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Ephemeral Grotesque: The Confluence of Transience and Uncanniness in Viennese Actionism

Avishi Bohra

Neerja Modi School

avishi.b@nmsindia.org

Dr.Sejal Yadav

Independent Researcher

sejalmadhaviyadav@gmail.com

Abstract

The paper investigates the interplay between transience and uncanniness as defining characteristics of Viennese Actionism (VA), a radical performance art movement that emerged in post-war Vienna during the 1960s. Grounded in secondary research methodology following analysis of visual archives and theoretical records available, this study aims to explore how the ephemeral nature of the Actionists' performances shapes audience perceptions and contributes to the movement's broader cultural critique. Contextualising the VA within the socio-political landscape of Austria following World War II and emphasising the artists' intention to confront societal repression of trauma and the historical legacy of Nazism through visceral and shocking acts of performance, the paper highlights the uncanny as a significant aspect of the Actionists' work, drawing upon psychoanalytic theories from Freud, Lacan, and Kristeva, among others, to elucidate how the familiar becomes disturbingly strange within their performances. Revelations follow - actionists employed grotesque imagery, bodily abjection, and ritualistic violence to destabilise the viewer's sense of reality, compelling them to confront their discomfort and the repressed memories of a collective past. The findings further illustrate that the ephemeral quality of these performances serves as a mechanism for evoking the uncanny, where fleeting moments of revelation disrupt conventional perceptions of identity and existence. Through detailed analysis of key performances, such as Hermann Nitsch's Orgien-Mysterien-Theater (OMT) and Günter Brus's Self-Painting, the research demonstrates how the Actionists' radical engagements with the body not only challenge aesthetic norms but also expose the fragility of societal constructs surrounding morality and history. Ultimately, this paper posits that the intersection of the ephemeral and the uncanny is crucial to understanding the impact of VA, revealing how these transient moments resonate within the psyche of both the audience and the performers, thus contributing to the ongoing discourse surrounding trauma, identity, and the role of art as a catalyst for confronting uncomfortable truths in a post-traumatic society.

Keywords

Ephemeral, Grotesque, Performance Art, Psychoanalysis, Uncanny, Viennese Actionism

Introduction

The Viennese Actionism (VA) (Wiener Aktionismus) was a radical, violent, explicit but short-lived performance art movement developed during the 1960-70s, by its four main performers Grunter Brus, Otto Muehl, Hermann Nitsch, and Rudolf Schawrzkogler (and several others who joined shortly) to progress matters of body art, Happenings, Fluxus, and action painting (Schmatz, 1992); "Actionism", is an English version of the common German term for performance art.

Aiming to "tear the mask off society" and disrupt Austria's dominant sanitised view by exposing its underlying hypocrisies and uncomfortable truths (Seserko-Ostrogonac, 2010), especially within Vienna's post war restrictive political and cultural climate (Parent, 2018), the artists used their works (their Actions*)* to make repellent and illicit statements (Isaacs, 2022), strongly communicating their dissatisfaction with the uptight bourgeois and the government prevalent in Austria after World War II (Seserko-Ostrogonac, 2010). Notwithstanding the social amnesia enforced by the state (Guðmundsdóttir, 2022), which thwarted any kind of reckoning to the country's Nazi past, the brutalities the Nazi's executed and the role played by the public in the crimes committed (Guðmundsdóttir, 2024), the artists drew upon the sense of disillusionment in the conservative values and collective denial in Austrian society (Bulatov, 2019).

With a strong sense of belief that the horrors of the past were repressed in the social unconscious of the public (Hinderliter, 2014), and also the fact that Fascist ideology and Catholisicm - whose influence extended into the laws and moral systems, still informed the social psychology of the Austrian conservative bourgeois culture (Parent, 2018) - the actionists seeked to disintegrate these sources of individual and collective restraints and breaks strict moral codes around sexuality, body, behaviour, and the psychological being (Isaacs, 2022).

Actions were performed not to create beauty or provide comfort but rather to unveil the dark undercurrents of modern life (Widrich, 2013; Bulatov, 2019). The movement was therefore efficacious and hence more ritual than it was entertaining (Isaacs, 2022). The art they created was deliberately shocking (Barber, 2004), including self-torture (Guðmundsdóttir, 2024), bodily fluids, naked bodies, corporeal abjection, disturbing movements, and references to virility, sexuality, masculinity (Guðmundsdóttir, 2024), and violence (Barber, 2004). Use of

organic material such as blood, milk, urine, entrails (Barber, 2004) and naked bodies instead of canvases as ‘surface’ in their carefully controlled performances underscored the dejection that they thought hid behind Austrian post-war life (Seserko-Ostrogonac, 2010).

By moulding ordinary material into grotesque imagery (Parent, 2018) - such as done by Muehl’s use of daily objects to depict female genitalia (Barber, 2004) - the Actionists attacked ‘normal’ society, dismantling its conventions (Weiner, 2015) and forcing it to reveal repressed destructive impulses resulting from the war (Widrich, 2013). Sacrificial and Christian symbolism, including crucifixes and sacrificial imagery (Blau, 2009), invoked visceral religious aspects (Guðmundsdóttir, 2024) while simultaneously desecrating them, challenging the ideas of ‘purity’ and ‘sin’ (Seserko-Ostrogonac, 2010). Further, the ‘Body’ was viewed as a site of existential conflict between individuality and societal control; it was used not merely as a tool for expression but as an embodiment of personal and collective suffering. So, using degrading/violent processes, in their performances they stripped the body of codified social references (Bulatov, 2019). Most of their Actions were interpreted as aggressive assault on mainstream culture, attracting the attention of authorities and leading to the criminal prosecution of some of the group’s members (Barber, 2004).

Before the rise of VA in the 1960s, Vienna’s art scene was dominated by conservative styles, reflecting Austria's reluctance to confront its role in World War II and a nostalgic attachment to its imperial past (Seserko-Ostrogonac, 2010). While Abstract Expressionism was gaining traction globally (Seserko-Ostrogonac, 2010), Vienna clung to classical forms, marginalising avant-garde artists who struggled to gain visibility (Jarosi, 2013). Although early-20th-century Secessionists like Klimt and Schiele had pioneered experimental ideas (Simpson, n.d.), by the 1950s, any avant-garde momentum had faded (Lorena Fonseca, n.d.), and the few artists inspired by post-war European movements lacked support. The cultural environment was characterised by a high degree of control (Jarosi, 2013), with galleries and art institutions often closely aligned with political ideologies, supporting only “safe” or non-controversial art like Informel. VA emerged as a radical response to this stagnant environment (Seserko-Ostrogonac, 2010).

Various art movements and artists influenced shaping VA, including Antonin Artaud, whose theories and writings had a tremendous impact (Foster et al., 2004). Artaud was interested in psychological repression and the alienating effects of contemporary culture, aligning with the

Actionists' aim to disrupt the oppressive status quo and undo psychological repression through shocking and transgressive actions (Isaacs, 2022). While the term "Ostranenie" or "Defamiliarization" associated with "Soviet Formalism" is not explicitly used in the provided sources, the Actionists did aim to estrange viewers from conventional perceptions of the body, sex, and social interactions by challenging bourgeois morals and values (Guðmundsdóttir, 2024), transgressing boundaries of civil propriety (Parent, 2018), using shocking imagery (Guðmundsdóttir, 2024), and exploring the body as an analytic object and libidinal site (Foster et al., 2004). While Actionists reacted against the conventional techniques of Tachisme and Action Painting (Seserko-Ostrogonac, 2010), they drew inspiration from international avant-garde art including Fluxus and Happenings (Blau, 2009), sharing interests like using the human body as a medium and material (Jarosi, 2013) and participating in gatherings like the Destruction in Art Symposium (Hinderliter, 2014). They were known for their anti-establishment stance and radical opposition against the state and bourgeois culture (Guðmundsdóttir, 2024). They incorporated irrationality (Hinderliter, 2014) and used provocative, taboo-breaking art to challenge bourgeois values and morals (Guðmundsdóttir, 2024) and expose underlying hypocrisies (Guðmundsdóttir, 2022).

