Visions of Xs: experiencing La Fura dels Baus's XXX and Ron Athey's Solar Anus

Roberta Mock

The Xs to which I refer in the title of this essay are intended to conjure a web of associations clustering around eroticism, death and visual theatricality: excess, of course; but also negation, annihilation, crossing out; the indication of a specific location—X marks the spot—a location that is always liminal; the sign of the sacrificial cross; the laceration of subject and object, of performers and spectators, of the artform itself; a point of convergence; pornography. I am trying here to see and feel back to a near-historical moment—during the first half of 2003—when I was among many who were struggling to rethink the ways in which we articulate, position and critique our experience of contemporary theatrical performance events. It started with a coincidence: my attendance, within a fortnight, of La Fura dels Baus's production of XXX at the Riverside Studios in London¹ and Ron Athey's Solar Anus at a lap-dancing club in Birmingham. These performances had much in common despite their very different styles: that is, the apparently different ways they positioned the audience, used space, constructed textual narrative and signalled metaphorical intention.

XXX could most easily be classified as a play, drama, theatre; Solar Anus as a solo performance, live art, risk art, body art, or (using Richard Schechner's terminology) an actual. Both, however, centred on the embodiment of taboo through the dislocated mechanisms of fantasy, identification, illusion, allusion, body and act. They were not only 'about' eroticism and death; they were performances that theatricalised eroticism and death, that were about the theatricalisation of eroticism and death, as
well as the way these three terms are inherently and essentially inter-related. In returning to them now it is possible to identify a period during which certain aesthetic concerns emerged and crystallised. Adrian Heathfield, at that time, described the manifestation of these concerns in live art as ‘excessive performance’:

This broad tendency of contemporary performance towards immediacy, not just present in those practices based on physical limits, endurance or pain, enables artists to make works whose live force is excessive. The aesthetic powers and cultural consequences of such moves are often reduced by their popular miscomprehension within a generic notion of ‘shock tactics’, which supposes a fixation on and superficial taste for the very moment of a spectator’s ‘trauma’.2

In reflecting upon immediacy, shock tactics and miscomprehension in this chapter, I will attempt to resist the temptation to read these performances retrospectively – that is, to draw heavily on ideas that have emerged since the mid ‘noughties’ or my experiences of performance since first seeing them (and, in particular, of Solar Anus as part of The Monster in the Night of the Labyrinth at the Hayward Gallery, London, in 2007).3 Rather, I wish to concentrate on how and why the coincidental proximity of XXX and Solar Anus triggered for me a network of associations that connected Georges Bataille, the Marquis de Sade and Antonin Artaud. The dialogue that ensued, traced in this essay, explores the ways in which the theatricalisation of transgressive sexualities which approach and allude to death are able to challenge cultural expectations of theatrical disciplinarity through the performance of excess.

First performed by Ron Athey in 1998, Solar Anus was presented as part of Fierce, an annual festival which, as its publicity states, ‘frolick[s] where others fear to tread’ and provides platforms where ‘watching and being watched is a recurrent theme’. These would serve as appropriate scraplines for La Fura dels Baus’s XXX as well. Tickets for both performances were restricted to those over eighteen years of age. This perhaps should come as no surprise since both were based on, and/or devised and adapted from, the writings of two closely connected French political pornographer-philosophers. Solar Anus, described by Dominic Johnson as ‘an esoteric
tour de force of unseemly erotics, half-mad splendor, and offbeat gravitas’, was a response to an essay of the same name by Georges Bataille. It occurred midway through a 24-hour ‘durational/experiential arts event’ entitled ‘Visions of Excess’ at the Demon lap-dancing club, curated by Athey himself with drag queen Vaginal Davis. The Demon Club was mapped into several areas each hosting booths, platforms, installations, screenings and performances designed to be experienced either collectively or as an exchange between artist and individual spectator–collaborator. These areas, mostly named after Bataille’s writings, included The Acephalica Lounge, L’Histoire de L’Oeil Lounge, the Absence of Myth Annex and the outdoor Courtyard where Solar Anus was performed.

XXX was inspired by the Marquis de Sade’s 1795 novel Philosophy in the Bedroom, which many consider his most lucid and coherent political statement. Despite its re-contextualisation from late eighteenth to early twenty-first century, and the omission of small (but significant) details, La Fura re-presents Sade’s vision with remarkable accuracy and faithfulness. Very briefly stated, the narrative concerns the sexual (and therefore political and philosophical) initiation of an eighteen-year-old virgin, Eugénie (who was fifteen in Sade’s original), by a team of incestuous brother and sister porn-industry veterans and their über-libertine accomplice, Dolmancé. This education culminates in the willing girl raping her repressive mother with a strap-on and then crudely stitching her vagina together. Sade’s original story augmented this final scene rather more horrifically. Following penetration by her daughter, Eugénie’s mother is raped vaginally and anally by a syphilitic valet and then sewn up so none of the poison can escape. We also discover that it is Eugénie’s father who has sanctioned and arranged the education of his daughter and licensed the treatment of his wife who would inevitably come to fetch her. In one of the production’s more balanced reviews, the Financial Times noted that Sade’s novel ‘delves into areas of sexuality that we still find uncomfortable to talk about, let alone see enacted on stage’.

