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CONTEMPORARY ACTIONISM AS A TOTAL WORK OF ART

Abstract: The following report explores Richard Wagner’s concept of total art or Gesamtkunstwerk, a notion that gained prominence in the 19th century and found resonance in Symbolist art. This movement interpreted total art as a synthesis of various artistic forms, particularly music and theatre, infused with spiritual significance. Our objective is to demonstrate that in contemporary performative art, the integration of diverse media could give rise to a comprehensive work of art, akin to Wagner’s original vision. The article contends that performative art and actionism, by employing complementary artistic elements such as music, literature, theatre, objects, installations, and painting, have the potential to evolve into a unified and spiritually enriched work of art.

Keywords: total art, global art, synthesis of the arts, Gesamtkunstwerk, actionism, performance art, spirituality

The relationship between art and spirituality has been frequently analyzed and well-documented. The new² medium of artistic expression, the performative or actionist, which we aim to explore, presents challenges both artistically, through the amalgamation of various modes/media of artistic expression, and in terms of message/purpose, which tends to transcend the horizontal level of existence toward a spiritual one.

By establishing a connection between contemporary performative art, as a mode of expression involving gesturality, spatiality, message, freedom of expression, the harmonization of different artistic mediums, an interest in spirituality, and the symbolist concept of art and artist³, we propose the hypothesis that contemporary actionism has its roots in the 19th-century symbolist movement, as well as in the

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² Although manifested since the mid-20th century, actionism can still be regarded as one of the new mediums of artistic expression, considering that the periodization of art history suggests the 1960s as the beginning of contemporary art.

³ In his “Art Poétique” (1871–1873), Verlaine proposes the theory of the musicality of language and the detachment of language from external, material reality (Zina Molcuț, *Simbolismul european*, Vol. I, Albatros Publishing, Bucharest, 1983, p. 9). Moreover, in the *Symbolist Manifesto* written by Jean Moréas and published in the newspaper *Le Figaro* in 1886, it is stipulated that the symbolist poet is a visionary who employs free verse (Philippe van Tieghem, *Marile doctrine literare în Franța, De la Pleiadă la Suprarealism*, Univers Publishing, Bucharest, 1972, p. 265), and displays a nonchalant approach in the creative process. René Ghil, a symbolist poet and author of the work “Treatise on the Verb” (1888), republished under the title “Working with Method” (1891 and 1901), emphasizes that poetry must reflect the law of the universe, involving rhythm, movement, and evolution. “Art must be movement, transition, and the translation of movement. Instrumental music is the art most capable of translating the perpetual becoming of emotion, so poetry must imitate it. It can imitate it because, before

concept of the total work of art, encapsulating the idea of a synthesis of the arts as formulated by the composer Richard Wagner.

As a consequence of merging theories of art and religion, the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, elaborated by Wagner, brings to the forefront the idea of a “saving”, “redeeming”⁴ art, as an alternative to the diminished status of the Catholic Church. It suggests a transfer between the function of the Church and that of artistic institutions, capable, in his opinion, of revealing the spiritual aspect of existence. “One might say that where Religion becomes artificial, it is reserved for Art to save the spirit of religion by recognising the figurative value of the mythic symbols which the former would have us believe in their literal sense, and revealing their deep and hidden truth through an ideal presentation”⁵.