Research Gap

While existing literature has extensively examined the thematic and aesthetic elements of VA, particularly its provocative and socially critical dimensions (Jarosi, 2013), there remains a significant void in the scholarly exploration of the uncanny nature of the movement. The Actionists were profoundly influenced by psychological theories, including psychoanalysis (Foster et al., 2004), showing a distinct interest in probing the psyche and the unconscious (Parent, 2018), often employing concepts like abreaction and catharsis (Guðmundsdóttir, 2022) rooted in the release of suppressed instincts and unconscious force (Jarosi, 2013). Psychoanalytic theory, as discussed in the sources, engages deeply with the unconscious and concepts like repression (Lacan & Fink, 2006) and the body in performance (Isaacs, 2022). Rahimi's work also links psychoanalysis, the visual, and the uncanny to fundamental aspects of the sense of self and reality formation (Rahimi, 2013). While general unsettling aspects and provocation are often noted, most analyses fail to delve into how Actionist works specifically and intentionally distort familiar human forms and everyday objects to evoke feelings of unease and dislocation (Writings of the Vienna Actionists), linking these effects to theories of the uncanny (Freud, 1919; Rahimi, 2013). The specific methods employed, such as the use of the human body or animal carcasses as artistic materials, their manipulation,

actions involving smearing with various substances like paint, meat, and bodily fluids, the incorporation of blood, carcasses, and entrails, the presentation of carefully posed, sometimes bandaged bodies in masochistic tableaux, and works exploring perpetual disfiguration and the pathological body through self-painting and mutilation, as well as the use of materials like pork dripping and inexplicable prostheses, contributed to a grotesque visuality aimed at provoking reflexive painful reactions and reactivating sensitivity/empathy by "getting under people's skin" (Rahimi, 2013). These descriptions of Actionist methods are drawn from our previous conversation history and may not be explicitly detailed in the current set of sources, but the psychological frameworks for understanding their impact are present (Lacan & Fink, 2006; Isaacs, 2022).

Furthermore, there is a notable lack of meticulous examination into temporal psychology and the perception of the ephemeral nature of this art. The sources suggest that art can be subject to analysis based on physical properties, but also highlight the challenges in studying aspects that are not static or easily quantifiable across different populations or over time (Fekete et al, 2022). Foucault's work, while not directly on Actionism, grapples with the nature of discourse, its historical formation, dispersion, discontinuity, and appearance in sudden irruption rather than continuous origin, which provides a theoretical lens for considering the ephemeral nature of events and their relation to documentation and historical understanding (Foucault, 2013). Parent also touches on the idea of recursion in media and history, noting challenges in capturing ephemeral events and potential "historical blind spots" in documentation (Parent, 2018). The Actionist events were typically performed as unique, quasi-ritualistic events with an ephemeral duration, vanishing as their intensity burned out, posing challenges for their historical preservation and analysis beyond documentation (Writings of the Vienna Actionists). While some research has explored the psychological impact of static art, including audience engagement and emotional reactions (Fekete et al 2022), the specific psychological effects of transience in art, particularly within the context of Actionism's fleeting performances, have not been scrutinised in detail in the provided sources (Foucault, 2013; Fekete et al 2022).

This paper, therefore, aims to investigate how these two seemingly antagonistic properties—the uncanny/bizarre elements and the transient/fleeting nature—interact to leave an impact, either short or long-lived, on both the audience and the creator. The paper will also

explore how these properties contribute to defining VA itself and how the bizarre elements of the Viennese Actions are situated within their transient or fleeting nature.

Research Question

How do the antagonistic elements of transience and uncanniness shape the Viennese Actionism as a whole?

The 'Uncanny' has been defined and redefined by many psychological theorists, each attempting to capture its complete, elusive and unsettling nature, or contextualise it within the human psyche. First popularised by Freud's foundational work in 'The Uncanny (1919)' (Freud, 1919) (Windsor, 2020), the concept expanded with Lacan's, Jentsch's, and Kristeva's, linking it to the unconscious, the symbolic, the abject and the unfamiliar. Following collective contributions and extensive revision through time, the concept has become central to psychoanalysis, exploring the intersection between perception, identity and the eerie return of what is familiar yet strange, and fleeting. For this research, we define the uncanny with the ephemeral—that which is transient - to explore how this interplay shapes VA. For me to place the uncanny within VA, it is pertinent that I establish that the movement, with its deliberate and unsettling manipulation of the human form and experience, is inherently suited for such scrutiny. In essence, and through condensation, uncanny is the unsettling experience of the familiar becoming estranged, dismantling boundaries between the known and unknown, self and other, revealing the discomfort of confronting the return of repressed or forgotten aspects of the psyche, and often leading to horror and anxiety.

VA, with its subversive agenda to expose the unspoken truths of post-war Austrian society, finds a natural resonance with the concept of the uncanny (Seserko-Ostrogonac, 2010). The artists sought to reveal the grotesque underbelly of a nation whose collective memory was marred by the repression of its Nazi past (Seserko-Ostrogonac, 2010), employing visceral, often disturbing materials to force confrontation with the uncomfortable realities long buried in the social unconscious (Guðmundsdóttir, 2024). The uncanny emerges in their work precisely through this unsettling return of the repressed, where familiar human experiences are recontextualised in alienating, grotesque forms that destabilise the viewer's perception of reality: the unsettling recognition of the familiar becoming disturbingly strange. Further, the

movement's deliberate engagement with bodily mutilation, ritualistic violence, and grotesque imagery (Isaacs, 2022) renders the familiar human body and everyday objects disturbingly unfamiliar, bringing the uncanny to the forefront of the viewer's experience. The uncanny arises when something familiar becomes alien, and Nitsch's work exemplifies this phenomenon as he subverts the familiar rituals of human existence, such as birth and death, into grotesque and unsettling spectacles. The viewers are made to confront their discomfort, their own unconscious fears, as the boundaries between the known and the unknown, the sacred and the profane, are utterly destabilised.

Historiography of the Uncanny and the Ephemeral

Ernst Jentsch, the German psychiatrist, first used the term uncanny in his essay *On the Psychology of the Uncanny* (1906), where he describes the uncanny (*unheimlich* or unhomely) as something new and unknown, initially perceived as negative (Jentsch, 1997). He examines the uncanny by introducing a distinct and intricate perspective, grounded not solely in emotional or psychological disturbance but in the cognitive uncertainty surrounding the distinction between animate and inanimate objects. His approach, rooted in cognitive psychology, underscores the intellectual confusion that arises when an object straddles the boundary between living and lifeless, unsettling our sense of reality, and also when the familiar and the unfamiliar collapse into one another. Jentsch argues that it is precisely this failure of categorisation that gives rise to the uncanny (Jentsch, 1997). Similarly, the ephemeral—by its very nature, ever-shifting and transient—can contribute to this uncertainty, both lingering at the periphery of consciousness, offering momentary glimpses of unsettling familiarity before fading away, leaving no stable trace. This aligns with the uncanny's tendency to defy permanence, to appear as something fleeting yet persistently jarring in its very brief existence.

