

The Image of the Artist in Performance Art: The Case of Rudolf Schwarzkogler*

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[H]istorians have learned to recognize that the anecdote in its wider sense taps the realms of myth and saga, from which it carries a wealth of imaginative material into recorded history.

– Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist*¹

The confusion of the fictional with the documentary haunts not only Schwarzkogler's work, but performance art in general. And the Schwarzkogler myth is summoned by anyone aiming to compromise, trivialize, sensationalize, or simply discredit artists using the body as material for art.

– Kristine Stiles, 'Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions'²

There is an account of Rudolf Schwarzkogler—introduced to the public by *Time Magazine* critic Robert Hughes in 1972—that maintains that the artist died as a result of deliberate and self-inflicted penis mutilations undertaken in a series of performances in the late 1960s.³ This account is entirely false. What is more, evidence of its falsehood is available and familiar, having been exposed by a multitude of scholarly studies and exhibitions on Schwarzkogler's work. During his lifetime, Schwarzkogler was all but unknown outside his native Austria. The myth of his death made Schwarzkogler and the Viennese Actionists (the group of artists with whom he collaborated between 1963–1969) notorious; but it has also demonstrably impacted the reception of performance art more broadly. This essay examines the contours of the Schwarzkogler myth in its current guises and the relationship between its production and absorption into the assumed critical expectations for what the medium of performance art entails. The obstinacy of the Schwarzkogler myth would seem to indicate that the contemporary reception of performance depends as much upon the mythologized images of its artists as it does the substance of the works themselves.

I will begin by examining the documentary history of Schwarzkogler's *Action #3* (1965), a brief encounter with which reveals the unequivocal disparity between the photographic images as representation and the mythic representation of the images. From the moment of the myth's propagation, its 'wealth of imaginative material' has riddled the recorded history of Schwarzkogler's actions. The power of the myth to preclude a critical approach to the work is evidenced by the fact that so outrageous a claim as auto-

castration was taken at face value, and circulated, for more than two decades; this claim has been buttressed by another equally outrageous one that contends that the artist was 'crazy' enough to take photographs to prove he did it. Indeed, instead of eliciting cautious skepticism and close looking, the narrative of Schwarzkogler's putative auto-castration has camouflaged its own speciousness by staging a sleight of hand. The myth goads one to look at the images of Schwarzkogler's action without actually seeing what is (or is not) there.⁴ The myth also effects a tautology: it masquerades as a truth that the photographs supposedly 'document'. As the examples discussed in this essay illustrate, this pervasive bias towards the photograph as document has played no small part in the sustainment of the Schwarzkogler myth. Ultimately, the myth's profound misrepresentations—of the artist's work, of the nature of performance documentation, and of the definition of performance art itself—have been harnessed as a trope to determine and delimit what is proper to performance. As all myths do, Rudolf Schwarzkogler's tells a story of propriety.

Action #3, 1965

In June of 1965, Schwarzkogler undertook a scripted action for a private audience of colleagues and friends, which was performed in the Viennese apartment of Heinz Cibulka, his model. This action, Schwarzkogler's third, was also explicitly intended to be photographed—by Ludwig Hoffenreich, a professional photographer—and it followed the descriptive outline of a written *Aktionsablauf* or 'action program'.⁵ Schwarzkogler's textual scores and drawn sketches indicate that he conceived of his actions as vehicles for methodical aesthetic exploration in the form of successive tableau arranged to be photographed. The production of action programs and preparatory sketches was by no means unique among the *oeuvres* of the Viennese Actionists, and Schwarzkogler's contain specific details for understanding his actions. The sketches show the planned configurations of rooms, props, and models; the scores provide lists of materials used in the actions as well as the identities of the principal actors involved, for example, 'C' indicating Cibulka and 'S.' Schwarzkogler.

Specifically, *Action #3* used Cibulka's body, which Schwarzkogler deliberately posed and juxtaposed with various objects, including a gauze-wrapped ball, electrical wire, rubber tubing, a glass medicine bottle with dropper, a fish, razor blades, scissors, a knife, and a dark stone. Hoffenreich's photographs of *Action #3* illustrate Schwarzkogler's intent to construct and control an 'action field'—what the artist defined as 'the real objects found in the surroundings' and 'the space around the actor'.⁶ In many photographs, for example, the controlled staging of the model and objects is readily apparent: Figure 1 shows a bare-chested Cibulka lying atop a rectangular board that has been placed on the floor and covered with a white sheet; Hoffenreich's shod right foot can be glimpsed in the bottom corner of the photograph as he shoots his subject from above. In others, Cibulka's body is concealed by gauze bandages, first tightly wrapped and then disheveled (Figure 2); and in the final images, his head and torso are wrapped again in clear plastic sheeting (Figure 3). In all cases, whether standing upright, sitting, or prone, Cibulka's body is connected, sometimes quite literally, to a prop—electrical wires are arranged to emanate from his mouth, encircle his head, or seemingly enter his arm like an intravenous drip (Figures 1 and 10). In two photographs, Schwarzkogler himself actually appears in the frame: Figure 4 shows him (note Schwarzkogler's dark hair and beard) standing behind Cibulka, cupping the side of his face to steady the deployment of a syringe; the next photograph shows his outstretched right hand lifting the edge of the bandage over Cibulka's eye (Figure 5). Several images depict a large fish hanging down the middle of Cibulka's naked back, which then reappears, its head decapitated, facing the camera and protruding from Cibulka's penis with razorblades placed in its agape mouth (Figures 6 and 10). What will subsequently become the most controversial element, however, is his bandaged penis. A number of photographs exhibit it swaddled in white gauze secured by flesh-colored adhesive tape, and a few augment the suggestion of wounding. One photograph in particular includes dots of dark color spotting the gauze on Cibulka's penis, while two others of Cibulka sitting astride the bandaged ball illustrate Schwarzkogler's written directive for a 'thin dark trickle' to run from the model's penis onto the ball⁷ (Figure 7). Three photographs juxtapose a pristinely bandaged penis laid on a table edge with more than a dozen razor blades, or surgical scissors and a syringe (Figure 8).

