

# Gestating Bodies: Performing Masculinity in Viennese Actionism

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## Abstract

In this article I examine the motif of male reproduction in Viennese Actionism and its discursive links with esotericism. The Actionists were a collective of artists best known for their radical performance art. They appropriated various esoteric traditions for their subversive tactics, including for destabilizing gender norms and attacking bourgeois morals. They utilize gendered imagery from alchemy and vitalism in their works, adopting an image of virile masculinity that hails phallic creative powers. The analysis foregrounds the presentation of male reproduction in Günter Brus' action, *Der Helle Wahnsinn – Die Architektur des hellen Wahnsinns* (1968), as I investigate the ideas of masculinity attached to the motif and the gendered expressions in the performance.

Keywords: Viennese Actionism; Masculinity; Male reproduction; Performance art; Neo-Avant-Garde; Alchemy; Vitalism

## 1. Male Reproduction and Masculinity

The motif of male reproduction can manifest as a gestating male body, rebirth or self-generation of the artist, or the creation or birth of an entity (human, mechanical, esoteric). It has a long history within western culture, where it occurs in myths, cosmologies, esoteric tracts, literature and the arts.<sup>1</sup> There are ancient myths of male pregnancy and birth that include the Greek god Zeus birthing Athena from his head or Dionysus from his thigh,<sup>2</sup> various versions of Adam giving life to Eve, and “rituals of male couvade and sympathetic birthing.”<sup>3</sup> Esoteric traditions such

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1. Velasco, *Male Delivery*, 2006.

2. Leitao, *The Pregnant Male as Myth and Metaphor*, 2012.

3. Davidson, “Pregnant Men,” 210.

as alchemy incorporate male gestation and birth in their doctrines. Accounts of male reproduction appear in the avant-garde and modernism, where they exist as a testimony to the artists' spiritual and creative powers.<sup>4</sup> Examples can be found in Expressionism, Futurism, Surrealism and Actionism, in the works of Franz Werfel, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, Frank Wedekind, Else Lasker-Schüler, Ernst Weiß, Unica Zürn and Ernst Jünger. This tradition encompasses the creation of all manner of machines and beings through alternative means: automatons, homunculi and golems.<sup>5</sup> To achieve their goals, the creators frequently mix the methods of esotericism and more traditional sciences or technology.

Fantasies of male reproduction tend to accentuate masculine power and frequently contain fixed ideas of virile masculinity. In this article I examine the gendered language and imagery surrounding male reproduction in Actionism and what it expresses about masculinity.

Actionism was an Austrian neo-avant-garde movement, active in the years 1962–1973. The name of the group is derived from the performance style attributed to the artists, which they called actions (G. Aktionen). Günter Brus, Hermann Nitsch, Otto Muehl and Rudolf Schwarzkogler are usually considered the core of the movement, although other artists were involved.<sup>6</sup> The Actionists were a male-dominated group. Female performers who repeatedly worked with the artists, such as Anna Brus and Hanel Koeck, were not considered creative members of the movement.<sup>7</sup> The only female artist linked to the group, VALIE EXPORT, later developed her own, feminist form of Actionism.<sup>8</sup>

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4. Kanz, *Maternale Moderne*, 2009.

5. There is a definite gendered dimension to these entities and their function. Notably, there is a narrative difference between birthing fantasies and the creation of mechanical women as objects of desire.

6. Among other artists affiliated with Actionism are Adolf Frohner, Kurt Kren, Ernst Schmidt Jr., Peter Weibel and VALIE EXPORT. The numerous performers that took part in the actions, such as Anna Brus, Hanel Koeck, Franz Kaltenböck and Hans Cibulka, were also an essential part of Actionism.

7. The role of women in the performances was often a passive one, as during the actions they were handled by the artists as just another material. Some actors, such as Anna and Koeck, had a say in the process, yet the actions are viewed as the sole creation of the artists.

8. "Feminist Actionism seeks to transform the object of male natural history, the material "woman," subjugated and enslaved by the male creator, into an independent actor and creator, subject of her own history." (EXPORT, "Aspects of Feminist Actionism," 71.)

The analysis reveals the tension between the Actionists' subversive practice and what can be viewed as a more traditional gender expression, that is their positioning between challenging societal norms of gender and sexuality, and the narrative of masculinity, virility and power found in their art. I argue that esotericism plays a key role in the Actionists' gendered expressions, as the motif of male reproduction and the gendered symbolism in their works is partly drawn from esoteric and ritual traditions such as alchemy. I examine how it unveils diverging ideas concerning masculinity within Actionism, which I will then further contextualize in light of the politics of post-war Austria. For this purpose, I analyze the instances of male reproduction as they appear in Brus' performance *Der helle Wahnsinn – Die Architektur des hellen Wahnsinns* (Sheer Madness – The Architecture of Sheer Madness, 1968).<sup>9</sup>

Notorious for their transgressive art practice, the Actionists positioned themselves against the hegemonical culture of Austria's Second Republic. Notwithstanding its crimes and complicity during the Second World War, afterwards Austria declared itself the first victim of Nazism.<sup>10</sup> With this act, a form of social amnesia was enforced by the state, which thwarted any kind of reckoning with the country's Nazi past.<sup>11</sup> It was this socio-political environment that inspired the Actionists' taboo breaking art, that aimed to challenge and protest the historical erasure happening in Austria. The Actionists' provocative performances centered the body and frequently dealt with themes of sex, sexuality and gender. These subjects were prominent in the sixties and seventies, when issues such as reproductive rights, sexuality, reproductive labor and the construct

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9. The first part of the title, *Der Helle Wahnsinn*, is a saying that refers to something that is absurd or crazy.

10. The signing of the Moscow declaration in 1943 by the United States, the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom confirmed this status to the world.

11. Austria's victim status remained the general consensus until 1986, when the controversy surrounding the presidential candidate Kurt Waldheim raised debate over the legitimacy of the so-called "victim theory" and the culpability of Austria. Waldheim had served in the German army during the war and was linked to the evacuations of Greek-Jewish people in Thessaloniki. Despite the controversy he won the election and became the president of Austria.

of the family were hotly discussed. However, in Austria second-wave feminism and the gay and lesbian or queer movements emerged a bit later than in other western countries.<sup>12</sup> The Actionists' works were therefore often ahead of the societal discussion on these matters. In their performances, they addressed topics such as pregnancy, sexuality and representations of masculinity/femininity.

Masculinity and femininity are social constructs generated from diverse forms of knowledge, such as science, law, education and psychoanalysis—namely, the discourses that create the numerous ideas concerning gender present in each culture. Neither a single nor a fixed concept, the “category of ‘masculinity’ should be seen as always ambivalent, always complicated, always dependent on the exigencies of personal and institutional power.”<sup>13</sup> According to Arthur Brittan “we cannot talk of masculinity, only masculinities. . . . Those people who speak of masculinity as an essence, as an inborn characteristic, are confusing masculinity with masculinism, the masculine ideology. Masculinism is the ideology that justifies and naturalizes male domination. As such, it is the ideology of patriarchy.”<sup>14</sup> Multiple and diverse forms of masculinity are present in any given historical era, including within a hegemonic culture or system. The sociologist R.W. Connell notes that to “recognize diversity in masculinities is not enough. We must also recognize the relations between the different kinds of masculinity: relations of alliance, dominance and subordination.”<sup>15</sup> There exists a hierarchy between men or masculinities, built on class, race, sexuality, age and dis/ability. Heading up this hierarchy is the model of hegemonic masculinity, first conceptualized by Connell. It describes the prevailing ideas of masculinity in society: “Hegemonic masculinity can be defined as the configuration of gender practice which embodies the currently accepted answer to the problem of the legitimacy of patriarchy, which guarantees (or is taken to guarantee)

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12. Repnik, *Die Geschichte der Lesben- und Schwulenbewegung in Österreich*, 31.

