

Abbreviated Selections from Masters Thesis:

Pellerano Gomez, Lauren. "The Radical Creative Potential of Feminist Performance Art as Articulated by the [Bakhtinian] Grotesque Body," 2014.

Fashion Studies is an inter-, multi-, trans- disciplinary field of study, which examines fashion as a system, as an industry, as symbolic and as material. Fashion Studies not only engages with the semiotics of dress, display and adornment, but also investigates the "fashioned" social body. This thesis will contribute to the field of Fashion Studies as an examination of the politicized body in visual and material culture. In this thesis, I hope to investigate the legacy of North American feminist performance art, locating the grotesque body at the center of this art marking—as the site of political dissent and radical transformative possibility.

The feminist performance art examined herein—in the works of Suzanne Lacy, Yayoi Kusama and *Go! Push Pops*—transgresses cultural norms by confronting them with the unrestricted grotesque body. In this text, performance art will also be considered as a radical creative practice. Feminist performance art constitutes a form of visual communication and artistic practice that resists attempts of commodification by the 'art market.' As such, feminist performance art is a site for activism as subjects engaged in this art form actively resist the cultural ideals promoted by the hegemonic neo-liberal capitalist economic system.

The theoretical context of thesis is rooted in a framework of feminism(s), contextualized by activism's 'actions' of resistance. This thesis traces the matrilineage of contemporary North American feminist performance art by framing it within the historical context of work produced by feminist artists of the 1970s. The literature review will consider the works that maintain the legacies of feminist performance artists of the 1970s, vis-à-vis selected members of The Feminist Art Movement as originated in Fresno, California. Specific interest will be paid to the co-founder of Womanhouse, artist and activist, Suzanne Lacy. The primary data used in this research consists of interview, experience of live performance and the viewing of recorded video content accessed via Web. The secondary data employed in this research consists of theoretical and historical texts, academic journals, and photographic images. The lens from which this thesis is written is necessarily rooted in the postmodern contemporary. That is to say, this thesis is written from a perspective that acknowledges the intersectionality of themes explored within.

All research conducted for this project is indebted to the work of cultural and social anthropologists, as well as medical sociologists, who have established a basis for examining the "body as text" in the academic tradition. Without this pedagogic precedent, this research would not have been possible.

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While this thesis will spring from the 1970s in North America as its point of origin, it is vital to note—from an art historical perspective—that performance art in the United States is directly derivative of the Dada and Fluxus movements antecedent to its historical development. Also of note, is the fact that feminist performance art existed well before the 1970s, taking root all over the globe. Art as [political] 'actionism' also has a much longer, transnational history.

Performance art stands as the holistic embodiment of a postmodern aesthetic. Performance art, as form, creates a site of pedagogical conflict, one with a multiplicity of

meaning and a lack of fixedness, communicated by a visual layering of signs and symbols. The advent of performance art complicated preconceived notions of 'time', 'space' and 'place'. Performance art creates a new kind of space, in which the space itself may be constructed to serve as a performative landscape (this will be later discussed in relation to the experience of Yayoi Kusama's *Infinity Mirror Room—Phalli's Field*). Performance art is also directional. There is a spatial relationship between that which is viewed and those who are viewing it—as with painting, drawing, sculpture or photography—however, this particular space is markedly different from the others mentioned. A performance is an art changed by the relationship between various persons present in and during the performance. There is an element of temporality which mediates the piece, as do the bodies involved in its execution.

As a form of "live arts," performance art is necessarily transient—even when documented—occurring in a specific time and place, with an intrinsic relationship to the "where" and the "when" to which it belongs. Performance art, both feminist and non-feminist, is site specific. While the meaning of each "performed" act is unfixed, the work being situated in a certain time and place signifies its context.

When art is classified as "performance," the work is activated, as the piece is acknowledged as an *action*—something in process. What makes performance art different from other forms of creative expression is that there are agents present in the moment of the art 'happening (n.)' and in the instance of this art 'happening (v.)' to, around, or near a body.

The use of the female body—of the woman artist's body—as a medium was a radical gesture in the art world of the '60s and '70s. Many feminists took up opposing camps on the issue, as some feminists argued the use of the body in performance re-inscribed the visual language of 'woman as commodity' dominating the popular culture. Women artists who had been exposed to dada, Fluxus and Surrealism, lifted elements from previous art practices, adding reflexivity and a fearless vulnerability, igniting the art scene and confounding viewers.

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In the documentary detailing the events both leading to and transpiring during the Feminist Art Movement, *Women Art Revolution*, film critic B. Ruby Rich explained the enigmatic shift in women's art practice during the 1970s. She notes, "Instead of the female body being the enemy of an artist, or the muse for an artist, suddenly, it really became not just the *stuff* of work but the tool of work" (Hershman Leeson, 2012).

The question of authorship and of maintaining authority without compromising authenticity was a struggle for many feminist artists of the 1960s and 1970s. As male voices dominated much of art theory, art criticism and many institutional positions in museums, galleries and the academy, women making feminist art were constantly being challenged to defend their work and their process. Some feminist performance artists responded by creating work that was increasingly confrontational, as well as work that could not be bought and sold at will.

Alternatively, many feminist artists—especially those involved in performance or 'live arts' happenings—used their bodies as a powerful medium for resistance. Through the body, feminist performance artists blurred the line between the public and private. Their particular form of art making challenged notions of space, institution, performance and the everyday while closing the gap between artist and viewer.

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Yayoi Kusama's infinity rooms employ a radical aesthetic that fundamentally challenges questions of the 'real,' the 'imaginary,' the embodied and the infinite. Kusama's *Infinity Mirror Room—Phalli's Field* is an installation that functions as part sculpture, part happening. The space is activated upon the viewer's entering. The piece requires a subject to enter its walls, and yet it confuses the subject-object relationship through the repetition of patterns and physical mirroring. Kusama's chamber of mirrors is arranged as an optical illusion, generating a landscape of infinite self-reflection in the literal sense of the term.

While Kusama's renegotiation of the original *Infinity Mirror Room—Phalli's Field* no longer allows for viewers to climb into the piece—there is a barrier in place at The Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam—the refraction of images created by the mirrored space lends itself to a multiplicity of meanings. Mimetic images are interrupted by soft, spotted, polychromatic objects that are at once nebulous and static, in red and white. Kusama's piles of bulbous forms blur the boundaries between the planes of the room, obscuring the space where the work's edges end and the infinite begins.

Citation:

Hershman Leeson, Lynn. Interview with B. Ruby Rich, 2006. *Women Art Revolution*. Multiple Formats. 2012. Zeitgeist Films, DVD.