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(Auto)Biography of Hurt: Representation and Representability of Rape in Feminist Performance Art

Abstract

Rape is a crime so close and personal, a trauma so individual, yet an experience so grotesquely impersonal, collective and inherent in our culture that it has a distinct place in the artistic practice of many feminist authors fighting for a voice where the cry had been muffled, refusing to be reframed into another masculinist fantasy of violence. Resistance through performance art as a mode of expression, its power and limitations, is what this article attempts to approach and start to untangle. When it comes to the artistic mode that prides itself most on its closeness to life and body – when there is pain, the pain is real – this paper aims to answer the following questions: how does one approach a violent invasion of a person's body and self in a culture that perpetuates the mass psychology of rape (Brownmiller), and what can it mean to those who stand by and watch?

Keywords: rape, feminism, performance art, autobiography, representation, representability, pain[1]

1. Intro: (Re)Staging Feminism and Femininity

> *Rape does happen indeed. Its re-presentation, its translation into signs, images, signposts, posters, and pins, however, is an altogether different matter, closed off by quotation marks from the unspeakable experience, the full horror that cannot but remain absent, elsewhere, and real. (Sielke, Reading Rape 189)*

Feminism and art have had a long and fruitful interaction, and performance art has a unique place here as a medium that women and feminists have been drawn to for multiple reasons, some of

which I shall explore in the following text. Although performance art has its own long and not exactly gender-sensitive tradition, one which we could trace back at least to the historical avant-gardes – and further, depending on our definition of performance art – it blossomed in the 1960s and 1970s as a favorite medium among feminist artists, partially presenting an alternative to the dominant tradition of apolitical, non-figurative and in many ways low-key masculinist Conceptual and Minimalist Art. Women and feminists were drawn to the medium because it could put forward their gender and other identities, because it provided a site in which they could investigate and problematize the possibilities of the woman's (self-)affirmation and subjectivity – not only take back their own body from the patriarchal constructs that reduce it to a more or less sexualized object but also form and use a position on the margins of the existing framework, which renders women not just as-yet-unrepresented but also un-representable[2] . It is this ambivalent space or space-to-be that offers, in the words of Jayne Wark, "evidence of lack or loss of presence because the transitory nature of performance undermines any secure relation between subjectivity and the body." (8) What is also inherent in the form/medium of performance art is that it balances between "[R]eality" and fiction, which was for feminist artists so obviously a logical extension of the conviction that the personal is political as they aimed to introduce the politics of gender into the art world of their time, which had not perceived it as a form of politics, dismissing any and all references to the experience of women as self-indulgent and irrelevant (Wark 88). Feminist performance art was and, unfortunately, still is oftentimes perceived as not universal enough for the universe in which the universal is male; it is deemed limited in its scope, not as germane to the discussion; however, its countercultural importance is unquestionable even though it still blossoms in the shade of the patriarchal blind spot.

2. Art Meets Act: Transgressive Powers of Artistic R epresentation (Suzanne Lacy)

During the 1960s, and 1970s and onward, many feminists entered the art world, many artists became feminists, and many important feminist topics – one of which is the preoccupation of this article – found their way into the humble limelight of performance art. Performance art that attempts a representation of rape is interesting in many respects, and the intrinsic link between the theme