13. Berger, Wallis, and Watson, “Introduction,” 3.

14. Brittan, *Masculinity and Power*, 51, 53.

15. Connell, *Masculinities*, 37.

the dominant position of men and the subordination of women.”<sup>16</sup> I would add that this power relation also applies to a dominant position over genders outside of the male/female binary.

Scholars such as John Tosh and Ben Griffin continue to engage with and reconsider Connell’s notion of hegemonic masculinity and the hierarchy of masculinities.<sup>17</sup> Framing masculinity as a process, Griffin points out that “individual men do not continually perform the same masculinity,” but rather move between different forms.<sup>18</sup> Tosh identifies that hegemonic masculinity “is always in a tense—and potentially unstable relationship with other masculinities, whether defined in terms of sexuality, class, age, or race.”<sup>19</sup> Of notable importance is the plurality of masculinity within its hegemonic form, that is, there usually isn’t just one type of masculinity that holds a dominating position within society. Furthermore, it should be added that masculinity isn’t restricted to a fixed gender, i.e., masculine traits do not solely apply to a male body.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, one shouldn’t conflate masculinity with (biological) men.

Actionism presents a contradictory dialogue regarding gender and masculinity, as it encompasses subversive positioning alongside a more traditional expression of masculine powers. The Actionists advocated for free sexuality and a less restrictive gender identity. Some of their actions featured gender play and transvestitism, especially the performances of Brus.<sup>21</sup> They likewise argued against the traditional,

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16. *Ibid.*, 77. Aside from hegemonic masculinity, Connell categorized forms of masculinity into three groups: complicit, subordinate and marginalized.

17. Tosh, “Hegemonic Masculinity and the History of Gender,” 41–58. Connell and James W. Messerschmidt have also argued for a reconstruction of the concept, noting that “our understanding of hegemonic masculinity needs to incorporate a more holistic understanding of gender hierarchy, recognizing the agency of subordinated groups as much as the power of dominant groups and the mutual conditioning of gender dynamics and other social dynamics.” (Connell and Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” 848.)

18. Griffin, “Hegemonic Masculinity as a Historical Problem,” 384. Griffin furthermore introduces a new way of reframing and using Connell’s theories.

19. Tosh, “Hegemonic Masculinity and the History of Gender,” 43.

20. Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*.

21. Brucher, “Ästhetische Travestie,” 41–65.

bourgeois family structure and its domineering father figure.<sup>22</sup> The Actionists critiqued the hegemonic types of masculinity predominant in Austria, such as fascist masculinity and the conservative, Catholic father. Nonetheless, they also upheld gender clichés in their works, including in narratives of the artists' superior powers. Despite criticizing masculine norms in his actions, Brus adopts similar models for his own artistic rebirth. I investigate what this communicates about gender in Actionism, namely how these masculine ideals are both subverted and reaffirmed in the works. I argue that *Der helle Wahnsinn* shows Brus' desire for an alternative masculinity, an aspiration that is in part made ambiguous by the artist's own reliance on a narrative with an inbuilt emphasis on masculine power. The analysis furthermore sheds a light on the impact of esotericism on these concepts of masculinity and how they manifest in the historical and neo-avant-garde, be it as instruments for destabilizing traditional ideas of gender or as visions of masculine virility. It is important to highlight that the Actionists work with esotericism and its gendered imagery isn't only as a mean of subversion. In *Der helle Wahnsinn*, it is vital to the ritual narrative of the performance.<sup>23</sup>

## 2. The Artist-Alchemist

The Actionists frequently adopted and repurposed esoteric symbols and gestures for their art. As an academic and collective term, esotericism encompasses versatile religious and philosophical perspectives, practices and traditions. This includes

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22. The writings of Wilhelm Reich on the family as the birthplace of totalitarianism influenced their thought. (Reich, *The Mass Psychology of Fascism*, 1972.) Muehl later started his own commune, aiming to revolutionize life. Nonetheless, he ended up reproducing the same kind of gendered hierarchy structures that he originally positioned himself against, with the artist himself taking on the role of the dominant and authoritarian father figure. The AAO-commune came to an end when some of its horrifying practices came to light. In 1991 Muehl was charged and sentenced to seven years in prison for statutory rape.

23. In her analysis of femininity in ritual performances of Thelema, Manon Hedenborg White points out the importance of examining gendered expression both in relation to and apart from hegemonic gender logics. These performances contain important significations outside of their position within societal power structures, and should be considered as such. (Hedenborg White, "Double Toil and (Gender) Trouble? Performativity and Femininity in the Cauldron of Esotericism Research," 182–200.)

alchemy, Theosophy, Gnosticism, Christian kabbalah, Wicca, Hermeticism, Rosicrucianism, Neoplatonism, Anthroposophy, astrology, ritual magic, spiritualism and satanism. In this analysis, esotericism is approached as a form of knowledge or a knowledge-based discourse.<sup>24</sup> While historically esoteric practices have often been categorized as rejected knowledge and considered marginal or subversive, esotericism also does its part in confirming and reinforcing societal norms and structures, including reproducing gendered hierarchies.<sup>25</sup> These complex relations are visible in Actionism, which offers a prime example of how the neo-avant-garde interacted with esotericism and occulture.<sup>26</sup> The Actionists used material from various currents, which they blended with religious motifs and myths. For his *Orgien Mysterien Theater* (The Orgies Mysteries Theater), Nitsch drew from Catholicism, mystery plays, Dionysus cults and satanism. He cites alchemy, the black mass and mysticism as integral to the “history of the action.”<sup>27</sup> In later interviews, Brus speaks candidly of his interest in shamanic traditions and their impact on his later performances such as *Körperanalyse* (*Body Analysis*, 1969) and *Zerreißprobe* (*Breaking Test*, 1970).<sup>28</sup> Schwarzkogler utilized practices and regimens from eastern spiritual traditions, new age doctrines and reform movements for

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24. Kilcher, “Seven Epistemological Theses on Esotericism,” 143-48.

25. Hanegraff, *Esotericism and the Academy*, 2012. On the problem of categorizing esotericism as rejected knowledge: Asprem, “Rejected Knowledge Reconsidered: Some Methodological Notes on Esotericism and Marginality,” 127-46.

26. The term occulture originates from Christopher Partridge and describes “the new spiritual atmosphere in the West” that is, the presence and function of esotericism in modern (popular) culture. (Partridge, *The Re-Enchantment of the West*, 2:2.)

27. In his enumeration, Nitsch also mentions the Roman circus, cults, hunting, Surrealism, Italian Futurism and Fluxus. (Nitsch, “Versuche zur Geschichte der Aktion,” 44-68.)

28. Brus, “Bemerkungen zur Zerreißprobe,” 265; Abrell, *KünstlerInnen. 50 Positionen zeitgenössischer internationaler Kunst*, 57-58. I tackle the shamanic aspects of Brus’ action *Zerreißprobe* (*Breaking Test*, 1970) in my doctoral thesis (Guðmundsdóttir, “Subversive Esotericism and Aesthetic Radicalism,” 2021). Other scholars who have pointed out the influence of shamanism in his works are Franziska Meifert (“Zweimal geboren,” 3-63) and Justin Hoffmann (*Destruktionskunst*, 1995).

his art and to establish an aesthetic and ritualized lifestyle.<sup>29</sup> Given the various discursive entanglements in the Actionists' works, such as with religious traditions, psychoanalysis and mythology, it is not always clear where their esoteric ideas originate from. Their esoteric knowledge is picked up from all manner of sources, not always the original material, but rather the occulture of the era.