Sade’s libertines (both male and female) conflate sexual and political power. As Angela Carter proposes in her classic study, The Sadeian Woman, from the inverted axiom ‘I fuck therefore I am’

[Sade] constructs a diabolical lyricism of fuckery, since the acting-out of a total sexuality in a repressive society turns all eroticism into violence,
makes of sexuality itself a permanent negation. Fucking, says Sade, is the basis of all human relationships but the activity parodies all human relations because of the nature of the society that creates and maintains those relationships.

Sade’s protagonists ‘fuck the world and fucking, for them, is the enforcement of annihilation’. La Fura’s publicity stated that they attempted to make ‘no moral judgement’ on the story’s narrative. Alex Ollé, XXX’s co-director, recognised that most commentators on Sade’s work find at least one system of morality inherently at work in his texts, stating in an interview before the production came to Britain: ‘Sade takes you to a point where you are forced to reject him. Actually, I think he is a bit moralistic.’

Presumably, the omissions I outlined in the final scene (that is, syphilitic inoculation, the treatment of wives as chattel, the implications of incestuous paedophilic abuse, and so on) represent the point at which La Fura rejected Sade. It would perhaps have been clearer to say that La Fura were making no moral judgement on the Sadean universe they felt able to recreate under the circumstances, refusing to indicate to audience members precisely how they should react to what they were experiencing. The questioning of morality was left to the individual; its tolerable limits (that is, the definitions of taboos and the identification of where and how transgression takes place) were not located by the company on our behalf. Perhaps even more accurately, La Fura publicly situated their audiences in the same space, with the same dilemma, as Sade’s private readers, just as Ron Athey places his audiences for Solar Anus in the position of Georges Bataille’s private readers.

It was Bataille’s generation that resurrected and rehabilitated Sade, that held a public séance and first made him perform on their behalf, both as justification for and illuminating contrast to their own concerns and beliefs. Many who were Bataille’s friends, colleagues, collaborators, detractors and sparring partners – such as Maurice Heine, Pierre Klossowski, André Breton, Jean Paulhan, Maurice Blanchot and Simone de Beauvoir – published ground-breaking studies of Sade’s life and work. Bataille wrote the preface for the 1950 edition of Justine. But, more than any of his contemporaries, Bataille has been identified with Sade – occasionally simplistically identified as a reincarnated Sade – owing to his methodologies, subject matter, obsessions (with waste products,
for example), his materialist atheism and the correlative relationship he proposed between eroticism and death. Each produced both ‘clandestine’ and ‘signed’ writings. Each was accused of either advocating fascism or providing highly sophisticated critiques of its dangers and repugnance.

I have no intention of embarking here on a detailed comparison of Bataille and Sade. For two reasons, however, it is worth outlining some of the main points raised by others elaborating their divergence. The first is to indicate that there are no simple syllogisms available for those who wish to draw conclusions about the interplay between violent sexuality and death. The second is that, to illustrate this point, the ‘messages’ and experiences conveyed by Solar Anus and XXX broadly correspond to those found in Bataille and Sade respectively. According to Athey, reading Bataille helped him make sense of, and then inspired, his performance work:

Some of Bataille’s major premises as the ‘excremental philosopher’ and his accusations (such as his critique of conservative Surrealists in their name-dropping of de Sade), resonated deeply in me. He elevated filth to sacred status, Incestuous Mother, Perverted Priests, while completely destroying familial, cultural and societal myths... His essay ‘Solar Anus’ triggered and fit my view of the magic tricks inherent in the anus.

Michael Richardson points out that, like Sade, Bataille ‘believed writing should be thrown down as a challenge to the reader; it should be a deliberate provocation, and not serve a one-to-one relation in which the reader assimilates a message from the author’. I think it is reasonable, here, to substitute ‘spectator’ for ‘reader’ and ‘performance-maker’ for ‘author’ in relation to the performances inspired by their writings. For both Athey and La Fura, if their work is intended to challenge and provoke, it is also intended as a gift to their audiences.

Famously, Bataille wrote that ‘eroticism is the assenting to life even in death’, which, as Richardson notes, would be unthinkable to Sade, for whom ‘sex served to annul death’. For Bataille, sex is the ‘intermediary between birth and death, and in the sexual encounter we experience the chasm at the edge of existence’. At this point we strive to extend beyond our limits, to reach the impossible. Our identities merge with our partners; we are lacerated, and we collapse into a state of undifferentiated being,
what Bataille calls the continuity of existence. The Sadean encounter avoids such contamination by keeping the sexual subject and sexualised object separate, as this connection with another weakens our assertion of sovereignty as isolated beings. Bataille noted that ‘Sade makes his heroes uniquely self-centred; the partners are denied any rights at all: this is the key to his system. If eroticism leads to harmony between the partners its essential principle of violence and death is invalidated.’ Bataille’s notion of sovereignty and freedom, on the other hand, necessarily includes engagement and communication as a social being. For him, sexual communion between participants results in an eruption of violence; it is not the pre-requisite for a rupture that leads to violence.