and medium can be made explicit by connecting Wark's insistence on the subjectivity that performance art provides to the female artist – who had been denied subjectivity, both universal and artistic – to du Toit's argumentation that finds in rape the apotheosis of the patriarchal denial of subjectivity to women. In other words, what better medium to challenge that which underlines the patriarchal bias towards women more than anything else in the intense competition of means to oppress the second sex, than the medium in which the artist faces her audience, as herself, with her own body, her own wounds, scars, pains. Suzanne Lacy has dedicated much of her art to engaging the audience in crimes against women happening in their very own community; for example, Three Weeks in May (1977) provided a map of the city, on which every sexual assault was marked every day, as it was reported (along with marking the other nine assaults that had likely happened but were not reported). It also included thirty events involving various artists and a piece inspired by experiences told to Lacy by willing survivors, entitled "She Who Could Fly" (1977). The latter consisted of survivors' stories told in the gallery for two days, then written down and attached to a map of the USA on the walls, marking the place where the rape occurred. On the evening when the gallery was opened to the public, the audience found as the central piece a lamb carcass with white-feathered wings, suspended from the ceiling, and four women squatting above it (artists who had themselves had an experience of rape and had prepared for the piece through a ritual led by Lacy), naked and covered in red paint. This series of events and works gained a lot of media attention, and though it used the somewhat problematic method of framing rape stories into narratives[3] , it also used guerilla interventions in the city to remind of the dangers we are likely to ignore in our everyday life and underline the ever-present threat that can be carried out at any moment, in addition to relying on the shock-provoking gallery piece, which turned stories into flesh and materialized the hovering presence of that which many are not willing to face. As one of several pieces by Lacy that addressed rape as a significant part of patriarchal structures – and not just as a rare case of an encounter with a psychopath – this project makes statistics palpable, opens up the space for interaction, emotional exchange and, most importantly, the expression of feelings by survivors, an exit from the torture chamber that their body, mind and microcosm have become. The personal and the political sing in unison and, to quote Lacy's own words about feminist art:

Strong feminist art might or might not be obviously political; by virtue of its expression of an oppressed cultural experience, it will always in fact be political. In the most directed of such art its purpose (and contrary to the myth of functionless art as high art, it does have a purpose) is to provide information about women's experience, invite an exchange with its audience on the issues raised, and ultimately to transform culture. Feminist art is always concerned with communication with its audience. It cannot rest on prior assumptions or conventions about the nature of art; it must create its own basis for audience understanding. (70)

Performance art approaches its recipients with the gloves off, so the link among the artist with her experience, the work that is the experience and the audience that experiences it is painfully tight.

3. When Justice Fails (Tracey Emin)

Rape is far more than a matter of crime statistics and empathy between and for survivors; it is an important part of the patriarchal system, a screw in the mechanism of the dominant hegemonic dynamics which renders women less than human within the frame of humanism, others that form props and properties, sliding interchangeable objects. In general, women's knowledge of their rapeability, the permanent threat of rape (of harm inflicted to the body, through the body and beyond the body) inscribed in the heteronormative code of patriarchy's unlevel battle of the sexes, translates into the fragility of their sense of self, of being-for-self in the world (as Louise du Toit formulates it), and thus bears a heavy impact on all women's relations with their others (du Toit 86). It is important to acknowledge that the performative aspect of rape reveals the rapist as subject and the woman reduced to a dehumanized object, her body restrained by force, threat and/or crippling fear, made into a prop, used to enact the rapist's fantasy. When framed as artistic representation, written or visual narrative, the recipients figure as voyeurs, passive bystanders. Sabine Sielke in her analysis of the rhetoric of rape argues that, faced with a written narrative about rape, we do not identify as either the rapist or the raped, but we remain a bystander, Peeping Tom, ashamed but unable to withdraw (Reading Rape 102). However, the impact rape has on its victims is often described as a presence of shame, guilt and anger that never fully reaches its target/culprit but seems to bounce back and accumulate in the survivor, who feels alienated and denied the possibility of abreaction. Somewhat analogically, the representation of

rape in performance art is unique in that the rapist is not there, and the victim or survivor faces the interior drama or, rather, the solipsistic aftermath, the never-ending epilogue – alone. Though it mostly addresses visual arts, an interesting perspective is given in a text titled “Rape Trauma, the State, and the Art of Tracey Emin” by Yxta Maya Murray, written for a law journal and trying to reconstruct an experience of rape from the work of Tracey Emin and find in that experience arguments for a better understanding and, consequently, forming a better legislative basis to help survivors of rape. This analysis, according to the author herself,

> *constitutes an effort to incorporate art's revelations of women's buried experience – or, as I conceive of these details, artifacts – into legal understanding. This approach could be used to bring to light in law subterranean truths about abortion, sexual harassment, domestic violence, and other harms experienced by women. (1636)*

