



Performance Anxiety – the Art of Catharsis (2008)

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Introduction

My artistic practice began, in 2004, with a desire for catharsis. Much of my work since has been concerned with the articulation of that desire and my attempts to achieve it through the process of making art. Although the themes in my work have become more complex over the last four years, that initial attraction to catharsis has endured. This has led me to explore not only the role of catharsis in the work of other artists but also the history and differing theories of catharsis.

One of the most well-known and widely argued theories on catharsis is laid out by Aristotle. In *The Poetics*, he describes the genre of tragedy as “achieving through pity and fear the catharsis of such emotions.” However, there is no further discussion or explanation of the term “catharsis” in the work. Some clues as to the original meaning may be inferred from the use of the term in larger Greek society where it is associated with ritual purifications, medical purges and cleansing of the body and mind to restore balance.^[1] This idea of the restorative or healing value of catharsis is based on Aristotle’s view of human virtue as a mean between extremes.

Unlike Plato who, in *The Republic*, criticises poetry for its ability to arouse certain emotions, such as pity and fear, which he argues inhibit a man’s ability to think rationally,^[2] Aristotle was not afraid that art would subvert rationality. Emotions, for Aristotle, are not intrinsically dubious. Instead he argued that good art should elicit responses in which these psychological and emotional elements were balanced and appropriate. When appropriately balanced and focused emotions are a proper and vital aspect of human existence and our response to the world. Aristotle felt that tragedy could provoke an intense, yet justifiable, emotional response in its audience and thereby effect a purifying of their cognitive and emotional state by purging any unhealthy or corrupted aspects.^[3]

In contrast to Aristotle’s communal and theatrically based hypothesis of catharsis Freud’s psychoanalytic method also aims to restore emotional balance, this time for an individual subject rather than a group. Freud’s practice consists of a “talking-cure” whereby the patient or analysand verbalises their thoughts, which are then interpreted by the analyst with the aim of discovering the unconscious conflicts causing their symptoms.

Freud stated that talking about a painful experience required a patient to call to mind the original traumatic situation and allowed them, through verbal and non-verbal means, to express the emotions they could not, or would not, release at the time. He observed that disturbances disappeared when the patient was able to talk about their painful experiences while at the same time expressing all the appropriate emotions. This expression of emotion was fundamental to the process of catharsis. The patient is given a second chance, in a therapeutic situation, to produce all the reactions which were denied them in the original, traumatic circumstances.^[4]

Most people are aware of the stereotype of the suffering artist, epitomised by Vincent Van Gogh, who makes work to express, or salve, their painful existence. There is a belief that perhaps the process of making art, as distinct from art therapy, will lead to some form of healing. In this paper I will discuss how artists have engaged with concepts of catharsis in their work, firstly looking at artists who make work to experience catharsis. In the second chapter I will address artists who make work to provoke a cathartic experience in their audience. In the final chapter I focus on artists who make reference to religious and spiritual concepts and whose work engages with ideas of transcendence. In each chapter I will compare the place that catharsis holds in my own work, with that of the artists discussed.

Chapter 1 – Making art to experience catharsis

A curative value has been attributed to art more than once in its history, although the idea has often been viewed with skepticism. Through the course of my research I have investigated two artists, Louise Bourgeois and Bas Jan Ader, whose work I believed could be interpreted as a personal search for healing. In this section their work will be discussed in relation to ideas of catharsis, and alongside these examples I will compare my own early attempts to experience catharsis through the process of making art.

The details of Louise Bourgeois’ fractious home life are well-known by now. She was raised by genteel tapestry restorers, her robust and boisterous father and her frail but stoic mother. The entry of an English tutor, who became her father’s mistress, led to an awful tension in her household that has permeated much

of her work since. In the essay *The Personal Effects of a Woman with no Secrets* Louise Neri quotes Bourgeois as saying, "All my work of the last fifty years, all my subjects, have found their inspiration in my childhood."^[5]

Spider 1997, consists of one of Bourgeois large black spiders balancing over a cell containing scraps of old tapestry and an armchair. The spider embodies both her mother's strength and fragility. It guards its eggs jealously and towers over the small cell below it, but the thin, fluid legs belie the spider's precarious position. The material covering the walls of the cell relates to her mother's familiar activity. It also forms a room beneath the spider, complete with armchair, where one can retreat to safety, as if in the mother's lap.

