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Introduction

I am interested in looking at anger in women and uncovering the cause of female rage, focusing on inequality, oppression, misogyny, and the patriarchy. Feminist **performance** art is a powerful form of expressing this anger. I will be looking at feminist performance artists, VALIE EXPORT^{1*} and Hannah Wilke who challenge how women's bodies have long been confined to sexual objects through art and media. My second keyword is **medical gaze**, exploring medical misogyny that has historically disregarded women's emotions as hysteria, to further silence and marginalise women's suffering. I will be discussing the controversy behind the Salpêtrière hospital alongside artist Leila Hekmat's *Symptom Recital: Music for Wild Angels* (2022) performance, which redefines outdated symptoms of hysteria in women. My final keyword **abjection** will explore the lived-in source of rage that influences the action and the performance. Two artists I am particularly interested in whose work embodies this inner rage while reclaiming the female body are Carolee Schneemann and Ana Mendieta.

I will also be discussing key theorists and thinkers such as Simone de Beauvoir, Laura Mulvey, Sandra Lee Bartky, Michel Foucault, and Julie Kristeva to support my essay.

¹ Artist, VALIE EXPORT, spells her name in all caps. The name was sourced from a packet of cigarettes, an act of feminist-rebellion to disrupt the tradition of adorning her father's or husband's name (Shaw, 2024).

Performance

“To be a woman is to perform” (Hamarani, 2023)

The saying above has been attributed to feminist philosophers and thinkers who challenge the harmful societal expectations placed on women to appease the male gaze. To begin with, my first keyword, performance, I will look at French Existentialist Philosopher Simone de Beauvoir’s theory, “One is not born, but rather, becomes a woman” (Beauvoir, 1953, p. 273). Here, Beauvoir argues that to be a woman is not to be defined by biological sex but rather shaped by patriarchal societal norms and expectations on how women should appear and act. Many female artists have used performance as a platform to challenge the idea of women solely existing as passive objects, expressing how womanhood is a socially learned role rather than an innate biological destiny. It highlights the persistent pressure to navigate and conform to external expectations.

This leads me to the work of feminist performance artist VALIE EXPORT. In a series of performances, she called *Tap and Touch Cinema* (1968-1989), EXPORT plays into the role of performative femininity to challenge the overly sexualised female body portrayed in Hollywood cinema. Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey explores this in her essay, *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*, writing:

In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly. In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness (Mulvey, 1975, p. 11).



Fig 1. VALIE EXPORT, *TAPP und TASTKINO (TAP and TOUCH CINEMA)*, 1968-1989

During the performance, EXPORT strolls Vienna's busy shopping district, wearing a cardboard box fitted with armholes on her upper body; the front of the box is cut out, with a curtain covering her exposed breasts. During the performance, EXPORT is accompanied by her male friend, Peter Wiebel, who acts as her 'pimp.' Throughout the performance, he encourages members of the public, predominantly men, to reach through the curtain and fondle EXPORT's breasts (Alberro, 2000). Through this performance, EXPORT investigates the concept of 'expanded cinema,' a concept devised by American filmmaker Stan Van Der Beek, referring to bringing character stereotypes outside the screen (Shaw, 2024). In EXPORT's piece, she expands on Van Der Beek's concept by using her body as a medium to play into the oversexualised female character seen in films. This piece was especially powerful as

EXPORT embodies performative femininity to reclaim spectatorship over the female body, altering the female body from “passive object to active participant”, while forcing the male audience to publicly address their “erotic fantasies” towards the female body (Alberro, 2000, p. 136).

Like EXPORT, Hannah Wilke is known to challenge the over sexualised and objectified female body throughout art history and modern media. We see this in Wilke’s 1976 performance piece, *Hannah Wilke Through the Large Glass*, where the artist uses her own body to critique the male gaze (Vigneault, 2017). At the beginning of the performance, we see Wilke dressed in a white two-piece men's suit topped with a matching fedora as she strikes fashion poses behind the cracked glass screen of Marcel Duchamp’s infamous conceptual piece, *The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors* (1915-23). The cracked glass of Duchamp’s work disrupts the pleasure of viewing the female nude, questioning how we perceive women through a broken patriarchal system (Vigneault, 2017). As the performance progresses, Wilke gradually strips off her clothes, revealing her naked body to the viewer. By utilising these dramatically sexualised poses, Wilke playfully mocks the eroticisation of the female nude throughout art history and media, using her own body to directly challenge the male gaze.