Following a fourth action that same summer, Schwarzkogler progressively curtailed his artistic activities. He performed his final, sixth action in the spring of 1966.⁸

After 1968, he created only a handful of drawings and typewritten scores, and became increasingly withdrawn, depressed, and suffered health problems that were likely attributable to an obsession with severely restrictive eating regimes.⁹ On June 20, 1969, three years *after* the performance of *Action #3*, at the age of twenty-nine, Schwarzkogler died as a result of a fall from the window of his second-floor apartment in Vienna—whether accidental or intentional, it is not known; there were no witnesses.¹⁰ A public funeral was held for the artist on 27 June at the Zentralfriedhof (Figure 9). In November of 1970, a year and a half after Schwarzkogler's death, photographs of his actions were exhibited for the first time, at the Galerie nächst St. Stephan in Vienna. In 1972, six photographs from *Action #3* were included in the Documenta 5 exhibition in Kassel, Germany, the catalog for which reproduced the photographs alongside Schwarzkogler's 1965 text entitled 'Manifest PANORAMA I'¹¹ (Figure 10).

This succinct account constitutes the complete creation and exhibition history of the *Action #3* photographs up to the point of their inclusion in Documenta 5. The deliberate emphasis on chronology is meant to draw attention to the attestable history of Schwarzkogler's artistic production, which has been overwritten by the claims of subsequent critics, most sweepingly in Robert Hughes's exhibition review of Documenta 5. Hughes, writing for *Time Magazine*, focused his remarks on the photographs of *Action #3* in order to elaborate his deep disappointment with the state of contemporary art, neatly encapsulated in the title of his piece, 'The Decline and Fall of the Avant-Garde'. Quoting Hughes at length is essential, because his discussion of Schwarzkogler is responsible for securely establishing the defining features of what would become the artist's myth:

Those interested in the fate of the avant-garde should reflect on a Viennese artist named Rudolf Schwarzkogler. His achievement (and limited though it may be, it cannot be taken from him; he died, a martyr to his art, in 1969 at the age of 29) was to become the Vincent Van [sic] Gogh of body art. As every moviegoer knows, Van Gogh once cut off his ear and presented it to a whore. Schwarzkogler seems to have deduced that what really counts is not the application of paint, but the removal of surplus flesh. So he proceeded, inch by inch, to amputate his own penis, while a photographer recorded the act as an art event. In 1972, the resulting prints were reverently exhibited in that biennial motor show of Western art, Documenta 5 at Kassel. Successive acts of self-amputation finally did Schwarzkogler in....

No doubt it could be argued by the proponents of body art (a form of expression whereby the artist's body becomes, as it were, the subject and object of the artwork) that Schwarzkogler's self-editing was not indulgent but brave, taking the audience's castration fears and reducing them to their most threatening quiddity. That the man was clearly as mad as a hatter, sick beyond rebuke, is not thought important: wasn't Van Gogh crazy too? But Schwarzkogler's gesture has a certain emblematic value. Having nothing to say, and nowhere to go but further out, he lopped himself and called it art. The politics of experience give way to the poetics of impotence.¹²

Employing Schwarzkogler's supposed act of emasculation as proof positive, Hughes's main objective was to establish that the avant-garde had conclusively died. In each case, whether that of Schwarzkogler or the avant-garde, Hughes linked death to impotence, and he presented the emptiness of Schwarzkogler's action (his putative self-castration) as exemplary for its having precluded the possibility of (artistic) progeny. It is noteworthy that the six images exhibited at Documenta V attributed to Schwarzkogler were all assigned the generic title 'Action with a Male Body', making no reference to the specific identity of the figure.

This characterization and use of Schwarzkogler's photographs as the ultimate example of art's endgame has perpetuated a deeply dismissive image of performance art within popular discourses that reject the medium as narcissistic and masochistic.¹³ The conception of performance art as pathological has been facilitated in large measure by how Hughes defined the medium itself, positing a direct equivalence between the artist's body and the artwork, which not only conflated subject and object but also subject and artist. This misapprehension of the structure and processes of performance art exposes two important issues. First, it reveals a tacit recognition of the ways in which performance art is fundamentally different from theater, in not being grounded in a theatrical tradition of impersonation and the accompanying suspension of disbelief. Second, however, it betrays a concomitant misapprehension of the relationship in performance art between artist and artwork in the claim that an artist's performative action should be read as

the transparent expression or reflection of his or her mental state. The misconception attending the second notion in fact depends upon and reinforces the first, such that the presumptive unstable mentality of the artist is understood to be a factual representation of the self.

This conflation often involves a crude appropriation of popular mythologies of artistic expression, a point reinforced by Hughes's pairing of Schwarzkogler and van Gogh—in effect, these two tortured artists produced tortured art (Figure 11). Nonetheless, Hughes maintained an important distinction between them: whereas van Gogh did not consider his act of slicing off his earlobe a work of art, Schwarzkogler did his putative self-mutilation, such that it became his 'emblematic' gesture. Within this formulation, the expressive and symbolic role of van Gogh's gestural stars, cypress trees, and wheat fields are abandoned for the gesture itself. Hughes's notion of performance art thereby removes the function conventionally played by painting as an extension, sublimation, or displacement of the artist's expression, but does nothing to modify or complicate the conception of the art object as a result. It simply and reductively closes the circuit between artist and product. Without a material outlet, the artist's expression can only be turned back upon the body; without a material product to show for his efforts, Schwarzkogler can only reveal his 'poetic impotence'.

