DISCOURSES ON VIOLENCE IN CONTEMPORARY EUROPEAN MUSEUMS

Florina CODREANU, Assistant Professor, PhD, Technical University of Cluj-Napoca

Abstract: The interdisciplinary approach of contemporary violence through the medium of different artistic events hosted in the last two decades by renowned European museums proves to be in full expansion. Despite the eclecticism dominating the socio-historical research into the discourse of violence, there is a specific relation between museum art and violence that has to be addressed on an individualized basis of research. Along the present study questions about the aesthetics of violence, horror and pain – openly favoured by contemporary art and the impact of various theories (violence within systems of thought) upon the recent artistic production (violence within the context of creation) are to be discussed at length. At the same time, the nature of violence employed by the museum exhibitions at question takes a lead role in defining the discourses on violence, from gender violence to war violence.

Keywords: violent art, theory, aestheticization, museum, discourse

1. Institutionalised Violence

Beginning with the controversial exhibition entitled *Sensation* (1997) at Royal Academy of Art from London the public's perception on art has drastically changed. Art was no more a source of delight and wonder, but a disturbing incentive for reflection on social and political issues. The implied violence was acknowledged by both the organisers and the media as such: "There will be works of art on display in the Sensation exhibition which some people may find distasteful. Parents should exercise their judgment in bringing their children to the exhibition. One gallery will not be open to those under the age of 18" (Royal Academy), "gory images of dismembered limbs and explicit pornography" (BBC) or artworks on show "may cause shock, vomiting, confusion, panic, euphoria and anxiety" (Brooklyn Museum, New York). With the exception of Berlin Hamburger Bahnhof museum, all the intended museums for the exhibition on tour have confronted with the public's criticism and vandalism turned against the dissatisfying exhibits. However, if we look back on art history the phenomenon of artistic expression of violence received with violence is not a novelty in the field. The novelty consists in displaying these forms of art in renowned and honoured institutions, which enjoy partial funding from the state.

Getting beyond this key-exhibition that was inaugurated in the UK at the end of the nineties, there have been other related exhibitions with reference to violence in Germany on *Blood: Perspectives on Art, Power, Politics and Pathology* at Mak Frankfurt and Schirn Kunsthalle (2001-2002) and in France on death and vanity such as *Crime and Punishment* at Musée d'Orsay (2010) or *Vanitas from Caravaggio to Damien Hirst* at Musée Maillol (2010). Even though the latter exhibitions traced back the history of blood and death, without having an exclusive contemporary core or encountering violent resistance from the public, their

BDD-V464 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:42:33 UTC)

realisation has been gradually extending the public's expectations and sense of receptivity to contemporary matters.

Along with collective or thematic exhibitions, which are symptomatic of an increased interest in violence from an artistic standpoint, there are solo exhibitions that draw attention to provocative questions of our times. For instance, the German artist Johannes Wohnseifer explores the politics, history and time, within the exhibition *Emptiness and Violence* (2003) from Sprengel Museum Hanover and continues with another exhibition having a homonym title on the American land at New York (2008). In the meantime, the Yugoslav artist Sanja Iveković launches the exhibition *Sweet Violence* at MoMA, New York from a feminist activist position. In fact, the American and Canadian territories are very open to any European feminist exercise. The art militating against genre violence finds itself within two representative exhibitions, namely *Off the Beaten Path: Violence, Women and Art* (SUA) at New York and *Transformation by Fire: Women Overcoming Violence through Clay* (Canada) at Gardiner Museum from Toronto.

Contemporary art also does not neglect the violence promoted by the war state, old-established by the historical art from the end of eighteenth century in the spirit of French Revolution. War beauty and violence attractiveness are exploited in plenty of shock and identification images to such an extent that Wolfgang Muchitsch, the scientific director of Universalmuseum Joanneum, the oldest museum in Austria, was questioning the place of war in museums in a book edited by himself[1] and the museum power to avoid the transformation of violence, injury, death and trauma, into touristic objectives. Furthermore, by analysing the art on display from the last decades and its effect upon the public, the trivialisation of violence through aestheticization is no longer a danger as in the nineties, but rather an accomplished fact. In addition, the violent art goes through a period of creative and conceptual exhaustion that narrows down its chances of causing noticeable changes in the daily planning of life. Conformed to repetition and stereotypy, this art would no longer know the scandalous impact that used to ensure its notorious success.

