

Feminism, Performance Art and The Perception of Marina Abramovic

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Abstract

By the 1970s, performance art had become well-known and popular. However, because many performance artists aggressively abused their bodies in their works, they were labeled narcissistic and hyperbolic. The art practice of Abramovic addresses a multitude of debate-oriented feminine issues that pertain to challenge and conceptualisation. To put it in terms of feminist post-structuralism, her thesis is extremely influential in the effort to overcome the rigidity and arbitrariness correlated with gender stereotypes. Abramovic is inverting these basic distinctions and therefore making entirely new outlets available to both artists and the general public. While she does not openly accept the term herself as a feminist, it would be difficult to figure such messages in her work which instead tends to drive into traditional gender norms. An analysis of Abramovic's work reveals that the concept of art doesn't need to include 'feminism'. However, Marina has a wide influence over the contemporary practice of performance art.

Keywords: Feminism, Feminist Art, Performance Art, Marina Abramovic, Guerrilla Girls.

Introduction

Feminist art is a genre of art aligned with the feminist ideology of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Feminist art draws attention to the social and political inequalities that women face in their daily lives. For the first time in modern history around 1970 the woman in North America and Great Britain gathered together politically to protest their exclusion from male dominated exhibitions and institutions. They challenged the museums of Modern Art Institutions calling for continuous, non-juried exhibitions. They demanded space for working for both male and female artists in area of political, theoretical and aesthetic issues. Feminist artists in many countries shared similar concerns and feminism developed as an international movement with local socio economic and ideological factors exploring in different ways. The reclaiming of past histories was only one of several areas of feminist investigation. Many of them sought forms through which to valorise women's experience and the early 1970s period show an explosion of work that consciously reinserted women's personal experiences into art practice. For the first time many women produced work with their naked bodies as subjects & exploring from their personal points of view.

Women infiltrated the conventional and academic art world that had been dominated by white male artists. As Simone de Beauvoir illuminates in *The Second Sex*, "Representation of the world, like the world itself, is the work of men; they describe it from their own point of view, which they confuse with the absolute truth"¹. Historically the art world was dominated by men, with the advent of progressive contemporary art in contrast to a society of conservative art. This is no anomaly in the art world. It is the evolving social political environment of the sixties and seventies that inspired feminists to make use of performance art as a personal and political weapon. Lynn Hershman Lesson said "In Women Art Revolution, women were able to enter the art scene through performance"². Women involved in performance art movement in late 1960s and "took up the challenge of developing new artistic strategies,"³ by transforming a traditional space into a potential platform for social change.

My point of interest is to how feminism has been incorporated into the performance art practice and how Marina Abramovic well-known as 'Grandmother of Performance Art' has interpreted and addressed it. Where she has connected or disconnected her work with feminist performance art. Feminist performance artists worked with their own experience which



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allowed them to make their own contribution as a woman and artist. Here I need to explore the source of feminism and their progress through ages in terms of performance art and how Marina Abramovic addressed it through her work practice.

Abramovic's early exploration of performance art in the 1970s, when she and other female performers used performance in order for the use of the body, spectatorship and tradition and length to highlight a large and varied woman presence. In her early long durational art, she was influenced by the feminist performance art to use time and potentiality as a tool as a method for both combating passive perception and measuring one's strength.

Feminism and Performance Art

Performance as a medium of feminist art has been used to express the anger of women to change. The process has been revolutionaries by female performers and translated into a strong political response through cultural intervention and affirmation 'personal is political'. Denying the unbiased male genius metaphor significantly linked the feminist message stated academic art, and traditional practice is not excluded from politics. The perceptions of women vary from men from an essentialist point of view and their art clearly distinguishes. Feminism is also defined as wave with stages that seek to improve the equality and equitable opportunities of women in society. Then the wave defeats before it creates another wave. This grouping allows us to discern groups with distinct aims and features and to establish a wide timeline for the evolution of feminism. The start of this revolutionary movement were taken place in the West and gradually spread across the world.

