Franko B
In conversation with Dominic Johnson, October 2004.

Live Art Development Agency Study Room Guide

Dominic Johnson: The first point I wanted to talk to you about is that it seems that, in picking out important or influential works, you are keen on drawing not just from performance and live art but also from the history of fine art practice. Also there is an emphasis on literature and political writings. Maybe you could comment on the inclusion of people like **Yayoi Kusama**, Louise Bourgeois, Susan Sontag, **William Burroughs**, Georges Bataille and so on, alongside figures more clearly related to a history of body art practices.

Franko B: I always need to ask myself where the influence comes from. It comes from different things. I would say that all of these different types of work are art. And within art history I wouldn't want to separate body art from Louise Bourgeois, or **Gina Pane** from Bataille. I came across these people before I was making body art, and so my inspirations or influences have more to do with what you come across in life as a whole, what you respect in life, interpreted in different areas. I think that art is art, it doesn't matter what the medium is. Somebody who works with earth, or somebody who works with paint, for me it doesn't matter. Either I find it interesting or I don't find it interesting; even if I don't find it interesting it doesn't have much to do with whether it is art or not.

DJ: It seems though that implicit in your resistance to separating fine art practices from live art practices, and as is visible perhaps in your own work, is a problematisation of the issue of spectatorship. I was wondering if your inclusion of fine artists has anything to do with a desire to move away from theatrical conventions. You have chosen several artists whose work sits very uncomfortably with the history of theatre.

FB: My agenda wasn't to not include theatre. I include things that I am aware of and that I am interested in. They happen to be these works which aren't really theatre. It's not purely a political thing. My background is a fine art one, so my references will be from that history, and not necessarily from theatre. Maybe if I spent three or four years studying performance my approach would be very different.

DJ: It also seems to me though that work by people like **Ron Athey**, **Raimund Hoghe**, **La Ribot** and **Bobby Baker** although very different, engage with dynamics of spectatorship that theatre is not very good at providing. The ways that you relate to the body in these works emphasise a kind of engagement that isn't really foregrounded in conventional theatre.

FB: I agree. I don't go to see much conventional theatre. I have been asked to oversee a student theatre project, using Artaud's *Spurt of Blood*, and I don't know how successful I would be with that sort of work. It is difficult for me. I haven't been trained to work within a theatrical structure, and I don't know how to engage with it. I engage with what I

feel is necessary for the moment, and so hopefully out of this situation something interesting will happen. I saw a piece by Richard Foreman for example, and it wasn't that I liked it or didn't like it. Half of me felt depleted and half of me didn't care. It felt like it was over my head and I don't think access is important and it wasn't provided for me.

DJ: Yes you can see that what Foreman or Robert Wilson are doing is a very different type of work to the ones you have chosen. It's interesting that in work by many of the people you have picked out, and in Artaud perhaps, there is a breakdown of meaning and of language. Many of the artists you have chosen use live art as a strategy that aims at different forms of expression, that rely on performance to collapse verbal language. Wilson and Foreman still maintain unities of meaning, and rely on a specific usage of text, and so on.

FB: Yes, and it makes you wonder what the value is of this kind of work. But when language, the spoken word, breaks down the barriers, becomes poetic, then it becomes meaningful. If I can be touched by it then language is still useful. **Forced Entertainment's *The Travels*** is a very good example. I've seen lots of their work but this is my favourite, it is the simplest, and in a way there is still a lot happening in it. It is really beautiful, the way they set up images in it, verbal images of the places they have been. It's very poetic but very raw and emotional. So I think that I like different works for different reasons. If they don't have humour then they need to be able to touch me. And if they have humour they don't just need to make you laugh or cheer you up – if I wanted that I could go to a comedy night. There needs to be a tension, a confrontation, like in La Ribot's work, the way she uses humour to stage a confrontation with dance, especially in her early work in 1997-98, like the piece at the ICA. It's head-on, almost crazy, in a great way – you either hate it or it makes you laugh until you piss in your trousers, but you laugh because it's anarchistic. It's not that she can't dance and is taking the piss out of its history – she is classically trained and can dance you under the table, but is using dance to challenge its own traditions. She has made a personal political decision to react against something she feels strongly about, and is thinking about it on her own. That's why I like her work. When she performs she has this kind of aura. She is not vulnerable in the way that someone like **Gina Casetta** is in performance, but there is a vulnerability in the way that she is totally naked, I don't mean just without clothes but completely exposed in the space – it's almost banal but she amplifies it to an extreme. Her work is never half-hearted, if she wants to upset an audience she'll upset them, and I like that.

DJ: And there is always a breakdown of meaning in her work, the pieces don't need to pass on a meaning. It's that breakdown of communication that actually makes them meaningful.

