

FRESH MEAT RITUALS: CONFRONTING THE FLESH IN PERFORMANCE ART

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University of Missouri-Kansas City, 2003

ABSTRACT

Meat entails a contradictory bundle of associations. In its cooked form, it is inoffensive, a normal everyday staple for most of the population. Yet in its raw, freshly butchered state, meat and its handling provoke feelings of disgust for even the most avid of meat-eaters. Its status as a once-living, now dismembered body is a viscerally disturbing reminder of our own vulnerable bodies. Since Carolee Schneeman's performance *Meat Joy* (1964), which explored the taboo nature of enjoying flesh as Schneeman and her co-performers enthusiastically danced and wriggled in meat, many other performance artists have followed suit and used raw meat in abject performances that focus on bodily tensions, especially the state of the body in contemporary society. I will examine two contemporary performances in which a ritual involving the use of raw meat, an abject and disgusting material, is undertaken in order to address the violence, dismemberment and guilt that the body undergoes from political and societal forces. In *Balkan Baroque* (1997), Marina Abramović spent three days cleansing 1,500 beef bones of their blood and gristle amidst an installation that addressed both the Serbo-Croatian civil war and her personal life. In *The Burden of Guilt* (1997), Tania Bruguera slowly ate a bowl of dirt over the course of an hour

under the weight of a slaughtered lamb in her living room that she had opened to the public. Though these works differ in intent and the socio-political context from which they emerge, they both exemplify the use of raw meat as a medium uniquely suited to express the anxieties of the vulnerable body. Both artists rely on an abject meat ritual in order to confront and possibly transcend the violence and horror that threaten their individual bodies as well as the traumatic experiences of the collectivities they represent. These collectivities include the war-torn and stereotyped Balkans that Abramović represents or the Cuban citizenry burdened by an oppressive regime that Bruguera embodies. Both artists, however, use their bodies in rituals that reflect the universal human condition.

APPROVAL PAGE

The faculty listed below, appointed by the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences have examined a thesis titled “Fresh Meat Rituals: Confronting the Flesh in Performance Art,” presented by Milica Acamovic, candidate for the Master of Arts degree, and certify that in their opinion it is worthy of acceptance.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Meat entails a contradictory bundle of associations. In its cooked form, it is inoffensive, a normal everyday staple for most of the population. Yet in its raw, freshly butchered state, meat and its handling provoke feelings of disgust for even the most avid of meat-eaters. Its status as a once-living, now dismembered body is a viscerally disturbing reminder of our own vulnerable bodies. Since Carolee Schneeman's performance *Meat Joy* (1964), which explored the taboo nature of enjoying flesh as Schneeman and her co-performers enthusiastically danced and wriggled in meat, many other performance artists have followed suit and used raw meat in abject performances that focus on bodily tensions, especially the state of the body in contemporary society. Whether Paul McCarthy parodying porn by committing sex acts with food for *Sailor's Meat* (1975), Zhang Huan strolling the streets of New York for *My New York* (2002) in a beef costume that resembled the bulky frame of a steroid-pumped body-builder, or Eloise Fornieles lacerating a cow carcass with notes of thanks and apologies from the audience in *Carrion* (2008), performances that ritualize the use of meat are abject reminders of our own vulnerable human flesh and the ways in which it, like meat, is dismembered by society.

In this thesis, I will examine two contemporary performances in which a ritual involving the use of raw meat, an abject and disgusting material, is undertaken in order to address the violence, dismemberment and guilt that the human body endures under political and societal pressures. In *Balkan Baroque* (1997), Marina Abramović spent three days cleansing 1,500 beef bones of their blood and gristle amidst an installation that addressed both the Serbo-Croatian civil war and her personal life. Her repetitive action of

wiping away meat from bones that could never be completely cleansed reflects the impossibility of erasing the guilt of the war. Similarly intent on expressing the burden of collective trauma, Tania Bruguera slowly ate a bowl of dirt over the course of an hour under the weight of a slaughtered lamb in *The Burden of Guilt* (1997). This first performance of the work was conducted in her living room that she had opened to the streets, making her private space a public one, more surprising and disruptive to the everyday life of the spectators than if the work had been conducted in an institution. Bruguera's action referenced an origin myth of the native Cubans that committed suicide by eating dirt to avoid submitting to the conquering Spaniards, yet in Bruguera's re-telling it is clear that her body represents the current Cuban nation under the weight of an oppressive regime. Though these works vary from each other in intent and context, they both adopt raw meat as a medium uniquely suited to express the anxieties of the body. Both Abramović and Bruguera explore and confront an individual and a collective bodily threat through the use of an abject meat ritual with the hope of transcending their ordinary physical and psychological limitations as a metaphor of breaking through all other limitations imposed on them, i.e. outside society, their own conditioning to outside expectations.

Emerging out of the action paintings, Situationalism, "happenings", and Gutai actions, performance art since its inception in the 1950s has experimented with the materiality and artwork-potential of the body as well as the immaterial, ephemeral and transitory possibilities of art-making. The medium often opens up a space where issues of personal identity, the individual versus the collective, publicness versus privacy, and the power of ritual can all be explored. Performance pieces range from long-duration works that test the physical and mental limits of the body to the exposure of the audience to quick actions or monologues that

explicitly critique institutions or societal norms. Abjection, with its powerful ability to shock us or draw on our most primal emotions and desires, is a favored tactic of contemporary performance. Raw meat, with its manifold disturbing, yet familiar, associations is a perfect medium through which artists can seek an emotional response from a viewer. Much has been written on the abject since Julia Kristeva's work "Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection," as well as on performance art's focus on a return to the body and the medium's role in conceiving contemporary art as an immediate experience. Little, however, has been written specifically on meat as an abject tool that brings distinct connotations to an artwork. The 2008 exhibition *Meat After Meat Joy* explored meat as a subject and medium in many types of artwork and its catalog is the main literature on the topic besides articles and reviews of individual artworks.¹ The exhibition argues that meat is a unique object, a substance that was once-living and is now dead, yet still a body, one that can provoke disgust while also serving as a substrate of life, a reminder of the needs, sensuality and mortality of the flesh and its possible deformations. As Hatry describes it, meat in art is a fitting metaphor for the deformation that humans undergo from both political and personal processes.²

Why meat is so provocative as an artistic medium has much to do with its potential for evoking disgust in the viewer. Michel Chaouli's theory of disgust as a phenomenon that comes from the viewer's horror-stricken identification with the vulnerable openings and points of breakage of once living parts explains how the dismembered nature of meat makes viewing it an immediate and visceral experience. Abramović chooses to cleanse bones of their meat in *Balkan Baroque* because of the medium's abject reminder of what actual human

¹ Curated by Heidi Hatry and held at Pierre Menard Gallery and Daneyal Mahmood Gallery.

² Hatry, Heidi. *Meat After Meat Joy*, exh. cat. (Cambridge: Pierre Menard Gallery, 2008) 9.

bodies endure during war. Similarly, Bruguera opts for representing the burden of being a citizen under the guilt-projecting Cuban state with a sacrificial animal as a metaphor of the sacrificed Cuban body.

Both these artists not only present meat as metaphors of the death and dismemberment that humans suffer under state-sponsored violence; they also immerse themselves in meat ritualistically, going beyond simple representations of horror into a process of transmuting that horror into something else. Deborah K. Ultan's theory on the purpose of ritual in performance art explains how the performing artist's individual body is transformed into a transpersonal one through ritual. In comparing and contrasting the two seminal performances of *Balkan Baroque* and *The Burden of Guilt*, the essence of meat in contemporary performance, as well as its variability, can be better understood and appreciated.

CHAPTER 2

THE IMPOSSIBLE CLEANSE: MARINA ABRAMOVIĆ AND *BALKAN BAROQUE*

The stench was unbearable.¹ For seven hours a day, four days in a row, performance artist Marina Abramović sat in the darkened basement of the 1997 Venice Biennial pavilion, cleansing 1,500 fresh cow bones of their blood and remaining bits of flesh (*figure 1*). They formed a giant, luminous pile upon which the artist sat in a bloodied white dress, singing songs from her childhood as she endlessly scrubbed away at the bones with a metal brush. In the heat of summer, worms began to crawl out of them.² These blood stains, however, could not be completely removed—suggesting the possibility that the artist’s ritualistic cleansing was in the end a futile task. Before the pile of bones was a copper coffin-like box filled with black water, while two additional copper basins in which to bathe the bones flanked the sides of the room (*figure 2*). Images were projected on the walls of the basement, videos of the artist’s mother and father on opposite sides of the room. A full-body video projection of Abramović, dressed as a doctor, hovered between them in the center of the basement. “I’d like to tell you a story of how we kill rats in the Balkans...” she ominously began.

The Yugoslav civil wars had ended less than two years ago. Around 130,000 Yugoslavs had perished, and the conflict had shocked the world with accounts and images of genocide and mass rape, of which the Serbian army and state were internationally condemned as the main perpetrators of war crimes in both the Croatian and Bosnian

¹ Steven Henry Madoff, “Metaphor and the Feeling of Fact,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, October 3rd, 2013, <http://www.brooklynrail.org/2013/10/criticspage/metaphor-and-the-feeling-of-fact>.

² Marina Abramović, interviewed in “Marina Abramović. Balkan Baroque. 1997,” MoMA Multimedia, accessed January 1, 2015, <http://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/190/1988>, audio.

conflicts. Abramović, a Belgrade-born Serb who identified as a Yugoslavian, gave this installation the ironically grand and musical title of *Balkan Baroque*. Perched on the illuminated pile of bones in a voluminous, white gown and surrounded by darkness, Abramović resembles classical depictions of an anointed albeit suffering martyr. The lighting effects and the combination of architecture, video, and sound utilized in Abramović's work all suggest the Baroque style of high drama. The use of this recognizable style further accentuates the grotesque nature of the content being displayed.

