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Performers: women, art and action, an examination



↑ *Quisiera yo renegar*. Videoperformance. Carmen F. Sigler, 2008.

The emerging feminist movement of the 1960s analysed all aspects of the oppression of women. The 1960s and 1970s were years of great militancy with protests and demonstrations in the streets, discussions, readings from the most significant feminist writings of the time and debates. There was much discussion of stereotyped sexual relations, whose imposed models were viewed as relations of power. Theories were expounded on the body as a territory of pleasure, colonised by men and over which they exercised cultural and physical control —control that women needed to recover in order to manage their own bodies. Increasingly, personal relations were seen as political relations as the patriarchy came under the spotlight.

This feminist movement and its discourses on the body coincided with a change in attitude in art. The period was marked by happenings, actions, assemblies, and the Fluxus movement. Artists began to take an interest in the ordinary objects of everyday life —used and broken things. People saw the possibility of bringing art to the world of the everyday; there was an attempt to bring art down from its pedestal, with a less serious and more experimental approach to the process of artistic creation. Happenings, activities and actions came from that broad and open terrain where creative disciplines such as theatre, music, poetry, painting, sculpture and dance met and exchanged ideas. New attitudes emerged that abandoned well-trodden artistic paths, standing instead at a new crossroads between different trends.

As early as the late 1950s and the 1960s, the female body was being used in some of the first actions. In 1955 Ann Halprin created an experimental dance piece in San Francisco, entitled *Workshop*, which explored everyday gestures and sought to extend the vocabulary of dance and release the body from traditional choreographic forms. Her work was very much in keeping with the premises of the leading aesthetic movements of the time, as posited by the Situationist International, created in 1956 around the figure of Guy Debord. Debord developed the theory of the transformation of everyday life, criticising the entertainment society. He proposed abandoning art —at least a certain type of art— through game-like invention and the construction of situations, of the *dérive* or «drift». During this period Jiro Yoshihara created the Gutai group in Japan. It contained a number of Japanese women artists, including Atsuko Tanaka, who used new materials to create her performance pieces. In 1956, she produced her famous *Electric Dress*, an outfit composed of flashing coloured light bulbs, one of several works by the artist that reflected on the female body and fashion.

In the late 1960s and early 1970s, with a widespread rejection of the art object, art actions —which began to be known as «performance pieces»— became increasingly common. The new consolidated feminist movement was also becoming very active. Many women depicted the processes

through which their own bodies were passing, exploring the relations between the female body as a subject and as a social object.

In New York in 1960, against this backdrop of ideas and experimentation, a number of different happenings were organised and experimental dance workshops were set up; the participants included women such as Trisha Brown, Lucinda Childs, Simone Forti and Yvonne Rainer, who were to give a strong boost to these new experimental interventionist areas in dance and choreography. A clear feminist tone can also be seen in several of the actions by Japanese artists in the Fluxus movement. For example in Shigeko Kubota's 1965 performance piece, *Vagina Painting*, performed at the Perpetual Fluxfest in New York, the artist used red paint and a brush fastened to her underwear to create an abstract painting on a paper lying on the ground. The piece, executed using overtly sexual pelvic movements, made reference to menstruation and creation, in a sort of feminist version of the *action painting*. In her 1961 work *City Piece*, the New-York-based Japanese artist and member of the Fluxus movement, Yoko Ono encouraged people to «push an empty baby carriage all over the city»; while her *Body Sound Tape Piece* referred to the sound of different emotions and the body. In a 1968 performance piece, Yoko Ono and John Lennon recorded the sounds of the foetus which Ono no later miscarried. This was in line with some of approaches of 1970s essentialist feminism —especially Luce Irigaray— on the discourse elaborated from the female body, from the creative energy of sexuality and the primacy of touch.

In her 1960s performance pieces, Carolee Scheemann also stressed the importance of the female body and female sexuality, which she sought to liberate in her actions, reacting against the male colonisation of the female nude and reaffirming her body as the site of her own sexuality. In 1964, this performer, painter and film-maker created the Kinetic Theater along with a group of other artists. Their *Meat Joy*, performed in Paris that year as part of the Festival of Free Expression, provoked outraged headlines in the French press. Other women artists such as Charlotte Moorman, also working within Fluxus, performed actions that combined musical instruments, silent music, the body and a sense of play.

