

Title:

Female Empowerment: Examining Women Who Defy Patriarchal
Structures and Assert Their Independence in Performance

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Programme of Study: Fine Art (BA Hons)

Module: ADAD5004

Word Count:

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INTRODUCTION

In 1960s and 1970s, the feminist movement emerged, challenging patriarchal structures and advocating for gender equality. This essay delves into the theme of female empowerment within the context of performance art, examining how women of this era defied traditional norms and asserted their independence through creative expression. From iconic protests and demonstrations to groundbreaking performances and artistic interventions, women during this period utilised performance as a means of reclaiming agency over their bodies and narratives. As performance was newly being introduced, giving opportunity for female artists to stem away from traditional norms. Through a nuanced analysis of the cultural, social, and political contexts of the time. These women challenged patriarchal structures, dismantled oppressive systems. By examining the legacy of the feminist movement in performance art, we gain insight into the enduring power of liberation, and social justice.

“These two issues - the objectification of the female body in art, and the marginalisation of women as artists - have been the most important concerns for feminist theory and practice over the past thirty years.” (Carson, F., & Pajackowska, C. (2000).

This quote highlights two critical issues: the objectification of the female body in art and the exclusion of women as artists. It underscores the ongoing relevance of these concerns in contemporary discourse and their central role in shaping feminism.

CHAPTER I

Yoko Ono, a multimedia artist who is mostly known for her performative pieces. She was born in Tokyo, Japan, in 1933. Ono's upbringing in Japanese culture, beliefs, and traditions profoundly influences her artistic practice. She gained recognition as a notable figure in New York during the 1960s and undertook an approach in the performance movement. This movement, characterised by its experimental and boundary-pushing nature, diverged from traditional norms for females in the art field, ushering in new beginnings that continue to influence contemporary art practice today.

Ono's primary focus in her work is to welcome viewers to reconsider and contemplate the significant similarities and differences between art and life. One of her most renowned works worldwide, documented in multiple feminist books, is *Cut Piece* (1964). Some may perceive this work as non-feminist due to men and women cutting her clothes off, taking charge over her body and revealing her skin. However, it is crucial to understand that Ono allowed such acts to be done during her performance as she wanted to show both sides of gender. She invited the audience to become part of the performance, allowing them to come on stage one by one, and use a large pair of scissors that was positioned in front of her. With it to each cut a piece of fabric from the garment the artist was wearing. Ono was seated on the floor with her legs folded under and her arms against her sides, she relinquished control over her body, and keeping a vacant facial expression, she "...replicated the polite Japanese sitting position seiza, assumed in formal or respectable environments" (Wilson, 2003). A motionless posture reminiscent of a Zen stage, a position adopted culturally in Japan. As seen in the figure 1.



Figure 1.

The theme of this performance was interpreted in various aspects, including a commentary on the vulnerability of nudity, the objectification of women and a representation of the possibility of violence actions present in humans. This challenging performance not only tested the artist but also the audience. In the 1960s, as the feminist movement gained momentum, so did this new era of performative art. Ono push the boundaries of traditional norms by allowing the audience to touch her clothing and body, placing them in an awkward and confrontational position of consent. Additionally, the piece was interpreted as a protest against war, with references to the 1945 atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Ono aimed to represent the destruction caused by these events through the clothing teared down, resembling those affected by the bombings. A photograph documentation from the

archives of Yamahata Yosuke, victim of Nagasaki young child's corpse after bombing, seen in figure 2.



Figure 2.

During the performance, various reactions were documented. People were overheard laughing from below the stage. Ramachandran a Neuroscientist explains that a human may laugh under worrying, or threatening circumstances, the brain deceives itself by using a laughing mechanising. Referring to the brief report of (Ramachandran, 2004).

When the audience approached the artists body, and the action of cutting fabric off, there was an obvious difference between gender. Women typically knelt down politely to delicately snipping a small amount, while showing respect. A lady from the audience, cut a fashionable

asymmetrical décolleté collar. On the contrary men exhibited an arrogant and aggressive approach to the artist, jumping onto stage, standing over, circling around Ono and cutting multiple larger parts of her clothing. One young man, in particular, seen in the figure 3, stood out for his unmannerliness. Cutting through multiple layers of fabric and revealing her skin and vulnerability. Differ to the artists facial reaction, when she first began the performance with a neutral dissociated expression, Ono's increasing discomfort began when the audience began cutting her garment near her vulnerable private areas.

Figure 3.



She started blinking more and more, circling her eyesight around the room and to the ceiling above. Ono's arms that were loose by her side took rise, engaged her hand to keep her brassiere in place over her chest. The man kept cutting, it appeared that his action was not going to end, until a woman's voice from the crowd called him out to, "Stop being such a creep!" (Cut Piece, Vimeo, 8:43 – 8:45) And finally, came down the stage in the end.