Balkan Baroque confronts the horror of the war that dismembered her homeland. The artist explains how, despite the nearly unachievable nature of her cleansing ritual, the action was still a vital one because it alerted viewers to the irreparable consequences of all military conflicts:

The whole idea, that by washing bones, and trying to scrub the blood, [it] is impossible. You can't wash the blood from your hands, as you can't wash the shame from the war. But, also was important the transcendence that can be used, this image, for any war, anywhere in the world. So, to come from [the] personal, [the image] can become universal.³

Abramović, like Tania Bruguera in *The Burden of Guilt*, uses a meat ritual to confront a both personal and a universal conflict rooted in fears around the precariousness of bodily existence. *Balkan Baroque*, confronts viewers with the fears of dismemberment, violent death and the terrifying possibility that the utter viciousness shown in the Yugoslav wars might actually be an unalterable part of what makes us human. *Balkan Baroque* inspires horror not only because of its reference to the atrocities of the Serbo-Croatian war, but also due to the unease generated by the artist's reflection on the dark, murderous and carnal inclinations of humans as a species. Abramović confronts this unease in order to subvert it;

³ Marina Abramović, interviewed in "Marina Abramović. *Balkan Baroque*. 1997," MoMA Multimedia, accessed January 1, 2015, <http://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/190/1988>, audio.

rather than displaying and then condemning the violence by representing it from the position of a distant observer, the artist willingly and perversely immerses herself in blood, flesh and bone. This unsettling immersion within an abject substance like meat (with its connotations of violence, death and carnality) allows Abramović to initiate a penance-like cleansing ritual that offers some hope of overcoming and transcending, for herself and for humanity as a whole, the horrors of dismemberment and death that *Balkan Baroque* symbolically presents.

Abramović was born in Belgrade in 1946 to parents who were active in the Communist party. During her undergraduate art studies there, Abramović abandoned painting in favor of experimenting with sound environments and performance. Her early performances focused on the physical endurance and psychological thresholds of extremely dangerous and masochistic scenarios, such as whipping and cutting herself for *Lips of Thomas* (1975), nearly suffocating in a ring of fire for *Rhythm 5* (1974), and inviting an audience do anything they wished to her, including shooting her, in *Rhythm 0* (1974). In 1976, she began exclusively collaborating with Ulay in works that focused on the difficulties of relating to the Other. They tested their mutual endurance by colliding with each other for an hour in *Relation in Space* (1976), sitting immobile with their backs together and tied by their hair for sixteen hours in *Relation in Time* (1977) and by commemorating their artistic and romantic break-up by walking the Great Wall of China from opposite starting points over the course of ninety days in *The Great Wall Walk* (1988). Deeply immersed in a meditative practice that they saw as part and parcel of performance art, the pair returned each other's gaze for seven hours straight in twenty-two performances of *Nightsea Crossing* (1981-87), as well as in a circle with a Tibetan lama and an Australian Aborigine in *Conjunction* (1983) over the course of four days during four hour sessions.

Pushing bodily and mental limits through challenging, long-duration pieces is a recurrent theme in Abramović's body of work. In the 1990's, she became increasingly concerned with how to invite the viewer into a meditative state with her. The artist's solo work from 1995 to the present displays her persistent interest in meditation and Buddhism, and entails increasingly intricate environments filled with symbolic objects meant to facilitate meditation and energy changes. In *House with an Ocean View* (2002), Abramović lived and fasted in a gallery for twelve days amidst minimalist furniture, crystal pillows, uniforms in the colors of the Vedic Square, and the same hiking boots she wore for *The Great Wall Walk*. Despite the meditative nature of the piece, ladders with rungs made out of knives leading up to her platform invoked the same sense of danger that permeates her early work. Abramović's work from 1995 onwards also began to make more references to her Yugoslav background. Abramović left Belgrade in 1979 and spent most of her life outside of Yugoslavia, creating work that rarely commented on her home country. In 1997, however, Abramović created *Balkan Baroque* in response to the Serbo-Croatian civil war. It included ethnic references to folk songs and czardas music, as well as personal references such as the images of her parents. Continuing in this vein, her video *The Hero* (2001) mourned the death of her father and commemorated the meeting of her parents during WWII. Subsequently, she addressed the geopolitical context of Eastern Europe once again in *Balkan Erotic Epic* (2005), an installation radically different from all of her previous work in its partially authentic, partially fantasized ethnography and focus on sexuality. The work features videos of Abramović and many co-performers in folk costume as well as cartoons demonstrating Balkan magical fertility rites.

The Dismemberment of Collective Identity

The Balkans, is a name that is frequently interchanged with Yugoslavia despite the peninsula's actual inclusion of other countries such as Bulgaria, Romania and Greece, etc. The term has historically carried a negative connotation, being associated with an inferior Other to Western Europe that is presumably naturally prone to conflict and barbarity. Explanations by policy-makers and the media for the 1990s civil wars that broke up Yugoslavia tend to make vague references to ancient, unending conflicts, thus oversimplifying the region's more complex history in a way reminiscent of the caricatures of orientalism. However, as scholar Maria Todorova argues in *Imagining the Balkans*, this region is not typically imagined in the same way as the "Orient", which has always been geographically vague and seen as timeless, unchanging, and effeminate. Instead, the "Balkans" designates a more specific geographic reality that is regularly imagined as masculine, dynamic, and continuously in a state of transition because of its status as in-between East and West.⁴ Abramović clearly subscribes to these images of an opposing East and West and of the Balkans as a mixed and contradictory crossroads of the two, explaining in a 1999 interview that, "It's true. Geographical belonging is very important. I'm from the Balkans. The Balkans is literally a bridge between East and West. It's right there, a bridge between two different worlds, a most contradictory place."⁵ By conceiving the Balkans as a transitory space between two supposedly polar opposites, the East and the West, outsiders to this region end up believing that it is an inherently conflicted place. Abramović alludes to

⁴ Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 14-16.

⁵ Janet A. Kaplan, "Deeper and Deeper: Interview with Marina Abramović," *Art Journal* 58 (1999): 7.

this idea of inherent conflict when she says that “on the bridge, there are always winds, and maybe that’s why there have always been wars, why it has been such an unstable area.”⁶ Todorova explains how this commonly used bridge metaphor for the Balkans paints the region as “a bridge between stages of growth, and this invokes labels such as semideveloped, semicolonial, semicivilized, semioriental.”⁷ Building upon these stereotypical notions that nonetheless hint at the complexity of identity affiliations of this region, Abramović chose the name *Balkan Baroque* (besides its catchy alliteration) rather than *Yugoslav Baroque* or *Serbo-Croatian Baroque*, which would better reflect where the conflict took place and its actual uniqueness in pan-Balkans politics. “Balkans” is the term that most strongly carries a historical legacy of violence and barbarity. It brings to mind already existing stereotypes of the region, an idea of inherent discord that makes civil war and the inability to wash blood from the bones non-surprising. Yet the presence of universally relatable bones and blood in this work amidst a ritual connected to meat-eating signals to the viewer that this violence is not local, but endemic to the human experience, and it allows Abramović to introduce and pull apart stereotypes of the region.

Abramović becomes our guide to this strange territory in a literal sense. In the central video projection of the installation, she addresses the viewer (assumed to be an outsider to the region) in a lab coat and glasses, delivering statements with clinical and scientific authority (*figure 3*). The doctor-artist explains matter-of-factly to the viewer “how we in the Balkans kill rats. We have a method of transforming the rat into a wolf; we make a wolf-

⁶ Marina Abramović, *Marina Abramović: The Bridge*, exh. cat. (Valencia, Spain: Genralitat Valenciana, 1998), p. 54. Quoted in “The Art of Marina Abramović: Leaving the Balkans, Entering the Other Side,” by Jovana Stokić in *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*, ed. by Klaus Biesenbach, (New York: The Modern Museum of Art, 2010), 23.

⁷ Maria Todorova, *Imagining the Balkans* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 16.

rat.”⁸ Claiming to have interviewed a Belgradian man who had caught rats for 35 years, Abramović describes a horrific and unlikely method to stop rat infestation.⁹ Rats, the artist explains:

...take good care of their families. They will never kill or eat the members of their own family. They are extremely intelligent. Einstein once said: ‘If the rat were 20 kilos heavier it would definitely be the ruler of the world.’¹⁰

Abramović further explains that rats eat huge amounts of food, and that if they were to stop, their continuously growing teeth would suffocate them in absence of their daily grinding.¹¹

The artist describes the method of killing the rats in the same way that she usually describes her performance pieces and methods, whether in interviews or catalogues: in the instructive manner of giving directions or providing a repeatable recipe. This strategy implies that her performances are actual proven experiments, and thus objective fact, though there is an ironic aspect to trying to find the rationale or “diagnose” the reason behind such irrational behavior as mass violence. For the “Balkan way” of catching rats, Abramović instructs:

To catch the rats you have to fill all their holes with water, leaving only one open. In this way you can catch 35 to 45 rats. You have to make sure that you choose only the males. You put them in a cage and give them only water to drink. After a while they start to get hungry, their front teeth start growing and even though, normally, they would not kill members of their own tribe, since they risk suffocation they are forced to kill the weak one in the cage. And then another weak one, another weak one, and another weak one.¹²

⁸ Marina Abramović, *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*, ed. by Klaus Biesenbach (New York: The Modern Museum of Art, 2010), 166.

⁹ Marina Abramović, interviewed in “Marina Abramović. Balkan Baroque. 1997,” MoMA Multimedia, accessed January 1, 2015, <http://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/190/1988>, audio.

¹⁰ Abramović, Marina, *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*, ed. by Klaus Biesenbach (New York: The Modern Museum of Art, 2010), 166.

¹¹ Abramović, Marina, *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*, ed. by Klaus Biesenbach (New York: The Modern Museum of Art, 2010), 166.

¹² Abramović, Marina, *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*, ed. by Klaus Biesenbach (New York: The Modern Museum of Art, 2010), 166.

We hear about how this last surviving rat in the cage, the strongest one, is taken the hour before his inevitable suffocation and has his eyes gouged out by the rat catcher. In a panic, the blinded rat kills all of the other not yet captured rats in the building, until he is at last overcome by one stronger than him, the final survivor after all of the carnage, the Balkan wolf-rat who will kill all future rats that come his way. Quickly, the viewer realizes that the rat is a stand-in for human beings, who think of themselves as intelligent and rational, until senseless atrocities that humans inflict on one another occur and shock them with their counter-proof. Both rats and humans will in certain dire circumstances reveal their capacity for destroying members of their own species (i.e. cannibalism). The rats represent the Yugoslavs involved in the conflict, especially Serbs, as violent and inferior others, acting in subhuman ways that need to be curated by Abramović for the presumably more civilized outsider. The idea that this behavior only happens with the interference of the rat catcher and the rats' starvation also suggests that outside forces, i.e. western interests in addition to Yugoslav politics and internal factors, may have driven previously peaceful citizens to bloodshed.