A possible source of Wagner’s theory on the total work of art could be the concept of communion present in Christian theology. Wagner, known for his appreciation of the Christian religion, which identifies the unity of all things in the person of Christ as a central element achieved through His sacrifice on the cross, might have drawn inspiration from the Christian notion of communion. This unity is sought by every believer⁶ aspiring to salvation. Additionally, Wagner also admired the theory of the “unity of all that lives”⁷ a characteristic of Brahmanic teachings. This concept suggests that art alone can reveal the unity of all beings, utilizing allegory and imagery in their external form, which represents the visible manifestation of the idea.” What we understand in general by the artistic province, we might define as Evaluation of the Pictorial (*Ausbildung des Bildlichen*); that is to say, Art grasps the Figurative of an idea, that outer form in which it shews itself to the imagination, and by developing the likeness—before employed but allegorically – into a picture embracing in itself the whole idea, she lifts the latter high above itself into the realm of revelation. Speaking of the ideal shape of the Greek statue, our great philosopher finely says: It is as if the artist were shewing Nature what she would, but never completely could; wherefore the artistic Ideal surpasses Nature. Of Greek theogony it may be said that, in touch with the artistic instinct of the nation, it always clung to anthropomorphism. Their gods were figures with distinctive names and plainest individuality; their names were used to mark specific groups of things (*Gattungsbegriffe*), just as the names of various coloured objects were used to denote the colours themselves, for which the Greeks employed no abstract terms like ours: “gods” were they called, to mark their nature as divine; but the Divine itself the Greeks called *God*”. “Never did it occur to them to think of ”God” as a Person, or give to him artistic shape as to their named gods; he remained an idea, to be defined by their philosophers, though the Hellenic spirit strove in vain to clearly fix it – till the wondrous inspiration of poor people spread abroad the incredible tidings that the ”Son of God” had offered himself on the cross to redeem the world from deceit and sin”⁸. Wagner identifies in the Son of God, who took on human form and genuinely died on the cross, a clear manifestation of an invisible God in a visible form, thus drawing a direct analogy with art.

Similarly, the same artist and art theorist attribute a sacramental role to art by converging its ideal with that of religion, through the artist as the individual responsible for bridging the two dimensions. He adopts an ancient concept of the artist as a priest or prophet, whose role is to mediate between Art and Religion, between the material and the spiritual, the inner worlds. He refers to the artist as a “mediating friend” or a “poet-priest”, endowing them with the role of guiding the uninitiated towards the absolute ideal, towards a “reborn life”⁹.

anything else, voices are actually musical instruments, thanks to vowels and consonants” (Philippe van Tieghem, *op. cit.*, p. 267).

⁴ **Richard Wagner.** *Religion and Art, Richard Wagner’s Prose Works*, volume 6, traducere de William Ashton Ellis, 1897, p. 7. (Richard Wagner, *Religion und Kunst*, Vol. X, Sämtliche Schriften und Dichtungen, 1880, p. 213)

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ Ibidem, p. 7.

⁷ Ibidem, p. 13.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 8.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 23 (“Well for us if then, in conscience of pure living, we keep our senses open to the mediator of the crushingly Sublime, and let ourselves be gently led to reconciliation with this mortal life by the artistic teller

The Wagnerian concept of the total work of art, grounded in spirituality and elaborated in a series of essays (*Oper and Drama*)¹⁰, proposed a synthesis of various arts, incorporating musical, theatrical, and literary representations. In this vision, the music of the future (*Zukunftsmusik*) implies an interweaving of drama and music.

The same concept, associating poetry and art in general with an inward turn towards immateriality, spiritual issues, freedom of expression, or “free verse”, specifically towards the musicality of language with an emphasis on action, is observed manifesting itself in the Symbolist¹¹ movement. This movement embraced the idea of synthesizing the arts proposed by Wagner, expressing it fully in the manifestations of the Salons of *Rose + Croix*, which can be considered the earliest attempts to materialize the concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The contemporary art historian Friedrich Teja Bach, in fact, regarded Symbolism as the “cradle of modernism”¹².

Subsequently, we recognize in the pre-avant-garde and avant-garde periods a “telescopic effect”¹³ of the adoption and propagation of the same Wagnerian and Symbolist ideologies by historical avant-garde movements such as Futurism¹⁴, Dadaism, and Surrealism.

Other art critics, such as Constantin Prut and Dan Grigorescu, identify in Abstract Expressionism the same freedom of expression, later embraced by performance art/actionism. They place the stylistic roots of Expressionism in Surrealism¹⁵.