In this article, the focus is on the Actionists' use of alchemy in their works. Alchemy centers on a ritual procedure, the *magnum opus* or the great work, that creates the philosophers' stone and the elixir of life. Through a series of transmutations, the alchemist strives to turn base metals into gold or silver. The metamorphosis is not only material but occurs on a spiritual level as well, culminating in the transmutation of man. The process can be divided into four phases: *nigredo* (black), *albedo* (white), *citrinitas* (yellow) and *rubedo* (red).<sup>30</sup> *Nigredo* represents putrefaction, or death, followed by purification and rebirth (*albedo*). The religion scholar Mircea Eliade asserts that *albedo* "probably corresponds, on the spiritual plane, to a resurrection expressed by the assumption of certain states of consciousness inaccessible to the uninitiated."<sup>31</sup> According to him, "the two subsequent phases, the *citrinitas* and the *rubedo*, which are the consummation of the alchemical operation and culminate in the Philosopher's Stone, further develop and fortify this new initiatic consciousness."<sup>32</sup> The Actionists adopted such narrative structures of spiritual and material transmutation for some of their works. Although they don't necessarily refer to alchemy in a direct manner, I argue that it often supplies motifs for their ritualistic performances, such as ritual death and rebirth, the homunculus, putrefaction and purification.

Alchemy intersects with other key aspects and discourses in Actionism, such as destruction, reality and psychoanalysis. Nitsch perceives a resemblance

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29. Among the works in Schwarzkogler's possession were: Lus de Sayjan, *Magie der Sexus* (1966), Yogi Ramacharaka, *Die Kunst des Atmens der Hindu-Yogi*, Swami Nikhilananda, *Der Hinduismus*, and *Medizinische Astrologie* (1926) by Henrich Däath. A list of the works in Schwarzkogler's personal library can be found in *Rudolf Schwarzkogler*, ed. Eva Badura-Triska, and Hubert Klocker, 455-58.

30. Although the number of phases varies, they are usually somewhere between four and twelve.

31. Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible*, 162.

32. *Ibid.*



between the great work of the alchemist and that of the artist, namely that they both “work with realities.”<sup>33</sup> The concept of reality is essential for the Actionists. They claimed that in their performances they worked directly with reality, instead of simply reproducing it as other art does. Their understanding of alchemy is largely adopted from the psychoanalyst C.G. Jung. Psychoanalysis is a central factor in Actionism, as demonstrated in the artists’ use of concepts such as abreaction, castration anxiety and the Oedipus complex. The Actionists proclaimed their art to have a cathartic purpose, building on psychoanalytic theories and esoteric doctrines. In his writings, Nitsch cites Jung’s ideas on alchemy as a psychological process and an expression of the unconscious.<sup>34</sup> This applies to the collective unconscious as well, which is a shared, universal part of the unconscious.<sup>35</sup> Jung’s interpretation of alchemy was fundamental to the Actionists’ understanding of the tradition, and inspired their own fusion of esotericism and psychoanalysis. In this article I examine the alchemical symbolism in Brus’ performance, *Der helle Wahnsinn*, in particular as it intersects with gender and the narrative of male reproduction.

### 3. Birthing the Artist

#### 3.1. Sheer Madness

Male reproduction is a repeated motif in Brus’ oeuvre. What is notable in *Der helle Wahnsinn – Die Architektur des hellen Wahnsinns*, is the variety of the reproductive imagery incorporated into the performance. Gestational and birthing gestures are at the center of the action, which was performed by Brus in the Reiff Museum in Aachen, Germany. The action engages with “existential

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33. Nitsch, “Versuche zur Geschichte der Aktion,” 56.

34. *Ibid.*, 55.

35. Jung argued that the collective unconscious contained mythical “primordial images” or “archetypes”, such as the shadow, the mother, the father, the child, the devil, the god, the wise woman, the anima and the animus. He likewise theorized on the existence of archetypal events like birth, death and initiation. (Jung, *Four Archetypes*, 2003.)

procedures: creation of life, birth, breathing, excretion and pain.”<sup>36</sup> In the action, Brus appears dressed in shirt and trousers. He is equipped with various objects, such as thread, chalk, an egg, plate, a pillow, razor blades, a bucket, a pair of scissors and a piece of paper-wrapped meat. An audience description of the performance reads as follows:

Brus tied his left foot to an (umbilical) cord that was attached to the floor. Then he drew the outline of a womb around himself. He placed his head on a plate. He breathed a raw egg on the plate in and out: the origins of life. During the event the actionist stuffed a packet of meat into his trousers. Amid fierce spasm and screams he then plunged a pair of scissors into it and violently tore the meat out.<sup>37</sup>

The short description omits several parts of the performance. During the action, Brus commits numerous transgressive acts.<sup>38</sup> He cuts his shirt and his chest open with razor blades. He urinates in a bucket and defecates on the floor. In fact, this was the first action where Brus performed such acts in front of the public, i.e., urination and defecation. Photographs of the action give further indications of the mood of the performance. One shows the artist rolling around on the floor screaming, his hands holding the piece of meat over his genitals.<sup>39</sup>

The poster advertising *Der belle Wahnsinn* contains a handwritten layout for the performance. It includes three illustrations: one shows a fetus in a womb with an umbilical cord (or Brus as the fetus), one is of feet or footprints in a circle and lastly there is a drawing of a square, where in each corner one word describing different actions is written: drink/eat/urinate/defecate. The description of the planned action is mostly in a word or two, or short sentences. The plan for the birth scene is followed by the word murder, written in all caps. The last three words on the page are in all caps and in a closed bracket: nutrition, breath, discharge.

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36. Schwanberg, “1965–1970 Chronologie,” 78.

37. Green, *Writings of the Vienna Actionists*, 54.

38. These acts were not without their effects on the audiences. A woman threw up during the birth-simulation. (Schwanberg, “1965–1970 Chronologie,” 79.)

39. Photos of the action were taken by Henning Wolters.

There exists no filmed footage of the action, therefore my analysis is based on the material at hand: photographs, the written description, the poster and other related material. Analyzing performance art of the past can be challenging, as the view is limited to the archival objects available. Photographs are frequently in black and white, and provide a narrow perspective. Other sensory elements, such as sound, are impossible to experience. The Actionists emphasized the importance of the direct art experience. However, the detailed documentation done by the artists themselves conveys that their actions were likewise intended to be experienced retroactively.<sup>40</sup> At times they performed for friends in private residences and, as a result, the films and photographs were the only means for the works to be appreciated by a wider audience.<sup>41</sup> Although they can only offer a fragmented view of the original performance, they still afford important insights into Actionism.

### 3.2. Claiming the Womb

*Der helle Wahnsinn* exhibits the artist's rebirth, as Brus simultaneously takes up the role of the fetus and the gestating body. Rebirth is a core element in Actionism and a prime example of the male reproduction motif. The Actionists' first manifesto and its accompanying event, *Die Blutorgel* (*The Blood Organ*, 1962), illustrated the artists' symbolic death and rebirth, a narrative that they adopted from the traditions of alchemy and other ritual practices.<sup>42</sup> In alchemy, death and rebirth are necessary to achieve the *magnus opus*—to transform the self. For the event, the artists immured themselves in Otto Muehl's cellar studio for four days. At the end of them, the cellar and the art exhibition within was opened in a ceremonial manner—signaling the Actionists' rebirth.<sup>43</sup> The manifesto refers

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40. Widrich, "The Informative Public of a Performance," 141–44. For more on photography in Actionism: Badura-Triska, "Staged Photography," 96–113.

41. In some cases, the actions were fully intended as films or photographic art objects. (Badura-Triska, "Staged Photography," 96–113; Jutz, "Vienna Actionism and Film," 136–57.)

42. Thomas Dreher refers to this event as "the premier of Viennese Actionism." (Dreher, *Performance Art nach 1945*, 164.)

