

The Sacrificial Aesthetic: Blood Rituals from Art to Murder

Dawn Perlmutter

**Department of Fine Arts
Cheyney University of Pennsylvania
Cheyney PA 19319-0200
idolchats@aol.com**

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The concept of the “sacrificial esthetic” introduced in Eric Gans’s [*Chronicle No. 184*](#) entitled “Sacrificing Culture” describes a situation in which aesthetic forms remain sacrificial but have evolved from a necessary feature of social organization to a psychological element of the human condition. Gans concludes that art’s sacrificial esthetic is essentially exhausted as a creative force and argues that the future lies with simulations, virtual realities in which the spectator plays a partially interactive role. His most significant claim is that “This end of the ability of the esthetic to discriminate between the sacrificial and the antisacrificial is not the end of art. On the contrary, it liberates the esthetic from the ethical end of justifying sacrifice.” The consequence of the liberation of the ethical justification of sacrifice is the main concern of this essay.

Throughout the history of art we have encountered images of blood, from the representations of wounded animals in the cave paintings of Lascaux through century after century of brutal Biblical images, through history paintings depicting scenes of war, up through the many films of war, horror, and violence. Blood is now off the canvas, off the screen and sometimes literally in your face. It is no coincidence that this substance has intrigued artists throughout history. Blood is fascinating; it simultaneously represents purity and impurity, the sacred and the profane, life and death.

There are many expressions of the aesthetic that manifests itself in blood and flesh. The most familiar examples are evident in the current popularity of tattooing, piercing, branding and body modifications. These comprise the basic prerequisites for entry into the worlds of Modern Primitives, Vampire Culture, and The Fetish Scene. These highly ritualized subcultures evolved out of various aesthetic genres

such as: Happenings, Body Art, Performance Art, Ritual Art, the Gothic Movement, and Hollywood. Originally the goal of these artists was personal transformation and attempts to reclaim the spiritual. The result was unconventional forms of the sacred manifested in art that attacked fundamental values of Western culture, provoking censorship on many levels of society. The culture war began. In this essay it will be argued that aesthetics now ideologically freed from ethical responsibility to society has evolved into an authentic sacrificial culture inclusive of ritual murder.

The Flesh

A phenomenon in contemporary art has been occurring in which blood is no longer merely represented but is actually being utilized for various art forms. Performance artist Chris Burden did not paint or sculpt a crucifixion; in 1974 in a work entitled "Trans-Fixed" he had himself crucified to a car. In the 1970s Burden's art performances also included having himself shot with a gun, punctured, burned and run over by a car. Burden's body became the ultimate sculptural material, the ultimate object. [images/interview "Interview with Chris Burden" <http://www.artnode.se/burden/>] Artist Gina Pane does art performances that consist of self-inflicted cuts to her body including her face. In 1971 she performed "Escalade non-anesthésiée" in which she climbed a ladder that had blades attached to the steps. In 1972 in a performance entitled "The Conditioning (part I of "Auto-Portrait(s)," she laid down on an iron bed with very few crossbars that had fifteen long candles burning underneath. In 1974 in a performance entitled "Psyche" she kneeled in front of a mirror, put on make-up and proceeded to cut into her face with a razor blade. In 1975 in a performance entitled "Le corps pressenti" she made cuts between her toes with a razor blade so that the blood would create permanent stains on a plaster cast that her feet were resting on. [images "Gina Pane" http://www.geocities.com/SoHo/Lofts/8344/gina_pane.html] In 1974, artist Marina Abramovic performed a work entitled "Rhythm 0" in which "she permitted a roomful of spectators in a Naples gallery to abuse her at their will for six hours, using instruments of pain and pleasure that had been placed on a table for their convenience. By the third hour, her clothes had been cut from her body with razor blades, her skin slashed; a loaded gun held to her head finally caused a fight between her tormentors, bringing the proceeding to an unnerving halt." (1) The same year artist Petr Stembera performed an action entitled "Narcissus #1" in which he stood gazing at a self portrait which was placed on an altar surrounded by lit candles. Blood was drawn from his body with a hypodermic needle; then Stembera proceeded to mix the blood with his own urine, hair, and nail clippings, finally drinking the mixture in front of his altar. These are just a few examples of the use of blood in performance art.

Beginning in the 1960s and culminating in the 1970s there were several European artists who used animal and human blood in violent actions that focused on the body. The most famous of these were a circle of Viennese artists that included Hermann Nitsch, Gunter Brus, Otto Muehl, and Rudolph Schwartzkogler. These artists utilized several artistic mediums inclusive of painting, assemblage, drawing, photography, and collage. They also created and participated in what was referred to as action-happenings. However their work was fundamentally different than the American Happenings and Fluxus movements in that it was based on the tradition of Surrealism, which accounts for the overwhelming prevalence of blood and violence. Their work, which influenced many American artists in the 90s, became known as Viennese Actionism and their interests included the cult of Dionysus, the rituals of the Catholic Church and the psychoanalytic theories of Sigmund Freud, Karl Jung, and Wilhelm Reich.⁽²⁾ Hermann Nitsch did a series of performances titled “Orgies-Mysteries-Theater” that frequently entailed the dismemberment of animals, large quantities of blood and traditional religious symbolism. [exhibition review “Bloody Man: The Ritual Art of Hermann Nitsch”

<http://www.zhurnal.ru:8080/staff/gorny/english/nitsch.htm>] A 1974 performance entitled *48th Action* at the Munich Modernes Theater involved the disembowelment of a slaughtered lamb whose entrails and blood were poured over a nude man, while the drained animal was strung up over his head. Art Historian RoseLee Goldberg describes Nitsch’s performance in terms of ritual:

