

Extreme performance art in the Postmodern era.

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This essay will explore the notion of performance art, with specific reference to controversial/contentious works pertinent to the development of postmodernist art. I will begin to examine a selection of works and explore within the context of postmodernism the influential development of performance art. By looking at some of the most influential performance artists I will try and establish how effective their work has and is within the socio-political context of both art and wider society, and how certain works do effectively articulate current issues in society. The medium of performance is a real political representation, as it is a live enactment, conveying emotion. These works gave the audience the ability to interact, and share the work and even add their voice as it was through their pro-active involvement, as opposed to being a purely passive as an audience. Having such a performance acted out in front of an audience adds a beguiling entrancement to a political idea, as the work is a live enactment, as opposed to a still piece of artwork on a wall. The postmodern era contains many influential performance pieces, which still capture the eye.

To define postmodernism in relation to performance art, the main sector of influence could perhaps be capitalism, and various other influences such as pop/youth culture at the time. Postmodernism as with other eras, appeared to be heavily influenced by society at the time. The postmodern era suggests a new political consciousness, with westernised culture becoming consumed with political controversy, with the freedom to express. Postmodernity could be said to have had an influence on the conceptual aspects in contemporary practice.

Yoko Ono, a playful performance artist, has grasped audiences, with her innovative, vibrant self-expression and political articulation in her overtly expressive performances. Her work appeared to be engaged in politics, peace, and concept. Ono's Dada esque approach performance art was recognised especially in her famous 'Cut Piece' first performed at the Sogetsu Art Center in Tokyo (1964), in which she asked members of the audience to come and cut pieces of her clothes off, one by one. The audience contained males, who also had the chance to cut the clothes off Ono's body. In Ono's statement, she claimed the piece

wasn't a feminist piece, but a piece to represent giving and freedom, "It has to do with the positive and negative side of giving, but we can make it positive. And the funny thing was, most people thought of the other side, which is the body being violated"^[1], Ono realised the portrayal in her work, given that most people perceived the work as a bodily violation. 'Cut Piece' as an original work invited and actively involved direct interaction between Ono and the audience, giving them control and freedom to create the piece. The piece as it's been performed has been perceived as a feminist work, and perhaps still is, given men were allowed to cut the clothes off a woman's body, wherever he desires. Amid its sexual connotation, the piece exudes a sense of giving and sharing, something, which is important to Ono. This piece was the beginning of an artist giving the audience choice over what happens, instead of them being the audience to purely observe a piece, "It always draws something out of people. At Carnegie Hall, it seemed to draw violence out of the audience, like a poison. It is a frightening piece to perform. Very tense, but I wanted to show that we have to trust each other. If I'm going to say that, I have to do it myself. I have to trust people myself. It could be a bit dangerous."^[2] The piece was so open and accessible to the audience, that the outcome would inevitably be different each time, adding danger and suspense to the performance. In great irony, the act of giving in this particular performance was over shadowed by the seemingly Scopophilic desires of the males, who cut her clothes to such an extent, she became entirely nude. Ono's work has always had an obscure edge, for example, 'Fly', where a nude was laid down with several flies crawling all over the body. Fly, similar to Cut piece had sexual connotations, something which Ono seemingly wanted to test peoples perception of vision, "I wanted the film to be an experience where you're always wondering, am I following the movement of the fly or am I looking at the body? I think that life is full of that kind of thing. We're always sort of deceiving ourselves about what we're really seeing."^[3], having a

^[1], <http://onoverse.com/2013/02/cut-piece-1964/> Yoko Ono. (). *Cut Piece (1964)*. Available: <http://onoverse.com/2013/02/cut-piece-1964/>. Last accessed 22nd November 2013.

^[2] <http://onoverse.com/2013/02/cut-piece-1964/> Yoko Ono. (). *Cut Piece (1964)*. Available: <http://onoverse.com/2013/02/cut-piece-1964/>. Last accessed 22nd November 2013.

^[3] <http://verysmallkitchen.com/2012/06/14/flyfly-yoko-onos-sky-cinema-and-propositions-for-a-score-based-art-practice/> - Yoko Ono, 'Fly'. Verysmallkitchen.com. Last accessed 13th November 2013.

piece as bold as this was perhaps designed to work out whether people observed the activity, or the body itself. The piece reflects the audience's behaviour back at them, showing that people acted with voyeurism, and thrived from the idea of the personal interaction with the artist. The extremities in this work are relevant to the postmodern era, with movements such as Fluxus, which Ono was associated with. Ono's work reflects freedom and giving, and is often perceived in a sexual manner, with various dangerous aspects.