Bataille’s biographer, Michel Surya, expresses these ideas in the economic terms Bataille himself used:

Bataille, unlike Sade, is not a libertine, but debauched, which distinguishes them profoundly. The eroticism Bataille puts in play soils, spoils and wrecks. By projection, it shares common cause with an obsessional representation of death. It wrecks memory, self-indulgence, vows, the possibility of beauty, of salvation, fidelity, education, morality, women, God ... it’s all the same. The libertine adds while the debauched man takes away. The first lives in an economy of accumulation; of pleasure, of possession ... the second in a spending economy, one of loss, waste and ruin.

For Bataille, a debauched sexuality – that is, one simultaneously excremental and sacred – was at the heart of mystical experience. In a question and answer session at Club Maintenant in 1948 he stated that ‘in sadism we begin by suppressing the object, while in mysticism it is necessary to suppress the subject.’ Bataille’s essay ‘The Use Value of D.A.F. de Sade’ is among his early writings, and was completed at the end of the three-year period from 1927 to 1930 which began with the writing of ‘The Solar Anus’. Both are published in the first section of Allan Stoekl’s collection of Bataille’s work entitled Visions of Excess, which also contains a short 1929 essay entitled ‘Formless’. According to Yve-Alain Bois, the informe (or formless) ‘has only an operational existence; it is a performative, like obscene words, the violence of which derives less from semantics than from the very act of their delivery’.
Both La Fura and Athey chose to devise their pieces from texts that were performative but not blueprints for performance (that is, scripts or playtexts). As in Bois’s explanation of the formless, I am referring to performativity in the Austinian sense of ‘doing things with words’. Sade’s *Philosophy in the Bedroom* was written in the form of a philosophical dialogue, not to be enacted but read. Sade, of course, considered himself a dramatist and at least one of his plays was professionally produced during his lifetime. However, as his twentieth-century translators Austryn Wainhouse and Richard Seaver note:

It is an understatement to maintain that, were his seventeen plays all that history had bequeathed us of his writings, Sade would hardly have a claim to immortality. The force, and indeed the essential worth, of Sade’s works varies directly in proportion to their clandestine nature. The more open and public they are, the more conventional they become. The dramatic works, being most public, suffer most from conventionality and from what appears to be Sade’s inherent timidity when faced with the dramatic form.15

Unlike Sade, Bataille did not leave us with any performance scripts, although apparently he wrote at least one which was later lost: it was a film script, never made, about a Marseille soap manufacturer who likes to pretend to be the Marquis de Sade and engages in the practices described in *One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom* and *Philosophy in the Bedroom*. Not unlike La Fura, Bataille believed that this film would be ‘commercial’.16 XXX and *Solar Anus* each attempt to transpose and translate the essence of both form and content to a visual embodied medium. In the process they destroy the separation of these two terms, inscribing the operation of the formless, to which I will return later in this chapter. In the case of Athey’s work, it is already mirroring the instability of Bataille’s polemic in “The Solar Anus”, in which Bataille’s copula/copulation dyad, according to Allan Stoekl, leads to ‘obscene, parodic, burlesque, and ever-inverted significations’.17

*Solar Anus* and XXX are linked not only through their source materials, themes and specific philosophers18 but also their tension or elision or collapse of performative ‘form’ and ‘content’. Although I experienced both in Britain, they were conceived, created and performed by artists who are
neither French nor British: La Fura dels Baus is a Catalan company that was founded in 1979; Ron Athey is an American writer and performer who, from the early 1990s to the mid 2000s, toured productions such as Martyrs and Saints, Four Scenes in a Harsh Life, and the autobiographical Joyce to the UK with his company. According to Athey, by ‘using casts that take pride in being marginalized, not only s/m queers but [those] having hardcore appearances’, he tried ‘to create a pageant of erotic torture and penance’. Regardless of whether it took place in gallery settings, traditional theatre spaces or club environments, the heart of his performances always revolved around, in his own words, the bringing of ‘overdone gothic religious tableaux to life using medical based S&M techniques’. Solar Anus continued this tradition. When I saw it for the first time, however, it was fairly atypical for UK audiences who were engaged with Athey’s body of work, not only because it was a solo performance but also because it dispensed with rich scenographic environments which often included projection and other uses of technology. Athey has said that he thought that Solar Anus was a clean departure for him from ‘story telling’.

What is important to note is that in 2003 it was as inappropriate to consider Athey only as a solo live artist as it was to classify La Fura as a traditional ‘theatre’ company. La Fura originally brought together artists from different disciplines (sculpture, mechanics, dance, music and so on) in order to create radical industrial street theatre. Their 1983 production Accions, best described as site-specific performative installation, made the company’s agenda concrete: audience members, stimulated viscerally by sensory bombardment, were to act as co-participants in the creation of a performance text. They described it as ‘a game without rules, a drink thrown in your face … a brutal stream of hammer blows, a sound execution, a chain of unlimited situations’. Since then, the company has created large-scale spectacle, digital theatre, internet-based projects, corporate events and opera. XXX was only La Fura’s third text-based production in twenty-five years, and one of relatively few staged in traditional theatre buildings.

