

Canvas

ART AND CULTURE

AND ARAB WORLD

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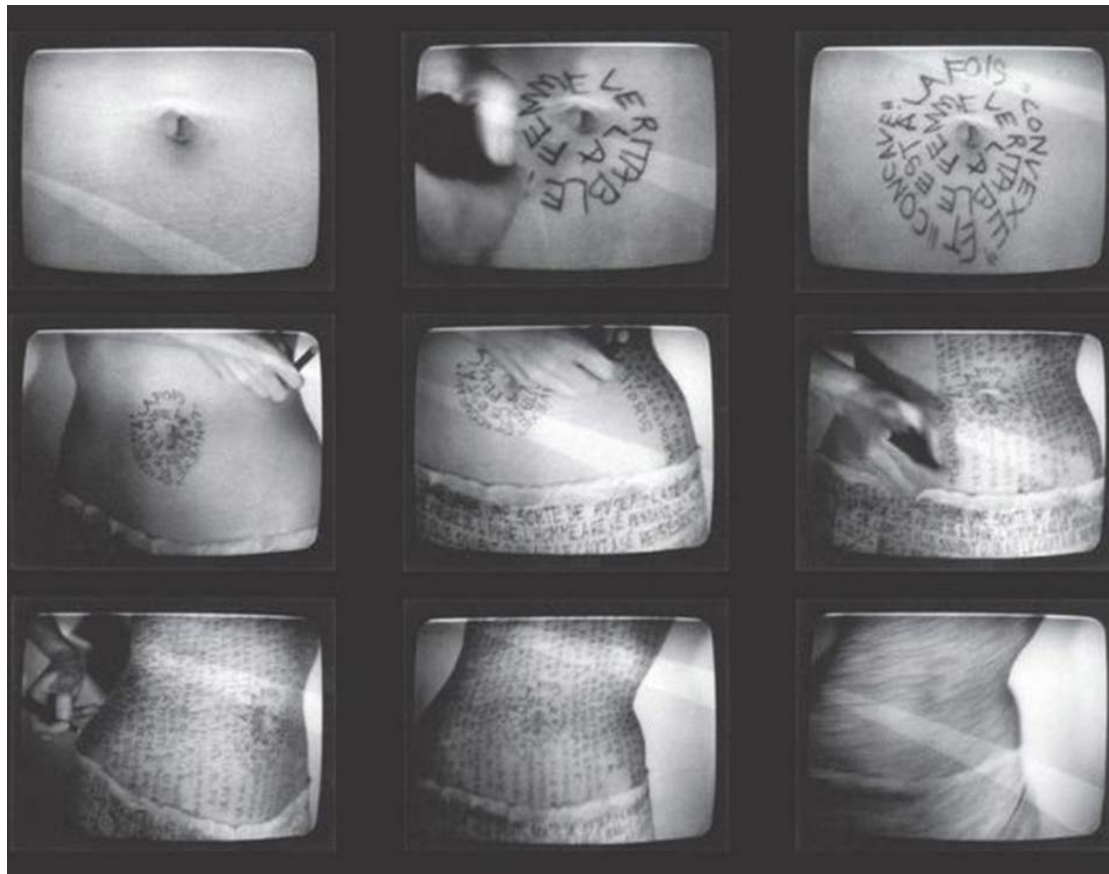
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is ART
A WOMAN

CHRISTINE MACEL in VE
VICTORIA SIDDALL on FR
and BETTINA RH
on photogr

ACTING OUT: ON THE PRIMACY OF PLACE IN FEMINIST ART

Siobhan Forshaw gives a sweeping survey of feminist performance art, and questions whether Middle Eastern artists can or should be included in the global feminist art movement.



Feminist acts within performance art are associated perhaps most strongly with the European and North American *avant-garde* of the 1960s and 70s. In an era of radical consciousness-raising, women's names, voices and bodies were integral to the deconstruction of patriarchal power in art. Through performance, women artists found a conceptual medium that was young and malleable, as opposed to the male-dominated traditional fine arts of painting and sculpture, which historically appropriated the female body as a tacit subject upon which to project the fantasies of artist and audience. By reclaiming the female body as a site for art through performativity, the live nude gained agency, was able to walk out of the frame, and into the gallery space.