The author goes through the work of Emin, her obsessive recounting of her own sex life, defined by multiple experiences of sexual assault in her childhood and framed by horrifyingly judgmental reactions of her close community. Although this is only one quite surprising article, with a methodology that contemporary art theory could not stand for, it implies that art is able to communicate that which is often overlooked or camouflaged in courts of law – the eroticizing of rape survivors[4] . But what is also interesting in this unconventional case study is that the author unmasks Tracey Emin’s criticism of the community she grew up in, in which she was multiply othered, and in which there was hostility toward a young woman in pain where there should have been compassion and outrage toward the assailant, as well as general lethargy when it comes to violence against women. Later in her art, Emin stages her own trials, places herself at the center of her own moral universe. Mostly, the works are drawings, photographs, patchworks and installations, through which the artist communicates quite directly, from the well defined subject position of a woman once labeled promiscuous when she needed help and protection, now aggressively and somewhat ironically, provocatively inhabiting the role of a sexually liberated woman, not willing to silence her experiences any longer. Though she is not a performance artist per se, there is something very alive in her art, an almost performative aspect to the preparation of many works (see “Tracy Emin’s My Bed”), but what makes her art powerful is the pain weaved into the works, the violent accusation directed toward the audience, the autobiography finally told in a

court of her own. On the other hand, her not being there, as opposed to the presence present in performance art, gives the audience (or at least I have experienced it like that) a feeling of the border between being inside the work, with closure and a bold middle-fingered gesture to the world, and being left or shut out as part of the heavily flawed society. And, on whatever side of that border one finds herself, it feels almost impossible to cross over.

4. Strength and/in Vulnerability (Ana Mendieta)

Ana Mendieta was a Cuban-American ecofeminist artist heavily preoccupied with the vulnerability of the female body, exposing its place in culture primarily through presenting its absence, leaving behind photographs as souvenirs of loss (see Wark 70). In the early phase of her career, as she was introducing scenes of blood and violence into her work, Mendieta made Untitled (Rape Scene) (1973), a performance piece that was a reconstruction, a reenactment of a student's rape and murder. Bent and tied over a table, half-naked and covered in blood, she holds the pose, exposed to the public, leaving to them to (re)construct the story of what happened. The audience was invited to enter the scene [sic] of the crime and feel somehow complicit while the narrative of rape is once again embodied and present. Other works by Mendieta often balanced on the line between life and death – if such a line can be conceptualized. The obsessive themes of her land art, body art and (interactive) movies involved an exploration of the relationship between the body and (other) natural elements. Still, what is almost never skipped in regard to Mendieta's art is her biography and its unfortunate violent ending. The artist fell to her death at the age of 36 from a window of the apartment she shared with her husband, a renowned Minimalist sculptor. Allegedly, the couple had been fighting passionately before the "fall," and the husband was tried for murder. However, the art community he was (an important) part of had closed ranks; he wasn't convicted, and the death was proclaimed either an accident or a suicide – though both sound equally suspicious. Somewhat symptomatically, the husband testified that their fight was due to his being significantly more exposed as an artist than his young wife. Though I find the spectacularization of this tragedy quite a cheap thrill, it is significant to the discussion of the way in which patriarchal society perceives and values artists in relation to their gender and in the context of art addressing issues of (sexual) violence and both physical and psychological threat women face – the way this

biography intervenes with art is among those valuable, however horrific, examples. Much of the reception of Mendieta's work has retrospectively been caught up in the story of her death, somehow often overshadowing the art itself, which was always a celebration of life, an exploration of nature and (woman's) body and the destructive forces inherent in or acted against beauty[5] .

Figure 1 Ana Mendieta, Rape Scene, 1973.



© The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection L.L.C. Courtesy Galerie Lelong & Co.

