‘Porca Miseria’ (Pig Misery): live art, masochism and catharsis

Lucinda Hesketh

Lee Adams is a performance artist, experimental filmmaker, sculptor and curator (for further details see his website: www.leeadams.net). His performances, which are influenced by the Japanese Butoh movement,1 push the boundaries of endurance of his own body and feature both real and simulated acts of self-mutilation, sexuality and taboo-breaking imagery. Since 1988, Adams has presented live art performances using his own body as a canvas to suggest tortured states of mind (Theodorakou 2008). Although his performances can feature self-cutting, pain, physical and mental endurance, humiliation, shame and an element of catharsis, he says he is not a masochist:

I think the biggest misconception is that I’m a masochist and that I get a kind of sexual kick from inflicting pain or discomfort on myself (Stanborough 2007, 74).

Even so, Adams argues that images of Christ, depictions of Saint Sebastian, along with other saints and martyrs, and the seppuku of Yukio Mishma (whose work scandalised Japan with its frank exploration of male homosexuality), can all be seen as sadomasochistic images (Theodorakou 2008).

‘Porca Miseria’ was a five-hour durational performance installation, commissioned by Duckie for Gay Shame, the 9th Annual Festival of Homosexual Misery (2004). Gay Shame was created in opposition to Gay Pride, not just in response to its overcommercialisation, but as an attempt to preserve Gay Culture and to resist its assimilation into the mainstream. Gay Shame criticises Gay Pride as having an oppressive, conservative construct which dictates that homosexuals have to adopt heterosexual constructs, such as marriage, albeit same-sex marriage. Gay Shame is an attempt to identify homosexuality as culturally homogenous, still allowing and encouraging interaction with other social and cultural groups without being absorbed into them. The whole point of Gay Shame is for homosexuals to no longer care that they are being shamed and to recognise themselves as such, not just in terms of sexual orientation, but culturally as well (Munt 2008, 4).

‘Porca Miseria’ was staged at The Coronet in London (leeadams.net). The performance space comprised of a small curtained-off peep-show booth. Before entering the space, audience...
members had to pass a sign saying ‘Perverts Pay Here: Half-Man Half-Pig’ (Adams 2010, 65). They had been issued with pink ‘Duckie’ pounds, which they could spend at various different side-shows that were part of the festival. When audience members rang a bell, a small hole was opened in the booth, into which they inserted their currency for the show to begin. When the curtain was pulled aside it revealed Adams wearing a pig’s head and a strap-on dildo that was so realistic that it fooled most of the audience members. The booth resembled a pigsty, strewn with stinking straw, in which Adams would perform an obscene parody of an erotic peep-show. Yet more apertures in the walls of the booth allowed viewers to interact with Adams, even going so far as masturbating the phallus that he wore. They were allowed this interaction only after paying yet more of the fake money. The show was designed, as Adams states, to provide ‘in certain respects a banishing ritual, an exorcism, and a revolt against shame’ and ‘was ultimately meant as a celebration of the erotic and transgressive possibilities, often unexpectedly afforded by systems of enclosure and control’ (Adams 2010, 66-67). In other words, as homosexuality has been traditionally forced underground, its very illicitness offers erotic possibilities due to the embracing of what can be seen as transgressive sexual parameters. Due to these transgressive parameters, the performer takes it upon him to recognise himself as something other than the norm or stereotype as viewed by society. As Judith Butler explains, society draws up a certain set of parameters that idealise heterosexuality as the norm and this forces homosexuals to conform to certain stereotypes, or corporeal styles, that heterosexuals expect from the ‘other’ (Butler 2003, 73).

