HISTORICAL PRESENCE IN VISUAL CULTURE
Contemporaneity
Vol 5, No 1 "Agency in Motion" (2016) | ISSN 2155-1162 (online) | DOI 10.5195/contemp.2016.184
http://contemporaneity.pitt.edu

Documenting/Performing the Vulnerable Body

Pain and Agency in Works by Boris Mikhailov and Petr Pavlensky

Ingrid Nordgaard

Abstract

This article explores the concepts of pain and agency in the photography series *Case History* (1997–1998) by the Ukrainian photographer Boris Mikhailov, and in four performance-actions (2012–2014) by the Russian performance-activist Petr Pavlensky. Although they represent different generations and respond to different historical contexts, Mikhailov and Pavlensky share a focus on the wounded body. Taking both the documentary and performative aspects of these artworks into account, Nordgaard argues that the wounded body stands forth as a body of agency which also reflects the social, political, and historical settings in which it exists. The relational consideration of the two artists therefore offers important insights for understanding post-Soviet Ukraine and present-day Russia, and reflects on the correlation between the private and the public body. By placing Mikhailov and Pavlensky in dialogue with a broader discussion on spectatorship and the role and significance of "shock imagery" and spectacle in contemporary media, the article further suggests why artworks depicting the body in pain have both an ethical and political function.

About the Author

Ingrid Nordgaard is a PhD student in the department of Slavic Languages and Literatures at Yale University. She holds a Bachelor of Arts in Russian Studies from the University of Tromsø, Norway, and in 2013, she completed a Master of Arts in Russian Studies at New York University.

Documenting/Performing the Vulnerable Body

Pain and Agency in Works by Boris Mikhailov and Petr Pavlensky

Ingrid Nordgaard

In September 2015 when the European refugee crisis was at its most pressing, a photograph of toddler Aylan Kurdi lying dead on a beach in Turkey circulated in international media. As Adam Withnall of the *Independent* phrased it in a headline: "If these extraordinarily powerful images of a dead Syrian child washed up on a beach don't change Europe's attitude to refugees, what will?" Withnall added, "[t]he *Independent* has taken the decision to publish these images because, among the often glib words about the 'ongoing migrant crisis,' it is all too easy to forget the reality of the desperate situation facing many refugees."[1] From Whithnall's point of view, the distressing image moved beyond the confines of the seemingly habitual everyday reporting of human tragedy. Shortly after, however, online news sites commented on the image taken by photojournalist Nilüfer Demir, only this time the headlines did not express a call for mercy and action but were rather set on exposing the *truth* behind the image: "Aylan Kurdi's father denies claims he was a people smuggler and driving boat that capsized and led to son's death;" "Europe's policy did not kill Aylan Kurdi;" "'Aylan's father just wanted better dental treatment': Liberal Senator Cory Bernardi's brutal claim that drowned Syrian boy wasn't a 'real refugee'."[2] In the months following the death of Kurdi, the French satirical magazine *Charlie Hebdo* published several cartoon versions of the image, accompanied by headlines such as "What would've become of Aylan had he grown up? —A groper."[3] Suddenly the tragic fate of the helpless three-year-old was used to complicate the narrative of the European crisis: as if the image caption that once read "This is tragic" now stated "This is tragic, but . . . ."

On the one hand, the example above shows how we believe that images could have the power to change attitudes. This stance aligns with William Stott's claims about social documentary photography of the 1930s, which he stated "encourages social improvement" by making us feel implicated through portraying social situations that may be altered.[4] On the other hand, some of the photograph's reception suggests that such hopes are futile in the context of contemporary media. In our ever-changing media reality, the distinction between media-producer and media-consumer is increasingly ambiguous: interactive social media frequently intersect with traditional news reporting, and online self-publishing blurs the boundary between critical journalism reporting and opinion pieces. While one may argue that such a media landscape supports openness, transparency, and diverse outlooks, it could also distort the distinction between reality and fiction, and news reporting and

[1] Adam Whithnall, "If these extraordinarily powerful images of a dead Syrian child washed up on a beach don't change Europe's attitude to refugees, what will?," *Independent* September 2, 2015, http://www.independent.co.uk/.

[2] Respectively, Andrew Griffin in *Independent*, September 13, 2015, http://www.independent.co.uk/; Crispian Cuss in *Al Jazeera*, September 4, 2015, http://www.aljazeera.com/; and Louise Cheer in *Daily Mail*, September 8, 2015, http://www.dailymail.co.uk/.

[3] See, for example, Amanda Meade, "Charlie Hebdo cartoon depicting drowned child Alan Kurdi sparks racism debate" in the *Guardian*, January 14, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/.

[4] William Stott, *Documentary Expression and Thirties America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1973), 21 and 26, respectively.

entertainment, thus slowly erasing the difference between media consumption for informational and for entertainment purposes. This is perhaps especially true in cases that involve human suffering or pain; we have become so accustomed to seeing pain in the media that the potential of an empathic viewing of the tragedy and despair of others seems lost—a statement that has certainly become a cliché, but that still rings true.

The fact that the image of Aylan Kurdi triggered such an overwhelming response discloses how public display of pain is inherently connected to discussions of ethics, voyeurism, general media consumption, and spectacle.[5] More important, the photograph reveals how fragile the wounded body is when captured without knowing, unable to give consent to its own visibility or simply becoming part of larger narratives over which it has no control. The appearance of presumed pain in such documentary images may help us conceptualize, understand, and provide photographic evidence for global suffering, but it is also too easy to ignore its presence or to question it—as seen in the case of the Syrian toddler.

This paper explores the relationships between photography, agency, spectatorship, and pain in works by the Ukrainian photographer Boris Mikhailov (b. 1938) and the Russian performance-activist Petr Pavlensky (b. 1984). These two contemporary artists have addressed the body in pain and its visual presentation using both photography and live bodily performance. Representing different generations and working in different social and art historical contexts, Mikhailov and Pavlensky nevertheless share the goal of capturing bodily vulnerability and revealing the physical impact of social and political injustice on the human body. In Mikhailov's photograph series *Case History* (1997–98), homeless people openly exhibit their wounded, naked bodies in front of his camera. Pavlensky, in the performance-actions *Seam* (2012), *Carcass* (2013), *Fixation* (2013), and *Segregation* (2014), mutilates his own body publically in some of the most symbolically laden locations in Russia. Although what follows is not an explicit comparison of the two artists, a relational consideration is productive because both Mikhailov and Pavlensky refuse to present the wounded body as a powerless victim. Instead, I argue that the wounded body in their works represents a way of exposing and contending with external factors that may be harmful not only to the individual, but to all of us. It is my hope that a discussion of the two artists will offer new perspectives on the making and distribution of photographic images of bodies in pain, and on the fraught correlation between the artist, the photographic subject, and the spectator.

[5] Debord claims that with the intense focus on production in the modern age, everything has become mere representation characterized by *spectacle*, "a social relation between people that is mediated by images." Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle,* trans. Ken Knabb (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Secrets, 2014), 11. Indirectly following Debord's notion of the global spectacle, Phil Carney argues that photography is a "social practice of production" and a strong social force; the photograph produces more than it represents. Whether or not photographic images are depicting what is "real" or mere fantasy is beside the point, as Carney is more interested in showing how photographic images are parts of how we define our lives. Carney, however, does not linger on the negative impacts of the (photographic) spectacle, but like Debord he points out that it defines the way we live. The reality of social practice can indeed be seen through the photographic spectacle, but it is also produced by it: the photograph must be seen as a performative force. See Phil Carney, "Crime, Punishment, and the Force of Photographic Spectacle" in *Framing Crime: Cultural Criminology and the Image*, eds. Keith J. Hayward and Mike Presdee (New York: Routledge, 2010). Susan Sontag, among others, has criticized the concept of spectacle: "[t]o speak of reality becoming a spectacle is a breathtaking provincialism. It universalizes the viewing habits of a small, educated population living in the rich part of the world, where news has been converted into entertainment." See Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 110.

