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SCENOGRAPHY VERSUS RITUAL IN HERMANN NITSCH'S ACTIONS

Abstract: This article focuses on the relationship between scenography and ritual as reflected in the actions of the Austrian artist Hermann Nitsch. The aim is to observe the specific elements in his works referred to as “Aktionen,” using the method of hermeneutics of the artistic performance. This examination encompasses the aspects of both direction/scenography and the ritual. The premise we start from is that, although they may appear to be “theatrical pieces,” Nitsch’s actions incorporate spiritual meanings and a purpose that goes beyond their purely mimetic, theatrical aspect, towards a ritual dimension.

Keywords: scenography; improvisation; ritual; action; performance; art; liturgy; spirituality.

The artistic landscape of mid-20th-century Europe was marked by the emergence of a group of Viennese artists (Hermann Nitsch, Otto Muehl, Günter Brus, and Rudolf Schwarzkogler²) who explored a relatively new³ artistic expression known as “Viennese Actionism.”⁴ Among them, Hermann Nitsch was the artist with a significant body of work, a well-defined concept, and a presence spanning several decades in contemporary art.

Given that the mode of artistic expression by the Viennese Actionists, both provocative as a response to the socio-political context of the era and anti-traditionalist in its use of the body⁵ as the primary medium of manifestation, raises questions pertaining to the meaning and form of these manifestations, our intention is to employ the hermeneutical method to investigate whether, particularly in the case of Hermann Nitsch and his concept of theatre, these actions are based on preconceived designs or are events falling into the category of ritualistic actions. Our hypothesis is that they are less likely to be mimetic representations of a pre-established scenario and more likely to be manifestations with a broader perspective, a specific purpose, spiritual significance, and ritualistic characteristics.

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² **Constantin Prut.** *Dicționar de artă modernă și contemporană* (ediția a II-a). Editura Polirom, Iași, 2016, p. 23.

³ We are referring to the legacy of the Viennese artists’ mode of actionism, which draws inspiration from the early 20th-century European avant-garde movements and, notably, the Dadaist movement. In their evening gatherings, the Dadaists employed expressions that pushed the boundaries between theatre and performance.

⁴ **Dan Grigorescu.** *Dicționarul avangardelor* (ediția a II-a). Editura Enciclopedică, București, 2005, p. 5.

⁵ The Viennese Actionists aimed to create a “direct art” (...), which they understood as the merging of life with art. They gained recognition in the 1960s through spectacular and often aggressive actions in which they used their own bodies or those of collaborators as “material.” This material included their own excrements, other bodily fluids, animal blood, parts of animal bodies, as well as paint and sharp objects (Mechtild Widrich. *The Informative Public of Performance. A Study of Viennese Actionism, 1965–1970. TDR (1988-), Vol. 57, No. 1 (Spring 2013), p. 138.*

Terminology

The issue we are referring to arises from the use of key terms in the discussion, specifically “theatre” and “ritual” by the Viennese Actionist artist Hermann Nitsch. He titles his personal body of work as the *Orgien Mysterien Theatre* (Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries). When referring to the sources of his art, he mentions terms such as “ritual,” “myth,” “religion,” and others, which point to an entirely different dimension, one that is spiritual. Lastly, it is essential to consider the term “Aktionen,” which Nitsch uses to describe his artistic manifestations, recontextualizing the idea of theatre and imbuing it with new connotations: “I realized the connection between my own action theatre and ‘informal painting,’ or action painting, around 1959/60. There was something dramatic about the way the abstract expressionists (Pollock, Mathieu et al.) painted. The creative process, the happening in which the painting gradually evolved, became just as important as the result. In this sense I performed painting actions in 1960 at my studio at the Vienna Museum of Science and Technology where I was working as a graphic artist at the time. The dramatic procedure of the painting action was a component of my O. M. Theatre. With regard to informal painting, I think that I then exhausted its possibilities to the limits. I hardly used the paint brush anymore, the splashing and pouring of paint on a surface was the real event.”⁶

Drawing from the etymology of the Greek word *theatron* (“theatre”), which signified a place for seeing or viewing⁷, specifically referring to a space dedicated to artistic events, a space intricately linked to the notions of communication and the reception of the substance of this communication, we observe a shift in meanings and an expansion towards the concept of paratheatre⁸ in contemporary art. Contemporary theatre tends towards the idea of *performativity*, encompassing a keen interest in interdisciplinary⁹ approaches, surpassing the enclosed boundaries of the performance space, as well as the mimetic nature of representation.