This physical confrontation with audiences stirred a uniquely visceral and emotional power: in *Cut Piece* (1964) and *Rhythm 0* (1974) Yoko Ono and Marina Abramović respectively took viewers to the darkest edges of self-harm and assault; Carolee Schneemann pushed a female-centric vocabulary for hetero-eroticism with *Meat Joy* (1964); Martha Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* (1975) made a parody of women's commoditised domestic responsibilities. Their work referenced how the very state of being female involves acting out, and represented how socio-personal roles – 'mother', 'wife', 'daughter', 'muse' – constrict female experience and potential. However, the so-called 'second wave' of feminism that shaped the conditions for such seminal performances



Opposite page:
Stills from Nil Yalter's
film *The Headless Woman*
(*Belly Dance*). 1974.
© Nil Yalter

This page: Renate
Bertlmann. *Pregnant Bride*
in a Wheelchair. 1976
© Renate Bertlmann,
Verbund Collection

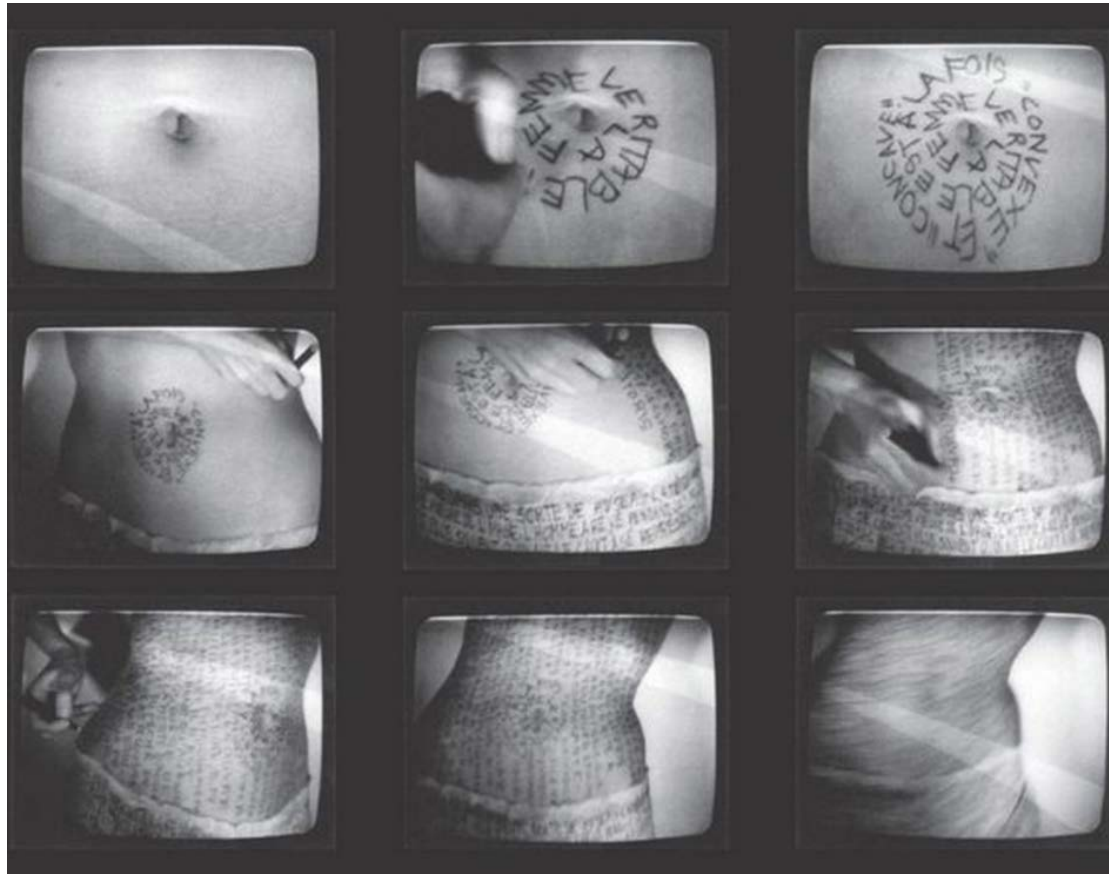
also institutionalised problems with the movement that persist until today. The renewed current discourse around systematic and intangible gender inequalities has been mirrored by a revival of feminist art centred around the body, with a particular focus on the concept of intersectionality. The term, coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw and used to describe the mutual reinforcement of different structures of oppression (for example, race and gender), now permeates global debate on social justice, and in turn has begun to influence art criticism, often in the critical consumption of work made by Middle Eastern women artists.

In her 2010 work *Moments of Glory*, Leila Pazooki skewers the critical tendency to invent western counterparts for non-western artists,

thereby abdicating responsibility for engaging with artists within their true individual contexts. She references the historic lack of enquiry into the contributions of artists outside of the European and North American sphere, where existing gender critiques intersect with issues of identity. In 1978, Renate Bertlmann's monstrous *Pregnant Bride in a Wheelchair* performance enacted pregnancy as disability, as Bertlmann's grotesque figure staged the dissociative effects of motherhood, marriage and virginity on personal identity. Four years prior, Turkish pioneer Nil Yalter's *The Headless Woman or the Belly Dance* also explored the fetishization of the female figure, albeit in a radically different manner, by inscribing a poem on her body, before proceeding to belly dance. Her critique

