

Photo removed due to copyright restrictions.  
Screenshot of Mick Foley's first fall in "King of the Ring - 1998"

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Yves Klein photo "Leap into the Void."  
See [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Le\\_Saut\\_Dans\\_le\\_Vide.jpg](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Le_Saut_Dans_le_Vide.jpg)

MiL: Mick Foley, King of the Ring, 1998 R: Yves Klein, Leap into the Void, 1960
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"The story line I proposed would be heart wrenching. I would be bludgeoned, I would be helpless, and my wife would be watching from the front row. To be helpless, I would need to be handcuffed. I had come up with the idea years earlier, and used to get major adrenaline rushes while I roared down the highway at 4 am thinking of my emotional scenario... 'Vince, if we can make the fans actually feel the dilemma I'm going through, it will be the heaviest angle we've ever done.' I then told him how I thought it should go, starting slow, and then culminating with a series of chairshots to my unprotected skull" (Foley is Good, 14).

"The body, which previously had to be veiled to confirm the Modernist regime of meaning and value, has more and more aggressively surfaced during this period as a locus of the self and the site where public domain meets the private, where the social is negotiated, produced and made sense of" (Jones, 20-21).

The body of the wrestler and the body of the performance artist largely work towards the same goal: to serve as a discursive cultural palette through performance of pain, conflict, and disruption to the physical self, to give the individual body over as a site of a wider cultural testing of temporality, endurance, and mortality itself. Though targeted for vastly different audiences, and inhabiting very positions of status and reception in the society to which they play, wrestling and performance art utilize remarkably similar tactics for deploying the individual body in the cultural field with the intent of challenging social norms and physical directives. Both engage with the complicated and violent game of the performance of pain, in which suffering is real, but formed and tuned in a way that allows for it to transcend simple models of masochism or sado-masochism to extend into the realm of performative cultural catharsis. At the heart of these choreographies of wrestling and performance art is the constant attempt to (re)define the dichotomy of the natural versus the cultural body: the body as choreographed object or natural, self-directed entity.

In the post-world war context, ideas about the body, its cultural role and representations, changed drastically. While early twentieth-century discourse looked at the body in terms of health, sanitation, productivity and preservation, the post-war body was employed and described in terms of its degradation and permeability. With the proverbial boundary of the body broken through the horrors of war and turmoil, there came an increased awareness of the corporeal self as a receptacle for political inscription, and a distinct call from many theoreticians to acknowledge and activate the body through co-production of its constant choreographic reality. Foucault, the pivot point for this discourse on the docile, politicized body, describes the physical self as at once the most

fundamental, natural being, and also a ubiquitous, diffuse site of political production:

“The disciplinary controls of activity belonged to a whole series of researches, theoretical or practical, into the natural machinery of bodies; but they began to discover in them specific processes; behavior and its organized requirements gradually replaced the simple physics of movement. The body, required to be docile in its minutest operations, opposes and shows the conditions of functioning proper to an organism. Disciplinary power has as its correlative an individuality that is not only analytical and ‘cellular,’ but also natural and ‘organic’” (Foucault, 156).

Implicit in this political production is a possibility for the body to be employed to induce societal change, should agency be taken by the individual in this production: “That is to say, there may be a ‘knowledge’ of the body that is not exactly the science of its functioning, and a mastery of its forces that is more than the ability to conquer them: this knowledge and this mastery constitute what might be called the political technology of the body. Of course this technology is diffuse, rarely formulated in continuous, systematic discourse; it is often made up of bits and pieces; it implements a disparate set of tools or methods” (Foucault, 26). Important here is the sense that there is a potential power latent in the individual body, but paired with the impossibility of that power being effectively engaged because of its dispersal into the scale of the individual, the breakdown of the body into its smallest choreographed and habitual acts.

The cultural body, as it appears in both professional wrestling and performance art, finds particular significance at this moment in post-war corporeal discourse. In both mediums, the individual body is employed in a performative spectacle that allows for its meaning to be compounded and extended into a wider cultural scale. “Moral laws cannot be applied to human beings but through their bodies. So that moral phenomena are also tightly associated with the images of the body. To say that one never suffers alone is not a simple cliché. The laws of identification and of communication between images of the body make one’s suffering and pain everybody’s affair” (Schindler, 40). In both body art and professional wrestling, the physical is at the forefront of the performance, serving

as both a self-forming subject and a choreographed object. The performance of the body, and this careful negotiation of the physical object/subject, is transformative, not exclusively for the performer but for the viewer as well, having engaged with the challenges, pain, and reconstitutions that the performer's body endures on an intimate reactionary level.