Precious Liquids 1992, is a large circular wooden structure. There is a door on either side and a large loop of metal runs around the outside with the words "Art is a guaranty of sanity" engraved on it. Inside the structure a large black coat hangs above two wooden spheres. The coat covers a smaller garment with the words "merci-mercy" embroidered on it. The room also contains a bed flanked on either side by metal stands brandishing an assortment of glass shapes. The large black coat symbolises the oppressive authority of the father but is tempered somewhat by its protective relationship to the small dress. The linguistic pun embroidered on the dress suggests contradictory feelings of gratitude and pity for the "Great Extravagant Show-Off". The glass represents for Bourgeois the muscles and their relationship to the emotions, organic and unstable. She talks about the tensing and relaxation of muscles in relation to the secretion of precious liquid, through weeping at the end of suffering or perspiration from a state of apprehension. She links this concept to the development of the little girl into an adult who finally discovers passion rather than terror, for whom "the secretion of fluids can be intensely pleasurable."^[6] The engraving, "Art is a guaranty of sanity", on the outside of this work is a clue as to the position art seems to hold in Bourgeois' life. Whether art prevents her from losing her sanity altogether or helps her to regain it once lost remains unclear. Perhaps by reworking the details of her tempestuous childhood she feels she can better understand what happened and the impact it had on her.^[7]

Louise Bourgeois' work seems intimately involved with her own personal history sometimes to the exclusion of everything else. Bas Jan Ader's largely performative practice is in some ways more universal, but is nonetheless inspired and informed by his tragic childhood.

Ader was named after his father and was expected to follow in his footsteps by becoming a minister in the church. But when Bas Jan was only two years old his father was arrested, and later executed by firing squad, for his participation in the resistance movement responsible for helping Jewish families to hide from the Nazis. This traumatic event, along with his mother's book about the war years, have informed many of the themes in Ader's work.^[8]

The majority of Ader's work involve staged 'falls' documented through black and white, silent films and selected photographs. *Fall 1, Los Angeles 1970*, shows Ader sitting on a chair on the roof of his house before toppling over, sliding down off the roof and into the garden. In *Fall 2, Amsterdam 1970*, Ader rides his bike alongside a canal before plunging into the water. For *Broken fall (organic), Amsterdamse Bos, Holland 1971*, Ader hung from the branch of a tree over a ditch until he could no longer maintain his grip and fell into the water close to the bank. As the son of two ministers, Ader would have been aware of the significance of the fall in the Bible. It is synonymous with ruination and failure: the fall of Jericho, the Fall of Satan, the Fall of Man. The concept of the fall had a more personal significance for Ader as well. In an interview in 1972 he said, "I have always been fascinated by the tragic. That is also contained in the act of falling; the fall is failure."^[9]

The work *Untitled (Sweden) 1971*, consists of two colour slide projections, of identical dimensions, projected side by side. The two images are of the same pine forest but with slight differences in each. In the left-hand image Bas Jan is standing beside a tree and in the right-hand image he is lying down; a few fallen trees lie alongside him. This is a continuation of his fall theme, albeit with a more direct reference to the execution of his father which took place in a forest. His mother's book reads, "The trees of the forest stood impassive like the pillars of a cathedral."^[10] Bas Jan's position beside the felled trees can be read as grieving and keeping vigil over his father's unmarked grave. There is in this action an echo of his family's wishes that he follow in his father's footsteps; perhaps Ader desired to join his father in the forest.

In Search of the Miraculous 1975, was a three part work to be exhibited jointly by the Claire S. Copley Gallery in Los Angeles and the Groninger Museum in the Netherlands. The first part of the work consisted of eighteen black and white photographs of a flash-lit search through Los Angeles at night, beginning in a canyon on the eastern edge of the city and ending at the ocean. On the photographs Ader had written the lyrics of the Coasters' 1957 hit "Searchin'". Along with the photographs, a student choir sang sea shanties to a piano accompaniment. The second part of the work was a solo trip across the Atlantic Ocean, from Cape Cod to Amsterdam. Ader left the harbour on 9 July, 1975 but never made it to Groningen. He was spotted once about sixty miles out to sea and again near the Azores, but after that he disappeared. Ader intended to complete the trilogy with a second nocturnal search, this time through Amsterdam and more sea-shanties at Groningen, along with the presentation of the second part of the work. His voyage bears a strong resemblance to a journey his father made to Jerusalem by bicycle, and the sea shanties reiterate his father's last piano concert before his departure. Found amongst his father's possessions were the layered lines of his farewell poem:

't Is niet om mij: 'k heb fel en taai gestreden
Bij dag noch nacht begeerd naar rust:
'k Heb in het lijden der gedoemden mee geleden,
en vaar nu heen naar verre, lichte kust'

'Tis not because of me: I have fought with the best
By day nor night desire no rest
I have suffered with the damned
And now sail to a bright and distant land.^[11]

Bas Jan's disappearance and presumed death is a morbid double of his father's own fall, but perhaps, as this poem suggests, there is a sense of release from suffering. Perhaps it really was a miracle.

