

Is Feminism [the equality of the sexes] still relevant today [post-feminism] and how have artists throughout the waves of feminism reflected their agenda in their art?

“I believe the artist has an obligation to society” – Marina Abramovic

For my current project ‘Political Landscapes’, my area of study is Feminism and how photography has impacted societal ideologies and views of equality between the sexes. Artists that have stood out to me in particular are Marina Abramovic and Izumi Miyazaki, both of which are conceptual contemporary artists that focus in performance art and video art. They both tackle the issues surrounding gender inequality and defy expectations of female artists. Abramovic doesn’t necessarily do this intentionally yet her work explores the public and how they react to certain confrontations in the form of performances and exhibitions that hold connotations of this topic, which in turn regards her as a significant artist that shapes the movement of feminism in art. Some of her work is seen as radical in the ways in which she pushes herself to explicitly convey her emotions into her performances and simple acts. Contrasting with this, objectifying herself by displaying no emotions to simply carry out strong messages without the use of words. Opposed to Abramovic, Miyazaki uses humour and performative, tableaux photography to subtly comment on the stereotypes and expectations that social culture pressures females to live up to. I believe feminism has adopted a negative name for itself, as at the beginning of its time, the word was known for its definition: the advocacy of women's rights on the ground of the equality of the sexes. However, as different types of feminism began to form and extreme views have been expressed and received by the public, the word feminism has become tainted. The general view upon the political ideology is negative, it is disregarded and untrusted by many, simply because extreme feminists have expressed motives that attack and blame the opposite sex for inequality which contradicts its definition and has disrupted its meaning. Similarly, it is negatively viewed because the movement's priority was to provide equality for the suppressed sex. Over time and from each goal reached for the equality of women, the inequalities between both sexes have become more balanced. In modern day, the movement is interpreted to only cater to the suppressed sex. The meaning of the word should be known to provide equality for both sexes.

Throughout art history, when female artists have been discussed their art has always been regarded as biologically determined, that all associations of femininity are linked to their style of painting and the subjects they choose to paint. Female artists were seen as the minority. This was stemmed from common ideologies and gender norms within society that restricted their subject matters in their paintings – only painting objects that reflected their femininity like flowers or portraits of miniatures, using mediums like pastels and watercolour. Moreover, women who were subjects within paintings were often objectified by the male artist simply for the pleasure of the receiver. Typically, within paintings of the nude, women were often stripped of their sexual power so the spectator - typically a man – could monopolise their own sexual power and inherit dominance over the submissive subject within a painting. Women

within art have always been overlooked and restrained of their creativity because of male dominance within society, or in other words, the patriarchy. Even at present day, female artists struggle to create pieces of work that don't have a hegemonic hold, connotations or histories of traditional ideas of femininity. This can be perceived as boundaries, so therefore female artists usually find other ways of creating art, for example installations, producing pictures, performance or video art. These are contemporary ways of producing art and therefore don't refer to a particular or dominant gender.

MARINA ABRAMOVIC



Figure 1 Marina Abramovic, *Rythm 0*, 1974

During the second wave of feminism [1960s-1980s] art became more and more of an outlet for female artists to express their views, opinions, make statements and reclaim the representation of their gender. Between 1973 and 1974 Marina Abramovic performed five pieces in which she tested the physical and mental limitations of her body. For example, Abramovic performed one of her most iconic works "Rhythm 0" in 1974, recorded and performed live. The piece was 6 hours long and involved Abramovic standing still and

inviting the audience to do whatever they wanted to her using 1 of 72 objects laid out on a table, including instructions reading, 'There are 72 objects on the table that one can use on me as desired. Performance. I am the object. During this period, I take full responsibility.' These objects ranged from a rose, honey, and wine to scissors, razor blades and even a gun loaded with one bullet. The objective behind the performance was not in the favour of the feminist movement. Surprisingly, Marina Abramovic doesn't consider herself a feminist, her purpose behind the performance was to find out: 'what is the public about and what are they going to do in this kind of situation?', how far would they go? Abramovic said that visitors were gentle to begin with, offering her a rose or a kiss. However, only within the third hour of the performance her clothes were completely cut from the razor blades and the audience began to become more violent towards her and exploit her situation. In the fourth hour, the same blades were used to cut her throat so someone could suck blood from her neck and thorns from the rose were stuck into her stomach. While these acts of violence were displayed, a 'protective' group began to define itself within the audience. At one point when the gun was pushed against her with her own finger propped and curled round the trigger, a fight broke out between the audience members. The audience even went so far to commit various minor sexual assaults on Abramovic. Art critic Thomas McEvilley, who was present, wrote, 'She was so committed to the piece that she would not have resisted rape or murder'.