A great part of especially older performance art is documented only in photographs, as is the case with Mendieta's Untitled (Rape Scene), which bring forth the question of how we could/would read the work if it were not for the lengthy descriptions providing a context. Likewise, it is impossible to photograph rape as an act for it resides not in the visual but in the discursive framing of the visual, meaning that it needs a context. Legislation would agree – rape is an invisible crime, extremely hard to prove, where the context is crucial, and it is the only crime in which the victim is investigated and scrutinized even more than the rape perpetrator. Furthermore, when acknowledged, rape is reduced to a case of rape, framed as an extreme and extraordinary event perpetrated by a sexual maniac, an abnormal and anomalous person not representative of the system; its systemic nature is never acknowledged as such. As stated by du Toit,

> *Rape is therefore in rape-prone and patriarchal contexts not an abnormal or anomalous occurrence – it is rather an extreme expression of a logic already pervasively at work in the society. … Rape should not be viewed in isolation and should not be privatized, and in so far as it does happen, it is an ideologically inspired move. Rape is an inherent and even a key element in the political constitution of a rape-prone society, in particular of the political relation between the sexes in that society. (66-67)*

Thus the unspeakability, unrepresentability of rape is as systemic as the violent act itself, unforgivable in that the survivor has no power to accuse or, therefore, forgive; unforgettable in that it constitutes a moment of death, moves beyond the patriarchal limits of subjectivity, shatters subjectivity. However, there is also potential for rebirth, with the basis for a new person, newly constituted subjectivity, taking place in the moment of rape. Perhaps an artistic artefact (art-e-fact), always universal no matter how personal and (auto)biographical, may provide more insight into the experience than individual law cases. In a way, art – and performance art as its extreme in some respects – is the only communication medium able to balance on the line of the (un)representable, on the verge of what is beyond representation, made real specifically by its frame of artificiality.

5. Exploration/Exploitation of Power (Yoko Ono)

In the much-cited Cut Piece (1964), Yoko Ono made herself vulnerable, inviting the audience to engage, to create the work themselves, while turning herself into an object, a toy, a piece of art that they can play with, testing how far they would go as they were transgressing into an area of sadism, destruction, violation and exploitation of the female body. Voluntarily posing as a projection sheet for their fantasies and self-imposed limitations, she holds a mirror to our civilization, not explicitly evoking the term rape but finishing her piece in shattered clothing and covering her breasts in a subtle gesture that aims to restore her humanity. What this piece exposes is how easily people start feeling free to occupy a position of power if the possibility is handed to them and how easily the borders of decency and empathy are breached when it comes to the female body. The tight web of power imbalances is at the basis of our culture, and all sexual relations contain the imbalance on one level or another. It is not only that our culture supports or perpetuates rape culture, it is a rape culture, which becomes visible if we deconstruct some of the presumably benign imperatives of our civilization and reverse the toxic process of normalization and naturalization of that which is culturally specific and – again – gender biased in the most dangerous way. In the words of radical feminist Susan Griffin from 1971:

> *Erotic pleasure cannot be separated from culture, and in our culture male eroticism is wedded to power. Not only should a man be taller and stronger than a female in the perfect love-match, but he must also demonstrate his superior strength in gestures of dominance which are perceived as amorous. … The scenario is even further complicated by the expectation that, not only does a woman mean "yes" when she says "no," but that a really decent woman ought to begin by saying "no," and then be led down the primrose path to acquiescence. (29)*

The description still stands, we haven't evolved much in the half-century since; men are still taught to be pro-active literally to a fault, and women are taught to fear, deflect, internalize. Griffin makes another great point:

> *Each girl as she grows into womanhood is taught fear. Fear is the form in which the female internalizes both chivalry and the double standard. Since, biologically speaking, women in fact*

have the same if not greater potential for sexual expression as do men, the woman who is taught that she must behave differently from a man must also learn to distrust her own carnality. She must deny her own feelings and learn not to act from them. She fears herself. This is the essence of passivity, and of course, a woman's passivity is not simply sexual but functions to cripple her from self-expression in every area of her life. (33; emphasis added)

Which is why these artistic means of self-expression are so important still. But it is also interesting to note that all the artists in question play on fear in various ways – question it as a systemic imperative, provoke it, suppress it, soothe it – but explicitly never show it. It is indicative that the sight of a woman showing no fear is somehow unsettling and, for a feminist audience, inspiring and empowering.