The Photographic Subject in Pain: Context and Representation

Before discussing Mikhailov and Pavlensky on their own terms, some context should be given regarding the photographic medium and photography's presumed relationship to pain and its representation. Moreover, it is also worth asking what type of response such images may trigger in the viewer. In her famous account *On Photography* (1977), Susan Sontag claims that photographic images have lost their ability to trigger an ethical response in the spectator, because visual representations of suffering have become commonplace and are inherently linked with sensationalism. In Sontag's account, such images create a "chronic voyeuristic relation" to the world.[6] In a similar vein, Martha Rosler's 1981 essay "In, Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)" offers a substantial critique against the notion that documentary photography can give a truthful account of "reality." Claiming that documentary photography only offers empty remarks about the "conditions of man," Rosler states that the common idea "that documentary precedes, supplants, transcends, or cures full, substantial social activism is an indicator that we do not yet have a real documentary."[7] In other words, documentary photography may pacify the viewer by reaffirming the distance between the photographic subject and the spectator, rather than function as a call for action.

The remarks made by Sontag and Rosler raise important points about the photographic subject and the spectator, contemporary media, and the aestheticization of suffering. In addition, it indirectly addresses the issue of agency. According to Sontag, the act of taking a picture is somewhat predatory because it violates people by turning them "into objects that can be symbolically possessed."[8] From Sontag's point of view, the photographer is in complete control, whereas the people in the images are objectified and robbed of agency, as both Sontag and Rosler argue is the case in Diane Arbus's photographs of social "outsiders."[9] Photographing wounded, differently-abled, and non-normative bodies highlights the non-conformity of these bodies, which emphasizes the photographer's power but also victimizes the photographic subject. As I understand Sontag and Rosler, to be victimized is the same as being deprived of personal agency. This is perhaps articulated most clearly in Rosler's essay, which states that traditional documentary photography "carries (old) information about a group of powerless people to another group addressed as socially powerful."[10]

[6] Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1977), 11. Jacques Rancière offers a different approach to "intolerable images" and their distribution in relation to the question of ethical response. Rancière convincingly argues that our systems of information do not operate through an overabundance of horrific images, but by "selecting the speaking and reasoning beings who are capable of 'deciphering' the flow of information about anonymous multitudes. The politics of its images consists in teaching us that not just anyone is capable of seeing and speaking. This is the lesson very prosaically confirmed by those who claim to criticize the televisual flood of images." Rancière, "The Intolerable Image" in *The Emancipated Spectator*, trans. Gregory Elliott (London; Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2009), 96. While Rancière's observations are an important contribution to the discussion of photographic images and their distribution, my paper will not follow his line of inquiry.

[7] Martha Rosler, "In, Around, and Afterthoughts (On Documentary Photography)" in *Decoys and Disruptions: Selected Writings, 1975-2001* (Cambridge, MA; London: MIT Press, 2004), 196.

[8] Sontag, *On Photography*, 14.

[9] Sontag for instance writes: "The ambiguity of Arbus's work is that she seems to have enrolled in one of art photography's most visible enterprises—concentrating on victims, the unfortunate, the dispossessed—but without the compassionate purpose that such a project is expected to serve." See Sontag, "Freak Show," *New York Review of Books* 20, no. 18 (1973), http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1973/11/15/freak-show/.

[10] Rosler, "In, Around, and Afterthoughts," 179.

In *Regarding the Pain of Others* (2003), Sontag engages with her former work on photography and further grapples with the medium's ethical implications. Commenting on some of the most harrowing images from the past two centuries, Sontag struggles with the question of photography's value. Although skeptical of the medium's ability to convey reality, Sontag implores the atrocious images to haunt us, as photography depicting suffering potentially is "an invitation to pay attention, to reflect, to learn, to examine the rationalizations for mass suffering offered by established powers."[11] However, Sontag does not explicitly address the photographic subject's agency, but rather focuses on the spectator's reaction to the images of wounded bodies. It therefore seems as if Sontag is still hesitant to approach the body in pain as a body with agency. In the following, I will show how Mikhailov and Pavlensky challenge such a position as the wounded body in their works stands forth as a body that may bear the actions of others, but also has the capacity to act.

Boris Mikhailov's *Case History*: Documenting History and Delegating Performance

As a result of the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the city of Kharkov, Ukraine, went through dramatic changes over the course of the 1990s.[12] Gradually, the city was covered with foreign advertisements—bright and colorful manifestations of the newly accumulated wealth of a fortunate few and in stark contrast to overwhelming signs of poverty. Watching his home city change before his eyes, Boris Mikhailov became astutely aware of a new presence in the modern cityscape: a great number of homeless people. Whereas Kharkov had undergone the transition from communism to a market economy, neo-liberal reforms, hyperinflation, and the downsizing of social welfare systems, these were the people who had lost their homes and received no state support. Wanting to document the historical moment, Mikhailov embarked upon a project that took two years to finish and resulted in *Case History* (completed in 1999), a series of more than four hundred life-sized color photographs portraying the lives of homeless people in Kharkov.[13]

An active photographer since the 1960s, Mikhailov has received international acclaim for his numerous photography series.[14] While his early work to some extent shared the conceptual framework of Moscow Conceptualism (associated with figures such as Ilya

[11] Susan Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others* (New York: Picador, 2003), 117.

[12] Ukraine gained its independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. The years to come would be marked by dramatic economic decline. According to the World Bank, in 1991 the GDP per capita was $1,490; by 2000 it had fallen to $636.

[13] The historical specificity of *Case History* is important. In the Soviet Union, it was strictly forbidden to take photos in specific public spaces, to develop photos that might question or criticize Soviet ideology and everyday life, and to photograph naked bodies. Explaining his reason for creating *Case History*, Mikhailov stated, "[h]aving these laws and their consequences in my memory, I was aware that I was not allowed to let it happen once again that some periods of life would be erased" in Boris Mikhailov, *Case History* (Berlin: Scalo, 1999), 7.

[14] Mikhailov was born in Kharkov, Ukraine (USSR) in 1938, and began his career as an amateur photographer in the 1960s. By the late 1960s, Mikhailov had finished what is acknowledged as his first larger photography series, *Superimpositions*, and he soon became a figure within the unofficial art scene in the Soviet Union. In 1976, he quit his job and devoted himself entirely to his photographic work. By the early 2000s, Mikhailov had made twenty-six photography series. In 2000, he was awarded the Hasselblad Foundation International Award, considered by many to be the most prestigious recognition in contemporary photography. For a cohesive account of Mikhailov's stylistic and formal development as a photographer, see Urs Stahel, "Private Pleasures, Burdensome Boredom, Public Decay—an Introduction" in *Boris Mikhailov: A retrospective/Eine Retrospektive*, ed. Urs Stahel (Zurich: Scalo, 2003), 12–17.

Kabakov, Erik Bulatov, Viktor Pivovarov, and Andrei Monastarsky), his post-Soviet series speak directly to the state of confusion, disillusionment, and the collapse of order that followed as a result of the dissolution of the Soviet Union.[15] *Case History* marks a pivotal point in Mikhailov's photographic documentation of post-Soviet reality. Several of the photographs show explicit nakedness or human suffering, and the series includes photographs of animals, children, Mikhailov himself and his family members, objects or rooms, and cityscapes. The images therefore depict not only the situation of the homeless, but also reflect general life in Kharkov.

Figure 1
Boris Mikhailov, *Untitled*, from the series *Case History*, 1997–98. Chromogenic color print, 58 7/16 x 39 3/16 in. Copyright Boris Mikhailov; courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York.

[15] For more on Mikhailov's connection to Moscow Conceptualism, see Boris Groys's *History Becomes Form: Moscow Conceptualism* (Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2010) and Matthew Jesse Jackson's *The Experimental Group: Ilya Kabakov, Moscow Conceptualism, Soviet Avant-Gardes* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2010).