When Adams was researching ‘Porca Miseria’ he discovered that the demise of the travelling freaks shows occurred around 1940, due to anomalies being scientifically explained as diseases or genetic mutations; the eugenics movement saw human anomalies as mistakes of nature. Circus freaks subsequently evolved into objects of pity instead of fear (Adams 2010, 67). This may inform a visual element for Adams’s external performance, but being viewed as an object of pity, or even fear, can also be applied to how homosexual men may be viewed in a patriarchal society. In relation to this Adams states that in ‘Porca Miseria’: ‘I was attempting to examine the “dialectic of shame and grace” (Hanson, 1998), in search of the mystical “strange beauty” to which Genet refers’ (Adams 2010, 66). The ‘strange beauty’ is from Jean Genet’s The Thief’s Journal [1949], where he writes on the subject of shame:

The veil of modesty torn, the shameful parts shown, I know- with my cheeks aflame- the need to hide myself or die, but I believe by facing and enduring this
painful anxiety, I shall, as a result of my shamelessness, come to know a strange beauty. (Genet 2000, 127)

Adams’s reference to this quotation again implies that ‘Porca Miseria’ is a revolt. As a homosexual, Adams is showing that he is not ashamed of what others have labelled him as, but instead mocks the label in a parodic, cathartic performance.

Despite the masochistic behaviour within his performances, this may not be the sole purpose behind ‘Porca Miseria’. In fact, one could consider Adams’s performance as brave, self aware and challenging. As a letter from Austin Osman Spare to Adolf Hitler proclaims: ‘If you are a Superman, let me be forever animal’ (quoted in Swaffer 1950). The superman is the repressor, but the animal is truly free. In ‘Porca Miseria’ Adams is not accepting his homosexual stereotype but mocking it in an effort for it to loose its power. Being a homosexual and viewed as freakish by a patriarchal system that enforces enclosure and control, the realisation of this could result in finding the real self, or the individual within. Once one is aware of an artificial structure, that we are conditioned to accept and not question, and instead of accepting it, deconstruct and challenge it, then it is easier to separate the individual from the stereotype.

The lines between catharsis and masochism can appear blurred, this maybe due to the fact that elements of both appear in each. Within the BDSM (bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism) scene, sadomasochists can find not only a sexual, but cathartic release (Devon & Miller 2006, 8). When Adams states that he is not a masochist this maybe true, because catharsis and masochism can be so closely interlinked and can even be confused with one another. Adams’s need for a cathartic release appears to be resulting in masochistic behaviour, even if he himself is not a masochist. Could this also imply that, due to psychological dissonance, he cannot consciously realise the masochistic behaviour and tendencies he is inadvertently displaying? Because masochism is so closely related in people’s minds as a way to gain sexual release, and Adams appears to be solely gaining a cathartic release from the masochistic behaviour he displays on stage, he may not define himself as a masochist because he does not experience the pleasure of this cathartic release necessarily as a sexual one.
Throughout the 1970s a genre of performance art that consisted of ‘bodily violence’ became more prominent (O’Dell 1998, 17). According to Kathy O’Dell, the author of *Contract with the Skin*, within this movement of bodily violence performance artists appeared to share a common set of concerns and parameters including,

the mechanics of alienation in art and everyday life; the psychological influences of the domestic site on art and everyday life; the sensation of being both a human subject and an object; the function of metaphor in art; and, especially, the relationship between artist and audience (1998, 17).

O’Dell’s observation concerning the relationship between performer and the audience can be more easily linked to masochistic behaviour when the agreements between the two are put into the context of a contractual agreement. Italian critic Lea Vergine has debated that performance artists have always been aware of the process as far as the relationship and agreement with the audience is concerned, however, they may not have registered them consciously as contractual (O’Dell 1998, 18). The term, ‘masochistic contracts’, is used repeatedly by O’Dell when describing these agreements (O’Dell 1998, 19). She also questions why artists in this field push their bodies to such extreme physical and psychological limits if masochism is not involved. Additionally, she acknowledges the relevance of political, legal and social structures that can often be oppressive; these in turn can play a part in the development of the relationship between performer and the audience (O’Dell 1998, 19). However, the concept of these particular ‘masochistic contracts’ originally appeared in the 1870 erotic novella *Venus in Furs* by Leopold von Sacher-Masoch, in which a masochist and a sadist draw up a ‘masochistic contract’ to explore their urges. Like O’Dell the novella stressed the importance of the agreement between the partners (Sacher-Masoch 2000, 62). French philosopher Gilles Deleuze officially coined the term “masochist contract” in 1967 (O’Dell 1998, 19). Deleuze published the first detailed literary analysis of the novels of Sacher-Masoch, cross-referencing literary and psychoanalytic principles in a detailed clinical study of masochistic behaviour (O’Dell 1998, 19).