On the other hand, the term “ritual,”¹⁰ derived from the Latin *ritualis*, covers a broad spectrum of meanings, ranging from the concept of ceremony associated with religious worship to profane aspects that involve the idea of repetition, process, arrangement, the use of specific spaces, gestures, and objects with designated roles within a ceremonial act.

An important contribution comes from Mircea Eliade, a historian of religions who highlights (through the opposition of sacred and profane, Cosmos and Chaos) the human need to perform actions

⁶ **Helmut Essl.** *Hermann Nitsch, 20th Painting Action*. Vienna Secession, 18–21 February 1987. Kerbert Verlag, Bielefeld / Berlin, 2021, p. 52.

⁷ **Paul Allain & Jen Harvie.** *Ghidul Routledge de teatru și performance*, translated from English by Cristina Modreanu și Ilinca Tamara Todoruț. Editura Nemira, București, 2012, p. 436.

⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 438.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

¹⁰ The etymology of the word refers to the following meanings according to <https://www.etymonline.com/word/ritual> (Accessed on 16 Oct. 2023): “1950s, ‘pertaining to or consisting of a rite or rites,’ from French *ritual* or directly from Latin *ritualis* ‘relating to (religious) rites,’ from *ritus* ‘religious observance or ceremony, custom, usage;’ 1630s, ‘done as or in the manner of a rite’ (...); 1640s, ‘prescribed manner of performing religious worship;’ 1650s, ‘book containing the rites or ordinances of a church,’ and ‘the external forms of religious or other devotional exercises, often in that sense somewhat pejorative (mere ritual, forgetful of meaning);’ (...) ‘a formal act or procedure of religious observance performed according to an established manner,’ from Latin *ritus* ‘custom, usage,’ especially ‘a religious observance or ceremony’ (source also of Spanish and Italian *rito*), which perhaps is from PIE root **re-* ‘to reason, count,’ on the notion of ‘to count; to observe carefully.’ **Rite of passage** (1909), marking the end of one phase and the start of another in an individual life, is translated from French *rite de passage*, coined by French anthropologist Arnold van Gennep (1873–1957). The hypothetical source of/evidence for its existence is provided by: Sanskrit *radh-* ‘to succeed, accomplish;’ Greek *arithmos* ‘number, amount;’ Latin *veri* ‘to consider, confirm, ratify;’ *ritus* ‘rite, religious custom;’ Old Church Slavonic *raditi* ‘to take thought, attend to;’ Old Irish *im-radim* ‘to deliberate, consider;’ Old English *rædan* ‘to advise, counsel, persuade, read;’ Old English, Old High German *rim* ‘number;’ Old Irish *rim* ‘number;’ *dorimu* ‘I count.’ 1844, ‘pertaining to or according to ritual,’ with *-ic* + ritualist, i.e., ‘one versed in or devoted to rituals’ (1650s), later ‘one who advocates a particular sacramental ritual’ (especially one established by law or custom); 1670s, (...); by the late 19 c., *ritualistic* meant especially ‘placing great emphasis on external forms and symbols.’ Related: *Ritually*; *ritualism* (1838).”

that order the profane space, such as placing a stone, erecting a pillar, consecrating a space, marking a centre, as well as redefining time through the remembrance of myth and cosmogony. Ritual manifestation returns the religious individual to the moment of world creation, behaving as the simplest and most direct way to establish a connection with divinity and the gods. The necessity of the presence of the sacred within the profane is a reality that transcends all eras and civilizations, as attested by the historian of religions. “Traditional societies are characterized by the implicit opposition between the inhabited territory and the unknown and undetermined space surrounding this territory: the former is ‘the World’ (more precisely, ‘our world’), the Cosmos; the latter is no longer a Cosmos but a kind of ‘other world,’ a foreign space, chaotic, filled with spectres, demons, and ‘strangers’ (assimilated to spirits and phantoms). This rupture in space would, at first glance, be attributed to the opposition between an inhabited and organized territory, hence ‘cosmicized,’ and the unknown space extending beyond its boundaries: on the one hand, there is a ‘Cosmos,’ on the other, a ‘Chaos.’ However, if an inhabited territory is a ‘Cosmos,’ it is precisely because it has been consecrated beforehand, because, in one way or another, it is a work of the gods or can communicate with their world. ‘The World’ (meaning ‘our world’) is a universe in which the sacred has manifested itself, and where the rupture of levels is, therefore, possible and repeatable.”¹¹