By describing their past work, I am neither simply attempting to contextualise the productions I attended in May 2003 nor arguing that one cannot fully appreciate specific performances without access to the background noise of intertextual knowledge. Rather, I wish to draw attention to the use of inappropriately limiting frameworks when
attempting to situate, and thereby make meaning with, productions that transcend the boundaries of genre and disciplinarity. In the case of XXX, I am not primarily referring to the furor which played itself out on the front pages of the tabloid press: ‘Art? This is Nothing More than Porn’ *(Daily Mail*, 24 April 2003); ‘Sex on Stage Storm: Raunchiest Show Ever Hits UK’ *(Daily Star*, 24 April 2003). Frankly, for me, this is how the popular press *should* be reacting to intentionally provocative experimental theatre and, in general, it refrained from too much xenophobic rabble-rousing. Quoting interviews with those members of the opening night audience who somehow missed the warning that ‘this production contains extreme and explicit sexual themes and images throughout’, these articles could barely conceal their disappointment that XXX was operating well within the law. The live sex may have *appeared* real but appearances are deceiving. Every tabloid quoted the same interview with Carlos Padrissa, its co-director: ‘This is not pornography. It is art. The sex in XXX is not real but virtual. It is all theatre. It looks like real sex and the actors are often naked but it is just touching and kissing, there is no penetration. The man who comes out of the audience is a plant and what you see is really made of silicone. But our aim is to make it look as if it were real.’

![Figure 11.1. Ron Athey in Solar Anus. (Image: Cyril Kuhn)](image)

Figure 11.1. Ron Athey in Solar Anus. (Image: Cyril Kuhn)
Interesting, then, that a few weeks later, not a peep was heard about *Solar Anus*: a man naked except for stockings and high heels exposes his tattooed anus to us and pulls a string of pearls out of his rectum; he engages in *real* auto-penetration with a shoe-mounted dildo just inches away from the audience's faces (should they so desire, as there is no formal seating), and then pierces his face with hooks in such a way as to create a 'lift' of wide-eyed surprise (Figure 11.1). The lack of fuss could have been due to a number of reasons: that the performance took place in a lap-dancing club – although the events performed there were as much a parody (of the corporate pornography of lap-dancing) as were La Fura's actions within the XXX setting of a porn movie studio; or that it was publicised with much less ferocity than XXX – it was actually quite difficult to find out about it if you lived outside Birmingham. Or perhaps Britain's mass media had already been convinced that performances such as these are marginal but legitimate 'art' activities, defined as such by 'experts'. In 1998, Athey was featured, along with Franko B, Fakir Musafar and Orlan, on a South Bank programme about body art, introduced by Melvyn Bragg on the very populist *ITV*, which presented his work within an established tradition of religious art imagery.

A few weeks before experiencing XXX and *Solar Anus* I attended the *Live Culture* programme at the Tate Modern in London, a four-day event including performances and a symposium which celebrated and contextualised live art practice. In their programme preface, the curators of *Live Culture*, Lois Keidan, Daniel Brine and Adrian Heathfield, outlined the significance of contemporary live art practices and also provided frameworks by which to analyse them. These include the way they have

spread out of the gallery into other spaces and disciplines; their disruption of cultural borders and traditions; their engagement with risk and extremity; their correlation with the technological culture of immediacy; their impact on political activism and social intervention; and their role in the expression of new identities.24

Ron Athey's work is clearly located in this 'fluid landscape' where, as Keidan and Brine state, '[i]n the simultaneity, interactivity and convergence of our media saturated culture, Live Art invests in questions of immediacy,
reality and hybridity: creating spaces to explore the experience of things, ambiguities of meaning and the responsibilities of agency.\textsuperscript{25} Athey contributed to the symposium discussion and here I first saw a film of Solar Anus.

It is important to remember, however, that the protection of expert academic and critical opinion can be a fragile safety barrier when moral fundamentalists get their knickers in a twist and the popular press smells blood (both figuratively and literally). In 1994 Athey was at the centre of what amounted to a censorship campaign following a performance of Four Scenes in a Harsh Life at the Walker Art Gallery in Minneapolis.\textsuperscript{26} This production included a 'human printing press scene' in which Athey ritualistically cut patterns into the back of another performer, creating impressions of the drawn blood on towels and then flying the imprinted towels like little flags above and near the audience. The problem? Athey was HIV positive and so, it was erroneously presumed, was his co-performer Darryl Carlton (aka Divinity Fudge). Death and sexuality were deemed to be in too close a proximity to the audience. This was considered a political act, and an obscene act – therefore not an artistic one. The performance served as an example as to why National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) funding should be cut, not just to the 'undeserving' like Athey, but across the board. The irony is that Athey never received NEA funding; the Walker Art Gallery received about $150 toward producing Athey's art. It was the gallery, therefore, that was threatened virtually with closure through lack of funding should they continue to present work like Athey's.