This story of rats unnaturally killing their own kind, told by Dr. Abramović in the video projection, as the flesh-and-blood artist Abramović cleanses bones before the screen in her bloodied white dress, establishes the context in which we should imagine the beef bones—the bones of humans perversely slain in the midst of the civil war in Yugoslavia. The importance of using actual bones with real blood and gore for *Balkan Baroque's* representation cannot be understated. Stories of wartime killings and atrocities are typically told through narratives, statistics, photos and video footage. Such tools can provoke an emotional response in the viewer, but none of these techniques are as immediately visceral as

the medium that Abramović opted for—literal flesh and blood whose stench caused visitors to cover their noses and mouths. The abject nature of such materials ensures that the viewer relates to the context of the piece in more than just a metaphorical way. To see a mass of bones, to see the flesh that still hangs from them, to see dismembered bodies strikes home in a fundamentally different way than imagining the Other, no matter how empathetically the viewers may do so. Such sights resonate with the viewer's own body in a primal and intimate way; as viewers, we easily transfer our own demise from the universally identifiable demise of those torn bodies. In viewing these unidentified bloodied bones, we are reminded of ourselves. The fear of our own dismemberment is awakened along with our empathy for the Other thanks to this universal image that explicitly addresses our own meat and bones.

Smell, a sense not traditionally offered through artworks, contributes to this abject impact of Abramović's handling of the bloody beef bones. Despite occupying a low position in the modern hierarchy of sensorial registers, smell plays a salient role in cognition and is potently connected to memory. Capable of permeating an entire space, as it did in the basement where Abramović performed *Balkan Baroque*, the smell of the 1,500 beef bones created an inescapable putrid sensation that added an additional layer of disgust to the piece. Our sense of taste is dependent on smell, both our culinary experiences and our disgust at putrid, spoiled food are impossible without it. Writing on the aesthetics of smell, Larry Shiner and Yulia Kriskovets point out how both classical and modern philosophers have viewed smell as a lower sense than sight and sound, supposedly less capable of achieving the moral aims of these more valued senses.¹³ Smell has also been seen, particularly by Kant, as

¹³ Larry Shiner and Yulia Kriskovets, "The Aesthetics of Smelly Art," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65 (2007): 275.

too sensuous, too much of a reminder of the body and almost completely at odds with the ideal aesthetic engagement that entails reflection on morality and imagination.¹⁴ As part of an artwork, smell is simply too direct, too base for traditional art viewing. Yet it is exactly this body-based directness that makes smell a perfect addition to a performance like *Balkan Baroque*, where the featured objects of bones and flesh are an abject reminder to viewers of the vulnerable meat of our own bodies. This literality is what makes *Balkan Baroque* so effective—we actually *see* and *smell* the evidence of slaughter, as well as the artist’s attempt to cleanse it. The artwork calls on the viewer to think about atrocity with extreme emotion in the hope of fomenting empathy in a more immediate manner.

Yet why are these materials, the cow bones, their clinging remnants, their smell and Abramović’s intimate handling of them so effectively and fearsomely disgusting? In “Van Gogh’s Ear: Towards a Theory of Disgust,” Michel Chaouli explains that disgust is a phenomenon we feel specifically in regards to objects that are not only abject, but that also threaten our sense of subjecthood.¹⁵ Chewing with an open mouth is a disgusting act because it disrupts the human illusion of being a neat, discernible subject rather than a messy being with open and vulnerable holes, sinews and points of breakage.¹⁶ Visibly masticating, as well as excreting, suffering bodily harm, etc., reveals our complex and precarious status, an identity that is not a simple and stable “I”, but a composite just like any lifeless object.¹⁷ In

¹⁴ Shiner and Kriskovets, 275.

¹⁵ Michel Chaouli, “Van Gogh’s Ear: Towards a Theory of Disgust,” in *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, ed. by Frances S. Connelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 61.

¹⁶ Chaouli, 59.

¹⁷ Chaouli, 59.

this displacement of one's subject-self, the object that we find disgusting transforms into a menacing subject, "demanding our enjoyment" as Immanuel Kant would describe it.¹⁸

Disgust is an operation exploited by *Balkan Baroque* through its bones and gristle in order to reinforce for the viewer (who may not have personally experienced war or violence) not only the physical vulnerabilities of the victims of the Yugoslav wars, but also of her own permanent condition of vulnerability. The sheer magnitude of the pile of bones in *Balkan Baroque* further makes the scene into an abomination, reminiscent of acts of mass murder that could happen anywhere. As Abramović explains, the work represents both the Yugoslav wars and *any* war.¹⁹

Meat functions so well as a powerful symbol in this artwork not only because of the disgust it provokes in its raw, just-stripped-from-the-bone state, or because of its metaphorical reference to criminal acts. It is also an essential symbol in *Balkan Baroque* for what curator and artist Heidi Hatry refers to as "the deformation of the soul."²⁰ Hatry explains this connection between the deformed soul and the deformed body, for which meat can be a stand-in:

The distorted, damaged, deformed body as depicted in modern and contemporary art is an obvious metaphor for the deformation of the soul if you will, of the fact that we are all born human and that few of us die terribly human, a sort of Rousseauian perspective. Reducing the body to meat or having humans interact with meat or even avowing the meat-substrate of the living body is a way of addressing the typical deformation of people through any number of social and political processes, not to mention the simpler ones of family, love, rivalry, envy, etc.²¹

¹⁸ Chaouli, 61.

¹⁹ Marina Abramović, interviewed in "Marina Abramović. *Balkan Baroque*. 1997," MoMA Multimedia, accessed January 1, 2015, <http://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/190/1988>, audio.

²⁰ Hatry, Heidi. *Meat After Meat Joy*, exh. cat. (Cambridge: Pierre Menard Gallery, 2008) 9.

²¹ Hatry, 9.

In *Balkan Baroque*, the meat that Abramović scrubs off ad infinitum is the damage inflicted on humanity by violence, hatred or fear. On one level, the bloody bones are the souls deformed by the circumstances of the Yugoslav wars, both perpetrators and victims forever deformed by ethnic hatred, political failures and crimes against humanity. On another level, these damaged bodies are a stand-in for the universal vulnerability of human beings, deformed by physical violence and contemporary societal pressures in countless ways around the globe. It is for both levels that Abramović tirelessly performs the feat of six-hour scrubbing four days in a row, attempting to wash away the most horror-laden material of the piece, far more disgusting than clean bones by themselves would be. Yet, as the artist acknowledges, “you can’t wash the blood from your hands, as you can’t wash the shame from the war.”²² Yet Abramović’s Sisyphean task serves as an expression of both the horrors of what happened and the artist’s traumatic experience of witnessing the consequences of this war.

Carnal Horror and Pleasure

In an interview, Abramović described how she was at first unable to make any art that addressed the war when conflict began in Bosnia.²³ Surprise and shame stifled her. The first work in which she briefly acknowledges this shame is *The Onion* (1995). In this performance, Abramović eats a large onion, skin and all, while gazing at the sky and complaining about her life (*figure 4*). Most of her complaints are about the mundane and

²² Marina Abramović, interviewed in “Marina Abramović. *Balkan Baroque*. 1997,” MoMA Multimedia, accessed January 1, 2015, <http://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/190/1988>, audio.

²³ Marina Abramović, interviewed in “Marina Abramović. *Balkan Baroque*. 1997,” MoMA Multimedia, accessed January 1, 2015, <http://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/190/1988>, audio.

repetitive aspects of her life, the exhaustion caused by traveling, gallery receptions and career decisions. Yet her complaints escalate and become a confessional of personal shame; she tells viewers that she is “tired of always falling in love with the wrong man, tired of being ashamed of my nose being too big, of my ass being too large. Ashamed about the war in Yugoslavia. I want to go away, somewhere so far that nothing matters any more.”²⁴ Here we see how Abramović’s personal shame is inextricably connected to the shame of her cultural background and its current affairs. Abramović begins to envision *Balkan Baroque* when she returns to her native Belgrade in 1997 after the breakout of the war and interviews her mother, father and the man who caught rats for thirty-five years.²⁵

Projected on the walls of the eerie basement in which Abramović carries out her macabre task are videos of her parents, Vojin and Danica Abramović, placed opposite each other, thus framing both the live performance and the video recording of the artist embodying the role of a scientist in the center of the space. At first glance, the inclusion may seem odd in relation to an artwork that Abramović describes in universal terms, referencing wartime slaughter. However, it is clear that Abramović also brings to the surface conflicts embedded in her personal history, virtually attempting to cleanse herself of her upbringing in the Balkans. Just like the bloodstains on the bones, however, it is not possible for Abramović to wipe away her identity. As she scrubs the bones she sings Serbian folk songs all day, with verses like, “You sing beautifully, sing beautifully, blackbird, blackbird... What else can I do,

²⁴ Marina Abramović, *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*, ed. by Klaus Biesenbach (New York: The Modern Museum of Art, 2010), 156.

²⁵ Marina Abramović, interviewed in “Marina Abramović. Balkan Baroque. 1997,” MoMA Multimedia, accessed January 1, 2015, <http://www.moma.org/explore/multimedia/audios/190/1988>, audio.

what else can I do when my feet are bare...’’²⁶ These folk songs harken back to Abramović’s childhood in Belgrade, and are a reminder that despite the artist’s extensive practice abroad and her occasional references to her home country in performances, she has still been shaped by her origins and the years spent in Yugoslavia. These songs also provide a mournfully sweet contrast to the blood and gore of Abramović’s ritual, further highlighting its grotesque nature, and solidifying relation of the work to the now defunct homeland of the artist. In this way, Abramović adds her individual perspective to the regional and universal implications of the narrative of violence already operating in *Balkan Baroque*.

Abramović’s parents were top-ranking *partisans* in the Yugoslav state, working in the military and occupying high-ranking positions in the Tito era government. Vojin Abramović was a military commander and Danica Abramović had been a major during World War II and later was the director of the Revolution and Art Museum in Belgrade. Extreme military discipline reigned at home. In an interview for the documentary on her MOMA retrospective “The Artist is Present,” Abramović describes the extent to which the dysfunctional and Spartan environment of her childhood home fueled her desire for artistic expression:

This total control of my mother, to this obsessional discipline which I had imposed on me, I had to have my own space...I was so incredibly unhappy as a child. It was hell...My father would come home late, my mother and he would always fight...It was always very unpleasant, a very tense situation. I missed so much to be loved, missed so much to express emotions in my childhood. I asked of my mother, why she never kissed me. And she was so surprised, and totally natural with a big smile on her face, she says, ‘Of course not to spoil you. My mother never kissed me either.’²⁷

Having lived outside of Former Yugoslavia (to pursue an international career) since 1976,

²⁶ Marina Abramović, *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*, ed. by Klaus Biesenbach (New York: The Modern Museum of Art, 2010), 164.

²⁷ Marina Abramović, interview in *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*, dir. by Matthew Akers and Jeff Dupree, Music Box Films, 2012.