Such activities sprang from Nitsch’s belief that humankind’s aggressive instincts had been repressed and muted through the media. Even the ritual of killing animals, so natural to primitive man, had been removed from modern day-experience. These ritualized acts were a means of releasing that repressed energy as well as an act of purification and redemption through suffering.⁽³⁾

Hermann Nitsch is still conducting his Orgies-Mysteries-Theaters; now they last as long as six days and are often protested by animal rights activists.
[image/information “The Official Hermann Nitsch O.M. Theater Website”

<http://dogbert.inreach.com/vissol/index.html>

Brus and Muehl were more concerned with creating political statements through the use of photography and collage; however, their images also entailed blood-drenched bodies and violent mutilations. In the book *Out of Actions* Hubert Klocker, curator of Collection Friedrichshof, Vienna, states, “Nitsch and Schwartzkogler employ the magical gesture by assuming the role of the shaman or the priest. Brus, on the other hand, uses the body as a projection surface for the subconscious

collective potential. It then turns into an expression of the sacrificial act.⁽⁴⁾ The most controversial of these artists is Rudolph Schwarzkogler, who participated in Nitsch's actions and created works that he referred to as "artistic nudes-similar to a wreckage" in which he performed self-administered mutilations. Schwarzkogler died violently on June 20, 1969 prompting several conflicting reports regarding the circumstances of his death. Art critic Robert Hughes in a 1972 issue of *Time* magazine stated:

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 V at Kassel. Successive acts of self-amputation finally did Schwarzkogler in.⁽⁵⁾

Art historian Kristine Stiles claims that this is one of the notorious myths surrounding performance artists and that the real cause of Schwarzkogler's death was that he plunged to his death by jumping out a window while obsessed with Yves Klein's photomontage "Leap into the Void," which falsely depicted Klein jumping from a second story window. She also states that Schwarzkogler had begun experimenting that year with physical health regimes which he hoped would cleanse and purify his own body and mind.⁽⁶⁾ In either account, Schwarzkogler's death was a violent act inspired by his immersion in the aesthetic and has the quality of a failed purification ritual. [article/images 'Rudolph Swartzkogler' <http://www.brainwashed.com/axis/schwarzkogler/rudolf.htm>] This incident inadvertently created an aesthetic mythology in which suicide is hailed as the ultimate performance art, the completed sacrifice.

Similar examples of extreme body modifications in performance art can be found throughout the world and are strikingly similar to religious rituals that entail blood. ["Body Modification Ezine"<http://www.bme.freeq.com/index.html>] "Performance artist Michael Journiac made a pudding with his own blood and offered it for consumption by his audience."⁽⁷⁾ This is similar to the practice of autosacrifice by Aztec priests who drew their own blood as an offering.⁽⁸⁾ Australian artist Stelarc suspends himself in different environments by ropes attached to hooks driven through his flesh. Although he claims "that these works are only involved with transcending normal human parameters including pain,"⁽⁹⁾ they are strikingly reminiscent of rituals among some Plains and Northwest Coast tribal groups of North America. [image/video "Suspension" <http://www.stelarc.va.com.au/suspens/suspens.html>] Performance artist Fakir

Musafar has made it quite clear that his intentions are to perform live demonstrations of religious rituals and practices. Influenced by National Geographic and Compton's Picture Encyclopedia, "by the time he was twelve, Fakir had begun a systematic, personal exploration of virtually every body modification and ritual practice known to man."⁽¹⁰⁾ A small sample of his performances include hanging by fleshhooks while performing an Indian O-Kee-Pa ceremony, penis stretching with weights while performing sexual negation rituals of the Sadhu of India, having one-pound weights attached to his chest with fishhooks enacting mystical practices of the Sadhu of India, and corseting his waist enacting an initiation ritual of the Ibitoe. Fakir Musafar has been performing rituals and body modifications for over forty years. [images/magazine "Fakir Musafar's Home Page, Bodyplay Magazine, and Piercing School" <http://www.bodyplay.com/>]

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The Blood

The use of blood in performance art can be likened to the use of blood in Girard's theory of sacrifice. Girard refers to the two natures of violence as harmful violence and beneficial violence and proposes that ritual is nothing more than the regular exercise of beneficial violence which is achieved through sacrificial rites: "The physical metamorphoses of spilt blood can stand for the double nature of violence. . . . Blood serves to illustrate the point that the same substance can stain or cleanse, contaminate or purify, drive men to fury and murder or appease their anger and restore them to life."⁽¹¹⁾ This is consistent with artist Barbara Wiesen's explanation of why she uses blood as a medium in her art works: "because I wanted to provoke multiple responses that might both attract and repulse at the same time."⁽¹²⁾ For Girard, "The function of ritual is to 'purify' violence; that is, to 'trick' violence into spending itself on victims whose death will provoke no reprisals."⁽¹³⁾ Blood rituals are necessary to redirect violence onto inconsequential victims in order to purify the community of the terror of uncontrolled killing.⁽¹⁴⁾ Girard states,

Only blood itself, blood whose purity has been guaranteed by the performance of appropriate rites—the blood in short, of sacrificial victims—can accomplish this feat. . .