FB: But the pieces definitely do have meaning, they are about specific things. There are some that are about her son. It's interesting that she repeats things that her son does. **Tim Etchells** does the same – we were talking about his relationship with his sons, how he will see them do something or say something and he'll use it, but it will take on a new

meaning to the one intended. And to go back to La Ribot, there was a piece that referred to 1930s jazz for example.

DJ: But the effect is not at all reliant on the audience getting that reference, or knowing that the piece might be about her son.

FB: I agree, but the point is that the work retains something very human, is related to events in her life. It's not a polemic I guess.

DJ: And the idea about using the language of children could be seen as reverting to a stage where language is still unformed, where the dependence on language is volatile. You could relate that delicate hold on language to your own work, or to **Albert Vidal**. **Vito Acconci**, **Aaron Williamson**, **Oleg Kulik** or **Tehching Hsieh**. Here a grip on language is made difficult to critique issues of national identity, or to perform situations in which language is not made available. These artists say things about our uses of or dependency on language itself, sometimes mimicking a pre-linguistic or extra-linguistic phase of development. What that leads onto is the idea of failure. Your chosen artists look at the failing body, the sick or disabled body, the encounter with the traumatic event and the compulsion to repeat it, in the work of **David Wojnarowicz, Rudolf Schwarzkogler** or **Bob Flanagan**. Gina Pane or **Ana Mendieta** could be seen as staging death as the ultimate failure, as thinking about what is means to have a body that fails and dies. **Marina Abramovic** or **Stelarc** look at what it might mean to try and overcome that failure, to think about how even their attempts at transcendence are bound to fail.

FB: That's true, and I think I chose these people because the ideas you are talking about are problems I relate to. It's not purely about whether you fully understand the work or where the artist is coming from, but that you still realise that it is really important work. That's the interesting thing for me, that it is political, and that it is personal. They engage with the suffering body. Ron Athey's for example is amazing work, it's very brave work.

DJ: But this work also brings up questions about what it is to look at a suffering body.

FB: And that's why the dignity of the work is important, that it allows for you to engage with that suffering in a responsible way. They need to set up precedents that allow people to learn more about the suffering of real people. Maybe that way others won't have to make the same mistakes. It might only be performance art but it is really important because it moves people, it shows people and is expressed. It's cathartic to a certain degree but the point is beyond that, to me what people do is a contribution to the society they live in. You could say that what I do is a selfish act, but what makes it important to me is that it has a use value, it is a tool for education, for reaching people and for the work that it does beyond just what it can do for the performer in purely practical or therapeutic terms. It's about communicating, building bridges, you know? And part of that especially has to include communicating things that might be really horrible in this world, because they affect us and make people suffer.

DJ: And tied into that is the need to communicate ideas about the sexual body. **Gilles Jobin's** work is interesting partly because it expresses things about the violence of the sexual body. Other artists on your list are clearly communicating ideas about sexuality that need to be expressed, that risk getting ignored or overlooked.

FB: I laugh when I say this, but I want people to be open, to stay open, to try and have access to things that are not always easy to stomach, and that of course includes ideas about sex and sexuality. Look at **David Nebreda**, someone might say it is obvious to have him on my list, he's a schizophrenic, he's a self-harmer, but the work is difficult but in a way is very beautiful, and he shows what you can do with problematic material.

DJ: And this work is erotic in a very uncomfortable way, it links it to illness and to pain. Dark sexuality, violent sexuality…

FB: And many of these artists use the body to do similar things but in very different ways. Gilles Jobin does it through dance, and his work is darker than someone like Michael Clark, who is a dance genius but his work doesn't touch me like Gilles's. Gilles's work is still very much dance but there are undertones that makes it interesting because it is so aggressive, there is so much attitude. Merce Cunningham is another dancer whose work is amazing. I saw him in 1988 and it really moved me. I saw Michael Clark around 1987 and yes it's fun and it's a fuck you to dance, punk ballet, but that's all there is to it. Cunningham used different strategies, he works at the same places as everybody else but brings different tools. He was still dancing when I saw him, he has arthritis and was shaking, the poor guy, and is working against ideals of beauty.