Moreover, Eliade observes that, even in the aspects of the modern, desecralized world, there is a tendency to escape from profane space or time through actions such as reading a book, watching a movie, or celebrating a birthday. The irreligious individual appears to detach themselves from the linear time of history through these behaviours, breaking the continuity of “profane” time and, in a sense, “shaping” themselves. In the process of desecralization, both of the world and the individual¹², there is an unconscious affirmation of the preservation of an ancestral religious behaviour and a need to relate to transcendence.

In this regard, we believe that the contemporary actions carried out by Hermann Nitsch can be considered “ruptures” in temporal and spatial continuity, falling into the category of *paratheatre*. Stemming from actionist painting, these actions actively engage the audience as an integral part of the artistic event, utilizing an extended, delimited (consecrated) space outside the confines of the traditional theatre, thus creating a space within space, a time within time. Their primary objective is to induce sensory and cathartic ecstasies.

Furthermore, the artist mentions informal painting as the starting point for his theatrical actions, in the sense that painting itself becomes an action (*Schüttbild*), and the material used (paint) is self-referential, pointing towards substance as matter. “My action painting is the first step in the realization of my *Orgien Mysterien Theatre* [“Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries”]. There’s no symbolism. You can use your private symbolism, and you can have contact through your subconscious, but the most important thing is the substance of the color. It’s not so much the *chroma* of the color. It’s more the material. And for all the action painters: the color wasn’t so important. I think, for Jackson Pollock, or de Kooning, the color was not so important. But the *substance!*”¹³

In the context of Hermann Nitsch’s concept, action represents a confrontation with life itself, with a concentration on evoking a multitude of sensations in the audience and the intensity of emotional experiences¹⁴.

¹¹ **Mircea Eliade.** *Sacral și profanul*, translated from French by Brîndușa Prelipceanu. Editura Humanitas, București, 2017, pp. 25–26.

¹² *Ibidem*, p. 153.

¹³ **Scott Indrisek.** *Intensity Is the Best Politics: Hermann Nitsch in New York at Marc Straus.* <https://www.marcsraus.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/2015.9.11-Hermann-Nitsch-Reviews-ArtInfo-ArtNet-VICE.com-pressed.pdf> (Accessed on 16 Oct. 2023).

¹⁴ “Looking around at walls adorned with Schüttbilds, Nitsch’s word for the works that contain the records of his actions (Schüttbild roughly translates to ‘bulk image’), I understand what he means by intensity, and what he means later when he differentiates the word ‘aggressive’ from ‘intensive’ – this is not art that is meant to be understood in a classical sense, but rather, touched, tasted, heard, smelled, experienced.” (Scott Indrisek. *Ibidem*).

Scenographic Elements in Hermann Nitsch's Actions

In close connection with the concept of theatre by the Austrian artist, we can propose several illuminating sources: the appropriation of the idea of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, a concept specific to the artist Richard Wagner, implies a broadened vision of artistic performance, encompassing the amalgamation of multiple art forms within the actual spectacle. This idea traverses the history of art, being embraced by the Symbolist movement, historical avant-garde movements, and 20th-century actionists, including Nitsch. The Wagnerian concept encompasses musical, theatrical¹⁵, and literary representations, as well as the relationship between art and religion¹⁶, where art assumes the role of religion and the Church, with the purpose of “saving” the world.

Wagner holds an integrative and unifying vision of the arts, which he likely drew from his affinity for both Christianity and Brahmanism, particularly concerning the “unity of all beings.”¹⁷ It is an idea that only art can embody, giving form and image to the concept (*Ausbildung des Bildlichen*).