Hughes's erroneous claims that the photographs of *Action #3* recorded Schwarzkogler's deliberate and successive amputation of his own penis, and that those acts were directly linked to the cause of the artist's death, became the accepted, indeed perhaps the only, account of Schwarzkogler's life and work for almost twenty years. One of the most demonstrable examples of the myth's persistence and immutability appeared in Henry Sayre's book, *The Object of Performance*, published in 1989 by the University of Chicago Press. Sayre made almost identical assertions as Hughes in claiming that Schwarzkogler's photographs offered 'most horribly' a 'documentation... of Rudolf Schwarzkogler's 1969 piece by piece amputation of his own penis.'¹⁴ In doing so, Sayre not only powerfully reinforced the truth claims of Hughes's myth—with the authority of a renowned academic press adding credibility to the claims—but more fundamentally Sayre utilized the example of Schwarzkogler's 'amputation piece' as evidence for grounding his very approach to performance art upon photography as 'document', with its ability to convey an absent presence. He writes, 'performance art... [has] come to rely on the medium [of photography] as a mode of "presentation"'—the 'record of the art event that survived the event.'¹⁵ Whereas Hughes was unnerved by and critical of the implications of what he saw to be the production of objectless gestures, Sayre seemingly resolved this problem by privileging the documentary photograph in its ability to restore the 'object of performance'. Sayre credits the document with saving from extinction both objectless art and the museum, which exists solely to house objects of art. Furthermore, neither Hughes nor Sayre took into account the fact that Schwarzkogler had theorized precisely the substitution of the traditional art object as product or relic with the concept of an 'action field', which privileges an engagement with the space around the actor and the real objects found in his or her environment. That Sayre's belief in the essential role and veracity of the photographic document was grounded upon false premises and inaccurate assertions about Schwarzkogler's images was not lost on Kristine Stiles, who noted in her extensive critical review of Sayre's book that 'the relationship between performance and its photographic documents that Sayre set out to unpack unravels from page two...'¹⁶

It is perhaps worth reminding the reader at this juncture that a) no penises were harmed during the making of Schwarzkogler's action, and b) the body and the penis in the photographs were not Schwarzkogler's. Yet, the basic components of Hughes's account have so successfully established the definitive, encompassing, and enduring misapprehension of the artist Schwarzkogler, his artwork, and more generally the medium of performance art, that the source of their potency warrants a closer examination. In taking up the subject of the Schwarzkogler myth and revisiting the particulars of its formation, my intent does not center on disentangling the threads of myth from history. Other scholars have pursued the project of repudiating the Schwarzkogler narrative, unequivocally and definitively, perhaps none more so than Stiles herself. Rather, the arguments that follow concentrate on the reasons why the tentacles of this myth perniciously persist in wrapping themselves around a multitude of targets. In this essay,

I attend to the 'wealth of imaginative material' that the mythologization of Schwarzkogler has carried into recorded history as a 'vehicle of the most diverse realizations.'¹⁷ I proceed by identifying several frameworks within which the operations of myth function, drawing upon the work of Roland Barthes, Ernst Kris, and Otto Kurz with respect to the semiological structure of myth (Barthes) and the role of myth in artistic biography (Kris and Kurz). From this foundation, I analyze several recent iterations of the Schwarzkogler myth to further interrogate the image of the artist in the historical narratives framed around Schwarzkogler and the role of mythologization upon which that image depends. The examples represent a range of perspective, critical complexity, and intent, and each is a product of a discrete context or practice: art history, art criticism, and performance art itself. Together, these examples provide a picture of the elements of the Schwarzkogler myth that draw upon the imagination of critics, scholars, and artists alike, and highlight not only the continued obsession with this infamous fiction but the necessity of coming to terms with its influence in the reception of performance art. Ultimately, in posing the question 'Why are we more eager to believe that Schwarzkogler cut off his own penis than he didn't?' this essay examines entrenched beliefs about the artist's persona, documentary truth and deception, and the persistent stigmatization of performance art.

But first, to return to Robert Hughes, who was offered the opportunity to recant. In November of 1996, on the occasion of an exhibition of Schwarzkogler's work at the Smithsonian's Hirshhorn Museum, Hughes was interviewed by Murray White for *The New Yorker* and questioned about his 1972 review:

This is one of those pieces of art-world folklore, and it was in circulation before I got to it. The idea of anybody unmanning himself in this way is so horrendous and weird that I think it developed a kind of credibility. Who on earth would want to make *that* up?... I just thought, Well, here is this ultra nut taking to the final extreme the gesture of van Gogh with his ear... And I was wrong... I will go down there and sprinkle ashes upon my head while kneeling on a piece of sackcloth and apologize to the offended shade of Rudy Schwarzkogler... Unfortunately, there's no way to put the toothpaste back in the tube.¹⁸ Or, less euphemistically, to reattach the artist's penis. With this backhanded 'apology', Hughes deferred responsibility, as a critic and author, for his failure to verify the facts of the Schwarzkogler story that was already 'in circulation'. Even though he admitted to being wrong, he did so in a way that maintained he was still right to be wrong. In essence, Hughes believes he cannot be blamed for being mistaken, since the implied fault lies not with himself but with the 'ultra nut' Schwarzkogler. For indeed, *who* on earth would want to make that up?¹⁹

I admit that I have often been struck by the awkwardness of asserting that an artist did not, in fact, cut off his own penis, but it indicates the essentially tabloid nature of Hughes's story. His deliberately sensational critique provoked a public furor that, even now, some thirty-five years after its first report and fifteen years after its incontrovertible rebuttal, remains the dominant myth underlying the reception of performance art. The public—and this includes professionals—is implicated in this perpetuation, in that it would rather preserve the Schwarzkogler castration myth than consider the aesthetic potential and critical agency of Schwarzkogler's actions and their implications for artistic production. One signal of the myth's attractiveness can be found in the very title of Hughes's original review, 'The Decline and Fall of the Avant-Garde'. In punning upon Edward Gibbon's epic history (*The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, 1776), Hughes implicitly compared the avant-garde to the grandeur of Rome at its zenith, whereas Schwarzkogler, Viennese Actionism, and performance art are equated with the dissipated decadence of the late Empire—hyperbolic, effete, and impotent. Ironically, then, when viewed in this light, it is Hughes that performs the castration; his essay emasculates the avant-garde and Schwarzkogler in a single stroke. This emasculation takes its effect by construing the artwork as the product of an unstable mind: in rendering it as art of the insane, Hughes can dismiss it as inconsequential. The public is encouraged to mock the impropriety of Schwarzkogler's act along with Hughes in lieu of actually attending to it. In effect, Hughes's fiction functions as an unusually pernicious form of censorship, instantiating a mythology that continues to overwrite the truth and undermine the real implications of Schwarzkogler's work and of the medium of performance art.