Ader has argued that reading his work as related entirely to his father's death is too anecdotal.^[12] While surely the tragedy had a great influence on the imagery used in his work, Ader's understanding of the very human aspect of failure plays a large part in the conception of his artistic practice. My own work addresses a similarly universal need for catharsis, but from the point of view of a personal search for it. Unlike Bourgeois and Ader I do not cite or reference any specific traumatic events or situations which need to be exorcised. Instead I address a more general need for help and healing.

For the performance *Bed – Hair 2004*, I lay face down and unresponsive on a bed in the studio. My classmate Natalie Windsor stood next to me with scissors in her hand. I was covered up to my waist by a sheet, but otherwise naked. Natalie began by taking a handful of hair in one hand and then cutting it away with the scissors. She continued this process, often physically moving my head, until she had cut all my hair. This performance initially relates to the idea of violation. The bed is a place of security, a metaphor for the womb, but also for a private mental space. The transgressive act, reminiscent of Delilah's betrayal of Samson, takes place within this space. This is a psychical violation as well as a physical one and the ramifications, loss of strength and power, are two-fold. Conversely the shearing of hair could be seen in a positive light as a rite of passage. It signifies the movement from one state to another, a leaving behind of old things. The work is an attempt to move on from old ways, to heal old wounds.

In the performance *Black Hole 2005*, I sat cross-legged on the edge of my bed trying to control my breathing. Hidden between my legs was a cup of black paint. After my breathing had settled I dipped my fingers in the paint and began to rub the paint on my chest. This work was an attempt to define the centre of the awful gnawing feeling in my chest. It was an attempt to make visible the invisible reality of my situation. This idea of exposure is related to the Beuysian showing of wounds: by first acknowledging our sickness we can later be healed. The black paint signifies a corruption or hollowness, something wrong. The bed is the site of safety and healing, where I can expose my wounds and perhaps find a cure.

I was initially attracted to performance art through the work of Joseph Beuys, particularly his promise of healing through the power of art. Performance is strongly linked with concepts of the unconscious, through its connection to Freud's theory of sublimation. Each action is pregnant with both deliberate and unintended meanings. In both of these performances, documentation was a secondary concern. This changed as my practice progressed, but at the time the most important thing for me was the direct connection between the artist and the audience, the witnesses to my confession.

Chapter 2 – Making art to provide catharsis for others

Art's potential for effecting political and spiritual change was one focus of the modernist avant-garde vision of the heroic artist. While this view has become somewhat less fashionable in contemporary society, there are still artists whose work makes claims to explore or employ the curative powers of art. In this chapter, I will discuss the work of two artists, Lygia Clark and Joseph Beuys, whose work is intended to provoke a transformation in its audience. Lygia Clark attempted to effect this change in the individual through the active engagement of the audience, whereas Joseph Beuys was concerned with the treatment of society at large. I will also address my own artistic practice in relation to this area.

Lygia Clark's interest in the cathartic effects of art was inspired by her experiences with psychoanalysis. Through her artworks she strove to provide individual psychological healing for others and the return of a sensory completeness depleted by contemporary life. Clark proposed, through the audience's sensory experience of her work, a reintegration of the disjointed, contemporary "body of parts". This ideal, integrated state suggests a mind-body totality in which no one sense is given priority.

Clark experimented with different forms of sensual interaction, including tactile, kinetic, olfactory, and audio components in her work. These strategies were devised to break the normative relationship between the audience and the art object, and re-awaken the sensory capacities of her audience. *Mascaras sensoriais 1967*, from *La casa es el cuerpo* (The House is the Body) consists of cloth masks fitted with different devices to transform and provoke hearing, vision and sense of smell. Clark uses the cannibalistic metaphor of antropofagia, as proposed by the writer and critic Oswald de Andrade, to develop a radical proposition by which artist, object and spectator are simultaneously incorporated into one.^[13] It is through the transformation of the spectator from passive viewer to active participant that such a restoration or reconnection might take place. Clark's experiments began with group activities and therapy sessions, but ultimately she turned to an individual practice with one subject/patient interacting with her *Objet relacionais*. She called this therapeutic practice *Estructuracion del self – The Structuring of the Self*.