Fig. 1. Hermann Nitsch, *122. Aktion*, Burgtheater Wien, 2005

Danilo Eccher illustrates the representation of the idea of a total work of art in Hermann Nitsch's actions in his work *Dietro l'altare di Hermann Nitsch* (Behind the Altar of Hermann Nitsch),¹⁸ where one can observe the integrative dimension of the Austrian artist's personality and work. His actions are preceded by detailed drawings, both related to the content of the ‘play,’ thus in relation to its substance and associated with the architectural space¹⁹ (e.g., *15. Aktion*, 1965, and *The Six-Day*

¹⁵ **Richard Wagner** (1813–1883) was the author of a series of essays such as the one titled “Opera and Drama,” in which he expounds his theories regarding the association between music and theatre. His concept of *Zukunftsmusik* (the music of the future) proposed an art form in which music and drama would be inseparably linked (Michael Kennedy. *Oxford Dictionary of Music*. Oxford University Press, New York, 1985).

¹⁶ **Richard Wagner**. *Religion und Kunst*, Vol. X, *Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen*, 1880 (Richard Wagner. *Religion and Art. Richard Wagner's Prose Works*, Vol. 6, 1897, p. 213).

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, p. 226.

¹⁸ **See Danilo Eccher (Ed.)**. *Dietro l'altare di Hermann Nitsch*, Catalogue. San Giovanni Lupatoto, Verona, Italy, 2009.

¹⁹ The artist envisioned an underground space in which *The Six-Day Play* would take place: “In 1965 I began to plan the rooms in which my *6-day play* should take place. I intend to build an underground theatre in Prinzenhof on the Zaya, for all the happenings which won't be executed either in the open air or in the rooms and, above all,

Play for the Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries, 1988) in which the action would take place (Figs. 2–3). The artist composes the music accompanying the artistic event (Figs. 4–5) and even writes the script for *The Six-Day Play* (Figs. 6–7), incorporating the roles of scenographer and director into his responsibilities.



Fig. 2. Hermann Nitsch, *The Deposition*, 2006–2007, triptych, serigraphy, 200x300 cm

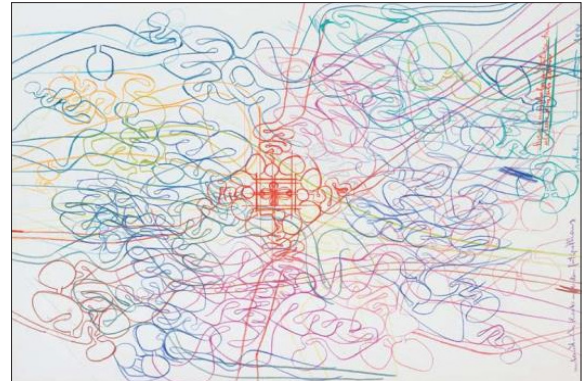


Fig. 3. Hermann Nitsch, *Untitled*, 1994, architectural drawing, sketch, pencil/paper, 70x50 cm

The new concept of theatre, known as the Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries, is detailed by Hermann Nitsch in an interview conducted by Otmar Rychlick during the exhibition “Hermann Nitsch, 20th Action Painting” at the Vienna Secession from 18 to 21 February 1987. “Originally the O. M. Theatre was a ‘poetry of words.’ I had been developing this since 1956. Even at this time I wanted to write a six-day drama. My style was influenced by Trakl, German expressionism, French symbolism, Stefan George, Joyce, and surrealism. I always sought strong forms of expression, an intense, sensual language which I only saw realized in dramatic works by Kleist and in Greek tragedy. Around 1958 I understood that what I really wanted was incompatible with the traditional language. I proceeded to break with verbal expression and to provide the spectators with direct sensual sensations. My participants of the play should taste, smell, behold, hear and touch. I produced actual happenings whose sensual intensity was to deeply move the participants of the play. Besides the intake of odorous and flavorful substances, liquids like blood, vinegar, wine, milk, egg yolk and so on were spilled in the theatre. Raw meat, lukewarm, wet and bloody mesentery was supposed to be looked at and get touched. The sensuousness of the substance was important to me. I see the same sensuousness of the substance within informal painting. Paint is poured and splashed onto a surface and then smeared, pulpy colour mass is smeared upon the picture. The painting process becomes a real happening. Theatre occurs on the perspective plane. I always say that the painting of the O. M. Theatre is the visual grammar of my theatre on such a surface. The intrinsic action, the intrinsic action theatre leaves the places of refuge of the painting itself and goes beyond space to total reality.”²⁰

the sheltered vegetative life in the lightless womb, exercise a very strong attraction on myself. In the underworld, in the grave, in the earth, the nascent sleep of death takes place.” (Danilo Eccher (Ed.). *Op. cit.*, p. 28).

