

## A man or machine

*I'm going to say something to those who despise the body... A soul is just one word for body. The body is a great wisdom, a cluster with one meaning, a war and peace, a herd and a shepherd.*<sup>1</sup>

The Cartesian dualistic theory of dividing the mind and body was criticized from the very beginning, since its first appearance. In his work "Machine Man" (1748.), Julien Offray de la Mettrie explicitly rejected the Cartesian theory and suggested the existence of connection between the material (the material body) and the one signified as *esprit* (mind, spirit or soul), claiming that *the different conditions of soul are always connected to those in the body.*<sup>2</sup> The Cartesian logic emphasised the fact that the body needs to be transcendental, i.e. according to Freud's terminology, it has to be either repressed or neglected. It should be pointed out that, even though the repressions of the body had been successful in the Cartesian theory, the body still had considerable and important repercussions in the discourse of the history of art. In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such discourses are reflected within the mechanisms of binary or opposing relations according to performative basis: body/work of art. The stereotypical pictorial narrations of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century have brought about significant entropies in the choice of the drawing medium, thus questioning the relation of forms and the necessary content of the institutionalized museum painting. There have also been questions concerning body and its connection between the body of an artist and the artistic artefact in creation. Greenberg's critical model, based on the fantasy of unreal, objective and critical thought, loses its influence when the new discourses arise, which aim to confirm the dominant impact of the body on the active aspect of creation and also on the analysis of visual art. Contrary to Clement Greenberg and his kantian theory, in which he had to conceal and hide his body in order to be able to express purely logical and aesthetic opinions; there is Harold Rosenberg who speaks of a working and completely realized artist in his famous essay *American Action Painters*, in 1952. Even though Greenberg strategically aimed to obliterate the body; *picturing Jackson Pollock as a hero who used his concealed painting technique of spraying colours to a paper, thus bringing the logic of formalized purity which was created by the French modernists, artists had openly begun to display body as a part of their work. The ironic fact is that Pollock openly "showed" the creation of his paintings, gesticulating dominantly with the body, which was attested by the photographs and films. The Pollock's version, which remained crucial in today's history of art, judging from the pure logic of the surface processing in his paintings, is less connected to Greenberg's and more to Pollock's figure in action, which Rosenberg praised highly in his essay American Action Painters, which clue I found in Allan Kaprow and the other young artists' replicas of Pollock, interested in performance art. That Pollock is a performative Pollock, who strains his body, firmly tied to the process of painting and its inevitably embodied and longed for reception.*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*

<sup>2</sup> Julien O. De La Mettrie, *Machine Man*, 1961. p. 97

<sup>3</sup> Robert S. Nelson, Richard Sheef, *Critical Terms of The History of Art*, Svetovi, Novi Sad 2003. pp. 317-318.

During the sixty years of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, (visual) artists have extensively used the body for various aims: action painting, applied art, autodestruction, autoeroticism, fluxus, performance, processing art, ready-made, happening, body art, video, etc. Action isn't a matter of taste anymore. *The taste is not a deciding factor when it comes to a revolver shot or the construction of a labyrinth.*<sup>4</sup>

According to Merleau-Ponty, the body is not just a simple object, but the grouping of the meanings that are lived-through, i.e. the body isn't a conventional sign but rather the connecting point between us and the world; that is, simply put, the body is our interface. *The function of a living body I can only comprehend if I myself perform that function and the amount of me which represents the body itself, rising up to the world. Thus, the exteroceptivity entails the forming of the stimuli; the consciousness of the body penetrates into the body, the soul spreads to all its recesses and the behaviour dominates its core sector.*<sup>5</sup> Merleau-Ponty also ponders and demystifies the phenomenon of perception, i.e. the relationships of the body as an object and the possibilities of its mechanical physiologies (the central and peripheral theory of modern physiology). Merleau-Ponty suggests that the body “*should not be compared to a physical object but to a work of art*” in its coextensiveness with its own appearance, for the expression is inseparable from the expressed notion and nature as “*the focal point of the existence*”, and not with the interchangeable and static “*function*” of the stable terms<sup>6</sup>. If we are to comprehend body in the same manner as we comprehend a work of art, perhaps the definition of the final meaning would reduce the strain when facing the complexity and openness of a work of art. According to Merleau-Ponty, modern physiology is faced with the complex questions regarding the relation of the realistic body, the stimulus, psychological facts, amputations, phantom limbs, receptors. The projection of a phantom limb onto the body which endured some sort of amputation is especially important to him. The phenomenon of a phantom limb could symbolically signify or represent the connection between the body of an artist and the artefact of art inside the action which we define as the work of art.

Stakić's performances and actions represent directed, planned and conceptualized work which is recorded by two or more cameras. According to Šuvaković, the definition of performance *has two meanings: 1) it was introduced during the early 70s of the past century and signifies complex, actions prepared in advance and realized by a postconceptual artist who is simultaneously an author, in front of museum, gallery or just casual observers; 2) it is applied retrospectively, as a historical designation for artistic experiments.*<sup>7</sup> Miroslav Stakić adeptly and skillfully separates perceptive artefacts between the body and his own artistic artefact. In his case, we have a series of actions, video performances called *The Big Machine Art* where the author consistently separates his arms from the body and mind. Precisely spoken, his hand, which he uses for drawing and painting, has been, in this case, replaced by the several-tons

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<sup>4</sup> Harold Rosenberg, *The Views of Postwar American Art*, Prometej, Novi Sad 1997. p. 30

<sup>5</sup> Maurice Merleau – Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Logos, Veselin Masleša / IK Svjetlost, Sarajevo 1990. p. 102.