The properties of blood, for example, vividly illustrate the entire operation of violence. . . . Blood that dries on the victim soon loses its viscous quality and becomes first a dark sore, then a roughened scab. Blood that is allowed to congeal on its victim is the impure product of violence, illness or death. In contrast to this contaminated substance is the fresh blood of newly slaughtered victims, crimson and free flowing. This blood is

never allowed to congeal, but is removed without a trace as soon as the rites have been concluded.[\(15\)](#)

The artist becomes or enacts the sacrifice, the stage represents sacred space, the performance is held in sacred time, and significantly the blood is fresh, crimson and free flowing. A classic example of performance art as blood sacrifice is a performance entitled “Bloodbath” by Minnesota Artist Billy Curmano. Press releases announced that “The artist’s own blood is shed in a human sacrifice intended to focus attention on global violence.”[\(16\)](#) At the performance, which was symbolically held on Saint Valentine’s Day, Curmano was dressed in white and sitting next to a globe of the world; the audience was informed that his blood would be spilled as a sacrifice to ease the need for suffering and death.”[\(17\)](#) Since Curmano had promised that he would supply his own blood for the sacrifice and would not mutilate himself on stage, a nurse sat next to him and extracted a dozen vials of blood by needle from Curmano’s arms as a drum beat in the background. During the ceremony Curmano opened each vial with his teeth and spilled his blood on the globe while a voice offstage announced the names of countries in conflict.[\(18\)](#) Although this encompasses all aspects of the use of blood in sacrifice, it is basically a non-violent performance.

The Pain

The use of blood in performance art is often extremely violent and similar to another religious concept, mortification. In a wide variety of religious traditions mortification occurs in the context of initiation rituals. “The term mortification derives from the Latin *mortificare* (to put to death) . . . some practices of mortification seem intended symbolically to assimilate the initiate into a deathlike condition that is to precede an initiatory rebirth.”[\(19\)](#) The practices refer to specific forms of bodily discipline, ranging from sleep deprivation to ritual forms of abuse. Deprivations are ways of symbolizing death: the dead do not speak, eat, drink, or sleep. Violent rituals can be seen as endurance tests that serve as a rite of passage into adulthood. The significance is not the violent act but a symbolic death and rebirth.[\(20\)](#) Christian mortification can be seen as an element in the more general practice of asceticism. The concept is derived from the Pauline ideal of participation in the crucifixion of Christ by putting to death the desires of the flesh. This self-imposed martyrdom was a way that Christians could recapture some of the self-sacrificing intensity of the early church.[\(21\)](#) This included various degrees of self-inflicted violence, such as fasting, sleep deprivation, self-flagellation, the wearing of what is referred to as a hair shirt, “really a scourge worn as a belt against the naked flesh, the rope made more painful by being knotted or by the addition of metal nails.”[\(22\)](#) The goal of this self-infliction of pain was to experience ecstatic union

with God. In his book entitled *Holy Anorexia*, Rudolph Bell describes the life of Catherine Benincasa, one of the many medieval women who tortured themselves as a form of Christian mortification:

from the age of sixteen or so she subsisted on bread, water, and raw vegetables. She wore only rough wool and exchanged her hairshirt, the dirtiness of which offended her, for an iron chain bound so tightly against her hips that it inflamed her skin. For three years she observed a self-imposed vow of total silence except for confession. . . . three times a day she flagellated herself with an iron chain. . . . each beating lasted for one-and-one half hours and blood ran from her shoulders to her feet.[\(23\)](#)

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In her book, *Mutilating The Body: Identity in Blood and Ink*, Kim Hewitt eloquently stated: “Catherine’s religious devotions rewarded her with visions that led her to believe she experienced mystical union with God. She was canonized as a saint by the Catholic Church and became a model for holy anorectics for the next two centuries.”[\(24\)](#) In an interview with Andrea Juno and V. Vale in the book *Modern Primitives*, British performance artist Genesis P-Orridge recounts one of a series of art performances entitled “Coum Transmissions” that has strikingly similar characteristics to mortification practices:

Instinctively, without pre-planning, I started to do cuts-scrape my body with sharp nails (not razor blades; to me, that didn’t feel ritualistic enough; it had to be a dagger or nail or implement. . . I was pushing myself to the point of being declared near dead. At the last Coum Transmissions action in Antwerp . . . I started cutting a swastika shape into my chest about 9” square with a rusty nail; then I turned it into a Union Jack (the British Flag), and then just scratched and cut all over the place.[\(25\)](#)

After that performance he was rushed to the hospital where he had a near death experience inclusive of astral projection [interview “Coum Transmissions”<http://www.brainwashed.com/tg/coum.html>] Another example of an art performance that exemplifies mortification practices is that of Sheree Rose and Bob Flanagan entitled “Autopsy.” Flanagan lies nude on an autopsy table while he is whipped, beaten, strangled, pinched with clothespins, has various objects inserted into his rectum and has his penis sliced with a knife. The title has obvious

references to death, and although Bob Flanagan does not speak in this performance, in earlier interviews he relates how “frequent near death encounters modified his concepts of gratification and abstinence, reward and punishment, and intensified his masochistic drive.”⁽²⁶⁾ [film review “EUFS: Sick: The Life and Death of Bob Flanagan,

Supermasochist”<http://www.eusa.ed.ac.uk/societies/filmsoc/films/sick.html>]

The rationale behind both Genesis P-Orridge and Bob Flanagan’s art performances are that they are means of achieving spiritual transformation through imposed or self-imposed pain and violence leading to deathlike conditions. The question remains: how does one distinguish this activity as performance art from other acts of sadomasochism? In response to a similar question Genesis stated:

I’ve met genuine masochists and they’re usually rather dull, because they don’t give you any intellectual explanation at all, nor are they interested in one. . . I’m interested in heightened awareness, and I’m interested in learning more and more-about not just myself, but what is possible through the achievement of-not early trance states, but altered states in the true senses.⁽²⁷⁾

This presents the conception of sadomasochism as a form of spiritual art which corresponds to the concept of mortification in initiation rituals and Christian asceticism. [film review “Not So

Sick”http://www.pathfinder.com/time/magazine/1997/dom/971103/acine.no_t_so_sick_.html]

It also corresponds to Bataille’s philosophy of sacrifice, which is equated to eroticism. Bataille states:

It is the common business of sacrifice to bring life and death into harmony, to give death the upsurge of life, life the momentousness and the vertigo of death opening onto the unknown . . . if we now consider the similarity between the act of love and the sacrifice. Both reveal the flesh. Sacrifice replaces the ordered life of the animal with a blind convulsion of its organs. So also with the erotic convolution; it gives free rein to extravagant organs whose blind activity goes on beyond the considered will of the lovers.⁽²⁸⁾

Bataille’s concept of eroticism posits an interpretation of sadistic and masochistic acts as a form of ritual sacrifice.