Myth Yesterday and Today

In the most general sense, Hughes's misrepresentations promoted the obfuscation of historical accuracy in favor of the distortive power of myth. The story of Schwarzkogler's self-castration as Hughes re-told it contains fundamental features of myth outlined by Roland Barthes in 1957 in his watershed essay, 'Myth Today'.²⁰ In that text, Barthes defines myth as a type of speech—a 'mode of signification' for specific social use that includes forms of pictorial representation, including photography. Myth is determined to be a 'peculiar' semiological system because it reduces signs to mere signifiers. In other words, myth conflates a sign's form and meaning at the outset, as if an image already and inherently contained both. At the same time, myth works to evacuate its own meaning, to displace and distance it—Barthes calls it 'impoverished' but not dead—so that while the value of myth's meaning is necessarily diminished, it nevertheless continues to supply an infinite reservoir of history. Barthes writes, 'the form must constantly be able to be rooted again in the meaning and to get there what nature it needs for its nutriment; above all, it must be able to hide there. It is this constant game of hide-and-seek between the meaning and the form which defines myth'. Myth then introduces onto this framework a whole new concept of its own to replace the devalued historical meaning. It works as a substitute for history, which is the driving motivation of myth. The 'knowledge' contained in the mythical concept is 'confused, made of yielding, shapeless associations', which directly serve myth's *appropriative* function.

Barthes describes the artificial causality of myth in the following terms: 'everything happens as if the picture naturally conjured up the concept, as if the signifier gave a foundation to the signified'. In short, myth accomplishes two things—it effectively distorts its object, and it transforms history into nature. These actions can be readily transposed to the subject at hand: in the first instance, the distortion that occurs lies in the assertion that Schwarzkogler's photographs are documentary self-portraits, rather than recognized as images of a scripted performance with a model; second, by naturalizing history, the Schwarzkogler myth renders all the particulars of *Action #3* into an inevitable by-product of the artist's general psychological nature.

The 1934 landmark study of *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist* by the Viennese art historians Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz offers another productive framework for understanding the salient elements of the Schwarzkogler castration myth. Working chronologically from the earliest examples of artists' biographies in the writings of Lysippus and Socrates, Kris and Kurz trace the appearance of what they called 'artist anecdotes' or 'fixed biographical themes', namely, a set of preconceived, stereotyped, and recurrent notions of the artist that still significantly influence our views of who an artist is and what he or she portrays in his or her art (although the artist is presumed to be male). Surprisingly, or perhaps not, Kris and Kurz discovered that one of the most distinctive aspects of artist anecdotes is that claims stated therein are often false. In place of accuracy, the elements of an individual artist's biography, however varied from artist to artist, tend to align around a set of limited themes: 1) an innate, prodigious talent discovered by chance at a young age; 2) an ability to deceptively imitate, or even surpass, nature in creating the illusion of reality; 3) a belief in the artist as divinely controlled or inspired; and 4) a conflation of the artist's person with his artwork, such that a reciprocal relationship exists between the two.

These topoi often turn around or are activated by a deep ambivalence about images, which manifests in several interrelated ways. For example, an artist's aptitude for mimesis can generate confusion between reality and illusion, a talent that is both praised (god-given) yet potentially dangerous (god-like). A similar fear of ambivalence exists at the root of the boundary—heavily policed by historians and critics—established between divinely inspired imitation and sinister mechanical replication. Ambivalence also permits the injection of the artist's subjectivity into the now-animated image and a subsequent counter-transference back onto the artist, which amounts to an uncertainty about identity. The cases of the Schwarzkogler myth that I discuss next are strongly implicated by these forms of ambivalence: they illustrate the consistent attempts to equate Schwarzkogler the artist (and person) with his artwork, and they underscore the assumption of deceit in repeated emphases upon distinguishing illusory fiction from documentary truth (damning or negating the former in order to uphold the latter). The enduring fascination with the artist 'Schwarzkogler' and the images he produced

speaks to the deeply cultural, conventional assumptions about an artist's personal relationship to his artwork, the role that equivalence plays in that relationship, and the resultant expectations that performance art so conspicuously complicates. In effect, the Schwarzkogler myth comprises a perfect storm of seemingly inviolable assumptions about artistic creation.

The Schwarzkogler Myth in Play

This essay's initial motivation stemmed from a personal encounter with the Schwarzkogler myth, during a lecture by Donald Kuspit entitled 'Frederick Hart Against the Modernist Grain', delivered on October 4, 2007, at the University of Louisville. Kuspit's presentation that evening generally followed arguments outlined in an essay he authored for a 2007 catalogue raisonné on the sculptor, 'Tragic Beauty and Human Wholeness: Frederick Hart's Reparation of the Figure', which discusses Hart's figurative work as a restorative 'antidote' to the 'psychosocial destructiveness and inhumanity' of modern art, whether manifested in its 'sadistic' and 'freakish figures—abortive versions of human being' (Kuspit's reference to the paintings of Francis Bacon), or in the 'vainglorious' 'endgame abstraction' of Minimalism.²¹ Drawing upon a psychoanalytical, specifically Jungian, approach to art-making, Kuspit privileges artwork 'rooted in traditional respect' for creation, as demonstrated by Hart's *Ex Nihilo* sculptural relief for the Washington Cathedral. He writes, 'In a sense, art that does not return to this moment of creation—that does not ponder... the meaning of being human—is not truly creative.'

In his University of Louisville lecture, Kuspit reiterated this polemical contrast between the hope and spiritual morality of Hart's *Ex Nihilo* tympanum and the 'narcissistic preoccupation' with destruction represented by Modernist art. In contrast to his essay, however, Kuspit alluded in his talk to examples of contemporary performance artists to support his arguments about the general bankruptcy of twentieth-century art. Although he did not provide the names of the performance artists to whom he referred, he did offer detailed descriptions of two artists' work that exemplified the type of contemporary art that he wished to denigrate in order to elevate Hart. One artist had 'castrated' himself for the sake of his art, and another, with AIDS, had 'nailed his penis to a board' and then proceeded to throw his blood on the audience. Most troublesome to hear were the factual errors evident in both of Kuspit's examples: the first repeated Schwarzkogler's mythic self-castration; the second offered both a sensationalized misrepresentation as well as a conflation of performances by Bob Flanagan²² and Ron Athey.²³ At the conclusion of the lecture, as Kuspit took questions from the audience, I alerted him to the fact that he had mistakenly claimed, in his implicit reference to Schwarzkogler, that the artist had castrated himself, when in fact he had not. Kuspit's succinct response to this comment was, 'I knew that'. As confounding as this admission appeared to be, more striking was the seeming compulsion to repeat the Schwarzkogler myth even when he subsequently claimed to know the charge of self-castration to be false. In effect, the myth was more powerful and persuasive than the truth. Either way, deploying the Schwarzkogler myth in this context functioned as a means to reinforce a second myth—that of the inherently narcissistic and destructive nature of performance art, whereby the relationship between the myths of Schwarzkogler, Flanagan, and Athey becomes one of reciprocity.