Yoko Ono has not stopped her exploration of gendered power imbalances in using herself as victim/anti-victim; she has pushed boundaries to make her feminist point in other directions and – as some thought – maybe even a few steps too far. The movie Rape (1969) by Yoko Ono and John Lennon was a subject of much controversy at the time as it is basically a camera following a young woman, an illegal foreigner in London, who does not speak the language and cannot understand why a man is incessantly following and filming her ("Rape"). At first, she is puzzled but smiling, gradually she grows irritated, afraid, and eventually breaks down helpless and crying in a corner, with the camera inside her apartment, cruel and silent. The movie is supposedly not staged, the cameraman is Nic Knowland and Eva Majlath the woman – a woman unknowingly chosen by the directors[6] . While Joan Hawkins makes a good point underlining the fact that Eva Majlath, the main character and unwilling object par excellence of filming, is in fact in Britain illegally and may have perceived the camera as an authority instance (132), and Mark Richardson reminds us that the film would not resonate as intensely today when the camera frame is a possibility in anyone's and everyone's pocket, I would focus attention back to its simple and, if you will, penetrating title. Majlath's illegal status not being insignificant, what I find as the cause of discomfort, along with the obvious, is the language barrier. Though she tries both ignoring and extensively talking to the camera, her words make no impact; we watch her frustration mount as her words vanish into thin air while she exhausts the languages she knows. The piece's authenticity rendered it unethical, immoral even; Hawkins correctly called it out for capitalizing on

the very injustice it seeks to expose. However, its impact, both artistic and political, depends on its being (or being believed to be) a true violation, intrusion, invasion into the private sphere of a woman, without her consent. While watching it, we are as spectators inhabiting the position of the anonymous violator, engaging in the intrinsic violence of the camera's male gaze. Interestingly, the movie is categorized as drama and thriller on the IMDB[7] .

6. The Weight of Stigma (Emma Sulkowicz)

Figure 2 Emma Sulkowicz, Mattress Performance/Carry that Weight.



© Emma Sulkowicz Studio 2014

Figure 3 Emma Sulkowicz, Mattress Performance/Carry that Weight.



© Emma Sulkowicz Studio 2014

More recently, a young artist on campus had provoked quite a controversy with a performance art piece (Mattress Performance/Carry that Weight, 2014) meant as her graduation work: she announced she would carry her own mattress everywhere around the campus until the man who raped her, also a student on the campus, left – voluntarily or not – or until she graduated. She sooner graduated as the university found her claim to be unsubstantiated. She told her story of how her more or less casual boyfriend had raped her anally while they were having sex in her dorm room, on her bed, on her mattress, turning her safe space into a scene of trauma. A few years passed until she came up with the concept, but trauma does not age and has no statute of limitation. Her gesture was to put pressure on the institution she felt had betrayed her and many other young women, as well as to raise consciousness about the otherwise invisible weight survivors carry. This case and its visibility provoked an intense backlash, organized to battle the so-called “fake rape charges.” Questions arose that never fail to follow a rape accusation, her behavior was deemed illogical, the accused man so painfully normal and well liked. Though the work itself is quite successful in its simplicity, as it makes the weight of trauma visible, its significance (the controversy and backlash included) depends heavily on the specific experience she had in reality, involving the man she named and the school she claimed was responsible.