The modern feminist wave continued from the 19th Century to the 21st century undergoing many ups and downs, continuation, and discontinuation in the process. When it started it was termed as 'The first wave of feminism' (1850-1940). In the context of capitalist society and political structure, first-wave feminism emerged in the ground to tie the political campaign for gender empowerment and radical actions in Europe and the United States. First-wave feminism continued concerning exposure and equality for women and they influenced feminism all over the east and western societies throughout the 20th century. 'The second wave of feminism' continued from 1960s-1980s and its radical art revolution sparked full blast with the efforts to promote civil and homosexual rights and to fight the battle. It was also break the traditional attitudes and stereotypes against a new era in performance art practice. 'The third wave of feminism' was continued in 1990s and it shows more inclusiveness in race and gender for women.

Guerrilla Girls and Feminist Revolt

Guerrilla Girls is a group of women feminist activist artist of 1985 from New York City. Gradually a number of people joined them to actively participate with a twofold orientation of attracting the stereotypic art houses towards them and getting exposed from the male dominating art society. The rise of the group was raising voice against the exhibition held in Museum of Modern art in New York City in 1985

where among one hundred sixty-nine artists only thirteen were female. This imbalance became the spark for the establishment of a potential and influential group of activists in the art world to fight racism and sexism.

Those women artists and art practitioners stayed quiet and adopted fake identities of past renowned women artists. They questioned for this discrimination and made public aware through their self-posing posters which were composed with bold statements but also showed an ironic sense of humour. The posters carried the legend "A public service message from the Guerrilla Girls, conscience of the art world."⁴

Their physical representation was addressing the discrimination of male and female artist, lack of getting offers from good galleries, no such significance in History of Art, unequal pay, female nudity, family and personal physical issues. They used to wear Gorilla mask in front of public and their postures to show masculinity as an act of performance to keep focus on their issues, humour and an odd visual identity to represent gender and corruption in all aspects of society. By exposing ignored understory, subtext and unacceptable we diminish the value of a mainstream narrative. They believed in a feminism that fought against sexism and promotes human rights for all genders and all races. They did huge number of street posters, stickers, street projects etc. all over the world like Mexico City, New York, London, Istanbul, Shanghai, Rotterdam, Bilbao etc. They projected their retrospective in Bilbao and Madrid. They used to do projects and exhibitions to stand against and attacking the unpleasant behaviour and inequality practices by the most prominent museums and art houses of New York. One of their most popular travelling show was Guerrilla Girls: Not ready to make nice but attracted thousands. They can be anyone and anywhere in between the crowds with an eager to change the perception of the world against discriminations.

Performance art and Marina Abramovic

In performance work generated by second-wave feminism this present artistic approach has without question challenged to women's personal and political viewpoints. One of the distinct problems in this early work was a denial of the patriarchal domesticity and a good revival of femininity by goddess's depictions. In Martha Rosler's work 'Semiotics of Kitchen' (Fig.1 & Fig.2) gives a voice of protest for feminist act. Kitchen challenges the powerful system of the patriarchy of women's colonial status as consumers. Rosler stares right at the camera and sees herself as a cynical observer and not a survivor of the senseless repetition of domestic servitude and materialistic obsession.

Schneider stated 'On the one hand, 'woman' is exposed as constructed, shown to be the dream of patriarchy and ultimately a ruse servicing the desire determined by capitals. On the other hand, there is the resiliently physical fact of bearing a body marked female and experiencing the resultant social reality effects of bearing those markings.

If performance art considered as a non-formal creative approach then feminist performances have a huge gender potentiality to unhinge the very deep structures and assumptions about gender⁵. The female body may be viewed as a politically as the blockage between nature and society, the performance functions of the body, contradicts the perception of women as passive objects⁶. Female performance artist might use their bodies as a focus in their art in every way, sometimes it was expressed of nakedness or overt use of culture and personal experience of the politicised body. Subversion takes place as a response to a structured.

Performance art was already widely known and often embraced by the 1970s. But since various artists violently exploited their bodies in their works, they were also seen as narcissist and hyperbolic. Abramovic performed *Rhythms 0* (Fig. 3) as a reaction to this criticism, where she remained motionless and handover herself to the audience as if she is an object. There were seventytwo objects which included grapes, feather, honey, gun, whip, rose, bullet etc. Abramovic broke her stillness as object at the end of the six-hour span and started walking. The public was scared that they would challenge her as a human.

This is one of the most influential works ever in her career and performance history. Her work based upon challenging the physical limitations in every aspect and building the emotional stance and relation towards artist and viewers. is one of the most influential performing artists of last three decades. Abramovic's work focusing mainly on body limits, stamina and pushing emotional barriers within herself and the public. *Rhythm 0* is one of her older works from her lifetime that visually showed the seventytwo subjects public reactions to both joy and pain.