Her series *Nostalgia del cuerpo* (Nostalgia of the Body) is made up of objects that suggest a direct relationship to the body, that mimic the appearance or function of bodily organs. *Respire conmigo 1966*, is a rubber tube that, when stretched, emulates the sound of breathing. *Pedra e ar 1966*, consists of a plastic bag filled with air, with a stone resting in it. These works were made to be manipulated and experienced by the audience as objects with inherent qualities suggestive of major bodily functions, such as breathing and movement. Clark abstracts these physical traits in order that the viewer can experience them as sensorial phenomena related to an interior experience but presented as an exterior event. In this way the work proposes a re-familiarisation of the audience with their internal selves and represents a knowledge of the self that has been lost through modern existence.

Like Clark, Joseph Beuys believed in the healing power of art. "I realized the part the artist can play in indicating the trauma of the time and initiating a healing process."^[14] He deliberately incorporated in his works elements of a Germanic tradition that was tainted by its association with Nazism, in an attempt to reclaim these various mythologies, beliefs and philosophies. Beuys compared the denial of Germanic culture to the covering of a wound and proposed an alternate tactic of exposure. He espoused a showing of wounds that he believed would allow for a greater understanding of the past, which would in turn lead to a "healthful" recovery. Beuys was not only concerned with German society, traumatized by World War II, but with the West in general. For Beuys, the role of the artist was no less than the healing of Western society and the restoration of its ties to nature.

The materials Beuys uses have a common link in their engagement with ideas of energy, such as batteries which generate electricity, felt which stores heat and copper which acts as a conductor. The real and symbolic energy in Beuys' work is intended to liberate our own internal stores of energy, buried deep in the unconscious of the spectator. This liberation results in an inner transformation or healing of the individual which would ultimately lead to the transformation of society. In this spirit he created a work from felt entitled, *The Art Pill*, 1963, as if a medicinal remedy could be achieved through aesthetic means.

Beuys was interested in the concept of comprehension of pain as the first step to healing. Repetition of the injury allows for understanding through the exposure and re-experiencing of the wound. But this re-presentation of the affliction is characterised by its displacement from the original wound, allowing for a therapeutic effect rather than a simple repetition of the initial trauma. This theme is powerfully evoked in *Show Your Wound 1974-75*. The work consists of two iron tools, two white wooden planks, two blackboards, two dissection tables, two lamps, two iron boxes covered with glass and containing fat, two zinc boxes also containing fat, two test tubes, two bird skulls, two clinical thermometers, two preserving jars with gauze filters, two pitchforks with cotton scarves atop two blackboards and two issues of the Italian newspaper *Lotta Continua*^[15] mounted in white wooden boxes. Beuys uses of medical accoutrement – the test tubes, thermometers and gauze – suggests a need for healing. The inclusion of other elements, such as bird skulls and dissection tables, suggests a pessimistic view of the future should the warning be ignored. Beuys also provides a solution – the fat and lamps embody a symbolic healing energy and the pitchforks and iron tools suggest both a reconnection to life and work.

In 1944, while stationed in Crimea with the Luftwaffe, Beuys was in a plane crash on the Crimean Front. He claimed to have been rescued by Tartar tribesmen who wrapped his broken body in fat and felt and nursed him back to life.^[16] Though the veracity of these claims has been challenged, as it relates to his art the truth is somewhat irrelevant. The event has taken on a mythological scope. Through this creation story, fat and felt are imbued with shamanistic powers of healing and Beuys has become a modern day shaman by virtue of this initiation rite. In his performance piece, *I Like America and America Likes Me 1974*, Beuys spent three days in a caged room with a coyote. Wrapped in felt and wielding a shepherd's staff, he embodied the role of shaman and mediator, attempting to heal a traumatic split in the Western psyche. The coyote is a metaphor for the gap between our natural state and the reality of contemporary urban existence, as well as a native American symbol of harmony and by extension a reference to America's traumatic colonial history. While initially frantic and agitated, the coyote eventually became accustomed to the artist's presence and was able to relax. This wordless dialogue between Beuys and the coyote is transformed through art into a healing process for others.

My work is intimately involved with a personal search for catharsis, but unlike Clark and Beuys this has never extended to providing catharsis for others. Instead my artistic practice began rather simply as an attempt to exorcise personal demons. I used my work to discuss the ways in which we attempt to cope, by writing, by retreating. I talked about a need and desire for healing and attempted to find that healing through the practice of making art. In the process I found that I was increasingly incorporating references to other artists' works into my own.

