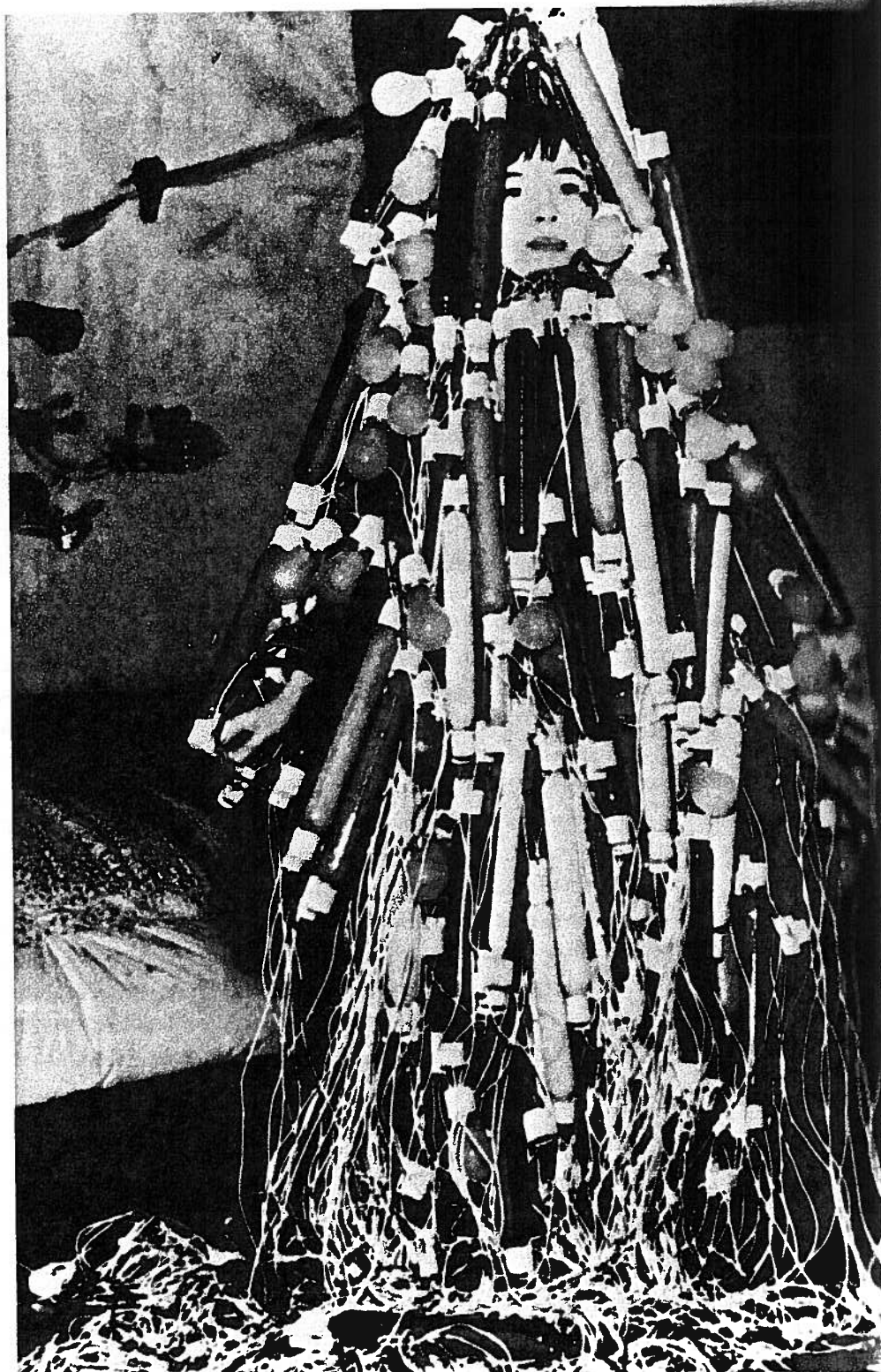


**THE RETURNS OF TOUCH: FEMINIST PERFORMANCES, 1960-80**



Peggy Phelan

Inspired by the civil rights and antiwar movements in the United States, protests against military dictatorships in South America, student revolutions in Western Europe, and political unrest in Eastern Europe, feminist art emerged unevenly but persistently in various international locations during the 1960s as a political and aesthetic movement simultaneously.<sup>1</sup> While the 1960s was one of the most fecund decades for art innovation—it was then that Minimal, Pop, Conceptual, and Land art all appeared—feminist artists were explicitly inspired by political activism and saw their art as contributions to the advancement of that activism. Feminist art emerged from a politically inflected reading of the history of art and a clear-eyed ambition to transform that history by radically questioning its fundamental organizing principles.

The influence of feminism on the history of art and theory should not be underestimated, although it almost always is. Feminist critical and creative work has been responsible for the most far-reaching transformations in both art-making and art-writing over the past four decades. Art theory without some awareness of the class, race, and gender implications of globalization within and beyond the art market, as well as the differing vectors of power at work in an array of cultural contexts, is now seen as narrow, if not hopelessly naïve. In the past forty years, feminist art and theory have gone well beyond exposing the particularities of the role of sexism in the ongoing history of art to probe the distorting blind spots of Western art history's disinterest in, or colonialist appropriations of, the art of large portions of the world's population.

And yet, great art compels because it cannot be reduced to a political slogan, no matter how righteous. Refusing to confirm a simple political formula along the lines of "voyeurism is sexist, therefore we must give it up," the claims of the best feminist art illuminate the often ambivalent relationship we have to the distinction between what we know and how we feel, particularly in regard to libidinal desire. "WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution" offers an opportunity to examine a richer, more nuanced story about feminist art and its legacies than the one usually told.

While it is often said we are living in a post-feminist age, a description that paradoxically suggests that feminism is both passé because it has been fully assimilated and somehow irrelevant because it has failed to eradicate sexism, we have not begun to assess fully the particular force and shape of the feminist art movement, especially work that was created in places other than the United States or England. Part of the difficulty of creating this assessment comes from the fact that the feminist art movement left so little untouched. Indeed, one of the most revolutionary legacies of feminist art concerns the epistemological contours of touch itself.

Atsuko Tanaka  
Electric Dress, 1956  
Performance at  
The Second Gutai Exhibition,  
The National Museum of Art,  
Osaka, Japan

<sup>1</sup> For a fuller discussion of these issues, see my "Survey" essay in *Art and Feminism*, ed. Helena Reckitt (London: Phaidon Press, 2001), 15–49. On the geographical and political terrain of feminist art, see Griselda Pollock, ed., *Generations and Geographies in the Visual Arts: Feminist Readings* (London: Routledge, 1996). One of the best discussions of these complex aesthetic and political histories, especially as

they played out in Eastern Europe, can be found in Kristine Stiles's remarkable essay "Uncorrupted Joy: International Art Actions," in Paul Schimmel, ed., *Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–1979* (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art; and New York: Thames & Hudson, 1998), 226–329.

