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MALIN ARNELL

In the Beginning There Is an End

Approaching Gina Pane, Approaching *Discours mou et mat*

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ABSTRACT: In this fifteen-minute lecture-performance, Malin Arnell presents her dialogue with the work of French-Italian artist Gina Pane (1939–1990). Oriented around textual and visual traces of Pane and Arnell's historical intra-action, this ongoing dialogue explores performance art documentation and historical narratives. The project interrogates the operations of archives, asking: 'How do queer feminist performance archives make you vulnerable, how do they make you feel, act, react?' 'Whose bodies remain present, and which bodies are lost?' The framework of the work — its repetition with variations and its artistic and queer feminist methodologies — enables an exploration of history, documentation, and bodily epistemology as an attempt to take responsibility for what is not known by doing, through action — through performance.

KEYWORDS: performance art; reenactment; Gina Pane; artistic research; lesbian continuum

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In the Beginning There Is an End

Approaching Gina Pane, Approaching *Discours mou et mat*

MALIN ARNELL

The lecture room at ICI Berlin is darkened. I place myself with a microphone on a stand behind the seated audience. I read the text below from an iPad. On the large screen in front of us, a fifteen-minute long excerpt from the documentation of my action *Reflect Soft Matte Discourse* (2011)[1] is projected parallel to the documentation of the French-Italian artist Gina Pane's (1939–1990) action *Discours mou et mat* (1975).[2]

> Here I am — Now — And then
> In front of you
> Within History

1 The action *Reflect Soft Matte Discourse* was performed together with Clara López Menéndez, who featured as 'the body of an unknown woman' listed in the score, and Ulrika Gomm, who documented the action with a video camera. The action was part of 'LIKA — A Performance Evening' at KAMARADER, Stockholm on 24 May 2011.

2 This text is an excerpt from a longer script, which was part of the performance lecture *AFTER, REHEARSAL AFTER*, first performed as a praxis session during the conference 'PSi19: Now Then: Performance and Temporality!', 26 to 30 June 2013, Stanford University, Stanford, CA., and which later became part of my dissertation 'Avhandling / Av handling (Dissertation / Through_action, 2016)' at Stockholm University of the Arts/Lunds University <http://dissertationthroughaction.space/avhandlingav_handling-dissertationthrough_action/after-rehearsal-after-4/> [accessed 20 February 2021].

Figure 1. Malin Arnell, still from video documentation of *Reflect Soft Matte Discourse*, 2011, combined with a video still from Gina Pane's performance *Discours mou et mat*, 1975. Courtesy of the artist and of the Galerie Kamel Mennour, Paris.

Over time — In time — Right here
Colliding
In love — By love and uncertainties

With documentations
Others and mine
Ours
Together
In Difference

Action — Enacted — Re-enacted — Later rehearsed.

(This is what I desire.)
We ask: 'Is your body mine?'[3]

She said: 'This is a mobilization of aesthetics against anaesthesia.'

'I am the others.'[4]

On 28 June 1975, Gina Pane performed the action *Discours mou et mat* (*Soft Matte Discourse*) at De Appel in Amsterdam. Following her

3 Gina Pane, *Lettre à un(e) inconnu(e)*, ed. by Blandine Chavanne, Anne Marchand, and Julia Hountou (Paris: École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts, 2004), p. 85: 'ton corps est-il le mien?'. Quoted and translated in Frédérique Baumgartner, 'Reviving the Collective Body: Gina Pane's *Escalade Non Anesthésiée*', *Oxford Art Journal*, 34.2 (June 2011), pp. 247–63 (p. 258).

