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Silent Screams and the Everyday:
Sexual Violence in Performance Art

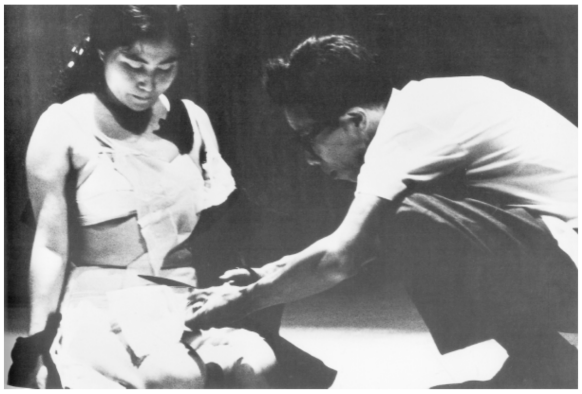
Very little documentation remains of Yoko Ono's 1964 performance, *Cut Piece*, which was performed for the first time at the Yamaichi Hall in Kyoto (Rhee 103). Ono, a Japanese-American avant-garde artist (Rhee 98), sits silently on the stage after asking audience members to approach her, one by one, and cut off pieces of her clothing (Rhee 102). Although Ono claims *Cut Piece*, in part, highlights the power of giving (Rhee 103), some critics argue that Cut Piece's larger message concerns "the potential for violence and the image of the male aggressor and female victim" (Rhee 103). Ten years later, Serbian-born artist, Marina Abramović, showcases *Rhythm 0* (MAI). In this piece, Abramović stands passively for hours and receives varying degrees of pleasure and pain, all from a participatory audience of those who cause injury and those who attempt to safeguard Abramović from harm (Gershman). The purpose of this paper is not necessarily to argue whether Yoko Ono and Marina Abramović are, indeed, feminists—though their performances just happen to coincide with the Second Wave of feminism (Mann 60). Rather, by calling attention to these earlier performance artists, we are more equipped to analyze performance art as it relates to sexual violence in the 21st Century.

Marina Abramović stands passive, motionless in *Rhythm 0* (1974) (Gershman) and, in all senses, *othered* by way of the torture and manipulation with which the audience inflicts. The

absence of movement in Abramović's performance piques feminist discussion, where identity and autonomy take center stage. Abramović's personal experience of being sexually assaulted (Gershman) allows the artist to establish her own role within this small commentary on autonomy, self, and society as the performer, and these concepts are exemplified by the various levels of pain and pleasure she receives. The audience strengthens its own awareness through the act of being coerced into participation— to harm or to protect the artist. Consequently, Abramović becomes "a puppet" in contrast to her more lively self upon returning to her hotel room after the show (MAI). Abramović's presentation of a non-neutral, sexed, "imaginary body" (Gatens 231)— created in an artistic space— provides the "framework in which we can give an account of how power, domination, and sexual difference intersect in the lived experience of men and women" (Gatens 230).

Yoko Ono also discusses a sort of "surrender" of mind and body and presents contradictions in *Cut Piece* (Rhee 113). She asks: "Are women the only people who know the pride and joy of surrender?" (Rhee 113). Ono's surrender is amplified as she is confronted by a seemingly threatening audience member:

> One person came on the stage…He raised his hand,



4.4 Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece*, performed at the Yamaichi Hall, Kyoto, 1964. Reproduced from *Yes Yoko Ono*, exhib. cat., 2000, 159. Copyright © Yoko Ono, courtesy of the artist.

> with the scissors in it, and I thought he was going to stab me. But the hand was just raised there and was totally still. He was standing still…with the scissors… threatening me. (Rhee 103)

Critics such as John Rockwell show a distaste regarding the too-dramatic contradictions present in Ono's work, "particularly the oddity of her persistent concern with women's integrity coupled with a costume, that included hot pants and black plastic boots up to her knees" (Rockwell 60). On the other hand, although Rockwell refers to a different Ono performance in his New York Times review, he creates a critique that actually does end up highlighting how women are often reductively packaged and that they cannot exist with greater complexity, that they cannot be be concurrently sexual and respectful (60). Ono amplifies this unique tension— those 'oddities' that Rockwell addresses in his review (60)— when Ono pairs *cutting* in relation to *silence* (Rhee 104) in *Cut Piece*, where the artist "surrender[s] to the audience through her performance. And the audience's gaze surrender[s] to her pose" (Rhee 114).

Performance artists rooted in feminist principle set the stage for future generations of artists who go on to address themes of sexual violence. Iranian-born artist, Kubra Khademi, was exiled from Afghanistan after her 2015 performance, *Armor* (La Porte Peinte). In a 2016 interview with Rocio Berenguer, Khademi sits at a café in Paris and reflects upon her experience performing *Armor,* and the artist explores the "everyday walk" for a woman (Berenguer). Through walking, Khademi believes she can "achieve herself" (Berenguer): "Staying at house and home for the woman is so much defined in my country. Her entire life— her life in the world — is in the house…that's it. I'm a sister, mother, daughter but when I walk, this is the way I can achieve myself." (Berenguer). Khademi centers in on the sheltered existence of women in relation to the world, paying particular attention to her culture's attitude concerning public sexual

assault and street harassment in one of her walking performances, *Armor* (Berenguer). A cell phone video captures the artist as she takes to the streets of Kabul, wearing custom-made armor that accentuates her breasts and buttocks (Mallonee).

