

Hermann Nitsch and David Kilpatrick
A Conversation

Hyperion, Volume III, issue 4, December 2008

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Introduction by David Kilpatrick

Hermann Nitsch began his *Orgien-Mysterien* [Orgies-Mysteries] Theater in the 1960s when, along with Günter Brus, Otto Mühl, and Rudolf Schwarzkogler, the Viennese Actionist movement tested the limits of performance and body art while facing the wrath and condemnation of civic and cultural authorities. Although he and his collaborators were seen as such a threat to the cultural order that they were at times incarcerated for their art, today, his place in the world and history of art is secure, celebrated in prestigious museums and galleries throughout the world and in the pages of



histories of contemporary art and performance. Nonetheless, his works retain their ability to shock and provoke, violating conventional genre distinctions and threatening the secured position of the subject perceiving the object of art. On February 19, 2005, at the Slought Foundation in Philadelphia, Nitsch sat down to discuss his work and its philosophical underpinnings.

DK: The Orgien-Mysterien Theater stages decontextualized rituals outside or after any unified or coherent cultural reference. With the emphasis on sacrificial imagery, is this aimed at a (re-)production of the sacred?

HN: Ritual for me is not only a thing of religion. Ritual is also something about form. For me, the leitmotif of Richard Wagner, that's a ritual. When Andy Warhol repeats his prints a hundred times on the wall, that's also a ritual. When Monet paints a cathedral in the morning, at noon and the afternoon and the evening, it's also ritual. Many things in music have to do with ritual. Ritual is for me not only a thing which belongs to religion. It's also something of form, of the architecture of art.

DK: The form is such that even though the context changed the form is still there for us to engage with so there's a trace of the sacred? Are you concerned with the sacred or engaging with forms of the sacred?

HN: We can learn from the sacred way of art. We can very much learn. But that's not only a thing of religion, to repeat something, to repeat it and repeat it again. That's also the problem of having an addiction. You repeat it so long so that everybody understands it. Well, ritual has to do also with meditation and with praying, whatever, but I'm against that [notion] that ritual is only understood in connection with religion. But anyway, I'm very interested in the ritual of all kinds of religions. You have also ritual in the military, ritual in the psychopathology of illness, the ritual of neurosis. Ritual is a special thing and this has a lot to do with art and religion.

DK: Are you concerned about the relation to the divine, even if that relation is one of absence? Is that a precondition of your work, the withdrawal of the divine?

HN: I never imitate rituals but I use them. I think the roots of art are in religion and mythology but anyway, ritual belongs not only to religion.

DK: My engagement with your work, the way that I receive and understand it is in the wake of the death of God.

HN: That is very complicated because the death of God—you know Nietzsche and I'm sure you know every word from Nietzsche, what he had written, and I would say I know it also, I'm a great, great admirer of Nietzsche—but the

death of God is a kind of history.

I'm very interested in the development of God and then the development from God to Being.

Not especially the Being of Heidegger, how he understands it. I like him very much, he was a great philosopher. I'm not interested in his fascistic... that was a very, very bad mistake because he had not the objectivity. He was looking to myth but not to the situation here. And because of this reasoning is his mistake. For me, what's interesting is what he had written, his works *Sein und Zeit*, I like *Was ist Metaphysik?*, *Einführung in die Metaphysik*, then I like (for me it's his second important work) *Beiträge zur Philosophie (Vom Ereignis)*, it's very great, and also it's a kind of ritual, with religious language.

Anyway, I'm very interested in the development of art. At first you have animism, and then there comes polytheism, and then monotheism, and after that comes pantheism. The idea of God changed. Nietzsche for me was a very, very religious man. But he didn't believe in one person is a God.

I believe in the creation and everything and in eternity, in life, in love. I would say I believe in Being. For me it's not necessary to use a God. And also it isn't necessary for me to use "God is dead." It's a fight of Nietzsche but, for me, transcendence is very important. Being is without transcendence, of course, but that's not the person.

DK: But is this a finite transcendence?

HN: Being is ... around it and in it is transcendence. Around it and in it. And when we hear—when we very, very intensely hear—then transcendence is waking up to Being.

DK: I use the term post-theological when I discuss your work. Some use the word "postmodern." Do you see yourself more in the modernist tradition?

HN: At the beginning I thought of myself as avant-gardist, as a very modern artist but I always had a deep connection to the great masterworks. Let's say to Richard Wagner, to Scriabin, to Bruckner, to Mahler, to Flaubert, Balzac and the paintings of the Renaissance. From the beginning I was interested in the expression of "*Gesamtkunstwerk*." Later, many people used the expression "postmodern" and at the first time I was against it but then I saw that maybe I was one of the first postmodern artists because I was so interested in the past and I tried with my work to continue all these great projects of the past.

DK: So you're more comfortable with the word postmodern?

HN: It's more fashion than reality, but anyway a little bit more comfortable. A little bit.

