

Reclaiming the Body: Feminist Performance and the Production of Female Subjectivity

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Abstract. This essay examines how the structural absence of female subjectivity in modern and contemporary art reinforces visual hierarchies that position women as objects rather than agents of meaning. Drawing on the work of feminist art historians Linda Nochlin, Griselda Pollock, and gender studies scholar Judith Butler, the essay argues that women's exclusion from artistic authority is historically and discursively produced through institutional and representational structures. This essay asks: how do feminist performance practices challenge this structural absence, and to what extent can embodied performance reconfigure the relationship between the female body, spectatorship, and agency? Through a comparative case study of *Tap and Touch Cinema* (1968) by Valie Export, *Interior Scroll* (1975) by Carolee Schneemann, and *Rhythm 0* (1974) by Marina Abramović, the essay demonstrates that feminist performance does not simply represent female subjectivity, but actively produces it through embodied confrontation, authorship, and exposure.

Keywords: Feminist, female subjectivity, spectatorship, agency.

1. Introduction

In 1971, feminist art historian Linda Nochlin asked, “Why have there been no great women artists?”¹ Rather than searching for overlooked female geniuses, she argued that the question itself was flawed, asserting that “the fault lies not in our stars... but in our institutions and our education” [1]. Women's absence from the canon, therefore, was not biological but structural: they were excluded from art academies, exhibition systems, and professional networks, and denied access to life drawing classes essential for history painting [1]. Artistic “greatness” was thus defined around male participation.

These exclusions were reinforced by broader social structures that positioned women in supportive roles—as wives, muses, or assistants—while authorship and artistic authority were reserved for men. The category of the “artist” itself was therefore historically gendered, aligned with masculinity. Building on this critique, feminist art historian Griselda Pollock argues in *Feminist Interventions in the Histories of Art* [2] that art history operates as a discourse structured by power, in which women are “present differently” as objects of vision rather than subjects of authorship. Subjectivity, therefore, is not simply excluded but unevenly produced within visual systems. Emerging alongside second-wave feminism, these critiques redefined the female body as a contested site—regulated by norms of passivity yet mobilized as a site of resistance.

This essay examines how the structural absence of female subjectivity in contemporary art is reproduced and challenged through feminist performance. Focusing on *Tap and Touch Cinema* (1968), *Interior Scroll* (1975), and *Rhythm 0* (1974), it argues that these works transform the female body from a passive object into an active site of agency and critique, demonstrating that subjectivity is not recovered but actively produced.

2. Methodology

This essay adopts a qualitative comparative case study approach combined with feminist visual analysis to examine how female subjectivity is constructed, suspended, or reclaimed through performance. Performance is central as it foregrounds the body as a site of meaning and enables analysis of spectatorship, agency, vulnerability, and power. The three case studies are selected for

their distinct strategies of intervention, with analysis focusing on audience interaction and the production of meaning through participation and control.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

This essay draws upon feminist art history and gender theory to frame the absence of female subjectivity in contemporary art as a structural condition rather than a historical accident. In “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” [1], feminist art historian Linda Nochlin challenges the myth of artistic genius, demonstrating that women were systematically excluded from the institutions necessary for artistic achievement. As she argues, art making is shaped by social institutions: women were denied access to life drawing classes—essential for history painting—and excluded from academies and professional networks that enabled artistic recognition [1]. As a result, artistic “greatness” was structurally defined around male participation.

What becomes particularly striking is that exclusion operates not only through formal barriers, but through their normalization. Women’s absence is thus interpreted as a lack of ability rather than restricted access, and must be understood as an institutional effect rather than a natural condition. Extending this critique, feminist art historian Griselda Pollock argues in *Feminist Interventions in the Histories of Art* that art history operates as a discourse structured by masculinity, in which representation functions as a site of ideology [2].

Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, developed in *Gender Trouble*, further conceptualizes subjectivity as constructed rather than innate, produced through repeated acts within structures of power [3]. Together, these frameworks suggest that female subjectivity is not given, but historically produced, providing the basis for examining how feminist performance intervenes through embodied practice.

2.2. Literature Review

Building on these theoretical foundations, feminist art history has shifted from questions of inclusion toward a critical analysis of representation, examining how visual systems actively produce gendered hierarchies. Within this shift, performance art emerged as a key site for feminist intervention. As RoseLee Goldberg [4] and Amelia Jones [5] argue, performance challenges traditional art forms by foregrounding the body, temporality, and audience engagement, positioning the body as produced through its representation and reception. In this context, bodily “presence” refers not simply to visibility, but to the immediacy of the body in time and space, resisting its reduction to image and enabling direct engagement with spectatorship, power, and vulnerability. This shift provides the conceptual framework for examining how performance intervenes in systems that have historically positioned women as objects rather than subjects.