Another example of the Schwarzkogler myth in play comes from a review article by the feminist author Germaine Greer, published in *The Guardian* on February 11, 2008, under the title, 'What Do Artists Prove By Mutilating Their Bodies? That They Are Ghastly—and Uninteresting'.²⁴ Greer penned her commentary in response to the exhibition of Günter von Hagens' flayed, Plastinated corpses in *Body Worlds 4*. Greer likened von Hagens' work to 'sideshow impresarios who used to exhibit bearded ladies, tattooed men, eight-legged goats and dog-faced boys'. Greer claims—and disdains—that such fare is categorized today as 'art', commenting that the 'cultural heirs of sword-swallowers and fire-eaters are all at art school'.

Plastinated corpses provide Greer the occasion to decry the genre of performance art in both its current and historical practice. Greer had a particular form of body art in mind, one that involves an artist 'deliberately disfiguring and damaging' his or her body, a body that she assumes to be 'strong, healthy, and young'.²⁵ This brings her to a discussion of the Schwarzkogler myth:

The outer limits of body art were set in the 1960s by the Aktionismus Group: Hermann Nitsch, Rudolf Schwarzkogler, Günter Brus and Otto Mühl. By the time

photographs of a performance in which Schwarzkogler apparently cut slices off his penis were shown at *Documenta V* in 1972, the artist had committed suicide. The most sinister aspect of the story is that the photographs were faked; the thing being sliced was not Schwarzkogler's penis but a replica made of clay. What the viewers of the work were excited by was their mistaken belief that they were witnessing a potentially fatal self-mutilation. Schwarzkogler's confederates in Aktionismus have taken care ever since not to dispel the illusion.

This paragraph in particular contains several fascinating mistakes—if mistakes they are. It is clear from Greer's remarks that she is aware that Schwarzkogler did not amputate his penis, but by contending that the photographs were 'faked' omits the essential fact that the body in the photographs was not Schwarzkogler's at all, but Cibulka's. However, Greer assumes that the body pictured always and necessarily signifies *as Schwarzkogler's*: this way, the fact that he may not be cutting himself becomes evidence of duplicity. The inaccuracies of Greer's account also include elements of her own fabrication: the charge of suicide, and the insertion of a clay replica, the latter of which forms the fabric into which she weaves her own myth asserting the falsity of the photographs.²⁶ Despite the fact that no body was harmed in any aspect of Schwarzkogler's action, Greer reads the photographs as attempting to assert both the 'facticity' of mutilation and the 'perfidy' of the performance. Her assertion also presumes that viewers approached the images with the Schwarzkogler castration myth already in mind, that is, that the images were understood as photo-documentation of an actual castration, rather than as aesthetic objects, the subjects of which could be anything from meditations on castration to healing.²⁷ Following a certain chain of false logic, if the notion of Schwarzkogler's self-castration is abandoned but the ideology of the documentary photograph is upheld, then the conclusion must be that the photographs were designed to be deceptive. Moreover, like Hughes, Greer displaces responsibility for the perpetuation of the castration myth. Her essay implies a sort of nefarious conspiracy in which the Actionists are cast as an artistic cabal dedicated to the preservation of their sensational legacy. We are given to understand that it is incumbent upon the artists to correct the repeated mistakes of critics and art historians over the last thirty-five years: a scandalous claim is put before the public without documentation, and the accused are required to dispel the charge.

In my correspondence with Greer, she identified Robert Hughes as 'a friend of mine', whose 'version of the Schwarzkogler action' she may have become aware of as early as 1972, but she nevertheless asserted that the 'myth was in circulation long before that'.²⁸ I asked her where she had read or heard about the supposed use of a clay replica. She responded that she could not remember where she had 'read this detail. I guess you know that Cibulka is still around; he occasionally gives interviews and I might have read one'. Greer admitted that she now realizes there are no photographs involving 'actual slicing, so the prosthesis would hardly have been necessary'. At the same time, however, she reiterated her belief that Schwarzkogler's action was faked and offered a definition of performance art that would distinguish between its authentic and false forms: 'the action must be carried out before an audience in real time, not faked in private and photographed. Schwarzkogler, Cibulka, and Hoffenreich created evidence of an event that never happened, but, just as with a certain crucifixion, belief in the event became an imperative—for some'.

In this instance, Greer's privileging of live performance echoes similar arguments made by Peggy Phelan concerning the demand for artistic 'presence' in the determination of performance art's authenticity and validity—its ontological status *as* performance proper. Once the measure of performance art's authenticity becomes tied to presence, the problem of representation and documentation is immediately implicated, as these statements by Phelan make clear:

Performance's only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations of representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology.... The document of a performance then is only a spur to memory, an encouragement of memory to become present.²⁹

What needs to be acknowledged, however, is that from its very beginnings, the history of performance has included the photographing, filming, and eventual videotaping of actions; the role played by these 'recording' media has been inextricable from and instrumental to the production of 'live' performance.³⁰ Furthermore, performance

itself questions and often purposively undermines (Schwarzkogler's images offering a case in point) the artificial categories of reality and fiction, truth and artifice, presence and mimesis, subject and object, artist and artwork, presentation and representation. Accounts that deny the significant historical, practical, and theoretical relationships between performance and its representation offer an incomplete and skewed perspective on the medium.