43. The cellar had a back door through which the Actionists were able to exit and re-enter at will.

to this event, as well as containing references to ritual cleansing and rebirth.<sup>44</sup> Although they don't refer directly to the action as alchemical, their transmutation is a narrative of death and rebirth, with putrefaction and purification playing a key role.<sup>45</sup> The reliance of the Jungian interpretation of this process is made clear in the text, as Nitsch emphasizes how his art practice affects the audiences, who “descend into the unconscious” and become “themselves resurrected.”<sup>46</sup> The ultimate goal is abreaction, or the release of the repressed.<sup>47</sup>

*Der belle Wahnsinn* similarly contains an adaptation of alchemical motifs and ritual structures. Brus performs various functions of the body within the ritualistic spaces of a circle and a square, as referred to on the action layout. The performance revolves around generation and birth, which Brus refers to as a “existential procedure.” Various symbolic gestures and objects used in the action underline this, such as the egg. As the ritual frameworks of *Der belle Wahnsinn* make clear, the gestations and birth symbolism refer not only to a biological body and its functions, but to alchemical tradition. Alchemy is full of sexual and gendered imagery and language.<sup>48</sup> Its symbolism is “rich in both mythological and biological allusion” and “presents the image of the opus as the wrestling of an embryo from the womb of the earth, embodied in woman, a birth from

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44. In the text the number of days was originally three but was stricken out and replaced by four in handwriting. (Dvorak et al., “Die Blutorgel,” 46.) The manifesto is the “first textual trace” of the Actionists. (Kupczynska, “*Vergebllicher versuch das fliegen zu erlernen*,” 96.) It is comprised of a prologue and five texts written by Nitsch (“O.M. Theater”), Muehl (“Der M-Apparat”), Adolf Frohner (“Mein Trick-Track”) and the psychoanalyst Josef Dvorak (“Der ‘Schrei’ der Kunst,” and “Blutorgel als Daseinsgestaltung” written under the nom de plum Fritz Graf). Although Frohner isn't considered a part of the core group, he was involved with the Actionists in their earlier period. Dvorak was Muehl's psychoanalyst and owned a gallery where the Actionists held their first exhibitions.

45. Guðmundsdóttir, “Subversive Esotericism and Aesthetic Radicalism,” 2021.

46. Dvorak et al., “Die Blutorgel,” 47.

47. Abreaction is a psychoanalytic concept that Sigmund Freud introduced together with Josef Brauer as a part of their research on hysteria. It depicts the release from repressed feelings when a traumatic episode is reexperienced.

48. Principe, “Revealing Analogies,” 209–29.

a man-made alembic.”<sup>49</sup> The gestating man emerges in a literal sense in an illustration in *Atalanta fugiens* (Atalanta in flight) by the alchemist Michael Maier, which shows an image of a pregnant Hermes Trismegistus.<sup>50</sup> Apart from the symbolic portrayal of the *magnus opus* as pregnancy and birth, there exists the figure of the homunculus—a humanoid created by the alchemist. According to the philosopher and alchemist Paracelsus (1493–1541), the homunculus is made by using male sperm but “without the female body and the natural womb.”<sup>51</sup> For some alchemists, the creation of the homunculus is the main objective.<sup>52</sup> However, it should be understood as an allegory for completing the great work and achieving spiritual rebirth.

In *Der belle Wahnsinn*, Brus places himself inside a make-shift uterus and even supplies an umbilical cord in the form of string tied to his foot. In the absence of a womb, Brus draws one around him, further indicating the ritualistic aspect of the action. Womb imagery or womb-like places such as caves are often utilized in initiation rites.<sup>53</sup> In alchemy, the philosopher’s stone is created in a vessel that must be egg-shaped or similar to a womb.<sup>54</sup> On the poster for *Der belle Wahnsinn*, there is a drawing of a fetus or Brus representing the fetus. It shows a figure in a womb with an umbilical cord attached to it. Next to the drawing, Brus has written: “Lies in egg-form,” establishing a clear link between the egg-shape and the artificial womb. Along with the ritual structure, this illustrates that the symbolism of the work refers not solely to a biological womb, but to other forms of (ritual) reproduction, such as through the alchemical vessel.

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49. Allen and Hubbs, “Outrunning Atalanta,” 213.

50. Hermes is considered the creator of alchemy. For a more indepth analysis of this imagery, see Allen and Hubbs, “Outrunning Atalanta,” 210–29.

51. Paracelsus, *De Natura Rerum*, I. XI., 316–17. Cited in Goodrick-Clarke, *Paracelsus*, 175.

52. This is the case with *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*, written by Johann Valentin Andreae in 1616. His description of the homunculus reads as following: “We opened up the molds, and there were two beautiful, bright and almost transparent little images such as human eyes have never seen, of a little boy and a girl, each only four inches long. What amazed me the most was that they were not hard, but as soft and fleshlike as any human being, but they had no life. I am quite certain that the Lady Venus’ image was made in some such way.” (Andreae, *The Chemical Wedding of Christian Rosenkreutz*, 92.)

53. Eliade, *Rites and Symbols of Initiation*, 36, 42, 50–60.

54. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, 237–38; Abraham, *A Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, 219.

The employment of the egg in Brus' action warrants a closer examination. He has used eggs in some of his other birth or fetus related performances. In *Aktion in einem Kreis* (*Action in a Circle*, 1966), an egg lies on a plate inside a ritualistic circle that represents the womb, a similar composition to the one found in *Der helle Wahnsinn*. In these actions, the egg clearly refers to fertility, citing the ovaries and its eggs cells. However, it is further imbued with religious and esoteric symbolism. The symbol of the egg appears in alchemy, not solely as a vessel, but as the philosophical egg. Jung notes that in alchemy “the egg stands for the chaos apprehended by the artifex, the *prima materia* containing the captive world-soul. Out of the egg—symbolized by the round cooking vessel—will rise the eagle or phoenix, the liberated soul.”<sup>55</sup> Through this lens, the egg signals the rebirth of the artist.

The egg is present in numerous narratives of origins, both of cosmos and man. In Greek cosmogony the Orphic or the cosmic egg begat the primordial hermaphroditic deity Phanes or Protogonus, who then went on to create other gods. The androgynous or hermaphroditic symbolism often related in such creation stories is notable. According to the philologist David A. Leeming, “The egg is a symbol of nondifferentiation, differentiation between things being the essence of the creation of anything. It contains within itself male and female, light and dark, all opposites in a state of union. It is perfect entropy and signals the existence of creative power from the very beginning.”<sup>56</sup> The French Polynesian god Ta'aroa created himself by bursting out of an egg-like shell. He then proceeded to create the world, the shell becoming the material for the sky.<sup>57</sup> Brus' instructions on the poster: “lies in egg-form” come to mind here. The choice of words evokes different associations, including the egg-shaped instrument of alchemy and the creator coming out of the primordial egg. In *Der helle Wahnsinn* Brus breathes on the egg, referring to the “origins of life.” Yet, the

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55. Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy*, 202.

56. Leeming, *Creation Myths of the World*, 314.

57. *Ibid.*, 499.

act furthermore demonstrates his breath as a part of the reproductive process—as the source of life. Breathing life into things is normally the territory of gods, as is self-creation. Brus’ gesture moreover recalls the breathing techniques used during birth: Lamaze breathing exercises, which are intended to relax the body and to decrease the sense of pain.<sup>58</sup> Breathing techniques can moreover be a spiritual tool, as they are employed to reach another state (meditation, shamanic trance). With this act, Brus draws attention to his breathing, imbuing it with meaning within the performance. In the action, the breath and the egg are symbolically charged, both linked to biological and spiritual (re)birth.

