

Feminist Performance Art: The Body as a Site for Political Strategy

The 1960s and 1970s saw an unprecedented participation from female artists in the growing practice of performance art. Undoubtedly, this insurgence was heavily linked to the momentum of early feminist activism in North America. The Women's Liberation movement was one of several radical movements that were simultaneously active during that period. Others included the Civil Rights Movement, anti-Vietnam protests, as well as sub-movements for free speech and free love. This heightened degree of social unrest gave new role to artists as social and political agitators. Historian Irving Sander explains that until the 1960s political radicalism and artistic radicalism were kept separate however it was this era that "artists attempted to come to terms with their sense of moral duty by responding to the deepening social crisis of the decade[s]." (Wark 22)

The historical overview of these events and developments is essential in clarifying the context in which feminist performance art first emerged. The significance of the context points to female artists as introducing a new purpose for art: one that viewed art making as more than just aesthetic expression. These artists viewed performance art and their bodies as sites of social and political change and transformation.

The central premise of my thesis and research argues that feminist performance art played an important role in negotiating a new rapport between body, art and politics. Their vast body of work asserted that the materiality of the radical body is and can be a medium for resistance. Additionally, performative works heavily contributed to recognizing a previously denied professional status to women artists.

I would like to clarify, that for the purpose of this paper, not all women's art is feminist, nor is feminism to be confused with femininity. Rather, I suggest that feminist performance art is inherently political and upholds a conscious effort and intention to remedy effects and conditions of sexism. I would also like to note that the mentioned homogenized feminist activity operating in this era (1960s and 1970s) does not account for voices and contributions of many women of color, working-class women, and LGBTQ women.

A great thematic study of the origins and the development of North American feminist performance is Jayne Wark's *Radical Gestures*. She traces the ideological shifts of feminist art, from a primarily aesthetic movement to a highly politicized practice. She discusses an extensive range of works by feminist artists that use art "as a weapon to renegotiate their role within the art world and to confront the oppressive effects of sexism in the larger culture" (Wark iii).

It is heavily documented that the work of these artists constituted a quest for identity and subjectivity. By touching on early Modern theories of subjectivity, Wark describes that the quest for self-hood lies in the philosophy that "identity is not

innate, but results from our mode of existence... and to attain emancipation the exploited must first become aware of their false consciousness" (Wark 215).

She paints early efforts of feminist art as a slow and painstaking process of realizing true consciousness in order to achieve the goal of emancipation.

To further accent the discursive and backgrounding views of subjectivity and identity of feminist performance art, I bring forward the most important work of feminist philosophy and the starting point of second-wave feminism: Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex*. De Beauvoir declared, "One is not born, but rather becomes a woman. No biological, psychological, or economical fate determines the figure ...which is described as feminine" (De Beauvoir 267). De Beauvoir's work was essential in exposing the presumed equality of sexes in and introduced new thought for understanding the woman's experience and identity. In the quest of truth, knowledge, power, identity and subjectivity, early performance art focused directly on the materiality of the performers' bodies and presenting concrete every day life actions/gestures. Early performance artist Suzanne Lacy articulates this by saying "everything we do – from how we put our socks on, how we sit, how we wash dishes and *why* we are washing dishes? - should be seen as political " (Wark 136).

In *Foucault, Femininity, and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power*, philosophy and gender studies professor Sandra Lee Bartky highlights the significant gender differences in the everyday body through tracking gesture, posture, movement and general bodily comportment. She notes "women are far more restricted than men in their manner of movement and in their spatiality" (Bartky 11). The limited and constrained movement "manifests itself in reluctance

to reach, stretch and extend the body...and in typically posture and general style of movement" (Bartky 11-12). In her breakthrough work, Bartky accounts for the disciplinary practices that engender the docile bodies of women in institutions of modern life. Her observations are key in understanding how the body and its movements became a site of political strategy in early feminist performance art.

Consequently, violating the social order of women's bodies became an important bodily strategy for performance artists. Considering the limited range of appropriate movements self-regulated and imposed on women, a gesture that is outside of said range is inherently radical and politicized. For example, artists often engaged in "vulgar" actions and images in order to disrupt the extent of what was considered inside the "female nature" by performing extreme acts of "vulgar and non-feminine nature". A notorious example of this strategy is *What a Woman Made* (1973) by artist Mako Idemitsu, where she reveals a tampon leaching a trail of menstrual blood into pristine, white water.

Another politicized strategy is that of using the body as a site for erased history and memory. In critique of the hidden record of women in Western History, feminist artists began to engage in their own reconstruction of history and stories of self. Memory was drawn as a way to reassert subjectivity of one's particular history. Toronto artist Lisa Steele's *In Birthday Suit: Scars and Defects* (1974), is a performance piece where she gives a "show and tell" of every scar and defect her body has accumulated through a troubled and possibly abusive past. The traces left on the body position it as a repository for history, memory and passage of time.

Perhaps the most important strategy is that of employing the body as a site for transformation and healing. The performative body was and is the most readily and available medium for women to articulate their concerns. Performance was not an aesthetic end-result but rather a cathartic means to deal with difficult and painful experiences. One of the most important practitioners of this strategy was Linda Montano. The autobiographical element of her performances goes beyond most artists. She has not only used her life as a source for her art, but she has made herself a form of living art as she designs her life activities as art and frames them within the art world. Her most resilient work is her *One Year Performance* where she spent an entire year connected to artist Tehching Hsieh connected by an eight-foot rope.

Feminist performance art allowed women to place themselves, both literally and figuratively at the very centre of their artwork. This genre has been the most historically successful in using the body as a site for political strategies. Most frequently these women used their somatic materiality as medium for history and memory, as sites of transformation and healing and where the personal becomes political. Feminist performance art served as an effective method in engaging in both aesthetic and social concerns, while pioneering dialectics of oppression and liberation. These empirical strategies and tactics were not always well received by the public. However, we can now retrospectively recognize the importance of these historical perspectives as being agents of socio-political change and transformation and giving women artists the much-deserved professional status in the art world.

Works Cited

Bartky, Sandra Lee. *Foucault, Femininity and the Modernization of Patriarchal Power*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. Print.

Beauvoir, Simone de. *The Second Sex*. New York: Vintage Books 1989, c.1952. Print.

Wark, Jayne Marie. *The Radical Gesture: Feminism and Performance Art in the 1970s*. Toronto: U of Toronto, 1997. Print.

Artworks Cited

Linda Montano and Tehching Hsieh. *One-Year Performance*. (1970, 1983)

Lisa Steele. *Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects* (1974)

Mako Idemitsu. *What a Woman Made* (1963)