The theatricality and spectacle of wrestling and performance art allow for overblown explications of fundamental moral and cultural questions in a way that is impossible without the hyperbolic nature of each. Performance allows for a specific 'out' from binds to normal social rules and expectations. Artaud, in the Theater of Cruelty, calls for post-war theatricality to become again, as it was in ancient theater forms, the testing ground for extremities, and the locus of societal shocks and crisis: "Our long-standing habit of seeking diversions has made us forget the slightest idea of serious theatre which upsets all our preconceptions, inspiring us with fiery, magnetic imagery and finally reacting on us after the manner of unforgettable soul therapy"(Artaud, 64). There is an implication that complacency and passivity must be countered with extremity, the brand of performative extremity that is found in both pro wrestling and body art.

'Body artists', a group of artists identified with the post-war period, deployed the self in their work in a careful interrogation of the object/subject potentials latent in the docile individual body. As one subset of the body artists, the 'Destruction Artists' are perhaps most closely aligned with the performance of professional wrestling in their inclusion of theatrical suffering. "In a sense, destruction art is a warning system, an aesthetic response to human emergency that occurs in the lapse between theory and practice in terminal culture; it presents the pain of bodies, the anxiety of minds, the epistemology of technology, the specious claims of ideology, the absence of ecological responsibility, the loss of human integrity and compassion, and the violence that structures both gender and sexual relations. Just as destruction art is the image of resistance in the form of an event, it is also an important means to survival that must be continuously explored" (Stiles, 229). The body, as it is discussed in this context of post-war

performance art, is in a perpetual and inevitably failing struggle against cultural pressures and objectification. The staging of the struggle itself, in all its ugly violence and repulsive self-destruction, including imagery of blood, impact, shame, and sexuality, is the only chance at transformation, through an intense process of shock and interrogation of the value systems involved with that shock and repulsion.

In Destruction Art and wrestling, there is the induction of real pain and physical suffering embedded within the performance of the pain and suffering. The body suffers, but only so much as to demonstrate that suffering to the larger world. “The sign that the game has crossed from simulation to actuality is generally tied to the revelation of injury. For which blood is the most vivid sign. The knowledge that wrestlers blade their foreheads does not necessarily diminish the impact of seeing blood stream down a wrestler’s face, and, in any case, the fact that the bleeding may be self-induced does not make the blood itself less real, regardless. Aware of the actual risks involved in wrestling—the hazards of slamming, hitting, and leaping at another man—the fans are driven to look more closely, to look again, and to come back for another chance to look” (80).

Photo removed due to copyright restrictions.  
Terry Funk bleeding profusely and holding a steel folding chair.

Photo removed due to copyright restrictions.  
Razor cuts, bleeding, around the navel.  
From Gina Pane's work "Action Psyche," 1974.

L: Terry Funk

R: Gina Pane, Action Psyche, 1974

The 'real' suffering is a necessary step in the use of the body as a palette, as an object offered to the audience for experimentation and examination. Both sets of performers must put themselves at risk to legitimize these experiments, and to provide the necessary shock integral to the works' meaningful reception.

Despite parallel intents in deploying a discursive, performative body, there are obvious marked differences in the cultural placement of the mediums of pro wrestling and performance art. One primary difference lies in the level of inclusion of cultural content, and resulting formal values of the performances. The other is the drastic difference is in the reception of these performances; while wrestling is seen as 'low' art, adopting the clear directive of entertainment rather than profundities, performance art is given 'high-art' status, allowing it much greater leeway as a medium to employ shocks and repulsions in a conceptual, purified context.

Pro wrestling and body art both engage in an essentializing process to describe the contemporary body in its struggles with issues of race, class, and gender positions; though the mediums use precisely oppositional strategies to expose these basic questions. While Destruction Artists use a method of abstraction to reveal fundamental conflict, pointing to a representational moment or image, wrestling uses melodramatic layerings of cultural conflict to expose the bodies fundamental response to a hypercontextualized reality.

Interestingly, both wrestling and performance art claim to make use of the site of the everyday to expose the body's most basic conflicts and questions. "After World War II... the artists who began to use their bodies as the material of visual art repeatedly expressed their goal to bring art practice closer to life in order to increase the experiential immediacy of their work. Their powerful declaration of the body as form and content insisted on the primacy of human subjects over objects" (Stiles, 8). There is a clear sense that the artists creating this work want it to touch the real, the everyday level of existence from which its audience harkens.

Ironically, though, Destruction Art almost exclusively exists in a cultural vacuum; the aesthetic and content are very carefully stripped of any cultural timestamps or specified context. The artists attempt to revert to something more universal, seemingly natural, in order to describe the struggle against cultural obedience. To fight the cultural pressures, those references are extracted and then consolidated or discarded in favor of a more primitive exploration of the physical. This exploration can involve cultural symbols and associative objects, but never extends into a precise story or character. For example, when Chris Burden is crucified on the hood of a Volkswagon, the symbol of the car may be rich with specific cultural symbolism, but there is no 'before' or 'after' story to the event; the piece engages image rather than narrative. Similarly, when Marina Abramovic 'donates' her body to an audience as an object to be manipulated and injured, and provides that audience with 72 instruments with which to perform the task, there is direct engagement with the cultural objects and the artist's body, but again without explicit motivation or narrative. The removal of intent becomes key; the injuries are serialized in a way that disrupts the normal causal effect of pain, which is so readily available in the wrestling medium.

