

Question 4: From the series of FINE ART MAKING research strand lectures, choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists or designers that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.

Student name: Anya May Thorpe

Student number: 2308605

Course: BA Fine Art: studio Site and context

Module Title and code: Research in Context – ADAD5003

Tutors: Alex Duncan and Holly Slingsby

Word count: 2,744 (Excluding title page, table of contents, list of figures, references, and bibliography)

Table of Contents

<i>Introduction</i>	4
<i>Performance art</i>	5
<i>The Gender bias and Male Gaze.</i>	6
<i>Chris Burden</i>	11
<i>Marina Abramovic</i>	14
<i>Conclusion</i>	18

Figure List

Fig 1: Courtesy of Taylor Whitten Brown and “Art Market” at Artsy.

Fig. 2, Portrait of Pier Maria Rossi di San Second and Camilla Gonzaga, Parmigianino. 1539-1540

Fig. 3, Toilet of Venus (‘The Rokeby Venus’), Diego Velazquez. 1647-51

Fig. 4, Shoot, Chris Burden. 1971.

Fig. 5, Transfixed, Chris Burden. 1974.

Fig. 6, TV Hijack, Chris Burden. 1972.

Fig. 7, Marina Abramovic, Rhythm 0. 1974.

Fig, 8. Lips of Thomas, Marina Abramovic. 1975.

Is the Gender Bias and Male Gaze Relevant within Performance Art?

Introduction

Inside the art world the gender bias is and has always been relevant, there are many factors to the contribution of the gender imbalance, throughout history women have been denied the same opportunities as men in every area of life, this includes the arts. The Male gaze is inseparable from the gender bias, this essay will explore how female artists are more likely to have their work sexualised compared to a male artist. As well as male artists are more likely be taken more seriously for the same bodies of work as women. Within contemporary art, a notable selection of works come from performance artists, performance art has grown in notoriety throughout history being known as a controversial way to create work. In this essay I will research into the gender bias seen within performance art. For this, I will be comparing two established artists known for their similar bodies of works: creating intense, thought provoking and sometimes violent performance pieces, this being Chris Burden (1946-2015) and Marina Abramovic (1946-Current day)

Performance art

I have chosen to investigate performance art for this essay. It is an art form typically known for being live and or interactive work where artists use their bodies or presence as the medium, which most of the time it is documented through series of photographs, video or can be re-enacted by the artist. This art form tends to push boundaries and tackles controversial themes, this being the reality of the world as is, social and political opinions and rules, identity, etc. With this, performance art can provoke strong thoughts and emotions for viewers, by intentionally creating uncomfortable, strange, and repulsive work, but the use of comedic elements is also very common. Performance art was (and still is) one of the first medium where work made by women is less likely to be viewed in the perspective of the male gaze or as sexual objects, though it still happens.

“Performance art affords an immediate means to engage with audiences and to explore and enact ideas about identity and the cultural construction of femininity.

Since so much of the Euro American visual art tradition depicts female bodies (especially young and voluptuous), much performance art upsets that tradition by means of exaggeration, violence and, reversal” – Carolyn Korsmeyer, *Gender and*

Aesthetics: An introduction, 2005. ¹

Performance art engages with nudity despite gender, taking back the vulgar view that society have given it. Nudity is common in performance art due to the use of raw human form, stripping back any connotation that come along with clothing, using the body directly with no other traditional objects in the way of audience engagement. Saying this, performance artists still get judged for their works due to gender bias male gaze.

The Gender bias and Male Gaze.

It is known throughout the history of the corporate and domestic world men have had an upper hand due to patriarchy, with women having to fight for the same rights as men and being denied access to education, employment and much more. In the 1920s women were allowed to vote for political preferences, 1960/70s women started to gain more social and financial equality. In 2010 the equality act in the UK made it illegal to discriminate on set characteristics, age, disability, gender reassignment, marriage, pregnancy and maternity, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation. And yet, the gender wage gap is still a problem in the modern world. (U.k Parliament) ²

All of this is also relevant within all aspects of the art world, from being a renowned artist, buying and selling art to being a curator of art for galleries. Despite the struggles there has been a progress over the few past years.