### Touching Touch

To think of touch epistemologically requires that we put the sentient body at the center of knowing. While New Age philosophers, massage therapists, dancers, and yoga practitioners (among others) have long recognized the centrality of the sensuous body in ways of knowing, intellectuals and other so-called sophisticated thinkers have often ignored or undervalued the body as a source of knowledge. But in the wake of World War II, as the horrific implications of the Holocaust and the atom bomb began to reverberate within world consciousness, a new interest in the human body as a medium for art emerged. Called variously Body art, live action, or performance, the history of this work is directly linked to feminist art, although its roots took hold before that movement had a name. In Japan, artists of the Gutai movement responded to the United States' use of the atom bomb in their country by staging events that used the earth's ground and the artist's body as primary media. For example, Kazuo Shiraga created a sculpture, a performance, a photograph, and an environmental work in one gesture titled *Challenging Mud* (1955). In another performance, six artists wiped the pavement and manhole covers of a Tokyo neighborhood to bring attention to caring for the toxic ground (*Hi Red Center, Movement to Promote the Cleanup of the Metropolitan Area (Be Clean!)*, 1964).<sup>2</sup> One of the few women members of the Gutai group, Atsuko Tanaka created the important 1956 piece *Electric Dress*. Composed entirely of lightbulbs covering the artist's body from head to toe (her face was unadorned but when the dress was turned on, her visage was obscured by light), *Electric Dress* was simultaneously sculpture and performance and was instrumental in forging the tradition of wearable art that would become a staple of feminist art.

Tanaka's piece presciently suggested that the body in a post-nuclear age would be overtaken by the technological. The traditional Japanese association between clothes and wearer, what Liza Dalby succinctly described as a "merger,"<sup>3</sup> suggests the intensity of the interrelationship between external environment and inner landscape that inspired many postwar Japanese artists. Anyone who wore Tanaka's dress would be impossible to touch and impossible to ignore. Just as the nuclear bomb ignited a force that expressed itself as immense visible light, so too did Tanaka show us a body perpetually exposed to the returning illumination of that light. A prompt to historians and scientists not to forget, *Electric Dress* also underlines the often hidden gender politics at work in these fields. In place of the drapery of the feminine kimono, then, Tanaka covered her body with phallic lightbulbs and a shower of electrical cords. To be a "turned-on" heterosexual woman, then, came at the price of her transformation into an object that illuminates the phallic domain. In 1975, after a decade of strong feminist art and theory, Louise Bourgeois created a latex "dress" that seemed to render the artist all breast. With characteristic wit, Bourgeois's wearable sculpture reminds us that simply reversing the tropes of the masculine phallic bulb with the feminine breast will not take us too far in rethinking the complicated politics of embodiment.

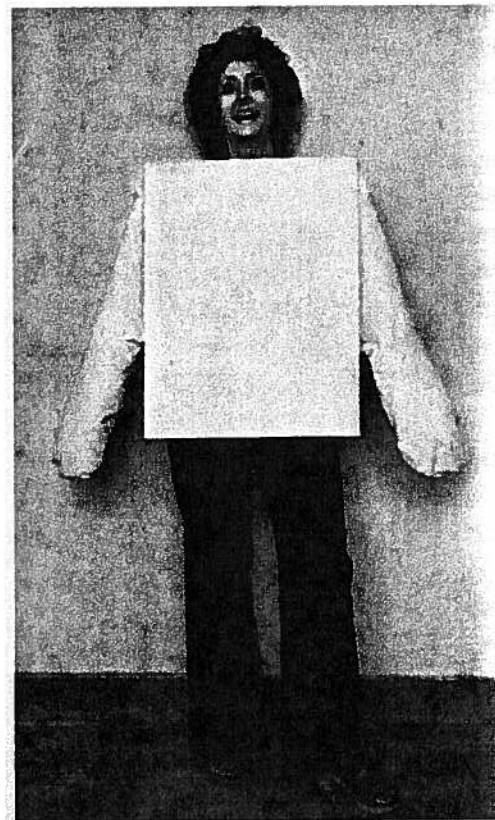
<sup>2</sup> See Shinichiro Osaki, "Body and Place: Action in Postwar Art in Japan," in *Out of Actions*, 121–57, for one of the best discussions of Gutai in English.

<sup>3</sup> Liza Dalby wrote: "In Japan, clothing and wearer merge." *Kimono: Fashioning Culture* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1993), 4.

**Helena Almeida**

right: *Desenho habitado*, 1975, detail  
Two black-and-white photographs  
with drawing and collage of horsehair  
28 3/4 x 24 7/16 inches  
Private collection

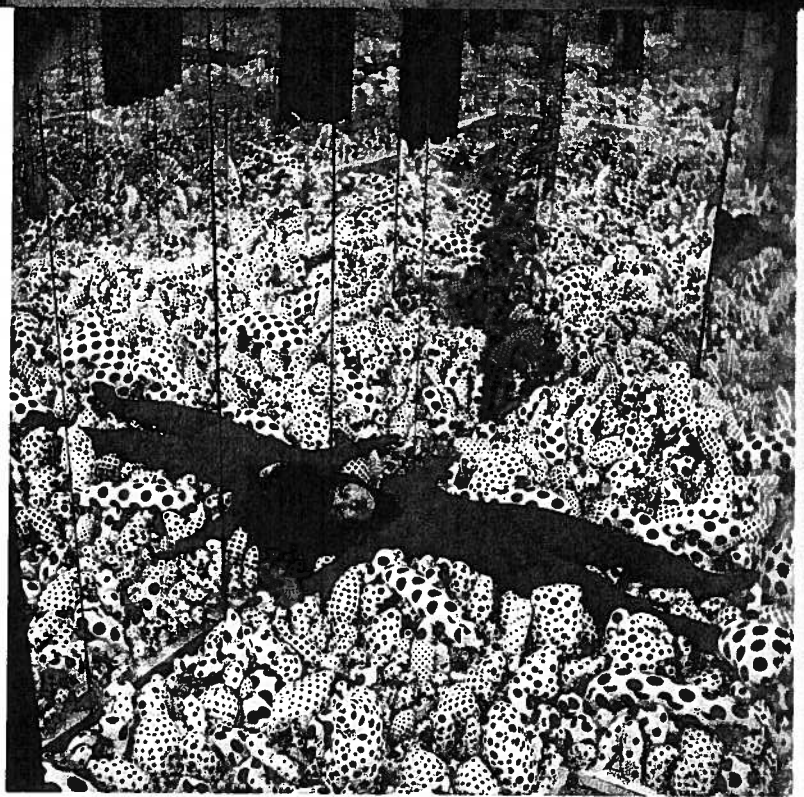
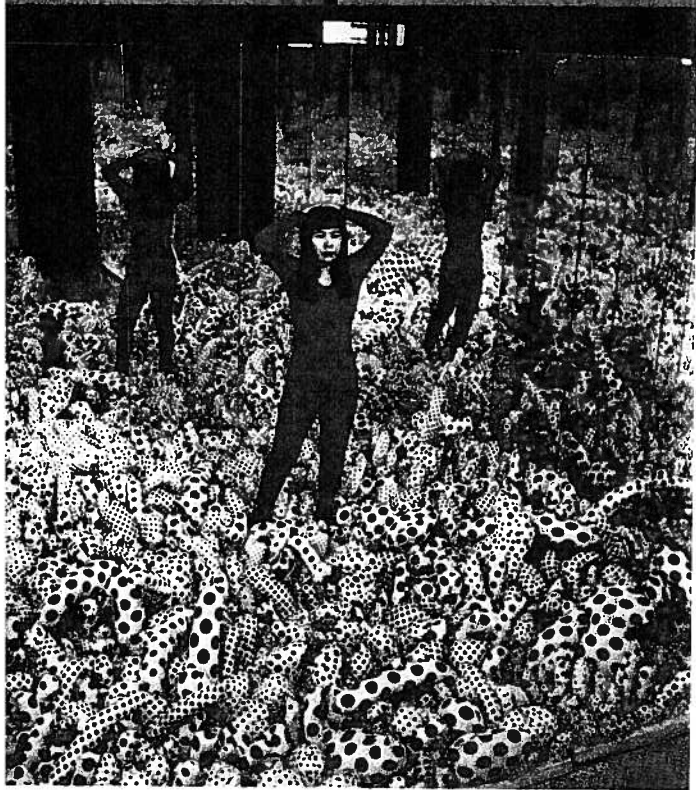
below: *Tela rosa para vestir*, 1969  
Black-and-white photograph  
32 1/16 x 28 3/4 inches  
Collection Fundação de Serralves, Porto