The centrality of artistic reception to the Schwarzkogler myth leads to my final example: the Bulgarian artist Boryana Rossa explicitly took up the mythos surrounding Schwarzkogler's Documenta photographs in a 2007 performance *Blood Revenge 2* (Figure 12). The title refers to her attempt, as a female and feminist artist, to critique the notion of castration as the ultimate gesture of the heroic male artist. Rossa described her performance as follows:

'Blood Revenge 2' is a memorial to Rudolf Schwarzkogler's performances 'Action 2 and 3', 1965. For about four decades, the myth that Schwarzkogler died after cutting his penis off has been marching successfully around the world... Influence for artists and insuperable gesture for some art critics this myth is an international performance art folklore... Through all my performance art practice I had to 'compete' with Schwarzkogler's ultimate heroic gesture. I was often told there is no stronger artistic gesture than an amputation of a penis. As far as I can't amputate my penis, I decided to recreate the performance considering the female anatomy. I created a hybrid of art history lecture and a body intervention. I told the true story... The photographs of 'Action 2 and 3' – the starting point of the myth—are *not documentation of an actual performance, but arranged scenes*. The model is Heiz [sic] Cibulka and Schwarzkogler is *only the photographer*. After that I asked people from the audience to be my photographers and imitate Schwarzkogler's photo compositions—the source of the myth. Thus the public took the role of the mythology producer. After that I stitched up the dildo to myself with surgical thread, cut it off and posed for the camera.³¹

Rossa was thus responding both to Schwarzkogler himself and to the critical reception of Schwarzkogler that, rightly or wrongly, has focused so exclusively on the act of auto-castration. Notwithstanding the significance of Rossa's feminist intervention in the discourse on castration, her performance mirrors several pejorative aspects of the mythologization of Schwarzkogler's original action.

First, Rossa's decision to perform *Blood Revenge 2* (upon) herself was decidedly self-conscious (Figure 13). The lecture with which she initiated her performance evinces Rossa's familiarity with the essential distinction between artist and object in performance art, in that she was careful to deconstruct for the audience the operative mechanics of that distinction as they obtain within the context of the historical reception of Schwarzkogler's photographs. Nevertheless, her choice to use her own body reinscribed the popular expectations for what performance art entails vis-à-vis the notional equivalence of artist and object. Using her own body also reified a dominant and narrow notion of performance art as it has been inflected by scholarly emphasis on Body Art, which locates performance's ontology and significance in the present body of the *artist* to the detriment of considerations of forms of performance, such as Viennese Actionism and Happenings, that depend upon the instrumentality of others—models, actors, and audience.

Second, this interjection becomes especially problematic in the introduction of self-mutilation. The act of suturing the dildo to her pubis resulted in a moderate but conspicuous flow of blood (Figure 14). On the one hand, this act necessitated Rossa's decision to use her own body, for how could she ethically ask someone else to perform a self-mutilation? On the other hand, her action injects physical mutilation into the reconstruction of a narrative whose original performance entailed none at all. In essence, having taken pains to assure the audience that, despite the intervening mythology, Schwarzkogler did *not* mutilate himself, Rossa proceeds to do just that in the name of recuperation and revenge.

Finally, an important fact that Rossa overlooked was the role played by Hoffenreich in photographing Schwarzkogler's action. Instead and in spite of her intention to tell 'the true story', she misnamed Schwarzkogler as the photographer. By framing the audience as photographers and recruiting it to document the performance, Rossa not only accentuated the voyeuristic and spectacular nature of the action, but she empowered others to produce 'documentary photographs' rather than aestheticized records, as

did Schwarzkogler, with Hoffenreich's assistance. Taken together, by incorporating several of the same vehicles and stereotypes that have been deployed in order to deem performance art unserious, impotent, and uninteresting, these aspects of *Blood Revenge 2* work to undermine Rossa's own critical objectives.

The Image of the Artist in Performance Art

The issues concerning the image of the performance artist are not confined to discrete instances involving only Schwarzkogler and the Schwarzkogler myth. Indeed, they appear to be more pervasive and especially relevant in the current moment when performance art as a medium is coming to the attention of major American museums as opportune for exhibiting, collecting, and owning.³² This trend is exemplified in the Museum of Modern Art's retrospective exhibition in 2010 of Marina Abramovic's performance works, the first of its kind and scope in the United States. That exhibition, entitled *Marina Abramovic: The Artist is Present*, was conceived and marketed on the basis of the performance artist as artwork, with Abramovic's presence authenticating and legitimizing every aspect: from the showcase performance of *The Artist is Present*, where visitors were invited to sit silently across a table from the immobile Abramovic; to the umbilical, mediating function of her presence in the atrium to the re-performed works, videos, and photographs in ancillary galleries; to the synchronization of the exhibition's length to the length of her own performance (over 600 hours). In these instances, the equivalence between artist and artwork so long mythologized in the image of the artist was re-inscribed in even more definitive ways. MoMA's presentation of Abramovic's work is a strong indication that mythmaking will supply the dominant vehicle for the promotion of performance art in the public sphere.

In his catalog essay on Abramovic, Arthur Danto marshals the myth of the artist's life as itself an art of performance in order to illustrate the supposed goal of the post-war avant-garde to merge art and life, or to overcome the 'gap' between art and life, as Robert Rauschenberg put it. (As Kris and Kurz have demonstrated, however, when it comes to the explanation of the artwork as an emanation of the artist's psychology, that boundary has in fact not existed since the time of Socrates.) Danto writes,

The challenge the avant-garde felt in the 1960s was overcoming the gap between art and life. In 1973 the poet Vito Acconci really ejaculated in the Sonnabend Gallery, though he was hidden from the eyes of visitors by an artificial floor, though he emitted sexual noises that were amplified in the space occupied by visitors. The Viennese Actionists poured blood over themselves, or cut themselves to death.³³