In ‘Porca Miseria’, the ‘masochistic contract’ is more overt because an exchange of money (albeit fake) was required before the performer would engage directly with the audience. This involved not only payment for services, but included an agreement that the audience could
physically interact with the performer and this physical interaction had to take place in order for the audience member to fully appreciate the entire scope of the performance. Therefore, the performer is willing to risk his own bodily safety within the performance because of this prior agreement with the audience. When Adams was asked if he enjoyed performing the 2001 solo performance ‘Cruising (LeVengeur)’, he responded:

I enjoyed the whole dynamic of the performance, the unknown possibilities of each encounter, the tension between myself and the audience, the lingering glances, the seduction, the complex power-play, the balance between exhibitionism and voyeurism. (Stanborough 2007, 74)

Deleuze also took into account certain principles explored by the psychoanalyst Theodor Reik in 1949. Despite Reik’s shortcomings, as far as missing the importance of the ‘masochistic contract’, he did highlight other components within masochism worth consideration. Reik observed four components of masochism (O’Dell 1998, 19), three of these can be applied directly to this statement: ‘the waiting period before the act’, ‘the enticement of a partner to assist the act’ (or the masochistic contract), and ‘the act’ itself. The fourth component, fantasy or ‘mental preview’ of self induced pain, can also be argued to play a part with the original realization of the piece(s) and parameters set by Adams.

According to psychotherapist Brett Kahr, people have sexual fantasies and desires on an unconscious level that remain dormant until triggered by certain external stimuli and thus become conscious (Kahr 2007, 21). So Adams may well have masochistic tendencies or desires that he is not aware of on a conscious level. Also, despite the fact that many adults fantasize about masochism and sadism, they do not admit to this due to the stigma involved; a large number of these fantasies are so extreme that acting upon them would result in a prison sentence (Kahr 2008, 54). Therefore, Adams may not admit to having masochistic tendencies because of the possible stigma involved, not to mention the fact that it might influence the way his work is interpreted.

Kahr made another interesting observation about sexuality and sexual fantasy with the theory of ‘eroticisation of trauma’. This is said to be a defence mechanism whereby one transforms an unpleasant experience into an erotic one (Kahr 2008, 415). This process could be applied to, and found in, a range of different circumstances. For example, in ‘Porca Miseria’ the
erotisation of gay shame could be present in order to emotionally and psychologically cope with the trauma(s) suffered. Perhaps Adams is eroticising the trauma of the difficulties of growing up in a society that could view homosexuality in an unflattering light. Masochists can achieve catharsis by exploring their fears in a sexualised manner in role-play sessions. They too could be considered to be eroticising the trauma.

In response to queries on whether Adams is a masochist or not, he has stated that: ‘I’m using my body, my own body, as a canvas if you like, and so if I’m describing tortured states of mind then I use my body to suggest that’ (Theodorakou 2008). One could take this at face value or continue with the theme of ‘erotisation of trauma’. As Kahr explains:

One must allow for the possibility that aggressively tinged fantasies can result not only from primary trauma, but also from creativity and from the capacity to allow oneself to regress to a more primitive mental state, without becoming fixated at an infantile level of functioning. (Kahr 2008, 399)

Kahr queries that these fantasies might actually represent a ‘developmental achievement’, having acquired and developed the capacity to expand the mind to encompass all variety of human experience (399). Not only could Adams’s actions be described as masochistic, but also closely linked to catharsis with his need to purge negative stigma attached to homosexuality. As Adams explains:

Porca Miseria was ultimately meant as a celebration of the erotic and transgressive possibilities, often unexpectedly afforded by systems of enclosure and control (Adams 2010, 67).