4 Ibid. p.85: 'Je suis les autres'.

instructions, I realized the action *Reflect Soft Matte Discourse* in May 2011 in Stockholm.[5]

> In the beginning there is an end.
> Slipping between position of power and passivity, between control and subservience.
>
> Back to the fall of 2010.
> *This is a beginning.*

I had the film documentation of *Discours mou et mat* sent to me as a DVD.[6] I played it on my computer: twenty-two minutes and thirty-four seconds. I had help in translating the words spoken, but not clearly audible, in the action: *Te Souviens-tu des seins de ta mère?* In English: *Do you remember your mother's breasts?* And the response: *Yes, they were soft and matte as snow.* Up to this point, I had not been aware that the action contained a dialogue about the mother, that the mother was present in the action, that the naked body could be understood as the mother. I hadn't known and I really didn't want to know. It was important to me not to know. I didn't want to know about Gina Pane's relationship to the various objects or to the different activities. I wanted to learn, to learn by doing, by putting *Discours mou et mat* into motion, by putting my body into dialogue with the objects and activities of which *Discours mou et mat* is composed. I wanted to be able to relate to and understand *Discours mou et mat* through a physical interaction with the materials. I wanted to use *Discours mou et mat* to allow the pain, the wound, to take its place.

There is a distinct difference between my body here and now in this room (or then and there in 2011) and Gina Pane's body in Amsterdam in 1975. There are similarities.

I imagine a lesbian continuum or a continuum of homosocial desire. My body. Gina Pane's body. The lesbian body. Gina Pane firmly

5 The action *Reflect Soft Matte Discourse* was performed together with Clara López Menéndez, who performed as 'the body of an unknown woman' listed in the score, and Ulrika Gomm, who documented the action with a video camera. Duration: 58 minutes. The action was part of 'LIKA – a performance evening' at KAMARADE, Stockholm on 24 May 2011.

6 From The Netherlands Media Art Institute. Gina Pane, *Discours mou et mat*, 1975, videorecording, 22:32 min, available from LIMA, the international platform for sustainable access to media art <http://www.li-ma.nl/site/catalogue/art/gina-pane/discours-mou-et-mat/2848> [accessed 2 February 2020].

Figure 2. Malin Arnell, still from video documentation of *Reflect Soft Matte Discourse*, 2011, combined with a video still from Gina Pane's performance *Discours mou et mat*, 1975. Courtesy of the artist and the Galerie Kamel Mennour, Paris.

asserted that her attitude was 'absolutely not autobiographical'.[7] By using Gina Pane's instructions, I am firmly asserting that my attitude is autobiographical (but not authentic). Is that possible?

I follow the score to create experience through my body, along with an audience in a given place in a limited time span. Not to put forward the truth concerning *Discours mou et mat*, but instead in an attempt to take responsibility for what I do not know through doing, through action, through performance.

'I lose my identity to find it again in others, back and forth, balance between the individual and the collective, the transindividual body,' Gina Pane writes.[8]

THIS IS A MUTUAL ACT

There are different versions of the score for *Discours mou et mat*. I will now read the one available in the archive of De Appel in Amsterdam:

7 Pane, *Lettre à un(e) inconnu(e)*, p. 40: 'Attitude absolument pas autobiographie'. Quoted and translated in Baumgartner, 'Reviving the Collective Body', p. 263.

8 Pane, *Lettre à un(e) inconnu(e)*, p. 40: 'Je perds mon identité en la retrouvant chez les autres, va-et-vient, équilibre de l'individuel et collectif, le corps transindividuel.'