#### 4. Womb Envy

In Actionism most of the reproductive imagery surrounds the artists’ creative powers and ritualistic rebirths through ersatz wombs (Muehl’s cellar studio, ritualistic circles). Therefore, Brus’ enactment of gestation and birth might seem like an anomaly. Although the gestating body doesn’t need to be female, pregnancy and birth are traditionally associated with women. A male portraying a pregnant body can therefore be considered a feminization. Nevertheless, I argue that Brus’ act of adopting the feminine reproductive organs aligns with the narration of masculine generative power found both in the avant-garde and alchemy. Sally G. Allen and Joanna Hubbs consider feminine powers to be of immense importance in alchemy, although there they are transcribed to the (usually) male alchemist.<sup>59</sup> They argue that “the origins and evolution of alchemy contain further evidence of an identification with the maternal feminine as a source of creative power, what we would call today ‘womb envy.’”<sup>60</sup> The psychoanalyst Karen Horney was the first to conceptualize the subject. She describes it as an “envy of pregnancy, child-birth and motherhood, as well as of the breasts and

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58. Brus cites these breathing techniques in an earlier trilogy of short films that center on gestation: *Pullover; Osmose; Einatmen und Ausatmen* (Sweater; Osmosis; Inhaling and Exhaling, 1967).

59. There have been many practicing female alchemists as well.

60. Allen and Hubbs, “Outrunning Atalanta,” 213.

of the act of suckling.”<sup>61</sup> Allen and Hubbs further cite the work of Erich Fromm, who regards the man’s drive for creation as a manifestation of “pregnancy envy”:

Quite in contrast to Freud’s assumption that “penis envy” is a natural phenomenon in the constitution of the woman’s psyche, there are good reasons for assuming that even before male supremacy was established there was a ‘pregnancy envy’ in the male, which even today can be found in numerous cases. In order to defeat the mother, the male must prove that he is not inferior, that he has a gift to produce. Since he cannot produce with a womb, he must produce in another fashion; he produces with his mouth, his word, his thought.<sup>62</sup>

Fromm’s text links this jealousy and desire with the creative work that becomes a replacement for gestation.

In spite of the alchemist’s employment of feminine powers, Allen and Hubbs note that

the equality of masculine and feminine in the alchemical opus is created in order to produce a masculine being, to right a masculine imbalance in masculine terms. The hermaphroditic nature of the *filius philosophorum* is a concession to the maternal by the dominant Father who thus encompasses the feminine (primordial animality) within the purer spiritual realm of the mind, the masculine ‘womb.’<sup>63</sup>

*Der helle Wahnsinn* demonstrates this fusion of the feminine and masculine, one that nevertheless remains a creation of man. The womb that envelops Brus, the place of his self-generation, is clearly established as of his making, as the audience witnesses him drawing it on the floor. In one way or another, he is the source of all organs of reproduction. The feminine symbolism of the performance is linked to the persona of Brus and his male body. Although playing the role of the gestating body, he is wearing a shirt and pants, which underlines his male-ness or masculine identity. Brus frequently wore women’s underwear and garters during his performances, yet here he chooses to wear male garments, therefore emphasizing his manhood (or

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61. Horney, “The Flight from Womanhood,” 60.

62. Fromm, *The Forgotten Language*, 233.

63. Allen and Hubbs, “Outrunning Atalanta,” 220. Allen and Hubbs base their analysis on Jung’s writings in *Psychology and Alchemy* (23–25.)



his performed masculinity) instead of portraying a more androgynous or feminine form.<sup>64</sup> The action does contain an element of hermaphroditism, in that Brus retains both feminine and masculine reproductive powers, but masculinity remains the dominant feature of Brus' performed gender identity.

The fantasy of male reproduction is closely entwined with the ambition to change and control nature. The practice of alchemy is a manipulation of nature, and a quest to perfect it.<sup>65</sup> With the *magnum opus*, the alchemist takes on a god-like pursuit, as the work is “a microcosmic reconstitution of the creation, in other words a re-creation.”<sup>66</sup> The idea of the reproductive man, be it the alchemist or the artist, entails the desire to bend nature to their own will. As exemplified in alchemy, the man as a creator demands perfection and seeks to exceed the abilities of nature and woman. This can materialize in the creation of the ideal man. In the following section, I examine how this appears in the historical avant-garde and Actionism as well as consider the masculinities attached to the motif of male reproduction.

## 5. The Ideal Man

In many historical avant-garde and modernist texts the accounts of male gestation show a being or entity being born, a product or a progeny that can carry various symbolic meanings, including that of an ideal man or nation. These stories contain discursive links with the rhetoric of virility, Nietzschean ideas on the *Übermensch* and the cult of the will, a rhetoric that was moreover present in fascism and Nazism as well as protofascist narratives.<sup>67</sup> The pinnacle of this is Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's *Mafarka le futuriste* (*Mafarka the Futurist*, 1909). The futurist novel tells of the king Mafarka, who reproduces his mechanical son

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64. For examples of Brus' transvestism, see *Transvestitenaktion* (*Transvestites Action*, 1967), *Körperanalyse I* (*Body Analysis*, 1969) and *Psychodramolett* (*Psycho-Mini-Drama*, 1969/1970). In these actions, he wears diverse feminine garments such as bra, garters, panty-hose, bikinis and high socks.

65. As Paracelsus proclaimed: “Man must bring everything to perfection.” (Paracelsus, *Selected Writings*, 166-67. Cited in Gibbons, *Spirituality and the Occult*, 26.)

66. Klossowski de Rola, *Alchemy*, 16.

67. Spackman, *Fascist Virilities*, 1996.

Gazourmah—a genesis that displays clear links to alchemy, the myth of the Golem and the evolutionary theories of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck.<sup>68</sup> The work illustrates the desire to create a superman or the ideal man.<sup>69</sup> Similar narratives are found in the writings of Ernst Jünger and Ernst Weiß, where they describe man being reborn as a superman out of death.<sup>70</sup> The manifesto *Die Blutorgel* demonstrates such a reproductive narrative, as Muehl’s text introduces the machine-man M-Apparatus: a figure that cites the homunculus, cybernetics and techno-hybrids.<sup>71</sup> The M-Apparatus is described as a machine of violence and destruction, and it evokes the similar hybrids of the historical avant-garde, namely, the collection of homunculi and machine-men that appeared in Futurism and other protofascist art, representing the ideal man of the nation state.

These early twentieth-century narratives of male reproduction often contained discursive links to evolutionary theories and eugenics, especially those that incorporated visions of a superman, such as *Mafarka le futuriste*. In his analysis of male pregnancy in modernist literature, Michael Davidson maintains that it encompasses a “biofuturist potentiality”:

At a moment when racial science and eugenics presented brave new worlds purged of defective, degenerate bodies and where sexological discourse made visible (and pathological) a new set of practices and subjects, the spectacle of male pregnancy was enlisted to imagine futures written in biopolitical terms.<sup>72</sup>

Davidson explains how “male maternity” became “a metaphor for the ways that modernism figured negative futures around the threat of nontraditional forms of reproduction. The figure of the pregnant male could be seen as a camera obscura on modernity’s anxieties over violated biology and traduced nature,”<sup>73</sup>

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68. Kanz, *Maternale Moderne*, 210–14, 217–22; Hjartarson, *Visionen des Neuen*, 312–15.

69. Blum, *The Other Modernism*, 45.

70. Kanz, *Maternale Moderne*, 148–54.

71. I analyze Muehl’s M-Apparatus as a homunculus in “Subversive Esotericism and Aesthetic Radicalism,” 95–96.

72. Davidson, “Pregnant Men,” 210.

73. *Ibid.*, 212.

a reflection on how man sought to affect nature and the evolution of humanity through eugenics and modern science.

