8-10 December 2000. Prior to its appearance in *Hyperion*, it was published in *Mythen, Riten, Simulakra: Semiotische Perspektiven*. Vienna: Österreichische Gesellschaft für Semiotik, 2001. The editors of *Hyperion* wish to thank David Kilpatrick for giving his permission to republish this important essay.

All images in this story were obtained from the  
Hermann Nitsch website: <http://www.nitsch.org/>

published in *Hyperion: On the Future of Aesthetics*, a web publication of  
The Nietzsche Circle: [www.nietzschecircle.com](http://www.nietzschecircle.com), Volume III, issue 3, June 2008