

Unveiling Feminist Narratives: Performance Art and Gender Activism in the 1960s

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Abstract

Background: Feminist performance art in the 1960s emerged as a radical response to gender inequality, institutional exclusion, and the objectification of women within the art world. Artists such as Judy Chicago, Valie Export, and later the Guerrilla Girls challenged dominant patriarchal structures through provocative and interventionist artistic strategies, reshaping feminist visual and political discourse.

Purpose: The purpose of this study is to examine how these three feminist art pioneers transformed performance into a tool of gender activism, redefined feminine artistic identities, and exposed systemic biases within major art institutions. The paper aims to trace the evolution of feminist narratives through their works and assess their long-term influence on contemporary gender representation.

Methods: This qualitative research analyses primary sources including artist statements, interviews, performances, and archival documentation. Secondary sources such as feminist theory, art-historical texts, and institutional critiques are used to contextualize each artists contributions within the broader feminist movement. Visual analyses of key artworks further support the findings.

Results: The study finds that Judy Chicago reframed feminine artistry through symbolic and collaborative practices; Valie Export used her body as a political weapon to confront objectification and gendered power structures; and the Guerrilla Girls employed satire, anonymity, and public interventions to expose institutional discrimination. Collectively, their practices catalysed a shift from second-wave to third-wave feminist thought and transformed the discourse around gender and performance.

Conclusions: The contributions of Chicago, Export, and the Guerrilla Girls significantly expanded the possibilities of performance art as a form of feminist activism [5]. Their interventions not only challenged historical gender biases but also established enduring frameworks for resistance and representation within contemporary art. Their legacy continues to inspire new forms of feminist expression and institutional critique.

Keywords: Feminist Performance Art, Judy Chicago, Valie Export, Gender Activism, Art and Feminism.

1. Introduction

The year 1960s marked a pivotal era for feminist artists who utilized performance art as a powerful medium to challenge existing norms and advocate for gender equality. This paper focuses on the contributions of few influential artists like Judy Chicago, Valie Export, and the Guerrilla Girls. Each, in her own right, played a crucial role in redefining feminine artistry and unmasking gender bias within the contemporary art world [6].

Judy Chicago, born in 1939, emerged as a seminal figure in American feminist art, dedicating herself to reshaping the narrative surrounding women's accomplishments in culture and the arts. Chicago's commitment to feminist art theory and her efforts to secure exhibition opportunities in esteemed institutions like MOMA and the Whitney Museum exemplify her dual mission. The symbolic act of adopting the surname 'Chicago' in 1969 reflects her defiance against traditional gender norms, setting the stage for her groundbreaking work, 'The Dinner Party' [2] in 1970.

Valie Export, an Austrian feminist artist born in 1940, challenged societal norms with her provocative performance works. 'Tap and Touch Cinema' (1968) and 'Genital Panic' (1969) exemplify Export's use of her own body as a political weapon, confronting the objectification and sexualization of women in cinema and society. Her refusal to recreate 'Genital Panic' underscores the contextual nature of her performances, emphasizing the temporal and political dimensions of her art.

The Guerrilla Girls, a group of seven female artists formed in 1985, collectively unmasked gender bias in major art institutions. Through bold billboards, affiches and public performances, they confronted the under representation of women in the art world. The iconic billboard in 1989 questioning the disparity in the Metropolitan Museum highlighted their unapologetic approach, challenging both the art establishment and societal expectations.

As we unravel the narratives of these artists, their performances, and the societal responses, we gain insight into the evolution of feminist discourse during the 1960s. The paper explores how these artists contributed to the broader transition from the second to the third wave of feminism, leaving an enduring impact on gender activism within the realm of performance art.

2. Review of Literature

The research paper is based on a wide range of literature that emphasizes how art had the potential to challenge social conventions and promote gender integrity. The literature

on feminist narratives in performance art and gender activism in the 1960s is enriched by a diverse perspective and key figures. Karim Crippa's article on VALIE EXPORT underscores the significance of artists challenging norms, shedding light on the Austrian feminist icon's groundbreaking contributions to both feminist and artistic discourse. Maria Hanson's exploration of the Guerrilla Girls at Drake University delves into the intersectionality of art, gender, and communication, likely offering insights into the collective's revolutionary endeavors. Nadja Sayej's article in *The Guardian* emphasizes the transformative impact of the Guerrilla Girls, challenging established norms in the art world and advocating for inclusivity. Richard Schechner's "Performance Studies: an Introduction" serves as a foundational text, providing a comprehensive overview of performance studies and its interdisciplinary nature. Together, these sources offer a multifaceted understanding of feminist narratives in performance art during the 1960s, highlighting the pivotal role of artists and collectives in reshaping gender discourse within the art world.

