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## Blood Drops Red Words: Considering VestAndPage's blood writing in performance

Andrea Pagnes<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

This self-reflective article addresses how VestAndPage (Verena Stenke & Andrea Pagnes) have been exploring blood in a bifold symbolic value as a performative tool since 2006: connection–separation, immutability–violation, abjection–access. After medical complications and becoming blood donors, the artist duo has started deploying surgical instruments in their performances to engrave Pagnes's skin, extract his blood, and ritualise this process into stream-of-consciousness writing. Thus, blood becomes a device of intimacy that allows them to transcend the representation of concepts and explore the human condition's transitory presence and fragile nature.

**Keywords:** Performance art. Blood. Intimacy. Momentary poetry.

### Gotas de Sangre, Palabras Rojas: Considerando la escritura con sangre en las performances de VestAndPage

#### Abstracto

Este artículo autorreflexivo aborda cómo VestAndPage (Verena Stenke y Andrea Pagnes) exploran la sangre desde 2006 con un doble valor simbólico como herramienta performativa: conexión-separación, inmutabilidad-violación, abyección-acceso. Tras complicaciones médicas y su conversión en donantes de sangre, el dúo artístico ha comenzado a utilizar instrumentos quirúrgicos en sus performances para marcar la piel de Pagnes, extraer su sangre y ritualizar este proceso en una escritura de flujo de conciencia. Así, la sangre se convierte en un dispositivo de intimidad que les permite trascender la representación de conceptos y explorar la presencia transitoria y la naturaleza frágil de la condición humana.

**Palabras clave:** Performance. Sangre. Intimidación. Poesía momentánea.

### Gotas de Sangue, Palavras Vermelhas: A escrita com sangue de VestAndPage em suas performances

#### Resumo

Este artigo autorreflexivo aborda como VestAndPage (Verena Stenke e Andrea Pagnes) têm investigado o sangue em um valor simbólico bifurcado como dispositivo performativo desde 2006: conexão-separação, imutabilidade-violação, abjeção-acesso. Depois de complicações médicas e de se tornarem doadores de sangue, a dupla de artistas começou a utilizar instrumentos cirúrgicos em suas performances para escarificar a pele de Pagnes, extrair seu sangue e ritualizar o processo em uma escrita de fluxo de consciência. Dessa forma, o sangue se torna um importante meio de intimidade, permitindo-lhes transcender a representação de conceitos e explorar o transitório e frágil da condição humana.

**Palavras-chave:** Arte da performance. Sangue. Intimidade. Poesia momentânea.

<sup>1</sup> El artista y escritor italiano Andrea Pagnes y la artista alemana Verena Stenke trabajan juntos como VestAndPage desde 2006. Exploran el arte de la performance y el cine basado en la performance como fenómenos de 'lugares sutiles' a través de su práctica creativa colaborativa, investigación teórica y artística, y proyectos comunitarios artísticos temporales y curatoriales, como la Semana Internacional de Arte de Performance de Venecia. Sus obras se han presentado a nivel internacional. Son profesores en la Universidad de las Artes ArteZ (Países Bajos) y en la Academia UNIDEE (Italia), y recibieron el premio a la mejor película en el Festival de Cine Independiente de Berlín (2018).



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Blood Piece: Use your blood to paint. Keep painting  
until you faint. (a) Keep painting until you die. (b).  
1960 Spring—Yoko Ono

From the body art movement in the 1960s and 1970s to today, artists have engaged with the material substance of their blood as a “potent aesthetic and political agent” (Manica & Rios, 2017, p. 2).

To highlight just a few performance and body artists, from Gina Pane, Marina Abramović, Ana Mendieta, Norbert Klassen, Zbigniew Warpechowski, Jan Fabre, the Viennese Actionists, Mike Parr, to Franko B, Ron Athey, Grupo EmpreZa, Regina Galindo, Casey Jenkins, Alperoa, Prem Sarjo, and He Yunchang (Ah Chang), each of them have bled for democracy, yearning for a more just society liberated from rigid, suffocating norms and commonplace conventions. Their performances demonstrate how the private is a powerful means to break through to the political, becoming political itself. By incorporating blood into their performances, they challenge viewers to confront their own perceptions of mortality, identity, resistance, and the body.