Contemporary actionism, often erroneously associated with “Viennese Actionism”¹⁶, is defined as an extension of the latter, surpassing the thematic boundaries of Viennese Actionism to encompass spiritual, aesthetic, social, or political¹⁷ issues. It retains the concept of the artist as an actor, whose body often becomes a medium of expression within an event associated with theatricality. However, it moves beyond scenic mimicry towards improvisation, adding the urgency of a purpose with spiritual-ritual connotations. Furthermore, contemporary actionist works embrace the idea of synthesizing the arts, aiming to reveal a much deeper content through the integration of various artistic mediums.

Some of the most relevant contemporary actionist artists, such as Joseph Beuys, Hermann Nitsch, Bill Viola, and others, reflect in subjective ways, utilizing the performative medium, the Wagnerian concept of the total work of art.

Joseph Beuys made his debut as an actionist artist in the Fluxus movement, emphasizing his attraction to its “interdisciplinary character (...), the lightness of the individual actions, the improvisatory nature of the “pieces”: apart from the large “furnishings,” such as pianos, tables, and ladders, each of the great World-tragedy. This Poet priest, the only one who never lied, was ever sent to humankind at epochs of its direst error, as mediating friend: us, too, will he lead over to that reborn life, to set before us there in ideal truth the “likeness” of this passing show, when the Historian’s realistic lie shall have long since been interred beneath the mouldering archives of our Civilisation”).

¹⁰ **Michael Kennedy.** *Oxford Dictionary of Music*, Oxford University Press, New York, 1985.

¹¹ Constantin Prut, *Dicționar de artă modernă și contemporană*, ediția a II-a, Ed. Polirom, Iași, 2016, p. 446.

¹² **Cristian-Robert Velescu.** *Brâncuși inițiatul*, Editura Editis, București, 1993, p. 39.

¹³ Acad. Răzvan Theodorescu, Acad. Marius Porumb (edit.), *Arta din România, Din preistorie în contemporaneitate*, Edit. Academiei Române, Vol. II, Edit. Mega, București – Cluj-Napoca, 2018, p. 427.

¹⁴ Marinetti, in the *Manifesto of Words in Freedom* (1913), expounded the theory of liberating words (Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, *Manifestele futurismului*, traducere din italiană de Emilia David Drogoreanu, Editura Art, București, p. 111), derived through the Symbolist channel, which praised “free verse” as a freedom of action and movement in literary space. This notion would later become the source of actionism in the mid-20th century.

¹⁵ **Dan Grigorescu.** *Dicționarul avangardelor*, ediția a II-a, Editura Enciclopedică, București, 2005, p. 226.

¹⁶ Dan Grigorescu, in *Dicționarul avangardelor*, ediția a II-a, Ed. Enciclopedică, București, 2005, pp. 5–6, mentions that “actionism” initially referred to the activities of four artists from Vienna who presented shocking performances, where the main element was not only their bodies but also those of other participants or animals. Subsequently, in a broader sense, “action” became a generic term for various representations in art galleries or on city streets. On the other hand, Constantin Prut, în *Dicționar de artă modernă și contemporană*, ediția a II-a, Ed. Polirom, Iași, 2016, p. 23, only considers the meaning of “Viennese actionism from the period 1962–1968, supported by a group of artists including Nitsch, Otto Muehl, Günter Brus, and Rudolf Schwarzkogler”

¹⁷ Dan Grigorescu, *ibidem*.

participant could bring along whatever he wanted"¹⁸. However, Beuys distanced himself from Fluxus's alignment with Dadaism, with its antitraditionalist and iconoclastic character. Instead, he embraced the concept of *Social Sculpture*, associated with art whose meaning lay in communication with the social body and in shaping it. Through his actions, Beuys aimed to trigger the latent creativity present in every human being.