While wearable sculpture sparks associations with fashion, the wearable paintings and drawings of Portuguese-born Helena Almeida convey a different meaning. In her 1969 *Tela rosa para vestir* (Pink canvas to wear), Almeida donned a blank but slightly pink canvas and “became” a painting by walking around in galleries and on the streets of Lisbon.<sup>4</sup> In her 1975–78 series *Desenho habitado* (Inhabited drawing), she traces some of what it might mean for women to be the body of art, rather than the object of art history’s narrow gaze. The series of photographs moves from images of the artist’s hands drawing thin lines to images of her face absorbed in manipulating lines made of horsehair in the air. Flat and somber, the photographs lack surface and bodily depth, suggesting that the artist’s body is merely a series of lines, something at once tangible and elusive. Although more delicate than Tanaka’s *Electric Dress*, Almeida’s photographs share the paradoxical gesture of inviting touch and making it impossible.

Tanaka’s work, and the art of the Gutai group more broadly, influenced Yayoi Kusama and Yoko Ono, two Japanese feminist artists who created significant performance and installation art in New York and Japan during the 1960s. Kusama’s phallic structures—sewn and stuffed fabric elements that covered her objects and surfaces—recall Tanaka’s lightbulbs, while her sense of scale and time owes much to the Gutai group’s acknowledgment of the vast temporal consequences of nuclear radiation. Kusama’s 1965 installation *Infinity Mirror Room, Phalli’s Field* stages an encounter with the apparently infinite force field of the phallic. Phallic-shaped fabric sculptures fill a room lined with mirrors, suggesting the unending duplication of men’s power. While this emphasis on repetition was related to Pop art, Kusama’s particular insistence on the phallic structure of what gets repeated also suggests the immense difficulty of finding a

<sup>4</sup>  
For a fuller discussion of Helena Almeida’s work, see Isabel Carlos and Peggy Phelan, *Helena Almeida: Têxto* (Lisbon: Instituto das Artes; and Porto: Civilização Editora, 2005).



**Yayoi Kusama**  
*Infinity Mirror Room,*  
*Phalli's Field, 1965*  
 Sewn stuffed fabric, plywood, and mirrors  
 Room: 98 7/16 x 196 7/16 x 196 7/16 inches  
 Installation at Castellane Gallery, New York

place for non-phallic form within the misogynistic cultural imaginary. But unlike Andy Warhol's repetitive returns to death and disasters as the currency for infinite recursiveness, her repetitions convey a disquieting exuberance.

Kusama's reflections on infinity achieve a sense of scale unprecedented in women's art before the war. For Kusama, art has an obligation to endure, if only as a way for the creative drive to outpace the drive toward destruction and annihilation to which Warhol and other postwar artists were also responding. Art's allegiance to repetition in the Vietnam era marshaled an often subtle defense against the return to the massive, mechanical killings that were the hallmark of World War II. Since many of her recurring mini-sculptural forms resemble phallic structures, Kusama's art also emphasizes the ways in which violence has historically been marked as gendered. The sometimes surprising intimacy of work pitched toward the infinite comes from Kusama's awareness of the ways in which creative and destructive drives seem to repeat themselves both in our inner psychic lives and in our external political landscapes.

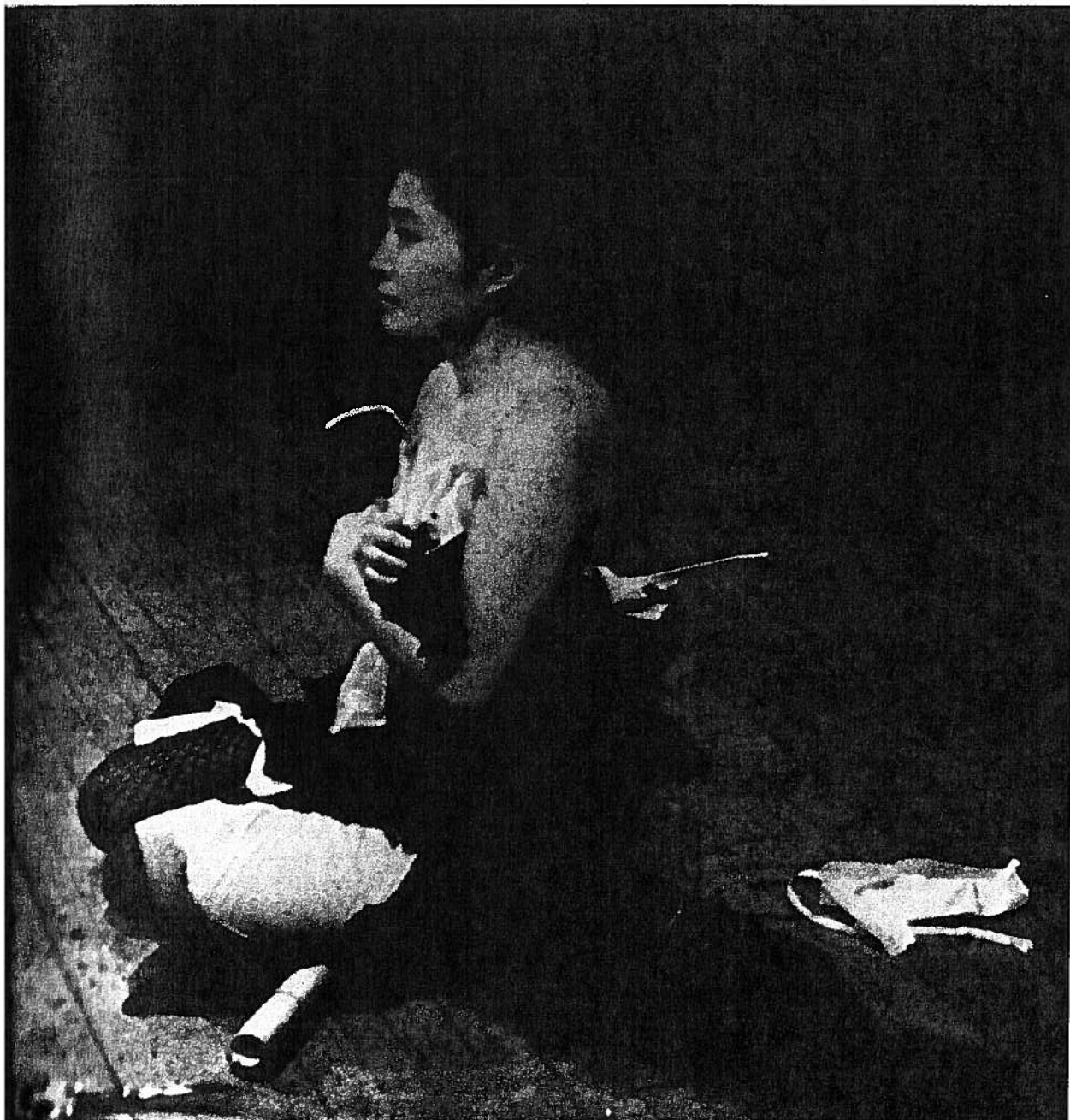
This double awareness suffuses Yoko Ono's visual and performance art, among the most explicit meditations on touch, love, and peace we are likely to see for some time.<sup>5</sup> Ono's *Cut Piece* stages the drama of touch in an intimate fashion. Performed in Kyoto and Tokyo in July 1964, New York in March 1965, and London as part of the Destruction in Art Symposium in 1966, Ono performed the piece again in Paris's Théâtre le Ranelagh on 15 September 2003 in response to the events of 9/11, calling that performance an offering for world peace. The forty-two-year history of *Cut Piece* spans different political moments and geographical and cultural

