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Pace University

Radical Joy Performed into Action:  
A Study of Feminist Performance Art

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Abstract

Although traditionally excluded from the art world as from all major institutions, women artists staked their claim by revolutionizing performance art as a medium in the 1960s and 70s. By integrating life and art, feminist artists developed the powerful ideology that “the personal is political,” especially in art. From this foundation of radical assertion, feminist artists explored, resisted, and deconstructed their struggles. Contemporary feminist artists not only have different battles to fight, they fight them in a different format: digital media. In this project, I seek to explore the ways performance artists before me have used the medium of performance art for radical change, and the ways it can be used to affect change in the future.

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## Radical Joy Performed into Action: A Study of Feminist Performance Art

### INTRODUCTION

Created for, by, and in service of men, space for women in society has only been found by carving it out of the resistant structure slowly and endlessly. 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” (143). The art world is no exception to this; it has been a traditionally male-dominated arena, including the emergence of radical performance art that rose in opposition to traditional art culture. It was the changing socio political landscape of the 1960s and 70s that sparked the use of performance art by feminists as a personal and political tool. In this project, I seek to explore the feminist foundations of the performance art movement, and participate in contemporary feminist performance by utilizing digital media and reflecting values of intersectionality and erotic fulfillment.

First, it is essential to understand where the medium of performance art comes from. In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Futurist movement began with Tommaso Marinetti, espousing dynamism and violent nonconformity in art and life. Tiring of manifestos and stagnant paintings, the Futurists moved into performance to engage the live audience in a way no other art form could. Disillusioned male artists in the Futurist movement “raged against the cult of tradition and commercialization of art,” viewing performance art as a particularly useful revolutionary device because it defies the rules of conventional forms of theatre; it does not require plot, character, or even substance, as Roselee Goldberg describes in her book *Performance Art from Futurism to the Present*. Performances can be riotous, frightening, subversive, spectacular, joyous, or completely unnoticeable (Goldberg 13). Performance art has always defied a conclusive

definition as an “extremely permissive, open-ended, and anarchic medium,” perhaps the only qualification being it is live art by artists (qtd. in Wark 8). This resistance to boundaries is part of what makes performance art so appealing as a medium. It is based in a belief that art can transform the world “as a vehicle for social change, and as a radical merging of life and art,” Amelia Jones writes in *Body Art: Performing the Subject* (Jones 13). But how revolutionary can a movement be if its primary participants are raging against a machine that was ultimately created to serve them?

### **WOMEN STEP IN**

As artists who genuinely had a reason to rage against the machine, women sought to infiltrate the academic and conventional art world that had been largely composed of white male artists. Lynn Hershman Leeson, a pioneer of early digital performance art, explains in her documentary *!Women Art Revolution*, “women were able to enter the art scene through performance” because it offered a rare arena in which they did not have to ask for permission from the discriminatory gatekeepers of museums and galleries (Leeson 2010). Despite its foundation in the male art world, the feminist artists who became involved in the performance art movement in the late 1960’s “took up the challenge of developing new artistic strategies,” turning a traditionally male space into a powerful vehicle for social change (Wark 28). Wark offers a strong claim when she writes: “the relationship between feminism and performance art since the 1970s has become so inextricably linked that it is inconceivable to speak of one without reference to the other” (3). Performance art offers an opportunity to merge art and life, and feminist artists created the direct engagement between art and “the politics of everyday life” that their male peers were incapable or unwilling to do at the time.

First, they somehow had to create a space for themselves as artists. The art world of the 60s and 70s subscribed to the limiting modernist maxim that art should transcend identity and personal experience, yet the anonymous label of “artist,” supposedly neutral, was undeniably male-oriented and attempts to subvert this trope were disregarded or criticized (Wark 5). Seeing this neutrality as it was, “an ideological device with which to maintain the status quo both within and beyond the art world,” feminist performance artists challenged this device by literally and figuratively created art around their personal experience, allowing them to assert their agency as artists and as women (Wark 5, 32).

While protests to include women’s art in museum exhibitions were sometimes successful, ultimately female artists turned to creating their own collectives and opportunities for artistic performance (Leeson 2010). Los Angeles artist Judy Chicago created one of the most influential groups of the time at Fresno State College in 1970 with her all-female class of untrained artists. In groups like this, women were able to openly and collectively explore their oppression, and the nature of performance seemed incredibly well suited for the task: as Chicago aptly put it, “Performance can be fueled by rage in a way that painting and sculpture can’t,” (Wark 53). In these performance groups, Chicago found commonality among the group of women: “I remember asking my students how many of them had been raped, and being just totally shocked...a quarter or half of them raised their hands. It was all discovery for what our true experiences had been,” (Leeson 2010). Discovering these shared experiences helped women both individually and collectively, exposing internalized misogyny manifesting as shame, fear, and rivalry with other women. A powerful sense of community and a fervor for change was ignited across the country: “It was at that precarious moment in history that art and politics fused, and then transfused into the blocked cultural arteries of the time” (Leeson 2010).