Regarding the choice for action, Beuys emphasizes its necessary character and its utility as a means to convey, through a scenario, ideas that otherwise could not be articulated. It is noteworthy that the artist utilizes a script, transforming his art into a so-called theatrical manifestation, albeit experimental, where improvisation plays a crucial role. Thus, actionist art encompasses the realm of scenography, which, as we will see, is juxtaposed with other artistic mediums. "I know a lot before i start an action. I know a lot about the necessity of the general idea of sculpture, but i don't know anything about the process in which the action will run. When the actions runs, my preparation works, because i am prepared to do a thing without knowing where it goes. You see, it would have nothing to do with art-if it were not an experiment for which i have no clear concept. If i had a clear concept of solving the problem, i would then speak about the concept and it wouldn't be necessary to make an action. Every action, every artwork for me, every physical scene, drawing on the blackboard, performance, brings a new element in the whole, an unknown area, an unknown world"¹⁹.

In his first performative action after parting ways with Fluxus, *The Chief* (Copenhagen, 1963, and Berlin, December 1, 1964, at the René Block Gallery)²⁰, Beuys elaborates the scenario of the action, arranging the scores (*Partituren*) as well as objects with a special significance in the Beuysian ethos: felt or fat, two carcasses of dead rabbits, a diagonal roll of felt in which the artist himself will wrap, and a copper wire leaning against the wall. He isolates the performative space from the audience by placing pieces of fat in the corners of the room and a transparent canvas in front of the door. The entirely intentional use of these objects, as well as their incorporation into the framework of the performative action, transforms them into installations. The artist's utterance of sounds resembling the roars of animals, along with at times music, adds sound to this scenography with a duration of nine hours, creating a rhythm that takes on a ritualistic quality. "Such a performance always has a theory behind it, a partitur or score, which gives information without information. Acoustically it's like using just the carrier wave as a conveyor of energy without loading it with semantic information. The wave carries the kind of sound usually found in the animal kingdom. The wave is **unformed**; semantics would give it **form** (Theory of Sculpture). The sounds I make are taken consciously from animals"²¹.

The artist employs notes²² to develop his theory of *Social Sculpture*, in which he mentions the use of objects as triggers for creativity or "stimulants for the transformation of the idea of sculpture, or of art in general. They should provoke thoughts about what sculpture can be and how the concept of sculpting **can** be extended to the invisible materials used by everyone: **Thinking Forms** – how we mould our thoughts or **Spoken Forms** – how we shape our thoughts into words or **SOCIAL SCULPTURE** – how we mould and shape the world in which we live: **Sculpture as an evolutionary process; everyone is an artist**. That is why the nature of my sculpture is not fixed and finished. Processes continue in most of them: chemical reactions, fermentations, colour changes, decay, drying up. Everything is in a state of change"²³.

The objects-witnesses become "relics" following his actions, and they are then exhibited as such. For instance, *The Bath tub* (1960) alludes to "the trauma of birth, the notion of salvation"²⁴. Beuys uses

¹⁸ Heiner Stachelhaus. *Joseph Beuys*, Abbeville Press, New York, 1991, p. 129.

¹⁹ Carin Kuoni (ed.), *Energy Plan for the Western Man, Joseph Beuys in America, Writings by and Interviews with the Artist*, Four Walls Eight Windows, New York, 1990, p. 71.

²⁰ Caroline Tisdall. *Joseph Beuys*, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, New York, 1979, p. 94.

²¹ Ibidem, p. 95.

²² Ibidem, p. 7.

²³ Ibidem.

²⁴ Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, Rosalind Krauss, Annette Michelson, *Joseph Beuys at the Guggenheim*, in *October*, Vol. 12, (Spring, 1980), p. 10.

various materials and substances, investing them with spiritual energies and utilizing their functions: fat, which heals; felt, which warms; honey, which nourishes; copper, which conducts; bones, blood, gelatin, a first aid kit (*The Pack*, 1969), and others.