As Allen and Hubbs make clear, in alchemy the end product of male reproduction is a masculine entity or masculine power. The being produced (or the main representative of the end product) in *Der helle Wahnsinn* is a piece of meat. The violence of the birth and the fact that it results in dead flesh can be regarded in the light of reproducing the ideal (fascist) man, that is, as a sharp critique of the fantasy of breeding the superman and glorifying domineering types of masculinity. In this context, the meat is moreover a comment on the worthlessness of human life during the Third Reich. Despite celebrating the ideal man and promising a new civilization, the Nazis viewed people as simply meat or bodies for the war machine (or the meat grinder). In the Nazi vocabulary, those in concentration camps were called human material or resources (G. Menschenmaterial), a term that served to strip them of their humanity. Brus' violent birth of an already dead "Menschenmaterial" can be interpreted as criticism of Nazism and its utopian visions, i.e., to birth the perfect new man and society. The stabbing of the scissors into the meat suggests abortion and therefore reproduction control, a critical instrument for the Nazis to cultivate their new nation.

## 6. Virile Masculinity

Male reproduction alludes to themes of virility and immense creative powers. Numerous works in the historical avant-garde and modernism feature the virile man: a fertile specimen that radiates physical health and strength. In the narratives of male reproduction, he can appear as the ideal man resulting from male creation, or the one who reproduces. Depictions of such masculine reproductive powers frequently cite vitalism. As a part of a philosophical anti-rationalism, this current saw its heyday in the nineteenth century and at the beginning of the twentieth. The core idea behind vitalism is the belief in a

life energy existing in all living beings and organic matter. This cosmic force is considered to govern life in the universe. Vitalism encompasses various heterogeneous theories, that touch on the subjects of biology, psychology, cosmology and even cultural criticism. The French philosopher Henri Bergson (1859–1941) theorized the existence of “*élan vital*,” or the *vital force*, which he saw as the catalyst of all life and evolution. Bergson considered the human intellect to be the clearest example of this “creative evolution.”<sup>74</sup> Among other influential theorists of vitalism were Hans Driesch, Alois Riegl, Georg Simmel and Friedrich Nietzsche.

The Actionists derived their vitalism from various sources: mystery cults, Nietzschean ideas on the Dionysian, and the theories of the psychoanalyst Wilhelm Reich on orgone energy.<sup>75</sup> For Nitsch’s *Orgien Mysterien Theater*, it is a key concept: “A philosophy of intoxication, ecstasy and delight finally shows that the innermost element of the intensely vital is intoxicated agitation, debauchery which represents a form of existence of the orgiastic in which joy, torment, death and procreation approach and merge with each other.”<sup>76</sup> His vitalist thinking fuses the Dionysian with theories of psychoanalysis. Nevertheless, Reich’s influence is most strongly felt in Muehl’s work, particularly in his writings on the practices of the AAO-commune.<sup>77</sup> The Actionists’ vitalist leanings manifest in their many portrayals of life energy and vital matter. Expressions of Dionysian life force can be found in the orgiastic performances of Nitsch, such as *Abreaktionsspiel* (*Abreaction Play*, 1970). In the action, the vital energy is demonstrated in the second half of the performance, which sees a turn from the ritualistic towards an orgiastic and chaotic display. The sexual is a crucial factor in the creation symbolism of Actionism. In *Die Blutorgel* manifesto the Actionists’

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74. Bergson, *Creative Evolution*, 2003.

75. Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, 1993; Normandin, “Wilhelm Reich. Vitalism and Its Discontents,” 179–204.

76. Nitsch, “The O.M. Theater,” 36–37.

77. Muehl considers Reich to be “the father of the new, profound revolution of consciousness.” (Muehl, “Wilhelm Reich und AAO Lebenspraxis,” 181.)

creative powers are illustrated through sexual imagery, as the artists claim its source to be heat (G. Brunst). Vital fluids such as blood, water, milk, wine and sperm also feature heavily in their works. These materials cite the *prima materia* (or the first matter), a key alchemical ingredient which has been described with various similes and names, including dirt, blood, honey, urine, sperm and egg.

The symbolism of male virility is hardly subtle. Alongside allusions to and performance of sexual acts, there are depictions of male genitalia, the phallus, and semen. Numerous actionist works showcase the penis and its functions, be it in connotation with sexual interactions, masturbation or ejaculation. These performances are frequently absurd and humorous. In *Kunst und Revolution (Art and Revolution, 1968)*, Muehl and his performance group shook beer bottles in a masturbatory manner and used the frothing beer to imitate ejaculation. Some actions focus on the prime instrument of male reproduction. Nitsch's eight action, *Penisbepülungen (Penis-Bathings, 1965)* demonstrates the handling of a penis that is bandaged and covered in blood, guts and other fluids in turn. This extreme focus on the male genitalia recalls phallus worship, which is believed to have played a part in Dionysian or Bacchanalian festivals, a tradition that Nitsch's *Orgien Mysterien Theater* draws from directly. The grail and the phallus are key (gendered) motifs in his art, which he claims to be "two mutually necessary extremes."<sup>78</sup> In the artworks of Actionism, the penis is a source of laughter and an object of veneration. I would like to note that the sacred and the humorous don't need to be in opposition and the latter has played a role in esoteric practices.<sup>79</sup>

Masculine generative powers can be represented with semen. Within an esoteric context semen can signalize (masculine) cosmic powers. In alchemy it refers to the *prima materia*. The male sperm is furthermore needed to create a homunculus (while a woman's reproductive organs or cells are not necessary). Brus' performance in *Der helle Wahnsinn* incorporates the fertilizing role of semen. In addition to his gestating activities, Brus also takes up the part of

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78. Nitsch, "The O.M. Theater," 36.

79. Greer, "Religion can't be a joke, right?," 127-36.

inseminator. The gesture of laying his head down on the plate carrying the egg can be interpreted as the head of the sperm penetrating the egg. The plate represents one of the ovaries and Brus is the sperm that interacts with and fertilizes the egg. Despite the action's emphasis on the womb and imagery linked with female reproduction, masculine vitality is shown to be crucial to the act of creation. The placement of Brus' head further suggests the brain as the real source of his reproductive powers,<sup>80</sup> an act that evokes the avant-garde discourse of masculine powers and reproduction, which frequently involved brain imagery.<sup>81</sup> In the foreword to *Mafarka le futuriste*, Marinetti proclaims: "I tell you that the mind of man is an unpractised ovary . . . It is we who are the first to impregnate it!"<sup>82</sup> Behind this utterance is the Nietzschean idea that the will of man is the ultimate reproductive force.<sup>83</sup> Brus likewise claims full reproductive powers, as he alone is the source of creation in the performance.

The Actionists' narratives of masculine creativity must be read in their historical context. The exaltation of virile masculinity should be viewed as reaction to the post-war realities of Austria: that is, the perceived crisis of national masculinity in the wake of the Second World War and the state's aspirations to rejuvenate Austria's image and national identity.<sup>84</sup> After suffering defeat at the hands of the Allied forces, the returning soldiers of Austria struggled to integrate and deal with their war trauma.<sup>85</sup> As the historian Richard Bessel observes, "Defeats are experienced as crisis situations for individual as well as the national

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80. Benedikt Hjartarson addresses brain imagery in the historical avant-garde and its connotations to reproduction. (Hjartarson, *Visionen des Neuen*, 293-320.)

81. Among other examples, Hjartarson cites a quote from the American poet Ezra Pound, where he describes the brain as "a sort of great clot of genital fluid held in suspense or reserve." (Hjartarson, *Visionen des Neuen*, 308.)

82. Marinetti, *Mafarka the Futurist*, 3.

83. Hjartarson, *Visionen des Neuen*, 306.

84. On the often repeated but doubtful claims of masculinity in constant crisis: Allen, "Men Interminably in Crisis?," 191-207.