2. New Aesthetics

After more than two millennia of preoccupations with the aesthetics of beauty, in which aesthetics was considered synonymous with a heighten sensitivity to beauty and good taste, during the nineteen century this philosophical status quo is going to be shaken up by the work of Karl Rosenkrantz, *Aesthetic of Ugliness* (1853) and brought to perfection later on by Umberto Eco's *On Ugliness* (2007). It is a matter of obviousness that the state of art is not going to be the same after the violation of the classical canons and the introduction of the category of the ugly in its field of interest.

Representing an epistemological milestone in the understanding of contemporary aesthetics, Tobin Siebers' contribution to art philosophy would clarify the intricate relation between the artist and the artistic production of the second part of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century. Without being perceived anymore as an artist in the traditional sense, the contemporary artist is merely a *janitor* at the scene of action or a

[1] W. Muchitsch (ed.): *Does War Belong in Museums? The Representation of Violence in Exhibitions*. Verlag, Bielefeld, 2013

BDD-V464 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:42:33 UTC)

reporter of the ongoing event: *send to the scene of a crime to record the violence and confusion and beauty of human effort*[2]. Always based on human conflict, Siebers' concept of "new art" makes human involvement mandatory and problematic at the same time. Since the main art elements originated in the human body[3], the violence within cannot escape art practice.

Once the praise for absolute beauty (both in its physical and spiritual form) had stopped, the broken beauty took over and disability became a key source of aesthetic appreciation, especially in reference to Nazi art that used to promote bombastically the human perfection and bodily integrity. Consequently, self-defacement[4] and self-amputation are acts discussed in detail by the aesthetics of disability or the aesthetics of human disqualification, wherein aesthetics itself represents an exchange between different bodies: *Aesthetics studies the way that some bodies make other bodies feel*[5]. From this point on the aesthetics of violence is not only implied, but also reliable to theorisation.

Even though the first trace of violence is to be found explicitly in medieval representations of Christic sacrifice and suffering, the aesthetic thought of the time does not accept it as such, but in the light of religious education performed by the anonymous artist that is paid either by a prominent secular patron, or by a powerful clerical figure. Experienced by means of the sense (Baumgarten) or the judgement (Kant) or both (Schiller), the category of beauty underwent a very long process of transformations until it gave way to its gainsayer, the ugly. After 1800, philosophy of art – the way aesthetics had been named – brought together the philosophical inquiries of Schelling, Schlegel brothers, Hegel and Schopenhauer. The latter showed that the intrusion of utility or politics should ruin the state of beauty, exactly what happened with the modern and mainly contemporary aesthetics.

At the dawn of the twentieth century, a dramatic shift in art and aesthetics deflected the entire field from the unilateral category of beauty towards a broadened scope and new aesthetics. From aesthetic realism that turned reality itself into an aesthetic projection to postmodern aesthetics that failed to define themselves coherently, many new aesthetic tendencies emerged on a continuous basis. Art and society became directly related, same as art and psychoanalysis, not to mention the anti-aesthetics or *kalliphobia*. However, the field of experimental aesthetics is not a realisation of the twentieth century, as it may seem, but of the ninetieth century through the work of the psychologist and philosopher Gustav Theodor Fechner. Undeniably, human aesthetic preferences have evolved along with the surroundings, the landscapes and the living conditions; that is why applied aesthetics are nowadays possible.

The aesthetic applications are disciplinary as well as thematic, and in the second, the category of violence conquered a privileged place given its full exposure not only in the work of art, but also in the events of daily life (death, destruction, terror, injustice, natural catastrophes, bomb attacks, arsons and so on), which affect and influence the artistic creation. Thus, contemporary art is in a great measure the result of exterior agency and the artistic

[2] Tobin Siebers, *The New* Art, in *The Body Aesthetic. From Fine Art to Body Modification*. Edited by Tobin Siebers. The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, p. 217
[3] *Ibidem*, p. 239: *Human blood is the first paint, human skin, the first canvas, human skeleton, the first sculpture, human lament, the first poetry, human cadaver, our first and only object.*
[4] See the performance *Hollywood Halloween* (1977) by Paul McCarthy
[5] Tobin Siebers: *Disability Aesthetics.* The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2010, p. 25

BDD-V464 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:42:33 UTC)

vision has internalised slowly and forcefully that exterior. The emotional impact on the artist is self-evident and only the direct or indirect transcription of the real events can relate to artistic value. The main question that arises is whether the artist is a prisoner of his own present and whether the contemporary anti-artist promotes creation or destruction. Moreover, the violent art is susceptible to describe an artistic movement in the absence of a certain similitude between violent representations and in the absence of a coherent formalism.