Performance as a feminist art form could be used to channel unearthed rage towards the advancement of women. Feminist performance artists revolutionized the form and turned it into a powerful political response through cultural intervention and the assertion that the “personal *is* political”. Rejecting the neutral male genius trope that had been considered essential to conventional art, the feminist mantra asserted that “lived experience is the ground from which all politics come,” and art is not exempt from politics (Wark 57). From an essentialist viewpoint, women’s experiences are distinct to women and their personal art made explicit the distinction between women as Other and man as Subject (universally relatable). Performance artist Linda Montano holds that men and women approach their art very differently: “Most women traditionally talk about their personal feelings while the man says, ‘I am everybody,’” described in *On Edge: Performance at the End of the Twentieth Century* by C. Carr (5). Again, the trope of the neutral male genius rears its head even among seemingly progressive artist groups. Montano’s valuation of personal experience and emotion is particularly evident in her work. She approached her life as a lived art experience, truly inhabiting the maxim of merging art and life. Accused of being apolitical and narcissistic, Montano sought not “to affect social change but ‘to relax into my true nature’” (Wark 96-97). There is something powerful about romanticizing the everyday as Art; anything can be an artistic choice, a radical gesture, a meaningful moment. However, Montano’s tendency to isolate herself from the real world and its political implications ultimately veers from the active feminist performance art on which I am focused.

With this newfound artistic pursuit, the performance work being created by second wave feminists was undeniably reactionary to the personal and political experiences of women. Some of the most distinct themes in this early work were a rejection of oppressive domesticity and a positive reclamation of femininity through goddess imagery. I would be remiss not to mention



Martha Rosler's 1975 piece *Semiotics of the Kitchen* as a crucial moment in this transformation. Straightforward and strangely humorous, Rosler's early video piece explored the "utilitarian domesticity" of the housewife in her kitchen, naming and demonstrating the use of kitchen utensils alphabetically and with increasing aggression. "You see a kind of madness and anger, contained but explosive...there's a certain kind of confrontationalism which I discovered quickly that many men found frightening," Rosler said of her piece (Leeson 2010). *Semiotics of the Kitchen* challenges the capitalist role of women as consumers without access to the means of production, the active male sphere. Rosler stares the viewer right in the face and poses herself not as a victim of her circumstances, but as a frustrated, sarcastic observer demonstrating the senseless monotony of domestic servitude and materialistic obsessions.

Offering a different cultural perspective on the role of women, Kyoko Michishita created early video work such as *Being Women in Japan: Liberation Within My Family* (1973-74) that followed her sister's recovery from brain surgery. By interviewing her sister's family during this difficult time, she discovered that "her sister is more needed than respected in the family and that her function is defined by food preparation and the maintenance of the routines of domestic life - with little acknowledgement of her individual identity" (qtd. in Wark 110). Although the times have indeed changed and domestic servitude is less mandatory, it still feels relevant for feminist artists today to "explore the relationships between individual consciousness, family life, and culture under capitalism" as Rosler sought to do decades ago (Wark 115).

In addition to rejecting domestic expectations, women also began to reclaim their femininity, cultivating radical self-love in response to a culture that demonized women for their "inferior qualities." Celebrating women's contributions and embracing the feminine were part of an effort in the 1970's to "identify, reclaim, and celebrate the collective history of women"

(Wark 62). The reactionary quality of the performance work is clearly evident; tired of their oppressive environment, feminist artists returned to a time where women were valued, their femininity a powerful asset as opposed to a debilitating weakness: thus, the burgeoning interest in goddess imagery, ancient matriarchal cultures, and connection to nature in early feminist performance. One of the first and most significant pieces addressing these themes was *Eye/Body*. Carolee Schneemann launched her individual performance career with the 1963 piece, a sort of goddess ritual set in her apartment, her grease-covered body surrounded by broken glass, umbrellas, and live snakes (Wark 41). Ana Mendieta, a Cuban American artist working in the same period, explored the connection between herself, the earth, and the universe in her performance work, often interpreted as representing “the timeless connection between the female body, the female creative spirit, and the earth itself” (Wark 71). However inspired these performances may have been (or how much they inspired me), it is important to address the critique of their regressive qualities. Because women have been consistently degraded due to their supposed inability to escape nature, some artists viewed nature/goddess performance as ineffective and insulting. Martha Rosler claimed performances of this nature “eviscerated the social meaning of the premise that the personal is political by transforming it into a form of personal fantasy” (Wark 66). This ultimately comes down to personal perspective on the purpose of art; must it all be politically charged? Can feminist artists (or artists who are women, for that matter) create art as a personal expression without addressing the larger implications? For this project, the inclusion of goddess and nature performances lies in an appreciation for ritual, as “the goal of feminist performance artists’ interacting with nature was...to create private rituals where the female body became fused with nature in ephemeral and noninvasive ways” (Wark 68).