Abramović finally returned to her country of origin to make sense not only of the recent civil war and the dissolution of the Yugoslav state, but also of the Balkans of her youth. For Abramović, the inherently conflicted nature of the Balkans situated between East and West is analogous to the tense situation of her childhood. The videos of her parents that at first appear to be still portraits highlight another duality, the contrast between the masculine and the feminine. When their images begin moving, Abramović's father Vojin energetically raises his hands up, while the otherwise stern Danica takes a surprisingly gentle pose, holding her hands clasped across each other on her chest, gazing sweetly onto the onlookers in a nurturing, motherly role despite being described by Abramović as a stern, even cold woman (*figure 5*).

These sharply contrasting poses change just as a surprising event transpires in the installation. In the central video projection, Marina Abramović suddenly and seductively takes off her doctor's coat, revealing a slinky black dress. Glasses now off, she gives a knowing stare to the viewer and wiggles her hips as she pulls out a red silk scarf from her bosom (*figure 5*). Waving the scarf in the air, Abramović dances wildly to Hungarian czardas music, throwing her arms up ecstatically and grinning ear to ear up towards the sky. Simultaneously, the projected Vojin raises up a gun while Danica covers her eyes as Abramović rebelliously dances, seemingly defying her stern parents. The introduction of such a celebratory and sensual element into a work that focuses on blood, bones and dismemberment may seem out of place at first, too strange of a juxtaposition with the abject ritual going on below the projection. Yet this contrast is consistent with the metaphors that meat offers, as well as the caricatures of Balkanism. As anthropologist Jessica Greenberg notes on the reconstruction of the *Balkan Baroque* installation space at Abramović's MOMA

retrospective, “The image of the Balkan carnivalesque, at once brutal and seductive, violent and pathetic, is a commonplace in films, literature and even everyday conversation.”²⁸ The irregular tempo, blaring trumpets and sensual stringed sounds of *czardas* music in the Balkans have connotations of celebration, as well as wild abandon and, possibly, debauchery; it is a common choice for the region’s taverns and for Roma bands to play. Despite the negative connotations of the term “Balkans”, the dance of Abramović to *czardas* music suggests that the supposedly inherent primal chaos of the region is sensual, free of inhibition and perversely desirable. In this context, “baroque” is even more ironical; a past European style that combined both ostentation and religiosity turns into a Balkanic imitation that is grotesque.

Abramović continues exploring Balkans imagery that is sensuous and grotesque in the multichannel video installation *Balkan Erotic Epic* (2005), reincarnating the projected image of Dr. Abramović from *Balkan Baroque* as Professor Abramović. Wearing a different pair of glasses, make-up and more glamorous attire than in her previous role, the artist narrates nine scenes (some animated, some enacted by Abramović and others) about Balkans pagan traditions.²⁹ According to Professor Abramović, the touching of genitals and breasts is believed by inhabitants in the Balkans to protect them from illness and the evil eye. As she asserts, images of men masturbating into the earth in order to fertilize the crops appear on the

²⁸ Jessica Greenberg, “Marina Abramović: The Space Between,” *Chicago Humanities*, n.d., <http://chicagohumanities.org/blog/guest-blog/marina-abramovic-the-space-between>.

²⁹ Klaus Biesenbach, “Marina Abramović: The Artist Is Present. The Artist Was Present. The Artist Will Be Present,” in *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*, ed. by Klaus Biesenbach, New York: The Modern Museum of Art (2010) 15.

screen.³⁰ Other scenes that were streamed in the installation include Abramović and a group of women in folk costume singing in the fields and fondling their exposed breasts, men in folk costume singing a Russian song about the “Slavic soul” with their erect penises exposed, and a bare-breasted Abramović repeatedly hitting herself in the chest with a skull, her hair covering her face. These images that shock the viewer with their unexpected combinations of explicit sexuality with traditional garb and music celebrate the life cycle of birth, sex and death while also mercilessly mocking the sanitized and idealized versions of “appropriate” patriotism and folk/local taboos. These associations of phallus with national pride, breasts with nature’s bounty, and dance with destruction and death all feed into the Balkanism that Abramović draws upon for her work, equally playing into desires of the outsiders of these regions and exposing well known tropes.

Whether critical or not, there is a self-Balkanizing attitude in these representations in *Balkan Baroque* and *Balkan Erotic Epic*, especially in how Abramović as a czardas dancer, clearly means to draw on the trope of wild joy in the midst of inevitable destruction which seems to be associated with this region. Greenberg criticizes this caricaturesque portrayal of regional identity in *Balkan Baroque*, observing that:

The story goes something along the lines of (as directed to a foreigner): there is something wrong with us, something dark, and violent and backwards about our mentality. We are victims of our own selves, and a world that can’t ever understand us. It says: we are fascinating surely, and you may even find it sparks desire. But don’t try to understand us (we barely understand ourselves). It implies: Simply watch our self-destruction and enjoy.³¹

This seems to be the point of Abramović’s juxtaposition of her czardas dance and the dismemberment of flesh, which highlights the primal link between destruction, fear and

³⁰ Marina Abramović, *Marina Abramović: The Artist is Present*, ed. by Klaus Biesenbach (New York: The Modern Museum of Art, 2010), 177.

³¹ Jessica Greenberg, “Marina Abramović: The Space Between,” *Chicago Humanities*, n.d., <http://chicagohumanities.org/blog/guest-blog/marina-abramovic-the-space-between>.

carnal pleasure. Greenberg is disturbed by these analogies in the Balkans context, and makes the following criticism:

The myth of Balkan (and here particularly) Serbian backwardness and barbarism on the one hand and victimhood on the other is perfectly crystallized in *Balkan Baroque*. It is a self-pitying narrative that somehow revels in degradation without ever really dealing with the violence to which it is putatively addressed. The grotesque becomes a kind of excuse-making, a pleasure in self-hatred that in the end only really focuses the viewer back on the subject without shedding any real light on the pile of bones that lies before it.³²

Though Greenberg is right in suggesting that Abramović's balkanisms may draw away from the work's universality and may evoke a self-pitying Balkanist attitude that merely reinforces stereotypes, it is important to note that the link between carnal horror and carnal pleasure is not unique to *Balkan Baroque* nor to other balkanizing sources. When examined in relation to other meat performance rituals, like Carolee Schneeman's seminal *Meat Joy*, it is clear that the paradoxical nature of meat, a substance of death consumed to sustain life, is a perfect symbol for confronting taboos associated with death, violence and sexuality (*figure 6*). A close encounter with such liminal/disruptive experiences is typically believed to test the limits of human nature, which *Balkan Baroque*'s ritual immersion in animal meat further reinforces.

Unlike Schneeman's *Meat Joy*, *Balkan Baroque*, does not end in a celebratory orgy of flesh in both its life and death forms, despite its references to sexuality. The video and performative components of the work compose a multi-layered context that is simultaneously universal and regional, collective and deeply personal. Rituals constitute a key strategy for Abramović's staged confrontation with the bodily horrors that meat can invoke. The act of cleansing had already become an important theme in Abramović's work before *Balkan*

³² Jessica Greenberg, "Marina Abramović: The Space Between," *Chicago Humanities*, n.d., <http://chicagohumanities.org/blog/guest-blog/marina-abramovic-the-space-between>.

Baroque. In *Cleaning the Mirror #1* (1995), a column of five televisions showcases Abramović's three-hour performance of scrubbing a human skeleton with soapy water (figure 7). Bones and the human skeleton are also central to her performance *Nude with Skeleton* (2002-5) in which a naked Abramović lies down with a human skeleton on top of her (figure 8). These two pieces feature some of the same themes as *Balkan Baroque*, a Death and the Maiden contrast, as well as rituals that push individuals to confront the horror of death and the taboo of physical contact with it. The pristine, already cleaned bones of these two works do not yield the same level of disgust that drives *Balkan Baroque* and the visceral connection between viewer and the victim with whom she/he may or may not identify. It is Abramović's use of meat that is key to connecting the work to the viewer's own living but vulnerable flesh.

Balkan Baroque goes a step further in its exploration of bodily horror by bringing viewers into close proximity to gristle, blood and meat, as Abramović uses water to cleanse the bones. Her repetitive acts embody the hope of transcending the senseless violence and frightening chaos that war foments. The power of ritual confers to her the ability to reach an altered, trance-like state that comes from the extended duration of her vain attempts at cleansing all the bones. Deborah K. Ultan argues that, in the context of performance art, this is the "transpersonal" state, explaining that "art may function in a ritualistic sense as a transformative agent and serve as a symbolical bridge between the self and the collective—the transpersonal..."³³ Abramović may be referencing her personal relation to the Balkans in a solo performance, but she sets up an immersive installation where the viewer walks into a

³³ Deborah K. Ultan, "From the Personal to the Transpersonal: Self Reclamation Through Ritual-in-Performance," *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 20 (2001): 32.

basement of horrors, disgusting sights, smells and meanings, which speak to primal fears and inclinations to aggressive acts. Her ritual is one that addresses not only her own struggles with identity and mourning the Yugoslav wars, but also embodies a transpersonal dimension—an alliance with the collective of victims, to which one becomes almost immediately drawn through the visual encounter with the instantly relatable, material of meat.

CHAPTER 3

EATING DIRT: TANIA BRUGUERA AND *THE BURDEN OF GUILT*

A decapitated lamb hung off of Tania Bruguera's neck. The dismembered animal made a strange and bulky apron for the artist, locking her body in a furry and bloody embrace (*figure 9*). The lamb's front legs were tied together with a piece of rope that yoked the morbid burden to Bruguera's upper back and shoulders while its hind legs splayed out at an extreme, body-breaking angle. The artist's white shirt and white shorts were stained and bloody. Barefoot and crouching on the floor before two bowls, one filled with saltwater and one filled with dirt, Bruguera bowed her head to the floor. Commencing with the ritual, she dipped a handful of earth into the saltwater and began kneading the mixture into small pellets. It was 1997, the year of the Havana Biennial, and bystanders buzzed around the residence, multiplying into a larger and larger audience that attempted to discern the meaning of such a strange sight. Some passerby merely stopped for a moment to look at the carcass-draped woman eating dirt and then continued on their way. "She is saying that we are all eating soil!" one observer scoffed.¹ Eventually the police joined the crowd of watchers. Bruguera kept eating the earth and salt water mixture in front of the fluctuating audience until all of it was consumed forty-five minutes later.²

Behind Bruguera and the ritualistic bowls hung *Statistics*, a giant Cuban flag woven out of human hair collected from 1996-98 from both local and exiled Cubans. The materiality of

¹ Gerardo Mosquera, "Cuba in Tania Bruguera's Work: The Body is the Social Body," *Tania Bruguera: On the Political Imaginary*, ed. by Helaine Posner, Gerardo Mosquera, and Carrie Lambert-Beatty (Milan: Charta, 2009), 25.