> In order to enter the performance space, visitors first had to sidestep a motorcycle that blocked the entrance. In the room, several objects had been placed as the scenery of the forthcoming performance: a safety helmet, boxing gloves, knuckle-dusters, a gold-painted golf ball and razor blade, red and white roses, plus a naked woman whose back had been decorated with blue stars.[9]
>
> The first scene lasted fifteen minutes. Pane entered the performance space, dressed in white pants, a white blouse, and high heels of the same colour. She wore sunglasses and had drawn blue stars on her left arm and hand. On the floor had been placed two mirrors, with sheets of glass on top. On the right mirror (from Pane's point of view), stars had been drawn, and the word 'aliénation' had been written on the glass. The left mirror was blank, but on the sheet of glass on top, the portrait of a person wearing shades had been drawn. The sunglasses reflected a mill and a field of tulips. Pane kneeled down behind the mirrors and played two cymbals of cardboard, with cotton wool on the insides. After this silent concert several slides were projected.
>
> During the second scene of five minutes, Pane smashed the sheets of glass with her fists.
>
> The next ten minutes Pane sat down on a stool, playing tennis with a ball that hung from the ceiling. She hit the ball with a racket and stopped it with her forehead.
>
> During the fourth scene, Pane crawled to the shattered sheets of glass to hit them once again, meanwhile gasping into a microphone.
>
> For scene five, that also took ten minutes, Pane cut a vertical incision in her upper and under lip with a razor blade.
>
> During the final scene, Pane laid down next to the naked woman and looked at the ceiling through binoculars. Meanwhile music by Brahms was played in slow-motion and some slides were shown.

There is also a clear difference between the political situations in Paris and Amsterdam in 1975 and the one in Stockholm in 2011. During the thirty-nine years that have passed since *Discours mou et mat* was performed, any number of political battles have been fought. Some of them are familiar, and some are not, probably different for all of us.

9 Gina Pane, *Discours mou et mat*, performance, Brouwersgracht, 28 June to 17 July 1975 <https://deappel.nl/en/events/gina-pane-discours-mou-et-mat> [accessed: 2 February 2020].

Figure 3. Malin Arnell, still from video documentation of *Reflect Soft Matte Discourse*, 2011, combined with a video still from Gina Pane's performance *Discours mou et mat*, 1975. Courtesy of the artist and the Galerie Kamel Mennour, Paris.

Then, in 1975: I was five years old. I was hiding in the woods, making up my own reality. Out there was the New Left, the Black Power movement, the war in Vietnam, the African independence movements, gay liberation movement, the situationist movement, the May 1968 revolt in Paris, the French structuralist feminism movement. Monique Wittig published *Les Guérillères and Le Corps Lesbien* (translated as *The Lesbian Body*).

Now: I have nowhere to hide. It's all around. It's inside. The inexorable growth of financial neoliberalism and concentration of wealth in fewer hands, the war on terror, the environmental catastrophe, the struggle to get through pessimism, the Arab spring, the Occupy Movement, Tiqqun in France, the revolts in Brazil and the deaths and confusion in Ukraine, the criminalization of homosexuality in Russia, and a Nordic region where xenophobia and racism are rampant, and the dismantling of the Swedish welfare state is at its peak.

And here we are. What battles are taking place right here right now? What is at stake?

In 1977, Gina Pane wrote:

> Before May 68, all living forces in Paris were working intensely to be able to get beyond the 'Social Criticism Theory' in order

> to be at peace with 'real life.' In this broken, upset environment, creativity was emerging everywhere. The confrontation of mine with the post-1968 public, benefited from a relationship that I could define as 'active' and my work was not only looked at, but lived.[10]

Gina Pane's actions, including her self-inflicted wounds, were motivated by her ambition to promote an idea of the body as a communal entity. Indeed, for her, this was the condition for a collective de-anesthetization.

> If I open my 'body' so that you can see your blood therein, it is for the love of you: the Other.[11]

There is a religious, spiritual aspect in Gina Pane's work. In this respect, her actions can be seen as a direct attempt to create a link between her own body and the spilling of blood associated, in Christianity, with redemption. The tone of Gina Pane's words is sometimes biblical, and she seems to be referring to an almost Christ-like wound when she cuts herself, when she opens the wound through her actions. When she cuts her lips, her eyelids, her abdomen, her tongue and upper arms. The wound stands for a state of the body's extreme sensitivity; it is a sign of suffering, a sign of external aggression. The wound recalls the situation of being the object of aggression, of always being exposed to violence.[12]

Gina Pane often used the word 'aggression'.[13]

Gina Pane once said that she had to perform *Discours mou et mat* to 'get her father and mother's relationship under control'. I thought

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10 'Avant Mai 68, toutes les forces vives de Paris travaillaient intensément pour parvenir à dépasser la "Théorie de la Critique Sociale" afin d'en assumer son "vécu". Dans ce climat éclaté, renversé, la créativité émergeait de toutes parts. La confrontation de la mienne avec le public d'après 1968 bénéficiait donc d'un rapport que je pourrais définir "d'Actif' et mon travail n'était pas seulement regardé mais vécu"' (Pane, 'Avant Mai 68', *Lettre à un(e) inconnu(e)*, p. 45. Written on 12 December 1977. Translated in Baumgartner, 'Reviving the Collective Body', p. 254).