Still, in making blood visible in performance, the frailness of bodies as bounded systems is uncompromisingly revealed, foregrounding the vulnerability inherent in these systems (Harradine, 2000). It only takes 20 to 60 seconds for a drop of blood to travel from the heart through the human body and back to the heart again. Even quicker, human blood is still spilt ruthlessly in useless wars. With these factors in mind, this self-reflective article examines how the artist duo VestAndPage (Verena Stenke and Andrea Pagnes) approach their own blood in their live performances to innervate both the intimate and private aspects connected to blood and the political ones. A couple in art and life, in the early 2000s, working in social theatre and applied drama as actors and playwrights, Pagnes and Stenke began to explore blood in two ways: as a direct expression of their inner wounds and a performative device. Placed amongst opposites, or the disparate - connection-separation, immutability-violation, visible-invisible, compensation-censure, abjection-access - blood's symbolic valence shows its shifting faces. As Joseph Beuys encouraged, the significance of showing our wounds has guided the core of the artist duo's artistic path since today.

VestAndPage used blood for the first time in the theatre play *Corpo 1 Prologue* (2005), with Pagnes interpreting the double role of the father and the soul of a Down syndrome actor with whom they shared the stage. In the final scene, with the stage set up entirely in white, as if it were an utterly surreal hospital room, Pagnes broke blood bags containing animal blood that spread everywhere as if there had been a massacre.

Figure 1 - VestAndPage and Isole Comprese Teatro. *Corpo 1 Prologue*, 2006.  
Photo by Simone Donati. In the image, Pagnes, after having poured blood on the stage and actress Laura Bucciarelli.



This useless waste of blood for theatrical purposes proved to be a turning point in VestAndPage's artistic practice. Soon after, they became blood donors and commenced deploying surgical instruments in their performances to extract Pagnes's blood with a syringe or needle and cannula or through incisions with a scalpel on the skin of his chest at the heart—the foremost sensor and motor clock



of existence. However, to avoid those performative acts as unjustified excesses or as a bleeding self-sale for a visual shock-tactic in the spectators, that is to exploit blood in a way that, from their viewpoint, does not clearly deliver what needs to be communicated and convey their urgencies, they started collecting his blood in glasses and ampoules. Slightly diluting it so that it does not clot, they began to deploy it as ink to ritualise it into a stream-of-consciousness writing, aphorisms, quotes and diagrams related to the specific theme of a particular performance.

Inspired by the idea, vivid in ancient cosmologies and Abrahamic religions, that blood is the soul's seat, by arranging their extracted blood as a spot of ink to write, VestAndPage aim to produce momentary poetry through an action that is intelligible and meaningful for them and their audience. At times, they invite the viewers to participate in the act of writing, like in the performance cycles *Panta Rhei* (2011-12), *Dyad* (2014-15), and the durational participatory performance cycle *Speak That I Can See You* (2007-14), seeking a poetic encounter and active interchange with the spectators who then partake actively in the performance, thus becoming writers and performers themselves. In so doing, Pagnes and Stenke assume that blood is not only a primary substance that brings into play the biological qualities of human bodies but an emblematic matter of life in terms of sharing and interconnectedness.

Figure 2 - VestAndPage. *Speak That I Can See You*, 2007. Photo courtesy of the artist. In the image (left), a word has been written by an audience member with his blood on his back. Thereafter (right), Stenke washes it away with her hands.



Blood-associated symbols are a complex subject. They “cannot be limited to blood therapeutic value within medicine” (Garraud & Lefrère, 2014, p. 14). Mythical elements associated with blood, common to Christian, pagan and agnostic thought constructions, flow together in Western thought formation (Camporesi, 1995).