The creation of *Quilt 2005*, is a prime example of this. It was an attempt to build a talisman for myself, an art object that could embody my desire for safety and healing. The quilt is made from felt, a reference to the mythical origin story of Joseph Beuys' crash and rescue. The felt embodies all those qualities of warmth and healing referenced by Beuys in his own work. The quilt's design is appropriated from Robert Rauschenberg's *Bed 1955*, and the under side of the quilt is marked with splashes of paint, reminiscent of the paint in Rauschenberg's work. These marks were linked to the concept of abstraction as an expression of a reality, be it emotional or spiritual, that couldn't be represented figuratively. My mother is a quilter and so this object has a special relationship with the concept of nurturing and protection. It is an attempt to remake the womb, to find the security and fulfilment of the pre-birth state.

The layering of art references with personal references in my work is facilitated by my practice of collecting images and ideas that interest me and displaying them on the walls of my studio where I can think about the connections between each one. By the end of 2006, my *studio space* was plastered with writing, painting, performance evidence and pictures of other artists' work. The works included were chosen specifically because they were influencing me in some way. Some artists, such as Nitsch and Malevich, were chosen because of their involvement with the themes of catharsis, healing and transcendence. My research into these artists and their works was helping to inform my understanding of catharsis and the current development of my work. Other works, such as *Seedbed 1971*, by Vito Acconci or *Shoot 1971*, by Chris Burden, have been influential in my development as an artist, but weren't directly applicable to the theme of catharsis. These works were included because they are my link to art as a whole and an integral part of my artistic identity and use of performance. Any investigation of art I undertake is intimately involved with these seminal influences. Of course, some works and artists cover both of these criteria, particularly Joseph Beuys and, to some extent, Mike Parr. There was also a third category of works included in my pastiche, those about which I knew relatively little, but which appealed to me on an aesthetic level. One example is *Zen for head 1962*, by Nam June Paik, which fitted well aesthetically and, according to my interpretation, mirrored conceptually what I was trying to achieve.

This research factored quite strongly in my performance work, as can be seen in the piece, *Catching Paint 2006*. In this performance I recreated the video piece by Richard Serra, *Hand Catching Lead 1968*, but replaced the eponymous material with black paint. My intent was to initiate a dialogue with Serra and his verb list through an engagement with this work. My understanding of process work and its current influence on my practice was critiqued through my futile attempts to catch paint.

Scrubbing 2006, is a good example of the focus of my practice from that year. It began with the process of painting one hundred abstract paintings on canvas boards using only black paint. Once all one hundred paintings were finished and dried the performance aspect of the work began. With a bucket of soapy water and a scrubbing brush I proceeded to scrub clean each of the one hundred canvases. This work referenced Rauschenberg's *Erased de Kooning 1953*, and its idea of a destructive act also being a creative act, as well as *Balkan Baroque 1997*, by Marina Abramovic. I was attempting through this work to effect an outpouring of the negative, what you might call corruption, through the process of painting. This related both to abstract painting and to my understanding of Malevich's Suprematist paintings. Then by scrubbing the canvases clean I was questioning the power of art to heal us, to leave us clean.

This propensity for reference and quotation has only increased in the intervening years, with a plethora of subtle allusions included in my recent works. This dialogue with and critique of the work, as well as literature and philosophy, that is influencing me is one of the driving forces behind my practice.

Chapter 3 – Catharsis and Transcendence

Over the last two years my practice has increasingly addressed the spiritual and ritual interpretations of catharsis as purification and through this investigation I have explored themes of transcendence and ascension. In this section, I will highlight the work of two artists, Richard Yarde and Anselm Kiefer, whose work explores and engages with ideas of spiritual catharsis. I will then compare their work with some examples from my own practice.

Prior to 1995, Richard Yarde's work was concerned with the cultural and political history of the diasporic African experience. That all changed when he was diagnosed with kidney failure, caused by years of medication for hypertension.^[17] While waiting for an organ transplant he turned to alternative treatments, including the "laying on of hands". He also investigated Central and West African beliefs about the magic and spirit worlds and their connection to health and illness. These ideas began to permeate his work, often contrasted with more scientific concepts. In 2000, Yarde received a kidney transplant, but by then his work had changed forever.