The *Rhythm 0* action is solely at the public's hands. This environment was created by Abramovic because she desired to know about the public. In this kind of case, what can they do? The public's acts started with optimism and compassion, as stated in the note. Audience first tested that how much truthful the statement of the artist is. The people seemed again to have a sense of confidence as further acts in the risk factor were taken without effects. There are no law-abiding repercussions after avoiding all liability. Two key points are laid out in this definition in the performances. The meaning of results and the psychological effects of seeing a person as a subject. People unleash their inner beast without accountability and repercussions. Both inhibitions and the sense of right and wrong become blur till the end of performance. After six hours of stillness she break the silence and stood up while proceeding towards the audience. Audience got scared and run away.

Marina Abramovic's Perception of Feminism

Marina Abramovic never described herself as a feminist, she's always seen something about her work as having a definite feminist trend. In her writings on feminist art, Jayne Wark has argued that it is not necessarily the presence of a feminist intention behind art that is important but rather the political implications of the art and whether or not these

implications engage in a feminist discourse⁷. Themes and concepts behind many of Abramovic's works were significant for feminism and feminist art – including the body and its limitations, the reactive-active binary and the adaptation of the principle of individual artistic creativity in the avantgarde field of art. In the previous works of Abramovic a certain respect for the body leads one to investigate the ways that the audience and the performer behave in the performance and respond with their bodies. She looks at how pain limits affect the body showed particularly in some of her aggressive works. The way the viewer responds to the body of the performer, particularly when roles are flipped to the active participant of the public offers an insightful and new approach at the female body. In conditions this strategy is much more relevant where the body of Abramovic has intentionally been susceptible to the public. Her later work 'Seven Easy Pieces' (2005) provides an overview of how Abramovic's performance will help in Art history and history of performance art a collective feminist initiative. It reveals that art doesn't have to draw attention to it as feminist in order to be read as feminist art.

Abramovic also highlights her body as an essential medium for her performance which has utmost presence from starting to end and also challenges physical limits of the body. This feminist analysis acknowledges clearly the role of the body in establishing social hierarchy in relation to art practice. It also considers the patriarchal repression of sexual desires and urges used to satisfy a hierarchical system and inferior females of the society. In her establishment of the self/other dichotomy, Simone de Beauvoir defines one of the ways in which the constructed social hierarchy works with the body⁸. Abramovic was inspired from the artist like John Cage, Marcel Duchamp and number of avant-garde artist from post war who showed the revolutionary pathways of performance art. In performance she pushed her body and mind in such extremes that other artist of same era couldn't even think of. While challenging in extremity she also explores what she calls the desperation in contemporary culture to overcome the body 's limits⁹. So Abramovic's performance need not to be read as feminist.

'Abramovic's Lips of Thomas'(Fig.4) an important performance art 1975 held in Krinzinger Gallery in Innsbruck. This shows the artist's ability to explore both the boundaries of his anatomy and the consequences of pain and enjoyment. At the case, Abramovic undressed, framed a man with a five-pointed star, stood there, ate a kilogramme of sweetheart, drained a bottle of wine and then split the bottle. The Artist cut a five-point star into her belly as she looked away from the portrait of the guy and bowing in front of it and bit herself with a whip, when she cut herself enough she laid down on an ice block. But a heater placed overhead of her so that the bleeding continuous with the temperature. She was rescued by the audience after thirty minutes when found fainted. This work was an infringement of both artist and artist's limitations with the audience. She put the viewers in a voyeuristic position as they did

not fully adhere and driven by societal norms of conduct which is an effective interfere. Every aspect of the performance was intended to return the audience in a certain manner, which required them to engage in an awkward situation. The listener is then left to understand in a tight position. In its performance the audience might intervene to prevent themselves from choosing between ethical dilemmas (interrupt in performance) and aesthetic concerns (remains a passive viewer). Abramovic has used deliberately some signs and symbols which carries different meanings. Samantha Henman quoted here "could allude to highly different mythical, religious, cultural, historical, and political contexts, as, for instance, it could be used as a symbol of Venus or, generally, for femininity"¹⁰. The viewer is put between ethics and aesthetics by Abramovic and the focus is given to the futility of spectators Interpretation represents the controversial role which feminist artists hold especially in a time period that is incorrectly referred to as post-feminist.