² Gerardo Mosquera in *Tania Bruguera: On the Political Imaginary*, ed. by Helaine Posner, Gerardo Mosquera, and Carrie Lambert-Beatty (Milan: Charta, 2009), 23.

the nearly twelve-foot long flag served to ground the otherwise universal themes of *The Burden of Guilt* in the context of Cuban politics (*figure 10*). Heavier and more textured than a normal flag, *Statistics* is created in the style of funeral flags, made to be draped over coffins for officious and patriotic deaths. Theorist Jose Muñoz observes how, “the flag that hangs behind [Bruguera] is made out of the nation’s actual body, or at least a part of that national body.”³ The addition of *Statistics* to *The Burden of Guilt* reinforces the idea that Bruguera’s body, too is a stand-in for the national Cuban body. Like the slaughtered lamb draped on her body and the patriotic funerary flag draped behind her, the artist’s own body under the duress of a bloody burden is an object of sacrifice as well.

Born in Havana in 1968, Tania Bruguera’s body of work addresses politics, oppression, and the dynamics of human power relationships. In her early practice, she established independent newspapers *Post War Memory I* (1993) and *Post War Memory II* (1994) that featured texts and illustrations by artists and critics working from both home and abroad to unveil what was happening in Cuban politics and society. Copies of the newspaper, which imitated the format of the official Communist party paper, were seized by the authorities swiftly after both publications while Bruguera was threatened with long-term imprisonment. Despite this opposition, she repeated the project with *Post War Memory III* in 2003. While studying in Chicago, Bruguera began the decade-long project of re-performing works of Ana Mendieta, the Cuban expatriate and performance artist who had passed away in 1985. She called this series of works *Tribute to Ana Mendieta* (1985-1996) and for Bruguera it offered a way to navigate her own expatriate identity while politics in Cuba continued to unfold. After

³ José Muñoz, “Performing Greater Cuba: Tania Bruguera and the Burden of Guilt,” in *Holy Terrors: Latin American Women Perform*, ed. Taylor, Diana (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 406.

Bruguera completed this series, she created solo performances in Cuba like *The Burden of Guilt* (1997) that explored the oppression of the Cuban populace by a government that not only failed to serve its needs but that also persecuted its own people through references to the nation's guilty origins of genocide and a history of burden. In *Displacement* (1998), Bruguera continued this political critique during a celebration of Fidel Castro's birthday by wandering the streets of Havana dressed as a *Nkisi Nkonde* mud doll covered with nails. Originating in the Congo and incorporated by Bruguera because of its relation to Afro-Cuban religion, the *Nkisi Nkonde* doll is made with the objects of a deceased person in order to grant a wish in exchange for the fulfillment of a promise by the practitioner. If the promise is broken, the *Nkisi Nkonde* awakens and seeks to punish the promise-breaker, as Bruguera does in her embodiment of the object that has been animated by the failures of Castro and his government to fulfill the promises of the Cuban revolution.

Dissatisfied with performance that fit too neatly the expectations of aesthetics and the psychological function of an artwork that can too easily be divorced from everyday life, Bruguera developed her theory of *arte de conducta* (behavior art). Seeking to perform in ways that did not create spectacles but actual social experiments, Bruguera began to use her performances to test how society, and sometimes unwitting participants, react to authority's enforcements of political agendas and social norms. In *Crowd Control in Force (Tatlin's Whisper #5)* (2008) at the Tate Modern in London, Bruguera does not herself perform but creates behavior art by orchestrating a scenario where two imposing policemen on horses continuously order a crowd waiting to get into the museum to randomly move, split and remerge. Though the directions are absurd, the crowd offers little resistance to the authority figures. Continuing the use of social experiments as art that does not just advocate activism,

but *is* activism, Bruguera coined the term “artivism” to describe her art that is both participatory and practical. One of the most salient examples of Bruguera’s artivism is her long-term work *Immigrant Movement International* (2005-2010) which essentially functioned as an immigrant rights and support organization. Because of the overt political aims of her work, many of Bruguera’s performances conducted in Cuba have led to her personal endangerment and repeated incarcerations by the Cuban state.

Sacrifice and Ritual

Bruguera created *The Burden of Guilt* (1997) at a stage in her career when she was focusing on the use of her body as a medium for catalyzing awareness and social change. In this performance, the sacrificed lamb is a literal burden that weighs on the artist as she carries out the penance-like ritual of consuming dirt. This performative ritual of a punishing and possibly self-harming act is rooted in the Cuban legend delineating how the indigenous population reacted to their subjugation by the Spanish invaders—a collective self-sacrifice. Whether the event is mythical or not, the symbolism of the act is a potent one. According to Bruguera:

There are events that are talked about in whispers; it’s not known if their purpose is to serve as testimony or if these stories are created because somebody needs to hear them. That was the uncertainty I felt when someone told me that the Indians in Cuba—at least a group of them—chose to rebel against their Spanish conquerors by eating dirt, and only dirt, so that their deaths would mark their resolve.⁴

The dirt-eating ritual that Bruguera enacts for *The Burden of Guilt* is a tribute to this legend of defiant self-sacrifice. Since Bruguera’s performance stands both for the sacrifice of the indigenous people and the sacrifice of the lamb in Abrahamic religion, this work suggests that a similar story of nation-wide subjugation that needs to be heard and witnessed is

⁴ Tania Bruguera, “The Burden of Guilt,” in *Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas*, ed. by Coco Fusco (London: Routledge, 2000), 152.

unfolding today. Commencing with the guilty origins of the founding of modern Cuba based on acts of conquest and genocide, *The Burden of Guilt* combines the local particularities of Cuban histories, myths and the status of the Cuban political artist with a potent metaphor of the human condition. Like Marina Abramović in *Balkan Baroque*, Tania Bruguera also uses a meat ritual that is abject to contemporary audiences and evoke the vulnerable condition of the human body and how it carries the burdens of both personal and collective guilt. Additionally, both artists use these abject performance rituals to address and possibly transcend the traumas of bodily and psychological dismemberment that meat as an art medium represents. Current literature on *The Burden of Guilt* has already addressed how Bruguera's body acts as a stand-in for the national body in this work. Jose Muñoz writes on how Bruguera's body is representative of a Greater Cuba, or *cubanía*, in "Performing Greater Cuba: Tania Bruguera and *The Burden of Guilt*." Explaining that *cubanía* is a condition of being Cuban that binds both current Cuban citizens and expatriates together in bonds of guilt over their recent histories and in their relations to each other, Muñoz argues that Bruguera offers her body as a metaphor of the ongoing guilt that permeates Cuban consciousness both inside and outside the island.⁵ Gerardo Mosquera also suggests that the artist's corporeal presence is analogous to the Cuban social body and becomes a medium for political protest.⁶

What I am adding to the current literature on *The Burden of Guilt* is a discussion of the role of raw animal meat as an abject signifier of the social body. I argue that Bruguera's meat ritual foment the communication of guilt, horror and redemption in this piece.

⁵ José Muñoz, "Performing Greater Cuba: Tania Bruguera and the Burden of Guilt," in *Holy Terrors: Latin American Women Perform*, ed. Taylor, Diana (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 406.

⁶ Gerardo Mosquera, "Cuba in Tania Bruguera's Work: The Body is the Social Body," *Tania Bruguera: On the Political Imaginary*, ed. by Helaine Posner, Gerardo Mosquera, and Carrie Lambert-Beatty (Milan: Charta, 2009), 25.

Drawing on Michel Chaouli's theory of disgust, I explain how the abject dismemberment of meat in *The Burden of Guilt* reveals fears about the viewers' bodily vulnerabilities.

Bruguera's ritualistic performance is an attempt to address these vulnerabilities, as well as the inherent guilt of being whole while others in *cubanía* have been or are currently being dismembered by political violence. Through the act of literalizing both her individual burdens and the collective burdens of *cubanía*, Bruguera offers a possibility of overcoming or at least coming to terms with the burden of guilt.

By choosing lamb meat as a medium for the performance, Bruguera enhanced the symbolism of sacrifice in *The Burden of Guilt*. The body of a freshly killed lamb carries the religious connotations of the sacrificial lamb of Judeo-Christian tradition. Passover marks the deliverance of the Jewish people from slavery by the Egyptians. It celebrates how they avoided the last of ten deadly plagues that struck their oppressors by marking their doors with lamb's blood, thus allowing death to pass over them. Like the indigenous Cubans who sacrificed themselves to resist their subjugation, the Jews offer a sacrifice to escape their oppressors, albeit to a more optimistic end. In Christianity, Christ is described as the Lamb of God whose divine yet human body was sacrificed in order to redeem humanity's original sin. In Catholicism—which is still the dominant religion of Cuba despite the decline of religious faith in post-revolutionary times—the ceremony of the Eucharist engages participants in the symbolic consumption of the blood and body of Christ. Bruguera's ritual is sacrament-like as well, her act of eating is incorporated into a tableau that addresses death and rebirth much like the Eucharist does. The freshly killed lamb that Bruguera carries, its bright red blood spilling vibrantly against her white clothing, is a literal reference to the sacrifice of an innocent body.

Though these Judeo-Christian references make for an apt reading of the lamb sacrifice in *The Burden of Guilt*, Bruguera sees them as secondary to the work's allusions to the local religious practices of Santería. In a letter to Muñoz, Bruguera explains that, "for me, the relation that exists with the Afro-Cuban religion is that the lamb is charged with energy rather than just symbolism."⁷ Santería syncretizes Yoruba beliefs brought by enslaved Africans with the Catholic veneration of saints. Forced to practice their native religion in secret, the Yoruba in Cuba would substitute statues of saints for their actual gods, creating a cover for their now forbidden spiritual practice. Rather than emphasize belief in a certain dogma, Santeria centralizes the worship act itself and the manifestation of a hierarchy of deities in everyday life. Religious and Latino studies scholar Miguel A. De la Torre explains that, "Santeria is highly ritualistic, and believers do not achieve the outcomes they desire based on the fervency of their prayers, or on the good intentions of their hearts, but rather on faithfully fulfilling the prescribed ritual or sacrificial procedure."⁸ Possible sacrifices include the slaughter of animals, their blood full of *ashé*, the cosmic energy underlying all things. Despite its status as "sacrifice" and its potential perception as a sign of loss or something given up, the bloodied lamb that rests upon Bruguera in *The Burden of Guilt* is actually the embodiment of energy that summons cosmic and mysterious forces, thus elevating Bruguera's performative actions to the status of spiritual rites.