Although the focus of *Case History* is above all on Kharkov's inhabitants, the series clearly documents a city in decay. In some of the photographs, Mikhailov carefully aligns the two, as exemplified by the image of a man lying in a hole in an asphalt road (fig. 1). From its jagged, uneven shape, it is evident that the hole is not carefully designed, but rather the result of natural erosion or caused by rough weather conditions. Covered by plants and trash, the hole has clearly remained unattended for quite some time. The man is formally dressed, but his suit is stained and his shoes are worn. His hands are swollen and a large wound is visible on his left wrist. His face is covered in dust and grease. These visual markers suggest that the man is one of the homeless people in Kharkov. Mikhailov here captures both human and social decline and seems to suggest an almost symbiotic relationship between the homeless man and his environment—one may even speculate whether the man's positioning within the hole is accidental, or whether Mikhailov instructed the man how to lie. For example, his back and shoe bottom run parallel to the right edge of the asphalt, while small indents are visible in the asphalt above his head and above the elbow of the arm on which the man rests his head. He stretches his left arm out in front of his belly, perhaps to provide the spectator the best view of his swollen and wounded hand, an awkward pose that mirrors the irregular shape of the hole. In the upper left corner of the photograph, a large crack appears in the asphalt, and the direction of the crack continues visually through the position of the man's right forearm and the angle of his extended leg. Lastly, the man's jacket chromatically mirrors the asphalt, and his unwashed face has the color of the dirt and gravel in the hole. Considering these compositional features, it is as if Mikhailov suggests that man and environment are one, as if the hole has perfectly taken shape around the man's body. While *Case History* at first glance resembles social documentary photography in the vein of Jacob Riis, Walker Evans, Roman Vishniac, Mary Ellen Mark, and David Goldblatt (to name but a few), it is Mikhailov's careful compositional choices such as these that add a clear artistic component to the series, thus situating *Case History* as both documentary and fine-art photography.[16]

Documenting a specific moment in Ukrainian history, Mikhailov pays special attention to homeless subjects who are covered in wounds and characterized by deformities, as if their bodies bear physical evidence of a society in decline. Considering the focus on bodies in pain alongside the title of the series, the spectator is forced to look at the bodies portrayed as though extracted from a medical journal of pathology. This aspect of the work even led one critic to accuse Mikhailov of contributing to the creation of a "pornography of pain."[17] Although such characteristics point out the complicated issue of voyeurism and the photographer's potential exploitation of his/her subjects, I challenge the notion that Mikhailov's photographs are set on victimizing or humiliating the subjects whose wounded bodies are depicted.

In one photograph, Mikhailov portrays a naked woman with a large abdominal hernia—a physical ailment that causes pain and discomfort that may be increased by basic, everyday movements (fig. 2). The woman's naked body is centered in the photograph, and the woman

[16] On the connection between Mikhailov and documentary photography, see Walead Beshty, "Toward an Emphatic Resistance: Boris Mikhailov's Embodied Documents," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry,* no. 12 (Autumn/Winter 2005), 80–88.

[17] See Henry Hitchings, "What's Right in Front of You" in *Times Literary Supplement*, July 18, 2003, 18. The art critic and author Boris Groys has argued against such criticism, noting that on closer inspection, *Case History* "is in fact concerned with the *mise-en-scène* of the body—in this case not as an ideologically staged "Soviet" body, but as an erotic body expressing desire" in Groys, *History Becomes Form: Moscow Conceptualism*, 140.

stands tall, in profile, with a serious look upon her face. Her body, covered in sunlight, is aged and worn, and a large scar is visible on her shoulder. The woman's pose seems contrived and staged, suggesting that she is aware of being photographed. The composition offers the spectator the best possible view of her deformity—exposed by the sun and set against a dark background. It is therefore tempting to argue that Mikhailov captured the woman in such a position so that the observer may get the best possible view of her deformity, satisfying our morbid fascination. However, a closer look at other formal, compositional decisions suggests that this is not simply an image of a hernia or a pathologized body. The woman's body is paralleled by the building structure behind her, as the brick walls are covered with wounds and architectural deformities, thereby evoking the marks that time leaves on everything and everyone. In some places paint is chipping off, and the wall to the right reveals a failed attempt to cover the brick in a different material. The beige color of the left wall is similar to the woman's general skin complexion, while the old paint stains mirror the darker shade of her nipples, her scars, and the mole above her right knee. The patterns in the mortar resemble the shapes made by the prominent veins in her hand, the creases in her elbow, and the wrinkles on her neck. Suddenly, the protruding hernia seems of less significance. Instead, in its detail and overall careful composition, the photograph becomes a celebration of lived life, imperfection, and naked vulnerability.

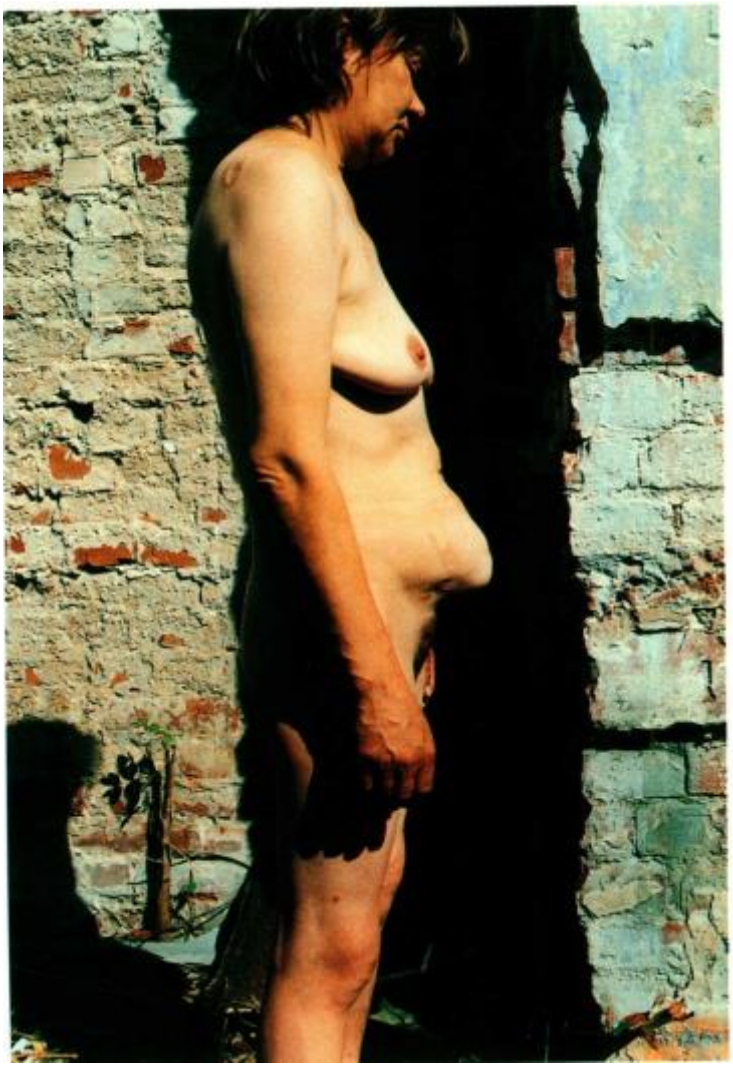

Figure 2
Boris Mikhailov, *Untitled*, from the series *Case History* (1997–98). Chromogenic color print, dimensions variable. Copyright Boris Mikhailov; courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York.

What I am proposing by analyzing this specific photograph in form, content, and context, is that Mikhailov is not interested in exposing the wounds or deformities of others simply to shock or provoke the spectator. In *Case History*, the body in pain needs to be considered from a more generous approach that pushes us to look beyond the explicit exhibition of cuts and bruises, and that challenges us to view these bodies as worthy of aesthetic contemplation. More important, Mikhailov's compositional strategies compel viewers to look more closely and consider the stories of the individuals photographed in relationship to their surrounding environment. The homeless in *Case History* therefore should not be viewed simply as objects of a social documentary, but as co-creators in an aesthetic production. This latter point is made even clearer when examining the connection between the documentary and performance in *Case History*.