After exactly 6 hours Abramovic stood up and started walking towards the audience yet, everyone ran away to avoid confrontation.



Figure 2 Marina Abramovic, Rythm 0, 1974

One could question, if Abramovic was a man, would the audience have reacted in a different way – would the audience go so far to commit various acts of sexual assault, and why was it only at the moment Abramovic's life was threatened did people try to intervene? There is the argument that the scenario was a performance and Abramovic had given consent. Perhaps that means the numerous acts that were committed could be forgiven because they had permission. Perhaps people enabled themselves and felt righteous enough because of the time frame of the performance. The equal pay act in America had only been passed a year before in 1973 and a few years before that in England, 1970, with the sex discrimination act only passed in 1975. However, the performance was based in Naples, Italy. In present day Italy has declined in its rank for equality between other European countries, out of 114 countries Italy ranks 82nd. Of course, Italy was worse in the 70s, especially for women. The violation of Abramovic during her performance perfectly reflected the views and mind sets of the public during the time, demonstrating the overriding dominance some men felt they had over women. Arguably, if Abramovic was a man, she would have had an unspoken established dominance, it is more likely that men would have treated her equally and women would have looked up at her and not dare to commit any violation. The fact that the women present in the audience didn't stand-up for Abramovic proves that the discrimination against women is evidently committed by both sexes due to the mind set induced into the female sex, to conform with dominant ideologies and with the dominant sex in hope for gratification, through the form of advertisements and media products like magazines and films that perpetually reinforce negative stereotypical mind-sets against both sexes.

The representation of women has been greatly influenced by the mass media's representation of women, which has become more of a problem in modern day than before, with effectively a 'digital revolution' that has recently taken hold within society, exposing people to more influencers than ever before. The consumerist messages that are constantly taken in by the public display certain attitudes about gender that we have copied and adopted out of the virtual world and into our reality. Adopting these messages, ideologies and attitudes that convey an 'ideal' way of life is difficult to avoid with the rise of technology exacerbating the consumption of media messages. Women are almost always portrayed to be an object of desire rather than a being, through dress codes, body language, beauty standards and context, stemmed from the concept of 'the male gaze'. Equally so, as equality has started to balance, 'the female gaze' has come into existence in the media. 'The female gaze' has negative and positive aspects, it acts as a way for women to reclaim power in the representation of themselves but has the same toxicities as 'the male gaze'. This acts like a poison for both the sexes. People feel constantly pressured subconsciously to meet impossible beauty standards that are enforced in the simplest of media platforms from films and adverts to social media. The use of make-up and photo manipulation set impossible standards that can't be achieved, leading to young girls and boys, women and men body shaming each other and themselves.

"In the 1990s, theorists have broadened the notion of femininity as a masquerade to encompass any gender identity. Like femininity, masculinity is a mythic construction that is perpetuated through the performative repetition of stereotypes of behaviour and dress" – Jennifer Blessings, book 'Rose is a rose is a rose'

This idea correlates to the theory that gender is performative by Judith Butler, explaining that "throughout the course of one's life, one reiterates performances of gender that conform to a gender-norm". From the moment a person is labelled or given a gender at birth, one performs their gender even if it is not necessarily their choice. Butler states,

"We act as if being a man or that being of a woman is actually an internal reality or something that is simply true about us, a fact about us, but actually it's a phenomenon that is being produced all the time and reproduced all the time..."

The idea of gender being performative introduces the idea that gender is constantly validated because people constantly perform their gender, yet people only perform gender because it is reinforced into particular ways of being that are demonstrated and displayed to people from early ages for example, with their parents, combined with exposure to the media, separating different associations for each gender. Butler also states that "there are constitutional powers like psychiatric normalization and there are informal kinds of practices like bullying which try to keep us in our gendered place".

I believe the response of Abramovic's performance is rooted at the identity of her audience. If there was no dominant gender, or no gender at all, then the public's response would most likely have been very different. The possibility of violence is still strong because of the objects that Abramovic offered to her audience, but I believe the exploitation of Abramovic was solely because of performative gender and male dominance that is repetitively demonstrated through the media, allowing the idea that one sex has power over the other. Following up on my opening quote "I believe the artist has an obligation to society", the purpose of "Rhythm 0" has an underlying motive. Whatever Marina expected or didn't expect from her audience, her performance was to provoke the public with a desired obligation to highlight the outcome.