DK: To return to this question of the divine, for me the way that Hölderlin talks about the withdrawal of the Gods, in your work there's the form, but it is as if the Gods have withdrawn. Is there ever any concern...?

HN: I told you before about the development of god—maybe he's dead—and I tried also to describe the development of art and I would say the first art is life of a religious feeling. The beginning of art is very deep in mythology and religion and ritual and all these things. Then you have in Greek tragedy, you have in Aeschylus, Sophocles and Euripides... Euripides was the first who destroyed a little bit in Greek tragedy, he opened up himself in the direction of psychology, of modern psychology, of Shakespeare and all the other things written for theatre. Even in the Greek tragedy you have the art becomes more to itself. With Euripides, don't misunderstand me, I like much more Sophocles and Aeschylus, but he was more modern. And for me after the Greek tragedy there's no theatre with such power because the Greek poets, they had a healthy feeling for nature. So you see the development of every kind of art, in music, in painting, sculpture. At first, it was very deeply connected with religion and then it comes to itself. In the position of the Renaissance, and then you have Beethoven, before there was Bach—he was in the path of religion, but then Beethoven, he composed his own drama, his psychology was very interested in his problems. Art in the beginning was very sacral but then it lost it. With the French Impressionists then art lost absolutely the connection to religion, it was not anymore connected with mythology and religion.

DK: Dionysus certainly dances in your works, yes?

HN: I hope so! But Dionysus is much more a principle than a god. There's a very big misunderstanding that we repeat the old rituals and old sacrifices. That's absolutely not true. I use our senses and I go with our senses very deep. I go back with the sacrifice, to animism and what else, and use the intensity of the feeling of our senses but I absolutely do not imitate, let's say, religious rituals or religious sacrifices.

DK: There seems to be now a great acceptance of your work in the art-world but the objects in the galleries and museums are off-shoots or after-effects of the theatrical event or action. How do you see your legacy in terms of genre? You create a *Gesamtkunstwerk* but that's ephemeral. Do you see your own work being judged in terms of drama, film, music, painting, relics...?

HN: Let's use the expression *Gesamtkunstwerk*. It is what I try to do. I tried to explain the development of art away from mythology and religion. We reached the stage or the situation where art is the same as everything, like a train station or whatever. Philosophy comes at the point that there was the birth of the expression of Being. And then I use the freedom of art, again, to connect it with Being and with a new kind of religion. You have this when you see the artists of the fin-de-siècle.

The whole project of Dionysism, I would say there's a new kind of contact of art and religion. And so you can understand with my art there is a godlessness, a Mass without God. It's Mass for us, a Mass for me, and a Mass for nature.

DK: A Mass without God?

HN: Yes, a Mass without God. A Mass without the Word of God. I would say a deeper feeling of God. For me, that is Earth.

DK: You say "Mass without the Word of God"; given the emphasis on spectacle in your work, what is the role of language?

HN: I started my work at the time where language was coming to its end. For me there was no more reason to use words. At first when I started my *Six-Day-Play* I wrote with normal language and then I used very much my senses for words and then I was coming to this point where I said "it isn't necessary anymore to describe the intensity of our senses, I will show it." That was a moment when I would not any more use the word, I use the senses directly. If you have a poem of Walt Whitman he uses the senses, he describes something and you have to remember; so with Stefan George, or with Ezra Pound, whatever, they always describe the function of our senses. I want to use, directly, our senses. Now, just now, and I use typically a smell of incense, or a taste of warm bread or a smell of wine, or whatever...

DK: You spoke already about the influence of Nietzsche. Is Georges Bataille an influence?

HN: Yeah, but the influence of Nietzsche was much deeper. Georges Bataille influenced me a lot; I have great respect for him. A little bit of the development, these French guys, it's funny, I picked up on the pain. Much more, I would say, what did influence me (because all of these things were coming out of me) was Antonin Artaud, his Theatre of Cruelty was very deep in me.

DK: So Artaud is the greater influence than Bataille?

HN: Artaud—I would say he was my brother. I was not able to read French and very late, in the seventies, after I had written most of my basic theory, there was a German translation of Bataille and I was absolutely happy that there exists this kind of true-ness.

DK: Do you see yourself in relation to other German language dramatists, like Heiner Müller or Werner Schwab?

HN: I have respect for Schwab and respect for Heiner Müller but I have the feeling that [their works are] more traditional theatre. Especially Schwab is a genius, but my work is much more constructed, and is much more philosophic architecture. It's very different.

DK: So you don't think the rubric of the history of drama is the proper context in which to understand your work?

HN: Oh, I think the history of theater is no context at the moment for my work. I'm very alone.

DK: At whose consciousness is the action directed? Is it at yours, at the performers, or the audience?

HN: This is a little bit difficult... A dream for me is the whole audience, working with me—let's say one week, or two weeks, or three weeks (it depends on how long is the performance)—and then we find who is very in the performance and who is more out of the performance, but we know what everybody has to do. That's my dream. For me it would be great if there is no border between spectators and workers. Maybe in the future it would be possible.