

For the seminal 2003 production of Franko B's performance, *I Miss You* (1999-2005), the Turbine Hall of the Tate Modern gallery on London's South Bank was transformed into a catwalk. The audience sat on either side of a long path of white fabric, which was illuminated with floor-level fluorescent lights, as Franko B — naked, painted white from head to toe and bleeding from cannulas inserted at the creases of his elbows — walked calmly up and down, his blood splashing onto the floor beneath him. Photographers placed at the end of the catwalk snapped his image, just as they might photograph models in a real fashion show. The sound of their cameras flashing was the only noise that punctuated the silence in the gallery.

In the comments thread of a YouTube video documenting this event viewers express confusion and outrage at the fact the work is labelled 'art' and performed in a gallery space. 'I don't see how this is a form of art', writes one woman, 'he violates his body and that's [sic] called art?' While another simply asks 'What is exactly his talent????' These kinds of questions, which express concern about the legitimacy of seemingly unconventional performance works, especially those that include bodily fluids, nudity and explicit references to sex, are common. Watching a person bleed, masturbate or perform acts of exertion in front of you is not easy — indeed, it is not supposed to be easy. Body-based works that engage these tactics are deliberately confrontational, they require the audience to acknowledge the live body of the performer and to question the social taboos that control how we use and understand our bodies. As Franko B himself has said, in an interview with theatre scholar Dominic Johnson, 'I want people to be open, to stay open, to try and have access to things that are not always easy to stomach'. In what follows, I trace the origins of this kind of

‘confrontational’ performance art work — offering a context and a historical frame through which to understand Franko B’s art.

Franko B’s work exists in a category most commonly called ‘Live Art’ (although it has also been referred to as ‘performance art’ and simply ‘performance’). Live Art is a term that covers a wide range of practices and is therefore difficult to define simply. It emerges from the methods of artists working in the twentieth century, who rejected art objects such as paintings and sculptures and turned instead to the human body and the mundane objects of everyday life as the canvas for their practice. Typically, such works blur the boundaries that exist between art forms, merging performance with fine art, sculpture, dance and film in order to produce what artist and scholar Dick Higgins called ‘intermedial’ art works.

In his 1966 essay ‘Intermedia’, Higgins mentions a number of twentieth-century artworks that challenged the established distinctions between disciplines, which we might think of as laying the foundations for contemporary Live Art. These included Marcel Duchamp’s ‘ready-mades’ — found, manufactured objects modified and presented as art, including his famous *Fountain* (1917), a urinal displayed at the Society of Independent Artists annual exhibition; and Allan Kaprow’s ‘Happenings’, where audiences were invited to participate in events in unusual ways — such as *Women Licking Jam Off a Car* (1964). For Higgins, ‘intermedial’ works served as a means of innovating art, which he believed had become stagnant in a time where ‘rigid categories’ were ‘absolutely irrelevant’. Throughout the late twentieth and into the twenty-first century, artists including Marina Abramovic, Annie Sprinkle, Stelarc and Bobby Baker continued to work at the intersection of forms, using their bodies to

challenge and transform what 'art' might be and ultimately creating Live Art as a distinct field. As Higgins wrote, traditional ways of receiving artworks, such as viewing a painting in a gallery, had eventually become insufficient for addressing social problems, as they did not 'allow of any sense of dialogue'.

The confrontational nature of much contemporary body-based Live Art practice centres around the concept of dialogue. Many artists who use their bodies to perform explicit, perhaps even offensive, acts do so in order to provoke conversation among their audiences about difficult issues. These are political works. Often the artists are gay and feminist practitioners who want to push the boundaries of what is acceptable, and explore how power is given and taken from their bodies by the wider culture. For example, in her show *Splat!* (2013), feminist performance artist The Famous Lauren Barri Holstein urinates on stage and pulls knives, food and toys from her vagina to the sound of pop music and power-ballads. She has argued that by explicitly presenting her body to the audience, she is confronting the eroticisation of women's bodies more widely, speaking to the sexual ways that pop stars such as Katy Perry, Britney Spears and Beyoncé are made to perform in service of their careers. Meanwhile, Ron Athey, a homosexual, HIV positive artist who is well known for his blood-letting performances, draws attention to the ways in which the body is explicitly presented in religious literature by referencing saints, martyrs and the crucifixion of Christ in his works. Athey's performances use needles, scalpels and hooks and always appear to be in conversation with his own health, prompting us to consider how the HIV positive body is framed in society at large.

Franko B's *Milk and Blood*, performed in Leeds at the end of 2016, sees the artist use the medium of boxing to investigate issues of pain, suffering, endurance, ecstasy and overcoming adversity. The duel between Franko and the gold punch bag, which slowly leaks milk as he spars with it, speaks back to and builds upon the heritage of Live Art practice I describe above. In the writings below, the event in Leeds is explored in more detail, with reflections by writers, an interview with Franko B and some of his own writing. What is important to bear in mind, when considering Franko B's practice, is that his work, like all art, is ultimately about making sense of the human condition. In the live interaction between audience and artist, Live Art performance works are often able to reveal something hidden, to make poetic sense of or ask questions about the world at large — even when they appear difficult, or hard to understand. As Franko B argues, 'It might only be performance art but it is really important because it moves people, it shows people and is expressed. It's cathartic to a certain degree but the point is beyond that, to me what [artists] do is a contribution to the society they live in'.

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