85. Hanisch, *Männlichkeiten*, 99-100.

manhood.”<sup>86</sup> With Austria under occupation until 1955, the presence of foreign victors was a constant reminder of the soldiers’ failure and seen as a further emasculation of the Austrian man.<sup>87</sup> As a part of the state’s attempts to restore stability and a sense of normality after the war, they sought to establish a new national identity. In effort to do so, the state looked to the past and celebrated the culture of the golden years. For post-war Austria those were the days of the Habsburg monarchy.<sup>88</sup> This endeavor furthermore called for a reconstruction of the masculine ideal. The historian George L. Mosse theorizes that a strong ideal of masculinity is regarded as a “reflection of the nation.”<sup>89</sup> The nation state establishes and regulates these paragons of masculinity through the institutions of society as well as the products of (popular) culture. According to Connell and Messerschmidt, at times hegemonic masculinities “do not correspond closely to the lives of any actual men” but rather “express widespread ideals, fantasies, and desires.”<sup>90</sup> The film historian Maria Fritsche examines how this reform of Austrian masculinity manifested in films between 1946 and 1955. She notes that “these images fostered pride in the newly created Austrian nation, while at the same time subtly reinforcing traditional gender relations by cleansing Austrian men from any association with war crimes and by softening their claim for power.”<sup>91</sup> It is to this environment that the Actionists are responding.

The Actionists’ displays of virile masculinity is a reaction to the dominant masculinities of post-war Austria, such as the Catholic conservative father or the new Austrian man. Their call for free sexuality and to abolish the nuclear family is reflected here. The virile man symbolizes sexual freedom and should be considered in light of the Actionists’ aim to free the Austrian people from

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86. Bessel, “Was bleibt vom Krieg?,” 300.

87. Hanisch, *Männlichkeiten*, 99-100.

88. The Habsburgs ruled over the Austrian empire (1804-1867) and the Austro-Hungarian empire (1867-1918).

89. Mosse, *The Image of Man*, 8.

90. Connell and Messerschmidt, “Hegemonic Masculinity: Rethinking the Concept,” 838.

91. Fritsche, “Austrian Men ‘Do Everything with Feeling!’ Representations of Masculinity,” 86.

repression. To a certain degree, each of the artists counteracts some standard of gender norms and ideas of traditional manliness. Nevertheless, their virile man and his reproductive powers bring up a troubling association with another type of masculinity—the fascist man. The Nazi party’s interpretation of the ideal man was the dedicated and preserving soldier, their primary goal being the regeneration of society and to “create a new civilization.”<sup>92</sup> Mosse notes that “Fascism used manliness both as an ideal and in a practical manner in order to strengthen its political structure, but devotion to a higher cause was at the center of its concept of masculinity.”<sup>93</sup> The Actionists’ glorification of virile masculinity links their art to fascist rhetoric, however fascist nationalism or a commitment to the goals of the nation state do not align with Actionism.

In their performances, the Actionists seemingly celebrate a fantasy of virile manhood. Yet, the humor and irony that at times underlie these actions also serve to undercut this image. For example, the penis isn’t always presented in its fertilizing glory or as an instrument of sexual pleasures. The Actionists’ works contain ample instances of castration symbolism. The actions of Schwarzkogler and Nitsch feature plenty of bandaged penises and the motif is central in *Orgien Mysterien Theater*. These performances are moreover acts of protest against the hegemonic state and its bourgeois values and morals. During *Kunst und Revolution*, Brus masturbates while singing the Austrian national hymn. The sexual act is turned into a gesture of subversion, rather than an endeavor to show masculine prowess. In *Der belle Wahnsinn*, Brus shows no attempt to reproduce a masculine ideal. Despite a narrative of rebirth through masculine powers, the man on display is not an epitome of strength or force. Male reproduction is not shown as a heroic act, but rather as a painful, destructive and frantic procedure. By urinating and defecating during the performance, Brus further emphasizes his fragile and physical humanity—he is far removed from fantasies of a superman forged through

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92. Gentile, “Fascism, Totalitarianism and Political Religion,” 40.

93. Mosse, *The Image of Man*, 155.



masculine will. Instead, he shows us a grotesque body that reflects the absurdity of bodily existence. To fully comprehend the symbolic meaning of male reproduction in *Der helle Wahnsinn*, other aspects of the action must be examined, most notably the transgressive acts Brus commits, such as self-harm, urinating and defecating.

## 7. Destructive Reproduction

In *Der helle Wahnsinn*, creation and destruction are intertwined, a combination already existing in the alchemical narrative of death and rebirth. Brus' performance includes multiple gestures of destruction. He acts out a violent birth, stabbing the meat with scissors, and cuts his chest with razor blades. The instances of self-harm should be recognized as ritualistic, and read together with the rebirth narrative of the action. Allen and Hubbs argue that

the primordial importance of the feminine as transmitter of the shaman's and later the alchemist's power is also underscored by shamanic initiation rites which necessitate a "dangerous" reentry into the paradigmatic body of the mother—cave, earth, water, fire—in order to learn her secrets and, thus, no longer be subject to her control. This parallels the alchemical vision of the absorption of the initiate into the body of the monster or into the womblike darkness called nigredo in order to begin the process of rebirth.<sup>94</sup>

Brus' bleeding wounds function as a birth canal for a spiritual rebirth. Thomas Dreher notes how in one of the action's photos, the composition of the cutting act evokes female genitalia. The photo shows Brus holding open his cut shirt, an opening which is shaped like a vulva, drawing attention to the cut and the blood running down in the middle.<sup>95</sup> Dreher further recalls a later illustration made by Brus, published in his magazine *Schastrommel* (1970), of a male figure with a vulva on his left breast.<sup>96</sup> The parallel imagery of female genitals and wounds appears elsewhere in Actionism. First and foremost, in the employment

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94. Allen and Hubbs, "Outrunning Atalanta," 215; Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible*, 41; Eliade, *Shamanism*, 46 ff.

95. Klocker, *Wiener Aktionismus*, 60.

96. Dreher, *Performance nach 1945*, 221.

of the side-wound in Nitsch's works. During performances, the wound is cut into lamb carcasses, where it is repeatedly feminized and sexualized.<sup>97</sup> Brus' choice of cutting his chest is interesting when considering the generative imagery of the action. He cuts himself through the shirt (his masculine attire), creating a vaginal opening or a perhaps a milking breast—his blood serving as a replacement for mother's milk. The act can be viewed as a feminization of the artist and calls into question the narrative of a dominating masculine power. The self-cutting moreover depicts Brus as hurt and bleeding, and is therefore quite antithetical to the imagery of strength and (fascist) masculine powers. His virile man is presented as frail and more androgynous than the original ideal.

The birth performance in *Der belle Wahnsinn* combines the creation of life with destruction and death. The birth is depicted as a violent event, as Brus plunges a pair of scissors into his surrogate fetus—a gesture that invokes a bloody C-section or abortion.<sup>98</sup> In an act that indicates the closeness of death and birth, Brus mimics giving birth to dead flesh. The ritual structure of the action furthermore suggests the necessity of death to achieve rebirth. The poster describes this act as “MURDER,” a proclamation that brings to mind ritual sacrifice. The meat in question is of an already butchered animal. The themes of butchery and birth are frequently intertwined in Actionism. In Nitsch's works already-slaughtered sacrificial animals and birth symbolism are often conflated and linked through imagery of the female genitalia. This is blatant in the actions *Maria Empfängnis* (*Immaculate Conception*, 1969) and *Abreaktionspiel*, where the parallels between the lamb carcass and the performer Hanel Koeck are repeatedly emphasized through gestures and symbolism, especially in paralleling the side-wound and the vulva.<sup>99</sup>

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97. Nitsch makes this sexual connotation crystal clear in his writings. (Nitsch, “Zur symbolik der seitenwunde,” 78–82.)