“At the current rate of growth, we won’t see gender parity in the auction market until 2053.” – Burns Halperin report 2022 ³

But unfortunately, the progress is not good enough or even fast enough, especially when you factor the numbers. Most of the highest rated London galleries exhibits are made up of male artist bodies of work, even though women make up the overall total number of art and design students.

“In the U.K 64% of undergraduates and 65% of postgraduates in creative arts and design are women, but 68% of the artists represented at the top London commercial galleries are men.” – Freelands Foundation. ⁴

This bias affects a myriad of things, but money and income are still one of the most effected, men do evidently get paid more than women for being an artist.

Median Prices for Female Versus Male Artists' Works

Works created after 1999

■ Female ■ Male

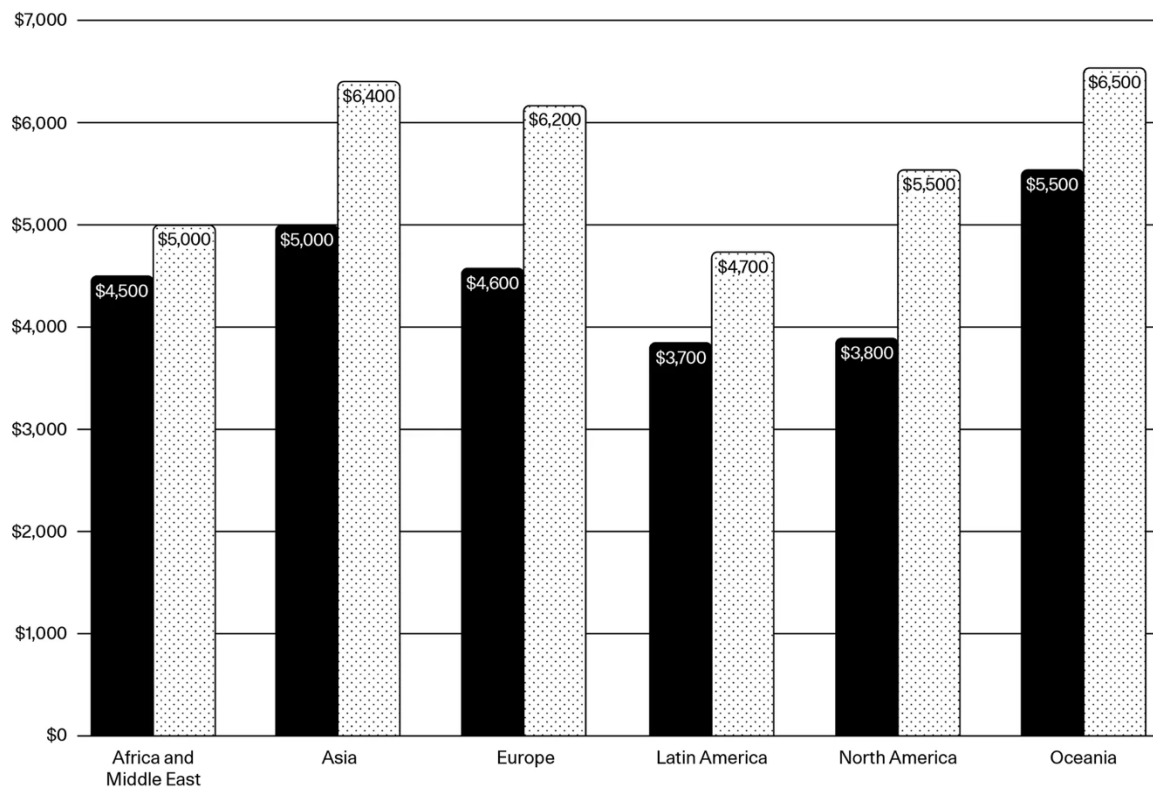


Fig. 1, Courtesy of Taylor Whitten Brown and "Art Market" at Artsy. ⁵

Alongside gender bias the male gaze is also important throughout history and relevant today, the concept being a feminist theory which entails women in forms of media are shown in a masculine perspective for male pleasure, presenting women and feminine bodies as objects of sexual desire. The objectification of women is something clearly seen in art history, men are depicted with dominance to show power to themselves and others as an abuse of authority and control in contrast female portraits are sexualised for male enjoyment and desire.