3. Feminism, Institutional Critique, and the Politics of the Body

The performances examined in this essay emerged during the political and cultural transformations of the late 1960s and 1970s, particularly second-wave feminism, which challenged structures regulating gender, sexuality, and representation. The slogan “the personal is political” reframed the female body as a site shaped by broader systems of power, positioning it as a locus of control, resistance, and subjectivity. At the same time, the art world was undergoing a crisis of authority, marked by the rise of performance practices and challenges to traditional institutions. Within this context, the female body became a central site of artistic experimentation, as women artists rejected roles as models or muses and instead used their own bodies as medium.

Performance provided a critical space for negotiating subjectivity. As Amelia Jones argues, it foregrounds the body as lived and embodied rather than a fixed image, enabling direct engagement with spectatorship, power, and vulnerability [5]. Feminist performance thus emerged as a direct intervention into visual and institutional structures that had historically marginalized women. It is within this context that the following case studies must be understood.

3.1. Case Study 1-Valie Export – Tap and Touch Cinema

In 1968, Austrian artist Valie Export presented *Tap and Touch Cinema (Tapp und Tastkino)* in public spaces in Vienna and Munich, including busy shopping streets, as part of a series of performances challenging traditional spectatorship. Emerging in dialogue with, yet distancing herself from, the male-dominated practices of Viennese Actionism, Export developed a body-centered practice that foregrounded female agency, as shown in Figure 1.



Figure 1. VALIE EXPORT.TAPP und TASTKINO (TAP and TOUCH CINEMA). 1968/1989

In this work, Export stood in public wearing a curtained box attached to her chest, inviting passersby to insert their hands and touch her bare breasts. Each interaction lasted only a few seconds and was strictly controlled by the artist. The performance invoked the language of cinema while removing its central mechanism: distant visual consumption. As Laura Mulvey argues, the “male gaze” positions women as objects of visual pleasure [6]; by converting looking into physical contact, Export disrupts this structure and reconfigures the role of the spectator. Spectators are no longer distant observers but active participants whose involvement is constitutive of the work. This transforms spectatorship into a site of ethical negotiation, requiring participants to decide how to engage within the limits set by the artist. As Claire Bishop argues, participatory art produces meaning through interaction; here, the spectator becomes a co-producer. Audience responses—ranging from curiosity to discomfort—reveal the instability of the viewing position, as looking becomes a visible and accountable act [7].

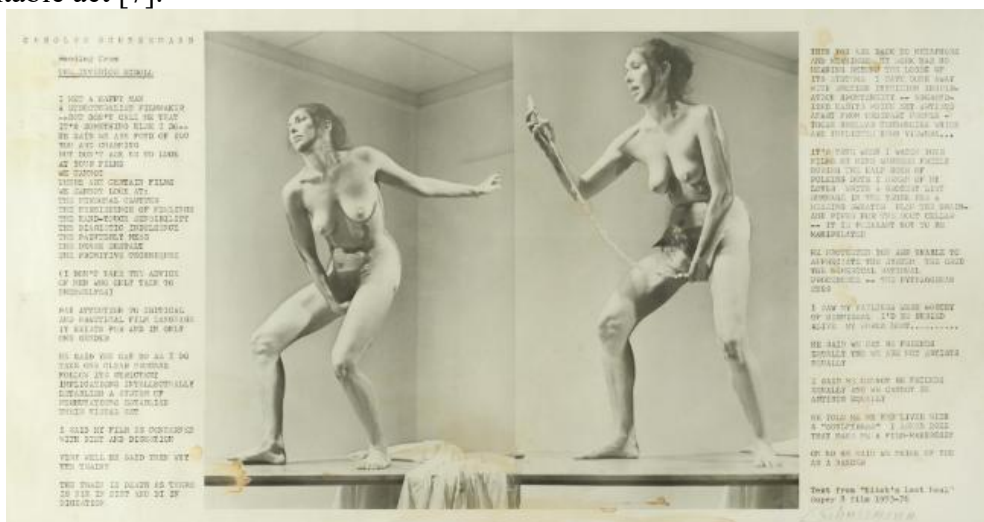


Figure 2. Interior Scroll', Carolee Schneemann, 1975

Within feminist art history, this gesture can be understood as an intervention into visual hierarchy. If women have historically appeared as objects of vision, Export's performance disrupts this by asserting agency within exposure, transforming the body into a controlled site of confrontation. The work's location in public space further intensifies its critique. By moving outside institutional settings, Export exposes how systems of display regulate the female body and forces spectators to confront their role within structures of looking and desire, as shown in Figure 2.

In this sense, *Tap and Touch Cinema* does not simply critique the male gaze but renders its conditions visible, revealing how power and control are embedded within acts of looking.