98. The act can also be taken to signalize the trauma of childbirth, a subject Brus had reflected on in *Transfusion* (1965). In the performance, the perspective was not the trauma of the gestating person but on birth being our first traumatic experience.

99. I address this in my analysis of *Abreaktionspiel* in “Subversive Esotericism and Aesthetic Radicalism,” 2021.

Death and destruction are essential components for a ritual rebirth. In alchemy, the state of *nigredo* or putrefaction represents the ritual death, a phase that centers on decomposition of material. Although the state of *nigredo* is not explicitly cited in the action, I argue that Brus' performance refers to ritual death. In *Der Helle Wahnsinn*, his defecation and urination can be considered as bodily acts of putrefaction. Within the action, they are clearly put in context with nourishment and life. The description on the poster groups together acts of nourishment and excretion. There Brus maps out ritual space in a circle and a square. Each represents and is used for different elements of the action. The circle, or the womb, is where the act of gestation and spiritual rebirth takes place. While the circle can represent “the perfect, eternal spiritual realm,” the square stands for “the earth, the corruptible world of illusion, the four elements.”<sup>100</sup> In the four corners of the square, Brus has written: drink/eat/urinate/defecate, which certainly are crucial parts of earthly existence, representing the cycle of nourishment and excretion all humans must abide. Within the framework of alchemy, nourishment becoming feces and urine represents the natural transmutations of the body. Furthermore, the employment of alchemical narratives in the historical and neo-avant-garde often saw feces signaling the *prima materia* or one of alchemy's end products—gold, or the artist-chemist creating gold (art) out of waste.<sup>101</sup>

At one point in *Der Helle Wahnsinn*, Brus takes down his pants and defecates on the floor. During the act, Brus sits in a fetus-like position, bent over and hooking his hands under the knees. Squatting is also a position used in labor. The relationship shown between defecation and pregnancy in Brus' art is worth a closer examination. In a text about the making of his and Kurt Kren's film, *20 September* (1967), Brus details being struck with inspiration after he was dancing on, and broke, a marble table: “marbel plate—marbel cake—mummy

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100. Abraham, *Dictionary of Alchemical Imagery*, 41–42.

101. The most blatant example of such an art work would be *Merda d'Artista* (*Artist's Shit*, 1961) by the Italian artist Piero Manzoni.

cake—tummy cooking—belly = shit.”<sup>102</sup> In this illuminating description, the artist brings together marble, food, pregnancy and feces, as the term mummy cake, or *Mutterkuchen*, refers to the placenta. This associative thinking reveals a connection between these bodily functions in the artist’s symbolic world. It moreover shows the humor that is a central factor in Brus’ works. The title of the action, *Der Helle Wahnsinn—Die Architektur des hellen Wahnsinns*, is another example. “Der helle Wahnsinn” is a saying that refers to something being absurd or crazy. The question is what Brus is alluding to. Architecture refers to structures, form, or design. The action centers on the cycle of life, nourishment, excretion, reproduction and death. It is our existence, including our bodily functions, that seems to be the punchline here. The structure of life in all its grotesque glory is the ultimate source of absurdity.

The act of defecating in a performance of birth can be read as a transgressive act. The gesture brings to mind the writings of Georges Bataille, who remarks that the “sexual channels are also the body’s sewers,” and quotes St. Augustine, “we are born between feces and urine,”<sup>103</sup> a viewpoint that is palpable in Brus’ work. Urine and feces are the excrements of life. They are not in opposition to the vital fluids that symbolize it, such as the blood, the semen or the egg; they are a part of the whole. Brus’ drawing of the square exhibits a balance—eating, drinking, defecating, urinating—each an essential part of his art ritual and of the life cycle. As Bataille reminds us: “Life is always a product of the decomposition of life.”<sup>104</sup> This premise underlies the rebirth narrative of alchemy and its expression in Brus’ performance.

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102. Green, *Writings of the Vienna Actionists*, 51; Klocker, *Wiener Aktionismus*, 137–38.

103. Bataille, *Eroticism*, 57–58.

104. *Ibid.*, 55.

## 8. Conclusion

The motif of male reproduction presents an abiding fantasy that in modernism and the historical avant-garde reflected the fears and anxieties of its era, and often revealed its masculinism and misogyny. The type of masculinity visible in these narratives was grounded in a rhetoric of virality and supremacist notions. By adopting the symbolism of male reproduction, the Actionists write themselves into a certain esoteric and literary tradition that celebrates phallic creative power while appropriating and rejecting the woman's body. Male reproduction in Actionism mostly follows a traditional path of emphasizing masculine creation, employing both alchemical imagery and vitalist rhetoric. The Actionists appropriate its highly gendered symbolism and with it bring forth and reproduce an uneven gender binary.

As a response to the perceived crisis of masculinity and the Austrian nation state's attempts at reinvention, the Actionists revive a form of masculinity based in sexual virility and phallic power. For them the virile man is a subversive other that they position against the Austrian petit bourgeoisie and the Catholic, conservative father. They moreover see virile masculinity as a way towards a release from repression. Still, the image of the virile man reinforces the idea of dominant masculinity. He is linked to ideas of supremacy and promotes a hierarchical order: he is positioned above women, other genders, masculinities, and even nature, in a narrative that falls under what Britton terms masculinism, or the ideology of the patriarchy. He moreover contains discursive links with fascist masculinity, in particular through the motif of male reproduction and the idealization of the virile man. However, the Actionists' employment of humor adds ambiguity to their representations of masculinity and undermines its idolization.

*Der belle Wabnsinn* offers a different rendition of masculinity. Although male reproduction remains a narrative of masculine power, Brus' performance destabilizes the male/female binary. The action shows an alternative form of virile masculinity. He subverts the masculine ideal, in that there is no manly perfection on display. Brus is not the image of the traditional, virile man.

He is cut up, in pain and partly feminized (bleeding wound, gestating). The rejection of ideal masculinity is further cemented in another part of the action, the birth itself. Instead of creating an ideal man, Brus produces dead flesh and excrement. His transgressive performance not only signals the necessity of death for a ritual of rebirth, but refers to the destructive consequences of idealizing (fascist) masculinity.

Esotericism is deeply intertwined with the gendered expression of the Actionists. Alchemical and esoteric imagery is adopted and repurposed for their subversive takes on masculinity. In a broader context, the analysis reflects the complex positioning of esotericism, i.e., its relations to societal power structures as well as its uses as a tool of subversion or as a counternarrative to the norms, in this case, the images and hierarchies of masculinity. The Actionists also mine esotericism for ritual purposes and for claiming the (cosmic) power of creation. Brus' performance in *Der belle Wahnsinn* doesn't solely hold meaning as a critique of masculinity. His adaptation of the masculine and feminine is vital to the ritual aspects of the action: the narrative of spiritual rebirth and self-generation. Esotericism and gender intersect in these gestures, serving the performance in more ways than as a social commentary.

The Actionists' works demonstrate that holding a subversive position on gender norms or the hegemonic masculinities of an era doesn't necessarily mean rejecting masculinity or narratives of masculine supremacy. As the analysis reveals, even artists who are critical of certain traditional forms of masculinity can still exhibit and reinforce other masculine ideals. Taking a stance against one or more manifestations of masculinity doesn't equal a renunciation of the masculine. The masculinities on display in Actionism moreover reflect how multiple and diverse images of masculinity exist simultaneously at any given time. Examining their performances in light of Austrian post-war society supports the findings of scholars like Connell, Tosh and Griffin, as it illustrates how the masculinity of an era is never singular, but comes in numerous forms and types. The analysis

moreover shows how types of masculinity can be read and understood differently depending on the context. The virile man appears as an example of fascist masculinity, as a sexual, Dionysian subject in the Actionists' art, and finally as the version performed in Brus action: a virile man that has been divested of fantasies of perfection, and presents a more human and fragile body.

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