Commenting on the creative process of making *Case History*, Mikhailov states that he approached the homeless from a journalistic point of view, but that he wanted to avoid doing "pure journalism"—defined by the artist as "taking snapshots of events without interfering."[18] He accomplished this by asking the homeless subjects to reenact situations or scenes he had witnessed, or to strike a pose of their own design. I claim that this should be interpreted as an act of embodied agency since Mikhailov's photographs do not solely document a specific historical moment; they also record the agency of Kharkov's homeless through their often self-fashioned portraits and reenactments. While I certainly do not propose viewing *Case History* as performance art, the staged elements of the works, and the complicit contribution of the homeless subjects who were asked to "perform themselves" should not be understated. Indeed, a continuum that may be traced in Mikhailov's photographs from the last three decades is his exploration of the fine line between theatrical performance (of everyday life) and documentary—an important aspect of his art that has been pointed out by several critics and is especially apparent in *Case History*.[19]

The implications of the homeless subjects' self-performance can be interpreted through Claire Bishop's concept of "delegated performance," defined as "the act of hiring nonprofessionals or specialists in other fields to undertake the job of being present and performing at a particular time and a particular place on behalf of the artist, and following his or her instructions."[20] The people who are hired, according to Bishop, are asked to perform their socioeconomic category, whether this is a matter of age, gender, race, disability, or profession. Mikhailov's accounts of the making of *Case History* focus on this element of collaboration between himself and the homeless, but it should be noted that he *paid* the

[18] Boris Mikhailov and Jan Kaila, "A Discussion between Boris Mikhailov and Jan Kaila" in *Boris Mikhailov: The Hasselblad Award 2000*, ed. Gunilla Knape (Goteborg: Hasselblad Center, 2000), 78–84.

[19] Viktor Misiano and Anna Pilkington give a valuable account of this connection in Mikhailov's work, coining it "the representation of the everyday and the performative acting-out of subjects." See Misiano and Pilkington, "The Ethics of View: Notes on Boris Mikhailov," *Afterall: A Journal of Art, Context, and Enquiry*, no. 12 (Fall/Winter 2005): 72–79. Anne von der Heiden also argues that the connection between the documentary and the performative is at the very core of *Case History*, and calls it "the most scandalous element of the work as a whole." See von der Heiden, "'Consummatum Est' *Case History* by Boris Mikhailov" in *Boris Mikhailov: A retrospective/Eine Retrospektive*, ed. Urs Stahel (Zurich: Scalo, 2003), 170–172.

[20] Claire Bishop, "Delegated Performance: Outsourcing Authenticity," *October* 140 (Spring 2012): 91.

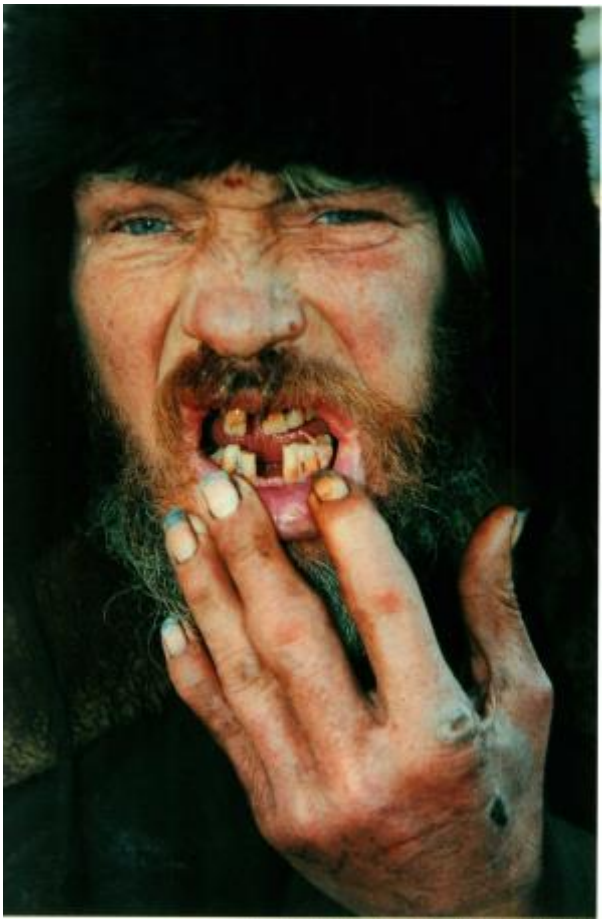

Figure 3
Boris Mikhailov, *Untitled*, from the series *Case History* (1997–98). Chromogenic color print, dimensions variable. Copyright Boris Mikhailov; courtesy Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York.

homeless for their participation.[21] To some degree, this establishes an unequal power relation between Mikhailov and the homeless, making it easy to criticize the photographer for exploiting a vulnerable social group. But although such a transaction may affirm the artist's hierarchical status, it is also a matter of probing singular authorship, delegating power, and entrusting the performers with agency.[22] There is a dialogical relation between artist and performer; as Bishop emphasizes, "delegation is not just a one-way, downward gesture."[23] To interpret the wounded bodies in *Case History* as exploited subjects who are taken advantage of deprives the homeless individuals of the agency that is manifest in their participation. To be clear, I am not suggesting that the homeless in *Case History* are fully in

[21] In the introductory notes to *Case History,* Mikhailov discusses the fact that he paid the homeless to participate in the making of the series: "Manipulating with money is somehow a new way of legal relations in all areas of the former USSR. And by this book I wanted to transmit the feeling that in that place and now people can be openly manipulated. In order to give this flavour of time I wanted to copy or perform the same relations which exist in society between a model and myself." In Boris Mikhailov, *Case History* (Berlin: Scalo, 1999), 9. The financial transaction between Mikhailov and his photographic subjects thus draws awareness to the capitalist system at large, and also speaks to the situation of post-Soviet Ukraine in the 1990s, during which time certain groups gained prosperity, while others faced the deepest poverty.

[22] Bishop, "Delegated Performance," 110.

[23] Ibid., 111.

charge of the work's production and its distribution, but rather that agency should not be reduced to thinking of the photographic subjects as exploited, and the artist as exploiter. Instead, the individuals in the series must be acknowledged for their participation in the making of the photographs. An old man who opens his mouth to reveal his missing teeth, pulling back his lip so we can see them better, surely displays an image of someone's pain and misfortune, but it is also the image of an individual who allowed for such a photograph to be taken (fig. 3). The old man looks straight into the camera as if to tell us that he is not ashamed of his pain, suggesting that being photographed in this setting is a matter of consensus, agreement, and mutual recognition between the photographer and the subject, although this naturally does not do anything to ease his personal tragedy. The confrontational gaze and the matter-of-factness with which the homeless man presents himself affirm his agency. Ignoring such an expression of personal agency, I argue, may lead to the further victimization of the photographic subject.

My intention so far has been to show how Mikhailov combines documentary photography, fine art, and performance in order to record a specific moment in post-Soviet history. In addition, Mikhailov's *Case History* presents bodies in pain that are not victimized or robbed of agency, but are rather active participants in the creative process of making the series. Nevertheless, in *Case History*, bodily pain as such is portrayed by Mikhailov as a consequence of social issues beyond the subject's control. What, then, of pain that is self-inflicted and consciously incorporated into artistic action?