Figure 4.

“Ono remembered, this work was rejected by several male colleagues “for being animalistic”. (Goldberg, 2004, p. 95). Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* remains a powerful and thought-provoking work that challenges traditional notions of art, gender, and power dynamics. Through this performance, she invites viewers to confront their own assumptions and biases, sparking conversations about consent, vulnerability, and the objectification of women in society.

CHAPTER II

Carolee Schneemann born in Pennsylvania, United States in 1939. Schneemann rose a leading figure in the feminist art movement in art representation in the years 1960s and 1970s, challenging the patriarchal structures of the art world through her bold daring work. Through her notable performances such as *Meat Joy* (1964), *Interior Scroll* (1975) and one of her earliest performances *Eye Body* (1963) which will be the prime focus for this section. Schneemann confronted taboos surrounding the female body and sexuality, redefining them as sites of agency and empowerment. By portraying the female body as more than society has

portrayed it, normalising the body as not a sexual object, she uses her own body as an extension and focus point to her art practice.

Figure 5.



“In 1963 to use my body as an extension of my painting constructions was to challenge and threaten the psychic territorial power lines by which women were admitted to the Art Stud Club, so long as they behaved enough like the men, did work clearly in the traditions and pathways hacked out by the men. (The only artist I know of making body art before this was Yoko Ono.)” (Schneemann, Documenttext 1979).

Furthermore, the artist critiques the expectation placed on women conforming to traditional masculine standards in order to gain acceptance within the art community. They highlight the prevailing notion that women must mirror male behaviour and produce work within established male-dominated traditions to be taken seriously as artists. This expectation is symbolised by the reference to the "Art Stud Club," a metaphorical representation of the exclusive and often male-centric nature of the art world. The artist's decision to use their body

Figure 6.



Figure 7.



as a canvas challenges these norms and expectations, asserting their autonomy and creativity outside of traditional pathways.

By incorporating the female body into her work in such a raw and unapologetic manner, Schneemann shattered prevailing notions of feminine propriety and passivity, demanding recognition for women as active agents of their own narratives. In Carolee Schneemann's performance series *Eye Body* from 1963, she redefines the boundaries of life through microcosmic movements. Schneemann's radical approach subverts the traditional portrayal of the female nude by denying it as merely an object of the male gaze. Instead, she merges her flesh into the environment, blurring the lines between her body and the surrounding world. Through the incorporation of technological elements like large panels, broken mirrors, glass, lights, moving umbrellas, and motorised parts, Schneemann transforms our man-made reality into a destructive installation which is reminiscent of a painting. These installations are where her performative female body becomes the focal point.

Figure 8



Figure 9.



The snake serves as a symbolic element for numerous contemporary and historical artists, as well as mythical icons. It carries various interpretations, often representing the Mothergoddess and Medusa as their primary depictions. Some artists refrain from attributing specific connotations to these figures, instead viewing the snake as a symbol of empowerment. Across these diverse symbolic meanings and representations, the underlying message consistently conveys a feminist statement of female strength and empowerment. By revisiting the role of females in art history, artists offer fresh perspectives that unveil new



insights for women today.

“In this case, Carolee Schneemann started off by interpreting the coiled snake as a primitive way to symbolise the uterus and vagina. It was a way to represent the energy that houses there and is ascribed to the Mothergoddess figure from these ancient times. The Mothergoddess would be both giver of life and representing fertility, but also death and decay, having the power to take all life away.” (Contemporary Art, 2016)

Figure 10.

CHAPTER 3

Marina Abramovic, born in Belgrade, Serbia in 1946, states she is the “grandmother of performance art” (Tate, n.d.). Known for her daring approach to extreme performance art, Abramovic has continuously pushed the boundaries of physical and mental limits while challenging societal norms and exploring the duo relationship between performer and audience. She states, “...I only learn from I fear most,” Marina Abramovic...” (Goldberg, 2004, p.13).

During the period from 1973 to 1974, Abramovic undertook a series of performances known as the "Rhythms." These series consisted of five performances. All to the relation to her body and mind. Her shift in her art practice, began from paintings and drawings. Abramovic gradually switched to performance where her own body is used as a medium for her pieces. The *Rhythms* series are the following: *Rhythm 10*, *Rhythm 5*, *Rhythm 2*, *Rhythm 4*, and *Rhythm 0*, which all showcased Abramovic's passionately bold acts of pushing her human limits.

The objective of Abramovic's performance, *Rhythm 0*, was to test how far would human behaviour reach. As well the open to interpretation along covered topics. Through this performance, Abramovic opts to challenge the traditional boundaries of the artist and audience. Allowing the audience to become the performer, while surfacing topics of objectification, vulnerability, power dynamics, and violent human interactions. This performance took place in Naples, 1974.