2.1 Judy Chicago: Redefining Feminine Artistry

Judy Chicago, born in 1939, stands as a seminal figure in American feminist art, leaving an indelible mark on the 20th-century cultural landscape. Over the course of the decades, she immersed herself in feminist art activities, driven by a deep commitment to reshaping the narrative surrounding women's accomplishments in culture and the arts. Chicago's journey as an artist, writer, and educator reflects her dedication to providing a platform for women's diverse experiences, feelings and perspectives within the art world. As a feminist, Chicago embarked on a dual mission. On one front, she actively engaged in the development of feminist art theory, advocating for its recognition and integration into mainstream artistic discourse. Simultaneously, she tirelessly worked towards expanding the possibilities for exhibiting feminist art in esteemed institutions such as the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) and the Whitney Museum in New York. This dual commitment underscored her belief in the trans-formative power of art as a means of social commentary and change.

In 1969, a pivotal year for Chicago both personally and professionally, marked by her remarriage, she made a symbolic and empowering choice. Adopting the surname Chicago, she reclaimed her identity in a personal act of defense against the conventional practice of assuming the husband's name. This act of self-naming epitomized Chicago's defiance against societal norms and became emblematic of her larger mission to challenge and redefine

the roles assigned to women. Chicago's assertion that "Performance can be fueled by rage in a way that painting, and sculpture cannot" (Tate) encapsulates her approach to art as a powerful tool for expressing and channeling intense emotions. This sentiment aligns with the broader trend among feminist artists who found performance art to be a compelling medium for conveying the visceral aspects of their experiences and perspectives.

A remarkable achievement in Chicago's career and a landmark in feminist art history is her magnum opus, 'The Dinner Party' conceived in 1970 (figure.1). This monumental work, a testament to Chicago's vision and dedication, is a large triangular regale table adorned with thirty-nine place settings. Each setting features porcelain plates meticulously decorated with embroidered linen, silverware, and painted embellishments featuring vagina motifs which is a powerful symbol of female anatomy, re-appropriated and celebrated. The white floor, composed of triangular porcelain tiles, is engraved with the names of nine hundred and ninety-nine other famous individuals, creating a symbolic space for recognition and appreciation.

Despite the profound impact 'The Dinner Party' would later have, its initial reception was marked by controversy and criticism. When it premiered at the San Francisco Museum of Art in March 1979, it immediately garnered substantial negative reviews. Hilton Kramer, the chief art critic for The New York Times, dismissed the work as 'kitsch' and 'obscene'. The installation faced rejection from numerous museums and institutions across America, leading to its removal and storage.



Figure 1: The Dinner Party (Judy Chicago, 1979). The Dinner Party (1974/79) & Details. Ceramic, porcelain, textile (1463 x 1463 cm).

However, 'The Dinner Party' [4] rose above its initial setbacks and rejection. In 2007, after three decades, it



Figure 2: Detail view from Judy Chicago's The Dinner Party (1974/79). Image courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.



Figure 3: Detail view from Judy Chicago's The Dinner Party (1974/79). Image courtesy of the Brooklyn Museum.

found a new home and was re-installed at the Elizabeth Sackler Centre for Feminist Art in Brooklyn, New York. This relocation and subsequent recognition underline the enduring significance of Chicago's creation as an icon of the early feminist art movement. Some art historians regard it as one of the most influential modern art movements of the second half of the 20th century.

Judy Chicago's artistic journey, as exemplified by 'The Dinner Party', serves as a testament to the trans-formative power of art as a vehicle for social change. Through her persistent efforts, Chicago not only redefined feminine artistry but also contributed significantly to the broader discourse on gender, representation, and the role of women in the arts. Her legacy continues to inspire generations of artists to challenge conventions, amplify diverse voices, and

pave the way for a more inclusive and equitable art world.

2.2 Valie Export: Body as a Political Weapon

Valie Export, born in 1940, stands as a pioneering Austrian feminist artist who has dedicated five decades to pushing the boundaries of conventional art through her groundbreaking performance works. Her name itself, conceived as an abstract design and emblem in 1967, can only be written in capital letters, emphasizing her artistic rebellion and departure from societal norms.

One of her most renowned works, the 'Tap and Touch Cinema,' presented in 1968 (Figure.4), exemplifies Export's commitment to challenging societal norms. This performance involved placing a box covered with a curtain in a public space, inviting the audience to put their hands inside for thirty seconds and touch her naked body. This daring act aimed to confront the objectification and sexualization of women inherent in the cinematic experience, laying bare the core of sexist movies.