Sigmund Freud, in *The Uncanny* (1919), reoriented the phenomenon in terms of the tension between the familiar and the alien. He defines the uncanny as "that class of frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar" (Freud, 2003). The paradox he explores is that the uncanny emerges when something familiar is suddenly encountered as foreign or strange again (Windsor, 2020). This aligns with VA's objectives, while Jentsch's emphasis on uncertainty and confusion regarding the distinctions between life and death, real and illusory, better aligns with the art produced by the movement at face value. Freud highlights how the

uncanny is deeply affective, rooted in repressed fears and unresolved conflicts, rather than a purely intellectual phenomenon (Frd, 2003). He asserts, “It (the uncanny) belongs to all that is terrible “to all that arouses dread and creeping horror… so it tends to coincide with whatever excites dread.” Freud’s linguistic exploration of *unheimlich* in German reveals how the familiar (*heimlich*) also encompasses the secret or concealed, meaning its negation (*unheimlich*) brings forth the hidden into public view. The uncanny, then, occurs when the most intimate interior coincides with the external world, provoking horror and anxiety. He further elaborates on two classes of the uncanny: one emerging from the persistence of animistic beliefs and magical thinking beneath the surface of rational modernity, the other from unresolved conflicts and suppressed desires. The former, tied to primitive thought structures, does not disappear but remains latent, resurfacing in uncanny experiences, creating a disturbing sense of familiarity yet estrangement. The second class arises from childhood fears and unresolved psychic trauma (Freud, 2003). Freud points to the persistence of early childhood complexes, particularly castration anxiety, symbolised by the fear of losing one’s eyes, as articulated in Hoffmann's *The Sand-Man* (Windsor, 2020; Windsor, 2018). The ephemeral quality of the uncanny manifests here, as these repressed fears return fleetingly in fragmented moments of terror, only to dissipate as quickly as they emerge.

For Jacques Lacan, the uncanny is not merely a return of the repressed but a confrontation with the Real—the unrepresentable dimension of experience that resists symbolization (Lacan, 2001). Whereas Freud’s uncanny highlights a return of repressed experiences, Lacan focuses on the limits of the Symbolic order, where meaning and language break down. Lacan suggests that the uncanny arises not from what is repressed but from what cannot be fully articulated in language. This gap between what is known and what remains unknowable creates a profound disturbance and a feeling of estrangement (Lacan, 2006). While Freud’s uncanny disturbs perception, where familiar things become unfamiliar, Lacan’s uncanny is more concerned with the subject's relation to their image and the destabilisation of meaning itself. Lacan builds upon Freud’s concept of the double, but where Freud associates the double with repressed fears of death, Lacan sees it as integral to the illusion of a coherent self, which inevitably fractures upon deeper examination. The uncanny, for Lacan, thus becomes a reflection of the tension between the imagined ideal self and the fragmented reality of subjectivity (Lacan, 2006). This momentary collision between idealised and actual self evokes a fleeting unease, reinforcing the uncanny’s ephemeral nature.

Contemporary scholar Julia Kristeva expands upon the uncanny. In Powers of Horror (1980), she introduces the concept of abjection, distinct from but related to the uncanny. Abjection involves the process by which a subject defines itself by expelling what it considers "impure" or "other," such as bodily fluids, decay, or death (Kristeva, 1982). Unlike the uncanny, which emerges when something familiar becomes estranged, abjection is a radical rejection of what threatens the boundaries of selfhood. The abject does not merely unsettle - it provokes disgust, forcing a visceral reaction, often in a fleeting, overwhelming instant before psychic defences re-engage, meant to preserve the separations between the acceptable and the unacceptable (Kristeva, 1982). If the uncanny blurs the line between the known and the unknown, the abject exposes the fragility of these lines altogether. The abject disrupts cultural and psychological boundaries, exposing our deep-seated fears of contamination and dissolution (Kristeva, 1982). By confronting us with what we repudiate, the abject forces recognition of what the subject violently expels to sustain its identity, creating a paradoxical space where repulsion coexists with fascination. This dynamic plays a crucial role in cultural and artistic expressions, as literature and art frequently invoke the abject to question societal norms and reveal the instability of identity.

As we synthesise the uncanny and the ephemeral, it becomes evident that the uncanny's fleeting nature contributes to its unsettling effect. It lingers between knowing and not knowing, recognition and alienation. Within the context of VA, this interplay is particularly significant. The uncanny is bound to its transient presence within performances, momentarily confronting repressed elements before disappearing. Its elusive nature allows it to be both remembered and forgotten, creating a paradox of permanence in absence. This brings us to central questions: Is the uncanny ephemeral because it is uncanny? Or is it remembered (and thus not truly ephemeral) because it evokes the uncanny? How does this interplay inform the understanding of VA?

Having outlined the relevant theories and developments surrounding the 'Uncanny' and established a strong foreground stounderstanding the 'Uncanny' as ephemeral, as well as having strongly determined the 'Uncanny' in the VA, I will now examine further this intersection, exploring the diverse forms, using critical psychological theories from psycho-analysts and critiques including but not limited to Kristeva, Freud, Lacan, Jenstch, etc, as to how the uncanny and ephemeral interacts with VA and further shapes/defines the movement as a whole.

Freud

The Freudian uncanny, rooted in etymology, and an encounter with unsettling, repressed psychological realities marked by a concealment/revelation tension, often manifests ephemerally as fleeting history, trauma, or fragmented identity (Dolar, 1991; Jarosi, 2013; Lacan & Fink, 2006). Freud posits its emergence from revived infantile complexes or surmounted primitive beliefs - a "return of the repressed" (archaic thoughts included) that, often in transient bursts, disturbs temporal continuity via recurrences and momentary resurgence of repressed feeling (Freud, 1919; Windsor, 2020). Trauma's manifestation via deferred action (Nachträglichkeit) reveals a complex, fleetingly perceived, non-linear temporal structure (Lacan & Fink, 2006), a disruption central to Actionism's impact.

VA deliberately operates within this Freudian framework (Seserko-Ostrogonac, 2011), acting as an "interruption of the static by the deliberate evocation of the 'past'" (Bulatov, 2019), through intensely ephemeral performances designed to rupture psychic and social complacency. Actionists emerged in post-war Vienna, a society unreconciled with its WWII trauma (Seserko-Ostrogonac, 2011), encouraging "social amnesia" (Guðmundsdóttir, 2022) by sanitising its history, ignoring Austria's complicity, and promoting an official "victim myth" (Hinderliter, 2014). This societal dissonance - collective amnesia meeting a moral renewal myth - created an environment ripe for this resurfacing of historical trauma (Seserko-Ostrogonac, 2011; Windsor, 2020), aligning with the psychoanalytic understanding of the uncanny as a sudden, shocking return. Trauma’s resistance to encapsulation and its tendency to return - often suddenly and fleetingly yet with profound psychic weight - was central to VA (Bulatov, 2019). Abreaction, Hermann Nitsch appropriation, signifies reliving traumatic experience through repetition (Seserko-Ostrogonac, 2011), frequently within time-bound, concentrated ephemeral rituals. Through visceral bodily enactments (Bulatov, 2019), often involving shock (Parent, 2018) and extreme acts of violence and degradation staged as transient events confronting collective memory (Foster et al., 2004), the Actionists confronted repressed history. This uncanny emergence, a momentary shattering of denial via performative immediacy, occurred when societal repression crumbled, awakening Vienna to long-buried horrors and the impossibility of escaping the past, often triggered by these brief, potent artistic interventions.