In this way these women artists not only placed themselves outside the conventional boundaries of art assuming *the removal of the borders between art and life* as the Fluxus movement had it, but also opened up a new way of examining themselves and the world, questioning the established sexual difference that had been socio-culturally imposed in common depictions. The performers of those years opened up new roads along which to move.

From 1970 on, many artists developed specifically feminist works. There was a rise in the number of works that reintegrated the experiences of women in art practice, and these artists had a significant impact on the

use of new materials and processes, exploring the social and political contents of their own existences.

They created performance pieces working in several different directions. Some prioritised the role of their bodies. These included the French artist Gina Oane and the Serbian Marina Abramović, who opted for ritualistic, symbolic and spiritual actions that examined the pain of the flesh, love and death. The Cuban-American Ana Mendieta, made her own reinterpretation of the traditions of worshipping archaic pre-patriarchal goddesses and Afro-Cuban magical rites, using her own body, directly or indirectly, and integrating it into nature. Others questioned the status quo that patriarchal society established for women. These included the American artist Martha Rosler, whose works examined the problems of housewives and mothers and their domestic lives. German artist Rebecca Horn spoke about the imprisonment of the body, wrapping her own body with cloths and objects, in a piece that is reminiscent on the one hand of feminine dresses and on the other of the instruments of bodily control.

These artists are simply a few examples of the many different approaches and directions taken by women performance artists in the 1970s. However, I believe that they share certain characteristics that differentiate them from other periods, such as: the predominant use of their own bodies as a terrain of inquiry and the subject of the action; an accentuation of eroticism, sexuality, pain and their limits, exploring sensations and bodily and mental liberation; a certain austerity in the development and presentation of the pieces; a direct involvement by the performers with the actions, to the point of taking physical risks; an absence, with some exceptions, of technological sophistication in the execution of the pieces; a strong lack of inhibition in the execution of the piece, intentionally or unintentionally provoking the audience; and a certain seriousness and, on occasions, dramaticism of execution. All of this is presented with a strong stress on the feminist tone describing the action.

In the 1980s, theoretical feminism began to question the silence of and about women in the construction of thought and the need to subvert language that had been accepted as universal, aseptic and all-embracing when it actually contained logo-phallogocentric symbols. In their theoretical writings and their oeuvre, feminists began to take into account «gender» differences (masculine and feminine) in an awareness of the androcentrism that had impregnated the habitual artistic representations. As a result, they propounded discourses offering strategies that deconstructed existing ones and framed new approaches from which they reappropriated themselves as subjects, integrating gender and feminist perspectives as mechanisms of construction and active resistance to inherited thought and language.

The 1980s were also the years of postmodernism in the visual arts, the years of eclecticism, when the end of the avant-gardes and global discourses was proclaimed and a theoretical and visual fragmentation was developed. It was in this context that a new generation of artists transformed performance art by integrating technical and communication media, such as photography, cinema, video and television and by infiltrating performance art into other creative areas. In this context one might include —among many others— Cindy Sherman, Jana Sterbak, Laurie Anderson, Sue Williams, Orlan and Diamanda Galas.

Sherman took performance art to the terrain of photography; between 1977 and 1980 she took a series of eighty black-and-white photos, *Untitled Film Still*, which are like frozen moments of an action; photos in which she uses herself as a model to interpret female characters born out of the cultural clichés offered by television and cinema. She transforms herself, morphing into ultra-feminine young women who provoke the spectator's voyeuristic gaze and introduces an ironic and humorous game of looking —at these girls and ultimately at herself. From 1980, on, however, Sherman started to use colour and develop further aspects of theatricality and set-design, using feelings such as horror, disaster and disgust. She is a clear example of the integration of photography into performance art, and one might describe her work as performatic or performative photography.

Another example and attitude from that time can be seen in the work of Jana Sterbak, the Canadian artist of Czech origin, who lived in France and Spain for a period. Some of her pieces were clearly performance art (such as *Artist as a Combustible* from 1986, in which she held burning materials on her head; the piece examined the potentially dangerous nature of inspiration). In others, the objects and people are at the same level, with the former having a semantic force in themselves, making reference to the sometimes absent body. In this regard she was anticipating one of the most interesting facets of 1990s art. I am referring to the series of dresses, such as for example *Remote Control*, from 1989, a kind of remotely controlled motorised metal can-can dress into which the body is inserted and cannot move on its own. The piece reflects on the restrictions and the conditioning factors our civilisation places on the body.