3.2. Case Study 2—Carolee Schneemann – Interior Scroll (1975)

In 1975, American artist Carolee Schneemann performed *Interior Scroll* in East Hampton, New York, later presenting the work in alternative contexts outside traditional museum and gallery systems. Emerging from a background in painting and experimental performance, Schneemann developed a practice that foregrounded the female body as a site of meaning, challenging its historical positioning as an object of visual consumption.

In *Interior Scroll*, Schneemann stood naked before an audience, applied paint to her body, and adopted poses referencing classical traditions of the female nude before slowly extracting a paper scroll from her vagina and reading aloud from it. Lasting approximately 20–30 minutes, the performance emphasized bodily presence and the emergence of language. This act reconfigures the relationship between body, text, and authorship: rather than functioning as a surface to be viewed, the body becomes a site of production, positioning Schneemann not as object but as author.

The gesture has often been read in relation to female reproductive processes, particularly birth. The extraction of the scroll parallels the temporal and physical dynamics of giving birth, reframing the body as generative rather than passive. Crucially, this is a symbolic rather than biological claim, transforming reproductive imagery into a source of intellectual and artistic production and challenging the reduction of women to reproductive function.

Audience responses were marked by shock, discomfort, and fascination, reflecting broader anxieties surrounding female sexuality while also signaling the work's radical challenge to norms of visibility and propriety. Within feminist art theory, *Interior Scroll* can be understood as an intervention into representational systems. As Griselda Pollock argues, women are “present differently” within visual culture; Schneemann challenges this by asserting the body as a site of authorship rather than representation [2].

In this sense, *Interior Scroll* does not simply reverse visual hierarchies, but redefines the conditions under which subjectivity is produced, transforming the body into an active agent of meaning, as shown in Figure 3.



Figure 3. Marina Abramovic's Rhythm 0 in Gallery Spotlight

3.3. Case Study 3—Marina Abramović – *Rhythm 0* (1974)

In 1974, Yugoslav performance artist Marina Abramović presented *Rhythm 0* at Studio Morra in Naples, as part of her early exploration of endurance, vulnerability, and bodily autonomy. In this six-hour performance, she stood motionless beside a table containing seventy-two objects, accompanied by the instruction: “There are 72 objects on the table that one can use on me as desired. I am the object.” The objects ranged from benign items, such as a feather and a rose, to dangerous tools including scissors, a knife, and a loaded gun. By relinquishing all control, Abramović allowed the audience to determine the course of the work.

By declaring herself an object, Abramović reconfigures the relationship between artist, body, and spectator. The body is no longer a site of authorship but something to be acted upon, shifting agency to the audience, whose actions produce the work.

The interaction evolved over time. Initially cautious, participants became increasingly aggressive: they cut her clothing, manipulated her body, inflicted injuries, and at one point placed the loaded gun in her hand and directed it toward her neck. This escalation reveals how quickly social norms can erode when constraints are removed.

Audience responses reflected shock, guilt, and avoidance. When Abramović began to move again, many participants left rather than confront her as a subject, exposing the instability of their position once agency was restored.

The institutional setting further intensifies this dynamic. By suspending conventions of distance and restraint, Abramović exposes how such frameworks regulate rather than eliminate power. Within feminist art theory, *Rhythm 0* can be understood as an extreme enactment of objectification, revealing its potential to escalate into domination.

In this sense, the work demonstrates that subjectivity is not stable or guaranteed, but can be suspended under specific conditions, showing how easily control shifts between body and audience.

4. Comparative Analysis: Negotiating Female Subjectivity Through Performance

The three performances examined here offer distinct models for negotiating how female subjectivity is produced within structures of spectatorship, institutional authority, and visual culture. Rather than fully reclaimed, subjectivity emerges as contingent and unstable, shaped through relations between body, audience, and control. A key distinction lies in how each artist structures agency. In *Tap and Touch Cinema*, Export regulates participation, implicating the viewer without relinquishing control. In *Interior Scroll*, Schneemann asserts authorship, positioning the audience as witness. In contrast, *Rhythm 0* suspends agency, allowing the audience full control and exposing the escalation of objectification into domination. Across these works, spectatorship becomes central to meaning production. As Claire Bishop argues, participatory art redistributes authorship through interaction [5]. Here, the spectator functions as co-producer, witness, or agent of control, demonstrating that spectatorship is structured by power rather than neutral.

5. Conclusion

These works do not resolve objectification but reveal its persistence. Female subjectivity is not recovered, but continuously negotiated within systems of power, visibility, and control. Extending the arguments of Nochlin and Pollock, these performances expose how subjectivity is produced, constrained, and sometimes violently denied.

Feminist performance thus makes visible the conditions under which subjectivity emerges, showing that to look is already to participate in a relation of power.

References

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