An artist I feel closely relates to Ono is, Marina Abramović. Again, her work oozed sexual connotations, and overtly dangerous acts, but although some of the work seemed either risqué or purely lethal, being another highly influential artist, Abramovic opened a whole new horizon for the postmodern performance era. Her work doesn't test the audience in the way Yoko Ono's work does, as her work appears to have more boundaries set, giving the audience less chance to make the piece barbaric. Marina Abramovic's Piece "The Artist is Present" (2012), is a beguiling act, an act in which she doesn't physically interact with the audience, but she connects on a more psychological level. She sat on a chair facing the audience for seven hours a day, for 3 months without a toilet break, and without food and water. This piece, as opposed to Ono's, didn't test the audience as such, but tested her own abilities. This piece reflects endurance, having carried out such a still, quiet piece for so long, with an audience staring back at her for seven hours a day. A piece such as this appears to be less enchanting than a piece of Ono's work, on initial analysis, but when the layers of concept are peeled away, the work actually interacts with the audience in a much deeper way. "The Artist is Present" holds many boundaries as people are not allowed to touch Abramovic, they are merely to observe, which is the complete opposite instruction to that of Ono's piece, yet they appear to work in parallel to one another. Another interesting piece by Abramovic is "Rhythm 0", the last in the Rhythm series, where 70 objects were laid out on a table, and the audience were given instructions to use the objects on Abramovic as they wish. Some of the objects included a spoon, a gun, a bullet, a feather and a scalpel. Rhythm 0 proved to be violent, sadistic, and cruel, "I still have the scars of the cuts," she says quietly. "It

was a little crazy. I realised then that the public can kill you”^[5], she gave the audience the power, and they acted in an almost animalistic way, as if they felt the freedom of not complying to the fabric of society. If you give them total freedom, they will become frenzied enough to kill you. This piece relates greatly to “Cut Piece” by Ono, challenging the audience, again reflecting their own behaviour back at them. In terms of postmodernity, these acts became a new revolution, offering the audience the freedom to do as they wish, which in itself became the piece. Performance art of this nature offers a unique perspective on the idea of an art work, posing as much more than a sculpture or painting, it brings to life an idea, a story, a belief, a way of thinking, in a much more narrative way. Abramovic’s ‘Rhythm 0’ uses the ideas of audience control, to test them, as the concept was to test the audience.

This notion of performance art reflects a feminist idea, although perhaps not intentional, the work opens up a political statement, suggesting that the males take advantage in a situation where they are given complete control of a woman’s body. An essay that analyses feminism is Laura Mulvey’s ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’, where she grasps an understanding of sexist behaviour in films, along with Scopophilia, voyeurism, and the ‘castration complex’. She states that humans have an innate need to look at the human body, “there are circumstances in which looking itself is a form of pleasure, just as, in the reverse formation, there is a pleasure in being looked at”^[4], suggesting the idea of Yoko and Abramovic being absorbed in their ego libido, exuding their own sexuality, and conveying it as an act of endurance or an act of giving. I believe that within the work of Ono and Abramovic, they covertly expose these ideas of sexism, and voyeurism.

Through analysing the messages conveyed in Yoko Ono’s and Marina Abramovic’s work, in relation to the Postmodern era, I have begun to establish that they fit into the wider context,

[5] Sean O’Hagan. (2010). *Interview: Marina Abramovic*. Available: <http://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2010/oct/03/interview-marina-abramovic-performance-artist>. Last accessed 1st December 2013..

[4] Laura Mulvey. (1975). *Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema*. Available: <http://imlportfolio.usc.edu/ctcs505/mulveyVisualPleasureNarrativeCinema.pdf>. Last accessed 5th December 2013.

with the use of the human body, the audience intervening, interacting, and making the piece how they desired, often illustrating a political belief. The audience had choice and power in the making of a piece, changing and radicalising the ideas behind contemporary art works. I believe that although the performances were acts of giving, they also tested the audience, on vision, voyeurism, and endurance. They offered their bodies to their work, which became a unique radicalisation in the world of Postmodern performance art.