Last but not least, the artist as creator exhibits a work on his own person (*How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare*, Schmela Gallery, Düsseldorf, 1965), on his body, which he uses as material in the context of the performative sculptural process but also as a manifestation of the self. He had “the ability to self – and body – mastery (...). From this point of view, the artist put himself in an analogical relation to the artistic materials as well as to his body: both were mastered as matter. Both functioned as a substance to which Beuys acted as a forming, shaping creator”²⁵.

Beuys utilizes sculpture, drawing, scenography, music, sound, written and spoken text, objects, and installations, integrating them into the performative environment. His declared purpose is to shape society through art, a goal that is inherently spiritual. In doing so, he evokes, albeit from a distance of several decades, the Wagnerian concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, in which art is seen as a medium for the expression of spirituality. The total work of art, realized through the synthesis of various art forms, becomes an ideal form of revealing this spirituality.

In the second half of the 20th century, Hermann Nitsch, adopting the same concept, developed a form of action art known as the *Theater of Orgies and Mysteries*. Starting from informel or action painting, where the emphasis lies on the substance of painting, typically red paint, thrown onto a surface in a gestural and instinctual manner (*Schüttbild*), in a process with a purely sensory purpose²⁶.

Nitsch gradually elaborates the concept of *abreaction*, drawing on mythological, philosophical, literary, and artistic sources. “Originally, the O. M. Theatre was a “poetry of words”. I had been developing this since 1956. Even at this time I wanted to write a six-days-drama. My style was influenced by Trakl, German expressionism, French symbolism, Stefan George, Joyce and surrealism. I always sought strong forms of expression, an intense, sensual language which I only saw realized in dramatic works by Kleist and in Greek tragedy. Around 1958 I understood that what I really wanted was incompatible with the traditional language. I proceeded to break with verbal expression and to provide the spectators with direct sensual sensations. My participants of the play should taste, smell, behold, hear, and touch. I produced actual happenings whose sensual intensity was to deeply move the participants of the play. Besides the intake of odorous and flavorful substances, liquids like blood, vinegar, wine, milk, egg yolk and so on were spilled in the theatre. Raw meat, lukewarm, wet and bloody mesentery was supposed to be looked at and get touched. The sensuousness of the substance was important to me. I see the same sensuousness of the substance within informal painting. Paint is poured and splashed onto a surface and then smeared, pulpy colour mass is smeared upon the picture. The painting process becomes a real happening. Theatre occurs on the perspective plane. I always say that the painting of the O. M. Theatre is the visual grammar of my theatre on such a surface. The intrinsic action, the intrinsic action theatre leaves the places of refuge of the painting itself and goes beyond space to total reality”²⁷.

In the so-called “Aktionen”, the German artist employs highly elaborate scenarios resembling theatrical plays (e.g., *Six-Day Play for the Theater of Orgies and Mysteries*, 1963), sketches of an underground architecture envisioned for future actions in Prinzenhof am Zaya²⁸, drawings (e.g., *The Last Supper*, 1976–78, *The Entombment*, 2006–7), and musical scores (e.g., *Score for Symphony IX Die Ägyptische*, 2009), all created by himself. He directs the actions, integrating objects with religious connotations (cross, chalice, priestly garments, etc.), with the aim of triggering cathartic reactions through the senses in true “orgies” reminiscent of those dedicated to the god Dionysus.

²⁵ **Corinna Tomberger.** *Show Your Wounded Manliness: Promises of Salvation in the Work of Joseph Beuys*, in Paragraph, Vol. 26, No. 1/2, MEN'S BODIES (March/July 2003), pp. 65–76, Edinburgh University Press, p. 70.

²⁶ **Helmut Essl.** *Hermann Nitsch, 20th Painting Action, Vienna Secession, February 18th-February 21st, 1987*, Kerbert Verlag, Bielefeld / Berlin, 2021, p. 52.

²⁷ Ibidem.

²⁸ **Danilo Eccher, ed.** *Dietro l'altare di _ Behind the Altar of Hermann Nitsch*, Catalog, San Giovanni Lupatoto, Verona, Italy, 2009, p. 28.