The high level of abstraction in Destruction Art is emphasized by its unique nature. The artists' performance is both temporal and in many ways impossible to document in meaningful ways. The pain or suffering induced dwell in the ephemeral; it is precisely the abstracted, passing moment of pain that the artist uses to describe the temporal, permeable body as it passes between roles as subject and object. The body then becomes an imagistic metaphor, or discursive 'one-liner' in many ways.

Professional wrestling, on the other hand, employs a strategy of compounding cultural contexts and specific, serial storyline. The extension of the performance over time and its serialization of suffering allows for the audience to become engage on a more profound, contextualized level, while still maintaining a sense of the essential body through the oversimplification and stereotyping that occurs

in these stories. In Barthes' key text on wrestling, we find a discussion of the relationship of the ties of gesture to intention in the form of the sign:

"The physique of the wrestlers therefore constitutes a basic sign, which like a seed contains the whole fight. But this seed proliferates, for it is at every turn during the fight, in each new situation, that the body of the wrestler casts to the public the magical entertainment of a temperament which finds its natural expression in gesture. The different strata of meaning throw light on each other, and form the most intelligible of spectacles. Wrestling is like a diacritic writing: above the fundamental meaning of his body, the wrestler arranges comments which are episodic but always opportune, and constantly help the reading of the fight by means of gestures, attitudes, and mimicry, which make the intention utterly obvious" (Barthes, 26).

The ongoing reading of context within the signs of gesture in at the heart of the wrestling performance. When a wrestler is seen receiving or doling out violence to other bodies, the physical enactment is serving a representative function; it is an action based on codification of specific psychic or emotional situations.

So, while performance art focuses heavily on the pointed, incisive abstraction of a bodily happening, wrestling does the exact opposite, piling meaning onto the body until its significance is overblown and not easily legible. "What makes the sex and violence of *Smackdown* and its companion programming transgressive is that it is *pointless*: it suggests no moral or behavioral lesson, no transcendent terminus of self-improvement. It is intentionally gratuitous" (Sammond, 155). Within the 'pointless' spectacle of excess and narrative in wrestling, there is a clear operation of body discourse at work, one that involves the constant reevaluation of the body's function in the dramas depicted:

"In a short circuit of signification that moves from the hard plastic body of the toy, through the hard flesh of the performer, to the massive, processed image about them, the presence of the wrestler is consumed, fragmented, and multiplied in the flow of its commodity status. Simultaneously larger and smaller than life, the wrestler's body becomes available in that moment, registering both its power and its submission to the system that articulates it. Seemingly different from the clothed middle-class body that is ostensibly autonomous, yet yoked into disciplinary regimes in which appearance and behavior are regulated according to acceptable norms, the wrestler's body also suggests rebellion contained." (Sammond, 7-8).

Wrestling's method of description of the body, one that occurs in an entertainment context and over time, allows for the audience to more actively partake in the performance, compounding the impact from involvement with the

work in a way that performance art consistently fails to follow through with. “Wrestling has long given its fans an active voice in participating in the performance itself, and the physical presence of the fan as part of the performance sets the live wrestling event apart from video, audio, or written narrative, on the one hand, and collaborative “virtual worlds” on the other. While sporting events provides fans with the chance to perform as well, the live sports experience differs substantially because viewers do not become involved in an immersive fictional world with an explicitly fictional serial narrative, in the way that pro wrestling performances do” (Ford, 4).

The task of the wrestler’s body, then, is tied up with more than its representation, instead with a complicated relationship of corpus to identity for the audience’s interpretation: “Once recruited into the profession, the major task of the professional wrestler is identity-work—building and husbanding an identity that can mobilize the appreciations of the audience and maintain them over time” (Stone and Oldenberg, 517). The representation of character allows wrestling to function on the level of theatrical shock that Artaud proposes. “Roddy spits in the Million Dollar Man’s eyes, flings his sweaty shirt in his face, or grabs Sherri, rips off her dress, throws her over his knee, and spansks her. Such characters embody the shameful spectacle of emotional display, acting as focal points for the audience’s own expression of otherwise repressed affect” (Jenkins, 50). The critical distance allowed for by the engagement with character rather than purely with self (as is usually the case with body art) increases the cathartic potential of the act.