Experience has shown us (for instance, in the case of the Romans in Britain trial) that the tabloid media often plays a crucial role in the demonisation of certain performances. Ironically, however, in tossing the bait to the supposedly slathering masses (who chose not to take it), the tabloid journalists who had not seen XXX seemed to understand and express its significance far more astutely than the broadsheet critics who had. According to Wendy Steiner,

[p]ornography and pornographic art are important because they mark the bounds between thought and deed, and like every such liminal zone they are fraught with fear – fear that fantasies will come true, will invade the world of public action – and the opposite fear, that there
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will be no such crossover, that the pleasure and energy and justice of this zone will have no realization outside it.27

This is a debate with which the ‘serious’ critics failed, or perhaps refused, to engage and yet seemed to suggest if one paid close attention to the sublimated leakings of their collective text. XXX was described as both too simulated and too stimulating (Figure 11.2); it was boring and yet there was too much going on; it was too distanced and yet the audience was too forcefully involved; it was repetitive and yet contained a string of remarkable – or gratuitous – images and visual effects; it was both tired and exuberant, witty and witless, reactionary and too naively literal.28 Over and over again, the critics referred to what they personally experienced and felt but this, somehow, was not considered enough. I had never seen reviews in which the critics pushed themselves so far to the front of the writing – and their seemingly unintentional exposure, perhaps, is why they needed to protect themselves by ultimately rejecting XXX. In discussing this production the critic was forced to open up, to publicly admit his or her fantasies and limitations.

Figure 11.2. Sonia Segura and Teresa Vallejo in La Fura dels Baus's production of XXX, Riverside Studios, London (2003). (Photo: Tristram Kenton)
The critical responses to XXX uncannily mirrored those generated by Sade’s writing itself — which the vast majority of reviewers had clearly never read (but alluded to as if they had). The startling visual image which opened the production was considered spectacular but either empty or confusing: the Madame, exercising her pelvic floor muscles with a light pen, scrawled the words ‘A better world is possible’ on a tablet that was simultaneously projected on a giant screen. Admittedly, this is an extremely truncated version of the fifth section of Philosophy in the Bedroom entitled ‘Yet another effort, Frenchman, if you would become Republicans’ (which was detached from the novel and published as a patriotic pamphlet during the Revolution of 1848). But those who knew Sade’s life and work also know that he, like Bataille later, loved revolution for the revolt itself, not because he believed in utopian realisation. They might also have recognised that La Fura’s dramaturgy — based on excess, accumulation and saying (and showing) everything — mimicked the formalities of Sade’s writing.

My point here is not that audiences should know this but that the specific political point expressed by La Fura, through their stagecraft, textuality and visual imagery, was interpreted based on the critic’s assumption rather than signposts erected by the company. What was really being critiqued was not the company’s supposed message but its performance strategy, and in particular the way this reflected precisely that which disturbs many in Sade’s work. As Marcel Henaff has noted:

[The] repletion of excess brings about a change in the nature of knowledge: no longer a simple knowledge of objects, but instead an experience of sexual pleasure that transforms the ‘normal’ body into a libertine body. What is discovered in and through excess is not simply added to other kinds of knowledge. Instead, it radically overturns them by exposing the repressed elements of their operation: violence and desire.29

What, for me, was being expressed in the reviews of XXX was that La Fura was not making what the critics could then ‘know’ as ‘theatre’ and that they therefore did not have the vocabulary to discuss it. Unlike in live art, the artistry in theatre seems here only to be recognised in the depth, as opposed to the transparency, of the illusion; in the clarity and explicitness
of interpretative opportunity; in the Cartesian duality of mind and body. This is perhaps summed up best by Michael Billington's review in The Guardian, first objecting to La Fura's 'unquestioning acceptance of Sade's dubious philosophy' and then blaming the company for not providing us with 'the genuine dialectic' of Weiss's Manet/Sade.\(^\text{30}\)

And it was while reflecting on this review that I stumbled across another set of coincidences, this time revolving around Antonin Artaud. Just as Billington banished XXX from the garden of theatre by evoking Brook's Theatre of Cruelty season, I once discovered that not all Artaudians wished to share their patron saint with Ron Athey. In 1996, during the closing panel discussion of a three-day event at the ICA in London entitled 'Incarcerated with Artaud & Genet', I was met with stunned silence – followed by outright hostility – when I suggested that risk artists like Athey (since I did not know the term 'live art' then) may be the closest contemporary embodiment of Artaud's theories of cruelty. No, I was told, Artaud's cruelty was symbolic, metaphorical. No amount of persuading, before I was unceremoniously ignored and shut up, could convince the assembled group that Athey's art worked on these interpretive performance levels as well. Here again, I now believe, what I was being told was that Athey's work (even that which played with critical distance, representational strategies, spoken text and large casts) was not 'theatre', mainly because the index and referent were seemingly too close to recognise distinctions.