For VestAndPage, being a blood donor has dramatically influenced how they utilise their blood in their performances: “In medical care, blood transfusion has neither alternative nor equivalent. It saves lives under numerous circumstances and helps many patients undergoing treatment” (Garraud and Lefrère, 2014, p. 14). Phlebotomy, for example, was a frequent practice to purge the body at the end of a seasonal cycle. The modern version of this atoning ritual is blood donation or blood exchange, that is, to give one's blood to save other lives. Therefore, blood donation can be interpreted as an evolution of ancient expiatory sacrifices, taking on the value of a sacred act.

Figure 3 (left) - In the image, Andrea Pagnes is donating blood.  
Figure 4 (right) - VestAndPage. *Mephisto Waltz*, 2011. In the image, blood was extracted during the performance for blood-writing purposes. Photos courtesy of the artists.



Conversely, losing blood or squandering it can be perceived as outrageous dispersion and deliberate dissipation of a vital fluid, an unjustified haemorrhage. An example is the ancient fear of menstrual blood discharge in the Middle Ages (an era of misogyny), considered an impure corruption vehicle.

Also, blood implies the fear of contamination, which plays a significant role in contemporary fantasies that have transferred into hygienic norms, a code of social behaviour that replaces archaic taboos and religious precepts, as just a few



decades ago, it happened with HIV.

With studies in literature, comparative philosophy, history of religions, and oriental and Social theatre, VestAndPage has practised blood writing in their performances after extensive research, analysing elements linked to their cultures of origin and combining them with political aspects that directly inform their personal experiences. Stenke was born in Germany from a family stigmatised by the trauma of the war and the forced, tragic exodus they had to undertake to flee Prussia in 1945 to save themselves. Pagnes was born in Venice and grew up with a fervently religious, repressive mother of Christian orientation and tradition. His father died prematurely, defending his political views against power systems, sharing Marx's thought that money is a "congenital blood-stain, the capital dripping with blood and dirt" (Marx, 1982, p. 926).

To these beginnings, also Pagnes's class A drug addiction, rehab route, the time of AIDS-phobia and the social fear of blood as a potentially infectious agent during the 1980s and 1990s played a fundamental role in VestAndPage's visceral way of interpreting performance art as an artistic practice of insight, deep inner feelings, healing, care and psychospiritual emancipation.

### The act of blood writing as an intimacy device

Having structured their poetics around the question of relations, the artist duo assume love as a universal value, a life force entering the body through the blood, and the lover a blood spiller, for: "Every drop of blood which proceeds from me is saying to thy dust I am one colour with thy love" (Rumi, 1973, p. 84). The idea of the lover as a blood spiller informs VestAndPage's concept of intimacy, which informs their performances. For them, "deep intimacy and intense companionship of mutual love is the best thing life has to give" (Russell, 1929, p. 123). In that, the partner, the lover, and the friend are "an otherness immanent in selfness, a becoming other of the self [...] Friendship is the desubjectivization at the heart of the most intimate perception of self" (Agamben, 2009, pp. 34-35).

For VestAndPage, to perform intimacy ritualising it in blood extraction and writing is to speak of their relationship and merge the need and the feeling of being

close, emotionally connected and supported, sharing thoughts and experiences. For them, intimacy is not only romantic; it implies surrender, vulnerability, and physical touch—forms of contact, including holding hands, hugging, kissing, and sex, but also wounds to stitch gently. Intimate relationships, or the lack of them, can significantly impact a person's mental and physical health. Intimacies are ways of healing in the literature of various fields, including education, sports, medicine, and psychic therapy. Being physically intimate, therefore, is not exclusive to sexual activity or romantic relationships. For instance, it can also be platonic about kinship, collaboration, and collegiality.

Creating intimacy is at the core of VestAndPage performance art practice. Their one-to-one performances, like *Lost Matter* (2023-2024), are often about the relational possibility of intimacy that, by being in proximity, can be built between the performer and the viewer, who may become collaborative performers, thus unpacking deep emotional or physical closeness in the present.