Sulkowicz's next piece was a cyberformance Ceci N'est Pas Un Viol (2015), consisting of a pseudo-surveillance video, written comment with questions for the viewers and the comment section in which the audience can leave their thoughts "mindful of what you desire to gain from expressing yourself" (Sulkowicz). What is most interesting about this piece is the multiple framing, dividing what it is – or is not. The artist can be well aware that most people who get in touch with this know about her Mattress piece as well as the background story; still, she specifically says that it is not about the night in question. The event seems like a reconstruction by everything one can gather; still, she insists it is not. The content of the video, we are informed, is consensual, but it features a rape – more specifically, consensual sex that has turned into rape, which gave many people reason to declare that it is not rape. As the artist tries to explain, the audience's participation can become participation in rape if they (we) choose to regard it as rape, as a reenactment, as some kind of proof, or pornography, against the artist's will. Interestingly, our participation depends not upon what we see but on how we interpret it or even how we name (or refuse to name) it, giving us as audience the power once more. What Sulkowicz has succeeded in doing is engaging a wide public in the debate over what constitutes rape and an even wider one as voyeurs in this case. The discussion has become much larger that her and her experience; as we are trying to engage (in one way or another, as audience or public, in art or in crime, wanting to believe or disbelieve her), we are confronted with the very fact of the invisibility of rape, of the impossibility of proving it and the seeming inconsistency of the behavior of rape survivors. Placing the tape online functions as a reaction to the intense engagement that widespread virtual "audiences" have had on her experience – the performance piece being secondary to the investigation of the actual story behind it, functioning almost as a thriller (once again) or a detective narrative. The fact that this singular case and singular piece has quickly been translated into two mutually exclusive narratives on rape on a systemic level should be read as symptomatic, as well as the fact that it would not have gained the attention or provoked the investigation of the systemic nature of rape if it had not pointed a finger to a specific person and demanded repercussions. Otherwise, it would have been something for the public to shake their heads or roll their eyes at, remain silent about and quickly forget.

7. Outro: Keep Listening

[T]o have great pain is to have certainty; to hear that another person has pain is to have doubt. (The doubt of other persons, here as elsewhere, amplifies the suffering of those already in pain.) (Scarry 7)

It is infuriating, although achingly not surprising, that even though a great number of rape cases remain unreported, those reported do not necessarily get investigated, those investigated do not get tried, and many of those that are tried do not get convicted, there has still remained enough of the patriarchal misogynistic space for mass protesting about the supposed fake rape claims, which these activists insist to be "real" and "wide-spread" and posing a great threat to – bear with me – "ruin the lives of the accused men." To quote one of Brownmiller's sharp aphorisms:

From prehistoric times to the present, I believe, rape has played a critical function. It is nothing more or less than a conscious process of intimidation by which all men keep all women in a state of fear. (15; emphasis in the original)

In a gesture of distancing herself (her self) from the story of her rape, which had been so massively appropriated, in 2016 Sulkowicz made a self-portrait in which she stood on a platform and talked to any interested visitor about anything – except the rape. Those who had questions about the rape were directed to another platform with a lifelike Emma mannequin and an iPod with recorded answers about that night and the following events ("Emma Sulkowicz"). Although she was willing to carry that weight, the unforgiving public is not willing to allow her to move away from the experience, much less forget the exposure it had provided her as an artist. For those who wish to hear the story she was forced to repeat endlessly throughout the previous years, there is the robotic presence reiterating it, and the story never changes. For those interested in the artist herself, she is present, free (as much as she could be) of the ghosts of her past. The work is also a nod to the internet as the site of the second violence she was subjected to, the mediated voices of suspicion and hate, never coming in touch with the full-fleshed human she is. Sulkowicz is constructing her self-portrait implying that the experience of rape and the performance piece she

made are an important part of her and will never cease to be so, but she has grown and moved on since then, and she wishes to look to the present and future, engaging with whomever is interested, in a direct and emotional way.

I find Sulkowicz to be the perfect example of autobiographical art about rape and the issues it raises, putting her audience and critics on a highly unstable ground. We witness how difficult it is to exit this limiting discourse that by reducing a work of art to an exclusively autobiographical story tries to deflect from the universality and mass nature of what it shows. At the same time, the fact remains that Sulkowicz had herself invoked the autobiographical moment into her work, and we must admit that it would not have gained as much political significance had it not from the very start been inspired by the balancing between (aestheticized) truth and (artistic) fiction.