²⁰ **Helmut Essl.** *Hermann Nitsch, 20th Painting Action*. Vienna Secession, 18–21 February 1987. Kerbert Verlag, Bielefeld / Berlin, 2021, p. 52.

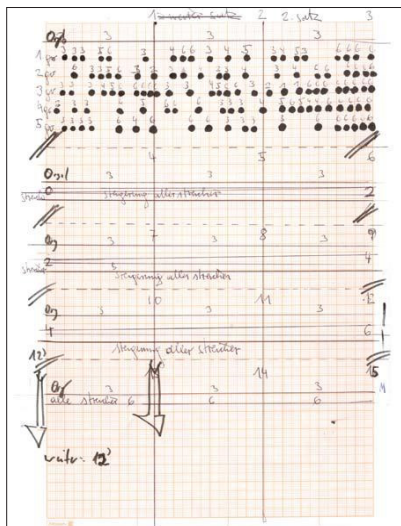


Fig. 4. Hermann Nitsch, Score for *Symphony No. 9* (“Die Ägyptische”), 2009 **Fig. 5.** Hermann Nitsch, Score for *Symphony No. 9* (“Die Ägyptische”), 2009

Furthermore, the concept of the Austrian artist’s theatre can also be related to Antonin Artaud’s *Theatre of Cruelty*²¹, which revolves around love, war, and madness, drawing inspiration from mythology and enveloping everything in poetry. It aspires towards the idea of a *total art*, maximizing the sensory element of the audience, which, in Artaud’s conception, is eroded. He aimed for a strong effect on the spectators, whom he saw as an integral part of the action, a concept that Nitsch may have adopted. In Artaud’s vision, the audience should sit on rotating chairs in the middle of the stage. In Nitsch’s works, spectators are also an integral part of the action, a dimension that the artist himself prepares for by carefully selecting the participants.

Total Conception of the 6 Day O.M. Theatre Play (1963)

First Day:
Introduction of all the actions.
Demonstration and short practice of the shouting and noise actions.
Participation of the onlookers.
Actions with substances and liquids such as vinegar, wine, ether, perfume, hydrogen-peroxide, blood, lymph, lukewarm water, etc.
Tactile actions.
The perception of sensations of smell and taste.
(The actions of all six days are connected with deliberately arranged sensations of taste and smell, which are transmitted to the audience.)
Actions with meat and slaughtered animals.
Introduction of the disemboweling action which is continually repeated on all the later days.
Symphonic evaluation of the noise music and the shouting choruses.
Exposure of the sexual organs.
The finale of the first day is a great abstractive action in the slaughterhouse.

Second Day:
The actions paraphrase myths of creation and myths about original sin and the fall.
Actions with animals’ genitals.
The killing of animals (in the slaughterhouse) is seen.
Theory of the killing experience.
The contrasting of sexual organ and monstrosity.
Procession of the onlookers, wounds are made in naked corpses at every point at which the procession stops. (Noise and shouting during this.)
Actions are carried through the theatre on stretchers. Their sexual organs are sprinkled with powder, rubbed down with sea-roses and blood and egg yolk are poured over them.

Third Day:
DIONYSUS-Lurgy.
Activation of Dionysian (break-through of organs).
Slow intensification of the actions, continual repetition of previous actions.
Theoretical texts on the essence of the Dionysian.
Dionysian lament equals abstraction. Dionysus = God of attraction.
Huge orgasmic action in the slaughterhouse. (Provocation of a breakthrough of organs).
Slaughtered skinned cows are disembowelled on beds, torn up and blood is poured over them. Sea-roses, dusted with powder, are stuffed into the torn-open carcasses. The onlookers wallow around in the entrails, on the meat and in the puddles of blood, shouting. They trample about on the bloody entrails.
Shouting from the chorus.
Noise from the orchestra.
Shouting and stamping from the audience.
Dionysus = War.
(War as a Dionysian phenomenon, regression into the chaotic, into the uncontrolled regions.)
ACTIONS IN THE OPEN AIR (bank-training ground).
Tanks drive over bloody entrails and slaughtered cows. Meat and entrails are squashed. Whirlwind blood is being poured over everything, noise from the engines and noise of trombones.
Several slaughtered cows are fastened to a concrete wall as if crucified. The tanks fire explosive shells at them. The corpse of a boy is fastened to a concrete wall as if crucified, a wreath of sea-roses is put on his head, his sexual organ is torn up. The entrails are torn out of the resistant wound.
Great orgasmic action in the theatre.
Intensification of the above mentioned slaughterhouse action.
Beds covered in white and 21 slaughtered cows are brought into the theatre. The cows are disembowelled and torn up by the shouting onlookers, while blood is poured over everything.
During the climax of this action, the naked corpse of a boy is fastened in one wall of the theatre, as if crucified.