Figure 5 - VestAndPage. *Lost Matter*, 2023. Photo courtesy of the artist.  
In the image, an audience member writes with a white feather on Pagnes's back covered in turf.







Acknowledging that intimate relationships often involve emotional connections with a partner and are crucial to the human experience, VestAndPage understand that the human ability to survive and thrive usually depends on open and courageous interpersonal connections to hold space for each other, which can stem from romance, physical or sexual attraction, but mostly from emotional support in togetherness to overcome recurring patterns of suffering. These connections can vary in form and expression but ultimately and significantly shape a person's relationships with the other, hence their attitudes towards behaviour and identity. In that, VestAndPage address intimacy as an urgent aspect of well-being to which contemporaneity seems to give little room, complicating relationships and communication between people. The conditions for intimacy include reciprocity of trust, emotional closeness, and self-disclosure—revealing personal or private information about oneself to others, which VestAndPage enact by writing them in their blood. For them, recognition by others comes with self-awareness, exposing oneself to vulnerability so that the body becomes an uncompromised storyteller. Hence, in their poetics, intimacy becomes a matter of visibility and self-value to understand how it shapes human contact and connection as a necessity following the sharing and mutual exchange of emotions and feelings.

Nurturing relationships is essential for well-being: it nourishes people's lives. Still, when the dimension of commitment joins the dimension of passion and attraction, things become more complex because people perceive a sense of closeness based on the need to realise one's desires and expectations of emotional fulfilment, which may not occur fully. Also, intimacy is transitory; it tends to fade over time. Likewise, performances are ephemeral. VestAndPage are aware that notwithstanding their effort to construct a shared identity with the audience in the space of intimacy, pleading it in their blood, to succeed in that is not as evident as it might appear in theory because the audience participates in the things that matter to them unless they feel emotionally or intellectually attracted to something unknown but deeply fascinating they do not fear.

As it happens in life between two (or more) persons, a performer that bleeds under the spectators' gaze exposes themselves as vulnerable and fragile, revealing



grey areas of shared norms and beliefs. The more a performer puts themselves emotionally at stake with their audience, the more defenceless they can feel, while the audience may perceive likewise, which can be disturbing. For instance, knowing that trusting is risky, one of the principal questions when performing intimate acts in proximity to an audience (in VestAndPage, by blood extraction, self-cutting and blood writing) is whether the performers can trust the audience and vice versa. Will they be able to protect their vulnerability, using their body as an experiential device to provoke a reaction from who is watching and, if the response is abusive, have the readiness to stand that response? Eventually, in such situations, to what extent do the traditional roles of audience and performers still determine their relationship, assuming that they are equally involved in the aesthetic experience of a performance which implies an unconventional intimacy—exposed, perceived and gazed?

Emotional intimacy presupposes the ability to be in touch with one's emotions and recognise them, which is what the ability to welcome the feelings of the other is based upon. If it is difficult for a person to be emotionally intimate with themselves, how can they expect to be able to connect with the other? Indeed, communication in the intimacy space can extend beyond routine exchanges related to daily tasks. Still, it must delve into the most personal and profound aspects (desires, hopes, dreams for the future) without fearing mutual diversity, differences of opinion, and conflicts but respecting and thus protecting each one's boundaries. Also, external interference that would risk complicating the dialogue instead of encouraging it creates two parties facing one another in their truth instead of two people confronting each other to build reciprocity and intimacy.

In this sense, VestAndPage's interactive one-to-one performance *Speak That I Can See You* is symptomatic and perceived as hierarchical power in the relationship between performers and the participating audience, invited, each one at a time, to write on Pagnes's naked back their unspoken or repressed with a white feather or a long rusty nail dip into a recipient containing his blood which Stenke provides for the audience, kindly invited them to contribute to the performance and talking gently to them, thus establishing a connection with them.