IZUMI MIYAZAKI



Miyazaki's work demonstrates the agenda of 3rd wave feminism; based around micro politics which is the term for unpicking and confronting subliminal messages - for example, in the form of advertisements - that shape the public's views and opinions. Yet, with this wave of feminism the agenda is of a global perspective, with the intention of empowering and enlightening women globally. Contrasting with this, some believe feminism is irrelevant and no longer a justified movement as all goals on the feminist agenda have been achieved; women's right to vote, the equal pay act and sexual discrimination act. However, Miyazaki has produced work in favour of feminism, implying that there is still need for change.

This self-portrait simply depicts Miyazaki turning to look at the camera while peeling an apple with a pink razor blade. This simple and abstract action carries different connotations of a 'traditional' female role; the razor blade and the apple, blending two sides of a suppressed and idealized female; beauty and domestic life. The razor blade is a tool used by many women to remove their natural hair on their own bodies, simply because of beauty standards that have been created all around the world in different societies that are constantly reinforced by advertising and the media. The apple could indicate the suppressed domestic female role, an idealized role depicted throughout history, particularly post WW2 in western society, events that sparked the 2nd wave of feminism. Women had experienced working in dominated male industries due to the lack of male workers because of the war, yet when the war was over many women were pushed out of work and subliminally forced to stay in their traditional domestic roles through advertisements commissioned by the Government. These advertisements conveyed women satisfied, content and happy from everyday domestic appliances that seemed to make their domestic lives easier, for example a dishwasher. These advertisements were aimed at women, reinforcing pre-war mind-sets and attitudes towards women and setting ideologies and standards of their roles in society. As a female from a western society, these are the sort of connotations I receive from Miyazaki's picture, a blend of two dominant ideologies based around women thrown together with a bi-product of humour - commenting on the ridiculousness of these standards. Attitudes towards women and feminism has changed radically since the beginnings of its movement, the fight for equality between the two sexes are not seen as urgent as they used to. The word feminism is constantly disregarded by everyone due to the change of meaning the word now carries. Although its definition hasn't changed, the word has been misused and it now carries a bad reputation. I don't think Miyazaki has purposely created this image with a feminist message, most contemporary photographers will comment on blatantly obvious issues in the world. Attaching the word feminist to any piece of art usually disrupts the incentive of the image as the meaning of the word has been disrupted itself.

This photograph is very simply constructed, with a simple background, lighting and colour palette that connote clinical and clean environments, representing certain aspects of the beauty industry. From an audience's perspective, by Miyazaki looking directly at the viewer, it seems like an intrusion of privacy and gives the unwanted impression of scopophilia while also, Miyazaki has caught the audience out on the act of peering in on her. The direction of light also adds to the illusion of intrusion. The light hits the Miyazaki front on and from the same direction of the viewer. Miyazaki has perfectly reconstructed the forms of media that the public is constantly subjected to that form standards without the consent of the viewer but, Miyazaki has subtly highlighted this exact process through her photographs. Each of her photographs are an act of rebellion against female stereotypes and social standards, even the fact that she is a female creating art and representing her own gender, empowering herself and encouraging others to do so through the realisation of what is dividing gender and applying humour.

RESPONSE



Above is a picture I produced from my project 'Political Landscapes'. Marina Abramovic and Izumi Miyazaki influenced my project a lot. From Abramovic I took the idea of performance and directed many scenarios in my project that displayed the characters and traits of my subjects. I shot my whole project in one room, my subjects personal space which I interpret as her landscape, decorated in an organised mess that represents many characteristics of the individual in each object that lies around her room and the interactions she has with them. My concept behind the series is influenced behind the history of women in art and Miyazaki. Miyazaki has control over the representation of her sex because she is taking them herself. Miyazaki purposely produces pictures that move away from the classifications of female stereotypes. As a female, I thought it was important that the representation of my subjects displayed them as individuals and not as objects, therefore keeping them in their personal environments and disregarding any ideas of perfection or social ideologies of how women should look and what women do. Women taking pictures of other women allows complete control over representation. I wanted the effect of getting to know the subjects when the series is viewed rather than seeing someone who looks 'aesthetically' pleasing in terms of beauty standards within the western world, with no character behind the individual. The series is a personal look into a stranger's life, using the notion of scopophilia but with consent and without the expectation of female stereotypes.

THE ADVOCACY OF WOMEN'S RIGHTS ON THE GROUND OF THE EQUALITY OF THE SEXES

I don't believe that gender is important yet so many people are surrounded by set ideas of what gender should be and the divide that those ideas place. Feminism is still relevant because although we have by law reached equality, the social standards of gender are completely different for males and females. I believe it is important for artists to tackle and confront the social difference between male and females to break away from the mind-sets that the media induces into the public, otherwise equality will never be reached if people believe there is social difference between the sexes.

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Rose is a Rose is a Rose, Jennifer Blessings

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