Another example of an artist who employs sadomasochism in his performances is

Ron Athey. Athey incorporates piercing, bloodletting and tattooing in his art events to create rituals of redemption. Ron Athey is HIV positive and a former heroin addict. In a 1993 performance entitled "Martyrs and Saints," Athey hung nude strung up to a column with long needles inserted into his head in such a manner as to represent a crown of thorns. His stated artistic intention is to achieve redemption through self-mutilation. [interview "FAD: Ron Athey's

Saints"<http://www.fadmag.com/items/athey/athey.html>] Another example of what could easily be construed as masochism is the work of French multi-media performance artist Orlan, who has been undergoing a series of cosmetic operations as art performances. She incorporates religious imagery, food, and comments on spirituality and its connection to the body while fresh blood is running down her face and body. During her performances she receives liposuction and facial reconstruction while reading aloud and eating. The title of her performance is Image/New Image(s) or the Re-incarnation of Saint-Orlan and her intended goal is to transform herself into a living saint. At the current time Orlan has undergone nine separate operations towards her physical transformation. She states, "It is no longer plastic surgery, but revelation."[\(29\)](#) [images "Orlan"

<http://www.rtbf.be/interieurnuit/metamorphoses/orlan.html>] Orlan's ritualized surgeries are reminiscent of the mortification practices of the many medieval women who tortured themselves to achieve spiritual ecstasy. This postmodern mortification further exemplifies the philosophy of George Bataille, "The urges of the flesh pass all bounds in the absence of controlling will. . . . If a taboo exists, it is a taboo on some elemental violence. This violence belongs to the flesh.[\(30\)](#) According to Bataille's concept of eroticism, the violent masochistic acts performed by Genesis P-Orridge, Bob Flanagan, Ron Athey, and Orlan are means of achieving spiritual ecstasy through the mutilation of the flesh precisely because these violent actions are prohibited in Christian doctrine. Taboos shape transgressions and the fluctuation between the two give rise to religious phenomena. There is no reason to doubt an artist's claim that acts of self-mutilation and violence in their work provide a personal transformation for them. What becomes questionable is the decision to practice these violent rituals in the context of performance art, which is then further complicated when the intention is to redeem or transform the audience.

The Crisis

From both historical and religious perspectives, the use of blood in performance art fails to accomplish religious rituals of blood sacrifice or ritual mortification because "rites involving blood always require the participation of the group or community."[\(31\)](#) When saints and monks performed private individual rituals they

had the full support of the Catholic Church, and when mortification occurs in the context of initiation rites, the ritual is part of an established cultural tradition, but artists do not have a collective doctrine of beliefs or a community of believers to support their rituals. However, this is not the only reason why the use of blood in performance art does not succeed as religious ritual.

René Girard proposes a concept he calls “the sacrificial crisis” which occurs when the entire sacrificial structure fails. According to this concept rituals can fail in the following ways: 1) when the sacrificial victim loses its mimetic relation with the community, creating a situation in which the sacrificial substitute is recognizably different from other members of the group; 2) when there is an unequal balance between pure and impure violence; and 3) when the rite is not believed in by the community. Furthermore, ritual failure can cause more harm and unleash even more uncontrollable violence. According to Girard “anything that adversely affects the institution of sacrifice will ultimately pose a threat to the very basis of the community, to the principles on which its social harmony and equilibrium depend.” [\(32\)](#) Violent Performance Art fails as ritual on all three counts and significantly represents a breakdown of American culture as defined by Girard’s concept. When performance artist Gina Pane burns her feet and hands, gashes herself with a razor and makes slits in her eyelids, [\(33\)](#) the audience is not experiencing a sense of communal catharsis; these acts only serve to provoke a sense of horror at this vision of apparently inexplicable violence. An example of sacrificial victims losing their mimetic relation to society is performance artists who are HIV positive or use HIV positive blood. This fails as ritual because the blood itself is designated as “polluted,” making the artist an unacceptable surrogate sacrificial victim for a healthy community. Girard states: “If the gap between the victim and the community is allowed to grow too wide, all similarity will be destroyed. The victim will no longer be capable of attracting the violent impulses to itself: the sacrifice will cease to serve as a ‘good conductor,’ in the sense that metal is a good conductor of electricity.” [\(34\)](#) An example of ritual failure occurred in a performance by Ron Athey. Athey pierced himself with needles, then carved designs into an assistant’s flesh, afterward hanging paper towels blotted with HIV-soaked blood above the audience, which caused a commotion in which members of the audience fled from the auditorium in panic. This exemplifies Girard’s concept of a sacrificial crisis: when the blood rite goes wrong it only serves to set off a chain reaction of uncontrollable violence.