The painting *Mojo Hand 1995-96*, was inspired by dreams Yarde had while on his sick bed. It consists of an x-ray of the torso of a pregnant woman, flanked on either side by pairs of hands, shown palm-up. On the left-hand side of the torso is a diagram of a DNA molecule and an enigmatic grouping of dots. On the right-hand side of the torso, the 23rd psalm is written in Braille. The background of the painting is made up of squares of blue, reminiscent of the fabrics used to make mojo bags. The word 'mojo' comes from the traditions of Western Central Africa and relates to the practice of making talismans for magical or healing purposes. The use of the hands relates directly to the concept of the "laying on of hands", but also to the African American hoodoo, Helping Hand, often found on candles and curio labels. The palm prints are organised in the manner of Christian benediction or hoodoo prayer. The x-ray of a pregnant woman, a procedure not normally undertaken, suggests that something may be seriously wrong with the mother or foetus. The placement of the skeletons between the hands implies a direct focus of energy and attention. In place of the mother's head is the mangled reconstruction of DNA. Its components are fragmented and broken in spots, while overly built up in others. The broken DNA echoes the suggestion of danger hinted at by the x-ray. The use of Braille to record the psalm

suggests an inefficiency of sight and a need for hands, though in this case the planar surface of the water-colour denies that sense of touch. The psalm is one that speaks of safety and guidance and is commonly recited by those suffering from illness.

In contrast to Yarde's syncretistic celebration of spiritual and supernatural ideas of healing, Anselm Kiefer critiques the transformative and transcendent ideals evident in post-war German culture. Kiefer was born in Southern Germany in the aftermath of Nazism. He began his artistic practice by acknowledging the dark history that many were attempting to forget. His focus has since broadened to include a wealth of history and mythology dating back to antiquity and in particular those Judaic traditions that Nazism sought to eradicate. Kiefer's work portrays the journey through states of being and understanding, of knowing or not knowing the world. He suggests transcendental visions and different states of being, in some cases hinting at how a transition to another state might occur, but ultimately he questions the possibility of any kind of transcendence or ascension. Kiefer's work espouses the importance of myths as a way of describing ideas about the journey of being in the world. By employing myths and stories from various sources, he allows for an exchange of meaning through juxtaposition and multi-layering.

Kiefer's multi-media painting, *Glaube, Hoffnung, Liebe 1984-86*, consists of a lead propeller fixed to the surface of a dark landscape. The title of this work and the trinity of the propeller blades refer to the three cardinal virtues according to the apostle Paul, faith, hope and love. The propeller itself implies the potential flight and one of the blades points over the horizon line where the propeller was intended to fly. This is contradicted by the lead from which the propeller is made, it is a heavy metal unsuitable for flight and is associated with poison and death. Kiefer also described two conflicting myths that work in this piece.^[18] The propeller blades are a symbol of transcendence, since in flight it would describe a helix like that on Hermes' caducean staff. Hermes is the protector of travellers, escorts the dead into the afterlife and is associated with alchemy. On the other hand the element lead used for the propellers is the metal of Saturn, the earth bound and melancholic God. With these ideas in opposition it is unclear if the ascension will ever be realised.

Von den Verlorenen gerührt, die der Glaube nicht trug, erwachen die Trommeln im Fluss 2004, is a multi-media painting with a broken concrete staircase attached to the surface, hovering at the horizon of what appears to be a vast desert landscape. The staircase at first appears to float effortlessly, but upon closer inspection seems alarmingly close to falling back to earth. The steps, like the propeller, are a symbol for ascension, leading beyond the horizon, but they are also flawed in their current presentation, broken and precarious. The title, '*The drums in the river came alive, beaten by the lost ones, who were not supported by faith*', evokes ideas of ritual and ecstatic religious frenzy, human attempts to connect with something greater than themselves. In some central African mythologies the Congo river serves the same purpose as the horizon in Christian baptismal iconography. Moving from the mundane world of the flesh to the spirit world involves passing below the surface of the water. Similarly in Greek mythology the dead must cross the River Styx to enter the afterlife.

While there had always been mythological and spiritual allusions in my work, the exploration and critique of transcendental ideals has been a key element of my artistic practice in 2008. Like Yarde's syncretistic celebration of healing, my work betrays an enthusiasm and desire for a spiritual purification, but also questions the possibility of its attainment.