## WHAT MAKES A WOMAN?

To delve even deeper into the issue of displaying gender in performance, the classic debate around essentialism arises: *what makes a woman?* It is clear that ‘femininity’ as we understand it is a constructed series of oppressions: “One is not born, but rather becomes, a woman...it is civilization as a whole that produces this creature,” de Beauvoir famously suggests (qtd. in Wark 60). Is there an innate femininity, untapped and pure underneath the layers of societal constructions? Because there has never been a time where women’s identity could exist outside of their relation to men, the answer to this seems impossible to find. The question remains: what makes a woman, and how can she express her true self positively in her art? Is it ultimately more empowering to embrace whatever it is that makes her woman, or to renounce it completely and subscribe to an anonymous ‘equality’? I would argue that rejecting what makes us different from men is anathema to the journey of our emancipation. There are clearly things that make women different (at least the experience) and these things *do* have value: at the very least, we must acknowledge where we came from, even the qualities that have been the “justification” for our oppression.

Carolee Schneemann attempted to navigate this divide despite the criticism she received. In her art, she knew she “could not simply drop the guise of ‘woman’ to appear as essentially a man, an artist—nor did she want to. The constructed and the essential were here inexorably tangled in a very ‘messy’ embrace” (Schneider 36). This messiness was interpreted negatively on both sides: essentialist feminists viewed her Goddess-inspired work as debased sexual narcissism while materialists thought it was pointlessly nostalgic and apolitical. Again, an impasse is reached: subscribing to ‘femininity’ is regressive, and abandoning it completely renders one invisible and neutral-male. There may not be a conclusive definition to ‘woman,’ but as

previously discussed, I believe it is ultimately more regressive to reject our identity as women as the “safer” route. Schneider addresses the complex bind that feminist artists found themselves in:

On the one hand, ‘woman’ is exposed as constructed, shown to be the dream of patriarchy and ultimately a ruse servicing the mold of a desire determined by capital. 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. On a third hand, even as ‘outing’ the masquerade appears to promise an end to the naturalization of femininity, the issue of the inhabitability, the performativity, the ‘masquerade’ of femininity rings of the historical habit of imagining woman as the endlessly inhabitable, impregnable, male-identified space... Just as we begin to posit ‘woman’ as an active subject, she explodes again into women—brilliantly, importantly, she bursts into her million-handed variations as if disappearing, again, into the infinite of her own multiplicities (Schneider 127).

However, a prominent issue with essentialism in women’s identity is the exclusion of trans women. If there is something inherent that makes us woman -- biological sex or even the experience of living life as a born-woman-- then those who are designated male at birth and later claim an identity as a woman are invalidated. There are some feminists who reject trans women-- either rejecting their identity entirely, or at least denying them a place in the political movement for women’s rights. It is understandable that there would be anxiety among radical feminists who fear appropriation of women’s spaces by men, particularly when their understanding is that the label “female” is not something one chooses, but is conditioned into. They argue that “a person born with male privilege can no more shed it through surgery than a white person can claim an

African-American identity simply by darkening his or her skin” as written in Michelle Goldberg’s New Yorker article “What is a Woman?” More and more, gender is understood to be arbitrary, and our forced binary of male v. female more often subverted, but what of trans people who feel that their identity is “opposite” to the roles they had been given? If “woman” is indeed a construction, then how can someone choose to be it? Can the cultural implications of gender be forgone in a free-for-all of gender identifications? Or is experience as a woman necessary to claiming the title? I support full inclusion of transwomen in the movement despite these nuanced discussions of identity politics, but it is important to understand that the multiplicities of female identity do not exist without contention.