Here Danto not only repeats the kernel of the Schwarzkogler myth (now multiplied in quantity) but its implementation effects the demand for a notion of performance art based upon the literal: even though Acconci was obscured from visitors' view, he 'really' ejaculated; the Viennese Actionists *really* poured blood over themselves, and they *really* cut themselves to death. Appending the fallacy that the Viennese Actionists, and not just Schwarzkogler, cut themselves to death to the previous two actualities serves to both cloak its speciousness and corroborate its truth claim. Once the separation between art and life is collapsed and the literalness between art and life is naturalized, as myth does, they can be extended to include, and to similarly naturalize, the relationship between art and death. Again, quoting Danto, 'The possibility [of death] was the mark of Abramovic's first phase of performance, and I think in general it is what drew her to performance in the first place.'³⁴ It is one thing to acknowledge the elements of Abramovic's oeuvre that foreground violence, abuse, and trauma, but quite another to cite 'the possibility of death' as a defining characteristic of performance art, in its history and practice. Yet Danto seems to accept, and even expect, this possibility in one of its most significant practitioners when he writes: 'Abramovic was seeking to revitalize for the benefit of a post-disturbational audience some of the turmoil that defined the world in which she became an artist, when performance gave her and her peers a chance to play Russian roulette in the name of art.'³⁵ This remark prompts need for serious concern when the critical discourse on performance art legitimizes an expectation of loss of life in the name of art—that what is bequeathed to future performance artists in perpetuating the Schwarzkogler myth is the 'chance' to gamble in a game of life and death. This is the Schwarzkogler myth in its most nefarious, irresponsible, and imperiling form. This, I think, is real insanity.

* First published in Polish: *Sztuka i Dokumentacja* no. 5 (2011): 63-82.

Illustrations:

<http://www.journal.doc.art.pl/ilustracje.html>

ENDNOTES

¹ Ernst Kris and Otto Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic in the Image of the Artist: A Historical Experiment* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1979), 12.

² Stiles, 'Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions', in Paul Schimmel, ed., *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949-1979*, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1998), 290.

³ Robert Hughes, 'The Decline and Fall of the Avant-Garde', *Time Magazine*, December 18, 1972: 40-41. Hughes's published account of the myth was the most detailed and complete, attributing the cause of Schwarzkogler's death explicitly to the repeated penis amputations he performed on himself in his art actions. While *Artforum's* review of Documenta 5 was published two months prior to Hughes's, the author, Lizzie Borden, made reference to the Schwarzkogler myth only indirectly and in a very restricted form: 'The few works that attempt to shock, like Kienholz's tableau of a castration and Rudolf Schwarzkogler's chopped-off penis, seem overly rhetorical' (45); and 'The late Viennese artist, Rudolf Schwarzkogler, chops off his penis inch by inch...' (47) See Borden, 'Cosmologies', *Artforum* 11, no. 2 (October 1972): 45-50.

⁴ An example of how the myth has inhibited close visual examination of Schwarzkogler's work can be found in the entry on the artist in Ian Chilvers and John Graves-Smith, eds., *A Dictionary of Modern and Contemporary Art*, 2nd ed (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), 638-639. The editors summarize the myth as follows: 'He [Schwarzkogler] achieved a place in the pantheon of great artistic oddballs by reputedly cutting off his own penis as part of a performance; however, the story depended on a misreading of the photographic documentation of the work (the object that is shown in close-up being cut with a razor blade is in fact a dead fish)'. Here the editors assert that the origin of the myth resulted from viewers having visually mistaken a fish for a man's penis (in photographs of *Action #2* (1965)). They also locate responsibility with Harald Szeemann, 'for arranging the photographs [at Documenta 5] in a sequence which encouraged the reading'. No fault is found with the two art critics named in the entry, Borden and Hughes, who circulated the myth in major international publications. Moreover, the entry does not offer any supporting information on the 'true version of events', neither the name of the photographer who assisted Schwarzkogler, the identity of the model who posed for his actions, nor the fact that three years elapsed between the last of Schwarzkogler's actions and his death.

⁵ See Eva Badura-Triska and Hubert Klocker, eds., *Rudolf Schwarzkogler: Leben und Werk*, exh. cat. (Klagenfurt: Ritter, 1992), 161-162, 186, 194. This exhibition on Schwarzkogler, curated by Badura-Triska and Klocker, helped not only to expose the fallacy of the Schwarzkogler myth but to showcase the multiplicity of the artist's *oeuvre* in important venues throughout Europe. The exhibition was organized by and originated at the Museum moderner Kunst in Vienna in 1992, traveled the following year to the National Gallery in Prague and the Pompidou Centre in Paris, and closed at the Kunstverein in Frankfurt in 1994.

⁶ Hubert Klocker, ed., *Viennese Actionism, vol. 2: The Shattered Mirror, Vienna 1960-1971* (Klagenfurt: Ritter, 1989), 352.

⁷ Badura-Triska and Klocker, eds., *Rudolf Schwarzkogler*, 194.

⁸ Schwarzkogler did not accompany his Viennese Actionist colleagues (at that time working under the name Direct Art Group) to the Destruction in Art Symposium (DIAS) in London in August and September of that year, nor did he participate in the Direct Art-organized Zock Festival in Vienna in April 1967 or the 'Art and Revolution' lecture at the University of Vienna in June 1968. After the Direct Art Group returned from DIAS, Schwarzkogler participated in a single collaborative event: Otto Mühl's 'Aktionskonzert für Al Hansen'. See Badura-Triska and Klocker, eds., *Rudolf Schwarzkogler*, 460; and Kristine Stiles, 'Notes on Rudolf Schwarzkogler's Images of Healing', *WhiteWalls* 25 (1990): 10-26, 12.

⁹ Though living in Munich at the time, Hermann Nitsch and Beate König (Nitsch's wife and a psychologist) were sufficiently concerned about Schwarzkogler's health that they discussed arranging psychotherapeutic treatment for him in Munich. See Klocker, ed., *Viennese Actionism*, 381.

¹⁰ In an interview with Stiles, Edith Adam, Schwarzkogler's partner, remembered on the day of his death that 'he had been experiencing a period of severe hallucinations and was sitting in the window of their apartment while she worked in another room. She conjectures that he either fell, owing to his mental state; jumped, a suicide that resulted from his depression; or actually attempted to fly, like [Yves] Klein, from their second-story apartment window...' See Stiles, 'Notes', 19; Stiles, 'Performance and its Objects', *Arts Magazine* 65, no. 3 (November 1990), 35; Badura-Triska and Klocker, eds., *Rudolf Schwarzkogler*, 460; Scott Watson, 'Rudolf Schwarzkogler', in *Rudolf Schwarzkogler*, exh. cat. (Vancouver: University of British Columbia, 1993), 3-20. Schwarzkogler's death and posthumous mythologization are also treated by William Martin in 'The Death and Times of Rudolf Schwarzkogler', *Art Criticism* 19, no. 2 (2004): 56-63.