Bruguera, however, also believes that the lamb carries some of this symbolism of vulnerability intrinsically, even in the absence of a reference to a specific religious frame

⁷ José Muñoz, "Performing Greater Cuba: Tania Bruguera and the Burden of Guilt," in *Holy Terrors: Latin American Women Perform*, ed. Taylor, Diana (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 405-6.

⁸ Miguel A. De la Torre, *Santeria: The Beliefs and Rituals of a Growing Religion in America* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm Eerdmans Publishing Co., 2004) xv.

work. She asserts that:

...I also play with the socially saturated sense in which the lamb becomes a Eurocentric, and hence 'universal,' symbol of submission. In other words, it's less local in its intent than it might seem. A sheep or lamb as everybody everywhere knows, lies down, just like the Cuban indigenous and like Cubans in the island.⁹

The lamb yields to metaphors of gentle innocence and vulnerability precisely because of its status as a meek, still juvenile animal that is killed young for its delicate meat. Carrying different connotations than other sacrificial animals, like the bull or chicken, the lamb is helpless and vulnerable. It "lies down," as Bruguera succinctly puts it, a mild and trusting creature that puts up no fight when taken to the knife. When people "act like sheep", they are being blind followers, submissive. Despite the defiant nature of the act of eating dirt as protest, Bruguera's performance is partially a submission to one's ultimate fate, and a submission to one's acceptance of guilt.

Bruguera used lamb meat in an earlier politically charged work that addresses historical memory, yet places greater emphasis on censorship. In *The Body of Silence* (1997-98), Bruguera sits naked in a box with walls covered in raw lamb meat (*figure 11*). After marking corrections in an elementary school Cuban history book that presented erroneous accounts, she would lick the marked pages, attempting to erase what she had just written as though remorseful of daring to criticize the official version of history. She then tore these pages out of the book and consumed them, hiding the evidence of her transgressive act. The blame that Bruguera wishes to attribute to the state is deflected back onto her, and she huddles in her corner, hiding what she has done, like a guilty child. Just like in her later renderings of *The Burden of Guilt*, Bruguera's naked body in *The Body of Silence* suggests a physical and

⁹ José Muñoz, "Performing Greater Cuba: Tania Bruguera and the Burden of Guilt," in *Holy Terrors: Latin American Women Perform*, ed. Taylor, Diana (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 405-6.

spiritual vulnerability that is reinforced by the dismembered animal flesh that surrounds the performance space. Her experience of shame as she huddles nude in a corner parallels the abjection of the bloody meat. The fearful undoing of her initial action points to Bruguera's embodiment of the state of the average Cuban, who, as a vulnerable lamb under an oppressive government, must remain silent. The cost of not remaining silent is the possibility of slaughter or dismemberment of some kind, and the usage of lamb meat is a recurring reminder of this vulnerability to punishment and censorship throughout Bruguera's work.

In a follow-up to *The Burden of Guilt*, Bruguera performed *The Burden of Guilt II* in museums in Santa Fe, New Mexico, and Antwerp (figure 12). For this work, Bruguera kneels before a bowl again, this time full of lamb fat that she kneads into her naked skin. In front of her rests a lamb's head—the piece of the lamb that was missing from *The Burden of Guilt*. Bruguera bows before it, and as Muñoz describes it, “the sacrificial beast's head is now her own and she is becoming this creature, or at least suturing the symbol onto her own body.”¹⁰ Here Bruguera takes the symbolism of the lamb one step further, she has transformed into the lamb more literally than in her past works. This act is also reminiscent of Santería rites; the lamb is offered as a sacrifice in order for the practitioner, in this case Bruguera, to partake of the *ashé* its ritual killing offers. This later performance reinforces the recurring theme throughout Bruguera's work of offering her body as a sacrificial lamb.

These references to animal sacrifice in *The Burden of Guilt* and *The Body of Silence* tie in with the performative acts of an important predecessor to Bruguera, fellow Cuban performance artist Ana Mendieta, who used a chicken as a sacrificial animal in *Untitled*

¹⁰ José Muñoz, “Performing Greater Cuba: Tania Bruguera and the Burden of Guilt,” in *Holy Terrors: Latin American Women Perform*, ed. Taylor, Diana (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 407.

(Death of a Chicken) (1972). For this performance, Mendieta held up a decapitated chicken and bathed her nude body in its blood (*figure 13*). The artist's ritualistic immersion in the darkly magical medium of blood is, as in *The Burden of Guilt*, a reference to Santería practices, as well as a way to invoke a sense of ancient, primal energy in the performance that adds to its profundity. Bruguera in *The Burden of Guilt* creates a similar ritual of sacrifice; yet in focusing on the carcass as a whole, the emphasis in this work is on the state of the flesh itself—whether Bruguera's vulnerable (and in later performances, naked) flesh or the disturbing, split-open flesh of the lamb. Under the weight of an animal carcass while she performs either in the stained purity of her white uniform or in the nude, Bruguera, too, creates a profound and eerie space where the viewer is implored to think about the discomfiting fundamentals of our vulnerable meat.

Both these Cuban performance artists wrangled with the issue of dislocation. Ana Mendieta was displaced as a child after the revolution and emigrated to the U.S. in 1961. Her work focused on the relationship of her body to the earth as a means of referencing her cultural roots. Mendieta explained:

I have been carrying out a dialogue between the landscape and the female body (based on my own silhouette). I believe this has been a direct result of my having been torn from my homeland (Cuba) during my adolescence. I am overwhelmed by the feeling of having been cast from the womb (nature). My art is the way I re-establish the bonds that unite me to the universe. It is a return to the maternal source. Through my earth/body sculptures I become one with the earth ... I become an extension of nature and nature becomes an extension of my body. This obsessive act of reasserting my ties with the earth is really the reactivation of primeval beliefs ... [in] an omnipresent female force, the after-image of being encompassed within the womb.¹¹

Bruguera was extremely influenced by Mendieta while conducting her M.F.A. studies, which marked the beginning of a ten-year series *Tribute to Mendieta* (1986-96). In these works, she

¹¹ Ana Mendieta, quoted in Petra Barreras del Rio and John Perreault, *Ana Mendieta: A Retrospective*, The New Museum of Contemporary Art, New York 1988, p.10, quoted in *Ana Mendieta, Untitled (Silueta Series, Mexico) 1974*, accessed January 24, 2016, <http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/mendieta-untitled-silueta-series-mexico-t13357/text-summary>.

re-performed a significant part of Mendieta's practice, including her earthworks (*figure 14*). Unlike Mendieta, Bruguera grew up in post revolutionary Cuba. However, she also carried out many of her studies and performances abroad, especially as her work was censored by the government and even led to multiple interrogations and threats of exile. Though Cuban, Bruguera often comments on her homeland while outside of it. Dislocation is as important a theme for Bruguera as it was for Mendieta. She often enacts performances that entail a symbolical reconnection to the land and explains that "the practice of eating dirt is found primarily in Africa and Latin America, where it is used as a means to be close to the place where you are from as you travel to a new destination."¹² In *The Burden of Guilt*, Bruguera swallows Cuban dirt, linking herself as intimately as possible to her homeland.

As in the native Cuban legend on which her performance is based, Bruguera eats dirt to reclaim the land and one's status within it. The act is a reconnection to one's home country in spite of whatever displacing or dismembering forces act upon the individual. In *The Burden of Guilt*, Bruguera emphasizes the sense of dispossession of one's home country as a result of the threat of exile. In a television interview, she points out that the phrase "comer la tierra" in Cuba means the last resort, when there are no other options.¹³ Because of political circumstances, the Cuban is a person who must eat dirt, who must, as Bruguera puts it, "accept anything," just like the lamb who lies down.¹⁴ Eating dirt in this context is also a sort of coming home to one's roots, to one's primal state of being. Bruguera, like Abramović, had

¹² Tania Bruguera, "The Burden of Guilt," in *Corpus Delecti: Performance Art of the Americas*, ed. by Coco Fusco (London: Routledge, 2000), 184.

¹³ Tania Bruguera, interview by Jorge Ramos, *Al Punto con Jorge Ramos*, Univision, September 6, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9aajD_o-mA.

¹⁴ Tania Bruguera, interview by Jorge Ramos, *Al Punto con Jorge Ramos*, Univision, September 6, 2015, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=N9aajD_o-mA.

spent a significant amount of time outside her home country and both artists return to their respective homelands with performance rituals that focus on an immersion in local motifs. Accompanying the return to homeland in both *The Burden of Guilt* and *Balkan Baroque* is a return to one's bones, a reconnection of the performer and viewer to a sense of primality. The materials of meat, bone and blood are abject, yet natural. They are suggestive of the lifecycle as dirt is, as "dust to dust" represents both the origins and end of human life. Bruguera's combination of dirt and flesh, consuming and dying, all suggest in a synchronous union a return to the womb of the earth and a death that may really be a symbolical rebirth. Though *The Burden of Guilt* evokes dismemberment and the anxious burden of bodily vulnerability, there is in the acting out of the ritualistic dirt-eating a sense of the unfinished, an unanswered question as to whether Bruguera will die from eating an entire bowl of dirt or if the nourishment will turn her into a strengthened being that can resist the constraints imposed by the state.

Rebirth seems to be the purpose of ritualistic sacrifice, or at least a transformation of some sort. In *The Burden of Guilt*, Bruguera explores whether atonement or transformation of the guilty body into a cleansed, unburdened one is possible. In a sacrifice, the personal body is offered or given up for the future benefit of a greater, universal body. In an essay on the relation between the personal and the transpersonal in performances, Deborah K. Ultan argues that performance artists like Mendieta "turned personal material into ritual performances where their own self-renewal could be collectively shared. The ritual process, structured around a set of specified actions, may catalyze the release of fears and anxieties,

dreams, and fantasies.”¹⁵ In this light, Bruguera’s solo performance can be read as the offering of the artist’s body as a social body, capable of representing Cuba or even humanity as a whole as it undergoes violence or decay just as the dismembered lamb. This universality is especially apparent in Bruguera’s later nude performances of the work. The naked body, along with the raw meat, is an immediate reminder of the human condition in its most vulnerable and essential state of being. Curator Heidi Hatry argues that the prevalence of distorted or damaged bodies in modern and contemporary art is metaphorical of the damage social and political forces can inflict on the average person. She finds raw meat, a literal damaged body, a perfect medium for describing human deformation, both literal and symbolic.¹⁶ *The Burden of Guilt* exemplifies this link between the deformation that meat essentially is and the deformation that the individual is subject to under oppression. Paired with the raw meat of a dismembered being and echoing the suicidal action of the native Cubans, Bruguera suggests her own impending dismemberment, as well as that of the social body she represents, Cuba, or anywhere that bodies are under the control of non-benevolent forces. The process of eating dirt and bearing the weight of the lamb gives Bruguera a chance to physically confront the anxieties and guilt that originate in being a citizen under a state which enforces its legitimacy by projecting its own guilt and shortcomings onto its own people. The viewer is afforded the same opportunity by observing the unfolding of Bruguera’s actions. After finishing the ritual, both Bruguera and the viewer are transformed; their survival of this powerful performance suggests that the actual burden it represents is one

¹⁵ Deborah K. Ultan, “From the Personal to the Transpersonal: Self Reclamation Through Ritual-in-Performance,” *Art Documentation: Journal of the Art Libraries Society of North America* 20 (2001): 32.