The confrontation's ephemerality - often marked by intense, brief performances (Barber, 2004) - is crucial, mimicking repression's elusive temporality: memory returning as a suddenly unsettling, ephemeral spectre whose transience amplifies its uncanny power. Film and photography became essential residues, capturing traces of events whose primary impact was their fleeting, live execution (Barber, 2004). Nitsch's OMT, notably its 1998 six-day realisation, exemplified confronting the present with past "barbarous violence" (Jarosi, 2013), amplifying a psychological "dramatisation of a historical momentum" (Seserko-Ostrogonac, 2011). These temporally finite events involved grotesque spectacles with real blood, bodies, and animal carcasses, depicting death and decay (Braber, 2004; Bulatov, 2019). Such actions, with raw imagery and sensory assault, aimed to collapse temporality during the psychic return within the unrepeatable performance (Guðmundsdóttir, 2022). Recurring symbols like the slaughtered lamb, encountered in these intense, transient contexts, furthered these themes (Widrich, 2013).

Actionists' performances, with visceral body-based imagery, function as ephemeral sites of re-traumatisation where violence, decay, and death converge in transient yet psychically impactful ways (Isaacs, 2022). Brus's Stress Test (1970), or Mühl's Enmiring of a Female Body (1963), (and other filmed actions like Action 137. Impudence In Grunewald and Mama And Papa), provided stark, fleeting encounters with the uncanny. Often secret or for camera (Weiner, 2015), these performances, by brevity and intensity, exposed fragile temporal boundaries (Jarosi, 2013), making the transient moment a potent source of uncanny disruption (Kristeva, 1982). The ephemeral here is a psychological strategy, mirroring repression's haunting, sudden, overwhelming quality. The works speak of bodily/temporal decomposition, where grotesque revelation reinforces traumatic ephemerality that Freud suggests marks such a return of repressed content (Windsor, 2020), an experience made more acute by performative transience (Jarosi, 2013). Each act, blood flash, or death invocation was a fleeting burst of traumatic recognition (Isaacs, 2022), an uncanny moment (Windsor, 2020) never fully forming stable memory due to its rapid passing, yet leaving an indelible, if temporally unmoored and psychically resonant, mark (Lacan, 2001). Brus's sadomasochistic character reflected expressionistic opposition to power; Muehl focused on destruction, employing blasphemy and "cesspool aesthetics" as "moral expedients" (Foster et al., 2004), all enacted within these impactful, temporally limited events (Windsor, 2020).

Intense audience reactions (Windsor, 2020), like vomiting during a birth simulation (Guðmundsdóttir, 2020), exemplified visceral responses (Isaacs, 2022) to fleeting, uncanny spectacles. Otto Muehl's filmed actions, such as Action 137 and Mama And Papa, used the body for radical, momentary, shocking transgressions against social taboos (Foster et al., 2004). His actions, exposing concealed body parts or repressed behaviours (urination/defecation) (Guðmundsdóttir, 2024), aimed to overturn norms through brief, potent provocations (Foster et al., 2004), exposing the 'social unconscious' (Seserko-Ostrogonac, 2011) and turning the body's reality inside out in a fleeting, revelatory instant (Guðmundsdóttir, 2024). Muehl's "material actions" used substances like food, paint, and blood in choreographed performances where sexual organs were manipulated, their uncanny power concentrated in their ephemeral, unrepeatable nature (Barber, 2004). These acts induced shock, amplified by their sudden, transient appearance. Muehl's Direct Art aimed to "punish Austria with grim visions" in impactful, fleeting forms. In Ornament Is a Crime (1966), Mühl and Brus smeared themselves. The ephemeral revelation of the body in these performances refused neat categorisation, exposing life's transient, unresolved aspects and transforming the familiar body into something strange within its momentary, uncanny appearance, where its primal, animalistic nature resonated. Through violent, transient disruption, Mühl's performances underscored the explosive convergence of the ephemeral and unsettling.

Nitsch's OMT (e.g., the 1998 realisation) thrust audiences into visceral, temporally concentrated encounters with death and decay using animal blood, entrails, and carcasses (Jarosi, 2013). Nitsch aimed for abreaction - cathartic release of repressed emotions - through intense, concentrated experience within a defined timeframe. This work divested art of aesthetic distance, presenting disturbing imagery of bodies cut/mutilated within the performance's ritualistic duration. His 3rd Aktion (1963) and early Blood Organ (1962) (nailed lamb carcass, splattered blood) were precedents carrying immense symbolic/uncanny weight despite their brevity (Barber, 2004). Freud's uncanny instances—the paradoxical living/dead realm (Freud, 2003), the double's anxiety, "evil eye," cut-off limbs - resonate in these fleeting displays, their horror heightened by their sudden, unassimilable appearance (Barber, 2004). Freud noted the blurring of animate/inanimate boundaries (Freud, 2003), a confusion heightened in transient performative contexts. Jentsch (discussed by Freud) (Isaacs, 2022) highlighted doubt concerning an animate being's life or a lifeless object's animation (e.g., wax-works) (Windsor, 2020), a doubt amplified by the fleeting, ambiguous nature of

Actionist presentations. The Actionists' treatment of the body - reducing it to material or subjecting it to decay within ephemeral performances - echoed this blurring. The body became an uncanny site: the familiar form, in a fleeting instant, could transform into something object-like or grotesque, briefly collapsing subject/object distinctions (Barber, 2004).

The doppelgänger, embodying self-preservation and existential dread (Freud, 2003), is central to VA and Freud's uncanny, often manifesting in fleeting, repetitive performative appearances. Freud's "double" is a significant source of this feeling, linked to the ego's doubling, starkly revealed in momentary confrontations (Freud, 2003). Initially an "insurance against destruction to the ego," the double transforms into a "ghastly harbinger of death" (Freud, 2003), a transformation often enacted in an Action's transient, unrepeatable space (Widrich, 2013). Brief, intense, violent rituals (cutting, bleeding) evoke the doppelgänger as a symbol of vulnerability, its impact amplified by ephemeral execution. Brus's self-mutilating art, performed as fleeting, searing events, exemplifies this. Schwarzkogler's masochistic tableaux, often captured in photographs preserving a transient, staged moment, carried "intense affective charge" inseparable from "very real psychological risks" (Weiner, 2015). Such self-mutilation or symbolic splitting, staged as ephemeral encounters, confronts the unconscious, revealing the self's lack of cohesion, bringing forth 'extimité' (where familiar is alien) in a sudden, uncanny flash. Repetition of violent acts (e.g., Schwarzkogler's Wedding (1965)) embodies Freud's death drive (Wiederholungszwang), its horror concentrated by performative, ephemeral reality. Lacan theorises this as traumatic repetition: tuché (a fleeting, failed re-encounter with the Real) and automaton (fractured consciousness). This repressed death drive manifests as a "paroxystic metaphor of psychic functioning"(Rahimi, 2013) palpable in Actions' transient, shocking violence, confronting audiences with the "horror of the real" in momentary bursts of uncanny recognition (Windsor, 2018).