### **THE BODY AS SUBJECT**

Identity variations aside, why *was* performance art so appealing to feminist artists across the board? First, if performance art can be described as an antiformalist approach to art-making, then feminist performances have enormous potential to “unhinge the very deep structures and assumptions” about gender (Jones 5). Because the female body can be seen as a politicized entity, the “hinge” between nature and culture, the use of the body as subject in performance subverted the notion of women as passive objects (Wark 36). They could use their body in any way they chose as the *subject* of their art; often this manifested as nudity or an explicit use of the politicized body seen in society (and in individual experiences). However, many first wave feminists were unconvinced of the subversive potential of the female body – does a female artist compromise her authority by exposing her body? Subversion occurs as a reaction to a structured system, and if that system always views women as objects, some argued that the female form would be necessarily degraded; use of it in any explicit way constituted participation in the “phallogocentric dynamic of fetishism” (Jones 24). Basically, is it empowering to use your nude

body if you cannot control how it is sexualized? Even if one cannot control how the body is received, avoiding it in its entirety essentially casts female artists to the shadows, asking them not to be a woman too loudly lest anyone notice that they have a body. Who benefits from that? Simone de Beauvoir would argue this subscribes to the problematic view that woman is the “relative” being, unable to think of herself without relation to man as a sexual dependent, the woman as Object to the man as Subject. To deny this assumption through performance has revolutionary potential, as de Beauvoir suggests: “If woman seems to be the inessential which never becomes the essential, it is because she herself fails to bring about this change” (de Beauvoir xvi-xvii). She challenges women to claim a subjective title, to take more than what they have been given, and change the world.

It does raise an important question, however: can women *choose* to be seen as a subject? Or will they necessarily be seen as, at best, an “active object”? Rebecca Schneider explores this concept in her book *The Explicit Body In Performance* by using Carolee Schneemann as a prime example. Schneemann remembers her work being dismissed as narcissistic exhibitionism that played into the stimulation of men, and was criticized by feminists and male artists alike for the use of her body in her performances (Schneider 34). If there is a way to claim agency and determine the meaning of one’s own space and body, Schneemann’s bold assertions in her work were certainly a step in that direction. Schneider claims that it was not the nude content of Schneemann’s work that was the issue, but rather “the agency of the body displayed” in women’s work causing anxiety and disdain among fellow artists (35). An impossible paradox: how to overcome the negative connotations of women’s bodies if any usage of them subscribes to these connotations?

On the other hand, Judith Butler suggests the elusive concept of “thinking a world makes a world.” In regards to female agency, Butler claims (qtd. in Schneider): ““We need to think a world in which acts, gestures, the visible body, the clothed body, the various physical attributes usually associated with gender, *express nothing*”” (106). Perhaps written off as delusion or simplistic thinking, there is power in actively subverting the patriarchal perspective on the body. Ultimately, it is impossible to claim that women using their bodies in performance could magically turn them from objects into subjects. What is more important is that the “appropriation of authorial agency could create the kind of ‘dissonance with their representations’” that could eventually alter those representations (Wark 35). ‘Think it into existence’ may feel passive, but activating it into performance can be a radical gesture of change.

### **THE EROTIC**

Directly related to the issue of women’s inner self is the concept of erotic power. Audre Lorde, a black lesbian feminist activist and writer, explains the concept of the erotic in her essay “The Uses of the Erotic.” Lorde defines the erotic as “a resource within each of us that lies in a deeply female and spiritual plane, firmly rooted in the power of our unexpressed or unrecognized feeling,” (Lorde 53). While implying an essence of essentialism, Lorde seeks to uncover a source of power in women that is both innate and a reaction to our environment. It is this erotic power that has been suppressed, abused, misunderstood, starved, and forgotten as a function of the patriarchy.

Embracing our erotic makes us powerful; it is “an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire” (Lorde 54). It is to embrace an activity with whole-hearted joy and mindful engagement, anything from making breakfast to running a meeting to taking a bath. Throughout history, women have been punished for embracing their

erotic and sensual selves or behaving in any way that rejects male power by investing in feminine joy. With this conditioning, it is no surprise that “we have come to distrust that power which rises from our deepest and nonrational knowledge. We have been warned against it all our lives by the male world, which values this depth of feeling enough to keep women around in order to exercise it in the service of men,” (Lorde 54). While the erotic can be present in sexual experience, it has been successfully relegated to the bedroom alone under the control of men, tainted with the misconception that it is synonymous with the pornographic when it is, in fact, the opposite. This is a key distinction to be made for my project; investing in the erotic in art will often be misinterpreted as overtly sexual or as self-degradation. It is vital to understand that when I refer to the erotic, I refer to its quality of powerful joy and its non-sexual nature.

To combine a discussion of body and identity, two artists of particular inspiration for me come to mind: Pina Bausch and Ana Mendieta. The work of Bausch has been described as “ultimate dance theatre,” and while her pieces do not necessarily follow a narrative, they often explore “the dynamics between women and men – ecstatic, combative and eternally interdependent” (Goldberg 205). It was her work in *Fall Dance* and *Café Mueller* that ignited my interest in her highly stylized, repetitive movements, varying in tempo and always imbued with her characteristic “ecstatic expressionism” (Goldberg 205). While some pieces are much lengthier and structured specifically as dance theatre, it is the antiformalist essence of Bausch’s work that relates most specifically to the goal of integrating art and life. Dance training is not a prerequisite to creating movement-based live art, and it is my belief that integrating Bausch’s unconventional and electric use of the body can help tap into our everyday erotic power.