Many of the previously cited works are situated on the edge of mainstream American culture and occasionally shocking even to veterans of the New York avant-garde art world. In order to gain a fuller understanding of the phenomenon of the use of blood in contemporary art it is necessary to examine these works from the perspective of religious and social prohibitions. Let us examine how current

censorship of art evolved from the Biblical prohibition of images. In his essay entitled *Art and Disturbation*, philosopher Arthur Danto addressed the topic of violent performance art which he termed “the arts of disturbance.” “Reality must in some way be an actual component of disturbance art, and usually reality of a kind itself disturbing: obscenity, frontal nudity, blood, excrement, mutilation, real danger, actual pain, possible death. . . . It is disturbance when the insulating boundaries between art and life are breached.⁽³⁵⁾ According to Danto, Disturbational art is a regressive movement; instead of going forward to its transfiguration into philosophy, it goes backward to the beginnings of art, and our involvement with this art puts the viewer in an entirely different space than anything the philosophy of art has equipped us for.⁽³⁶⁾ Danto proposes that “the aim of the disturbatory artist is to sacrifice himself so that through him an audience may be transformed . . . it is an undertaking to recover a stage of art where art itself was almost like magic-like deep magic . . . in brief, it is an enterprise of restoring to art some of the magic purified out when art became art.”⁽³⁷⁾ Although in agreement with this characterization, I would specify that the expression “when art became art” should be taken to mean when Judaic/Christian ideology subjugated this form of the aesthetic with biblical prohibitions on image worship. In his essay Danto suggests that disturbance art is what provoked the iconoclastic controversies at various times in history over the making of graven images:

You after all have to ask yourself why there has been at various times in history such intense controversy over the making of graven images, why there have been movements of iconoclasm at all. It is a struggle against the use of dark powers on the part of artists who, by making an image of x actually capture x.⁽³⁸⁾

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What Danto is describing is the religious concept of idolatry. The use of blood in art, specifically when the intention of the artists is spiritual redemption, would constitute an idolatrous act because artists are substituting themselves for the idol or the scapegoat. The artist is becoming another god, violating the biblical prohibitions as stated in the second and third commandments “Thou shalt have no other gods before me” and “Thou shalt not make for yourself a graven image.”⁽³⁹⁾ The use of blood in performance art also has striking similarities to rituals of blood sacrifice in form, content, and ideology, which is exactly what the prohibitions forbid. The violent use of blood in art will always be seen as deviant in American society because self-mutilation cannot be culturally sanctioned in a society founded on Judeo-Christian values. Bataille posits an explanation for this:

Transgression in pre-Christian religions was relatively lawful; piety demanded it. Against transgression stood the taboo but it could always be suspended as long as limits were observed. In the Christian world the taboo was absolute. Transgression would have made clear what Christianity concealed, that the sacred and the forbidden are one, that the sacred can be reached through the violence of a broken taboo.[\(40\)](#)

The ideal that the sacred can be achieved by transgressing religious commandments is an extremely frightening concept that would both politically and religiously undermine American culture. This explains why the works of artists are taken so seriously that they provoked a Supreme Court decision to regulate decency in art. From a Christian perspective, the concept embodied in these artworks that violence, sex, and ritual is a means of achieving the sacred constitutes blasphemy. Since the American legal system is fundamentally based on patriarchal Christian principles, it is no surprise that artworks incorporating blood, urine, excrement, semen, and violence will not receive any public funding on the grounds of obscenity. That would be the equivalent of financing the demise of the current American political and religious structure.

Although religious and government opinions on the subject are obvious, the response of the viewing audience needs to be addressed. Whereas artists may achieve individual spiritual transformation through their work, choosing to exhibit or perform publicly entails viewer response and participation. When an artist posits himself as a sacrificial scapegoat during an art performance, the experience of the audience is determinedly meaningful in interpreting the event. Interestingly enough, Danto's view of disturbatory art in aesthetics and Girard's theory of sacrifice in religion hold the same position in regard to the significance of audience participation. According to Danto the viewer's choice of whether to participate in a violent action or not is what distinguishes performance art from anything the philosophy of art has equipped us to construe as art.[\(41\)](#) According to Girard, the viewer's choice of whether to participate in a violent action or not is what distinguishes performance art from acceptable ritual. So it is no coincidence that violent performance art does not fit into Danto's Hegelian construction of the history of art and without audience participation represents what Girard refers to as "a sacrificial crisis," for in each case violent art is neither beneficial to nor culturally sanctioned in art or religion. This provides a non-biblical explanation of why the use of blood in art is a secular form of idolatry. It represents a struggle between those who would retain the ethics and morality of a monotheistic patriarchal society and those who believe in other ideologies. The principal point is that American art, religion, and culture cannot allow for the use of blood in contemporary art for the same reasons that blood is prohibited in the Bible: it is a threat to the fundamental

principles of the Judeo-Christian world view.

However, the fact remains that artists are increasingly using blood and violence in art and audiences are attending. This art can be referred to as “postmodern mortification” because it represents a spiritual attempt by artists to dismantle personal and societal boundaries through physical sacrifice as a ritual form of purification. Although it was demonstrated that this fails as religious ritual, it is a ritual process nonetheless. What will define the progress of this genre is not so much the artists as the audience. If audience participation begins to take place, participation being defined as religious interaction and communal transformation, performance art will no longer be positioned in the category of the aesthetic but will be designated by society as a new religious movement.

The Scenes

Ritual participation has been achieved and can be encountered in what is referred to as The Vampire Scene, The Goth Scene, The Fetish Scene, and The Body Art Scene, each of which is fundamentally based in aesthetics. It was the acceptance of the aesthetic use of blood in contemporary art that popularized these movements by sanctioning blood ritual. The significant difference is that ritual participation of audience members is required in the Vampire, Fetish, and Body Art Scenes, producing an authentic form of the sacrificial aesthetic.