The aestheticization of violence by printed media during militancy in sensational reports or by television in "tableaux vivants" challenge art autonomy and the art work function as momentary threads. The ancient contradiction between the dangers of aestheticization leading to the assimilation of art with the ordinary life (Plato) and the benefits of aestheticization through catharsis leading to cure and redemption (Aristotle) holds good still in the present day.

3. From Theory to Art Practice

As far as the theoretical approach is concerned, the state of research into violence studies is fundamentally eclectic, namely methods, ideas and even personal beliefs or credos coexist in an inoperative manner for the fluent study of violence within art history, liable to persist along the next decades. Nevertheless, there are yet two important questions to address, firstly why the aesthetics of violence enjoys a privileged position in the field and secondly if there is any weight of these theories upon the artistic production. In fact, exactly the proliferation of violence puts the theory in difficulty or makes it more impossible than ever.

If we were to draw the picture of these theories within the socio-humanistic milieu, three main categories would come forth. The first theoretical attitude is owed to monocausal theories in which theory precedes violence with a Structuralist frame of mind (R. Girard, W. Burkert, M. Maffesoli). The second one is based on reflective theories that approach violence in an analytical, dialectical and discursive manner (H. Arendt, W. Benjamin, R. Aron, E. Fromm). Last but not least, the theoretical resistance and detheorisation of violence from the contemporary mainstream is caused by the prevalence of case studies.

Language, art, cinematography, music, sport and dance, they are all contaminated or imbued with violence. Between aestheticization and intellectualization, violent art in Fraser's own terms is conditioned by one remaining principle that guarantees its quality: *violence that stays disturbing however often one returns to it*[6]. This shock value brings into discussion the distinction operated between art as protest (reactionary) and art as manifesto (within), both having a revolutionary and daring colour in connection to violence. Either active or passive, violence in art is not easy and never fun, not even when its value is hyperbolised or especially because of that. After art has conquered its physicality, it would be inexplicable not to make use of it in its forms of expression. Furthermore, the imminent conflicts between society and human being, between politics and the same human being etc. have to find a way out of the elusiveness into discourse since the humankind cannot survive doubtfulness and ambiguity to all eternity.

[6] John Fraser: *Violence in the Arts*. Cambridge University Press, Cambridge • London • New York • Melbourne, p. 50

BDD-V464 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:42:33 UTC)

Institutionalised violence is not pure violence that can escape the tyranny of intellectualization. In addition, there is not any mark of equality, as one might believe, between violent art and reality, between artistic production and daily life, each of them being endowed with a different time of realisation and with different stake and purpose. Though, in Baudrillard's radical interpretation the image (be it artistic image) substitutes for the real event by use of discourse and the whole world is turned into a chain of images by complete aestheticization and cosmopolitan spectacularization. In his view, nothing can escape the tyranny of the image, but from a more balanced perspective the image, and more precisely artistic image, takes time and effort to emerge and the engaged violence functions as an alarm signal for the untold.

Although Sadeanism (discussion of Sade) and Freudianism made a fabulous career along modernity by contracting a fruitful collaboration with the surrealists, all eager to explore the unconscious dimension of reality and interpret its signs, the contemporary art is rather reluctant to show any direct affiliation to theory. Probably, that is because most parties consider theory itself obsolete whereas art plays the role of living human expression. Taking into account genre, forms, conventions and patterns, violent art as such acknowledges not only the value of violence, but also the value and emergency of its discourses: *violence is usually the cutting edge of ideas and ideologies… ideas connect with the physical world, the world in which violences occur*[7]. As sharpener of judgement, violence in art evens up the violence from the real life and unsettles the hypocrisy that provokes violence, as Hannah Arendt would say.

In point of future, the approaches that are more liable to offer answers nowadays seem to be those driven up from art practice towards theory and in this respect the book of Anthony Julius' *Transgressions*[8] is illustrative of that matter. The author managed to build up the theory and history of transgressive art from Manet to contemporary artists such as Marcel Duchamp, the Chapman brothers, Andres Serrano, Damien Hirst, Gilbert & George, Paul McCarthy, Jeff Koons, Hans Haacke, and Anselm Kiefer. The journey is full of anxiety as any exhibition tour of a kind.