If Schneemann’s work could be described as asserting the body, Mendieta’s may be the opposite. Much of Mendieta’s work expressed her body in relation to nature as an *absence*. Her



*Siloueta* and *Fetish* series in the mid-1970s was a testament to the erasure of her markedly female and Cuban body. Leaving only “the impression of her body on the landscape, often in vulvar formations reminiscent of stone-age ‘goddess’ sculptures,” Mendieta holds a dialogue with a universal maternal source and expresses her “thirst for being” (Jones 26). Her work has been interpreted as representing “literal erasure” of the female body, as opposed to other feminist artists who asserted its presence. Others such as Jones view the absence as a wound experienced by a “Cuban immigrant woman trying to be an artist in the United States in the 1970s” (Jones 27). It is important to appreciate the extent to which culture influences identity construction and artistic influence—indeed much of Mendieta’s work sought to help “end colonialism, racism, and exploitation”—yet it should not be forgotten that Mendieta asserted her work as universal, and “existing outside time and culture and embodying the mysterious forces of nature” (Wark 71).

### **INTERSECTIONALITY**

A significant point to make here is the historical failure to include women of color and other minority women in any feminist movement to date. From the suffragettes to modern “white feminism,” women who experience oppression on multiple levels (such as race, class, sexual orientation, or gender expression) have been neglected within the movement, their individual and interrelated identities apparently too inconvenient to address. As Mendieta observed even during the powerful burgeoning of feminist art in the sixties, “they failed to remember us. American Feminism as it stands is basically a white middle class movement” (Wark 71). Some feminist artists have been cognizant of “how gender intersected with other forms of power and domination,” as Rosler had intended, reflecting on concepts of privilege in her work (Wark 113), but because white women benefit from racism, it has been convenient to focus solely on

“women’s issues” and ignore the intersecting oppressions that women experience. If the women’s movement is to cohesively and successfully move forward, an *intersectional* approach to feminism must be taken; that is, an approach that considers and values all women’s problems, not just the problem of being a woman. Kimberle Crenshaw, a civil rights advocate and professor at UCLA and Columbia Law Schools, popularized the idea of intersectionality in political movements after noticing “the moment where a different barrier affects a subset of us, our solidarity often falls apart,” (Crenshaw 2004). Despite the consciousness-raising intended to unveil to women their connected experience, often the specificities of class, race, and sexual orientation were glossed over.

Eventually, “normative assumptions of whiteness and middle-class values began to be challenged by women of color and lesbians” as seen in the formation of alternative artistic groups formed such as *Split Britches*, a 1981 performance troupe that focused on lesbian and non-white women’s experiences, and the Women’s One World (WOW) Café in New York that hosted primarily lesbian-focused work (Wark 77-79). Again, the issue of women’s identity and Otherness confounds: if there can be no coherent category of ‘woman,’ and indeed there is not, what will hold the feminist movement together? Where *is* our common ground? Or as Butler puts it, “‘What constitutes the ‘who’, the subject, for whom feminism seeks emancipation?’” (Wark 81). An artist I am particularly fond of embraces the values of intersectionality in her performance work: Xaviera Simmons. I saw her movement-based piece *CODED* at the Kitchen in New York, which explored her identity as a queer Jamaican woman through dancehall music, an erotic inhabitation of the body, and queer poetry. Minority artists making work about their experience are more visible now than ever, but what of the rest of the movement? How can feminist artists as a whole, including white privileged women, address the issues of

intersectionality without imposing our privileged viewpoint? Our understanding of our oppression is not complete and our movement will not succeed unless we can understand and address the issues of all groups of women. As Crenshaw explains, “without frames that allow us to see how social problems impact all the members of a targeted group, many will fall through the cracks of our movements, left to suffer in virtual isolation,” (Crenshaw TedTalk 2016). It may be easier said than done, but if we can “accept the pluralistic and often contradictory aspects of women’s individual and collective identities,” we can create a movement that is based in alliances of differences rather than forcing or asserting our commonality as women (Wark 81).