Performance art, in its lack of interest to shield the viewers with the silky membrane of “non-reality” from that which is destabilizing to (the experience of) the culture they/we live in, is taken by feminist authors as an opportunity to express their experience and challenge the perception of the system as natural, to show resistance by making the invisible not only visible but visceral, to form a space for themselves in which they can be unafraid as well as provide that same safe space for those who wish to engage and who need it just as much. Although it is oftentimes seen as confrontational and aggressive, (feminist) performance art can also be liberating, communicative, open, empathetic, all of which is present in Lacy’s work and necessary for her vision to change the world. The resistance in these works of art is in that the artists make their own platform, step onto it and resist being objectified by insisting on their position of subjectivity, on their experience as relevant, their autobiography as shareable and shared. And when resistance itself is not staged, it is in the call for action, it is in asking the audience about their position and their willingness to comply with the system and to stand by it by being merely bystanders. It is we, the audience, and we, the society, who are free to help Emma carry that weight or provide kind words online, to mind if and how we cut pieces of Yoko’s clothing. The artists here not only embody their trauma through their work, but they also draw the audience to embody their own position as Peeping Toms, their/our investment and complicity as we view Ana’s restaging of a violent scene, see Tracey’s relics of betrayal, watch Emma’s and Eva’s tapes in all their investigation of the borders between

reality and fiction. They ask if we are willing to face the realities of our city when it comes to sexual violence, to talk, listen, read, face an ugly truth. These works do not function without us, and no spectatorship is ever innocent.

There is no tension between the personal and the political, the individual and the collective in these works; they truly resonate as one and the same just as the experiences they recount are significant as both personal and political – experiences of women, experiences of being reduced/ignored/disbelieved/oppressed/violated. When talking about rape – and it is extremely important to talk as well as listen about rape – one must mind both the unique and the universal, the autobiographical, the biographical, and the mass. The devastating quality of rape goes far beyond the silenced and atomized individual cases, rationalized by the society that cannot perceive rape for rape is a part of its infrastructure – it is a condemnation to a lifetime of fear, it is an ever-lingering threat of a complete loss of subjectivity, loss of the possibility of autobiography as one loses control over the hand that is to write it. But on the margins of this grim vision, we find women who still write it.

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[1] The article is based on the author's presentation delivered at the Narratology and Its Discontents: Narrating beyond Narration conference (Zagreb, April 2017).

[2] As Luce Irigaray would have it when speaking in a broader context – in An Ethics of Sexual Difference – of the need for women not to erase or disembody sexual difference but assert its specificity and redefine it as a positive entity (see also du Toit 27).

[3] This type of retelling the experiences of rape as stories is not always problematic in itself but is often exploited and gives in to people's basest instincts in various popular media while doing nothing for presenting the issue as systemic, the threat as real for all women, the statistics as infuriating; when framed as a singular story, it receives a patina of almost-fiction, which shields the recipient from what should be a deep-cutting shock. Which is why I stress performance art as a medium with greater power when it comes to this type of hurt – although by recounting the pieces I may be stepping into a paradox.

[4]"[C]ourts persistently describe women's reactions to rape in ways that highlight victim deviance and shame, and this practice has the obscuring effect of eroticizing rape victims. In literature and art, we may discern a long tradition of lingering over descriptions of shamed, sexually incontinent (that is, out-of-control) women." (Murray 1655)

[5] I find myself once again in the paradoxical position of perpetuating that which I am criticizing, and I am falling into the seductive lure of this artworld scandal, but I have made the decision to reference this part of Mendieta's biography since the biographical is important for this article, and here it provides an example of a truly dark connection among life, art and life/death, and if my readers would respectfully allow me this self-referential and personal side note, in my future career I hope to continue investigations of Mendieta's work without ever coming back to this biographical moment of the artist again.

[6] Yoko Ono has explained that she could not be present because, besides the danger of her being recognized, her presence as a woman would intervene with the aim of the film and would establish a different kind of relationship with Eva (see Richardson).

[7] I shall indulge in one more piece of theoretical snuff and say that Majlath, later married Rhodes, was decades later brutally murdered, and I present this piece of information only in order to show how present the underlying violence of society (that art here is aiming to portray and challenge) is even on this small sample.



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