Freud's uncanny, stemming from revived infantile complexes, manifests potently in VA through the resurfacing of wartime traumas, often experienced as sudden, intrusive, flashback-like moments within fleeting performances. Muehl's actions, rooted in war experiences (Barber, 2004), transmitted memories through brief, shocking gestures. Nitsch's vision, shaped by childhood war memories, resurfaced with traumatic recall's sudden, uncanny quality (Seserko-Ostrogonac, 2011), mirrored in his ephemeral rituals' intensity. Schwarzkogler's father's suicide aligns with this trauma engagement, its impact ephemerally

re-experienced via art's confrontational immediacy (Barber, 2004). This psychic return resonates in VA's violent, transient spectacles, resuscitating experience by breaking collective repression in momentary enactments. The body becomes a fragmented trauma site, echoing Freud's observation on dismembered parts, provoking uncanny feelings - an image made more unsettling by its fleeting, hallucinatory presentation in an Action. Brus's Self-Paintings illustrate this, his body undergoing "perpetual disfiguration" in transient states. Muehl's technique of "smashing, cutting open, defiling, mixing up" embodies this fragmentation, often enacted with brutal, ephemeral energy. Nitsch's use of torture instruments created visceral, time-limited confrontations with decay/violence, furthering his abreaction aim (Carruthurs, 1970). Schwarzkogler's 3rd Action, with its bandaged, possibly dead figure (Barber, 2004), evokes disturbing ambiguity - a fleeting, uncanny tableau of suffocation and mutilation. This ephemerally presented manipulation blurs life/death boundaries, mirroring the uncanny's dread-inducing collapse of rational categories in a brief, intense moment. The Actionists' shattering/reconstruction of the body and blurring of animate/inanimate distinctions forced audiences to confront repressed fears and the ego's precarious unity, magnified by the uncanny encounter's sudden, transient nature.

Brus's Self-Painting and Self-Mutilation actions exemplify this ephemeral/uncanny convergence (Novero, 2007). His art centred on the "dissolution of integrity of self" (Bulatov, 2019), his disfigured body becoming "intent, event, result" within each fleeting, unrepeatable performance (Green, 1999). He cut his shirt/chest, let blood drip, drank urine, defecated, and rubbed excrement on his body (Novero, 2007) - each transient act contributing to an overall uncanny transformation. These "violent self-interrogation" acts transformed the body into a grotesque, alien form - a visual representation of the Freudian uncanny - challenging cohesive selfhood, amplified by each degradation's unrepeatable, momentary nature. For Brus, the "materiality of human body and political identity of citizen subject" were intertwined; violence applied to the body in brief, shocking gestures sought to "overturn originary violence" (Hinderliter, 2014). His work, aiming to "unscreen hidden operations of both power and human body" and explore "animality" to "find human in [a] space of bankrupt citizen," reflected profound psychological disorientation. Through its "radical nature of bodily analysis," condensed into powerful, ephemeral statements, it "resulted in obsolescence of representation in art," merging sign/idea - each fleeting performance a testament to this collapse (Seserko-Ostrogonac, 2011).

Lacan

In VA, palpable tension emerges as artists engineered the breakdown of social structures and language (the Symbolic order), forcing an encounter, often startlingly brief yet psychically resonant, with the raw, unsymbolized core of existence: Lacan's Real (Novero, 2007). This antagonistic approach cultivates the uncanny, an unsettling irruption where the familiar becomes disturbingly strange, its impact amplified by the performative moment's fleeting intensity. From a Lacanian perspective, this deliberate, temporally bound rupture shatters the Imaginary's cohesive, idealised self-image. The subject confronts an alienating distortion (Isaacs, 2022), a morcellement (fragmentation) compelling engagement, however transient, with their oack-of-being (Dolar, 1991) and perception's structural limits (Rahimi, 2013). The uncanny here is not a simple aesthetic effect but the affective trace of a traumatic, momentary confrontation with the Real - a force shaping Actionism's performative violence. Transient yet aiming for lasting psychic inscription, this violence critiques postwar Austrian society by exposing, in a flash of horrific recognition, the fundamental "illusoriness of the ego" - an entity Lacan identified with misrecognition. While echoing Freud's notion of the uncanny as a return of the repressed, Lacan locates this familiarity in the psyche's formation, where the Actionist encounter's suddenness mimics a traumatic return or missed encounter (tuché) with the Real.

A primary mechanism for inducing this Lacanian uncanny, concentrated within the performance's ephemeral duration, was the direct assault on the Symbolic order, particularly language. Günter Brus's performances exemplify this. In *Head Destruction* (1966), by chewing and swallowing scribbled notes - a regression from speech to visceral incorporation within a finite timeframe (Hinderliter, 2014) - he enacted distrust of language (Barber, 2004), aiming to "break" its phallic structure and expose its inability to grasp the Real. This drive to "annihilate rational communication" was furthered in Otto Muehl's *Entzweckung*, like *Excremental Theatre* (1969), which dismantled symbolic meaning within the action's fleeting passage. Employing abject materials and treating the human as object, Muehl voided actions of conventional significance. He created temporally delimited spaces where familiar categories collapsed, leaving audiences to confront "raw, unspeakable aspects of existence" in a profoundly unsettling, if brief, manner. His "total actions," conceived as "ritualised spaces of inefficiency" designed for "rapid self-consumption," used transience to prevent

Symbolic suture or the emergence of a master-signifier capable of re-containing the Real's eruption.

The Lacanian "double" - the inherently split self-image haunting the subject from the mirror stage - is invoked in Rudolf Schwarzkogler's uncanny aesthetics, often captured in photographs freezing otherwise ephemeral moments of bodily transformation. His staged Actions, like *Action 3* (1965), rendered the body "alien, even unthinkable" through progressive wrapping and "inexplicable prostheses" (hoses, bandages) (Weiner, 2015). This presented a self not merely unrecognisable but a horrifying, transient materialisation of the *object a*. The body became a dehumanised, partial object, evoking uncanny recognition of the subject's constitutive lack. Its potential dissolution into objecthood was made vivid in the controlled yet fleeting tableau. For Lacan, the ego is the seat of such uncanny phenomena (Dolar, 1991). Schwarzkogler's "masochistic tableaux," focused on the "moment, the punctum temporis," despite "near-photographic stillness" (a temporal suspension), conveyed affective charge inseparable from "very real psychological risks," making the familiar body a spectacle of potential disintegration - a "non-referential singularity" whose impact resonated beyond the brief performative moment.

Crucially, Actionism manipulated the audience's gaze to induce the uncanny and implicate them in this temporally concentrated confrontation with the Real. Lacan's gaze - not merely looking but an encounter with an external point from which the subject is seen - reveals the self's instability, opening "a hole in reality" (Dolar, 1991). VALIE EXPORT's *Action Pants: Genital Panic* (1969) subverted this gaze in a specific, fleeting public encounter. Exposing her genitals in a cinema, she forced audiences to "confront a real female body instead of its representation on film" (Parent, 2018). This aggressive, momentary display made the gaze itself an object of anxiety, confronting viewers with the Real of sexual difference. Her act - an "embodied stance against the Symbolic order" - imposed confrontation with the finite materiality of existence, and therefore with death, making visible the scopic field's phallic organisation in that unrepeatable instant. The mirror stage became a site of traumatic rupture, confronting the viewer with a "distorted, fragmented version of the self" as caught by the Real of the other's gaze in the action's brief timespan.