Petr Pavlensky: The Political Potential of Pain

In November of 2013, news agencies across the world circulated an image of a young man sitting naked on Red Square in front of the imposing Kremlin in Moscow with his scrotum nailed to the cobblestones (fig. 4). The young man was Petr Pavlensky, a professionally trained artist who sees his practice as uniting art and political action, and who in the last five years has emerged as a powerful voice of dissent in Russia.[24] Besides being mentioned in news reportage around the world, the persistent coverage of Pavlensky in magazines such as *Artforum*, the *Calvert Journal*, and *1843* (the *Economist*'s cultural magazine) has made Pavlensky a symbol of Russian art and activism in the eyes of a Western audience. The wide online distribution of Pavlensky's actions and the resulting commentaries triggered by them further speak to the charged relationship between his performances and their documentation, and also raise the question of whether the public aftermath of his actions should, in fact, be interpreted as being part of his overall performance. In the following descriptions, I refer to live performances—events that happened at a certain time and place in front of an audience—but my descriptions are necessarily based on photographs taken during the events. On the one hand, this represents

[24] Petr Pavlensky is a former student of both Saint Petersburg Art and Industry Academy and Saint Petersburg PRO ARTE Foundation for Culture and Arts (which he quit for political reasons). Together with Oksana Shalygina, he is the founder of the journal *Political Propaganda*, which publishes material in different media on art and politics. While Pavlensky's art does not always revolve around self-mutilation and a public display of the artist's own (naked) body, the works that will be explored here all focus on the wounded body in encounter with public spaces and political power. It should also be noted that, when referring to his performances, Pavlensky uses the Russian word *акция* (*aktsiya*). This term should be understood as an act that is the consequence of *actionism*. By employing this word to describe his art, Pavlensky positions himself within the larger artistic tradition and discourse of Viennese Actionism of the 1960s and 1970s, but more important, it connects him to Moscow Actionism of the 1990s, famously personified by figures such as Anatoly Osmolovsky, Aleksandr Brener, and Oleg Kulik. For the sake of simplicity, I will use the English word *action* when describing Pavlensky's performances.

a methodological challenge, and on the other, it offers a chance to approach Pavlensky's work as twofold: as both performance *and* as photographic performance documentation, circulated not as art but as news. To each of the performances that will be discussed in my paper, Pavlensky invited photographers to document his actions, although no contract existed between the artist and the photographers regarding the future media distribution of the images.[25] Thus, Pavlensky did not view the photographs as being part of the artwork. Rather, he used photography to validate and document his performances.

Figure 4

Petr Pavlensky, *Fixation* (*Фиксация*), November 10, 2013. Performance action with photographic documentation, Moscow, Russia. Photograph, 36.39 x 56.31 in. Photographer anonymous, image courtesy of Petr Pavlensky.

[25] Pavlensky in an email to the author, September 4, 2016.

Vol 5, No 1 "Agency in Motion" (2016) | ISSN 2155-1162 (online) | DOI 10.5195/contemp.2016.184

Paul Auslander has argued that whenever a performance is documented, the performance may be approached as raw material for documentation, while the document itself emerges as the final product that is widely circulated and known to a larger audience. [26] In a similar vein, Amelia Jones states that performance art is dependent on documentation "to attain symbolic status within the realm of culture."[27] In Pavlensky's case, this is especially true. Not only does the distributed documentation reach an additional audience both nationally and internationally, but it also helps constitute his actions as *art*: for, as Auslander claims, "the art of documenting an event as performance is what constitutes it as such."[28] In the Russian political context in which Pavlensky operates, such an attribution is of crucial importance. His actions have been interpreted by the authorities as signs of mental illness and as acts of vandalism, and as a result Pavlensky has been detained, fined, and imprisoned. Furthermore, the iconic photographs of his actions may become part of a collective memory of a body that resisted political oppression. The relationship between Pavlensky's actions and their documentation is therefore "viral" in the sense that Christopher Bedford deploys the term, precisely because the afterlife of his performances "extends the primary act of the performance into the indefinite future of reproduction."[29]

Although the action on Red Square was not the first time Pavlensky used his own body to express his opposition to the political situation in Russia, *Fixation* (*Фиксация*) received massive media attention due to its explicit content and loaded symbolism: the date of the action, November 10, coincided with the national Police Day, and Red Square bears special significance in the political history of the Russian state.[30] Regarding what he wanted to achieve with the performance, Pavlensky stated:

> The performance can be seen as a metaphor of the apathy, the political indifference, and the fatalism of Russian society. It is not the official lawlessness that deprives society of the possibility to act, but the fixation on its defeats and

[26] Paul Auslander, "The Performativity of Performance Documentation" in *PAJ: A Journal of Performance and Art* 28, no. 3 (2006): 3.

[27] Amelia Jones, "'Presence' in Absentia: Experiencing Performance as Documentation" in *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (1997): 13.

[28] Auslander, "Performativity of Performance," 5.

[29] Christopher Bedford, "The Viral Ontology of Performance" in *Perform, Repeat, Record: Live Art in History*, eds. Amelia Jones and Adrian Heathfield (Chicago: Intellect Books, 2012), 77.

[30] Police Day—or Police and Internal Affairs Servicemen's Day—is a professional holiday in Russia. It has been celebrated since 1962 and is formerly known as Militsiya Day. On this day, the police and everyone working in the Ministry of Internal Affairs are honored by their superiors and other government officials. Red Square dates from the late 15th century. For centuries, it functioned as one of the most central market places in Moscow, and was a gathering place for public celebrations and castigations. Red Square is also the location for Russia's famous military parades. It should be noted that Pavlensky's action evokes another historical component: in Russian prisons, there is a tradition of inmates nailing their scrotums to stools and benches to protest the prison authorities. See interview with Marat Guelman in Ekow Eshun, et. al., "The Naked Truth: the Art World Reacts to Pyotr Pavlensky's Red Square Protest," *Calvert Journal*, November 14, 2013, http://calvertjournal.com/articles/show/1768/pyotr-pavlensky-russian-artist-nails-red-square.

> losses nails us even firmer to the pavement of the Kremlin, shaping people into an army of apathetic statues—patiently awaiting their fate.[31]

Pavlensky's statement touches upon a number of characteristic elements of his work: its almost obvious use of metaphors and symbolism; its clear political component; and its desire to comment on the larger social body through the use of the artist's own body. The likening of the Russian people to "an army of apathetic statues" is telling of how Pavlensky views his contemporaries: as passive and submissive; easily shaped by the authorities; and as unwilling or incapable of changing their fates.[32] Nevertheless, the use of the word "army" suggests that Pavlensky acknowledges the potential power and inherent agency of Russia's citizens, and although Pavlensky is physically affixed to the square in his performance, the fixation alluded to in the title is also psychological in nature. I therefore argue that Pavlensky's actions do not only reflect the artist's interpretation of his contemporaneity, but they also call on others to act, even if indirectly. The way in which Pavlensky speaks to today's Russia, while simultaneously anchoring his actions in Russian history through his careful choice of performance locations and timing, makes his actions function as a reminder: history may be irreversible, but it should not dictate our present. This, of course, does not mean that Pavlensky's actions do not need to be contextualized within their own socio-historical moment to be fully understood.

Following the parliamentary election of December 2011, in which Vladimir Putin's party *United Russia* won the majority of the seats in the Duma, protests broke out in several cities around the country. For months to come, people regularly gathered in the streets to protest what they considered illicit elections and political and economic corruption—signs of Russia moving in a non-democratic direction. On February 21, 2012, five members of the punk rock collective Pussy Riot staged a performance of their song "Punk Prayer—Mother of God, Chase Putin Away!" in Moscow's Cathedral of Christ the Savior.[33] The video of the performance was uploaded to the Internet and soon went viral, and with their bright costumes and radical message, Pussy Riot became a world symbol of the anti-Putin opposition in Russia. However,

[31] "Акцию можно рассматривать как метафору апатии, политической индифферентности и фатализма современного российского общества. Не чиновничий беспредел лишает общество возможности действовать, а фиксация на своих поражениях и потерях все крепче прибивает нас к кремлевской брусчатке, создавая из людей армию апатичных истуканов, терпеливо ждущих своей участи." Author's translation. See, "Художник Петр Павленский прибил мошонку гвоздем к брусчатке на Красной площади," November 10, 2013, http://grani.ru/Politics/Russia/activism/m.221013.html.