Circumcision 2008, was a performance that involved me sitting cross-legged in the studio with my left arm painted black. I attempted to bite all the black paint off my arm. The painting of my arm refers to the somatisation of a psychological wound so that I can attempt to remove it. The black paint embodies the psychoanalytical theory of the lack, which says that in the womb we were fulfilled but after birth we discovered need. That need has grown out of all proportion, to the point where simply satisfying our desires cannot bring us back to that womb state. We will never be fulfilled and without need while we remain alive. The use of my mouth to remove the black paint is in a sense paradoxical or futile; I am trying to remove the lack by consuming it. The title, *Circumcision*, refers to the Judaeo-Christian tradition. Circumcision was originally a physical symbol of God's covenant with the descendants of Abraham. The concept of circumcision isn't purely physical, though. 'Uncircumcised' is a term used in the bible to describe people or objects which are unclean or immoral. Jews and Christians are exhorted to circumcise their hearts. In this sense the biting of my arm is a ritualised action, it is an attempt to remove a stain of impurity or immorality. This work embodies two conflicting theories about what is flawed in humanity and why we need catharsis. Both Christianity and psychoanalysis offer answers for our current state. Both structures seem to help people, but neither can save us in this life. I am attempting to find some synthesis through art to affect a real change.

The video installation *Leviathan/Ouroboros 2008*, consists of two complementary performances shown on televisions. On the left-hand screen (*Leviathan*) I am kneeling before a bowl of water, I pick it up and attempt to drink all of the water. The performance takes some time and my discomfort is visible and eventually results in my vomiting up some water. On the right-hand screen (*Ouroboros*) I am also kneeling before a bowl of water, but this time I place my hands on either side of the bowl and bow so that my face is submerged in the water. I hold my face under water for as long as I can hold my breath before I resurface. The work refers to the hermetic concept of a life divided into polar opposites to explain our feelings of brokenness and inadequacy. Through the practice of Hermeticism and the reconciliation of our disparate parts we can recover our wholeness and reach our full potential as spiritual beings. In this work the polar opposites of male and female, conscious and unconscious, active and passive are embodied in the two performances. These ideas are further complicated with the inclusion of Judaeo-Christian theology and psychoanalytical theory. The Leviathan is a biblical creature representing the chaos of the sea and is so great that it is said only God can slay it. According to Job 41:9, "Any hope of subduing him is false; the mere sight of him is overpowering". My attempts to drink the water belie my desire to subdue my sub-conscious/spirituality, to have total control. The Ouroboros is an alchemical symbol for rebirth and is complemented by the baptismal action that signifies passing into death and then rising to new life. Bowing into the water is an act of submission in contrast to Leviathan's attempts at control. *Leviathan/Ouroboros* does not propose a superior tactic for achieving catharsis, both approaches fail. I cannot drink all the water and I cannot hold my breath forever. Instead, like Hermeticism, it suggests a synthesis of ideas.

In the performance *Tiresias 2008*, I am sitting outside, cross-legged in front of a camera. I begin by looking up from the camera into the sun and holding my eyes open for as long as physically possible. When I can no longer stare at the sun I look back to the camera and blink away any tears without using my hands to rub my eyes. When they are clear again I return to staring at the sun. The performance is an articulation of my desire to express my emotional state both physically and artistically. This piece also references the work *I'm too sad to tell you 1971*, by Bas Jan Ader, in which the artist is recorded crying in front of the camera. *Tiresias* is the expression of my cyclical relationship to life and religion as well as my desire to stare into the face of God competing with a conflicting drive to turn away. To stare into the sun is ultimately a self-destructive act, like Icarus flying too high. The destruction of my eyes could be a reaction to divine enlightenment, like Paul, or to unbearable revelation, like Oedipus. The title *Tiresias* refers to the blind seer who helped Oedipus to discover that he had murdered his father and married his mother (causing him to gouge out his eyes). Tiresias is also the subject of several stories relating to the source of his own blindness, including witnessing Athena bathing and being punished by Hera for impiety.

By late 2006, I had settled on a method of documentation that has remained fairly constant in my work since. The work is performed for a solitary, stationary camera which acts as a stand-in for the audience and allows them to witness my actions vicariously. This allows each audience member to make a personal one-to-one connection with the work that would otherwise be complicated by the multiplicity of views and angles. There has been a shift in the focus of my

work, since 2006, from investigating the capacity of art to provide catharsis, towards more general themes of catharsis and transcendence. This connection between art and healing has not been completely eradicated, though, and cannot help but persist as long as I continue to explore themes of catharsis through the process of making art.