Fig. 2, Portrait of Pier Maria Rossi di San Secondo and Camilla Gonzaga, Parmigianino. 1539-1540. ⁶

Two portraits by Italian Mannerist artist, Parmigianino painted in oil around the years of 1535-1539. In these portraits, Parmigianino paints a family but splitting them into two separate paintings, one of the husband and the other of the wife and children, this alone shows the Gender bias at that time, the man being higher up and more important than the rest of the family.

Looking at the male model Pier Maria Rossi's portrait he is seen in a dominant pose surrounded by objects of high class to represent power. Then the finer details of the portrait which get noticed as the viewer starts looking in more detail. There is the golden fabric and the sword in his hand, which immediately shows the money and military status. His genitals being exposed in such a way to show confidence and

power which comes alongside manhood, The books in the background show his knowledge and interest in culture that he had the privilege to learn in these times due to being a man with status.

Then focusing on the other portrait of the rest of the family, they are together in a dark almost black background, having no more depth showing in the portrait thus is nothing to represent the women minus being a mother surrounded by her children.



Fig. 3, Toilet of Venus ('The Rokeby Venus'), Diego Velazquez. 1647-51. ⁷

A portrait of Venus the goddess of love by Diego Velazquez painted in oil around the time of 1647-51, is a pinnacle of male gaze. This piece has a more simplified composition, Venus laid down on draped fabrics looking into a mirror of her own reflection as cupid holds said mirror. The key focus in this portrait is her body, the surrounding objects are painted by choice in a blurred effect to have the body clearer for the viewer. Venus herself was not an identifiable person, so the details of her face

are blurred so the viewer can tell it's a feminine body without having a certain person in mind. This piece then became a part of a radical attack by Mary Richardson a suffragette in 1914, being slashed by a meat cleaver seven times in protest to the arrest of Emmeline Pankhurst, a women's suffrage leader.

"I knew the public did not care about this living women, but I knew they would care if

I cut up a lady on canvas who bore financial and artist value" Women' hour, Mary

Richardson, 1957 ⁸

At this time, many portraits of men and women were done in similar ways to the examples of works shown, men being powerful and women being the object of desire or a mother figure.

Chris Burden

Chris Burden (1946 – 2015) was an American artist who worked in many mediums throughout his time, performance art, sculpture, and installation. He became known in the 70's for his performance art, making a collection of work with the themes and ideas of personal danger as an expression for the arts. His first performance work was during his time at University of California, Irvine, where he locked himself in a locker for five days (this piece being named Five Day Locker Piece) While his performance works came across violent and dangerous, he never truly put himself in danger. All his performances were scripted pieces where there was only room for a slight margin of error.



Fig. 4, *Shoot*, Chris Burden. 1971. ⁹

Burdens most prominent work from the 70s and arguably the work he is most known for is *Shoot*, in which was first of its kind in the performance world, this work explores violence, control and the fragility of human life. In this performance, his friend, Bruce

Dunlap shot Burden in the arm with a .22-caliber rifle from around 15 feet away, the bullet going through his upper left arm. A video filmed on 16mm film of the live performance shows the action and aftermath of the shooting, in which blood trickles down his arm while Burden is shown in shock and pain. The whole event of this work was controlled, being performed in front of a small collection of friends chosen by Burden himself. Unfortunately, this work did go wrong, the original plan for the piece was for the bullet to graze his arm and cause one drop of blood for dramatic effect, not to go directly through his arm. But the friend shooting him was slightly off which caused the bullet to make more contact than planned.