The experience of "the gaze of the Real" - where the subject sees themselves as object, provoking "shattering anxiety" - was a consistent aim, often achieved through a

performance's intense, ephemeral climax (Rahimi, 2013). Brus's *Zerreißprobe*, his naked, shaved, self-injured body challenging masculine ideals, embodies this encounter: a fleeting, visceral tableau trapping audiences in an unsettling feedback loop, their horrified gaze met by the Real of his suffering, implicating them in his abjection. His deliberate self-wounding aimed to get "under your skin" by inscribing the Real of suffering onto the social field in a performative flash, exposing art's fragility and societal violence. This "self-mutilation" moved toward the "obsolescence of representation," demonstrating the signifier's failure to represent the traumatised body within the instant (Jarosi, 2013). In that moment, the body became the site of the Real's irruption - a distortion of the idealised body-image, uncanny in its alienation and intensified by sudden appearance. As "living sculpture," Brus walked Vienna "uncannily - half corpse, half living," his transient form presenting the familiar body as disturbingly other: a mobile sculpture momentarily revealing the subject's alienation from their specular image. Shattering the Symbolic impacts the Imaginary, precipitating uncanny, fragmented self-representation (Dolar, 1991) - a fragility made palpable in the action's unrepeatable nature. Muehl's *Material Actions* similarly provoked corporeal confrontation with the formless Real: "out of control" Muehlian bodies smeared in abject substances erupted into time without warning, their shock value inseparable from ephemerality. This "outrageous exposure of 'bodily delusions'" sought to strip the body of codified referents, demonstrating existence's paradoxical nature. In both Brus and Muehl, audiences, unable to Symbolize these momentary, visceral displays, were left to confront the "horror of disintegration," the uncanny fragility of the body-image when Symbolic supports falter - a recognition that, as Green notes, the "body image... is product of social flux" (Green, 1999), and thus inherently unstable.

Through such antagonistic, often brief but impactful strategies, VA ruptured "collectively enforced repression" (Foster et al., 2004). The "taboo-breaking" nature of their performances, often "almost unbearable" (Novero, 2007) due to concentrated intensity, sought confrontation with the Real's traumatic kernel (Parent, 2018). Presenting "grim visions" and inflicting "new injuries" (Hinderliter, 2014) in these transient acts (Weiner, 2015), they exposed the "dark knowledge" that the coherent self is an "illusory knot" (Rahimi, 2013). Any threat to this fragile synthesis - particularly a sudden, uncanny one - evokes "great terror." The uncanny, therefore, was a fundamental tool for producing momentary subjective destitution. It arose from the visceral immediacy of bodies pushed to limits within a finite performative window, dismantling Imaginary coherence and forcing a direct, if fleeting, encounter with "something

irreducible and inescapable.” This intense experience, designed to “unsettle the observer” and make them “acutely aware they exist” as split subjects in that instant, laid bare the ego’s misrecognition. It confronted audiences with the “ever presence of the real” - a Real whose traumatic impact is amplified by its sudden, ephemeral appearance - and with the “brutality of processes of subjugation based on bodily difference” inherent in the Symbolic. Thus, pervasive uncanniness - generated by deliberate, temporally punctuated psychological and physical transgressions - fundamentally shaped VA as a radical critique and harrowing exploration, through fleeting but profound encounters, of selfhood’s limits and societal order within a Lacanian framework.

Kristeva

While Freudian uncanny arises from repressed material's return, Kristeva’s abjection centres on violently expelling elements primally part of the nascent self (linked to maternal body, pre-Oedipal experiences), cast out to establish the "clean and proper" subject and Symbolic order (Kristeva, 1982). Despite differing psychic origins, the abject, in its horrifying insistence - often a sudden, overwhelming, transient crisis - powerfully manifests the uncanny within Viennese Actionism’s visceral engagement with bodily limits, waste, decay, and destabilised identity. This convergence generates horror and dread, as the abject operates by threatening, often in a fleeting yet impactful moment, the precarious lines between self/other, internal/external, life/non-life - borders whose fragility is exposed by the performance’s ephemeral intensity.

This violent, temporally concentrated confrontation with the abject resonates in Actionism's spectacles, where artists weaponise their bodies as sites for the momentary eruption of the expelled. Hermann Nitsch’s Orgies Mysteries Theatre (OMT) vividly demonstrates this, employing real blood, animal bodies, and carcasses (Jarosi, 2013) in rituals whose power often lies in their defined, albeit sometimes extended, temporal frame (Isaacs, 2022). These materials evoke abreaction through primal, sensory immersion in the abject, which is cast out from the culturally sanctioned (Seserko-Ostrogonac, 2011). The putrid smell of offal, a transient but potent sensory assault, creates a visceral crisis aiming to make audiences aware of their bodily existence and its contingent boundaries within that specific performative instant (Jarosi, 2013). Nitsch's work, in this Kristevan light, is a ritualized attempt to confront and momentarily reintegrate the abjected maternal-chthonic, aiming for "shamanistic healing

of postwar wounds" not via simple catharsis, but by re-staging subjective formation's foundational violence within a fleeting, intense present, provoking "utter intensity" through symbolic differentiations' collapse during the action's unrepeatable course.

VA, through its deliberate, often startlingly brief, invocation of the abject, profoundly disrupts deeply ingrained societal norms concerning the body (Guðmundsdóttir, 2024). This aligns the abject with the uncanny by forcing subjects to confront elements that, while foundational (bodily fluids, decay, maternal), became disturbing through primary repression, revealing fundamental disturbance at their corporeal/psychic borders, a disturbance often triggered by the performance's shocking immediacy and subsequent absence. The body, for Actionists, became a visceral canvas for staging this ephemeral return of the expelled. VA's radical critique of post-war Austrian society invited the abject to assault societal taboos, creating uncanny discomfort as bodily fluids and disfigured forms became artistic provocation, their impact heightened by their transient, unassimilable presentation (Parent, 2018). Günter Brus and Otto Muehl's actions, with bodies "out of control... turning their deepest inside out," directly confront audiences with the "unclean" underpinning the pristine bourgeois subject's illusion, a confrontation made more acute by its performative transience (Guðmundsdóttir, 2024). Rudolf Schwarzkogler's staged actions, meticulously documented (freezing an ephemeral tableau), feature carefully posed, bandaged bodies (Badura-Triska et al., 2012). In his 3rd and 4th Action, "the organic materiality of the body is rendered alien... by its subjection to inexplicable prostheses..." (Weiner, 2015). This evokes uncanny clinical detachment with visceral horror, pointing to the abjection of the fragmented body, where bandages might signify a failed attempt to contain a body surrendered to becoming waste within the action's staged, finite moment. This aligns with Kristeva's assertion that the abject exists on life/death borders, the corpse as "utmost of abjection" ("death infecting life"), fundamentally "disturb[ing] identity because it does not respect the boundary between object and subject" - a boundary dramatically destabilized in these fleeting yet potent performative crises (Kristeva, 1982). These actions presented the body in vulnerable, grotesque states, resonating with Kristeva's idea of abjection as violent casting off of impurities essential for self-constitution, where "abjection of self would be the culminating form." Performances momentarily reintroduce what was primarily expelled, destabilising psychic and social boundaries. The "dark knowledge" revealed is that the unified psyche and familiar body are precarious constructs, threatened by their abjected foundations, a threat made palpable by the actions' ephemeral, unrepeatable irruption (Guðmundsdóttir, 2024).