(Figure 6)

If there is no emotional connection, the participant (the spectator) would be called into question because there can be a lack of understanding between the performer and the spectator based on deep foundations rather than superficial elements. This can favour the emergence of a sense of progressive, imponderable estrangement and disturbance in the spectators themselves, which only a sense of established mutual empathy between them and the performers can avoid.

Figure 6 - VestAndPage. *Speak That I Can See You*, 2012. Photo courtesy of the artist. In the image, Verena Stenke dilutes Pagnes's blood in a bowl that the audience members will use to write on his naked back during the performance.



### Bleeding Soul in Blood's words

The mystery and fascination of blood have begun with humanity, influencing life's most sacred and profane aspects. The postulate that the soul is blood's innermost essence is present in ancient religions, Hebraism leading to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. It occupies an essential function for the Greeks and Romans. They sprinkle with blood places and objects for worship and rituals considered indispensable for the earth's fertility to establish a connection between



blood and life, remove any impurity, and restore the initial purity to the object that received it. Blood's consort with the soul – blood as the seat of the soul – which prevails in antiquity, is asserted in the Holy Scriptures, from *Genesis* to *Leviticus* and *Deuteronomy*, and repeatedly in the Quran, where “Adam is created from dust and a piece of thick coagulated blood” (Maulana, 2002, p. 1227). It is present in the *Hieroglyphica* by Horapollon Nilous, in Virgil's *Æneid*, in Saint Thomas's interpretation of Saint Paul's Doctrines, and also in “philosophers and physicians who sought to establish it scientifically as the true view among the many various notions of the situation of the soul” (Delitzsch, 2021, p. 286).

From the theories by Heraclitus, Plato, Aristotle, Galen, Critias, Empedocles, the Stoics, and Cicero and the shared assumption that “blood is not only the all conditioning basis but also the all-embracing source of the physical life” (Delitzsch, 2021, p. 290), a link between religious and biological categorisation gradually emerges, with implications to medical discourse and the question of the individual – bodily and spiritual – identity (Star, 2016). Thus, too for Pseudo Avicenna, considered the father of early modern medicine, who in the *De Anima* argued that “blood is the soul of man because it is by way of his blood that man lives” (Moureau, 2013, p. 289), hence theorised subjectivity as reflecting on “the intentional awareness of objects other than the subject of awareness, and on the subject's awareness of itself” (Kaukua, 2007, p. 4). The sentence attributed to Avicenna translated into Latin of a lost Arabic original and transcribed by Mino Celsi: “*Et anima est sanguis et sanguis est anima, et tota anima sanguis et totus sanguis anima, et qui aliter credit non-tenet naturam philosophi*” (Celsi, 1572, p. 275) in some way also recalls the Jews' belief that the soul resides in the blood. Avicenna's statement seems sourced from *Leviticus* (the third book of the Torah and the Old Testament): “For the life of the flesh is in the blood, and I have given it for you on the altar to make atonement for your souls, for it is the blood that makes atonement by the life” (Leviticus 17:11, 2011). From the low-medieval medical culture to Renaissance Hermeticism and the scientific discoveries of blood circulation in the XVI and XVII centuries (Harris, 1913), blood became an issue of knowledge without losing its spiritual aspects. Alchemists, philosophers and poets such as Roger Bacon, Jeffrey Chaucer, Paracelsus, Giordano Bruno, Pico Della



Mirandola, Cornelius Agrippa and physiologists and scientists such as Levinus Lemnius, Andrea Cesalpino, William Harvey, Antonie van Leeuwenhoekblood, continued to assert that it was “unrealistic to deny the eternal and spiritual value of blood” (Garraud & Lefrère, 2014, p. 21). Blood is the *spiritus vitalis*, the spiritualised human fuel that brings everything back to its origin (Santing, 2012). This idea inspired Rabelais to transmute physiology into poetry, for “life consists of blood; and the blood is the seat of the soul” (Rabelais, 1999, p. 272).