### **DIGITAL MEDIA**

While fourth wave feminism is often defined by its use of digital and social media, feminist artists have been experimenting with video production since the late 1970s. Lynn Hershman Leeson, a pioneer of digital art, created the first ever interactive laser disc for her piece *Lorna* as well as the first ever touch screen for *Deep Contact* in 1984. “Women really had a natural inclination to do these non-linear things that had technology,” Leeson discussed in an interview with Olivia Murphy in the ArtSlant article, “Digital Pioneer Lynn Hershman Leeson Walks Us Through Her Groundbreaking ‘Firsts.’” The potential implications of the video format were “its sense of “real” time, its supposed immediate and truthful relation to the world, and its supposedly privileged viewpoint in relation to events” (Wark 102). These opportunities for immediate and personal expression are particularly appealing to feminist artists. An additional question was the impact on live performance; if presented remotely over film, there is no guarantee that a viewer is there at all. This medium was also well-suited to exploring the personal minutiae of women’s lives that had been previously undocumented, such as Lisa Steele’s 1974 video piece *A Very Personal Story* in which she discusses the traumas of her life in

the style of a guarded personal confession. Kate Gilmore, a contemporary performance artist, uses her video work to express the struggles of femininity, putting herself in arduous and sometimes dangerous situations, striving for an impossible end. Her 2005 piece *Cake Walk* features Gilmore in a pink skirt and roller skates, attempting to climb up a crudely constructed wooden wall dripping with blood and flowers, as she falls off again and again. In *Standing Here*, she is filmed from above in a small enclosed space, left to claw and beat her way out of the enclosed structure. With the emergence of social media, opportunities for performance viewership widened. Artists like Celeste Barber, who parodies the absurd poses of model photography and expectations of female beauty, have reached significant followings using the casual daily platform of Instagram.

### **THE PROJECT**

This research serves as both foundation and inspiration to my performance project. I seek to move forward and make art that is relevant to the women's movement today: valuing intersectionality, erotic power, and the use of digital media. The initial concept for this project is to explore erotic ownership of the female body and spirit to help women overcome internalized misogyny and, ultimately, reject capitalist and patriarchal control of our value and self-image. This is, in fact, a difficult goal to achieve by anyone, let alone by a "new" artist. I understand any piece of art I create is just a call into the void, but at least it is a call with a purpose. This project is the beginning of a profound exploration into the world of feminist performance art and radical daily acts of resistance, joy, and mystic power. Ideally, the project will continue beyond the completion of my undergraduate degree and into my life as an artist. My specific goals for this project are as follows:

- a) To involve and inspire women to wake up to their erotic power.

- b) To create art that is not merely representational/metaphorical, but that women can connect to – INTERSECTIONAL/INCLUSIVE.
- c) To make art on a regular basis in order for the self and others to know that art can happen as a part of our daily lives, and it can enrich our experiences as women and as people.

The Live Art class on which this project is based ignited my interest in performance art. The work I created in the class was emotional, experimental, and highly inspired by the movement work of Pina Bausch and the writings of Audre Lorde. Both major pieces of mine were digitally based, and although digital media had felt out of my depth, the intensive I attended in Los Angeles this winter as a part of my BFA program changed my mind. There, we were encouraged to utilize social media in our careers and make digital content as much as possible. Initially resistant, I questioned how I could use these mediums in a way that would be valuable to me. It was recommended that in addition to posting frequently, going “live” on Instagram for an hour a week would help engage our viewers (“fans”) and increase visibility and followers. It struck me that I could use that “live” space in any way I wished, and I wished to make provocative live art, on Instagram, once a week. This structure was helpful to me in several ways: I can encourage myself to make something every week (or at least with some frequency), I have a greater chance of reaching / inspiring other women with my work, and I can subvert the often superficial content on social media that can be detrimental to the self-image of women. The purpose of using the Live feature is not necessarily to reach large amounts of people (or rather, I am not seeking validation through viewer count), but to embrace the ephemeral quality of Live performance -- not only is it happening live in the world, it is being streamed live through digital media, then disappears after twenty four hours.

I began by testing the structure of Instagram Live. The first Live session I did was a promotional introduction on March 6th, 2018. I set up my canvas and paints, lit a candle, put on some good music, and began to paint: “CALLING ALL WITCHES: THIS PROJECT IS FOR US. LIVE ART FOR AND BY WOMEN ON FUCKIN INSTAGRAM.” I left the sign up on the live stream for a while for anyone tuning in late.

I did not speak or look at the camera. Painting is a place where I express my erotic, and I simply engaged in that activity mindfully. Some thought that this was the first installment of my project, and although I had initially viewed it as simply promotional, it definitely had artistic value as the beginning of my project.