Abramovic stated, "demystification of the artistic act [and] the democratization of art are significant concerns for her artistic practice"¹¹. One of her most important performance in this aspect is 'Seven Easy piece' (Fig. 5, Fig.6, Fig.7, Fig.8) which was a re-enactment performance act in Solomon Guggenheim museum, 2005. Since 1970s she has taken performance art the medium of visual art expressions and body became the most important medium and subject matter. Her stamina determined the conditions for her early works. She has defined pain, fatigue and risk in a quest for change in her discovering her physical and mental boundaries. In this performance Abramovic re-enacts the works of her peers from 1960s to 70s. For most of the shows in the crucial early years, no evidence is available. One has to always have to rely on the evidence provided or photos that only present parts of a specific thing. Seven Easy Pieces discuss how an art form which in essence is ephemeral can be reconstructed and preserved. The reason behind Abramovic's reenacting the 'Seven easy piece' was absolutely important as part of a feminist art history conversation. For her series Abramovic selected few artists who individually have distinct ideas behind their own work and makes clear that gender or politics are not the driving force behind their appropriation. The aim of Abramovic is to reform what was then the 'canon' of the performing arts history and make it available to new generation art lovers. The value of usability also leads to Seven Easy Pieces challenging the notion of male artistic genius that has far so long infiltrated the world of art history. The reinterpretation of Abramovic makes great performing works what everyone can do, and what makes them fantastic is not that they are made by great people, but that they are common and important whether Bruce Nauman performed in the 1970s or one of Abramovic's students performed last week. The significance of Abramovic art practice lays

in the universality interacts to different view point stating 'Pluralist variety' in Feminist approach of art.

Aim of the Study

The key intention of this study is to explore the specific connection between feminism and performance art and how the iconic performance artist Marina Abramovic addresses the issue of feminist ideology in her works.

Conclusion

This exploration shows the relationship of the uprising of feminist movement with its effect in society and the seventies development of feminist performance art in North America. Feminist performance has helped redefine our understanding of aesthetic practise and its position in modern culture by bringing into question the presumption that art is an individual endeavour separated from ordinary contingencies from the previous Art Historical record, the feminist performance history should be seen by a political art phase which has used the base of aesthetic experience to fight and raise the voice in order to improve the situations and sufferings going parallel silently in the professional and personal front of women. Under the broader conceptual understanding of feminism, it has been accomplished that they played a very effective role in changing the conventional discourse and to up bring equal rights for women in art field lying centre of modernist and post-modernist practice.

Even the most revolutionary Feminist performance group 'Guerrilla Girls' fights continue till after thirty years towards the direction of equality and feminism. They have reinvented the word 'F' stands for feminism. They enormously continued to perform culturally and publicly on streets and in art houses of New York City and reached a level beyond gender, sex, race, and politics. Their fight gained success in a wider understanding of Pop culture and an utmost important model for the most creative ways to take feminism to next level where disinterest and disconnection are common than passion and zeal to do something better for society.

Variety found in the art practise of Abramovic is significant how it addresses a host of direct problems of feminist debate concerning the history of art and technology. In the sense of feminist post-structuralism and the destruction of rigid and false binaries associated with the role of men and women in society, Abramovic's work is highly significant. Abramovic is doing this by reversing the common use of these binaries and by providing totally different positions and choices for both artists and audiences. While she does not demonstrate freely that she is feminist, it would be counter-intuitive to do so when making the art she does which would only enhance conventional binaries of social roles. As we have seen, the work of Marina Abramovic shows that the art does not have to be referred to as feminism for a feminist discourse. The significance of her art practice lays in the universality interacts to different view point stating "Pluralist variety" in Feminist approach of art.



Figure 1



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5



Figure 6



Figure 7

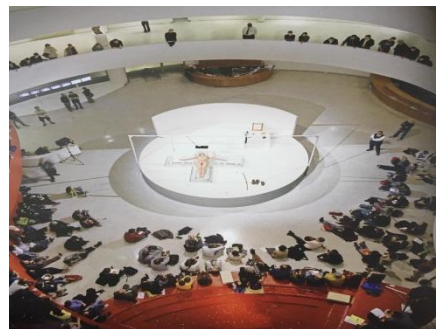


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