<sup>6</sup> Robert S. Nelson, Richard Sheef, *Critical Terms of The History of Art*, Svetovi, Novi Sad 2003. P. 324

<sup>7</sup> Miško Šuvaković, *Register of Modern and Postmodern Paint Art and Theory After 1950. godine*, Srpska akademija nauka i umetnosti / Prometej, Beograd / Novi Sad, 1999. pp. 241.

heavy machines he drives: excavators, bulldozers and other similar machines which are used in construction for rather tough works (the construction of buildings, roads, bridges, etc.). The paradox of usage of those machines and tools (in this case the construction machines) for drawing and painting lies exactly in their robustness as well as rough and limited function of usage. They are actually used to load, move, dig, demolish, distort and transport huge amounts of constructional and industrial material and waste (dirt, stones, etc.). However, by using those enormous tools of work, the author has demonstrated and proven that it is possible to dismantle the actual function of an excavator or a bulldozer and use it to create his own artistic expression or concept. The final product, in the whole course of actions and performances, is an artefact which is produced from this game, i.e. a drawing or a picture created by an indirect act of painting with the “help” of the big machine. The following visual expression can thank: a) partially author’s expressiveness and his initial idea about the project; b) the interaction between the artist and the machine, i.e. the possibilities of precise control of the machine itself (the responsiveness of commands inside); c) the mistakes, coincidences (we will designate them as ‘fluxes’) which occur due to a big distance between the artist’s perception from the inside of machine (the cockpit) and the paper which is several feet away from his sight (the flux in this case could be the whole group of complex relations on the following lines: artist-command board, moving controls-hydraulic dipper arm-excavator’s bucket-brush). The excavator’s hydraulic dipper arm, which is the main link between the artist in the cockpit and the brush attached to the excavator’s bucket, will be designated as the phantom limb. The artist’s body is, in this case, the bearer of the performances and stands in the interdependent relationship with the machine. The interaction between the machine and artist implies a specific type of information exchange (a term from electrical engineering should be most appropriate here), that is, some type of back coupling. When the excavator’s bucket and the hydraulic dipper arm face some resistance, the control of the entire machine is hampered. In these circumstances, the author faces many difficulties, but the essence and point of the entire concept is that the artist and his body act by following a certain procedure, and his body is brought into a complex relationship of interdependent fluxes with the machine and the initial idea. In this performance, the author uses both the machine and his body as objects of the work of art. In biological, psychological and social sense, the author’s body and the machine become means, material and bearer of designation, work, action and notion. Particularly, the author doesn’t deal here with simple performances and realization of a visual unit; he deals with concrete physiological, psychological and behavioural situations.

*Thus, the awareness of the body and soul become suppressed, the body, once again, becomes the good, purified machine, under the influence of the ambiguous notion of behaviour we’ve almost forgotten. Finally, the phantom limb often maintains the same position which the real arm had in the moment of harm. A wounded soldier still felt the shrapnels which maimed his real arm... It occurred that the phantom arm, which felt huge after the operation, suddenly diminished and finally vanished with “the patient’s acceptance of his dismemberment”... Some subjects systemically ignored their paralyzed right arm and gave their left arm when asked for their right arm, and above all that, spoke of their paralyzed arm as of a “long and cold snake”... Still, not a single psychological explanation can ignore the fact that severing the sensitive connections which lead directly to ecephalon, can neutralize the phantom limb.<sup>8</sup>* This relationship of the

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<sup>8</sup> Maurice Merleau – Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, Logos, Veselin Masleša / IK Svjetlost, Sarajevo 1990. p. 102.

phantom limb and the real body in particular, i.e. in our case, the concrete relationship of the author and the robust hydraulic dipper arm of the excavator, represents a type of semiotic toying with the phenomenons of actual and virtual presence, because, as Deleuze put it, *that relationship of real and unreal always forms a circuit (closed circle), but in two ways: sometimes it is referred to the unreal, as to something else in the endless circles, where it is imaginatively realized, and sometimes referring to the unreal as its own imagination, in shrinking circles which the real cristalizes with itself. The plan of immanence contains the real as the relationship with the unreal (imaginative) and the other members, and even the real as the member with which the unreal interchanges. In any case, the relationship between the real and the unreal is not the realtionship which could be formed between the two kinds of real. Those actualized real imply to already formed individuals, and the definitions reached by common ways, whereas the relationship between the real and unreal forms individualism in the process, i.e. the singularity of points for which is important to be pinpointed in each case.*<sup>9</sup>

The complex mechanism of dual identity on the performative basis of body = machine or artist/author = phantom limb, represent rebellious, individual assessment of personal, sole intentions toward “*the long and cold snake*”, with the aim to show resistance to the common and ordinary narratives of the reception of institutionalized art and the art in broad sense.

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(translated by: Vedran Cvijanović)

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<sup>9</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *A Dialogue (Real and Unreal)*, IK Svetovi, Novi Sad, 1996. p. 48.