The first real installment was the next morning, March 7th. I had planned on waiting to perform the pieces until they were all clearly laid out and could happen relatively sequentially, but I saw an interesting opportunity for one of my pieces: *Mutual Support*. The idea was to create a physical structure with two women supporting each other in a difficult situation. March 7th was (supposedly) a nor'easter in New York, and I invited my friend and fellow artist Stephanie to participate in this piece on my rooftop. I wanted it to represent mutual support between women of color and white women (or between women of varied intersectional oppressions), and the results were even more interesting than expected. I did not tell Stephanie when we would end the piece, only that we would hold the structure for as long as felt significant. I reached out to take her hands; it felt appropriate that the first gesture come from myself as a white woman. As we leaned back, I immediately felt unstable and worried I would drop her backwards into the slush; a truly disheartening omen. As I grounded myself physically and through eye contact, “I got you” was my inner mantra. The most striking situational factor was that I happened to stand with my back to the wind and my face remained dry, while Stephanie was pelted with icy rain and

cold, wet winds. It felt surprisingly apt in expressing the struggle of black women compared to white women, particularly in a space that I had created as a white artist. Later, I unpacked the performance with Stephanie, who was impacted by the idea of balance in relationships: there will always be movement, moments of worry, but it is ultimately about truly letting go and trusting equally.

The next two installations, *Move in a Way that Feels Good* and *Make Something Together*, were held in Washington Square Park on April 11th. The former was a movement piece inspired by erotic power in the form of everyday radical acts. As women, we frequently consider our bodies to be sexual/beauty objects, burdens, or utilities -- when we consider them at all. Consciously inhabiting one's body is a radical act of self-love, an investment in both erotic joy and a recalibration of how we view our bodies: not as objects, but as lovable subjects worthy of care and attention. I reject the notion that we must succumb to or shrink away from the oppressive connotations of the female body; I believe the only way to reject those connotations is to invest in new ones.

In planning this piece, I was reminded of Movement class freshman year. We studied the way the elements (earth, fire, air, water) are expressed in the body, and I chose earth and water as the reigning elements for *Move in a Way that Feels Good*, to deliberately and mindfully follow the impulses of my body, staying grounded yet fluid. My exploration began with a renewed practice of yoga and meditation, and I tried to find moments during the day where I could tune into the sensations or simple existence of my body. The plan was to begin by lying down in a meditative state of calm and reset, then simply listen to my body's impulses-- often manifesting as tension and a desire to stretch-- and follow them in movement. Without the intention to make it valid as "dance," I still had women who saw the piece ask me if it was modern dance. I thought

I must have been trying too hard to make it look like something beautiful, and while that is certainly a potent pressure, I had invested in the improvisational nature of the piece as a measure against perfectionism or obsessive planning to make it look “good” or interesting. The beauty associated with dance can be found in other ways, and dance does not have to be choreographed to still be an artistic use of the body.

I had initially wanted to have friends join in and perhaps encourage strangers to do so as well, but I decided to make it an individual expression of my erotic in a public space. I found a grassy spot where my body would be situated between the Washington Square Arch and a tree in the foreground, a happy accident of balance between city and nature. To further avoid a performative attitude (being too aware of the opinions of others), I kept my eyes closed during the piece and only took brief glances at my feet when I felt unbalanced. Although it took a few minutes to shed my critical self-awareness, I found an almost trance-like state after settling in. The performance lasted about twenty minutes, streamed live on Instagram, and although I am mostly pleased with how the recording looks, the recording is ultimately not the triumph. Its purpose is to serve as an example and a reminder of one way to express erotic joy in daily life, surpassing boundaries of private and public.

I have realized men will appropriate women’s space and bodies regardless of what women do, and if that is the case, I will not be deterred from expressing myself and defiantly living my life in my body in any way I choose. I have found this freedom in bars full of vulturous men as I groove my soul out on the dance floor, claiming my space and refusing to allow my joy to be commodified as a sexual invitation. I have found this freedom crying in public, unashamed of my private emotions manifesting publicly because I deserve to exist



naturally wherever I am. I also found this freedom in my third and most ambitious installment, *Make Something Together*.

By creating a public collaborative art event, I hoped to allow women to find a meaningful connection with each other, to bond over traumas and explore their diverse identities. I imagined a large group of women gathered around an enormous canvas, talking and poring over collage material, scrawling poetry, sitting quietly off to the side with me to discuss something personal. If women did not flock to join the project, I considered approaching strangers and asking if they would be comfortable sharing their experience either through conversation, art, or writing. The writings --anything too personal to be shared aloud or in images -- would be placed in my vagina purse, a safe and warm feminine place (although this now feels trans exclusive). I even considered that women would probably be nervous about joining, but I imagined it would be easily overcome in the presence of other women expressing their vulnerability through art.