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Ironically, Yoko Ono's important early artwork has been somewhat obscured by her fame. After she married John Lennon, her own past, her own life, became harder to see. Efforts have been made to correct the record, but there is still important primary work to be done with her archive. Stiles is one of Ono's best commentators; her 1992 essay "Unbo-soming Lennon: The Politics of Yoko Ono's

Experience," *Art Criticism* 7, no. 2 (spring 1992): 21–54, is especially rich. See also Kathy O'Dell, "Fluxus Feminus," *The Drama Review* 41, no. 1 (spring 1997): 43–60. O'Dell's formulation of touch and performance in her *Contract with the Skin: Masochism, Performance Art, and the 1970s* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998) has influenced my argument here. The other two major scholarly

books on Ono are *Yes Yoko Ono*, ed. Alexandra Munroe and Jon Hendricks (New York: Japan Society and Harry Abrams, 2000), the catalogue that accompanied her retrospective, and *Yoko Ono: Arias and Objects*, ed. Barbara Haskell and John G. Hanhardt (Salt Lake City: Gibbs Smith, 1991).



**Yoko Ono**  
Cut Piece, 1964  
Performance at Carnegie  
Recital Hall, New York, 1965

contexts. Each performance pursues and extends themes of sacrifice, passivity, aggression, intimacy, and public ritual across an encounter that stages the dense drama of touching and being touched.

The performance is deceptively simple: Ono, wearing her best clothes, sits passively on a stage and invites audience members to come up one at a time and cut pieces of her clothes off with a pair of tailor scissors. Ono first performed *Cut Piece* in Kyoto as part of a program called "Contemporary American Avant-Garde Music Concert: Insound and Instructure."<sup>6</sup> That version of the performance emphasized the aural dimension of the scissors touching the fabric of her clothes: "It was very, very difficult for people to come up. So there would be very long silences and then you would hear the scissors cutting. There were quiet and beautiful silences—quiet and beautiful movements."<sup>7</sup> Influenced by John Cage, with whom she collaborated in Japan and New York, Ono was interested in amplifying the sounds of objects moving closer and finally touching other objects; the scissors' blades moving across the fabric created a soft symphony in the hushed Kyoto hall.

As she repeated her performance in New York and London during the next two years, Ono's commentary about what her aims were changed, in part because the different contexts transformed the meaning of the piece. When she performed the work at New York's Carnegie Hall, the violent misogyny and racism displayed by the cutters was recorded in David and Albert Maysles' film documenting the performance. This aggression overrode the symphonic oscillation between silence and shredding that marked the Kyoto performance. Menacing and rowdy, the New York audience dramatized the politics of sexual and racial difference at the site of touch. Offering her body as a receptive field for the audience's often violent desire to strip her, Ono's New York performance (in part because it has been well-preserved on film) has become a touchstone within theoretical accounts of the power of feminist art. Writing in 1996, Thomas Crow argued: "It is difficult to think of an earlier work of art that so acutely pinpoints (at the very point when modern feminist activism was just emerging) the political question of women's physical vulnerability as mediated by regimes of vision."<sup>8</sup> Kathy O'Dell raised the rhetorical stakes a bit higher when she suggested that in *Cut Piece*, Ono "takes on the look of a creature in the process of being skinned," a description that suggests Ono had fear and panic in her eyes. But two sentences later, O'Dell described Ono as "training an icy stare on the audience" and concluded that Ono's performance replicated "stereotypically male practices of voyeurism, as well as stereotypically female states of passivity," and "competed with traditions of voyeurism and demonstrated another form of mastery over visual space."<sup>9</sup>

Crow and O'Dell emphasized the visible register of *Cut Piece*, but for me the power of the performance resides in the drama of physical intimacy that the piece stages. To participate in the performance the spectator has to come onstage; he or she has to enter the performance space and give up the security inherent in voyeurism and become the object of the audience's gaze. Moreover, the spectator-turned-performer has to come very close to Ono, indeed close enough to touch her. In the Maysles' film of the New York performance, when a particularly

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For a full discussion of the history and theoretical difficulties of Ono's performance, see Jieun Rhee's "Performing the Other: Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*," *Art History* 28, no. 1 (February 2005): 96–118; and Kevin Concannon, "Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*: Critical

Reception," talk given at the Third Annual Performance Studies Conference, Atlanta, 11 April 1997, available online at <http://webcast.gatech.edu/papers/arch/Concannon.html>.

7

Ono, quoted in Yoko Ono, 91.

8

Thomas Crow, *The Rise of the Sixties: American and European Art in the Era of Dissent* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1996), 133.

9

O'Dell, "Fluxus Feminus," 53.



**Marina Abramović**

top: *Rhythm 0*, 1974  
Performance at Studio Morra,  
Naples, Italy

above and right: *Rhythm 10*, 1973  
Performance at Richard Demarco  
Gallery, Edinburgh

aggressive male spectator approaches Ono and cuts off her bra strap, the artist flinches for a brief second before she resumes her passive sacrifice. This flicker is precisely where live performance gains its power; unscripted and momentary, Ono's work exposes the aggression that marks sexual difference and the laborious efforts women make not to be undone by it. As a drama of physical intimacy, the performance illuminates the range of responses intimacy as such generates—fear, aggression, tenderness, vulnerability, and a desire both to express and to foreclose that very vulnerability.