The success of 'Tap and Touch Cinema' has remained contentious, echoing the ongoing debate surrounding the objectification of women in media. Export's use of her own body as a canvas and a political weapon serves as a powerful commentary on the intersection of feminism and art. By pushing the audience to confront the inherent sexism in their gaze, she challenges the status quo and questions societal norms. In 1969, Export continued her exploration of the female body and its political implications with the performance piece 'Genital Panic.' This provocative work, showcased in Munich, featured Export wearing jeans with a strategically placed cut, baring her genitalia. The direct eye contact with the viewers in the video created a confrontational engagement that forced the audience to reckon with the female body outside the boundaries of social morality. Export's refusal to recreate 'Genital Panic' (Figure.3) speaks to her belief in the contextual nature of her performances. Elements of her works are intricately linked to the times in which they took place, making them irreproducible. Yet, she remains steadfast in her advocacy for transgressive methods in art. In her own words, "Artists should break rules to develop their practice. They should push these boundaries as far as they can [1]."

Vienna, where Export has lived since the end of the 1960s, plays a pivotal role in her work. She connects with the city, staying attuned to the recent developments in Austrian politics, and aligns her artistic expressions with critical awareness. The evolving Viennese art scene, marked by the emergence of new galleries and adventurous project spaces, mirrors Export's commitment to pushing artistic boundaries and fostering a dynamic cultural landscape.

Despite her significant contributions to feminist art, Export faced challenges in gaining critical acclaim, particularly in Austria. She encountered animosity and was ignored by many, reflecting the resistance to art that challenged societal norms. However, Export remains unswayed, stating, "I was someone who made art that was not acceptable. To a certain degree, this hostility persists its just become very subtle. But to be honest, I don't concern myself with it anymore."

Valie Export's body of work stands as a testament to her role as a trailblazer in feminist art. Her performances, marked by audacity and a commitment to challenging societal norms, continue to resonate in the contemporary discourse on gender, art, and politics. Export's unwavering dedication to pushing boundaries and her ability to use her body as a potent political weapon underscore her enduring impact on the feminist art movement. Export also stated that,

"For a long time, though, her work wasn't nearly as critically acclaimed as it is now. In Austria, in particular, the road to recognition wasn't an easy one. 'Not only did I receive a lot of animosity there, I was ignored by many,' she says. 'I was someone who made art that was not acceptable. To a certain degree, this hostility persists – it's just become very subtle. But to be honest, I don't concern myself with it anymore' [1]."

Guerrilla Girls: Unmasking Gender Bias in Art: The realm of contemporary art in the 20th century mirrored not just creative expressions but also the power structures prevalent in society. Major art galleries, predominantly financed by wealthy and white individuals, became symbolic of the existing gender disparities within the artistic domain. A glaring example was the New York Metropolitan Museum in the mid-20th century, where the directorial board was predominantly male. This gender imbalance was not reflective of the scarcity of female artists but rather a consequence of the systemic issues plaguing the art world. Although women were everywhere in art imagery, women artists themselves were barely represented. Exhibitions included only a few women and no racial diversity. During this moment of rising feminist action, a collective emerged as a bold voice in the art world, influencing the shift from second- to third-wave feminism.

In response to such blatant gender bias, a group of seven pioneering female artists emerged in 1985, collectively known as the Guerrilla Girls [3]. Despite the dominance of female imagery in art, women artists remained largely absent. Major exhibitions featured only a small number of women and no diverse artists. The Guerrilla Girls, multi-dimensional artists and visionaries, entered the art scene with a mission to challenge gender norms through their

unique brand of performance art.

According to Professor Richard Schechner, performance can be understood as "ritualized behavior conditioned/permeated by play" [8]. The Guerrilla Girls embraced this notion by incorporating masks and adopting a trendy presentation, effectively using public tactics to draw attention to their cause.

One of the most impactful tools in the Guerrilla Girls' arsenal was the creation of bold and provocative billboards, affiches, letters, booklets, and exhibits highlighting gender and racial discrimination prevalent in various creative spheres. In 1989, responding to a request from the Public Art Fund, the Guerrilla Girls unveiled a compelling billboard that posed a poignant question to the public: "Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?" Beneath this inquiry, a stark statistic was revealed: "Less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art sections are women, but 85% of the nudes are female" [3], (Figure 6). The visual accompanying this message depicted a relaxed lady wearing a gorilla mask, her teeth grasping a penis-like fan. The use of harsh terms and the passive expression on her face defied the traditional expectations of female representation in art. The Guerrilla Girls' approach was assertive and unapologetic, refusing to avert their gaze from the audience.