I admit to being a bit idealistic and a lot romantic about the power of women's collaboration. Our instinct to avoid each other as competition (or because living in New York means venturing outside oneself rarely and choosingly) is quite strong, and the project went much different than I expected. I had posted announcements on social media two days beforehand, not necessarily expecting all my friends to come, but wanting to get the word out to any women at all who might be interested. After the movement piece, I sought a space for the collaborative event; only considering the logistical implications of the spot. I chose a small raised concrete stage, almost like an open amphitheater, and started to set up my materials with my friend and collaborator, Mesa. The issue of alerting the public to an art piece (promoting, etc.) still confounds me, as I would rather be approachable versus pretentious and mysterious

about my art, so I made a sign that said, “SAFE SPACE FOR WOMEN, COME MAKE ART WITH US,” and propped it up against the stairs to the stage.

Betsy Damon, performance artist who worked a lot with goddess imagery and nature, noted that “the task of creating a female space in the streets for two hours made her feel like a guerrilla fighter and left her exhausted” (Wark 64). This challenge was very present for me as I attempted to create this space for women in public. The engagement of men was something that struck me more than I expected: some skated in circles around us like sharks smelling blood in the water, drawn to the place they were not welcome: some stood around asking questions as we sat on the ground, chatting and making art: some photo-bombed my livestream as self-promotion or out of a senseless need to appropriate our space: some had genuine conversations with me about my art and what it meant to do this project: some took pictures of me and said nothing. I did not push any of them away, but engaged as straightforward as possible and refused to veer too far from protecting the space. Many of the women who stopped by brought their male friend or significant other, and all of them were quite respectful of me, the project, and their partner’s interest in it.

Although I had planned to approach women and ask them to join, I found in the moment that it was more welcoming if I just sat in the space and continued to collage or paint by myself. I brought tons of art books from the Strand, magazines from my therapist, glue and scissors, and painting materials. I had my phone set up on a small tripod, live streaming on Instagram. The day began with my close friends and I chatting and collaging, the occasional passerby asking a question about what we were doing. Eventually, my friends left and I waited to see if strangers would engage. The first woman to approach was a German Parisian New Yorker, Inga. She was an older woman and we discussed the complacency of younger women in the movement, the

power of the erotic, Simone de Beauvoir and her French counterparts, and American traditionalism. For a while after that, I hung out with a group of high school art students, Lauren, Imani, and Leonie who were killing time after class. We all followed each other on Instagram. I tried to open a discussion about women's issues by talking about my own experiences and identity struggles, but the young girls were quiet. In fact, all day I tried to encourage and provoke intimate conversation and found that although I was listened to, these intimacies could not be forced. I had wanted profound confessions to be expressed aloud or on the page, but eventually, I left my collaborators to their own ways of expressing themselves. A few other groups of women stopped by, including Heather the mother of two who contributed one tiny image of women and children to the collage, and Becky with her dog Francesca, also an older woman who was "glad to see young women engaging in this way." The group of women that created with me were all of very different backgrounds and racial identities, and my fears that this would be a white girl art project were relieved by the spontaneity of live art.

The live/video aspect of the project has been particularly interesting to consider. The first hour of the live-stream ended up not being saved to my phone, and then my phone died just as the last of my friends left. I panicked, thinking my entire project would be ruined if it was not documented. However, as soon as Inga approached, I realized I would feel uncomfortable trying to record and live stream my interactions with other women. It was hard enough to gain any amount of trust with women I did not know, and live streaming felt like an abuse of the space I had created for us. In watching the videos I do have from the event, I was struck by the voyeuristic implications; it was shot from a few feet away, our backs to the camera, far enough that the group's conversation cannot be heard exactly. It felt like the viewer was on the outside looking in on our fun feminine space, but I questioned the value of having a viewer for it at all,

particularly an anonymous live viewer. Some men in real-time were inconsiderate of the space, and I can imagine the men in the digital sphere deriving perverted pleasure from watching us express our erotic. Ultimately, I decided that if I was creating a safe space for women, whoring it out on social media felt inappropriate. Documenting live art can be valuable, but there is a lot to consider about how it is documented. At the end of the day, I tried to journal about the interactions and the experience as much as possible before packing up my supplies and heading out after about eight hours.

As someone whose anxiety demands predictable and positive outcomes to any circumstance, the unpredictable nature of performance art has proved surprisingly therapeutic. No matter how much planning goes into a project, the beautiful thing about live performance is that you cannot control all the variables, and often that leads to a more interesting experience. I developed thoughtful concepts for each piece, but I could not have predicted the snow falling on Stephanie's face, the birds flying past me as my body rose, or the beautiful final art piece from the collaborative event. The conditions of time, space, and public atmosphere are valuable in their inability to be controlled, something that is difficult for me to accept but which I have learned through this project. I am eager to continue this project beyond graduation: to create opportunities for myself and other women to express ourselves and connect, to integrate life and art in a meaningful way, to find joy in daily life, to push boundaries and make change. We are constantly discovering ourselves through our art; perhaps this is the type of project that never ends.

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