In 1974, the themes of Ono's *Cut Piece* were revisited in Marina Abramović's extraordinary performance *Rhythm 0*. Promising to remain passive for six hours, the Belgrade-born Abramović invited spectators to use any of the seventy-two objects she had arrayed on a table next to her in a gallery in Naples in 1974.<sup>10</sup> The objects she had assembled on the table included a feather, a scalpel, paint, a gun, and a bullet. Before long, Abramović's skin had been cut and she was bleeding; a spectator had put the gun in her hand and cocked it against her forehead. There was a growing sense of danger. Other spectators intervened and Abramović accepted their care. In this radical gesture of an even more profound acceptance of the spectators' will than the original plan, a gesture that showed how active passivity often is, the performance was transformed; Abramović allowed her spectators to become co-creators of her work. In the still photographs documenting *Rhythm 0*, one can clearly see the tears and despair in Abramović's eyes and the cold indifference of the primarily, but not exclusively, male spectators. After creating this performance, Abramović's attitude toward her work changed and she became less interested in her own passivity and more interested in using spectatorial energy to create bodily change. In her collaborative works with Ulay, her professional and personal partner for thirteen years, Abramović explored the dynamics of heterosexual coupling, the nature of love and desire, and the edge of trust and mortality.



<sup>10</sup>

For a fuller discussion of this performance see my essay "On Seeing the Invisible: Marina Abramović's *House with an Ocean View*," in *Live: Art and Performance*, ed. Adrian Heathfield (London: Tate Modern, 2004), 16–26.



In 1988, they marked the ending of their personal and professional collaborations by beginning at opposite ends of the Great Wall of China and walking for three months in order to meet at the center to embrace and say good-bye. Titled *The Lovers—The Great Wall Walk*, the piece exposed the labor involved in generating a touch capable of loosening a once-loving embrace.

In her solo work, however, Abramović explored the dynamics of pain, violence, and self-destruction. In the first performance of *Rhythm 10* in 1973, for example, she recorded the “rhythmic melody” of the sounds made as she plunged a knife rapidly between the fingers of her outstretched hand, changing knives each time she stabbed her hand—rather than the surface on which her hand rested—until she had used ten knives. Playing the tape back, she repeated the performance using the recording as a “score” to duplicate the same actions and injuries at the same moments. At once a feat of extraordinary concentration and a scene of repetitious self-mutilation, *Rhythm 10* amplifies the ways in which women sometimes engage in self-sabotage. From foot binding to obsessive dieting, diverse cultural energy has been dedicated to deforming women’s bodies, often with women’s own almost masochistic consent.

In *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful* from 1975, Abramović conveyed the violent rejection of the female body at the heart of the beauty industry and linked that violence to the sexist demands of the art world—where the woman artist is expected to make beautiful art, but even more crucially, to be beautiful herself. During the hour-long performance, a naked Abramović violently brushed her hair back with one hand while combing her hair forward with the other hand as she repeated “Art must be beautiful; artist must be beautiful.” At the end of her piece, her face was bruised and her hair a mess, suggesting that the imperative to be beautiful often creates astonishing ugliness. These themes are also explored in works by American artists including Hannah Wilke, Cindy Sherman, Eleanor Antin, and Carolee Schneemann. Antin, for example, created *Carving: A Traditional Sculpture* (1972), a photographic documentation of her thirty-six-day diet that deconstructs the mythos of the sculptor who creates perfect form by eliminating errant material from a hunk of stone. But whereas Antin’s work employs the complex representational codes of photographic surveillance and criminology, Abramović’s performances are more visceral and less elegant.

In the early 1970s, Abramović used live performance to map the fault lines of feminism and art, often jeopardizing her own safety and well-being. While other performance-based artists, perhaps most famously Chris Burden, risked their own bodies to explore the interrelationship between live art and death, Abramović’s work exposed the gendered hierarchies at work in many of these explorations. Her work with Ulay focused on love and trust, rather than violence, but even there her body was much more vulnerable than his. In *Rest Energy* (1980), one of their most powerful collaborations, they stood facing each other, Abramović gripping a bow and Ulay pulling back the string and arrow. Their weight and concentration was absolutely focused on keeping the bow and arrow perfectly taut, with the arrow pointed toward Abramović’s heart—had there been an error, she would have been the one to feel it.

Live art's premise is that something transformative might occur in the scene of enactment that cannot be fully rehearsed. For many women body artists, this meant that the spectacle of pain, and especially of opening up their own bodies with razors and knives, offered an opportunity both to dramatize the pain of patriarchy and to create a new social body. The French artist Gina Pane, who influenced Abramović and the French artist Orlan, held the conviction that "the body's essential location is in 'we.'"<sup>11</sup> Pane's 1971 performance *Escalade non-anesthésiée* (Unanaesthetized climb) featured her walking up a ladder-like structure whose rungs were prepared with various sharp protrusions. Neither her feet nor her hands had any protective covering; therefore the higher she climbed, the more blood she lost. At once a comment on the escalation of the Vietnam War and the nature of women's bloody sacrifice within patriarchal culture, Pane's performance underlined the literal pain at the heart of female embodiment. Unwilling to romanticize such pain or to turn it into theater, Pane performed *Escalade* in her studio, only inviting the photographer Françoise Masson to come and document the work. It ended when she reached her own exhaustion point.<sup>12</sup>

While sometimes summarily dismissed as a narcissistic or exhibitionistic spectacle of pain and self-mutilation, the best feminist ordeal art called attention to the shared mortality of the human body, the ability to survive pain, and the persistence of ritual form. The pain at the core of this work poses difficult questions about masochism and about the force of women's agency, especially in relation to their own bodies. In addition to staging an action that punctured her hands and feet, which recalls Christ's stigmata, Pane also created *Self-Portrait* (1973). In this performance, she took a razor blade and made incisions around her fingernails and lips. Behind her, slides of women painting their nails were projected. A camera then recorded the reactions of women in the audience, and these too were projected, as Pane faced away from the audience while repeating the line "They won't see anything." Facing forward once more, Pane then drank milk. As the milk entered the sores opened by the blades, it became stained with blood. She then spit this blood into a bowl. The intermingling of the red blood and the white milk suggested the cost of nurturing, the performance that continues to dominate many women's everyday lives.