Fig. 6. Hermann Nitsch, *Script for The Six-Day Play for the Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries*, 1963, Days 1–3

Actions during the meal:
Animals are disembowelled (preferably smaltish animals, hares, smallish lambs etc.) on tables covered only with white towels, and are washed clean of blood with lukewarm water, the flesh is washed, the organs of the animals are washed.
kidneys the fat around the entrails entrails liver lungs.

In addition to this meal, very small amounts of food are distributed to the audience to sample, to broaden the wealth of “harmonic relationships” of the sequence of dishes. The “lymph-aesthetic comprehensibility” of the events of the play should be brought out.

End of the sequence of dishes at the lunch:
smell of incense
smell of wet white lace
smell of hydrogen-peroxide
smell of raw meat
taste of lukewarm red wine
taste of the overripe flesh of a red grape, squashed between tongue and gums.

Number 0 lays his penis on one of the tables.
A lamb is hanging as if crucified on one wall of the room.
Action with the wound in the side.
The lamb is disembowelled, the entrails are repeatedly stuffed into the lamb’s breast, blood is poured over them and they are torn out again.

A harmonium is played, in tones relating to the dishes and smells.

taste of lukewarm sugarwater
taste of white bread dipped in hot saccharine water.

These samples are handed out in very small tins. The smells are conveyed by wads of cotton wool which are dipped into the appropriate essence.

Actions with slaughtered, skinned lambs, action with a slaughtered, skinned ox (various actions of disemboweling are carried out).

Slaughterhouse
The participants are taken into a slaughterhouse. At least 12 to 20 skinned, slaughtered oxen are hanging on the walls of the slaughterhouse, head down as if crucified. Broad beds, covered with white sheets, are under most of the animal carcasses. On several of the beds are lying white feather mattresses and white pillows. A noise orchestra (20 men) and a boys’ chorus (40 boys) are grouped at the back wall.
In the middle of the slaughterhouse, many broad beds covered with white sheets, are so arranged that they form one huge bed. White feather mattresses and pillows are also lying on these beds. Huge quantities of raw meat and intestines are brought into the slaughterhouse and thrown on to the concrete floor in front of the group of beds in the middle.
Actions being to stamp on them and pour and splash light-red frothing blood, hot water, hot lymph and egg yolk on to the entrails lying about, the raw meat, the concrete floor and each other. Other actors spray water from hoses on to the entrails covered in blood and on to the bloody raw meat. At the same time, butchers hack open the oxen hanging on the walls and partially disembowel them. Blood, hot water, and lukewarm lymph are poured from buckets on to the intestines as they are falling down and into the hacked open bodies of the oxen. The participants dip entrails in blood, egg yolk, hot lymph and hot water, slip them against the walls and on to the floor, stamp about on them, kick them along and kick about between them. They throw them at each other, the oxen and the group of beds in the middle of the slaughterhouse. They also dip pieces of raw meat in the blood, egg yolk, hot lymph

Fig. 7. Hermann Nitsch, *Script for The Six-Day Play for the Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries*, 1963, more detailed information for Day 3

Therefore, we can speak of a meticulous organization of space, planning the constituent elements of the action, and a scenario created by the artist himself. However, when Nitsch discusses the rehearsals preceding the action, he emphasizes that they are not mimetic reproductions of a text or pre-established

²¹ Antonin Artaud. *Teatrul și dublul său, urmat de Teatrul lui S raphin și de alte texte despre teatru*, translated by Voichița Sasu and Diana Tihu-Suciu. Editura Tracus Arte, București, 2018, p. 95.

gestures but involve the free expression of the participant and an element of chance. “We practice. But we don’t play. We make a real thing. If I bind a person on the cross, I do it, really. And I hate if someone simulates pain. When he has pain, it comes.”²²

The scenography of Nitsch’s actions includes instructions regarding the moments of manifestation, their timing, the realization of key moments, such as crucifixions using dead animals or humans, orgies in which fruits and animal organs are used, and the wearing of white shirts by the artist and participants. The Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries aims at an “expansion of consciousness,”²³ or *abreaction*, i.e., the release of energies, emotions, and cathartic ecstasy.