DJ: Do you want to say something more about challenges to ideals of beauty? People like Nao Bustamante or Leigh Bowery…

FB: **Nao Bustamante's *America is Beautiful*** is a great piece, very funny but at the same time it's definitely not comedy. She confronts the audience, who tend to be white, middle class people who maybe expect a certain type of beautiful body, and she really deals with that, making a spectacle of herself and creating a sense of danger, putting herself in this situation where you think she's going to fall of the ladder or whatever. The bit with the bottles is hilarious, she's opening herself up to failure, and she makes herself look ridiculous, playing with the expectations of the audience. It's one of the best examples of an artist dealing with taboo, the way we look at ethnic bodies, or fat women. Or fat men – **Leigh Bowery's** work is a very good example of that. He'd come onto the stage and the queens would freak out and move away, and not just because he was a bitch. He'd come up to you and dance half-naked covered in beef, or wearing a toilet-seat on his head, and when people reacted to him so strongly, he showed up certain dynamics within our culture. He really tackled the ideals upheld in the gay culture of the 1980s, where gay men promoted an ideal of the beautiful body to try and cope with the fear of AIDS, muscle marys thought if they looked healthy it would show that they weren't affected by it, but of course so many people were dying. But

Leigh Bowery tackled these ideas about the body beautiful, and because of the way he was he made himself undesirable. He did this piece on Valentine's Day at the Fridge in Brixton, a big gay night, in the early 1990s, and he was given an enema and then shat on the audience. I say yes to that, because he shat on the people who saw him and people like him as a freak. He was a product of that world, working against it because he had to take it head on, and he did it in a really successful way, making people feel really awkward and embarrassed by him.

DJ: And there is such a contradictory elegance with his work, emphasising the pose, the glamour, especially in the Ceryth Wyn Evans video at Anthony d'Offay.

FB: Yes and that was for an art audience, so he was really taking the piss out of what that audience wanted to see from him, performing himself as an art object.

DJ: Do you want to say more about the strategy of presenting the unfamiliar body as an object of beauty, say in the work of **Guillermo Gómez-Peña** or **Raimund Hoghe**, the racially other or disabled body.

FB: Well what I think is interesting about Gómez-Peña is that in his work the body is political, and confrontational, in clever but very obvious ways, unlike maybe in Nao Bustamante's work. He did a piece where a performer provided the audience with acupuncture needles with flags on them, so that they would insert them into her skin and colonise her body. You couldn't make a more straightforward or direct image, and that's why his work is so important. He deals with clichés that we have about ethnicity, and tribal culture, it's not about reenacting history but talking about the present in a very confrontational way.

Lois Keidan: And he implicates the audience.

DJ: And that makes his work function as an intervention.

FB: Totally, because much of his work has been presented in the street, and works like protest. He had himself crucified in a public space, him and Roberto Fuentes I think, to make a political protest against immigration laws. It's deeply political.

LK: And what's really important about Gómez-Peña is that he brings those debates into the reality of the work. There was a piece he did in the States where a guy from the Christian Right was protesting outside the space, protesting against the freaks in this gallery, so what Guillermo did was bring him into the piece and put him on a platform to talk on stage with his banner. So he exposes this white racist for being a fool through the guy's own actions. Its eccentricity and directness but it is also about making people responsible for their own views and their own actions.

FB: **Santiago Sierra** is interesting for similar reasons, extremely political acts but very direct in his use of the public.

DJ: On a similar note, thinking about political intervention, you could look at almost all the artists you have chosen as using their work as a kind of testimony. Whether using verbal or more diffuse forms, they are bearing witness to the world and to crisis, or injustice, or solitude. Would you look at it like that?

FB: Yes but I think that all work is political for that reason.

DJ: But there is work that it purely decorative, even in performance.

FB: Yes but I think the majority of work is bearing witness in some way. A lot of work out there might be dominated by design.

DJ: And I suppose to a certain extent that disavowal or rejection of being political is a political act in itself.

FB: Totally, sitting on a fence. And of course not all political acts are good, or useful, not even purely in terms of affiliation, but in terms of how it's delivered, whether or not the act is believable, or is honest. There is work I don't have time for because I feel that is just fits into one closed corner that the artists puts themselves into, a position that is too comfortable, or where they can see themselves as some sort of spokesperson for a cause, when really they are just repeating propaganda. I respond to work that is done with dignity and also that has a purpose outside itself.

DJ: It's about avoiding a kind of slogan-based politics.

FB: Yes, and I think that with the work you should try to set an example. You should show people what you do so that they don't have to repeat the same steps, and that's what is important in mentoring people too. I guess I am a romantic – I believe that if I can change the course of one person's life, make them think on their own terms, then I have had some success with my work. Some people's work has definitely changed my life. Coming across certain artist's work showed me that I wasn't alone in thinking or acting differently, that there are ways to articulate those things, that there are better ways to express things than, say resorting to violence or whatever. And that's why art is beautiful, not in a decorative sense, in the sense that it attracts you and has an impact on your ways of viewing the world. It can be an amazing opportunity. And there are events in the world that have that same impact. The crashing of planes into the Twin Towers was presented as an amazing image. I kept lots of images of it…

LK: What was the Stockhausen quote? That it was an amazing work of art, and that artists can't compete with it.