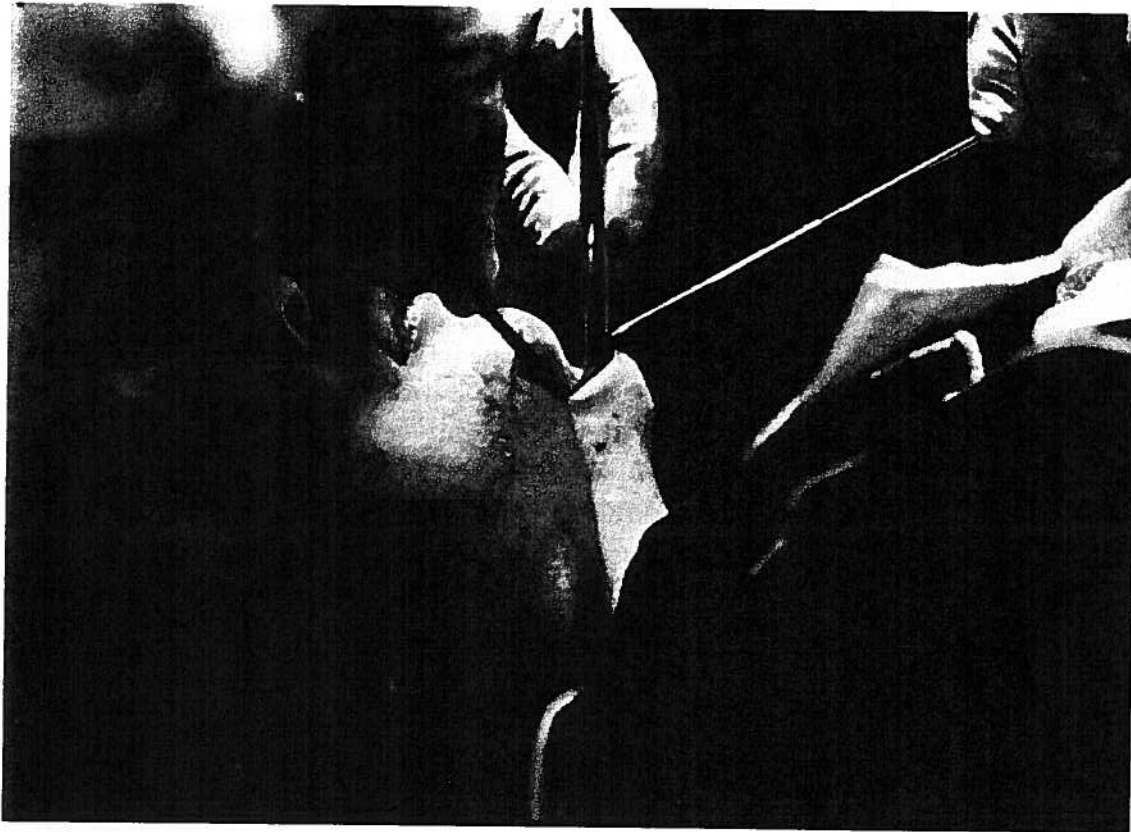
Pane's disquieting performances have also informed the work of Orlan, including her recent and ongoing performance of plastic surgery, *The Reincarnation of Saint Orlan*. Begun in 1990, Orlan's series comprises nine plastic surgery events to date that changed her appearance into the composite ideal Orlan had cobbled together from the features of Mona Lisa and various goddesses as they are depicted in art history.<sup>13</sup> Many of Orlan's operations were fully theatrical and involved dancing, reciting, and fashion. They were also filmed, and the artist created works out of the documentation of her transformation. I have found the films of Orlan's facial

<sup>11</sup> Gina Pane, quoted in Uta Grosenick, ed., *Women Artists* (Cologne, Germany: Taschen, 2001), 428.

<sup>12</sup> Jennifer Blessing has discussed Pane's careful use of photography in "Gina Pane's Witnesses: The Audience and Photography," *Performance Research* 7, no. 4 (December

2002): 14–26, which is drawn from her forthcoming dissertation on the artist's work, 28–30.

<sup>13</sup> For a fuller discussion of Orlan's choices for models and her overall ambition, see her essay "Intervention," in *The Ends of Performance*, ed. Jill Lane and Peggy Phelan (New York: New York University Press, 1997), 315–27.



**Orlan**

*La Deuxième bouche*, November 21, 1993, 1993

Cibachrome print

47 1/4 x 64 1/8 inches

Fonds régional d'art contemporain  
des Pays de la Loire, France

*Regard camera avec dessin sur  
le visage*, December 21, 1993, 1993

Cibachrome print

47 1/4 x 64 1/8 inches

Collection of the artist



**VALIE EXPORT**  
Still from *Tapp und Tastkino*,  
1968

reconstructions especially difficult to watch; as the scalpel lifts the seam of her face, I feel faint. The philosopher Emmanuel Levinas argued that it is in the face-to-face encounter that the intersubjective experience is most radically staged: “The Other becomes my neighbour precisely through the way the face summons me, begs for me, and in so doing recalls my responsibility, and calls me into question.”<sup>14</sup> Pane and Orlan make a similar point to the philosopher’s, albeit more viscerally.<sup>15</sup> Orlan’s radical surgical performances are pitched toward a future body that is at once based in the inequities of sexual difference and completely oblivious to them. “Remember the future,”<sup>16</sup> she proclaimed. That paradoxical pronouncement helps illuminate the promise of feminist performance: to bring about a future that remembers, without repeating, the history of sexism and all the other annihilating “isms” that came to light with and because of feminism.<sup>17</sup>

### Screening Liberation

While live art and feminism had an especially generative relationship in the 1960s and 70s, it was primarily in film that feminist theory made its most compelling advances. VALIE EXPORT—born Waltraud Lehner Höllinger in 1940 in Linz, Austria—changed her name in 1967. In adapting the name of a then-popular cigarette, Smart Export, EXPORT trenchantly (and wryly) underscored the assumption that heterosexual women are expected to “sell” their father’s name for their husband’s upon marriage. The commodified nature of this exchange meant that women were brand names that could be easily changed (and like cigarettes, easily stubbed out) to accentuate the prowess of the husband. The only woman artist associated

<sup>14</sup> Emmanuel Levinas, “Ethics as First Philosophy,” in *The Levinas Reader*, ed. Seán Hand (Oxford, England: Blackwell Press, 1989), 83.

<sup>15</sup> The performances of Gina Pane, Orlan, and Marina Abramović, whose 2002 performance *The House with the Ocean View* employed ladders studded with butcher knives for rungs,

has been a strong influence on the work of contemporary gay performers, especially Franko B and Ron Athey, both of whom use their own bleeding in front of others as a way to explore the ethical borders of intersubjective experience. Their work is also deeply informed by AIDS and the discourse of bodily fluids.

<sup>16</sup> Orlan’s frequent invocation of this motto is discussed widely in the critical literature on the artist. One of the best discussions in English of the concept and its centrality for Orlan can be found in Tanya Augsburg’s essay, “Orlan’s Performative Transformations of Subjectivity,” in *The Ends of Performance*, 285–314.

<sup>17</sup> Tania Modleski has written wonderfully of feminism as a performative promise, and her argument influences my own. See her “Some Functions of Feminist Criticism, or, the Scandal of the Mute Body,” *October*, no. 49 (summer 1989): 3–24.

with the Viennese actionists, a group of extreme body artists active in Austria's capital city during the 1960s, EXPORT quickly saw the limitations of an art form based on the general term "the body" because the generality erased the particular history and emotional density of women's bodies. In 1968, EXPORT premiered *Tapp und Tastkino* (Tap and touch cinema) in Vienna during an experimental film festival. The piece is usually referred to in English as *Touch Cinema*, which elides the notion of a kind of repeated touching, as in the attempt to grasp something difficult to hold, which is implied by the German "Tapp und Tast." The German title indicates a kind of groping toward, or even fumbling in the dark for, something that cannot be fully seen or fully absorbed.<sup>18</sup> The title of EXPORT's performance was meant both as an acknowledgment of her own attitude toward experimental art and as a provocation to her spectator, who was invited to grope in the dark for something not yet visible in the history of film: a woman who directly controlled the display of her own body.

For the first performance, EXPORT walked in the street outside the main screening rooms of the film festival wearing a styrofoam box (in later renditions this material was replaced by aluminum) around her torso. The front of the box, which protruded about six inches from her body, sported a curtain; worn like a vest, it resembled the architecture of a movie hall. Spectators were invited to enter the cinema by placing their hands inside the box and touching (after blindly groping for) her naked breasts.