“Writing is generally agreed to be among the greatest inventions in human history since it made history possible” (Robinson, 2009, p. 24). Embodying texts through blood words is an ascetic practice of ancient origins, near to performances of self-inflicted, violent acts on the body to create subjectivity, new social relations, or transmit a sense of sacredness. It involved pricking the performer’s sublingual part of their tongue or fingertips “to draw blood, which is then mixed with ink and used to copy Buddhist scriptures” (Kieschnick, 2000, p. 177). The performer could also extract his blood from a place near his heart to demonstrate the sincerity of his sacrificial act to accomplish the ritual, cutting his body more times to avoid that blood congealing and coagulating.

However, the ascetic practice of embodying texts through words written with blood is found only in ancient East Asia. The extraordinary nature of Buddhist scrolls written by scribe monks and devotees lies in the use of blood, which is supposed to have metaphysical properties that ordinary ink cannot have (Yu, 2012). From this perspective, Buddhist blood scriptures challenge how meaning is communicated. They are, as well as much more, repositories of knowledge conveying holy messages written with a potent, ideologically charged fluid mixture of ink and blood. Those who wrote them did so also to create new social relations, authenticate their moral suasion, draw orthodoxy from heterodoxy, and secure or challenge existing religious and political orders. They were believed to generate miracles, heal diseases, blur the boundaries between the seen and the unseen, save the land from natural disasters, and exonerate crimes (Yu, 2012). To take notice in recent times, examples of blood writing are the “Blood Quran”, said to be written in Saddam Hussein’s blood and proposed to be preserved as a relic of his brutality, and the letters written in blood by Dalit organisations members seeking

withdrawal from the CAA to President Kovind (Vikas, 2018).

Although nowadays, the weakening of the “religious” has reduced the visceral attraction for blood, the latter still informs much body-based performance art. Blood becomes the conflux of materiality and psycho-spirituality, charged with political, aesthetic and ceremonial connotations with its passions and disturbances. It allures and disgusts and is deployed as a tool for actions to transgress societal norms, rules of social behaviour, archaic taboos, religious precepts, and individual and collective boundaries.

However, for VestAndPage, writing with blood is not solely a declared, transgressive act that goes against codes of conduct but also a celebration of Eros and Thanatos: life through a poetic use of the lifeblood, entrusting its symbolic resonance to provoke reflections in the audience, question and challenge social norms, express deep inward feelings, or address existential issues.

Figure 7 - VestAndPage. *UnderScars*, 2023. Photo courtesy of the artist.  
In the image, Pagnes writes with his blood on a white cloth covered in mirror shard the sentence:  
*Red, like a drop of blood, left there, in the corner of the sky, in Heaven.*



VestAndPage often performs extreme physical acts in constrictive physical



situations not to glorify pain but as possibilities for a poetic encounter with suffering as a source of creativity. Drawing from their life experience, they translate their wounds into performative actions to seek authenticity and speak about existential concerns about the individual and society.

For them, spilling blood and writing with it is an act of intimate liberation. The catharsis resides in the process of a silent poetic discharge, relieving the emotional tension that the performance sets up for them and the audience/participants alike.

In their works, there is more romance than violence, a feeling of mystery associated with love, dreaming and remoteness from everyday life. They use their blood for the pure matter that it is: an essential body fluid, vital lymph par excellence, a vivid organic red 'ink' that rushes inside the veins, crimson drops of genetic and hereditary information.

In their performances, blood's symbolic and metaphorical value is likened to the poor painter of an ancient Zen story who had no money to buy colours. Still, one day, by accidentally cutting his hand, he discovered that he could paint just with his blood.

VestAndPage uses their blood in performance in a similar way. They let the fluid containing information they have inherited drip from their bodies and deal with it to stay in the present, bring back to life their past, and move towards their future. Also, Pagnes (Italian-born) and Stenke (German-born) pay great attention to the semantic value and ambiguous changes relating to or arising from the different meanings of words or other symbols whose meaning is forgotten or misinterpreted.