Both Athey and La Fura evoke the spectre of Artaud in discussing their own work. At one point, Athey wrote that the only way he could articulate why he chose to make disturbing images was by referring to Artaud's essay on theatre and the plague: the theatre, like the plague, 'releases conflicts, disengages powers, liberates possibilities, and if these possibilities and these powers are dark, it is the fault not of the plague nor of the theatre, but of life'.\(^\text{31}\) Similarly, it was Artaud's vision of the need to return to ritual, to engage the audience in the possibility of danger and risk, that formed the keystones of the 'Furero' language.\(^\text{32}\) There are other lessons to be learned from Artaud, however. In the quotation that follows, Artaud is writing about his production of Les Ceniz in 1935; his words could equally apply to La Fura's intentions in XXX:
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My heroes ... place themselves in the domain of cruelty and must be judged outside good and bad. They are incestuous, sacrilegious persons, adulterers, rebels, insurgents, blasphemers. And this cruelty in which the entire work is bathed ... is not a purely corporal cruelty but a moral one. It goes to the limits of instinct and forces the actor to plunge in up to the roots of his being so completely that he leaves the stage exhausted. Cruelty also acts against the spectator, and it must not permit him to leave the theatre intact, but he also must be exhausted, involved, transformed perhaps! Also I have sought, by all available means, to place the audience in the middle of the action.41

Unfortunately, it seems the audience did not really rise to Artaud’s challenge. According to Raymonde Latour’s report in Paris-Midi following the premiere, Les Cenci’s ‘audacity’ was occasionally ‘lost for a pleasing image’. He concluded that ‘I do not know what the reviews will be like, but what struck me most during intermissions was the absence of animated discussions. One can either love or detest this unusual play, but one should not remain indifferent to the courage and audacity of the effort.’42 Nearly seventy years later, following performances of XXX, the Riverside Studios bar was full of animated discussions. This, however, was not valued by the broadsheet critics, who also felt that the production’s audacity was either problematic and/or diminished by its spectacular visual aesthetics.

Pilar Orti, who interpreted between Spanish-speaking performers and English spectators during the audience participation sections of XXX, suggested in Total Theatre Magazine that perhaps the production could be better understood as live art rather than traditional theatre.43 There is certainly some benefit to this strategy: the production’s scenography, its vocabulary of visual imagery based on actuality – such as Eugénie’s whipping by Dolmanché from his flying metal sex machine, her immersion in a water tank as she communicates through an internet chat room, and group sex on a trapeze – were perhaps better appreciated by live art audiences used to reading bodily extremity, immediacy and technological innovation as creative languages in themselves (as opposed to those acting in the service of another language). Unfortunately, attempting to re-categorise a performance within a different genre in which it equally does not quite fit simply doubles the problem.
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Similarly, Ron Athey recognises that there are distinctions to be made between what he does and 'theatre', and yet he is resistant to labelling himself as a live artist. He has preferred to describe his work as 'performance', stating that 'an action is both the act performed, and representational of something with a bigger meaning. For instance, a surgical arrow inserted in the flesh is the act of piercing. It is also the act of representing the martyrdom of St. Sebastian.' In an important early analysis, John Edward McGrath draws together semiotic and phenomenological understandings of Athey’s work:

[In putting everything on the surface – death, religion, sex, all displayed, all intricately played with on the skin – his work indicates a life practice which does not use spatial metaphors of the deep, the hidden, the terrible to hold at a distance our most profound experiences ... Perhaps, like Athey, we can take the imagery of religion, posited as the consolation of, and therefore justification for, death and find in its surfaces – its shapes, not its meanings – the vectors of a pleasure which is supposed to disappear in death.]  

Solar Anus, like XXX, cannot be read as either 'theatre' or 'live art'; it needs to be read as both or perhaps neither. To be more specific, performances like these need to be read experientially in terms of the slippage between our understanding of the two terms. This means that audience members, like the performance-makers, must allow themselves to fall into the gaps created where actuality and illusion can never quite meet – the spaces Bataille might call 'the impossible' where we are both free and powerless.

It is for this reason that I return to his concept of the formless as an attempt to describe a process or an alteration that replaces semantic registers with an interpretive grid. Admittedly, Bataille's own short essay on the formless is in many ways less than helpful in establishing a methodology. His definition subverts the very act of definition, by stressing the function of a word rather than its meaning: 'Thus formless is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form.' Like most of his writing, it is witty, contradictory, provocative and ultimately implodes on itself, annihilating its ideas in the process. In this sense then, Bataille's writing on the formless is what it describes.
Yve-Alain Bois and Rosalind E. Krauss summarise and distil Bataille’s pre-Second World War writings, such as ‘The Solar Anus’ and his essay on Sade, in their understanding of the formless. They describe it as a process of decalification that operates through various processes of deviance – that is, the generation of waste and monstrosity through the making of the ideal.⁹ These processes are all found at work in XXX and Solar Anus, productions which both begin with the image of excreting anus: Athey expels pearls; the giant projected ass of XXX spurts a blob of runny shit, the image followed immediately by the vaginal poetry suggesting the possibility of a better world. Using Bataille’s vocabulary, the process of displacement from the face downward, or rather horizontally, is not ‘conducted in the services of an obscene thing’ but ‘as a defiance of the top that, in its very ridiculousness becomes attractive, attractive because repellent, high because lower than low’.⁴¹

