Towards an aesthetics of pain

By Stahl Stenslie, professor of experimental media-arts, Academy of Media Arts, Cologne, Germany

In ‘Ten Years of Pain’ by Håvve Fjell. 2003. Hertervig Forlag, Norway. isbn: 82-92023-12-7

The art of Håvve face us with new ways to physically deal with aesthetics. Many would doubt it’s even possible to label his actions and performances as art. But it is. And a challenging one too. Håvve is a visionary of his own body. Over the last years I’ve witnessed how he has gone from being a fairly wild and untamed body-entertainer to a subtle and expressive body artist. It’s hard to forget the image of how both his arms were carefully into a protective position over his face and groin sown with more than a hundred stitches. Sculptured into a painful composition Håvve’s eyes witnessed the dualistic aspect of this performance: in trying to avoid pain he suffered it. Such contradictions are typical of his art. He must both control his body while he simultaneously and passionately must lose it. He must cut deep enough to almost die, but shallow enough to survive. Which cut is the deeper?

On stage he’s a beast of dynamic movements, corpo-facial expressions, bodily fluids and orgiastic feelings. On stage Håvve is Rousseau’s wild child, fierce with life-force and high on the ecstasy of living. Far removed is the connection with pain and depression. Traditional notions of what is bad are inverted. Of course, this is because his body in pain is really no body in pain. The pain of Håvve is a good pain. In the heat of performance it’s a body high on cultured shocks and adrenaline. Håvve gets a kick out of his mastering of his body. And I say this in an imperative manner. Art should give us kicks. In this sense he’s exemplary. The physical violence of his art shows us the limits of self-exploration. And opens up new perspectives worthy of exploration.

He’s not just a brilliant entertainer. Håvve is also a political artist. One of the questions he poses is which socio-cultural body practice to take? How far is too far? What shall the kids today do? Isn’t genital piercing enough? When shall they stop? With self-mutilation? At the website of Body Modification Extreme there are some beautiful examples of how sexy a man feels having cut away his manhood. Now, Håvve deals with the use of the body. He cuts in the body to get at the body. Not away from it. Simultaneously I suspect that he has definite ethical boarders. Even if they appear further in the mirror than they are. Håvve’s work is fundamentally creative. The cutting away is as much displaying the body as training it. Preparing it for what? That’s a euthanasic question: how do we know what we want from life? Cutting, sowing, straining yourselves can be seen as a tactics of escape –or an attempt to learn your limits better. It’s a controlled play with the destruction of your body. In Håvve’s aesthetics of pain I see potentials for changing both social formations and affecting our particular identities. Three important moments I see in his art practice are:

- Pain as a knowledge building tool
  As a body artist he’s both the cause and effect of his own art. What he’s doing is changing the way we experience our bodies as tools for reflection and discovery of the self.

- Ethical inversions of contemporary ideals and values
  Of course, no one loves pain. But we might learn to love what we formerly knew as pain. It is this great turn around that Håvve express. He represents the ethical inversion of contemporary use of the body. In this sense he’s the Nietzsche of body art. Or maybe even a new Genet of ethics?

- Using the body as subtle, expressive canvas
  Håvve’s artistic body configurations (f.ex. bodystiching) combines the opposites of feminine vulnerability with male posing. This meta-sexual expressivity is a new tendency in body art practice
In his work he shows us a corporal interface to reality. As he expressed it himself: “you have to face the pain. And learn to love it”. This is not a common thing to do. Isn’t pain after all a destructive thing to have? In an aesthetical context, the challenge that lies behind this contradiction in terms is of fundamental importance to push forwards. Håvve von Munchhausen would pull himself up by the balls. Foucault remarked that “everything is sex”. Then again he also said “that everything is power”. Both these aspects are met in the practice of Håvve. This is good for the experimental arts. Taking a strong stance puts you right into the critical fire. As a germen proverb says, what doesn’t kill you, just makes you stronger. This urge and will to enter dark, unknown territories is fundamental for the expressivity of arts. Willingness to take risks and to cross boarders enables us –in Nintendo’s own words- to go to the next level.

Comparing Håvve to other practitioners of body art, I would put him in the same international avant-garde as Franco B and Kira O’Riley. A sign of this is the great resonance his works has found –amongst others by the world leading curator Juri Krpan of the Slovenian Kapelica Gallery. This gallery is a melting pot for the most experimental works within body arts and performance.

Transgressing your pain level is the mark of great sportsmen. The better sportsman is most likely the one who has the better control of his pain. How come we accept sports so easily – while hardly accepting Håvves expressive pain? The great irony is that today many sportsmen train themselves into invalids. Whereas I suspect Håvve will grow old and remain at good health.

At the bottom of all aesthetics there is a theoretical framework. But as Kant remarked, theory is the spawn of practice. It’s easier to think about something seen and done. It’s precisely Håvves practices that enable new reflections on how to deal with the body in artistic contexts – and clear the road for a new aesthetics of pain and suffering. We’re born into a fundamentally Christian culture, but we have to leave the image of Christ suffering on the cross behind. Using the body as a knowledge building tool involves a multitude of practices. Opening up is what we owe to the global landscape, but most of all to ourselves as social, moral, and psychological constructs.

Stahl Stenslie
Professor of experimental media-arts, Academy of Media Arts, Cologne, Germany. 2003
www.stenslie.net/stahl
www.khm.de/stahl
stahl@khm.de

Footnotes: Kapelica Gallery: www.kapelica.org

In ‘Ten Years of Pain’ by Håvve Fjell. 2008. Hertervig Forlag, Norway. isbn: 82-92023-12-7