The performance *The Smile at the Top of the Ladder* (2012) embeds this idea. Inspired by Henry Miller's book *The Smile at the Foot of the Ladder* (1959), Heinrich Böll's novel *Ansichten eines Clowns* (1963) and Bruce Nauman's *Clown Torture* video installations (1984-87), the second part of this performance revolves around an intermittent frantic dialogue on the absurdity of life to which one cannot escape. When Pagnes went into telling about the side effects of memory loss and consequent existential disorder, he began slowly engraving onto his chest the Latin word *ire* with a switchblade hidden in his hand.

Figure 8 - VestAndPage. *The Smile At The Top Of The Ladder*, 2012. Photo courtesy of the artist. The image portrays Pagnes's bare chest, and the word *ire* is engraved on it.



The English translation of *ire* is 'anger(s)'. In the Italian language, it has a double meaning: it can mean the plural of the feminine noun *ira* (Eng. 'rage') or *andare* (Eng. 'to go' and figuratively 'to let go'). To assume that the life force of the flesh is in the blood and its innermost essence is the soul is a position that may fascinate one's imagination. Nevertheless, to what extent can ancient alchemical thought be related to the contemporary creative thinking of today's performers? Of course, VestAndPage do not use their blood to explore elixir and ferment system notions like the ancient alchemists, who distilled blood as liquor in alembics and ampoules to reach the very essence of the soul. For them, blood is an element that helps them produce real poetry while they perform. This discourse is valid for





VestAndPage; it is not necessarily valid for everyone, nor do they aspire that it should be so. At last, they are interested in exploring blood as an organic fluid material in its manifold metaphorical value: expression of intimacy, carrier of suffering, and expression of life.

### Conclusive Remarks

Although inspired by ancient practices, for VestAndPage, the significance of blood lies in the paradoxical controversies and political contours that shaped modern European thought. In that, they look, for instance, at Nietzsche, who states that “whoever writes in blood and proverbs does not want to be read, but to be learned by heart.” (Nietzsche, 2006, p. 28). For Nietzsche, proverbs, like aphorisms, concern thoughts, define something in the use of the living word that divides and separates by its argumentative, political essence— something to be interpreted and capable of declining the question of the affectivity of thought as political, therefore articulating sense (Deleuze, 2006).

In their performances, VestAndPage rely on crimson drops spilling gently out of their bodies as a “perceptible sign” (Wittgenstein, 2001, p. 13), evoking meanings and having a dreamlike quality—blood drops like those on the snow contemplated by Perceval during his quest for the Holy Grail (McCracken, 1999). They write words with them, imagining they can express their thoughts more genuinely because they are composed of an organic substance that belongs to their body and keeps them alive.

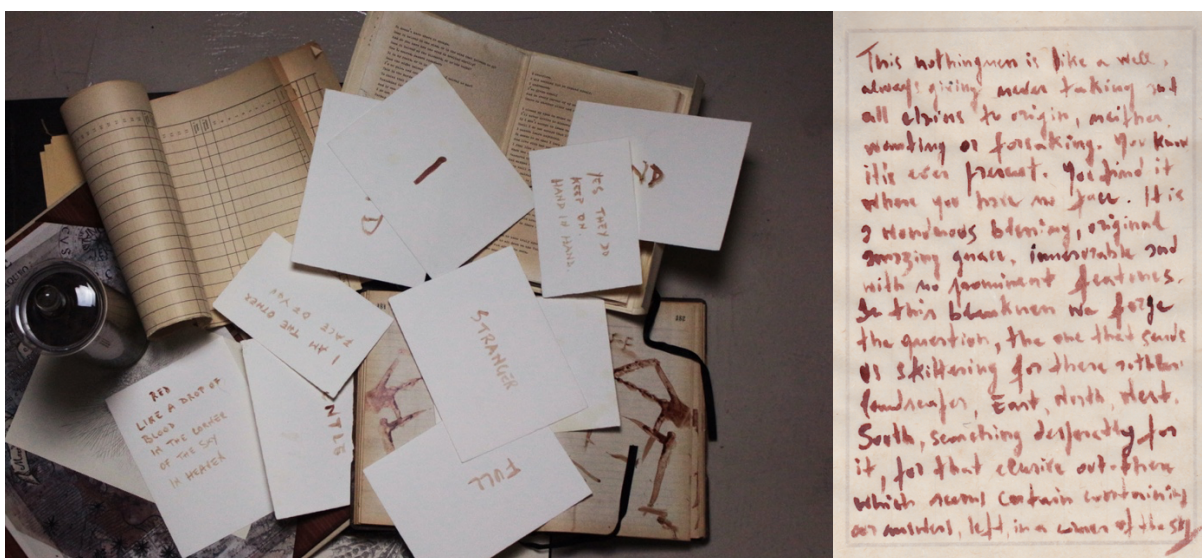
Because ideas are also actions, performance practices and rituals that define VestAndPage's poetics from which their ideas derive, they approach blood extraction and blood writing as a laborious, radical laying bare of an essential, poetic kernel flowing under their skin, a vital, poetic force rushing inside the veins to discover and uncover.