Hermann Nitsch aimed to achieve the total work of art in theatrical performances where chance held a special place, as the artist confessed that, although he plans the actions, he despises participants “playing” or pretending when performing. His actions (*Aktionen*) technically utilize the integration of various artistic mediums in a ritual inverted from the liturgical, where the triggering of purely physical sensations and the desacralization²⁹ of the body allow participants to experience abreaction, spiritual liberation.

Bill Viola draws upon artistic sources, particularly from the Renaissance period, literary inspirations from Walt Whitman³⁰, sound, and video techniques, along with sketches, in video actions whose spiritual message is revealed through references to existential questions. The artist is influenced by Christian and Eastern philosophy, Sufism³¹ in particular, utilizing the actionist medium for introspection and exploring the spiritual dimension of life. “Actually i can see a strong connection between the outstanding mystics and artists.... The basic tenets of the *via negativa* are the unknowability of God; that God is wholly other, independent, complete; that God cannot be grasped by the human intellect, cannot be described in any way; that when the mind faces the divine reality, it becomes blank. It seizes up. It enters a cloud of unknowing. When the eyes cannot see, then the only approach to God is from within... The essence here is the individual faith, and as God is said to reside within the individual, many aspects of it bear close resemblance to Eastern concepts and practices... I relate to the role of the mystic in the sense of following a *via negativa* – of feeling the basis of my work to be in unknowing, in doubt, in being lost, in questions and not answers – and that recognizing that personally the most important work I have done has come from not knowing what i was doing at the time I was doing it”³².

The artist employs the temporal component of his video actions to highlight the invisible aspects of a scene, as seen in works such as *Emergence* (2002), inspired by the fresco *Pietà* (1424) by Masolino da Panicale, or *The Greeting* (1995). The intention is to transport the one who films, the spectator, and the participant into an “intimacy of the experience”³³ and a personal engagement in the perception of the action. “Duration is the medium that makes thought possible; therefore duration is to consciousness as light is to the eye”³⁴.

Viola’s actions are often presented to the public in the form of perpetual installations, where the action unfolds in a repetitive manner. At times, the sound alternates between silence and aggressiveness, becoming a pure ritual incantation (e.g., *The Stopping Mind*, 1991; *Anthem*, 1983). In the action *Continuous Prayer* (1992), the repetition of verses by Walt Whitman for a week, in a video installation with a screen placed at a window, marks a ritual, an incantation, and a cycle of the day.

The mentioned artists have integrated highly personal visions of art and spirituality into their own performative experiments, bringing forth a concept originating in the 19th century, termed *Gesamtkunstwerk* by Richard Wagner. It is visualized as a synthesis of the arts for the spiritual purpose of “salvation through art”. In this sense, art and, implicitly, the artist would assume the role of religious institutions and their representatives, working to spiritualize the world.

Contemporary actionism, whether intentionally or unintentionally, appropriates the Symbolist and Wagnerian concept in a unique manner. In this context, art becomes “alive” through the involvement of the artist and the artist’s body in the artistic process, which takes on ritualistic undertones in actions aimed directly at healing society or the human individual.

²⁹ **Rina Arya.** *Ecstasy and Pain: The Ritualistic Dimensions of Performance Practice*, in *Revista Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, 13:3, 31–40, 2008.

³⁰ **Bill Viola.** *Catalog*, Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, 1998.

³¹ **Ziad Elmarsafy.** *Adapting Sufism to Video Art: Bill Viola and the Sacred*, in *Revista Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, No. 28. *Artistic Adaptations: Approaches and Positions*, (2008), p. 127.

³² *Ibidem*, pp. 129–130.

³³ **Tamy Kinsey.** *A Moving Meditation*, in *Revista Paj: A Journal of Performance and Art*, Vol. 31, No. 1 (Jan., 2009), p. 121.

³⁴ *Ibidem*.

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