The performance consisted of 72 objects displayed on a table with a white cloth underneath, a range of objects casting from two extreme spectrums. A few examples of them are accessories, candle, bread, rose, pleasure items, hazardous weapons, hair comb, grapes, scissors, feather, alcohol, chain, knives, plasters, rope, tape, camera, and a gun with a bullet. As seen in the images below.



Figure 11.



Figure 12.

The artist stood standing behind the the table with the following instruction announcement on a standing frame on the same table as the objects. Stating that she is taking full accountability during the performance, and that all 72 objects on the table can be used on her, as she herself becomes an object. As seen in the statement below.

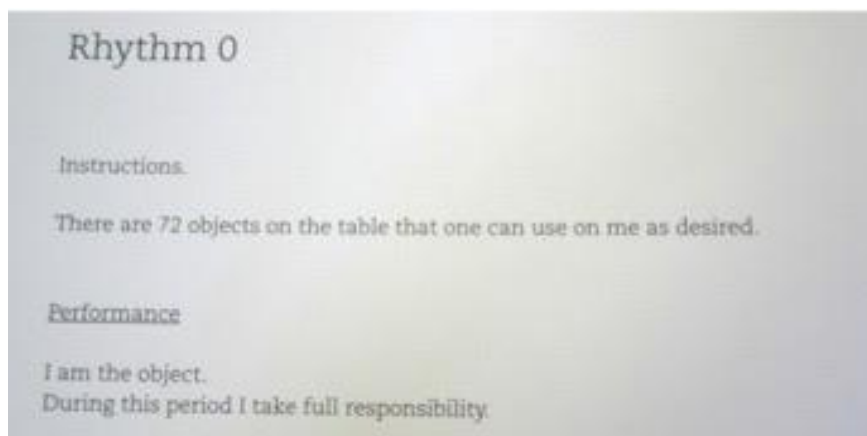


Figure 13.

The idea behind "Rhythm 0" was to dissolve the usual lines that separate artist and audience, producing an interactive and confrontational encounter that questioned conventional concepts of art and spectatorship. She portrayed herself as a passive object for a sincere moment which showed her audience's inherent cruelty.



Figure 14.



Figure 15.



Figure 16.

Several audience habits were noted during the six-hour performance. Audience members became more confident and violent towards Abramović's body, despite their initial timidity. "They show – predominantly – men playing with the objects, touching Abramović's body, ogling and laughing at her with their friends, as she stands there alone, tears filling her eyes." Hessel, K. (2023). They would cut her skin with razors and knives, to suck on her blood. Ripped her clothing off. Chain her to the table and stab a knife between her legs. Sticking the rose's thorns into her tummy. Some women were advising the males what they should do. She says she was not raped because it was a public gallery area, and most people were with their wives. As Abramović recalled, and spoke on the (TED talks, 2015).

However, in the midst of the chaos, a protective group developed from the audience, largely composed of women. They would wipe her tears, and bandage her wounds. The performance came to close end when members of the audience, loaded the pistol from the table and

positioned it into the artists hand aimed at her temple. When Abramovic came back to herself, and the performance was officially finished, the audience were not able to stay behind and face her as a human being. When she arrived to her hotel room she noticed her first ever grey hair. “Researchers found that the body’s fight-or-flight response plays a key role in turning hair gray”(Wein, H., 2022).



Figure 17.

Figures from 14 to 19, are all photographs from Marina Abramovic performance *Rythem 0*. As a form of documentation.

Figure 19.



CONCLUSION

As we reflect on the groundbreaking contributions of Yoko Ono, Carolee Schneemann, and Marina Abramovic, were introduced to us with their bold expressions and boundary-pushing performances, they have not only challenged the norms of their respective eras but also reshaped the domain of contemporary art. These women, celebrated as pioneers and risk-takers, have left an indelible mark on the artistic canon, inspiring generations of artists to come.

Yet, beyond their artistic achievements, it's essential to recognise the personal and societal struggles that these women have faced especially during the times of their performances. During the 60s and 70s, societies social norms would have already depicted the reaction to women creating feminist art. Under the circumstances these women were under, they would have faced negative reaction regardless of the outcome of the performance. Their art reflects not only their individual experiences but also the broader context of gender inequality and social injustice. By navigating these challenges with resilience and determination, they have become symbols of empowerment and resilience for women around the world.

As we continue to study and celebrate Ono, Schneemann, and Abramovic, let us also acknowledge the ongoing fight for gender equality and the importance of amplifying women's voices in the arts and around the world. Their work serves as reminders of the power of art to provoke thought, inspire change, and shape the world we inhabit. We still have a long way ahead of making more proactive feminist art to breach toxic masculinity minds. Which leads to my question... how does feminist art continue to push the patriarchal limits its surrounded by? Will the future generation give spotlight to great women artist?

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