Figure 11.3. Ron Athey in Solar Anus. (Image: Cyril Kuhn)
Bataille insisted that aesthetic value lay in immediacy, that to reach the purest form of ecstasy we must elude concern for the next moment and equally all those that follow after.\textsuperscript{42} \textit{Solar Anus} and \textit{XXX} both entropically remove objects and actions away from productive activity in the 'interest of the instant itself'.\textsuperscript{43} Simultaneously, however, they seem to destabilise time. Central to \textit{Solar Anus} was Athey's tattooed anus (Figure 11.3), the tattooing of which was fundamental to the moment of performance and performed in the service of the performance and yet took place at least six years earlier. The instant of tattooing is collapsed into the instant of ritual we later experienced. Similarly, La Fura created the illusion that the non-penetrative sexual actions we were watching live on stage were actually the scenes of penetration we were simultaneously watching on the screen behind. However, this penetration did take place, although in a different time, in the service of the production, in the service of the moment.

It may seem unusual to apply Bataille's theories to an activity he seemed to choose not to write about. In fact, I have only found one mention of theatrical performance in his writing, but it is a revealing one: Bataille claims to have got to know Antonin Artaud to some extent.\textsuperscript{44} They were certainly not close friends, although they obviously moved in similar circles. Artaud frightened Bataille but also made him feel strangely sympathetic; both challenged Surrealist orthodoxy and were therefore summarily dismissed by André Breton. Bataille recalls attending a lecture by Artaud at the Sorbonne and listening in a state of 'half-somnolence' until he became aware that Artaud 'had suddenly risen':

Before an auditorium packed with the bourgeois ..., he grasped his stomach and let out the most inhuman sound that has ever come from a man's throat; it created the sort of disquiet that would have been felt if a dear friend had suddenly become delirious. It was awful (perhaps the more so for being only acted out).\textsuperscript{45}

It is no coincidence that the performances which I feel can best be illuminated by being read against Bataille are also those that are indebted to Artaud.

Bataille's 'use value' (to mime his own application of Sade) for those considering live performance events lies in his theorisation of two forms
of communication: human sacrifice and poetry. Although he (thankfully) notes their very different levels of modern social acceptability, he also sees in them a close correlation:

Both a sacrifice and a poem withhold life from the sphere of activity; both bestow sight on what, within the object, has the power to excite desire or horror. The general result of sacrifice is death ... poetry is no less directed toward the same aim as sacrifice: it seeks as far as possible to render palpable, and as intensely as possible, the content of the present moment.18

Using Bataille, we can thus experience certain types of performance events as a form of embodied sacrificial poetry that approaches and alludes to death. There are distant references to sacrifice (and also Bataille’s parodying of Christianity which he sees as a force for denying human spirituality in its refusal to admit ecstatic ritual as well as its belief in a sovereign Godhead) in both XXX, which featured a symbolic crucifixion generated through projection, and Solar Anus, with its allusion to Christ’s crown of thorns. In his essay ‘The Solar Anus’, the paradoxical ‘luminous violence’ of Bataille’s sacrificial vision of sexuality is clear in his use of metaphors.

The ‘solar annulus’ for Bataille’s narrating voice is ‘the intact anus of her body of eighteen years to which nothing sufficiently blinding can be compared except the sun, even though the anus is the night’. Although the intentions are superficially reminiscent of those for Sade’s virgin Eugénie, it is ‘Bataille’ – ‘the filthy parody of the torrid and blinding sun’ – who is sacrificed through the sexual encounter: ‘I want to have my throat slashed while violating the girl to whom I will have been able to say: you are the night’. The object of desire and the performing subject collapse into a state of continuous being. For Bataille, ‘inner experience’ transcends the flesh and is ‘revealed in the death of the sacrificial victim. Underlying eroticism is the feeling of something bursting, of the violence accompanying an explosion.”18

In order to enact the sacrificial, performance must exceed the semiotic and move into ritual transcendence for both performer and audience. Ron Athey does more than act out the continuous being of Bataille’s narrator
and the girl he violates;” he is present in such a way as to position his audience simultaneously as potentially both or either. My experience of ‘reading’ Solar Amus as a film and decoding its imagery profoundly differed from my experiencing Solar Amus as an event. The live performance was overwhelmingly moving and affective. At midnight in the Demon Club courtyard, time stood still. It seemed like I watched Athey for a fraction of a second and also for eternity. The images burned. I felt firmly grounded and as if I was about to collapse. He performed on behalf of himself, on my behalf, on behalf of everyone present. In his account of Solar Amus, Pat Califia described the moment Athey began to extract the long double-strand of pearls from his asshole as an act of communication and gifting:

This act was somehow touching and romantic, the trick of a Victorian whore, Athey offering us something that came from a deep and intimate place inside himself. A treasure produced at no slight risk to himself. He was also, on a metaphorical level, making a roomful of people watch him shit. As a spectator, what should I choose to focus on, the beauty revealed here or the foul use that was being made of my time and attention? Deep in this dilemma, I fell into a state of silent wonder.90

Athey considers the role of his audience as one of ‘bearing witness’. This act of witnessing, in me, provokes what Bataille calls ‘inner experience’.