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Vampire culture like other religions consists of people who have committed themselves to an ideology, maintain ethical tenets within a hierarchical system, participate in rituals specific to their clans and in which aesthetics holds a significant, often magical place of significance within the group-aesthetic being broadly defined as symbolism, style, language, religion, art, presentation of self, appearance, and other cultural expressions. The Vampire Scene evolved from a combination of cultural myths, legends and the romanticized Hollywood image. Modern Vampyres signify themselves by spelling vampire with a “y,” which distinguishes them from Hollywood, mythological, and fictional references. The “Vampyre Scene” refers to individuals, groups organizations, events, businesses, and so on, who all share an interest in the Vampyre lifestyle. One particular group has an intricate network of members and is referred to as “The Sanguinarium.” This term is derived from the Latin word for blood “sanguis,” and signifies how Vampyres regard each other, as in “of the blood.” The Sanguinarium promotes a common Vampyre lifestyle comprised of etiquette and aesthetic and other tenets.

[images/information “The International Vampyre Connection”

<http://www.sanguinarium.net>] The manifesto found on their web page states:

The Sanguinarium is a network of individuals, social organizations and businesses for which the vampyre/vampire is a metaphor, representing a community interest in fetishism, the Occult, theatriics, art, lore as well as individual and spiritual expression and exploration . . . The Sanguinarium's final goal and purpose is to bring together all people who enjoy and find pleasure in darkness, occult, vampyrism and dark fetishism.[\(42\)](#)

Vampyres also distinguish themselves from Goths and the Gothic Scene, although aesthetic styles are similar and many times they attend the same clubs. The differentiating criteria are that Goths do not become members of clans or adopt the vampyre ideology. Many people are introduced to the Vampyre scene through the role-playing game "Vampire: the Masquerade," others through the erotic nature of the lifestyle and many more through popular literature such as Anne Rice's *The Vampire Chronicles*. Members congregate at Havens (Vampyre nightclubs) and Courts, which are social events or "town meetings" held in specific geographic locations. There is a sophisticated system of Courts and Havens throughout the United States and Europe. For example, The Court of Gotham includes all of metro New York City and the following Havens: Long Black Veil, The Bank, Alchemy, Contempt, and Mother. Another example is the Court of Lost Angels which encompasses Los Angeles and Southern California and whose havens include the Fang Club in Los Angeles, Bar Sinister, Coven 13 and Absynthe in Hollywood, Vampiricus and Release the Bats in Long Beach, Repent in Anaheim and many more. [images/information "The Fang Club"]

<http://www.fangclub.com/findex.html>] Currently the Sanguinarium lists ten Courts on their web site each containing many Havens. This demonstrates that Vampyre culture is not a passing fad but an extensive, highly organized community whose members number in the thousands.

The Sanguine Ankh is the symbol (sigil) of the Sanguinarium. Designed by master metal smith D'Drennen, it allows members to identify each other worldwide. It was derived from the ancient Egyptian symbol of eternal life and refers to the priest of the Egyptian god Horus' use of the bladed ankhs for bloodletting rites. The hierarchical structure of Vampyre culture is referred to as The Three Pillars. The lowest level consists of Fledglings who are either new to the lifestyle, inexperienced, or who are children of Vampyre adults. They are signified by having no prefix before their name and no stone in their sigil. After a period of initiation Fledglings can become Calmae, which signifies experienced members of the Clan, coven, or circle, and they wear a red stone in their sigil. The highest level is that of the Elders who are the most experienced and influential members of the Sanguinarium. They consist of leaders and founders of clans, owners of havens and

fangmakers (dentists who make permanent fangs for members), and they have a purple stone in their sigil. [artifacts “Sabretooth Emporium”

<http://www.sabretooth.com/main.html>

Use of language and etiquette is very significant in the Sanguinarium, which claims to promote chivalry, honor, style, and creativity. The expression “The Awakening” alludes to initial attraction to the Vampyre aesthetic, which is also referred to as the “birth to darkness” or “the becoming.” A Sire is a Vampyre parent, including parent and child, lovers, friends-anyone who guides a fledgling to his Vampyre nature. The fledgling or childe is an initiate until moving up to the next level. Mundanes signify non-Vampyres and people who do not support the lifestyle. Swans refer to those who are aware of the culture but choose not to partake. Black Swans are people who are tolerant of the lifestyle while White Swans are those who disapprove and try to persuade family members or friends to get out of the scene. It is interesting to note that black is a positive term and white is a negative term in Vampyre culture. Other forms of etiquette include Vampyre or Scene names, which are pseudonyms derived from various historical, mythological and biblical sources. Prefixes such as Lord, Lady, Marquis, Marquise, Mistress, and Master denote status in a clan. There are also distinctive Vampyre greetings; in the Gotham Sanguinarium, this involves joining of hands, a kiss on each hand, followed by a mutual kiss on each cheek.

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Other aesthetic characteristics include clothing, referred to as “garb,” which usually reflects a historical era such as Victorian or Edwardian, and an assortment of fetish, corset, bondage, and so on. Preferred colors are usually red, black, and purple. Silver jewelry is preferred to gold since it is less representative of the rites of the Catholic Church. Music is dominated by Gothic; other genres include Industrial, Classical, Punk, Techno and a variety of other forms. Some of the more popular Vampyre bands include Inkubus Sukkubus, Type O Negative, Nosferatu and Malkador. Wine is the drink of choice and some members will also partake of absinthe although it is illegal in the United States and most European countries.

The code of conduct is enforced by the Elders in a tradition that is known as the “Black Veil.” “The Black Veil” is comprised of eight ethical tenets of which the first and most important is to keep sanguine secrets confidential among members. The philosophy of the Black Veil includes secrecy, vampyre names, individuality, honor thy blood, respect, courtesy, and safety of the blood. Punishment entails excommunication from a clan for various lengths of time, according to the violation. It is significant to mention that these tenets only apply to the Sanguinarium and that there are many different sects and belief systems among vampires who are not part of this particular fellowship.