4. Conclusions

Why do we need violent art in the first place would ask any ordinary visitor of a contemporary museum. It is not comfortable, and by no means comforting, it is just nose rubbing in a world of tremendous competition for attention. We see horror and pain everywhere, in the hospitals, on the streets, in the war theatres across the globe, in our day-to-day life and on the news, so why should we see them at the museum, too. Any answer to such a dilemma does not come easy. All these are true with one exception: art does not borrow or imitate the ubiquitous violence available in reality, but embraces it in its own way in order to explain its occurrence, debunk its mechanism and reveal its limits.

What the public still fails to acknowledge is that contemporary art is more preoccupied with the moral/ity than ever, and even the self-proclaimed consumerism attached to it is just a cynical indirect way of showing the lack of standards and interest in morality of the public.

[7] *Ibidem*, p. 162
[8] Anthony Julius: *Transgresiuni. Ofensele artei*. Traducere de Tania Siperco. Vellant, Bucureşti, 2008

BDD-V464 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:42:33 UTC)

The question is then if undesirable images can turn a public upside-down and change its moral barometer without trivializing the same images by showing them repetitively. The field of creation, needless to say, like any other field of work, is not exempted from the risk factor and art's main risk is not to send its message across.

If violent art continues to be interpreted as a mere receptacle for stringent historical and social realities, it is not only art's fault, but also the interpreter's fault. Above all, the public's role has diversified from humble witness to moral creditor of a given piece of art, being entitled the power to dismiss what he considers art for violence's sake and not art for art's sake – as one does not cease to expect even within the multiple frames of contemporary aesthetics.

Bibliography

Aftershock: conflict, violence, and resolution in contemporary art. Sainsbury Centre for Visual Arts, 2007

Beauty, Violence, Representation. Lisa Dickson (Editor), Maryna Romanets (Editor). Routledge, 2013

Biesenbach, Klaus: *Into Me/ Out of Me*. Hatje Cantz Verlag, Germany, 2007

Body Parts. Critical Exploration in Corporeality. Edited by Christopher E. Forth and Ivan Crozier. Lexington Books, Lanham · Boulder · New York · Toronto · Oxford, 2005

D'Alleva, Anne: *Méthodes & Théories de l'Histoire de l'Art*. Traduction par Aude Cirier. Thalia Édition, Paris, 2006

Elkins, James: *Pictures of the Body. Pain and Metamorphosis*. Stanford University Press, Stanford California, 1999

Fraser, John: *Violence in the Arts* (Illustrated edition). Cambridge University Press, Cambridge • London • New York • Melbourne, 1976

Gevers, Ine/ the authors: *Difference on display. Diversity in Art, Science and Society*. NAi Publishers, Niet Normaal Foundation, Rotterdam, 2009

Gordon, Mark: *Contemporary Europe. Art Guide to Europe*. Hatje Cantz Verlag, 2009/2010

http://www.artcyclopedia.com/museums-int.html

Julius, Anthony: *Transgresiuni. Ofensele artei*. Traducere de Tania Siperco. Vellant, Bucureşti, 2008

Kuppers, Petra: *The Scar of Visibility. Medical Performances and Contemporary Art*. University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis • London, 2007

Langston, Richard: *Visions of Violence – German Avant-Gardes After Fascism*. Northwestern University Press**,** 2007

Muchitsch, Wolfgang (ed.): *Does War Belong in Museums? The Representation of Violence in Exhibitions*. Verlag, Bielefeld, 2013

Schwörer, Eva-Catharina: *Violence in the arts*. GRIN Verlag, 2010

Siebers, Tobin: *The Return to Ritual – Violence and Art in the Media Age*. University of Michigan. Journal for Cultural and Religious Theory. Volume 5. No. 1 December 2003, p. 9-33 (PURL: http://www.jcrt.org/archives/05.1/siebers.pdf)

BDD-V464 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:42:33 UTC)

The Body Aesthetic. From Fine Art to Body Modification. Edited by Tobin Siebers. The University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, 2000
The Culture of Violence. By James M Cain, Dr. Henry Jenkins, Helaine Posner. University Gallery/University of Massachusetts, Amherst, 2002
World of Wonder: *Is Bad Art for Bad People?* [Videorecording] UK TX Master, 2006

BDD-V464 © 2013 Arhipelag XXI Press
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.42 (2026-11-15 20:42:33 UTC)