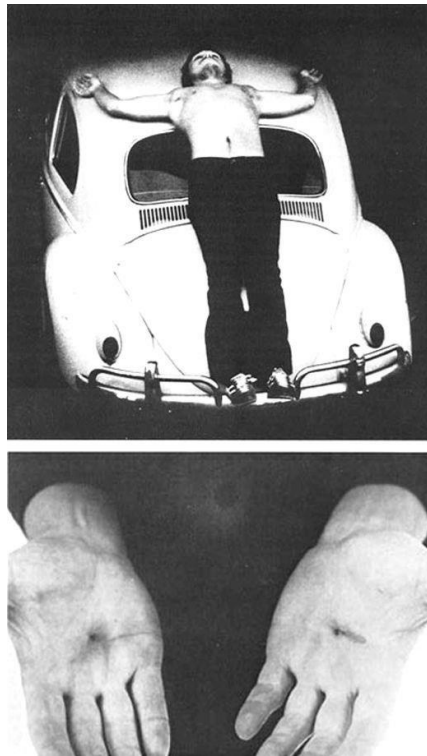


Fig. 5, *Transfixed*, Chris Burden. 1974 ¹⁰

This work by Burden is his most reproduced piece, taking place on April 23rd, 1974, in Venice, California. Burden was seen shirtless laying on the back bumper of a light blue Volkswagen beetle in a cross pose. The car half rolled out of a garage and then became stationary, the engine ran for two minutes at full throttle. It was later displayed that there was in fact two nails going through the palm of his hands into

the roof of the car thus being crucified, the nails and plaque used for the piece was later displayed as relics. Once again, Burden invited a small group of around fifteen people to this performance work but this time not telling the viewers what the work was about or what was going to happen. This was a religiously charged work obviously echoing the crucifixion of Jesus, it being performed a few weeks after Easter Sunday which was on the 14th of April that year. This work has many interpretations to it, it being rumoured the car chosen was a link to the fact the Volkswagen was known as the 'people's car' in Nazi Germany and having the car's engine roar for the two minutes signified the pain and suffering of what happened in world war 2 while the 'peoples car' was invented, the horrors of religion and Burdens own pain in that moment. This performance piece, alongside Shoot, Burden himself is the victim to his own chosen violence. Transfixed was indirectly celebrated by the artist David Bowie, the piece inspired lyrics in Bowie's song 'Joe The Lion' in which the actions done during Transfixed was mentioned

"Tell you who you are if you nail me to my car" – Joe The Lion, Heroes, David Bowie 1977. ¹¹

Marina Abramovic

Marina Abramovic (1946 – current day) is a Serbian conceptual and performance artist creating for over forty years. Her work explores the body, endurance, possibilities of the mind and the relationship between artist and viewer. After getting her post-graduate from the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb, Croatia, she returned to her birthplace of Serbia and taught at the Academy of Fine Arts, Novi Sad between the years of 1973 – 1975. Where she proceeded to do her first solo performance. To this day she is known for her powerful and emotion provoking performance works.

“I test the limits of myself in order to transform” then saying “But I also take the energy from the audience and transform it. It goes back to them in a different way.

This is why people in the audience often cry or become angry or whatever. A powerful performance will transform everyone in the room” Marina Abramovic, year

unknown ¹²



Fig. 7. *Rhythm 0*, Marina Abramovic. 1974 ¹³

Rhythm 0 is Abramovic's most recognisable performance pieces, it was a six-hour long performance in the Galleria Studio Morra in Naples, 1974. This was the fifth and final piece of her Rhythm series taking place during the years 1973 – 1974, the series included Rhythm 10, 1973, Rhythm 5, 1974, Rhythm 2, 1974 Rhythm 4, 1974 and then Rhythm 0, 1974. In Rhythm 0, Abramovic prepared a table of 72 objects including matches, lipstick, nails, a rose, scissors, a gun, a bullet etc on a table with her standing still nearby. There was no stage, the audience and herself were on the same level, inviting the audience to interact with her. On the table were instructions, they read:

Instructions:

There are 72 objects on the table that one can use on me as desired.

Performance.

I am the object...

During this period I take full responsibility.

Duration: 6 hours (8pm – 2am).

The work started off gentle but over the duration the participants became violent towards Abramovic, inflicting pain, and danger. An art critic named Thomas McEvilley who witnessed the whole performance stated:

"It became tamely. Someone turned her around. Someone thrust her arms in the air. Someone touched her somewhat intimately. The Neapolitan night began to heat up.