Fig 2. Hannah Wilke, *Through the Large Glass*, 1976

Medical gaze

This section focuses on the historical control of women through the threat of institutionalisation and diagnoses of hysteria. This will be discussed through the lens of the medical gaze, using the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris as an example. The medical gaze is a concept devised by French Philosopher Michel Foucault that outlines a medical practice where doctors would diagnose patients through a “biomedical paradigm, filtering out what is deemed as irrelevant material” that resulted in establishing “an abusive power structure” (Misselbrook, 2013, p. 312). This is relevant to cases of female patients admitted to the Salpêtrière hospital in Paris, France during the seventeenth century for what doctors diagnosed as hysteria.

Research shows that most women admitted to Salpêtrière hospital were not mentally ill but instead punished for defying patriarchal norms and structures. This could

include a woman disagreeing with her husband, being poor, prostitution, or having a libido that was considered either too low or too high. Choosing to be single and/or not being able to have children were also considered hysteria (Bosworth, 2000). Doctors believed that hysteria was caused by a 'wandering' or 'sad' uterus, while marriage was a recognised 'cure' for hysteria (Semmons, 2026). Feminist critic and writer Elaine Showalter expands on this writing: "During an era when patriarchal culture felt itself to be under attack by its rebellious daughters, one obvious defense was to label women... as mentally disturbed" (Showalter, 1987, p. 145). This highlights how doctors exploited the diagnoses of hysteria not as a genuine illness, but to further control, dismiss, and silence women in general, but especially those who deliberately acted against the patriarchy.

The level of control and submission forced upon these women at Salpêtrière links to the 'docile bodies' concept within the medical gaze. Docile bodies refers to Foucault's theory that implementing various methods of power and control would result in a more disciplined and obedient individual (Foucault, 1995). This has been expanded on by feminist writers such as Sandra Lee Bartky, by applying it to gender, demonstrating how the female body has historically been forced into docility due to patriarchal structures and expectations. Some of the expectations of women within the patriarchal structure were to obey fathers and husbands, and to provide domestic and sexual services for their husbands (Bartky, 1988). This further solidifies how women at Salpêtrière were seen as victims of this docility, forced into submission to appease the patriarchy. The hysteria diagnosis, or the threat of institutionalisation among women, spread beyond Salpêtrière, into most of mainland Europe with literary traces

discovered in the Netherlands, Russia, Scandinavian countries, Spain, Italy, and Germany (Koehler, 2013).

Today, the medical gaze is still prominent in the form of medical misogyny. As well as women not always being believed about their medical symptoms (Werner & Malterud, 2003), most medical treatment is still predominantly catered to and tested on the male body. Heart attacks present differently in women, but most people are only told how to recognise the symptoms that present in men. Similarly, CPR is taught on masculine dummies. Women in the military were expected to keep in step with male soldiers during marches, which causes medical problems in their joints due to a different average stride than in males (Criado-Perez, 2020). Men will get painkillers for most procedures, whereas women are less likely to get painkillers for more invasive procedures like coil insertion and smear tests (Guzikevits et al., 2024).

To challenge the historical notion of female hysteria, contemporary female artists have attempted to reclaim the harmful representation of the hysterical woman. This leads to the work of Leila Hekmat, who implements theatre, performance, costume design, and video into her work to redefine society's preconceptions of what it means to be a woman today. In Hekmat's cabaret-inspired performance, *Symptom Recital: Music for Wild Angels* (2022), she highlights how symptoms of hysteria that women were once punished for, such as being outspoken or sex-positive, can be liberating for women (May, 2022). Instead of attempting to 'treat' women, the work celebrates their differences. Through this, Hekmat shifts the negative stigma surrounding women's hysteria to a more positive one; she describes her 'patients' as "delightfully ill",

embracing their alleged hysterical symptoms in a world where Western women can express themselves and can challenge the patriarchy without threat of institutionalisation (Leila Hekmat, n.d.).