*Tapp und Tastkino* was intended as a critique of the traditional structure of cinema. Using her body as a literal screen, EXPORT reversed the voyeuristic structure of traditional cinema in which the spectator looks while remaining unseen. Exposed to her own gaze and the gaze of other spectators, the spectator of *Touch Cinema* gives up the security and pleasure involved in being a kind of Peeping Tom or Tina in favor of what one would assume to be the greater pleasure—touching the artist's breasts. Created seven years before the publication of Laura Mulvey's groundbreaking essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975), EXPORT's *Touch Cinema* brilliantly exposed the patriarchal structure of the cinematic apparatus. But exposing that structure did not lead to a wholesale dismantling of it.

For Mulvey, the destruction of visual pleasure offered by the voyeuristic structure of narrative cinema had to be dismantled if gender equality were to be achieved. She wrote: "Women, whose image has continually been stolen and used for this end [that is, for the pleasure of the male gaze], cannot view the decline of the traditional film form with anything much more than sentimental regret."<sup>19</sup> Collaborating with Peter Wollen, Mulvey went on to put her theory into practice in the 1977 film *Riddles of the Sphinx*. Disdaining voyeurism and the fetishism it inspired, Wollen and Mulvey composed the central section of their film with thirteen slow 360-degree pans, thus revealing what a cinema that refused to privilege any particular viewing position might look like. Their film also incorporated images of Mary Kelly's important feminist work *Post-Partum Document* (1973–79), thus extending a theoretical inquiry about sexual difference and the gaze across media. Heavily influenced by psychoanalytic theory, Mulvey and Kelly were instrumental in offering models for feminists who wanted to create both art and analysis.

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See Michael Sicinski, "VALIE EXPORT and Paranoid Counter-Surveillance," *Discourse* 22, no. 2 (spring 2000): 71–91, for a fuller discussion of EXPORT's work.

19

Laura Mulvey, "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," *Screen* 16, no. 3 (autumn 1975): 18.

Indeed, they thought of art as an arena for sophisticated critical argument and reflection. The attitude of their work helped support the growth of “the new talkie,” the dominant form of avant-garde cinema in the 1970s and 80s. One of the most sophisticated examples of this genre is Yvonne Rainer’s 1980 film *Journeys from Berlin/1971*, which investigates the psychoanalytic session, the Baader-Meinhof group, and the lyrical possibilities of a meandering camera as it repeatedly returns to caress and meditate on a series of objects on a mantelpiece. Rainer, one of the chief theorists and choreographers of the Judson Dance Theater, began to move from dance to film in the early 1970s while also writing trenchant essays chronicling the transformations in her feminist and eventually lesbian feminist thinking and theorizing along the way.<sup>20</sup>

EXPORT aligned *Touch Cinema* with the struggle for gay and lesbian rights, a struggle foregrounded by the 1969 police raid of the Stonewall Inn Bar in New York’s Greenwich Village. She saw her work as an “unveiled intrusion into the taboo of homosexuality” and sought women viewers-turned-touchers as well as men for her expanded cinema.<sup>21</sup> While EXPORT contended that *Touch Cinema* is “the first real women’s film,” the live performance, perhaps unwittingly, exposed some of the difficulties of assuming a direct relation between an aesthetic movement and a political revolution.<sup>22</sup> EXPORT’s performance illuminated the blindness of traditional and some avant-garde film practices, which continually reproduced the voyeuristic structure of the man of action and the woman as object to be seen. But once exposed, the political transformation that should have logically followed this insight stalled. Heterosexual women’s own visual and sexual pleasure is bound up in this voyeuristic structure, and Mulvey’s cool prediction that women would look upon the destruction of this pleasure with no more than sentimental regret was not borne out.<sup>23</sup> Moreover, the difference between the power and agency carried by the male gaze did not simply transfer to the woman artist who looked. Part of what *Touch Cinema* exposed was the radical difference between the agency of the male gaze and the lack of power associated with women’s looking. Men did not seem to care one way or the other that EXPORT was looking at them as their hands entered the movie hall enclosing her naked breasts. Their eyes did not lock into hers, as her architectural design encouraged them to do. They seemed content not to look at her face or eyes; her gaze had no shaming force—indeed, it lacked much agency at all. This was the same lesson that Abramović’s *Rhythm 0* taught six years later when a male viewer-turned-toucher put a gun in her hand and pressed it to her head.