[32] Art critic Marat Guelman for instance interpreted *Fixation* as a means of showing society and the opposition "that we have lost, that the battle is over: they've imprisoned us all and nailed us to the ground." Guelman even added that Pavlensky's action was "the artistic equivalent of setting yourself on fire," while the Russian artist Oleg Kulik viewed Pavlensky as a martyr. See Eshun, et al.

[33] Pussy Riot's choice of location is by no means coincidental. The original Cathedral of Christ the Savior was built in the 19th century, but, on the order of Joseph Stalin, it was demolished in 1931. In 1958, a large outdoor swimming pool was built on the foundation of what was initially supposed to become the Palace of the Soviets. The pool operated until 1994, and in the following year, the building of the new cathedral began. The second Cathedral of Christ the Savior was consecrated in August 2000. Eliot Borenstein has argued that the Cathedral of Christ the Savior must be understood as "the material foundation of the cultural logic of Pussy Riot" because it speaks to the concept of historical instability. Pussy Riot's performance must therefore be understood as a strong critique against the almost symbiotic relationship between the Russian state and the Russian Orthodox Church—a connection that was made explicitly evident in the months preceding the Russian presidential election of 2012 when Patriarch Kirill in his sermons encouraged people to vote for Putin. See Eliot Borenstein, "Holy Appropriate: Why Pussy Riot and the Cathedral of Christ the Savior Are a Match Made in Heaven," *Calvert Journal*, January 22, 2012, http://calvertjournal.com/comment/show/1983/christ-the-saviour-moscow-pussy-riot.

the severe legal persecutions facing the women also made clear how harshly the Russian state would punish political dissidents.[34]

Pavlensky's action *Seam* (*Шов*) of July 2012, was in indirect dialogue with Pussy Riot and the authority's treatment of the group's members. Standing in front of the famous Kazan Cathedral in St. Petersburg, dressed in black and with a stoic expression, Pavlensky held a large placard which read: "The performance of Pussy Riot was a replication of the famous action of Jesus Christ (Matthew 21:12–13)"[35]—referring to Jesus Christ's expulsion of money changers and merchants from the Temple.[36] In contrast, the artist's silence was made explicit and irreversible since his mouth was sewed shut with visible red thread.[37] Pavlensky's action thus expressed his support for the members of Pussy Riot, whose trial was to take place in Moscow the same month.[38]

A year later, in May 2013, Pavlensky would once more use his body to address the political situation in Russia. In the action *Carcass* (*Туша*), Pavlensky lay in front of the main entrance of the St. Petersburg Legislative Assembly bare naked and wrapped inside a large cocoon of barbed wire (fig. 5). As the barbed wire would cut deeper into the artist's skin with every move he made, Pavlensky was forced to lie completely still in the cold, incapacitated and dependent on law enforcement to be released. *Carcass* was performed as a protest against a number of laws that were discussed (and passed) in the Russian Duma in the fall of 2012 and spring of 2013, several of which Pavlensky and others interpreted as restricting individual freedom.[39] Pavlensky wished to embody this restriction, and to symbolize "the existence of a person living within a repressive yet law-given system in which every move

[34] For more on the aftermath of Pussy Riot's performance, see Masha Gessen, *Words Will Break Cement: The Passion of Pussy Riot* (New York: Penguin, 2014).

[35] "Акция Pussy Riot была переигрыванием знаменитой акции Иисуса Христа (Мф. 21:12–13)." Author's translation.

[36] The citation from Matthew 21:12–3 reads: "And Jesus went into the temple of God, and cast out all them that sold and bought in the temple, and overthrew the tables of the moneychangers, and the seats of them that sold doves, And said unto them, It is written, My house shall be called the house of prayer; but ye have made it a den of thieves." Pavlensky underlines the symbolical gesture of Pussy Riot's performance, as the officials of the Russian Orthodox Church are likened to the moneychangers in the Temple because of their commercial activities. For more on the Russian Orthodox Church and its economic relations, see Nikolai Mitrokhin's *Русская православная церковь: современное состояние и актуальные проблемы* (Moscow: Novoe literaturnoe obozrenie, 2004).

[37] For images and a survey of his actions, see Shaun Walker, "Petr Pavlensky: Why I Nailed my Scrotum to Red Square," *The Guardian*, February 5, 2014, https://www.theguardian.com/.

[38] Although clearly speaking to his present, Pavlensky's choice of action also situated him within a larger corpus of both performance artists and activists who have sewed their mouths shut to signal political oppression and the silencing of certain social groups. David Wojnarowicz, Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose, and Ron Athey are just a handful of the artists who have had their lips sewn shut during or as performances for diverse reasons, but the gesture further resonates with those of asylum seekers in Australia and Great Britain as a way of symbolizing unjust governmental treatment. See Amelia Jones, "Performing the Wounded Body: Pain, Affect, and the Radical Relationality of Meaning," *Parallax* 15 no. 4 (2009): 46–47.

[39] One such example is the Russian Federation's law "for the Purpose of Protecting Children from Information Advocating for a Denial of Traditional Family Values," which became known in Western media as the "gay propaganda law." Another, the law "On Amendments to Legislative Acts of the Russian Federation regarding the Regulation of the Activities of Non-profit Organisations Performing the Functions of a Foreign Agent," stated that Russian NGOs receiving donations from abroad must officially declare themselves as foreign agents, and that all "political activity" within a given organization must be registered with the authorities before being carried out.

triggers a strong reaction by the law, and forces its way into the body of the individual."[40] The title of *Carcass* further suggests that Pavlensky's body should be seen as immobilized and deprived of agency. The performance therefore exhibited the artist's body as willingly victimized as Pavlensky indirectly delegated some of his initial artistic agency to the people who witnessed his action, and to the ones who cut him out of the barbed wire—a point that will be explored more closely below.

Figure 5

Petr Pavlensky, *Carcass* (*Туша*), May 3, 2013. Performance action with photographic documentation, St. Petersburg, Russia. Photograph, 24 x 16 in. Photographer anonymous, image courtesy of Petr Pavlensky.

As a consequence of his actions, Pavlensky's mental state has been questioned, and the artist has been evaluated by state-appointed doctors and psychiatrists. One might say that the authorities had no choice—exposing or voluntarily seeking out pain goes against social norms, and is usually synonymous with destructive behavior. Pavlensky is well aware of this, which can partially explain the location of his (to the date of this publication) last performance involving his wounded body. The action *Segregation* (*Отделение*) took place outside the Serbsky Center, a famous psychiatric hospital in Moscow.[41] On October 19, 2014, Pavlensky sat naked on the wall outside of the Serbsky Center, and with his only accessory,

[40] "существование человека в репрессивной законодательной системе, где любое движение вызывает жестокую реакцию закона, впивающегося в тело индивида." Author's translation. See "Художник Петр Павленский прибил мошонку гвоздем к брусчатке на Красной площади," November 10, 2013, http://grani.ru/Politics/Russia/activism/m.221013.html.

[41] In the Soviet Union, punitive psychiatry was a common way of silencing artistic or political dissensus, thus diagnosing opposition as a mental illness. For more on the topic, see for instance Sarah Marks and Mat Savelli, eds., *Psychiatry in Communist Europe* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), and Rebecca Reich, "Inside the Psychiatric Word: Diagnosis and Self-Definition in the Late Soviet Period," *Slavic Review* 73, no.3 (2014): 563–84.

an enormous knife, cut off his right earlobe (fig. 6). By consciously performing an action that he knew would likely label him as psychologically unstable, Pavlensky challenged the carefully crafted distinction between the sane and the insane, which separates the healthy from the sick. Moreover, by physically cutting off his earlobe (which seems to have disappeared when Pavlensky was escorted away from the Serbsky Center[42]) from the rest of his body, Pavlensky gestured towards the fragile line of demarcation between the part and the whole; the individual and the state. He also evoked the trope of the misunderstood artist-genius—balancing between madness and prophetic clarity, and famously personified by van Gogh and his severed ear.[43] It is thus the act of cutting as such that is important in Pavlensky's action, not the physical mutilation of his body.