Some clans partake of blood drinking and bloodletting. A group of members who imbibe blood are referred to as a “feeding circle” and as opposed to media depictions they do not bite each other on the neck but usually use razor blades to make cuts into each other’s bodies and suck the blood from those cuts. Again it is important to mention that not all members of the Sanguinarium engage in this practice. Other popular customs include fetishism, sadomasochism and bondage & discipline sexual activities. This is inspired by the myth of the Vampyre as hunter. Participants are referred to as Regnant (master) and Thrall (slave); this involves an aspect of Vampyre magick termed “True Name” which is a variation on the sadomasochism safety word.

The Vampyre Scene is a serious and growing phenomenon that holds gatherings where thousands of Vampyres attend. The largest gathering is called “Endless Night” and is held in New Orleans throughout Halloween. Equivalent European gatherings include Vampyria and the Whitby Vampire Festival.

The sacrificial aesthetic is thriving in the form of this new culture. From a sociological perspective, when a group of people participate in a shared aesthetic in which identity and status are organized around a style that is distinguishable from the dominant culture it is referred to as a subculture. The Vampire subculture exists in opposition to the fundamental Judeo-Christian principles of mainstream Western Society. Vampyres pride themselves on practicing the antithesis of Christian ethics and this is apparent in the ritualized sexual and violent activities that permeate their interactions.

The Festivals

Vampyres frequently attend Fetish Scene and Body Scene Clubs, which involve public sadomasochistic activities. It is at the numerous “Scene” clubs where the worlds of body mutilation, piercing, performance art, blood rituals, tattooing, and all forms of bondage and violent sexual activity converge. The Fetish Scene refers to clubs where fetish, sadomasochism and bondage & discipline are promoted and The Body Art Scene refers to body piercing, tattooing, modern primitives, and so on. Performance artists who use blood attend and perform at all of these venues. These Scenes, which are all fundamentally based on violent aesthetics, are not mutually exclusive and usually overlap. The names of these clubs often appropriately reference historical predecessors. For example, a popular Fetish Club in Brisbane and Townsville Australia is called “The Hellfire Club.” In eighteenth- and nineteenth-century England, Hell Fire Clubs referred to places known for raunchy sexual and reckless excitement, where hedonistic and occult activities were prominent. The original Hellfire Club was founded by Francis Sashwood in 1751 when he converted an Abbey into a cult headquarters by decorating in Gothic style and pagan statuary.

It was rumored that these clubs were linked to Satanism and Witchcraft. Keeping with tradition, the contemporary Australian Hell Fire Club provides its members with an assortment of specially designed rooms, furniture, and devices in which they can imaginatively experience pain/pleasure. [images/information “Hellfire Club Information Page” <http://www.hellfireclub.com.au/intro.html>] One of the most infamous clubs in London today is appropriately named “Torture Garden.” Founded in 1990, it is currently Europe’s largest Fetish/Body Art club. Its average attendance is 600-800 people with special events attracting as many as 2000 and it claims to be a major pioneer in the fetish/body art phenomenon. It is a combination of a fetish, S/M, body art, Modern Primitives, straight, gay, performance art, body ritual, fashion, techno/industrial/atmospheric music, multimedia, and cyberspace club. The concept of Torture Garden may initially be difficult to accept, as it encompasses the most extreme manifestations of body piercing, mutilation, and ritual uses of blood in Western culture. [images/information “Torture Garden”

<http://torturegarden.com>] Besides dressing in the latest leather sadomasochism designs, original accessories include catheter bags filled with blood and urine, medical bags filled with blood, and air hoses when necessary. There is every imaginable form of mask, chain, whip, and sometimes even chainsaws and blowtorches are part of the festivities. The Torture Garden also contains a manifesto that clearly demonstrates the anomalous nature of fetish clubs. Their manifesto boasts:

Torture Garden remains the most radical and alternative club, always on the cutting edge of the latest underground subculture . . . Torture Garden is a world where the bizarre, strange and dreamlike become normal . . . Torture Garden is the apotheosis of all antinomies . . . The dissolution of all oppositions . . . As you mutate with Torture Garden, you reach new peaks of pleasure and eroticism and freed from the shackles of social convention . . . Torture Garden breaks taboos . . . Torture Garden has established an international reputation for encouraging artistic experimentation and transgression . . . (43)

This is practically a textbook definition of ancient festivals in which the deliberate violation of established laws occurred and where scandalous behavior was temporarily acceptable. It also exemplifies Bataille’s concept of “orgy” in which he contends that “In the orgy the celebration progresses with the overwhelming force that usually brushes all bonds aside. In itself the feast is a denial of the limits set on life by work, but the orgy turns everything upside down . . . These excesses derive

their most acute significance from the ancient connection between sensual pleasure and religious exaltation.”⁽⁴⁴⁾ In Bataille’s philosophy of eroticism he claims that the origin of orgy evolves from the existence of taboos which were set up to prevent murder and sexual violence and that these taboos shape the nature of transgression. Essentially the decadent nature of such clubs as the Torture Garden evolved directly from the violence and sexual prohibitions in Western culture. The manifesto of the club also claims, “At the Torture Garden the boundary between audience and performer disappears.”⁽⁴⁵⁾ The crucial difference between performance artists who enact blood rituals and activity at the various “Scenes” is that audience participation now takes place. That is the significant criterion, which dissolves the line between the aesthetic and the religious, taboo and transgression, imagination and reality.