Fig 3. Leila Hekmat, *Symptom Recital: Music for Wild Angels*, 2022

Abjection

Abjection, within the context of art defines “artworks which explore themes that transgress and threaten our sense of cleanliness and propriety particularly referencing the body and bodily functions” (Tate, 2022). Longhurst (2001) points out that male bodies are seen as more in control due to not having experiences of broken waters leading to birthing a child, lactation, and menstruation. These ‘leaky bodies’ can be seen as abject.

Abject art is especially popular among feminist performance artists, as it disrupts how women are expected to behave by using methods seen as unclean and provocative. Abject art was heavily influenced by feminist novelist and philosopher Julie Kristeva, who wrote, "The abject is perverse because it neither gives up nor assumes a prohibition, a rule, or law; but turns them aside, misleads, corrupts; uses them, takes advantage of them, the better to deny them" (Kristeva, 1982, p. 15). Within the context of feminist art, abjection is often used to dismantle the trope of the passive woman.

We see the use of abjection in Carolee Schneeman's iconic performance, *Interior Scroll*. Schneeman first performed the piece at the *Woman Here and Now* exhibition in Hampton, New York, in 1975, before an audience of female artists. The performance began with Schneeman entering the room carrying a white sheet and a bucket of mud. Schneeman carefully undresses herself before jumping onto a table, wrapping herself in the sheet and announcing to the audience that she will be reading from her book, *Cezanne, She Was a Great Painter* (Horne, 2020). The performance progresses with Schneemann discarding the sheet and painting herself with mud before embarking on a series of dramatised poses resembling those of a life model while reciting lines from her book. Schneemann then proceeds to gently pull a scroll of paper from her vagina, its contents containing a direct response to female film theorist Annette Michelson, who reportedly refused to watch Schneemann's films, labelling them "essentialist", "messy" and "too personal" (Horne, 2020, p. 1000).

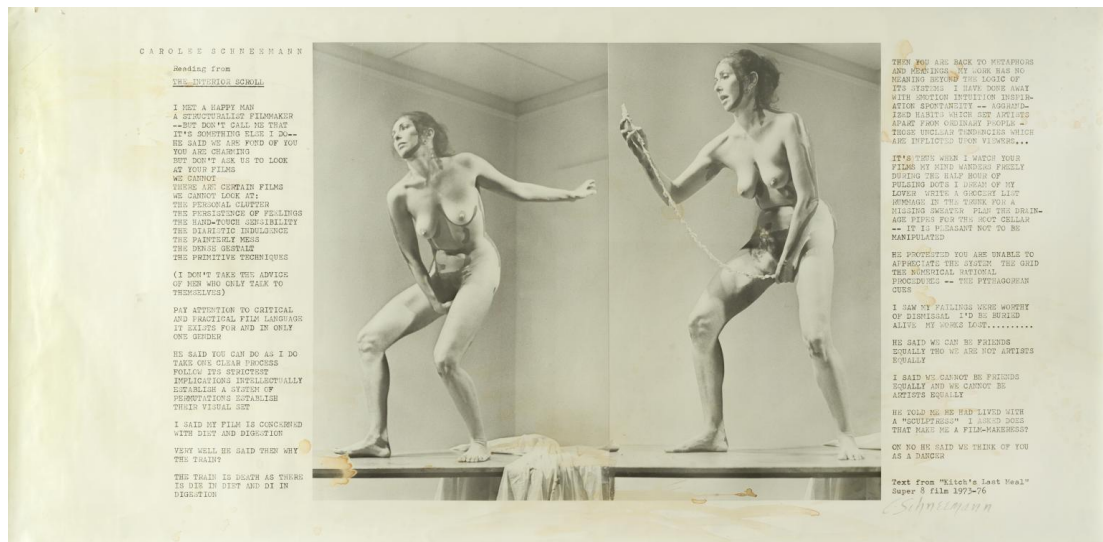


Fig 4. Carolee Schneemann, *Interior Scroll*, 1975.