11 Gina Pane, 'Lettre à un(e) inconnu(e)', in *ArTitudes international*, 15–17 (October–December 1974), pp. 26–35 (p. 34). 'Si j'ouvre mon "corps" afin que vous puissiez y regarder votre sang, c'est pour l'amour de vous: l'autre' trans. by Gina Pane.

12 See Mary Richards, 'Specular Suffering: (Staging) the Bleeding Body', *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art*, 30.1 (January 2008), pp. 108–19.

13 See Paweł Leszkowicz, 'Gina Pane — Self-Inflicted Pain Is You! Today Photographs Are All That Remain. We Can Only Imagine the Hurt', trans. by Timothy Williams, *Czas Kultury* (*Time of Culture*), 20.1 (2004), pp. 42–55 (p. 50).

I finally had that part under control.[14] And here I am, back in the middle of the psychoanalytic drama. Between consideration, offering, and acceptance.

The same year that Gina Pane performed *Discours mou et mat*, Hélène Cixous wrote *The Laugh of the Medusa*, in which she states:

> Woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies — for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text — as into the world and into history — by her own movement.[15]

Gina Pane never claimed to be a feminist, never firmly positioned herself as a lesbian, or dyke. In many of her works, she took a firm anti-bourgeois and anti-imperialist standpoint, and her fight was against the anesthetized society. She was neither an activist nor belonged to any political party, but she expressed a desire to challenge, through her work, 'the internal determinism' propped up by 'the regulatory systems'.

BETWEEN YOU AND ME

'Gina Pane's blood could not provide affirmation and succor for spectators, instead it demanded action.'[16]

When I decided to reenact *Discours mou et mat*, I tried to be very concrete in my approach to the material. I did not want to relate my actions to a predetermined narrative. I wanted to admit not knowing. Creating another narrative. Making a path. Following one. I wanted to point out the daily occurrence of violence. To point out that violence is always present.

Gina Pane wrote:

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14 Gina Pane, paraphrased in Antje von Graevenitz, 'Then and Now: Performance Art in Holland', *Studio International*, 192 (July–August 1976), pp. 49–53 (p. 52).

15 Hélène Cixous, 'The Laugh of the Medusa', trans. by Keith Cohen and Paula Cohen, *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 1.4 (Summer 1976), pp. 875–93.

16 Inge Linder-Gaillard, 'Stigmata, Icons and Reliquaries', in *Gina Pane* (Southampton: John Hansard Gallery, 2002) pp. 43–54 (p. 47).

Figure 4. Malin Arnell, still from video documentation of *Reflect Soft Matte Discourse*, 2011, combined with a video still from Gina Pane's performance *Discours mou et mat*, 1975. Courtesy of the artist and the Galerie Kamel Mennour, Paris.

> (The body is) the irreducible core of the human being, its most fragile part. This is how it has always been, under all social systems, at any given moment of history. And the wound is the memory of the body; it memorizes its fragility, its pain, thus its 'real' existence. It is a defense against the object and against the mental prosthesis.[17]

17 Ezio Quarantelli and Gina Pane, 'Travels with St. Francis: A Rare Discussion with the French Artist Who Is One of the Premiere Practitioners of Body Art', *Contemporanea*, 1.4 (November–December 1988), pp. 44–47 (p. 46). Quoted in Kathy O'Dell, *Contract With the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art, and the 1970s* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), p 27.

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