The ritualism in VA - particularly in Nitsch's and Muehl's works - invokes an uncanny return to, and perversion of, primal rites, engaging with Kristeva's understanding of ritual as a social mechanism for managing the abject, often through temporally structured, repetitive yet ultimately transient enactments. These performances mirrored religious ceremonies, yet their radical subversion of sacred symbols introduced profound estrangement by confronting the sacred with its defiling underside within the performance's unrepeatable duration (Green, 1999). Nitsch incorporated elements from Catholicism, mystery plays, Dionysus cults, and satanism into his OMT (Guðmundsdóttir, 2022). This was not mere appropriation; Nitsch's engagement in "blasphemy and desecration," aiming to "rid YOU of your disgrace and shame," (Guðmundsdóttir, 2024) can be interpreted as deliberately shattering religious rituals' symbolic efficacy by overwhelming them with the very abject material (blood, offal) they are designed to contain, a shattering achieved in the action's intense, ephemeral present. This transgressive re-enactment created acute estrangement, distorting familiar symbols into conduits for the unbearable within that fleeting, ritualistic frame.

The uncanny, from this Kristevan viewpoint, arises through the violent, often momentary, juxtaposition of the sacred (socially sublimated) and the profane (erupting abject), unsettling identities by exposing the abject at the heart of the holy. This created disorientation, as familiar ritual contexts, dependent on temporal continuity for their power, were shown to be founded upon expelling the taboo. Audience testimonies of spiritual unease reflect confrontation with these cultural constructs' collapse, experienced intensely in the brief, overwhelming moment of performance (Isaacs, 2022). Actionists deliberately created a "state of emergency" (Hinderliter, 2014) to provoke "reflexive painful reactions" (Bulatov, 2019), including "disgust and fascination" (Kristeva, 1982) and "bewilderment"- responses to a transient yet powerful stimulus. Nitsch's claim that his art caused audiences to "descend into the unconscious" and experience "resurrection" points to a desired shattering of the symbolic self and confrontation with the pre-symbolic, maternal chora (from which the abject is first expelled), a confrontation perhaps made more potent by the ritual's defined, ephemeral boundaries concentrating its transgressive force.

This aligns with Kristeva's assertion that the abject operates at the sacred/profane intersection, as purification rites (sacred) are established to ward off defilement (abject), thereby paradoxically keeping the abject central (Kristeva, 1982). Kristeva suggests abjection evokes "more archaic resonances... culturally before sin," linking it to "defilement in primitive societies" where clean/unclean boundaries are paramount. Rites involving "excremential and menstrual variants" illustrate how defilement, by transgressing the "border that separates the body's territory from the signifying chain," challenges "semiotic authority and symbolic law"—a challenge often enacted in a singular, transgressive, ephemeral performative act. Actionists wielded the abject, through "smearing, defiling, and mutilating" with "base organic substances"—as a "direct assault on societal taboos." (Barber, 2004) Exposing "latent violence and repression" in post-war Austrian society through the momentary, shocking eruption of the expelled, they aimed to "disrupt collective complacency" and highlight the "fragility of these structures", defining moral/aesthetic boundaries based on abject exclusion (Novero, 2007). Their work, aiming for "liberation from systems of signification" within the performance's fleeting intensity, directly confronted foundational repressions and expulsions constituting societal coherence and individual subjectivity, its ephemeral nature underscoring the constant, precarious work of maintaining such boundaries.

Jentsch

Jentsch's theory posits that the uncanny emerges not from repressed psychical content's return but from an epistemological rupture - the mind's acute failure to categorise something perceived as simultaneously familiar and strange, an encounter often intensified by its startling, unrepeatable, time-bound nature (Jentsch, 1997). This discomfort is primarily intellectual, a cognitive dissonance from inability to reconcile conflicting perceptual data or apply established conceptual frameworks, especially when the stimulus is presented only for a brief window of perception, denying sustained cognitive assessment (Jentsch, 1997). This breakdown in established understanding aligns with Foucault's concept of discontinuity, where "sudden irruption" challenges discourse (Foucault, 1982) - a quality mirrored in the abrupt, temporally delimited occurrences of many Actionist performances (Barber, 2004). Jentsch's intellectual uncertainty is a disruption in expected "discursive regularities" (Jentsch, 1997); when the mind struggles to categorise an object or event presented fleetingly, only to vanish, it signifies these systems' failure to provide clear "rules for the formation of objects,"

leading to a cognitive crisis (Windsor, 2018), an experience often defined by its brevity and consequent lack of opportunity for stable cognitive processing.

Jentsch’s core theory identifies intellectual uncertainty with the unsettling realisation that the familiar is not always secure, nor the strange entirely foreign; undecidability, often experienced in a potent flash of cognitive dissonance whose impact lingers despite the source's quick passing, is key (Jentsch, 1997). Encounters with objects or beings straddling established categories (human/non-human, animate/inanimate) make this intellectual disturbance palpable, especially when brief and resisting prolonged scrutiny. Jentsch cited dolls, automata, and wax figures as prime examples: entities mimicking human form but lacking vitality, creating profound doubt about their true nature and ontological status, a doubt amplified if such figures were only glimpsed momentarily or animated for a limited duration (Jentsch, 1997).

Viennese Actionist performances, through radical manipulation of body, materials, and situational contexts whose duration was often strictly controlled and unrepeatable, created Jentsch's intellectual impasse by challenging and collapsing conventional cognitive/social categories. Günter Brus's "Wiener Spaziergang" (1965), his white-mud-covered body bisected by a black line (SCHOPP, 2019), traversing Vienna, presented a "living sculpture" termed "uncannily - half corpse, half living" (Novero, 2007). This performance, existing dynamically only in its passage through public space and time (SCHOPP, 2019), directly invokes Jentsch's criterion of uncertainty regarding animate nature. Its live, unrepeatable occurrence forced onlookers into a cognitive struggle to reconcile the familiar human form with its bizarre, objectified, de-animated presentation, blurring the epistemological line between life/death, subject/object, art/reality, instigating an intellectual recoil whose sharpness was due to the action's unique, non-replicable unfolding in time, leaving a jarring cognitive imprint.

Otto Muehl's "Stilleben mit einem weiblichen und einem männlichen und einem Rinderkopf" (1964), a "material action" with human/animal heads in a chaotic mix of ingredients (Novero, 2007), profoundly unsettled by violating social norms and dismantling conceptual frameworks of categorisation within the brief spectacle of its shocking presentation and subsequent disappearance. Muehl's deliberate obliteration of distinctions (food/non-food,

human/animal, sacred/profane) prevented fixed symbolic meaning (Hinderliter, 2014). The "disorderly, polymorphous, 'degenerate'" materials, often assembled for a specific, time-bound event, then quickly disassembled or ceasing to exist in that configuration, forced audiences into a Jentschian intellectual impasse. Their cognitive capacity to categorise and understand faltered under this temporally compressed, sensorily overwhelming display that offered no chance for later contemplation (Guðmundsdóttir, 2020), generating an uncanny effect rooted in this epistemological crisis born of fleeting confrontation.

Jentschian discomfort arises from cognitive conflict, an intellectual disturbance from inability to reconcile perceptions or assign stable meaning, an inability exacerbated when the perplexing stimulus is only briefly available, leaving the mind in unresolved tension (Jentsch, 1982). The uncanny, for Jentsch, stems from experiencing the uncertain or undecidable. This intellectual uncertainty, a disruption in mental schemas, highlights our intellectual frameworks' limits when faced with phenomena resisting immediate classification, especially those appearing and disappearing before full cognitive grasp, their elusiveness contributing to the unsettling lack of resolution. The Jentschian uncanny is anxious uncertainty about what is real and what constitutes a known object, caused by an apparent phenomenological or ontological impossibility challenging epistemic coherence, a challenge often mounted and then withdrawn in the performance's singular, unrecoverable moment, amplifying the cognitive void (Jentsch, 1982).