The scroll text featured segments of a Super 8 film directed by Schneemann in 1973, titled *Kitch's Last Meal*. The film entails a conversation with filmmaker and Schneemann's ex-lover, Anthony McAll, "in which the artist sets intuition and bodily processes, traditionally associated with 'woman', against traditionally 'male' notions of order and rationality" (Manchester, 2003). This segment of film was used to comment on perceptions of women's bodies as unordered and irrational in a male-dominated art world that Schneemann would later describe as 'personal clutter' and 'painterly mess' (Horne, 2020).

This performance was highly controversial for its time as it challenged traditional views surrounding art and gender, due to Schneemann's criticism towards the silencing of women through her provocative reaction to critique. Schneemann's work introduces the concept of the female body as a source of inner knowledge and creativity. *Interior*

Scroll reflects on Schneeman's thinking around "Vulvic Space," which she describes as:

I thought of the vagina in many ways-- physically, conceptually: as a sculptural form, an architectural referent, the source of sacred knowledge, ecstasy, birth passage, transformation. I saw the vagina as a translucent chamber of which the serpent was an outward model: enlivened by its passage from the visible to the invisible, a spiraled coil ringed with the shape of desire and generative mysteries, attributes of both female and male sexual powers. This source of 'interior knowledge' would be symbolized as the primary index unifying spirit and flesh in Goddess worship (Schneemann cited in Tate, 2003).

Similarly, this use of abjection can be seen through many of Cuban performance artist Ana Mendieta's works. Between 1973 and 1980, Mendieta embarked on a series of performances titled *Body Tracks*. In this series of performances, Mendieta uses her body as a medium to paint with blood, slowly dragging her blood-soaked arms down a white gallery wall in a ritualistic manner (Cabañas, 1999).

The work links to Yves Klein's 1960s *Anthropometries* works, where he employed women as "living paintbrushes", smothering them in blue paint to capture imprints of the female nude on paper (Klein cited in MoMA, 2008). This was controversial as referring to women in this way stripped them of their identity and lessened the female form to artistic material as opposed to active participants. On the contrary, in *Body Tracks*, Mendieta uses her own body as the medium for her own work, reclaiming agency while criticising an art world dominated by men (Szymanek, 2016).

Nevertheless, Mendieta's choice of blood as medium is especially relevant in this piece as it introduces the female body as a site of abjection, which correlates with Kristeva's theory surrounding bodily fluids and the female body.



Fig 5. Ana Mendieta, *Body Tracks*, 1982.

Kristeva defines menstrual blood as a source of danger: “issuing from within the identity (social or sexual); it threatens the relationship between the sexes within a social aggregate and, through internalization, the identity of each sex in the face of sexual difference” (Kristeva, 1982, p. 71). Although Mendieta uses animal blood as opposed to menstrual blood in her work (Szymanek, 2016), it still actively addresses the taboo surrounding female bodily fluids recognised by Kristeva. Through *Body Tracks*, Mendieta redefines blood from something society views as dangerous and

threatening into a medium that embodies women's resistance, reclaiming agency of the female body.

Conclusion

Although I began my research with three very different keywords, I found connections between the three by applying female performance art to each. This was not my intention initially, but in researching each keyword, I found many female performance artists that aligned nicely with my keywords. A connection that revealed itself between these artists and other artists that I did not include was an anger towards the patriarchy and how many female artists use their bodies to reclaim a power that had historically been denied to women.

For next year, I would like to explore these areas further and include concepts such as the risk of further objectification when female artists expose their bodies for their art. I want to focus on performance video work, but I would also like to consider how female rage is portrayed in contemporary films such as *Midsommar* (2019), *Pearl* (2022) and *The Substance* (2024) and how this may influence my practice. Another potential area of deeper exploration is the three distinct parts of Mulvey's male gaze.

This research has focused on women who become the subject of their work as a force against oppression. In my own work, I have started to include aspects of this, as a recent piece included a video of myself. I would like to further explore the idea of turning myself into the subject in my future work. This has led me to the potential final

question: *How are contemporary feminist artists working to transform the female body from an object of patriarchal surveillance into a site of embodied resistance?*

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