Conclusion

I began in 2004 by making performance work to express my desire for catharsis and to experience healing, inspired by Joseph Beuys' promise of a remedy effected through the power of art. Like Bas Jan Ader, my work addressed a general but ultimately personal need for catharsis. However, unlike Ader, my work is generally devoid of specific biographical details. By 2006, my practice had developed into an exploration of the capacity art has to provide catharsis, through individual performances and the larger process of making work. This was evoked through the repeated inclusion in my work of references to artists who had been influential in my development. In 2008, I have been making work comparing and contrasting various myths and ideas about our desire for catharsis and the ways in which it can be achieved, as an attempt to highlight our need for it and to question the possibility of its attainment.

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1. Halliwell, *A companion to aesthetics*, Blackwell Publishers, 1992, page 62. [^]
2. Leech, *The dramatist's experience, with other essays in literary theory*, Chatto & Windus, 1970, page 123. [^]
3. House, *Aristotle's poetics : a course of eight lectures*, 1956, pages 109-110. [^]
4. Wegman, *Psychoanalysis and cognitive psychology : a formalization of Freud's earliest theory*, R. Hart-Davis, 1985, pages 87-88. [^]
5. Neri, *Louise Bourgeois : Obras recientes*, 2004, capcMusée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, page 81. [^]
6. Bernadac, *Louise Bourgeois : Obras recientes*, capcMusée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, 2004, page 18. [^]
7. Bourgeois recalled a time when her father cut the shape of a girl out of a tangerine peel and then used it to ridicule her saying, "Look everybody, this is Louise. She has nothing! All she's got between her legs is a couple of white threads!" The memory of this humiliation led her to recreate the simple gesture of her father's original insult, as if by re-enacting the ordeal herself she could have some control over the event or the painful memory. This anecdote was recorded by Neri, *Louise Bourgeois : Obras recientes*, capcMusée d'art contemporain de Bordeaux, 2004, page 82. [^]
8. His mother's book *Een Groninger pastorie in de storm (A Groninger parsonage in the storm)* tells of her life on the parsonage and its use as a haven for those hiding from the Nazis. It also covers the arrest, torture and execution of her husband as well as the infancy of her sons Bas Jan and Erik. When Bas Jan lived in California he attempted to translate the book into English but he never finished the translation and the manuscript was lost. [^]
9. Beenker, *Bas Jan Ader : please don't leave me*, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2006, pages 13-14. [^]
10. Beenker, *Bas Jan Ader : please don't leave me*, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2006, pages 20-21. [^]
11. Beenker, *Bas Jan Ader : please don't leave me*, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2006, pages 21. [^]
12. "Someone once said to me: I can well imagine that you are so obsessed with the fall; that's because your father was shot. That is obviously a far too anecdotal interpretation. Everything is tragic because people always lose control of processes, of matter, of their feelings. That is a much more universal tragedy, and that cannot be visualised from an anecdote." From an interview represented by Beenker, *Bas Jan Ader : please don't leave me*, Museum Boijmans Van Beuningen, 2006, page 14. [^]
13. Morgan, *Pulse : art, healing and transformation*, Steidl/ICA, 2003, page 14. [^]
14. Rosenthal, *Joseph Beuys : actions, vitrines, environment*, Menil Collection, 2004, page 33. [^]
15. Italian newspaper of the far left political party, first published in 1969. [^]
16. Morgan, *Pulse : art, healing and transformation*, Steidl/ICA, 2003, page 77. [^]
17. DuBois Shaw, *Pulse : art, healing and transformation*, Steidl/ICA, 2003, page 63. [^]
18. Bond, *Anselm Kiefer : Aperiatur terra*, White Cube, 2007, page 53. [^]

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PERFORMANCE ARTS. All Performance Arts. Film, TV, Video. The scope includes the realms of science and religion. For instance, Szczeklik mentions both the Papal Academy of Sciences session on evolution (Pope John Paul II: “The scientific theory of evolution is not at odds with any truth of the Christian faith.” p. 128) as well as religious overtones to metaphoric declarations about the power of the genome (“the language of God” p. 125). You’ve written that performing brings catharsis for you and the audience too. I’m fascinated by the idea of what classicists call the ‘Dionysiac cure’ and how everyone from Aristotle to Nietzsche say it brings healing. How is music cathartic for you? As ER Dodds pointed out in *The Greeks and the Irrational*, ecstatic cults (with drumming!) were always around...but when did they lose acceptance? With the triumph of the Enlightenment? Perhaps it was during the Renaissance that the view of the workings of the universe changed – from a universe that obeyed and was structured according to musical harm