Allowing for the fact that the different “Scene” clubs are analogous to festivals, from a Girardian perspective they still do not resolve the problem of the sacrificial crisis. According to Girard “The fundamental purpose of the festival is to set the stage for a sacrificial act that marks at once the climax and the termination of the festivities.”⁽⁴⁶⁾ He also claims that, “Festivals are based on the assumption that there is a direct link between the sacrificial crisis and its resolution.”⁽⁴⁷⁾ The problem of Vampyre culture is that it exists in a perpetual state of sacrificial crisis. Without any reference to a surrogate victim and any predominant ritualistic structure it is the epitome of a failing society that has reverted back to its violent origins. Activities in these Vampyre Havens and Fetish Clubs exemplify the concept of a deritualized festival. Girard states in reference to the festivals of failing societies “Instead of holding violence in check, the ceremonies inaugurate a new cycle of revenge. By a process of inversion that can befall all rites and that we have already had occasion to observe in the case of sacrificial rites, the festival ceases to function as a preventive measure and lends its support to the forces of destruction.”⁽⁴⁸⁾ Bataille’s philosophy supports this view: “Orgiastic eroticism is by nature a dangerous excess whose explosive contagion is an indiscriminate threat to all sides of life.”⁽⁴⁹⁾

The Sacrifice

Unfortunately, the violence that occurs in these clubs will only continue to escalate until ritual meaning is restored. The logical resolution of the sacrificial crisis as manifested in the various “Scenes” is the sacrifice of an original victim in order to reestablish meaning to future surrogate victims. It is at this point that the line of demarcation between performance and reality collapses and ritual violence erupts into what is designated occult murder. One example is a self-styled vampire clan in Kentucky who were arrested on November 29, 1996 for the murder of a Florida couple. This incident has been sensationalized in books, television, interviews and

an HBO special entitled “Vampire Murders.” [images/article “Court TV Verdicts: Florida v. Ferrell”<http://www.courttv.com./verdicts/vampire.html>] Sixteen-year-old Rodrick Justin Ferrell was the leader of a vampire clan comprising four other teenagers in which rituals included cutting each other’s arms with razors and sucking the blood. On the day of the murders, Heather Wendorf, the daughter of the victims, participated in the “embracement ritual” with Ferrell and “crossed over” into the clan by drinking each other’s blood in a cemetery. Ferrell then became her sire. That evening Rod Ferrell bludgeoned Richard and Naoma Wendorf to death with a crowbar in their Florida home. The letter “V” was burned into their bodies, symbolizing Rod whose vampire name was “Vassago.” Smaller burns on each side of the “V” represented the other members of the clan. After pleading guilty to armed burglary, armed robbery, and two counts of first-degree murder, Ferrell was sentenced to death in Florida’s electric chair on February 27, 1998. He is the youngest person on Florida’s death row. Another teenage clan member, Howard Scott Anderson, is serving life in prison after pleading guilty to participating as Rod’s principal accessory in the double murder. Anderson’s plea bargain saved him from the electric chair. Ferrell’s attorneys portrayed him as a troubled youth addicted to drugs and sexually abused by relatives. He became involved with Vampires through the role-playing game “Vampire: The Masquerade” and he was initiated into the scene by an older teenager Steven Murphy (vampire name Jaden) who subsequently testified at the trial that:

he initiated Rod into vampirism during a crossing-over ceremony in a Murray (Kentucky) cemetery that involved slashing their arms and sharing each other’s blood, followed by a lengthy period of meditation. As the senior Vampire who initiated Rod, Murphy said he became the younger boy’s sire and was responsible for his behavior. And although he explained the rules of vampire conduct to Rod, the witness said, his protégé violated those principles when he organized his own band of followers . . . The Wendorf Murders were not vampiric, Murphy explained, because Rod didn’t bleed the bodies. “There was no bloodletting. He did not take from them.”[\(50\)](#)

This contradicted his earlier testimony that vampires don’t kill and are expected to show the highest admiration for life. If vampires do not kill there would not be any knowledge of a distinctive vampiric modus operandi. It came to detectives’ attention through John Goodman (vampire name Damien), a close friend of Rod’s, that his motivation for the murders was that he was “possessed with the idea of

opening the gates to Hell, which meant that he would have to kill a large, large number of people in order to consume their souls. By doing this, Ferrell believed he would obtain super powers.”⁽⁵¹⁾ Psychological justifications aside, Rod Ferrell’s immersion into the occult clearly demonstrates that he was thinking in religious conceptions of sacrificial murder. This case is just one of many that entail blood rituals and murder. It is simpler to relegate these crimes to aberrant behavior than to imagine that we are living in a sacrificial climate.

Occult groups that practice ritual murder have an authentic understanding of the sacred nature of violence. You do not have to convince Vampyres or Satanists that humans are violent by nature; as living examples of Girardian theory, they fundamentally comprehend this. This provides an explanation as to why the Elders and High Priests of these groups show no remorse for their killings. The reason why many of their followers recant is that they have been reindoctrinated into mainstream ideology and subsequently view their actions as crimes as opposed to sacrifice. It is dangerous to view occult criminal actions from a strictly psychological perspective that tends to categorize them as psychopathologies; this relative assumption gives the false impression that these are not logical, rational choices. It perpetuates the denial of occult crime and relegates the offender to the only socially comprehensible category, “the irrational other.” Contemporary acts of inexplicable sacred violence are more effectively understood in what I refer to as “ritual anachronisms,” which are violent actions that are inappropriate to, or not adapted to, the value system that they are enacted in. No matter how bizarre a murder may appear, it can always be situated as acceptable in some historical era or distant culture. Occult crimes are the natural result of the escalation of violent aesthetics that dispute moral values. Blood Art, Vampyre Culture, The Fetish Scene literally set the ritual stage for sacrifice. Ritual murder is the epitome of the sacrificial aesthetic freed from ethical responsibility to society. What begins as artists experimenting with the use of blood and mutilation as a form of personal transformation escalates to an entire culture founded on the principles of a dark mythology manifested in orgiastic ritual. Once blood rituals turn participatory and ideologically justify sacrifice, idolatry is achieved.

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