In the third hour all her clothes were cut from her with razor sharp blades. In the fourth hour the same blades began to explore her skin. Her throat was slashed so someone could suck her blood. Various minor sexual assaults were carried out on her body. She was so committed to the piece that she would not have resisted rape

or murder. Faced with her abdication of will, with its implied collapse of human psychology, a protective group began to define itself in the audience. When a loaded gun was thrust to Marina's head and her own finger was being worked around the trigger, a fight broke out between the audience factions". Thomas McEvilley ¹⁴

In an interview in 2010, Abramovic reflected on the well-known dangerous performance.

"I still have the scares of the cuts," [...] "it was a little crazy. I realised then the public can kill you. If you give them total freedom, they will become frenzied enough to kill you." [...] "A man pressed the gun hard against my temple. I could feel his intent. And I heard women telling the man what to do. The worst was the one man who was there always, just breathing. This, for me, was the most frightening thing. After the performance, I have one streak of white hair on my head. I cannot get rid of the feeling of fear for a long time. Because of this performance, I know where to draw the line so as not to put myself at such risk." Marina Abramovic, 2010. ¹⁵



Fig. 8. Lips of Thomas, Marina Abramovic. 1975. ¹⁶

Just a year after *Rhythm 0*, she performed another violent performance piece, *Lips of Thomas*. She once again explored endurance in her work and audience

interaction, cutting a five-pointed star into the centre of her stomach, drinking wine, eating honey, whipping herself and lying while bleeding on an ice cross, until the audience stopped the performance. This work is heavily religiously charged, the five-pointed star, the cross, honey and wine, and the ice. All of them link to religious symbols, Communism, Christianity, Life and blood, and cold/ death. The audience decided to intervene after just 30 minutes, covering her cold body in coats, and carrying her off the stage, when the original plan was for her to lay on the ice cross until it had melted. Since the original performance, Abramovic has performed it several times, the most famous being in 2005, a part of her 'Seven Easy Pieces' when she recreated many performance works.

Conclusion

In conclusion, after researching both artists similar bodies of work, the gender bias is the same as always, having Burdens work praised and labelled revolutionary within the performance art world while Abramovic had more backlash and is overlooked in comparison just due to being a woman highlighting the underlying gender bias. But the male gaze is relevant in unexpected ways, Performance artists use this medium to fight against the male gaze, creating the female gaze, taking back the body, and portraying themselves as subjects of agency and chance instead of objects of desire. Actively slowly breaking down the barriers for future performance artists in hopes that the rebellion of the male gaze will break down in all areas of the art world.

References

1. Carolyn Korsmeyer, Gender and Aesthetics: An introduction, 2005.
2. Parliament.uk, <https://www.parliament.uk/about/living-heritage/transformingsociety/electionsvoting/womenvote/overview/thevote/> Accessed on 8th December 2025
3. Burns Halperin report 2022, <https://nmwa.org/support/advocacy/get-facts/> Accessed on 3rd November 2025
4. Freelands Foundation. <https://nmwa.org/support/advocacy/get-facts/> Accessed on 3rd November 2025
5. Courtesy of Taylor Whitten Brown and “Art Market” at Artsy, <https://www.madeinbed.co.uk/agents-of-change/stuck-in-the-dark-ages-a-womans-place-in-the-art-world> Accessed on 3rd November 2025
6. Portrait of Pier Maria Rossi di San Second and Camilla Gonzaga, Parmigianino. 1539-1540. <https://www.artesplorando.it/2020/02/parmigianino-pier-maria-rossi-di-san-secondo-e-camilla-gonzaga.html> Accessed on 2nd December 2025
7. Toilet of Venus (‘The Rokeby Venus’), Diego Velazquez. 1647-51. <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/diego-velazquez-the-toilet-of-venus-the-rokeby-venus> Accessed on 2nd December 2025
8. Women’ hour, Mary Richardson, 1957, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b046j8z9#:~:text=Freedom%20Charity-,Archive%20Collection:%20Mary%20Richardson,the%20life%20of%20Mary%20Richardson> Accessed on 8th Novmeber 2025
9. Shoot, Chris Burden. 1971. https://www.imdb.com/title/tt10514248/mediaviewer/rm334077441/?ref=tt_ov_i Accessed on 6th Decmeber 2025
10. Transfixed, Chris Burden. 1974. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trans-Fixed#/media/File:Transfixed_\(Burden\).jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Trans-Fixed#/media/File:Transfixed_(Burden).jpg) Accessed on 6th December 2025
11. Joe The Lion, Heroes, David Bowie 1977. <https://genius.com/1880353> Accessed on 8th December 2025
12. Marina Abramovic, year unknown. <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/oct/03/interview-marina-abramovic-performance-artist> Accessed on 8th December 2025
13. Marina Abramovic, Rhythm 0. 1974 <https://art21.org/gallery/marina-abramovic-artwork-survey-1970s/> Accessed on the 8th December 2025