¹⁶ Heidi Hatry, *Meat After Meat Joy*, exh. cat., (Cambridge: Pierre Menard Gallery, 2008) 9.

that can be overcome.

Artivism

Bruguera carries the burden of a sacrificed lamb, yet she is also offering her own artist-body as a sacrifice for this performance through a public ritual that is both self-punishing and possibly disconcerting to passersby. Her first public performance of this piece in her home could have invited a hostile response from some viewers and posed further threats. Bruguera also made herself vulnerable with this performance to a government that had already begun censoring her work due to its political implications. In this context, an additional meaningful layer of *The Burden of Guilt's* allusion to the native Cubans murdered and abused by the Spanish conquerors comes to light. Besides constructing a narrative of Cuba as a place founded through guilty actions, *The Burden of Guilt's* narrative implies a repeated history—that Cubans today, too, are eating dirt. The lamb's dismemberment is also a metaphor for dependence on the death or subjugation of others for one's own nourishment—the way Cuba's founding originated in the bloodshed of others and continues today. *The Burden of Guilt* can be interpreted as a metaphor of contemporary subjugation under the continuing Castro regime.

One burden that Cubans face today is the restricted freedom of expression. Though *The Burden of Guilt* took place at the time of the 1997 Havana Biennial, it was not performed at the official venue of the exhibition which featured only government approved Cuban artworks. Nor did the performance take place at a museum, gallery or mainstream venue, but was instead conducted in Bruguera's home, blurring the distinction between the space of art and that of everyday life. Art historian Gerardo Mosquera attended this first performance of *The Burden of Guilt* and recalled that “the artist opened a wide entrance, rarely in use, that

directly connects her living room with a narrow street and a creepy bar right in front. In this way, her private space became part of the populated, intense street life.”¹⁷ Only photographs by Pedro Abscal survive of this first enactment (*figure 9*). Bruguera re-performed the piece again several times, modifying the performance for each new venue in various cities abroad.¹⁸ In these later performances, Bruguera presents the piece in the nude, with a lamb carcass that has been gutted and looks closer to what would be hanging in a butcher’s shop than the fresh kill that was still nearly a whole animal in Bruguera’s initial performance (*figure 15*). The skinned and bloody ribcage in this version of *The Burden of Guilt* hangs over Bruguera’s torso and creates the illusion that the artist’s own body has been split open instead. Her naked body echoes the fleshiness of the raw meat and suggests that her human body is just as vulnerable as that of the lamb.

This vulnerability of the flesh has an important political dimension. Such public manifestations of nationwide dissatisfaction were then in the mid-1990s, as well as now in present day Cuba, risky and potentially dangerous to create or attend. The country’s transition into a planned economy and the U.S. trade embargoes devastated the Cuban economy for the long-term. Against the backdrop of *The Burden of Guilt*, the average Cuban was already dependent on obtaining food, gasoline and other items through the state ration system that began in 1962 and continues today. After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, billions of dollars’ worth of subsidies were no longer available to support the already

¹⁷ Gerardo Mosquera, “Cuba in Tania Bruguera’s Work: The Body is the Social Body,” *Tania Bruguera: On the Political Imaginary*, ed. by Helaine Posner, Gerardo Mosquera, and Carrie Lambert-Beatty (Milan: Charta, 2009), 23.

¹⁸ Gerardo Mosquera, “Cuba in Tania Bruguera’s Work: The Body is the Social Body,” *Tania Bruguera: On the Political Imaginary*, ed. by Helaine Posner, Gerardo Mosquera, and Carrie Lambert-Beatty (Milan: Charta, 2009), 23.

struggling economy. Bruguera's act of eating dirt in this context of shortages and economic uncertainty can be taken as a critique of Cuban policies which have led to the subjugation of the island's people once again; the dirt is a last resort in the absence of adequate nourishment, a state many Cubans are currently in. Meat is a word that is often used to describe the essence of matter; it has traditionally been seen as the most nutrient rich substance. Even though Bruguera is clad in meat, she ironically eats dirt instead.

In addition to this poverty, censorship, imprisonment and harassment were also in the 1990s, and still are today, an everyday reality for political dissidents and anyone perceived as propagating subversive ideas in Cuba. In 1994, the government forcefully dispersed a political protest in Havana. In this same year, Bruguera's *Post War Memory I* parodied the state's official newspaper by allowing Cubans residing in and outside the country to express freely their political and social opinions (*figure 16*). The work was censored and the newspaper copies were seized; the participants were threatened with fifteen years of jail time.¹⁹ Bruguera was not arrested for *Memory of the Post War* or for *The Burden of Guilt* in 1997, but she was later incarcerated four times in Cuba between December 2014 and June 2015 for her activism.²⁰ The most recent artwork that led to her arrest, *Hannah Arendt International Institute for Artivism (2015)*, was performed during the 2015 Havana Biennial. Like *The Burden of Guilt* in 1997, *Hannah Arendt International Institute for Artivism* was performed outside of the official Biennial at Bruguera's private residence (*figure 17*). In this

¹⁹ Tania Bruguera, *Post War Memory I*, accessed September 8, 2015, <http://www.taniabruquera.com/cms/504-0-Postwar+Memory+I.htm>.

²⁰ Lorena Muñoz-Alonso, "Artnet News Exclusive: Tania Bruguera's Arrest in Cuba Captured on Video," *Artnet News*, last modified June 4, 2015, <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/video-tania-bruguera-arrest-cuba-304865>.

piece, the artist spent one hundred hours reading out loud Hannah Arendt's *On the Origins of Totalitarianism*. She had her point about the oppressive policies of state censorship quickly proven given the fact that she was incarcerated after completing the performance. A mere two weeks later, Bruguera was arrested again and manhandled by police for participating in a "Ladies in White" protest (*figure 18*). This group was formed after the "Black Spring" of 2003 by relatives of seventy-five journalists who were arrested and tried en masse for counterrevolutionary activities. Participants protest every Sunday by attending mass and then marching in silence through the streets in white despite occasional arrests over the years, and because these incidents were increasing in 2015, Bruguera decided to join their protest and was subsequently arrested and injured alongside other protesters.²¹ Bruguera's burden as an artist is a literal one; she willingly exposes herself to the wrath of the state in order to carry out her art-activism. Speaking out about one's reality, one's dissatisfaction with society's material or political conditions, can lead to censorship or punishment in Cuba. Expressing one's actual state of flesh and blood in Cuba can be a heavy burden in a society where guilt is deflected back from the state onto its own people, any lack of national progress blamed on those "counterrevolutionaries" who hinder it. Under these circumstances, protesters like Bruguera bear the brunt of that state-imposed guilt.

The addition of raw meat to the performance changes *The Burden of Guilt* from a mournful meditation of subjugation and loss to a ritualistic act that poses threats to the body. Rather than solely recreating the mythic story of the resistant dirt-eating natives as a metaphor for the contemporary Cuban situation, Bruguera's use of the lamb carcass adds an

²¹ Jillian Steinhauer, "Artist Tania Bruguera Arrested Again in Havana, Injured by Police," *Hyperallergic*, June 9th, 2015, accessed April 13th, 2016, <http://hyperallergic.com/213188/artist-tania-bruguera-arrested-again-in-havana-injured-by-police/>.

element of shock and disgust to the work and heightens the visceral impact of the work. According to Michel Chaouli, the feeling of disgust ensues when one is confronted with objects that threaten our sense of subjecthood and disrupt any illusions of the human being as a neat, enclosed entity.²² Disgust ensues when we view abject objects and actions that remind us of our own messy abjection and our actual vulnerable state of being that is composed of breakable sinews and expandable holes, like chewing with an open mouth or popping a blister.²³ The juxtaposition of an abject, raw and split open animal body to Bruguera's whole, yet vulnerable, body in *The Burden of Guilt* generates disgust, thus drawing the viewer's attention to his or her own state of precariousness in a way that fosters empathy for the social body Bruguera represents.

Essentially, what meat brings to *The Burden of Guilt* is a literalization of the death and dismemberment that the narrative of the native Cubans' sacrifice alludes to, thus creating a stronger and more immediate feeling of imminent danger/threat to survival than the dirt-eating ritual alone does. Muñoz compares Bruguera's representation of the social body of Cuba with the attention that the Elian Gonzalez case received. In 1999, the boy was rescued from the sea after his mother and their companions drowned attempting to reach the U.S., ensuing a custody battle between the boy's father in Havana and his relatives in Miami. The six-year old boy became a symbol of the Cuban political struggle, not only in light of strained Cuban and U.S. relations, but also due to the strained politics between Cubans who remain in Cuba and those that have emigrated. Amidst impassioned protests and a never-

²² Michel Chaouli, "Van Gogh's Ear: Towards a Theory of Disgust," in *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, ed. by Frances S. Connelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 61.

²³ Michel Chaouli, "Van Gogh's Ear: Towards a Theory of Disgust," in *Modern Art and the Grotesque*, ed. by Frances S. Connelly (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 61.

ceasing media frenzy, the child was taken from his Miami family's home by a SWAT team before returning to Havana, to be nationally featured as a trophy at the side of Fidel Castro. Muñoz comments how, "the boy's welfare and actual physical well-being were overwhelmed by the abstraction of becoming a national symbol."²⁴ Observing how Bruguera purposefully dons the burden of such symbolism, he explains that:

"Bruguera's work literalizes the metaphors of national identity and nationality. The function of this literalization reveals the material and corporeal weight of metaphors...Bruguera's insistence on corporeal literalization makes us cognizant of the actual stakes of making people and bodies mere symbols. The stakes, as the performance's title suggests, are weighty."²⁵

From eating dirt as a resistant and suicidal action to the physical burden of guilt in the form of a butchered lamb, the symbols in Bruguera's work are heavy and sometimes uncomfortably literal. They make, through the microcosm that is Bruguera's body, a case for understanding suffering at large, by overcoming abstract reference points to which one finds it difficult to relate. Deeply conscious of the fact that symbols may overshadow the reality of the flesh, Bruguera exposes her own body, engaging in a sacrificial act.

