

Affect and transcendence in the oeuvre of Marie Julia Bollansée

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— 'Performance' is a notion that was originally used to indicate creative works of a theatrical and musical nature, even before the term popped up in the context of the visual arts. In her essay 'Notion(s) of Performance'¹ published in 1979, the Canadian Chantal Pontbriand (°1951), art historian and publisher of *Parachute*,² came to the realization that: 'the term performance in the visual arts can only be applicable when artists use their bodies as a form of expression'. This position makes a clear distinction between performances and other kinds of staging carried out by visual artists that often received (and still receive) the label of performance. The use of the body should be 'pure', which is to say, not theatrically, or merely as an instrument, in the realization of the actual artwork. With the American abstract expressionist painter Jackson Pollock (°1912 †1956), for example, who in the 1950ies painted with all his physical might, thereby filling canvases with splatters of paint, the process was imbued in a physical action that came to be described as 'action painting'. In this case the action is the instrument, not the result. The German painter and sculptor Klaus Rinke (°1939) uses his body as sculpture, whereby it stands in for the sculpted specimen. He carries out performances and records them photographically, after which he releases them into the world as autonomous artworks, as photographs and videos. The British-Italian artist duo Gilbert & George (°1943 and °1942) from 1969 in their 'Singing Statue' performance would cover their faces in a combination of bronze-coloured powder and Vaseline, presenting themselves as living sculptures in the streets of London, on squares, in galleries and in museums. It was an attempt to escape the passive qualities of sculpture. These are some of the kinds of performative behaviours that evoke associations with modern painting and sculpture. Performance art would thence continue to develop as an independent medium and later come to be of major importance, especially for artists who take on physical challenges and/or work with multimedia.

— Marie Julia Bollansée (°1960) began her artistic career as a sculptor, but, attracted by new technical possibilities, soon evolved into a multimedia artist. She also wished to break out of sculpture's static character. Her handmade, figurative clay sculptures³ – with mysterious, otherworldly gazes – made way for performances, video sculptures and installation art. The spirit in the gazes in her early works does however keep returning, in, for example, the use of body paint, with which she partially conceals her body in her performances. The presence of the physical body for Marie Julia is essential. In her oeuvre she stands central as a 'living' sculpture, often surrounded by the moving images she has recorded of streets, neighbourhoods and environments that inspire her, or that have left a lingering impression. These are images that refer to various stories, of both a historical and a personal nature. Marie Julia projects the images onto her studio walls and, covered with body paint or partially dressed, positions herself by standing in the projector's beam and merging with the projected image. This action, in turn, is recorded on video.

¹ *Performance by Artists, Art Metropole, Toronto, Canada, 1979*

² A Quebec-based art magazine oriented towards advanced criticism, of which 125 issues were published

³ *Les Gardiens Du Seuil, 1997*

Throughout the proceedings, which can last several hours – longer than the final result would lead us to assume – the artist works in her studio, in isolation. This unique way of working allows her, in a solo act, without an audience, to render a process public, whereby she evokes the psyche in herself. Reflection and affect play a significant role in this. Recently Marie Julia recorded images in de Via Della Pace (Street of Peace) in Rome's historical centre. During the projection of these moving images she stood in the projector's beam covered by a blue tarpaulin. It is the kind of image that regularly appears in news reporting about the refugee crisis. The impressions that arise as we watch Marie Julia's videos are a cross-section of a new situation, which occurred in-situ, whereby the performer is absorbed into the worldly reality of the past (the previously recorded video images, e.g. the historical centre of Rome) and the present (the performance itself). Ideas about the notion of 'time', which is inextricably linked to art and its history, arise in these installations as unfathomable values.

Marie Julia distinguishes herself clearly from the other artists who refer to tableaux from classical painting (in order to declare their link with history). In a similar video 'Reflections on the birth of Venus' (1976) the German artist Ulrike Rosenbach (°1943) projects the eponymous painting by Sandro Boticelli of 1470, after which she positions herself within the image of Venus and makes a video of this. Rosenbach as 'feminist' puts herself on display as a modern Venus. In contrast, Marie Julia time and again uses deeply personal and site-specific situations of experiences she has during her travels and whilst walking.

In executing her live performances Marie Julia always chooses a setting with a cultural-historical background⁴, a personal memory or a recent event of major importance. Most of her poses during these performances are stylistic and sculptural. As a body-art artist she transforms herself, like in her installations, with body paint, or covers her naked body with hand-knitted woollen clothing. The latter refers, among other things, to her family's history, whereby her father, as a sheep farmer, and her mother, as a spinner and knitter, dealt with age-old traditions; these are given an extension in the performances, which thereby consolidates and communicates Marie Julia's inner connection with her family. (Her mother was for a long time the person who produced these articles of clothing). Grasping these traditions and personal experiences points to the mythological circumstances from which Marie Julia's oeuvre has emerged. The reference to her personal history indicates the person-specific emotional state that runs like a red thread throughout her life.

⁴ The Abbey of Westmalle, the Seine, Théâtre de Verdure, Pompeii and others

Marie Julia's family members are also sometimes the subject or are part of the production process, as they apply the body paint or contribute by operating the video camera⁵ 'Silence on the Other Side' (2002) is a subdued performance whereby the artist, barefoot and in a self-spun sheep's wool dress is standing in the snow in homage to her deceased husband. The rituals and religious elements we see in her oeuvre emphasise the sensitivities with which Marie Julia embraces the world. Certain occurrences of a personal and humanitarian nature do not escape the artist's perception. We see these same emotions that are also present in Marie Julia's clay figures returning in her oeuvre as a whole, but performance allows her to express these emotions very explicitly. I sense that this is the most significant element that led the artist to performance art and that brought her the new insights in dealing with reality and rendering it explicit. The videos in her studio are, as already mentioned, recorded in the *absence* of an audience. The internet subsequently acts as a cost-free distributor of her video works: it is a medium that allows her to reach 'The Absent Audience' after all. Nevertheless, Marie Julia does not lead a withdrawn existence and the video images that surround her confirm her presence in public space. This dualistic aspect returns throughout her oeuvre as a whole, to which her video installations refer with emphasis, for example through the theme of 'identity.'

— In the video installation 'White Matters'⁶ Marie Julia places five large video screens alongside one another with each time an image from a performance that were executed in the absence of an audience. It is clear this installation, in confronting the performances with each other, makes another aspect visible. Although everyone will recognize themselves in all of the video works, there are still five different identities that rise to the surface, out of one and the same person (just as they do in the characters of the clay sculptures). In the video installation '9 personalities in 1 Body'⁷ the portrait of a woman (Riet Storms) is projected nine times in a different position and in different circumstances. (It is one of the rare works in which Marie Julia does not feature herself as the performing artist). In these projections of loosely recorded shots there appears a woman who, like in 'White Matters', performs nine times, each time as a different subject.

— The temptation is great to understand Marie Julia Bollansée's oeuvre through the 'transcendental theory' of the German philosopher Martin Heidegger (°1889 †1976), who tried to formulate an answer to the question of how a human being, in their everydayness, can be free.

⁵ For her live performances Marie Julia also calls on Hadewych, her regular camerawoman, and occasionally also incidental collaborators

⁶ Eva Steynen *Deviation(s)*, 2013 Antwerpen

⁷ Kunsthalle Lophem, 2004