¹¹ Harald Szeemann, *Documenta 5: Befragung der Realität Bildwelten heute*, exh. cat. (Kassel: Documenta, 1972), chapter 16, 73-74.

¹² Hughes, 'The Decline and Fall of the Avant-Garde', 40-41.

¹³ The discourse on narcissism and performance art extends to scholarly literature as well. See, for example, Lea Vergine, *Body Art and Performance: The Body as Language* (Milan: Skira, 1974, 2000); Rosalind Krauss, 'Video: The Aesthetics of Narcissism', *October* 1 (Spring 1976): 50-64; Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 7-8.

¹⁴ Henry Sayre, *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde Since 1970* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 2.

- ¹⁵ Sayre, *The Object of Performance*, 15.
- ¹⁶ Stiles, 'Performance and its Objects', 36.
- ¹⁷ Kris and Kurz, *Legend, Myth, and Magic*, 12, 36.
- ¹⁸ Murray White, 'Schwarzkogler's Ear', *The New Yorker*, November 11, 1996: 36.
- ¹⁹ Significantly, Kathy O'Dell's study of masochistic performance art, which she defines as works that center around 'individual acts of [actual] bodily violence', does not include any discussion of Schwarzkogler's actions in her case studies of Chris Burden and Vito Acconci. See O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art, and the 1970s* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 2-3. Amelia Jones, however, groups Schwarzkogler with these artists as well as with 'more recent S/M artists such as Bob Flanagan and Ron Athey' who 'have subjected themselves to the masochistic violence of others'. See Jones, *Body Art*, 125.
- ²⁰ All quotes are excerpted from Barthes, 'Myth Today', in *A Barthes Reader*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Hill and Wang, 1983), 102-105, 116-118.
- ²¹ Donald Kuspit, 'Tragic Beauty and Human Wholeness: Frederick Hart's Reparation of the Figure', in *Frederick Hart: The Complete Works*, ed. Donald Kuspit and Frederick Turner (Louisville, KY: Butler Books, 2007), 1-15.
- ²² Flanagan, a proclaimed masochist, battled cystic fibrosis, not AIDS, and died in 1996.
- ²³ Athey was a target of spurious allegations in NEA-backlash media coverage of a 1994 performance sponsored by the Walker Art Center. His March 5, 1994, performance of 'Four Scenes in a Harsh Life' at Patrick's Cabaret in Minneapolis drew escalating media and political attention when a museum member complained that the audience in attendance 'could have contracted the AIDS virus' because Athey was HIV-positive. See Mary Abbe, 'Bloody Performance Draws Criticism; Walker Member Complains to Public Health Officials', *Minneapolis Star Tribune*, March 24, 1994: 1A. The controversy subsequently reached the US Senate, and conservative senators Jesse Helms and Bob Dornan supported an amendment that prohibited any NEA funding of art 'involving human mutilation of invasive bodily procedures on human beings dead or alive; or the drawing or letting of blood'. See Jane Blocker, *What the Body Cost: Desire, History, and Performance* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004), 111-112.
- ²⁴ All quotes appear in Germaine Greer, 'What Do Artists Prove by Mutilating Their Bodies? That They are Ghastly—and Uninteresting', *The Guardian*, February 11, 2008: 28.
- ²⁵ Greer associates this kind of body art—which she identifies as 'purely carnal'—with the 'succession of tedious experiments' by Chris Burden in the 1970s. Greer briefly describes but does not explicitly name Burden's actions *Shoot* (1971), *Through the Night Softly* (1973), and *Trans-fixed* (1974).
- ²⁶ Although Greer does not cite Stiles' 1990 essay, it was there that the first contextualization of Schwarzkogler's work in relation to the ancient Greek healing practices of the cult of Asklepios, the Hero Physician, was made: 'At a site of Asklepios in Corinth', Stiles writes, 'excavations have unearthed hundreds of terracotta anatomical fragments that archaeologists have suggested represent the healed body parts of believers who visited the temple', including male genitalia. See Stiles, 'Notes', 20-21.
- ²⁷ *Ibid.*, 17. Research by Stiles revealed that Schwarzkogler 'read widely in European and Far-Eastern mysticism and sought to create an "art of painting as an art of healing"', and possessed a library that 'included texts by various swamis and yogis on healing and the religious practices surrounding Hatha Yoga' as well as a 'number of more locally authored texts on esoteric health practices and self-curative programs'.
- ²⁸ This and the following quotations by Greer are from e-mail correspondence with the author, July 1-2, 2008.
- ²⁹ Peggy Phelan, 'The Ontology of Performance: Representation without Reproduction', in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 146.
- ³⁰ See, for example, Dieter Ronte, 'On the Aesthetics of the Photography of Actionism', in *Blood Orgies: Hermann Nitsch in America*, ed., Aaron Levy (Philadelphia: Slought Foundation, 2008), 15-26; Richard Martel, ed., *Art Action 1958-1998* (Québec: Editions Intervention, 2001), 158-167.
- ³¹ This account of the artist's performance, emphases mine, is excerpted from: www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/feminist_art_base/gallery/boryanarossa.php?i=779. I would like to thank Boryana Rossa for her generosity in corresponding with me and providing a copy of her master's thesis, 'The Hole Body: Feminism, Science, Art and Their Myths' (Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute, 2007), which was connected to the exploration of artistic myth in *Blood Revenge 2*.
- ³² See, for example, Erica Orden, 'Herr Zeitgeist', *New York Magazine*, January 4, 2010, whose profile of MoMA and P.S.1 curator Klaus Biesenbach foregrounds the burgeoning interest in the institutional purchase of rights to works of performance art.
- ³³ Arthur C. Danto, 'Danger and Disturbation: The Art of Marina Abramovic', in *Marina Abramovic: The Artist is Present*, exh. cat. (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 31.
- ³⁴ Danto, 'Danger and Disturbation', 31.
- ³⁵ *Ibid.*, 32.

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