The use of the word ‘erotic’ in describing the performance, sexualising it despite its original intentions of being a cathartic performance, can indicate masochistic behaviour. Additionally, with the reference to corporeal stylisation of the homosexual man, and acknowledging this form of repression and control enforced by society, one can glimpse the internal struggle of the performer by paying attention to the external performance. Another element of the performance worth noting is Adams’s choice of costume worn throughout the performance. The Pig’s head and peep-show setting could be viewed as humiliating and degrading with exhibitionist elements. He made the point that homosexuality is seen as something shameful,
presenting himself as sub-human (half pig, half human), who is used in exchange for money, and this again could indicate masochistic behaviour, despite intending to be cathartic.

Adams certainly uses masochistic behaviour to achieve artistic and cathartic satisfaction. Any form of pleasure gained from pain can be viewed as masochistic behaviour, however his sole intended outcome is for the release of unpleasant emotions, of catharsis rather than pleasure, for instance in the case of masochism. There appears to be an underlying trauma to ‘Porca Miseria’ and a sexualisation of the performance that could imply an eroticisation of the trauma as far as this adaptation of gay shame is concerned. However, this does not appear to be his creative drive; this appears to be the urge to criticise and critique an oppressive societal structure that even commercialises Gay Pride. This in turn can produce cathartic effects for a performer such as Adams, where he can purge his negative emotions of a society that can be perceived as being oppressive towards and prejudiced against homosexual men.

The use of the half-man, half pig motif is not only a literal interpretation of Austin Osman Spare’s preference for the animal over the superman, but if ‘Porca Miseria’ is a criticism of Gay Pride, it could be read as an attempt to compare those who would normalize homosexuality to the oppressive superman, even going so far as to suggest that to be within an oppressed minority at least gives the individual the opportunity to experience otherwise forbidden erotic possibilities. However, masochistic elements are introduced by the fact that Adams himself was adopting the symbol of the oppressed animal and the audience were invited to ‘use’ him within a sexual context. In this way Adams not only parodies the commercialisation of homosexuality, he also implies that he would rather adopt the role of an abused animal and retain his individuality than be seen as a superman whose individuality has been absorbed into mainstream society.

There is also Adams’s maxim that he uses his body to illustrate tortured states of mind; that his body is his canvass. The masochistic elements of his performance are used to illustrate subjects that are deeply important to him and his use of masochistic elements convey the emotional response the subject of homosexual oppression invokes in him and his wish to convey this to the audience, as well as attempting to get them to feel the same passion for his themes. The intensity behind the emotions portrayed on stage can be so extreme that an act that was meant to have a cathartic release for the performer can, in fact, be perceived in
action as a masochistic one. However, when the performance is consciously sexualised what is cathartic and what is masochistic behaviour becomes blurred.

Masochism does not necessarily have to be linked purely to sexual pleasure. Any kind of pleasure gained from the experiencing of pain or humiliation can be seen as masochistic. Adams’s primary motive or drive, however, appears to be cathartic and not masochistic. The presence of masochistic behaviour within his solo performances, including ‘Porca Miseria’, appears to be merely one of the results of such endeavours. Due to traumas inflicted on homosexuals through systems of enclosure and control and taking ‘Porca Miseria’ as a representation of that, this performance could not be described necessarily as a masochistic piece, it does, however, display masochistic behaviour.

Notes
1. Butoh performances generally include extreme imagery, the grotesque and the absurd. It is mainly considered a dance movement and practitioners usually perform in white make-up with slow deliberate movements. Adams cites Tatsumi Hijikata as an influence, in particular his piece Forbidden Colours (Stanborough 2007, 72), which was based on a work by homosexual author Yukio Mishima and featured controversial imagery depicting homosexual and paedophilic acts as well as featuring performer Yoshito Ohno strangling a chicken between his legs (Yakushi1998).
2. The term masochism was derived from the author’s name, Sacher-Masoch.

References


Devon, M & Miller, P. 2006. Screw the Roses, Send me the Thorns. Fairfield CT: Mystic Rose.