FB: But you know what happened to him – he had his concerts banned. It's disgusting, and that's another reason why art is important, in that it should challenge what is allowed to be said or kept quiet, and comment on event in different ways, even if those comments are unpopular. I think Damien Hirst said something similar about the Twin Towers, but Stockhausen really paid for it. People boycotted his concerts, and you can't compete with that.

DJ: It relates to what we were talking about earlier, what it is that makes people want to look at images of horror or of death. Implicit in that desire is a discomfort with looking, but with being honest or open about why it is we are drawn to those representations, to see the monstrous as oddly beautiful, or to be sentimental about suffering.

FB: But also it is just important that we see that horror.

LK: Is there a difference between confronting something we might not want to confront, as in the newspaper photos by **Enrique Metinides**, the experience of a still image, and the experience of the creation of an image through performance. Thinking about influences and literary forms and photographic forms, and the experience of what the body in performance can do, the experience of that trauma.

FB: Yes, definitely, there is a difference. Although these things are all related to performance in some way. But with the image you are aware that you are not looking at performance, but you are still bearing witness to it, testifying to it. Seeing performance has the potential to make you much more uncomfortable, because it is live, and you are not just a consumer. It is a real experience that you take away with you. If you relate to it you can't help it, and you have to let what happens happen. Sometimes watching a performance I'll be on the verge of crying, and it's a very different experience to anything that an image might give you.

LK: I think one of the most important reactions to your work is how after a performance people will talk and talk about it in lots of different ways and then reach a stage when they realise that they do not actually have words for it. There is a sense of awe that is not the same with images – they would have words to describe the image. The experience is sensory and not purely intellectual.

FB: And this is important in relation to the archive, not what is the relevance, but what is important to bear in mind when approaching performance through an archive. I want people not to feel ashamed or inhibited, that they should see the work as much as they can and so the archive can work as a strategy, allowing people to read the work in different ways, from different angles, so it is not too big a problem. There should be as wide a collection as possible to show people different ways of thinking about life I chose the artists that I think, because of their personal and political positions, made choices and use strategies essentially to show different ways that we express themselves through the body. The body is always present. In spoken word performance how can you not think about the body? **Forced Entertainment's *Starfucker*** shows that really clearly. The audience is thinking of the banality, their stupidity, but essentially it shows that speech is always bodily…

DJ: And always remembering that fantasy is rooted in the body, that memory is rooted in body, and so not only the voice but also other traces of bodies remind the audience of that. That's why a publication like *Shattered Anatomies* is important, in showing that these traces do not

always take the form of books or videos, that alternate traces can document the performance while also carrying a residual trace of the body’s fantasy or memory. We could talk about some exclusions from your list. People like Paul McCarthy, Alastair MacLennan, Ron Vawter, Jack Smith.

FB: I find their work very interesting but I have never seen their work live. Their work might have touched me but it couldn’t have been as direct as the influence of other works. I could have included people like Chris Burden, but didn’t for the same reason. I came across these people in the last fifteen to twenty years, gradually. There’s an amazing choice of work out there, and it’s important to look in a different way. I could have gone for the obvious choices, other people working with the body, or working with blood, but the things that influence you aren’t always the ones that you’d expect to have such an effect.

DJ: I think that’s important in relation to the way that you present your work to artists like Francis Bacon or Mark Rothko. Once you’ve actually said the names they are not fanciful relations. Now that you mention Louise Bourgeois it makes a lot of sense. Bearing these artists in mind when you look at your work allows for another level of interpreting it, which the comparison to other more obviously similar artists might not be quite as useful.

FRANKO B was born in Milan and has lived in London since 1979. He has been creating work across performance, video, photography, painting, installation and sculpture since the late 80s. He has performed at Tate Modern, the ICA, South London Gallery and Beaconsfield, the NRLA and elsewhere in the UK. He has also presented work internationally, including in Zagreb, Mexico City, Milan, Amsterdam, Antwerp, Copenhagen, Madrid and Vienna, and recently produced a large-scale solo show of works at Galleria Pack, Milan. Franko B has lectured widely, including at DasArt, New York University and the Courtauld Institute of Art. He has been the subject of two monographs, 'Franko B' (Black Dog Publishing, 1998) and 'Oh Lover Boy' (2001) and has published a photographic project entitled 'Still Life' (2003). www.franko-b.com

DOMINIC JOHNSON is currently researching and writing a PhD on performance and death at the Courtauld Institute of Art in London, where he is also a Visiting Lecturer. He has published on artists including Jack Smith, Marisa Carnesky, Raimund Hoghe and Genesis P-Orridge.

See also Franko B’s Study Room list for further materials to view. **Artists**’ names shown here as highlighted and underlined correspond to the materials and reference numbers on this list.