I have to admit that XXX did not incite the same response in me. The attempt to involve the audience was too deliberate; I was forced to consider myself too much, I did too much thinking. Perhaps debauchery is more engrossing than libertinism (which is essentially always about somebody else’s desire or pain). Or perhaps, not unrelated, La Fura’s strategies of simulation and voyeurism work against spectatorial transcendence. Nevertheless, I believe XXX was a performance that derives from the same impulse as Solar Amus, a genuine attempt to communicate experientially. The performers, the directors and the dramaturgs made themselves vulnerable and performed on our behalf. And, like Athey, they did so through a form of nearly unpalatable beauty, evoking both horror and desire. Susan Sontag has suggested that the pornographic imagination may access a truth ‘about sensibility, about sex, about individual personality, about despair, about limits’ that ‘can be shared when it projects itself

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into art ... That discourse one might call the poetry of transgression is also knowledge. He who transgresses not only breaks a rule. He goes somewhere that the others are not; and he knows something the others don’t know.\footnote{91}

Experiencing XXX and Solar Anus so close to each other enabled me to articulate why we need to develop new frameworks with which to discuss theatrical performances that exceed disciplinarity, primarily through the collapsing distinction of form and content. This is especially the case for visceral performances (not just by La Fura dels Baus and Ron Athey, but also by companies such as Societas Raffaello Sanzio) that revolve around a transgressive engagement with death and sexuality, resulting in the rupture of generic structure. As Simon Shepherd and Mick Wallis have noted, ‘[t]he experiential provides the conditions for signification; in trying to write about what is ungraspable phenomenology needs signification.’\footnote{92} The collision in collective environments of fantasy and inner experience, by definition private and personal, and outer or public experience challenges vocabularies of reception. Concepts such as formlessness, by focusing on decategorization and deviance, may help us to articulate the ways theatres of cruelty, excess, accumulation, sacrifice, pornographic imagination and doubling are able to operate as channels of communication between the bodies of spectators and performers.\footnote{93}
Notes

1. La Fura dels Baus, XXX at Riverside Studios (London), 17 May 2003. Dramatised by Mercedes Abad, Alex Ollé, Carlos Padriça and Valentí Carrasco; directed by Alex Ollé and Carlos Padriça; performed by Teresa Vallejo (Madame), Pau Gómez (Giovanni), Sonia Segura (Eugénie) and Pedro Gutiérrez (Dolmancé).


10. Ibid.


18. Athey also refers frequently to the Italian film director Pier Paolo Pasolini as an influence and has used Pasolini's controversial Salò o le 120 giornate di Sodoma (1975), based on Sade's One Hundred and Twenty Days of Sodom, as source material when leading workshops. In 2002, Athey and Vaginal Davis co-curated an 18-hour performance art homage to Pasolini in Los Angeles, much like the Vision of Excess events that they have curated internationally in tribute to Bataille.


21. Since then, Athey has made a number of solo pieces, including a series of Incurruptible Flesh durational performances and a series of Self Obituarian actions, since 2008. In 2004–2005 he collaborated with Juliana Snapper to make and tour Judas Cradle, a two-handers that brought together extended vocal techniques, opera, video and archaic torture devices.


23. Quoted in John Byam, 'Sex On Stage: Shock,' Daily Star (24 April 2003), p. 25. The headline on the continuing page of this article, quoted here, is different from the one that appears on the front page of the paper ("Sex On Stage: Storm; Raunchiest Show Ever Hits UK").


25. Ibid., p. 4.


28. For a collection of critical reviews of XXX at the Riverside Studios, see Theatre Record, 23(9) (23 April–6 May 2003), pp. 541–5.


34. Ibid., pp. 136–7.


36. Wayne Thetton, email interview with Ron Athey.


41. Ibid., pp. 248–9.


43. Ibid., p. 148.

44. Ibid., p. 42. Emphasis in original.
45. Ibid., p. 43. Emphasis in original.
46. Ibid., p. 149. Emphasis in original.
49. The actions and imagery of Solar Anus were also inspired by the autoerotic photographs of the artist Pierre Molinier (1900–76). Dressed up in stockings, corsets and heels, Molinier used accessories such as silk dildos attached to his ankles for his performances of self-penetration to camera. Echoes of Molinier’s montages of dislocated body parts are also evident in the artwork for La Fura’s XXX website.
52. Simon Shepherd and Mick Wallis, Drama/Theatre/Performance (Abingdon and New York, 2004), p. 239.
53. Thanks are due to Carl Lavery, Cariad Astles, Jenny Graham and Karoline Gritzner, each of whom generously offered their expertise at various stages in the writing of this chapter. Any misreadings of the ideas they shared are entirely my own. Much of the material in this chapter also appears in Roberta Mock, ‘La Fura dels Baus’s XXX: Deviant Textualities and the Formless’, in Susan Broadhurst and Josephine Machon (eds), Sensualities/Textualities and Technologies: Writings of the Body in 21st-Century Performance (London and New York, 2010), which focuses on La Fura’s challenge to understandings of authenticity through technological simulation.