Figure 6

Petr Pavlensky, *Segregation* (*Отделение*), October 19, 2014. Performance action with photographic documentation, Moscow, Russia. Photograph, 72 x 48 in. Photographer anonymous, image courtesy of Petr Pavlensky.

[42] Marc Bennetts, "Acts of Resistance: Pyotr Pavlensky on Performance Art as Protest," the *Calvert Journal*, December 1, 2014, http://calvertjournal.com/articles/show/3373/pavlensky-performance-art-protest.

[43] Several commentators have connected Pavlensky to the figure of the *Holy Fool* (юродивый). The Holy Fool has deep roots in Russian Orthodoxy where the term designates someone who feigns stupidity or madness in order to uncover injustice. The figure also appears frequently in Russian literature. For more on Pavlensky as an example of the Holy Fool, see for instance Dasha Filippova, "The Russian Terrorist: Petr Pavlensky," *ArtSlant*, June 13, 2016, http://www.artslant.com/9/articles/show/46065#f4. It should be noted, however, that the artist himself has rejected such a comparison: see his interview in *Новая газета* in December 2012, http://www.novayagazeta.ru/arts/71111.html.

Simply focusing on Palvensky's own body leaves out an important component of his art: the relationship between the social body and the body of an individual, an essential aspect of his work because of its consciously and explicitly public nature. Discussing the performance *Carcass* in which the artist becomes completely dependent on others to be freed, Pavlensky actively engages with the question of why his performances are so centered on his own body: "Why I use the body? Because there is a social body—a body that I am also a part of. By using my own body in this act, I am showing what is going on with the social body."[44] If we take him at his word, Pavlensky does not conceive of his actions as disconnected from the lives of his Russian contemporaries, but rather seeks to reflect what he considers the state of the social body. Pavlensky's view on the artist's body here clearly resonates with the projects of other body artists who see the artistic subject as a subject that continuously reaches beyond itself in order to show that identity is always relational, thereby entering the aesthetic realm as a social and political entity.[45] In addition, the performed link between the individual and the social body in Pavlensky's actions makes it especially valid to analyze his approach to pain and to ask whose pain this really is. If Pavlensky's body is a metaphor for the larger social body, one may assume that he considers the social body in pain, perhaps even to be pitied or healed. And yet, despite Pavlensky's powerful use of metaphors, such metaphors do not obliterate the fact that, during his actions, the body in pain is indeed *his*. This raises an important issue regarding his actions: are we (as spectators and as representatives of the social body) somehow to blame for the individual's suffering?[46] Regardless of how one chooses to answer, the question itself shows the importance and potential of paying special attention to pain in Pavlensky's actions.[47] I argue that, due to the artist's blurring of the border between the private and the social body, the experience of pain

[44] RussiaForAll. "Художник Пётр Павленский о своей акции у ЗАКС СПБ," YouTube Video, 3:41, May 8, 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YlWAW0brShE. Author's translation.

[45] Amelia Jones, *Body Art/Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 13–14. See also Zdenka Badovinac, ed., *Body and the East: From the 1960s to the Present* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999); Michael Feher, "Of Bodies and Technologies" in *Discussions in Contemporary Culture,* ed. Hal Foster (Seattle: Bay Press, 1981); and Nelly Richard, "Margins and Institutions: Art in Chile since 1974," in *Art & Text* 21 (1986). For a specific account of body art and its social significance in relation to masochism in Western performance art, see Kathy O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art, and the 1970's* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).

[46] This question brings to mind other performances by artists such as Chris Burden, Gina Pane, and Marina Abramovic—artists who have all self-inflicted pain or had others inflict pain upon their bodies. For an analysis of the "silent acceptance" of audience members to such acts, see O'Dell, *Contract with the Skin*; and Frazer Ward, *No Innocent Bystanders: Performance Art and Audience* (Hanover, Dartmouth College Press, 2012).

[47] This is not to say, of course, that Pavlensky's actions are *about* pain as such. When asked about the role of pain in an interview, Pavlensky stated: "It is not important. In my actions I do not attach any conceptual significance to pain, and I do not emphasize it. The point is not to bring harm upon myself. In general, I relate to pain as I relate to a phobia that must be overcome—like any other fear. The feeling of pain originates in the mind." Author's translation. For the original quote in Russian, see Evgeniy Levkovich, "Пётр Павленский: 'Моя цель—побудить людей к действию'," *Julia&Winston*, November 9, 2015, http://juliawinston.eu/pavlensky/. While Pavlensky seems to want to draw attention away from pain as a component in his actions, I maintain that, to the average viewer, the assumed presence of pain still affects how one reacts to and interprets his actions.

Vol 5, No 1 "Agency in Motion" (2016) | ISSN 2155-1162 (online) | DOI 10.5195/contemp.2016.184

must be considered as both private and social in nature: the pain of another is also my own; the pain inflicted by another, is also inflicted by me.[48]

Pain Rendered Public

As should be clear from what has been explored so far, Mikhailov and Pavlensky are not necessarily interested in simply focusing on the pain of one single individual; rather, they use the wounded body to allude to the larger social and political structures that may be causing pain. For both artists, the distinction between the individual and the social body is thereby challenged. Because of this, I would like to suggest that the presence of pain in the artworks discussed above indirectly disputes Elaine Scarry's study *The Body in Pain*, in which she argues that pain is inexpressible; that it resists language and is characterized by its inability to be shared. As Scarry puts it, "[t]o have pain is to have *certainty*; to hear about pain is to have *doubt*."[49] Pain, for Scarry, cuts us off from our community and the ability to sufficiently express our emotions, and threatens to destroy our sense of self in the world: our ethics, the promises given by us to loved ones, and our personal integrity. Scarry approaches pain as an experience of pure negation; pain as something always appearing as being *against* the subject, even though the sensation of pain introduces a sense of radical subjectivity.[50]

Scarry's work has been influential across disciplines, but it has also been criticized for giving an ahistorical account of pain, in which pain is presented as an ontological entity of its own—independent of cultural and political signifiers. Pain becomes a *fact* for Scarry, rather than something that needs to be interpreted within a more complex framework.[51] Historian Joanna Bourke offers an alternative approach and seeks to contextualize pain as a concept and to challenge the notion of it being entirely private in nature. Bourke points out that pain can be felt differently depending on how one experiences it, and should be analyzed as a type of *event* rendered public through language—not as something that happens to the body independently of its environment.[52] As Bourke phrases it, "pain describes the *way* we experience something not *what* is experienced," and this "way" of experiencing pain is

[48] Jennifer Doyle's scholarship has explored the importance of the viewer's affective response to artworks of challenging or difficult content. Specifically writing on the "difficulty" involved in viewing the performances of the HIV-positive body artist Ron Athey, Doyle notes: "The work is hard because it forces us to keep company with vulnerability, intimacy, and desire. . . . These are the things that, in fact, make *life* hard. They are productive and important kinds of difficulty—not because they expand our ideas of what constitutes Art but because they speak to quite fundamental aspects of being a social subject." Doyle's book is especially useful when interpreting the use of the wounded body in *Case History* and in Pavlensky's actions, as she argues that the artist's triggering of an affective response in the viewer establishes or further strengthens the political and ideological implications of a given artwork, thus making us aware of our own responsiveness and potential to act. See Doyle, *Hold It Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2013), 20.

[49] Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), 13.

[50] Ibid., 50.

[51] Geoffrey Galt Harpham, "Elaine Scarry and the Dream of Pain," *Salmagundi* no. 130–131: 208.

[52] Joanna Bourke, *The Story of Pain: From Prayers to Painkillers* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2014).

intrinsically public and political in nature.[53] Bourke argues that by scrutinizing various pain-events from a political perspective, "we are encouraged to explore the political apparatus . . . of pain-events: the discourses, institutions, laws, and medical, scientific, historical, and philosophical structures that underpin knowledges and behaviours associated with being-in-pain."[54] However, Bourke states, although our experience of pain might be connected to larger systems of power (ideology, the state, the police, etc.), this does not mean that individuals are unable to reconstruct pain-events that may oppose them. The pain-event as a mode of opposition is, I argue, exactly what is being exhibited in *Case History* and Pavlensky's actions.