The ‘immersive fictional world’ staged by wrestling is firmly disavowed by the performance artist. “The stylistic range and ideological differences between these different forms had been subsumed by critics into the single category of performance art, despite protests by many artists who complained that the term depoliticized their aims and disarmed their work by proximity to theater, then associated by many with entertainment” (Stiles, 680). While performance art claims and strives to have an impact in the everyday, the obsessive self-

placement in the category of 'high-brow' and the refusal to engage with the overtly theatrical narrative, or the notion of entertainment, actually creates an impassible distance between artist and audience. The acts of the destruction artists, though certainly spectacularized, are also removed from the everyday and placed in a gallery or performed by the artist in highly controlled situations with limited audiences or no audience at all, in the case of much of the work which exists only in (highly inaccessible) video recordings.

The different tactics taken in entertainment and high art have everything to do with the commodity status of the product, and the body as it is presented for consumption. Performance art has a very ambiguous relationship to commodity; it at once refuses common consumption in order to self-validate and apply representational importance, and embraces self-commodification as a key conceptual point. "The artist's body becomes a gesturing, expressive body, sometimes an aggressively *activist body*, or perhaps a parodic, self-commodified body" (Jones, 21). The body itself is commodified, offered up for its audience in dramatic sacrifice. However, the art product itself contradicts this conceptual assertion: "Often uncommodifiable, difficult to preserve and exhibit, and defiant of social mores and morals while upholding the highest ethical principles, performance art rendered palpable the anxious corporeal, psychic, and social conditions of global culture in the radically changing electronic and nuclear age" (Jones, 694).

The disengagement with consumer culture is represented in the structuring of the medium's industry itself. "The first thing to notice about these artists is that no one is making them so it and usually no one is paying them to so it. The second is the absolute rigour with which, in the classic performance pieces, these very unpragmatic activities are carried out". "...if the fetishistic posing of sculpted abs, glutes, and pecs signal the body as object, this is a regulated and posable rebellion. It is a celebration of oppression freely chosen—of the object mobilizing his, her or its commodity status in a willful disregard for its effect on his, her, or its body or self" (Sammond, 8).

There are obvious differences in the process of consumption and reception of the wrestler's and artist's bodies. While the body in performance art is seen as purely representation, the wrestler's body has a much more dangerous, parasitic implication in society due to its placement in culture. In analysis and reception of both, however, there is often a misguided focus on the pain of the individual performer. The individual, however, is important in these mediums only so far as they serve as signifiers of larger cultural rhetoric. In this sense, neither medium engages with the sado-masochist directives that are often criticized as harmful and destructive in their reception. "If an artist beats himself, this does not mean that a sadistic audience is watching a masochistic artist. The problem has to be seen on another level, one on which they are both exposed to the beating...The personal exposure to danger in an art context has a semiotic/ symbolic quality in the flux of the art process, that goes beyond sadomasochism" (48). The same is true of wrestling, though because it is televised, readily available, and formally less 'refined', it is often seen as an exclusive act of violence, rather than a cultural or semiotic representation.

It is important to note that the reception of the highbrow Destruction Art is not without conflicted; often the NEA (National Endowment for the Arts) becomes enticed into the same reflexive arguments against this breed of art in the same way that government and institutional agencies attack the negative societal impact of the low art of wrestling. Often funding is withdrawn when the spectacle becomes too violent or spectacular, and artists have a history of suing the government to ensure their right to shock and repulse their audience. This argument, though parallel to the wrestling industry in its defense of the content, has a notably different tone. While Destruction Art may be seen as harmful or tasteless, it is never given direct responsibility for real-life occurrence of violence. This is largely because of the pre-supposed refined, intelligent audience of performance art. As opposed to the wrestling audience, seen as incapable of abstracting the performance of violence from actual violence, the art audience is

presumed to understand the discursive proposal of the pain and suffering presented.

In conclusion, Artaud's proposal of a theater that jolts its audience into cultural discussion is a highly appropriate description of both wrestling and performance art, though his assertion that this jolt should occur in place of the 'diversion' of entertainment is nullified by the proposal of professional wrestling. In fact, it is precisely the insertion of the important and intense body discourse into a commodified, accessible medium of entertainment that allows for it to have such a huge potential in challenging the contemporary politicized body.

"At this point in time, one would be hard pressed to find anyone who would seriously defend professional wrestling as a traditional sport. But neither is professional wrestling traditional drama, exhibiting aesthetic choices long considered too 'low' for the conventional definition of theater. Professional wrestling's transcendence of boundaries is precisely what makes it so interesting as a cultural phenomenon" (de Garis, 193). The blurring of boundaries and positioning firmly within the real life imbues the wrestling body with a marked political potential that the Destruction Artists, and performance artists using the medium of the body since, can never achieve because of its inherent distance from audience and consumerism.

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