Another example of this incursion of performance art into other areas can be seen in the work of Laurie Anderson, whose high-tech electro-acoustic performances, video clips and videos include special animation effects; Sue Williams who takes performance art to drawing; and the French multimedia artist Orlan, who has conducted radical work through which she has examined identity, representation, new technologies and feminism. Orlan is interested in feminist readings of psychoanalysis, and has worked on the idea that it is possible to deal with the internal image and the external image of the same person

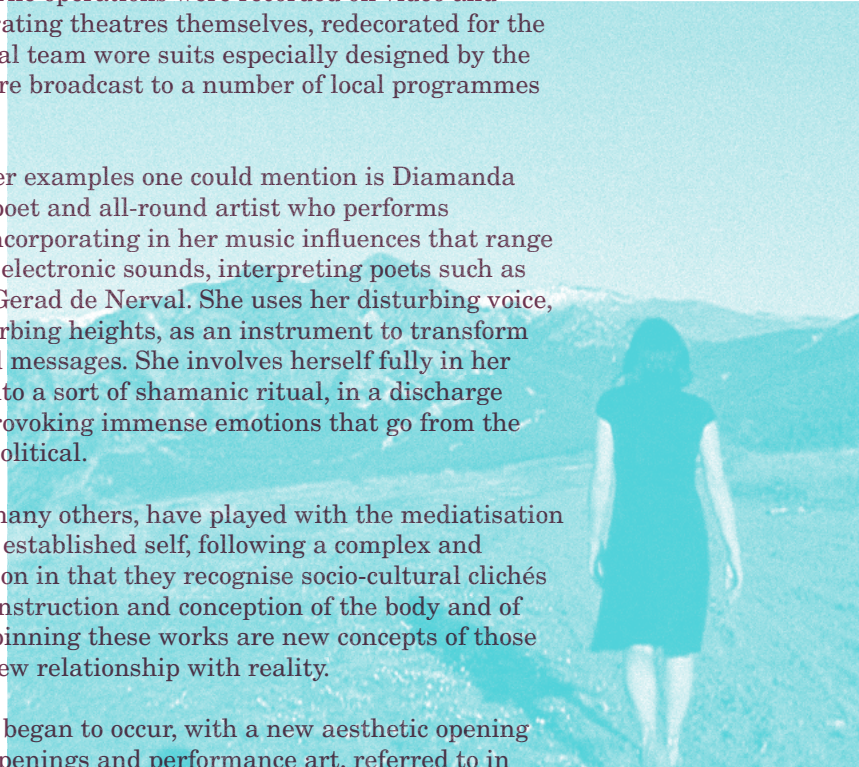
together. She made her own self-portraits using computer and new technologies to raise the issue of the *body's status quo* in our times and in future generations, especially in light of the potential of genetic manipulation which, according to the artist, will be the performance art of the twenty-first century. At the beginning of the 1990s, Orlan decided to change her image, undergoing cosmetic surgery in a series of operations she conceived of as performance pieces, creating an entire set design for the operating theatre, where she read psychoanalytical and philosophical manifestos while the doctors made real incisions under local anaesthetic. The operations were recorded on video and photographed in the operating theatres themselves, redecorated for the occasion. Even the medical team wore suits especially designed by the artist. The operations were broadcast to a number of local programmes via interactive telecom.

Another of the many other examples one could mention is Diamanda Galas, singer, composer, poet and all-round artist who performs performances/concerts, incorporating in her music influences that range from gospel to opera and electronic sounds, interpreting poets such as Artaud, Baudelaire and Gerad de Nerval. She uses her disturbing voice, capable of reaching disturbing heights, as an instrument to transform thoughts into sounds and messages. She involves herself fully in her concerts, turning them into a sort of shamanic ritual, in a discharge of released energy and provoking immense emotions that go from the visceral to the poetic or political.

All of these artists, and many others, have played with the mediatisation and disintegration of the established self, following a complex and sophisticated radicalisation in that they recognise socio-cultural clichés and stereotypes in the construction and conception of the body and of female identities. Underpinning these works are new concepts of those clichés that establish a new relationship with reality.

From the 1990s, changes began to occur, with a new aesthetic opening up that rediscovered happenings and performance art, referred to in terms such as «neo-political», «neo-conceptual», «post-utopian» and «neo-action» art. Performance art has found a much more favourable context and breeding ground among new generations of artists than in previous periods.