Hermann Nitsch’s "Blood Organ" (1962) extends this disturbance to sacrilege (Weiner, 2015), where a lamb's symbolic mutilation is recontextualised into an unsettling spectacle resisting stable moral, aesthetic, and ontological categorization (Guðmundsdóttir, 2024), its impact concentrated by its singular, historical occurrence (Widrich, 2013), now accessible only via documentation hinting at its original, time-bound intensity (Carruthurs, 1970). This founding VA event (Nitsch, Muehl, Frohner in a cellar; Nitsch nailing a dead lamb to canvas, splattering blood/intestines) signified art's return to "primitive depths" (Hinderliter, 2014) by presenting an object confounding established categories (art, ritual, animal treatment), creating profound cognitive rupture, its shockwaves initiated by the action's unrepeatable past-ness, forcing reliance on mediated memory (Seserko-Ostrogonac, 2011).. From a Jentschian perspective, its "utter intensity" stems not just from abreaction but from intense cognitive effort and ultimate failure to categorise these hybrid events fusing art, ritual, and visceral reality within their specific, demanding, finite durations. Violation and

re-signification of symbols like the lamb and side-wound (Nitsch's "primal excess") force audiences to confront taboo/life-death symbolism, disrupting cognitive/cultural schemas in ways traditional art's fixed, reviewable nature might not. Nitsch's work confronts spectators with reality defying easy classification, generating a Jentschian uncanny rooted in intellectual disorientation, amplified by "sensorial harshness", upheaving perception in a concentrated, all-consuming temporal experience overwhelming immediate cognitive processing.

Jentsch's uncanny also has a cultural dimension, reflecting societal shifts, manifesting in times of uncertainty when norms are disrupted, mirroring collective confusion and categorical breakdown, often through singular, impactful events themselves disruptive and sharply time-delimited, their brevity underscoring the contested norms' fragility. Valie Export's "Action Pants: Genital Panic" (1968) exemplifies this (Foster et al., 2004). Export and Weibel, seeing rituals of redemption lacking "purchase" in spectacle culture, engaged with "real registers" of social control, notably sexual behaviour (Foster et al., 2004). Export's public self-exposure (breasts offered for touch) was an "emancipatory shock" for insight into socialisation (Foster et al., 2004). Jentschian uncanniness here arises from radical decontextualization and re-categorisation of the female body/public space, achieved in a brief, unannounced public intervention whose fleetingness (Barber, 2004) was part of its disruptive power, preventing easy dismissal. "Genital Panic" addresses the body's reification by culture/capital (Parent, 2018). Transposing a private/sexually charged image into the public sphere so directly and for a limited, unnegotiated period (Parent, 2018), Export shattered expectations, forcing immediate cognitive re-evaluation of public/private boundaries, gender norms, and "public" interaction. She mobilised flesh "as a site of difference," drawing attention to "complex systems of signification," whose contradictions were laid bare in the action's singular, fast-disappearing moment (Green, 1999).

In Jentschian terms, Export's performance creates "anxious uncertainty about what is real" (Windsor, 2018) by defying neat categorisation within existing social/performative scripts, its unrepeatable, live nature profoundly contributing to its intellectual unsettlement. Familiar social spaces are rendered strange by an act defying classification as purely artistic, political, or personal, thus residing in an intellectually unsettling zone, its ambiguity preserved by the action's decisive passing from direct experience (Parent, 2018). Its transgressive nature challenges normalcy, placing audiences in an uncanny space where cognitive boundaries blur, a blurring perhaps made more acute because the stimulus is unavailable for prolonged,

rationalising study, leaving an unresolved intellectual query. Actionists, dismantling structural certainties via "radical refusal" of norms, mirrored societal disarray (Novero, 2007). Export's work makes this confrontation explicit, forcing audiences to grapple with unstable gender/public-private constructs on a cognitive level first, an engagement triggered by a singular, time-specific event demanding immediate, yet ultimately insufficient, cognitive processing. Thus, VA's uncanny, via a Jentschian lens, disrupts perception by confronting audiences with their cognitive limits, making visible inherent instability in understanding and exposing "brutality of processes of subjugation based on bodily difference" not as repressed trauma, but as a failure of, or violence within, existing categorization systems, a failure made starkly apparent in the Actions' unrepeatable, often abrupt, and cognitively challenging temporal reality, vanishing before they can be fully known.

Conclusion

The intersection of the uncanny and the ephemeral within VA serves as both an aesthetic and psychological foundation that challenges conventional structures of perception, identity, and memory. Through their radical performances, the Actionists embodied the transitory nature of trauma, history, and bodily experience, creating a momentary rupture that forced the audience into a confrontation with the repressed, the grotesque, and the unknown. The movement's engagement with psychoanalytic and philosophical conceptions of the uncanny—most notably as theorized by Freud, Lacan, Jentsch, and Kristeva - demonstrates that the unsettling effect of their actions did not merely stem from their explicit content, but from their fundamental destabilization of familiarity, order, and time itself (Isaacs, 2022).

Freud's formulation of the uncanny as the return of the repressed finds its resonance in the Viennese Actionists' insistence on dredging up Austria's suppressed historical memory and societal taboos. The performances enacted the sudden resurfacing of deeply buried anxieties, manifesting in brief but intense spectacles that resisted permanence, mirroring the very nature of repressed trauma. Similarly, Jentsch's theory of intellectual uncertainty is reflected in the audience's inability to categorise or rationalise the Actionists' use of bodily mutilation, ritualistic violence, and abjection - each act pushing against the boundaries of life and death, self and other, animate and inanimate. Lacan's perspective further nuances this reading, as the movement's grotesque manipulation of the body destabilised the symbolic order, forcing the audience into confrontation with the Real - the raw, unsymbolized chaos underlying human

existence. The Actionists' deliberate subversion of bodily integrity, exemplified in Schwarzkogler's staged self-mutilations and Brus's painted distortions of his form, underscores the breakdown of identity and the body's transition into an uncanny object of estrangement.

This interplay between bodily abjection and uncanniness is central to Kristeva's conception of the abject, where the violation of social and biological boundaries evokes a visceral horror. The Actionists' use of excrement, blood, entrails, and ritualistic performance directly engaged with this desecration, forcing the audience into an encounter with the expulsion of what society seeks to reject. These transient displays of grotesque embodiment did not merely depict defilement but actively enacted it, forcing an uneasy complicity in collapsing the distinction between the performer and the viewer, the spectacle of transgression. This effect was amplified in Muehl's dehumanising actions and Schwarzkogler's meticulously staged photographs, wherein the human form, though familiar, became alien and unreadable.

Ultimately, the transient nature of VA reinforced its uncanniness; these performances existed only in their moment of execution, yet their impact lingered in the psychological space they disrupted. The ephemeral was not merely a structural feature of the movement but an active force that ensured its haunting persistence, embedding itself into the subconscious of its audience long after the physical remnants of the performances had disappeared. In this way, VA, through its interplay of the uncanny and the ephemeral, did not merely shock or revolt - it unsettled, destabilised, and forced the audience to confront the discomforting truths buried within the psyche and the collective memory of post-war Austria.

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