Statement:

The sound remains in the nature,
Images have been remembered
in human's mind,
Either happens horrifying or
cool!
But what time carries, changes
the nature of those,
They become only the memories
of one's own
witnessing of those in everyday of other's life! (Khademi)

In the video, Khademi remains covered from head to toe, yet she is surrounded by swarms of men, whooping and yelling. Some of the men even attempt to grab the artist for their own amusement (or, perhaps, to punish her), but they discover she had already climbed into a vehicle. Khademi's performance walking fully clothed— yet with accentuated female-attributed biological features— demonstrates how frequently and openly sexual violence can occur, despite a woman's "everyday" action of walking. *Armor* highlights and protects sexual parts (Khademi) by the artist wearing a crafted armor piece. Khademi's performance is a departure from the aforementioned *Rhythm 0* and *Cut Piece*, both of which highlight the female form, yet Abramović and Ono act as surrogates, in line to be the recipients of violence against their own vulnerable bodies, while Khademi's *Armor* performance accentuates and protects the female body (BBC News).

Rhythm 0 by Marina Abramović and *Cut Piece* by Yoko Ono showcase women as passive, immobile objects. Khademi departs from that narrative by projecting her womanhood out into the world, rather than by remaining still. Another artist, Emma Sulkowicz, also demonstrates a departure from this earlier, stationary approach, as she performs her own interpretation of a woman's everyday walk but still maintains a certain passive role in the experience, just like these other performance pieces. When Columbia University updated its Class Day and Commencement guidelines in May 2015, prohibiting "large objects which could interfere with the proceedings or create discomfort to others in close, crowded spaces shared by thousands of people" (Izadi), many believe the change occurred as a direct response to Emma Sulkowicz's senior art thesis, *Carry That Weight*. Sulkowicz was raped in her dorm room while attending Columbia University (Columbia Daily Spectator). Due to inaction on the part of the college to ensure her safety— they did not suspend the rapist— Sulkowicz created her senior art thesis, an endurance performance piece called *Carry That Weight* (Izadi), where she carries a dorm room mattress in public from morning to night (Izadi). The artist displayed her 'rules of engagement' on a large studio wall, dictating that she could receive help carrying the mattress but may never ask others to assist her and she did not know how long the performance ultimately would last (Columbia Daily Spectator). Its conclusion was dependent upon the school suspending her attacker: "It could take a day or it could go on until I graduate" (Columbia Daily Spectator). Sulkowicz does end up graduating— mattress in tow— suggesting her attacker was never suspended (Izadi).

The shift in feminism during the 1960s likely influenced how Yoko Ono and Marina Abramović approached their performances— although Yoko Ono is the only one who explicitly identifies as a feminist (Rhee 103). Essayist and feminist June Jordan helps us to connect the experiences women face, expressed through performance pieces. In particular, she argues that there is:

> …a universal experience for women, which is that physical mobility is circumscribed by our gender and by the enemies of our gender. This is one of the ways they seek to make us know their hatred and respect it. This holds throughout the world for women and literally we are not to move about in the world freely. If we do then we have to understand that we may have to pay for it with our bodies. That is the threat. They don't ask you what you are doing in the street, they rape you and mutilate you bodily to let you remember your place. You have no rightful place in public. (Rose 363)

Abramović and Ono both raise awareness of these threats by amplifying them through the artists' immobile and vulnerable performances, where their bodies become a canvas for the audience to manipulate. Later feminist-oriented artists began to express themselves more vocally, such as singer Tori Amos. The artist's song, *Me and a Gun* (1991) retells her experience being raped (LlliquidDiamonds), and leads us toward a shift in feminist thought (Mann 56) and into Third Wave feminism, where resistance took a new "form of counter discourses that produce[d] new knowledges, [spoke] new truths, and constitute[d] new powers…decentering [] second wave feminism by the rise of a new discourse on gender relations: third wave feminism" (Mann 56).

The transition to the Third Wave probably helped artists such as Kubra Khademi and Emma Sulkowicz to demonstrate a woman's universal experience of fear— by mobilizing their performances outside and into public spaces. It is not known which artists actually inspire Sulkowicz and Khademi as they create their pieces, but it is possible that artists such as

Abramović and Ono contributed to this momentum that evolved feminist performance pieces and feminist theory. Perhaps it is just a hefty coincidence two major performance artists from the 60s and 70s mirrored each other's performances (in a sense); or that an artist at the transition into Third Wave feminism processes her rape experience in a strikingly more vocal manner; or how two younger performance artists use everyday walking out in public as a means to deliver their message. This paper explores differences between past and present, and one thing is certain: feminist dialogue concerning sexual violence— as expressed by performance artists— will continue until the day women achieve feminist equality.

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