The artist duo ritualises their blood, transforming it into a stream-of-consciousness writing. They use it as an intimate device, shifting from conceptual representation to the transient and fragile condition of the human being. Through their bodies in action, they spill drops of blood, which take the shape of words. In

doing so, Stenke and Pagnes aim to create fleeting poetry through a meaningful and comprehensible performative act to themselves and their audience and ignite a poetic encounter with the other that forges a profound emotional connection with the spectators and themselves.

By recognising the vivifying power of blood, they confront themselves with their Catholic background, repressive education, Marxist drift, and ancestral war trauma. Therefore, through blood writing, they attempt to untangle a fil rouge of hereditary and ancestral information that erupts into a fluid vermillion matter and then words matter: a mode of activating memory between illusion, mythmaking and forgetfulness linked with a sense of remoteness from everyday life.

Figure 9 & 10 - VestAndPage. *Afterwor(l)ds*, 2017. Photos courtesy of the artist. In the images, performance relics and blood writings.



Although the procedure of the act that leads to blood writing and the aesthetic form of the outcome remains closely connected to an ancient sacrificial practice, still, by considering sacrifice as a psychological trait of the human condition, the poetic outcomes of blood writing are a possibility “to liberate aesthetics from the ethical end of justifying sacrifice understood as a necessary feature of social organisation” (Gans, 1999, n.p.).

Ultimately, VestAndPage's blood writing manifests as an organic artistic expression calling for the radical tenderness we all need to live in harmony. Thus,





this practice is not only an act of artistic creation but also a ritual that transforms blood into a communication device. By imprinting their thoughts and emotions on paper with this biological material, Pagnes and Stenke aim to transcend the conceptual and delve into the ephemeral experience of life, where love sometimes heals suffering, alternating, coagulating, returning, and ultimately fading away.

In this way, blood writing becomes a form of momentary, visceral poetry, where each drop spilt becomes a symbol of human struggle, internal wounds, and the connection between art and life. With this practice, VestAndPage challenge conventional notions of performance, turning what might be seen as an act of violence into a process of healing and reflection. Sentences and drawings composed with blood enhance the meanings they wish to deliver since meaning before language or significance before the sign does not subsist. Hence, blood writing becomes a performative practice that reveals the finitude of human existence and establishes a potentially empathetic connection between the artist and their audience, making the fleeting nature of life tangible through the materiality of blood.

In so doing, Pagnes and Stenke also question whether this practice implies a strangled “cry for poetry” (Glissant, 1997, p. 9) that finds no other way out. Is writing poems with blood an attempt to pour “the poematic into the cracks of an already haemorrhaging reality” (Hirschman, 1965, p. 131)? Does it provide answers to failures, fears, and traumas in the struggle for existence? Perhaps it is just one way to find glimpses of beauty in human life’s vulnerability and precariousness, where dreams of selfhood continually collapse under strains of mutable, distressed societies.

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