14. Thomas McEvilley. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhythm_0#cite_ref-9
Accessed on 9th December 2025
15. Marina Abramovic, 2010.
<https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/oct/03/interview-marina-abramovic-performance-artist> Accessed on 9th December 2025
16. Lips of Thomas, Marina Abramovic. 1975.
<https://www.artsy.net/artwork/marina-abramovic-thomas-lips-22> Accessed on the 10th December 2025.

Bibliography

Apollon Undergraduate Journal. (2014). *Sexism in American Art Museums*. [online] Available at: <https://www.apollonejournal.org/apollon-journal/sexism-in-american-art-museums> [Accessed 16 Oct. 2025].

Baldwin, J. (2017). *The Question of Gender: The 'Unseen' Problem in Museum Workplaces*. [online] American Alliance of Museums. Available at: <https://www.aam-us.org/2017/08/28/the-question-of-gender-the-unseen-problem-in-museum-workplaces/> [Accessed 2 Nov. 2025].

BBC. (n.d.). *BBC Radio 4 - Woman's Hour, Suffragette Mary Richardson who slashed the Rokeby Venus; Criminalising Forced Marriage; Page 3 and the free Sun*. [online] Available at: <https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/b046j8z9> [Accessed 3 Dec. 2025].

Bergauer, A. (2024). *Gender-based Discrimination in the Arts Exists, and Here's the Research Behind It*. [online] Women in Technology. Available at: <https://medium.com/womenintechology/gender-based-discrimination-in-the-arts-exists-and-heres-the-research-behind-it-df5ba9c319f5> [Accessed 11 Oct. 2025].

Gørrill, H. (2020). *Women Can't Paint*. Bloomsbury Publishing USA.

MADE IN BED Magazine. (2025). *Stuck in the Dark Ages: A Woman's Place in the Art World*. [online] Available at: <https://www.madeinbed.co.uk/agents-of-change/stuck-in-the-dark-ages-a-womans-place-in-the-art-world> [Accessed 3 Nov. 2025].

McInerney, R. (2021). *The Male Gaze*. [online] Art History Perspectives. Available at: <https://www.arthistoryperspectives.com/posts/themalegaze> [Accessed 11 Oct. 2025].

National Museum of Women in the Arts (2022). *Get the Facts about Women in the Arts*. [online] National Museum of Women in the Arts. Available at: <https://nmwa.org/support/advocacy/get-facts/> [Accessed 3 Nov. 2025].

O'brien, S., Abramović M. and Serpentine Gallery (2014). *Marina Abramović, 512 hours [on the occasion of the Exhibition Marina Abramović: 512 Hours at the Serpentine Gallery, London, 11 June - 25 August 2014]*. Köln König.

Searle, A. (1993). *Talking Art 1*. Institute of Contemporary Art.

Smith, D., Collins, P. and Chodorow, N. (n.d.). *7 Feminist and Gender Theories Key Concepts □ Relations of Ruling*. [online] Available at: https://us.sagepub.com/sites/default/files/upm-binaries/38628_7.pdf [Accessed 11 Oct. 2025].

WHY (2023). *DOLAPO OBAT*. [online] DOLAPO OBAT. Available at: <https://dolapoobatgallery.com/blog/why-are-the-most-famous-artists-male> [Accessed 11 Oct. 2025].

Wood, C. (2022). *Performance in Contemporary Art*. Tate Publishing.