Bourke is a helpful interlocutor for understanding the role of pain in the works of both Mikhailov and Pavlensky because she focuses on the *public* component of pain. In my reading, the wounded body should here be seen as a body that is already incorporated in and marked by external forces that cause pain. Both artists therefore speak to the body's vulnerability—a topic that has gained a prominent position in Judith Butler's scholarship of the last decade. Butler has convincingly argued that the body is susceptible to external forces, although this does not mean that it is simply a surface for others to inscribe.[55] Vulnerability does not speak to a subject's personal disposition but must be regarded as inherently relational, as an inescapable result of our human condition of living amongst others.[56] In recent work, Butler pays special attention to forms of political resistance that mobilize the fragility of the human body, with the goal of asserting existence through deliberate bodily exposure.[57] Arguably present in *Case History* as well, this form of political resistance is especially apparent in Pavlensky's actions and adds another level of complexity to his use of pain as a mode of artistic expression. Pavlensky's physical susceptibility is visually exhibited through his nakedness, the fact that he is performing alone, and through his wounds. It is also reflected in the authorities' response to his actions, as their punitive repercussions *confirm* Pavlensky's status as an assailable individual, while simultaneously affirming the control and power of the state. At the same time, however, one may ask why the authorities consider it necessary to respond so strongly to a body in pain that at times is even completely immobilized. Does a wounded body really posit a threat to the social order? Judging by the reactions of the Russian authorities, the answer is yes, and thereby raises a certain paradox: by reacting so aggressively to Pavlensky's actions, the authorities actually

[53] Amelia Jones has also challenged the notion that pain is exclusively private in nature. Focusing on the presence of the physical wound, Jones notes that our perception of someone's wound as *actual* makes us realize that our own body may be wounded as well. Potentially, the wound can therefore challenge the strict boundaries between myself and my other, a notion that may have political implications. See Jones, "Performing the Wounded Body: Pain, Affect, and the Radical Relationality of Meaning," *Parallax* 15, no. 4 (2009): 55.

[54] Bourke, *The Story of Pain*, 19.

[55] Judith Butler, *Frames of War: When Is Life Grievable?* (London/Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2009), 33. For other accounts of vulnerability as a shared human condition with a political potential, see Debra Bergoffen, "February 22, 2001: Toward a Politics of the Vulnerable Body" in *Hypatia* 18, no.1 (Winter 2003); "Exploiting the Dignity of the Vulnerable Body: Rape as a Weapon of War" in *Philosophical Papers* 38 no.3 (2009); and Adriana Cavarero's *Horrorism: Naming Contemporary Violence* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008). The connection between Pavlensky's action and vulnerability was also pointed out by Colleen McQuillen in her conference paper "The Vulnerable Body as a Political Instrument in Contemporary Russian Art Activism," presented at the annual convention of the Modern Language Association, Austin, Texas, January 7–10, 2016.

[56] Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London/Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2006), 31.

[57] Judith Butler, "Rethinking Vulnerability and Resistance," paper presented in Madrid, June 2014.

acknowledge his potent bodily rhetoric and clear political potential. It is here that the power of the vulnerable body truly manifests itself and becomes a body of social dissensus and agency.

Although one may claim that Pavlensky's actions are more explicitly political than Mikhailov's *Case History*, both artists refuse to define vulnerability as a lack of agency. By contextualizing the body in pain socially and historically, they show how pain is *relational*—in essence, both private *and* social—which probes us to consider our own pain and our implicit relation to the pain of others. Furthermore, Mikhailov and Pavlensky offer valuable perspectives on what it means to inhabit and depict a wounded body in public.

Conclusion

Lying face down on a beach in Greece in January 2016, the famous Chinese artist-activist Ai Weiwei reenacted the photograph of three-year-old Aylan Kurdi. The black-and-white photograph which captured the reenactment—taken by Rohit Chawla, a photographer for one of the biggest English-news magazines in Asia, *India Today*—was part of a larger and exclusive photo shoot that the magazine had with Ai. Claiming that the image was a tribute to Kurdi, a press release from *India Today* commented on the reenactment and its public response: "The result is a world exclusive photograph that has gone viral. The whole story is one image, which is what great art is."[58]

The photographic documentation and distribution of Ai's reenactment bring us back to the issues with which my paper began, concerning the fine line between journalism and sensationalism; news and entertainment; critical austerity and consumerist concerns in contemporary media, and how photographic representation of the wounded body fits into this landscape. In addition, because the photograph of Ai first appeared in a news magazine, the picture introduces another question—whether news images such as these are, or should be considered, art. In *Regarding the Pain of Others*, Susan Sontag reflected on viewing wartime photographs exhibited in galleries, noting that such photographs and others automatically become art once they enter the gallery space. Sontag claimed that these images merely become stations along a stroll, which may cause us to lose our ability to contemplate what we see.[59] As a result, we fail to view the people in the photographs as subjects.

Jacques Rancière has keenly noted that art images do not "supply weapons for battles" but that they can inspire new configurations regarding what can be seen, said, and thought of, as long as "their meaning or effect is not anticipated."[60] This, I argue, applies to the artworks by Boris Mikhailov and Petr Pavlensky that have been the focus of my paper. By showing his *Case History* in some of the most prestigious galleries in the world, Mikhailov challenges the viewer to see the wounded bodies of Kharkov's homeless from an aesthetic perspective. Moreover, the participants in Mikhailov's series, who strike poses and willingly perform in front of the camera, are indirectly asking us to look at them and see them as *subjects*, as *people in pain*. In a rather different fashion, the wide media distribution of the

[58] The release then went on to mention that a full interview with Ai and more pictures from the shoot would appear in the magazine's next issue. "Artist Ai Weiwei poses as Aylan Kurdi for *India Today* magazine," *India Today*, February 1, 2016, http://indiatoday.intoday.in/story/artist-ai-weiwei-poses-as-aylan-kurdi-for-india-today-magazine/1/584804.html.

[59] Sontag, *Regarding the Pain of Others*, 121.

[60] Rancière, "The Intolerable Image," 103.

photographs documenting Pavlensky's actions, and the attention they elicit, reveals that we are not sure how to approach the wounded body when it is explicitly—and voluntarily—performed. By gaining attention from some of the major news companies in the world, websites and magazines become Pavlensky's personal exhibition space, making the viewer wonder whether she is witnessing art or international news. This speaks to the aesthetic, political, and social implications of these artists' engagement with the wounded body. Rather than viewing Mikhailov's *Case History*, Pavlensky's actions, and works like them by other artists as romanticizing or sensationalizing suffering, these projects need to be contextualized within a larger (art) historical setting. Only then will we fully comprehend the significance of pain in these artworks.

While I do not suggest that the representations of pain in Mikhailov's photographs and in the images documenting Pavlensky's performance-actions are more *authentic* or *real* than others, the wounded body in their art still stands forth as a body of agency and personal volition; as a body that may appeal to our voyeurism, but that simultaneously challenges us to contemplate what we are seeing and why we are watching. The wounded body may provoke and upset, surprise and appall, but it always challenges, always resists. As history takes yet another turn, one may hope that such a body will haunt us.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to my two anonymous reviewers for their invaluable comments, criticism and suggestions. I am grateful to Molly Brunson for her helpful feedback on a seminar paper on Boris Mikhailov and for challenging me to think more about his work, and to Marijeta Bozovic for fruitful conversations on the connection between politics and bodies. For introducing me to the diverse field of performance studies and for his priceless mentorship, I thank Joseph Roach. Thanks also to Petr Pavlensky for willingly answering my questions and for granting me permission to use his personal photographs. Lastly, profound appreciation is extended to my editor, Nicole F. Scalissi: I could not have asked for a more attentive reader, whose professional insights have greatly benefitted my paper.