Like Schneeman, Abramović, and other performance artists that incorporate raw meat into their works, Bruguera utilizes a meat ritual to confront both a personal and a universal dimension of conflict that is rooted in fears around bodily existence. *The Burden of Guilt* is an exploration of bodily traumas such as dismemberment, violent death and the discomfiting reminders of daily viciousness, i.e., meat-eating and the intertwining of life and death. There is also in this artwork, with its presentation of primal violence and

²⁴ José Muñoz, "Performing Greater Cuba: Tania Bruguera and the Burden of Guilt," in *Holy Terrors: Latin American Women Perform*, ed. Taylor, Diana (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 406.

²⁵ José Muñoz, "Performing Greater Cuba: Tania Bruguera and the Burden of Guilt," in *Holy Terrors: Latin American Women Perform*, ed. Taylor, Diana (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 406.

consumption, a reminder of the human's status as animal. Such an animalistic ritual as that offered by Bruguera is a rebellion against dehumanizing factors like religious dogmas, political ideologies or rigid societal norms. As in Abramović's *Balkan Baroque*, there is an interplay between Bruguera's status as an individual and her embodiment of a greater social body. The artist conveys a visceral experience of what it feels like to be a citizen of Cuba at a time when one is made to carry the burden of collective guilt. In her performances, which lie on the threshold between art and life, Bruguera reveals her own individual circumstances as an artist, who is both privileged as an internationally respected and freely mobile worker and a vulnerable target for censorship in her home country. Such a burden does not seem to be alleviated even when self-sacrifice is preferred to passive submission.

CHAPTER 4

CONCLUSION

Meat is a powerful symbol of the paradoxical body that is both living and dying, indicative of the body that is seemingly more than just an object, yet is still a very vulnerable and partible bundle. When incorporated into artwork, meat is a substance that invokes horror as well as sensuality, an inanimate object that is a visceral reminder of the human body's own status as an object. Meat's abject nature makes it an ideal medium for the aims of performance art, which has since its development in the 1950s sought to illuminate the relationship of the body to contemporary society—an often uneasy one. Meat has been used in performance to explore both trauma and taboo, from its risqué and sexual celebration in Carolee Schneeman's *Meat Joy* (1964) to its somber critique of societal violence in both Marina Abramović's *Balkan Baroque* (1997) and Tania Bruguera's *The Burden of Guilt* (1997). An analysis of both of these works furthers the understanding of a material not widely discussed in the performance art literature, especially in the use of meat as a substitute of the fears and guilt of the contemporary body. Both Abramović and Bruguera immerse themselves in the abject and disgusting medium of meat and test their endurance with a difficult, long-duration task. Both artists create their performances in response to dire problems in their homeland. The two performances, however, differ in many of their references, in how they address guilt, and in the level of risk in their realizations. Yet both works richly demonstrate one aspect of meat's expressive potential—its critical exposure of societal violence.

Balkan Baroque presents a narrative where Abramović performs a never-ending Sisyphean task in which the bones she attempts to cleanse can never truly be wiped away of

all of their blood and gristle. Like the repeating video loops of Abramović's monologue, dancing and images of her parents, her task seems to be one that could go on forever in an installation purgatory. It is as though Abramović is picking at a wound that might never heal, just like the Yugoslav civil wars that she is traumatized by. Though Abramović performs an amazing feat of endurance by washing the enormous pile of 1,500 beef bones in four days, *Balkan Baroque* leaves the open question as to whether the brutality of this conflict was due to terrible circumstance or whether civil war is endemic to human nature. The artist's actions, however, suggest a path of atonement for the individual who acknowledges his guilt. Because of the many references to Abramović's personal life and upbringing in Former Yugoslavia, the guilt presented in *Balkan Baroque* seems to be both individual and collective, a work just as much about Abramović's personal conflicts as it is about the Yugoslav civil wars.

Bruguera's tableau *The Burden of Guilt* is simpler and without an installation background like the one that Abramović is surrounded by. She also performs with significantly more risk to both herself and her audience than Abramović did in *Balkan Baroque* in the relative safety of the Venice Biennial. The venue is one of high prestige and its audience comes to the event with the intention of viewing and appreciating contemporary art. Bruguera, however, performed in her own living room that was open to random passersby of a Havana neighborhood, some of whom were disturbed by the strangeness of the artist's actions, and may not have reacted favorably. Bruguera had already been censored by the Cuban government before, and as the arrival of the police indicates, the possibility of arrest or immediate backlash for performing a politically critical artwork was very real and would be realized later in Bruguera's career. Bruguera carried out this performance in a

white outfit just like Abramović did in *Balkan Baroque*, both artists choosing the dramatic contrast of stark white garments that are bloodied by their handling of meat to emphasize the staining of what was once pure, the guilty crime that is the dismemberment of the bodies they represent. Bruguera, however, re-performed *The Burden of Guilt* in a more vulnerable state—in the nude. Her nakedness made the connection of her flesh and the lamb's carcass even more apparent, and further contributed to the primal energy that her dirt-eating ritual and emulation of a *Santeria*-like ritual already invoked. A nude body is also an effective way of representing the universal body in its most basic, possible state, allowing Bruguera to even further transform herself into a symbol of the collective.

The two artists' treatments of guilt are also distinct, and illustrate the different ways that meat can be connected to guilt and shame. Abramović clearly suffers from personal shame at what has transpired in her homeland as well as the difficulties of her childhood. Just like Yugoslavia was dismembered and its inhabitants shamefully massacred each other, the meat and bones that she handles are a massive yet dismembered mess, and she must take her time to sort through and purify each one. Abramović's goal in *Balkan Baroque* is to acknowledge every shameful occurrence/memory and to then expunge this guilt. Bruguera's purpose is a different one, as she performs in the context of an ongoing burden that she is currently still struggling beneath. The lamb that weighs on Bruguera in *The Burden of Guilt* is not completely intact---it is decapitated and split open---but it is still the recognizable carcass of an animal, in contrast to the completely torn apart pieces of *Balkan Baroque*. Cuba, though under the weight of an intolerant regime, is not dismembered in the way that Yugoslavia has been, and though it may be an oversimplification to describe its political situation as the people versus the state, this is the symbolism of Bruguera's body as she

wears the carcass. The two different uses of meat as an abject material have similar aims yet distinct effects. Meat can invoke the horror of chaotic mass violence, like the dismembered bits in *Balkan Baroque* do, or it can embody a gory sacrifice, like the slaughtered lamb in *The Burden of Guilt* does. Bruguera needs the form of a sacrificial animal in order to reinforce the reference she makes to the mythic native Cubans who sacrificed themselves in order to avoid conquest by the Spaniards. Emulating their defiant action, Bruguera, who is like all white Cubans a descendent of the conquerors, eats dirt that is an internalization of guilt, one that is projected by the government onto its own people in an attempt to shift blame and shame over the failed promises of revolution. Shame in *The Burden of Guilt* is a projected one, and the structure of the performance invites the viewer to think about whose guilt is in question.

Despite the opposition to the Cuban state that Bruguera's performance invokes, she, like Abramović, ultimately offers herself as a sort of ritualistic healer, using a performance to transcend her personal self into a symbolic, collective body that can address and then move past mass trauma and guilt. The fleshy, abject and disgusting nature of meat sharpens the contrast of the political and dehumanizing horrors represented in both performances with the abstract, renewing and transformative qualities that the rituals in both *Balkan Baroque* and *The Burden of Guilt* offer the viewer.

ILLUSTRATIONS



Figure 1: Marina Abramović, Detail from *Balkan Baroque*, 1997. Performance, 4 days, 6 hours, and three-channel video installation, 4:13 min. XLVII Biennale, Venice.



Figure 2: *Balkan Baroque*



Figure 3: *Balkan Baroque*



Figure 4: Marina Abramović, *The Onion*, 1995, 10 min. Performed for video, UTA, Dallas.



Figure 5: Detail of *Balkan Baroque*



Figure 6: Carolee Schneeman, *Meat Joy*, 1964, Performance.

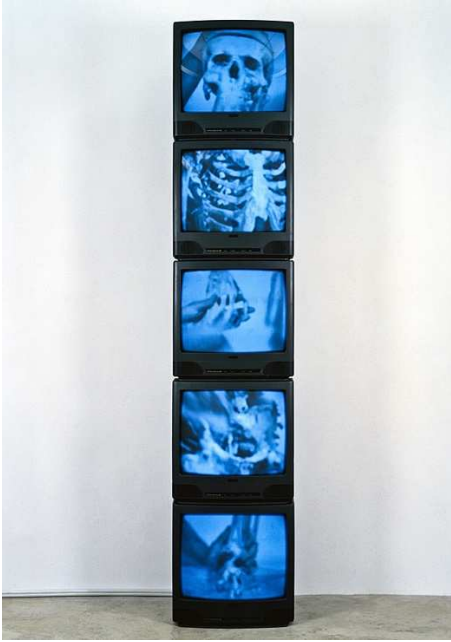


Figure 7: Marina Abramović, *Cleaning the Mirror #1*, 1995. Five-channel video installation with stacked monitors (color, sound), 112 x 24.5 x 19” overall. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York.



Figure 8: Marina Abramović, *Nude with Skeleton*, 2002-5. Black-and-white concept photograph for re-performances.



Figure 9: Tania Bruguera, *The Burden of Guilt*, 1997, Performance.



Figure 10: Tania Bruguera, *Statistics*, 1996-98. Human hair.



Figure 11: Tania Bruguera, *The Body of Silence*, 1997-98



Figure 12: Tania Bruguera, *The Burden of Guilt II*,



Figure 13: Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Death of a Chicken)*, 1972



Figure 14: Tania Bruguera, *Tribute to Mendieta*, 1986-96



Figure 15: Tania Bruguera, *The Burden of Guilt*, 1997, Performance.



Figure 16: Tania Bruguera, *Post War Memory I*, 1994



Figure 17: Tania Bruguera, *Hannah Arendt International Institute for Artivism*, 2015



Figure 18: Tania Bruguera after arrest

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