Many performance artists today still employ discourses in which women are objects and protagonists of the action. However, both they and current experimental performance artists, use a *mis-en-scene* that is a far cry from the austere minimalist character of previous periods and at times the body is immersed in the multiple media used to create the action.



In recent times, we have seen a new body art which is much more simulationist than in other periods, in which the body is sometimes referenced, represented and/or evoked indirectly. At the same time there has also been a move to fuse performance art with other artistic areas, to such an extent that today a distinction is drawn between performance art and *performative* or *performatic* art, influenced by art, or fusion or hybrid art. A host of different approaches and artistic practices have been included—and are still being included—within that performative or performatic art. They include work from the area of poetry, sound, body art, dance and certain types of theatre, as well as from the object world, certain types of installation, photographs and videos, and even, now as an experimental novelty, new technologies, which are opening up some brand new terrain.

All this has led the spirit of performance art to move into a whole range of artistic territories, with a stress on experimentation, an ever-greater inclusion of the sense of perception and the creation of situations in the works.

From the beginnings of performance art down to recent years, different generations of female artists have developed languages, discourses and specific practices within the field, that have been so important and so central that they have impacted on its development, leading to what has been called feminist and/or gender performance art.

In the Spanish-speaking world, there have been some very important action-art pieces by Latin American women artists, created from a feminist and/or gender perspective. Of the numerous female performance artists working in this context, we can select a few who exemplify the wealth of Latin American feminist performance art. Among the most recent are the performances by the Venezuelan artists Sandra Vivas and Deborah Castillo, both of whom use a corrosive sense of humour and a caustic irony; the first dealing with deconstruction and the exchange of gender identities and the second with the erotic myth of the Latino woman. The Brazilian artist Beth Moysés performs collective women's performance pieces that stand somewhere between acts of protest against gender-based violence, poetic-aesthetic rituals and group therapy. Coco Fusco and Carmelita Tropicana are both Cubans living in New York. Fusco examines the conflicts and social problems of Latin-American women and gender violence, while Tropicana uses similar approaches, but with parodying attitudes that are closer to theatre. Another Cuban, Tania Bruguera creates uncompromising pieces with a strong personal involvement and a ritualistic charge full of energy. The Bolivian group Colectivo Mujeres Creando, from La Paz, create action-art street works. Costa-Rican artist Priscilla Monge offers critical and ironic video pieces built out of different visual games. Teresa Serrano, from Mexico, examines the social, economic, sexual and cultural problems of women in a patriarchal culture.



In Spain, that rise in performance and performatic art has been reflected in a host of different approaches developed by very diverse artists (performance artists and others) from the new generations. The list is long, given the high level of acceptance and development of these new approaches. Some of the work we might mention in this context includes the actions developed over a period of several years by Madrid-based artists Ana Carceller and Helena Cabello, with a reference to the female body in terms of the double and the pair; Catalan artist Alicia Framis's performance pieces on gender-based violence, which use designs for protective suits; the intimate performance pieces by Eulalia Valdosera (also from Catalonia) using everyday objects; and Basque artists Ana Laura Aláez —fascinated by the world of fashion, cosmetics, the artifice that allows women to transform their bodies— and Itziar Okariz who performs actions with a strong political-feminist tendency. On the other hand, there are the Andalusians, Pilar Albarracín, with her actions questioning and examining the preconceptions and clichés about woman from the south, using playful-ironic *mises-en-scene* sweetened with large doses of humour; the ritualistic shamanic actions that liberate and regenerate women by Paka Antúnez; the self-referential video performances and those referring to gender identities by Carmen F. Sigler; and the games of disguises and identity allegories by Angeles Agrela. Finally in the Canary Islands, we have the feminist performance artist from Lanzarote Macarena Nieves Cáceres, who inter-relates performance art with poetry and the visual arts in work in which the central features are the text, the body and identity.

Nor should we forget some of the historical women performers working in Spain, including Concha Jerez and our admired Esther Ferrer, as well as other younger artists who have followed in their footsteps, such as Nieves Correa. With few exceptions, these women did not take expressly feminist positions in the conception and execution of their performance pieces (whether or not they themselves were feminists) but they did mark an important reference for later women artists and for our art in general.

It has been a long time since Italian feminists shouted «my body is mine to manage for myself» in the 1970s. Yet, despite the political-cultural colonisations of our bodies, the technological transformations to which we will be physically subjected, the genetic operations and possible future clones, that cry stills holds true.