### The Politics of Touch

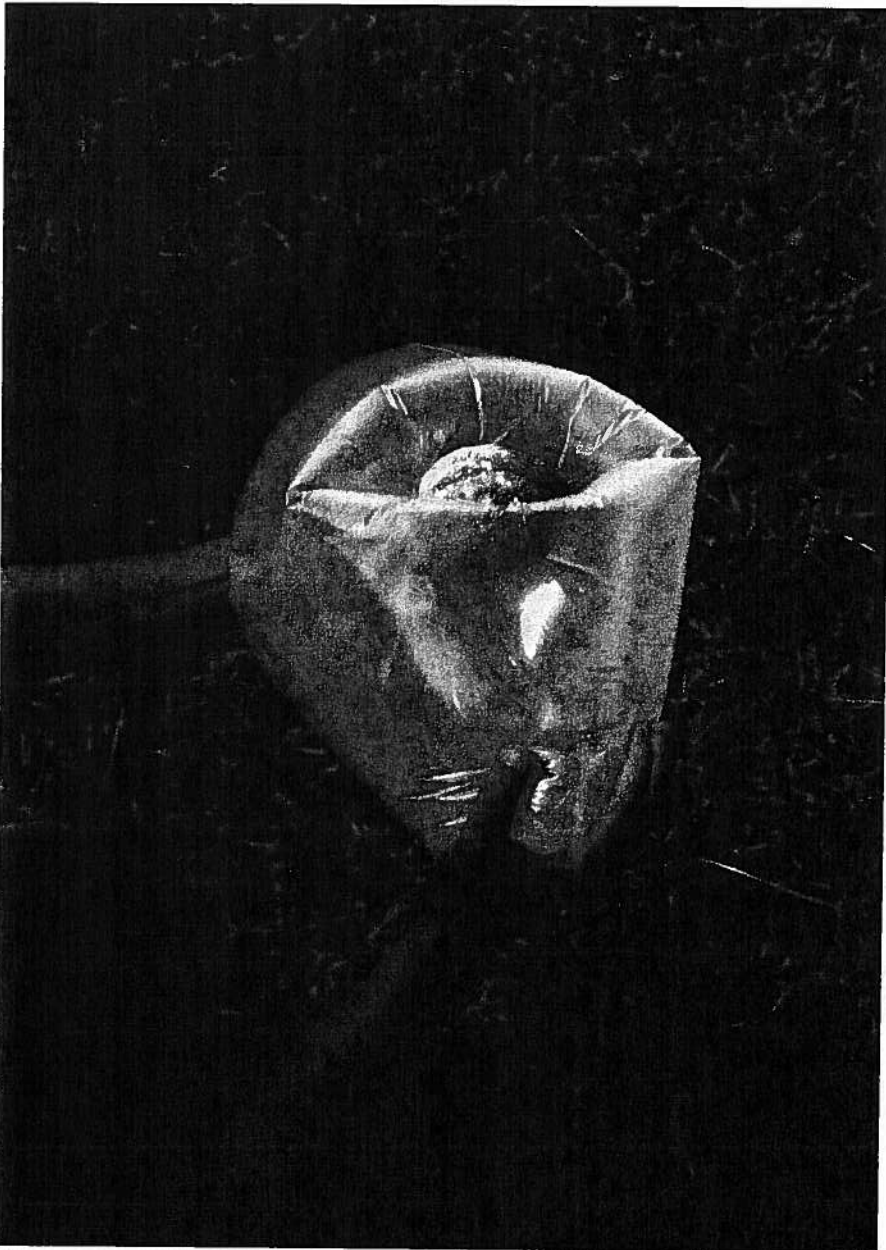
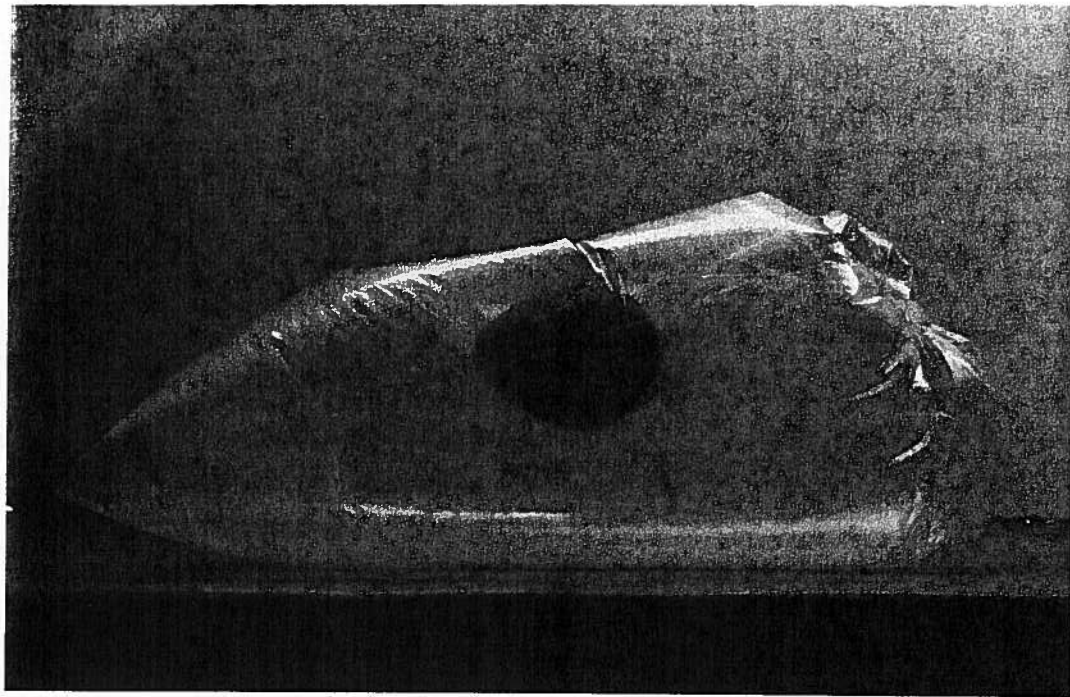
Mulvey’s analysis of cinematic vision inspired an enormous amount of critical work on the politics and psychoanalytic dimensions of looking and being seen. But we have not yet formulated a similarly persuasive theory of the politics of touching and being touched. Touch touches issues of pleasure, power, historical lineage, trauma, and ethics, making it an extraordinarily complicated gesture to formulate theoretically. Although critical work in this direction is sometimes summarized as a “haptic approach” to art, that term does not encompass the

<sup>20</sup> See Yvonne Rainer, *A Woman Who...: Essays, Interviews, Scripts* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1999).

<sup>21</sup> VALIE EXPORT, “Expanded Cinema as Expanded Reality,” *Senses of Cinema*, no. 28 (September–October 2003), accessible online at <http://www.sensesofcinema.com>.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> These issues are discussed very well in E. Ann Kaplan’s *Women and Film: Both Sides of the Camera* (New York: Methuen, 1983).



Phelan **THE RETURNS OF TOUCH**

**Lygia Clark**  
*Pedra e ar*, 1966  
Plastic bag and stones  
Dimensions variable  
Courtesy Cultural Association  
"The World of Lygia CLark"

complex politics at work in relation to live performance. Art devoted to touch does not necessarily ignore the visual, nor does it eliminate the difficulties provoked by libidinal desire. Since much of this work responds to the history of violence central to women's lives throughout the world, it often repeats some form of violence in an attempt to master and transform it.

Brazilian-born Lygia Clark investigated touch as a language for art. Clark rejected the concern with formalism at the center of the Concretism movement that was predominant in Brazil in the late 1950s and early 60s.<sup>24</sup> Viewing the preoccupation with mathematical form as a dead-end, Clark, Lygia Pape, Hélio Oiticica, and others endorsed the Neo-Concrete Manifesto (1959), which rejected "the machine and even the object as such [in favor of] living organisms."<sup>25</sup> Rather more than calling for experiments that blurred the line between art and life that had propelled performance artists in the United States during the 1970s, Clark eventually came to the conclusion that "the art is the body."<sup>26</sup> Her ingenious *Pedra e ar* (Stone and air, 1966) invites viewers to cradle a sculpture made of a common plastic bag inflated with air and tied with a rubber band, on top of which sits a small stone. The viewer-turned-toucher is asked to squeeze and release the bag so that the pebble appears to "breathe." Thus, art becomes living body; the hands touch the work and lend it breath and movement. The delicate intimacy of this touch is especially startling against the backdrop of the Brazilian military dictatorship under which the relationship between individual and collective breath, speech, and body were all under attack.

Pape's fabric sculpture *Divisor* (1968) invited spectators (for the first performance, the audience was primarily children from the *favelas* of Rio) to put their heads and limbs through perforations in a very large white cloth. As each spectator "enters" the artwork, the sculpture's gravity, weight, and form is transformed. When two people stand in opposite ends of the fabric, the material in the middle drapes down to the floor. As more people enter, the body of the artwork, like the social body that gives it form, seems to stretch and expand and become alive. Pape took the traditional "woman's form," fabric art, to create a stage for the creation of new social bodies that live and change in and across each performance.

Dramatizations of the sensuous and violent epistemology of touch form one of the most consistent themes in the history of feminist art. The knowing invested in and through touch helps us grasp some of the larger critical issues that still need to be addressed in theories and histories of feminist art. While feminist political insight propelled feminist art-making, the relationship between politics and art does not conform to a linear cause-and-effect logic. There is a supplement in great art, something that exceeds rational analysis and critical prediction. But perhaps by creating conditions to be moved by the complexity of touch as both wound and salve, some of the artists in this exhibition might help us grope our way toward another future within the rich history of feminist art.

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For excellent analyses of the work of Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica, see Lygia Clark and Hélio Oiticica, *Cartas 1964–1974* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Universidade Federal, 1996).

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The Neo-Concrete Manifesto was originally published in *Jornal do Brasil* (Rio de Janeiro), 22 March 1959. It has been reprinted in English in Dawn Ades, *Art in Latin America: The Modern Era, 1820–1980*, exh. cat. (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1989). It is also widely available on the web in several languages.

26

One of the best accounts of Clark's evolution in English is Suely Rolnik's quite extraordinary essay "Molding a Contemporary Soul: The Empty-Full of Lygia Clark," in *The Experimental Exercise of Freedom*, ed. Susan Martin and Alma Ruiz, exh. cat. (Los Angeles: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1999), 57–110.