The Ritual Dimension of Hermann Nitsch’s Actions

Often mentioned by the artist, the mythological source of his theatrical actions lies in the cult and myth of Dionysus, the patron of celebrations dedicated to the vegetation and life. This reference is observed in the scenario of *The Six-Day Play for the Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries* (1963): the artist envisions a “Dionysian liturgy”²⁴ on the third day, as well as an “activation of the Dionysian”²⁵ to achieve the ecstasy of the senses through the “Dionysian ferment.”²⁶ In connection with the celebrations dedicated to the god Dionysus, Nitsch uses materials and substances of plant and animal origin, such as fruits, animal carcasses, intestines, meat, flowers, and blood.

By using elements of Christian ritual as well, such as the cross, crucifixion, chalice, blood, both in sketches (like *The Last Supper*) and in actions (*Aktion I*, 1962), the Austrian artist performs a reversed ritual where the association with the Crucifixion of Jesus Christ, with its saving and sanctifying effect, is desacralized by using inert animal carcasses or the naked bodies of participants. Additionally, the artist intends, through this reversed ritual that involves the triggering of sensory ecstasies, to achieve spiritual liberation.

Last but not least, the artist assumes the role of a priest dressed in a “liturgical” garment, a white shirt, which he will sprinkle with paint or blood during the action. Nitsch confesses that this shirt becomes a “seismograph,” recording every movement of the artist-shaman: “Due to my deep admiration for Stefan George and Gustav Klimt, as well as to my conviction that the practice of art must be viewed as equivalent to the offices of a priest, I was moved, as early as 1960, to wear a simple white habit – like smock during my painting actions. The wearing of the shirt gained importance in the course of my subsequent dealings with the relics of the O. M. Theatre. The actor who was descended into a state of ecstatic excess stains and besmirches the canvas as spontaneously as possible, driven by his intensity and excitement. Often, this intensity is transferred to the SHIRT with more immediacy than to the mere canvas.”²⁷

²² Scott Indrisek. *Ibidem*.

²³ Hermann Nitsch. *A Cura di Danilo Eccher*. Galleria d’Arte Boxart, Italia, 2007, p. 28.

²⁴ Aaron Levy (Ed.). *Op. cit.*, p. 186.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

²⁷ Helmut Essl. *Op. cit.*, p. 91.



Fig. 8. Hermann Nitsch, *The Six-Day Play for the Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries*, 5 July 2021



Fig. 9. Hermann Nitsch, *The Six-Day Play for the Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries*, 5 July 2021

In this regard, the shirt becomes an “icon”²⁸ of the entire action. “It is as if during the act of painting who throws open our own abysses comes into the proximity of sweating blood, of drinking dry the cup of sorrow, of castigation and flagellation, of crucifixion, of the rending of Dionysus, of the blinding of Oedipus. His priestly robe, his sacrificial shirt, bears the wet stamp of kenosis.”²⁹

In the context of Hermann Nitsch’s concept, the role of the artist is that of a “savior,” a liberator through his art. The actions seem to take on the characteristic of a “liturgy” in which gestures, materials, and substances³⁰ are combined. Danilo Eccher speaks of the relic, which is a participant not only in the theatrical action or the performative act, but also in the “ritual of art.”³¹



Fig. 10. Hermann Nitsch, *The Artist’s Attire*, 2005

²⁸ *Ibidem*, p. 53.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 91.

³⁰ **Hermann Nitsch.** *A Cura di Danilo Eccher.* Galleria d’Arte Boxart, Italia, 2007, p. 7.

³¹ *Ibidem*, p. 11.

The Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries can be characterized as a reversed liturgy, which amplifies the senses instead of sanctifying them. In the same vein, it uses strident, aggressive music, and orgies instead of purification. It mimics the Christian sacrifice to trigger catharsis in a European syncretism that appropriates the philosophy of bodily pleasures of classical Hellenism³², the Dionysian ritual, Christianity, pagan sacrifices, pantheism, and monotheism simultaneously, Nietzsche and Jung's philosophies, generating a "liturgical theatricality."³³

One can discuss gestures with ritual significance, the consecrated space of the action as a "sacred" space, and the use of the body as an integral part of the theatrical ritual of the Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries.

Conclusion

The concept of the theatre as a *total work of art*, generated through the symbiosis of various artistic media with sources rooted in mythology, philosophy, and religion, implies a new artistic language that Hermann Nitsch employs for spiritual purposes. On the one hand, we are faced with a complex theatre that adheres to scenographic and directorial rules, unites script, music, drawing, painting, and considers the relationship between artist and audience. On the other hand, we observe an expansion of the idea of theatre towards a performative action with a ritualistic character, where the artist no longer plays a role but lives the role assumed. The purpose of the action is not to merely replicate pre-established lines mimetically but to trigger catharsis of the participants' emotions. The artist takes on the role of the priest, and his art aspires to "save" the world, in an astonishing transfer of functions between art and religion, between the sacred space of the Church and that of the action, reminiscent of Richard Wagner's concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

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³² **Danilo Eccher (Ed.).** *Op. cit.*, p. 12.

³³ *Ibidem*.

Image Sources

Fig. 1. Hermann Nitsch, *122. Aktion*, Burgtheater Wien, 2005, Photo: Georg Soulek – In: Nitsch, Hermann. *A Cura di Danilo Eccher*. Galleria d'Arte Boxart, Italia, 2007, p. 6.

Fig. 2. Hermann Nitsch, *The Deposition*, 2006–2007, 200x300 cm, triptych, serigraphy. – In: Eccher, Danilo (Ed.). *Dietro l'altare di Hermann Nitsch*, Catalogue. San Giovanni Lupatoto, Verona, Italy, 2009, pp. 42–43.

Fig. 3. Hermann Nitsch, *Untitled*, 1994, architectural drawing, sketch, pencil/paper, 70x50 cm. – In: Eccher, Danilo (Ed.). *Dietro l'altare di Hermann Nitsch*, Catalogue. San Giovanni Lupatoto, Verona, Italy, 2009, p. 18.

Fig. 4. Hermann Nitsch, *Score for Symphony No. 9 (“Die Ägyptische”)*. – In: Eccher, Danilo (Ed.). *Dietro l'altare di Hermann Nitsch*, Catalogue. San Giovanni Lupatoto, Verona, Italy, 2009, p. 50.

Fig. 5. Hermann Nitsch, *Score for Symphony No. 9 (“Die Ägyptische”)*. – In: Eccher, Danilo (Ed.). *Dietro l'altare di Hermann Nitsch*, Catalogue. San Giovanni Lupatoto, Verona, Italy, 2009, p. 52.

Fig. 6. Hermann Nitsch, *Script for The Six-Day Play for the Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries*, 1963, Days 1–3. – In: Levy, Aaron (Ed.). *Blood Orgies: Hermann Nitsch in America*. Bergman Curatorial Seminar, University of Pennsylvania, 2008, pp. 186–187.

Fig. 7. Hermann Nitsch, *Script for The Six-Day Play for the Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries*, 1963, Days 1–3. – In: Levy, Aaron (Ed.). *Blood Orgies: Hermann Nitsch in America*. Bergman Curatorial Seminar, University of Pennsylvania, 2008, pp. 188–189.

Fig. 8. Hermann Nitsch, *The Six-Day Play for the Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries*, 5 July 2021, https://www.nitsch-foundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/6TS_2021_July_5–11_Program.pdf (Accessed on 16 Oct. 2023).

Fig. 9. Hermann Nitsch, *The Six-Day Play for the Theatre of Orgies and Mysteries*, 5 July 2021, https://www.nitsch-foundation.com/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/6TS_2021_July_5–11_Program.pdf (Accessed on 16 Oct. 2023).

Fig. 10. Hermann Nitsch, *The Artist's Attire*, 2005. – In: Eccher, Danilo (Ed.). *Dietro l'altare di Hermann Nitsch*, Catalogue. San Giovanni Lupatoto, Verona, Italy, 2009, p. 75.