Figure 4: Valie Export, Tap and Touch Cinema (1968/1989). Performance and film; B/W video with sound (1:11 min). The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Image courtesy of the MoMA.

In an interview, the Guerrilla Girls emphasized the significance of labels, acknowledging their limited significance in defining individual identity. However, amidst this recognition, they deemed the label of 'feminist' as essential, signifying a transformative way of perceiving the world [7]. Their self-identification as feminists underscored their commitment to dismantling entrenched gender biases in the art world.

The painting titled 'Guerrilla girls in museums:



Figure 5: Action Pants: Genital Panic (1969) by Valie Export. Screenprint. Collection of the Museum of Modern Art, New York. Image courtesy of MoMA.



Figure 6: Do women have to be naked to get into Boston museums? (1985), offset poster by the Guerrilla Girls. Image courtesy of Tate, London; Photo: I' Tate, London [2024]

Time for Gender Reassignment' (Figure.7) serves as a poignant representation of their activism. This artwork depicted winged gorillas and angels rising above museums, challenging the traditional notions of hierarchy and power within these institutions. The Guerrilla Girls, through their creative endeavors, sought to initiate a gender reassignment of roles within museums and the broader art world.

The Guerrilla Girls played a pivotal role in unmasking gender bias in art by challenging systemic inequalities and

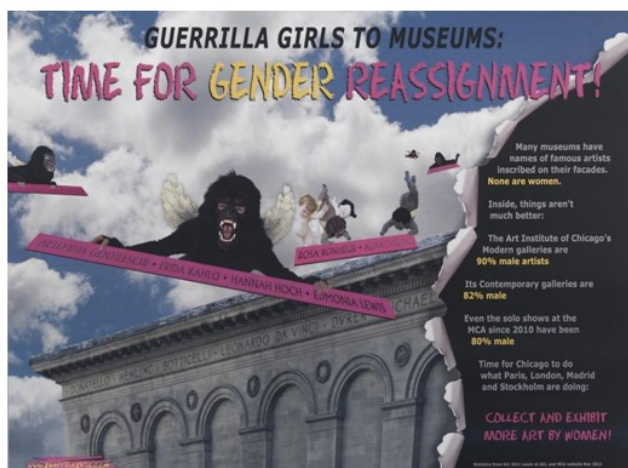


Figure 7: Guerrilla Girls to Museums: Time for Gender Reassignment! (2012), poster by the Guerrilla Girls. Image courtesy of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York.

advocating for a more inclusive and equitable representation of female artists. Their performances, billboards, and artworks became powerful tools in the fight against gender discrimination, and their legacy continues to inspire contemporary feminist artists to question and dismantle prevailing norms. The Guerrilla Girls succeeded not only in exposing the gender bias inherent in major art institutions but also in catalyzing a shift towards the third wave of feminism, contributing significantly to the ongoing discourse on gender equality in the art world.

3. Conclusion

In revisiting the feminist narratives of Judy Chicago, Valie Export, and the Guerrilla Girls in the context of 1960s performance art, it becomes evident that their contributions were pivotal in unmasking gender bias and reshaping the discourse on gender and representation [10]. Chicago's 'The Dinner Party' stands as a testament to the transformative power of art, overcoming initial setbacks to become an icon of the early feminist art movement. Valie Export's daring performances challenged societal norms and the objectification of women, pushing the boundaries of feminist expression. Her refusal to recreate certain works emphasizes the temporal and contextual nature of her art, highlighting the need to understand performances within their specific socio-political contexts [9]. The Guerrilla Girls, with their bold and unapologetic approach, played a crucial role in unmasking gender bias within major art institutions. Their interventions, particularly the 1989 billboard, continue to inspire contemporary feminist artists to question prevailing norms and advocate for a more

inclusive art world.

The feminist narratives woven by these artists in the 1960s were not only acts of creative expression but also powerful tools for challenging societal norms and advocating for gender equality. Their legacy endures as a beacon for future generations, urging artists to persist in the pursuit of a more equitable and inclusive artistic landscape.

Authorship contribution

Swapna Biswas: Conducted the visual and contextual analysis of the mural; conceptualized the structure of the paper; prepared the full draft; reviewed art-historical sources; and ensured adherence to academic and formatting guidelines.

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Data availability statement

All information used in the study is derived from publicly available art-historical literature and direct observations. Additional details can be provided at reasonable request.

Declaration

The author declares that this paper is an original work and has not been published or submitted elsewhere. All external sources have been properly cited.

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