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Opposite page:
Yoko Ono. *Cut Piece*. 1964. Performed in *New Works of Yoko Ono*, Carnegie Recital Hall, New York, March 21, 1965. Image courtesy of Lenono Photo Archive, New York. Photography by Minoru Niizuma
© Minoru Niizuma

This page (above): Carolee Schneemann. *Meat Joy*. 1964. Kinetisches Theater, Paris, France. 60-80 min. 16mm film. 6 min. Archive/Collection: Kunsthau Zürich.
© Carolee Schneemann

(Below): Mona Hatoum. *Roadworks*. Performance still. Brixton. 1985. Gelatin silver print on paper mounted on aluminium. 76.4 x 108 cm. Photography by Edward Woodman. Image courtesy of White Cube, London
© Mona Hatoum

is sustained in the more recent work of Şükran Moral, whose 1997 works *Bordello* and *Hamam* layer post-colonial concerns in a woman's intervention of traditionally male-only environments in Turkey.

Through the process of documentation, performance often interacts with other media, both as a method of preservation and extension of the performance itself: as the Lebanese-born Palestinian artist Mona Hatoum translated her performances from the 1980s via film and photography stills, the Moroccan-born artist Lalla Essaydi's photographic series imply a preceding performative process that remains private, between artist and subject. Her best-known works, made between 2003 and 2013, are densely laden portraits of women weighed down by heavy garments and jewellery, their skin crowded with henna-tattooed inscriptions in Arabic, meticulously applied by Essaydi herself. The sense of a cooperative

relationship between the artist and her subjects poses a challenge to traditional power imbalances and raises questions of agency in the presentation of the body, which is then broadened to include other bodies, including the social, the national, and the political. Saudi artists like Manal Al-Dowayan and Arwa Al-Neami circumnavigate constrictions on the use of their bodies in order to make statements about self-representation and the erosion of female agency within society, whilst the work of Palestinian artists Jumana Emil Abboud and Emily Jacir integrates performance, oral narrative practices and archive to explore their contested personal and national histories.

The very elision of non-western contexts by western critics and art historians has itself led to a recurrent strand of exploration for certain Middle Eastern artists. Longstanding and ongoing political tensions in

MIDDLE EASTERN LOUISE BOURGEOIS
 RENOIR OF SOUTH AFRICA
 JAPAN'S ANDY WARHOL
 KOREAN MARK ROTHKO
 IRANIAN JEFF KOONS
 CINDY SHERMAN OF ASIA
 DALI OF BALI
 PICASSO OF INDIA
 INDIAN DAMIEN HIRST
 CHINESE GERHARD RICHTER
 BRAZILIAN JOSEPH BEUYS
 CHRISTO OF CHINA
 AFRICAN ANSELM KIEFER
 JASPER JOHNS OF KOREA
 GOYA OF CAMBODIA

Şükran Moral. *Bordello*. 1997. © Şükran Moral

the region, contested territories and shifting borders have led to a particular fluidity when it comes to narrating histories, which artists like Mona Hatoum and Nil Yalter have related to their sense of personal identity. Works like Hatoum's *Divan Bed* (1996) and *Nature Morte Aux Grenades* (2006–07) carry a dormant sense of threat, their violent connotations aligned with Yalter's ongoing lines of enquiry, which extend beyond the body to incorporate issues of migration and identity in works such as *Temporary Dwellings* (1974–77). These pioneers, alongside institutionalised names like the Iranians Shirazeh Houshiary and Shirin Neshat, are cited by critics as an attempt to symbolise inclusivity within the global feminist art movement.

The trouble is, many of the artists frequently pushed forward to represent these claims have often in fact realised their artistic maturity in a European or North American context: whilst Leila Pazooki studied painting at Tehran's National Art Academy, her studies matured in Berlin, and she continues to make work from the city. Nil Yalter has lived and worked in Paris since 1965, Shirazeh Houshiary left her homeland in Iran in 1973 for a life spent mostly in London, and Mona Hatoum made some of her breakthrough performance work as a student in London, where she continues to

live and produce work. It is, therefore, problematic to position these artists as spokespersons for an entire region, race or gender, without taking into account their individual history, heritage and influence. This presents a curious paradigm, in which artists are both bound by western comparisons, and simultaneously used to represent 'otherness' in art – leading to a facile and ultimately dishonest portrayal of the ability of women artists to freely make work that may be politically critical in their own countries.

Drawing parallels between artists instead of considering work within its actual context places limitations on the intentions and achievements of artists outside of the overwhelmingly white hegemony that dominates the art history 'canon'; by assimilating non-western artists within a more established critical framework, structural imbalances remain unchallenged, and the work of feminism within the art world remains implicitly regulated. Through the construction of and reflection on global art histories, it is possible to move towards a truly global and inclusive art world without a hasty interpretation that seeks easy solutions where they simply don't exist. As white feminists are brought to consciousness about their historic shortcomings, critics of culture should be held to similar account. 