

Performance photographs and the (un)clothed body: Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*

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Abstract:

Clothing played an important role in a number of performance art events during the 1960s and 1970s. Performances such as Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* (1964), Marina Abramović's *Rhythm 0* (1974) and Hannah Wilke's *Super-T-Art* (1974) implicated the viewer in an embodied relationship with the (un)dressed artist. In these works fabric was variously torn, bound, wrapped, folded and cut off the body. The movement of fabric as it is wrapped and gathered, the sound of cutting clothes away from the body and the charged atmosphere of a potentially violent encounter are all imagined in the photographs that exist of these works. This article explores the relationship between performance and photography in Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece*, a performance in which members of the audience cut fragments of clothing away from Ono's body. Far more than documents that record live events, as if supplementary to the real encounter, these photographs have their own aesthetic, which informs the way we 'remember' the performances and understand their significance. Using the dialogue Ono sets up between performance and photography, this article challenges the dominant feminist reading of scopic violence in *Cut Piece* and considers the work in terms of the intensity of the present.

Keywords:

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Cut Piece

This article asks how the present day spectator can 'remember', via photographs, the provocative, desiring and sometimes dangerous use of clothing in feminist performance art of the 1960s and 1970s. I focus specifically on the black and white photographs that exist of a performance by conceptual artist Yoko Ono called *Cut Piece* (1964). First performed at the Yamaichi Concert Hall in Kyoto in 1964, then subsequently in Tokyo, at the Carnegie Recital Hall in New York in 1965 and at a 1966 symposium on 'Destruction in Art' in London, *Cut Piece* involved Ono kneeling on the floor dressed in smart clothes with a pair of scissors in front of her. Audience members were invited to approach the stage one at a time, pick up the scissors and cut parts of her clothing away. They could then keep these fragments of cloth. Initially people were hesitant, but as the performance progressed audience members became more willing until Ono's clothes were in tatters. There were different reactions in the various locations. Reflecting on the experience three decades later in 1994, Ono noted that the Japanese audiences were more discrete than the audience in New York when asked to cut away her clothing (Enright 1994: 37). The work provoked a range of

feelings about unclothing this particular body both at the time of its production and of its subsequent consumption via photographs and film footage. A number of photographs of individuals cutting away portions of fabric have been widely disseminated and are, somewhat ironically, the primary form of remembering an event that has been celebrated for its provocation as a live encounter. This begs a question about how else the work might have been remembered had different photographs from the various performances found their way into the public domain. In this article I consider the relationship between performance and photography in *Cut Piece*, both at the time of the event and since, and ask how this dynamic has framed an understanding of the work's significance.

The literature on *Cut Piece*, as well other performances that addressed the (un)clothed body made during the nascent or early stages of second wave feminism, such as Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy* (1964), Hannah Wilke's *Super-T-Art* (1974) and Marina Abramović's *Rhythm 0* (1974), does not often discuss the tactile and material aspects of the use of clothing. This is presumably because this element is assumed to be lost to the contemporary experience of the work. Unavailable to anyone who wasn't there to experience the sound of fabric being cut or to retain its fibers on their skin, it is exemplified by Peggy Phelan's definition of performance as that which disappears, a cultural form lauded for the political power of its immateriality and resistance to commodification (1993: 146). In this way materiality is limited to the 'originary' moment of encounter. Art criticism tends to focus on those aspects of the event that can be identified in the photographs, which are consequently treated as documents more than continuations of an artwork.

This inevitably shapes the way in which *Cut Piece* is read (my account is no exception to this), but also results in a lack of attention to that which exceeds the photographic, for example, the fragments of cloth that Ono asked people to keep. I explore the possibility that the photographs of *Cut Piece* can be understood not as documents of a prior event, destined only to disappoint in their denial of access to the (un)clothed body of Yoko Ono, but instances of a perpetual liveness in which the work is continually made anew.

Violence / generosity

Cut Piece has been positioned in relation to Ono's involvement in the Fluxus movement of the 1960s. Fluxus was an informal international group of avant-garde musicians, artists and poets influenced by Surrealism and Dada. The activities of Fluxus members were innovative and often invited the participation of a spectator. Their output included public concerts, theatrical events, concrete poetry, random music, performances, actions and gestures as well as unusual publications and anthologies. This was experimental, conceptual work undertaken by a loose affiliation of practitioners including Joseph Beuys, Nam June Paik, George Brecht and Yoko Ono. The term Fluxus was coined by American writer, performance artist and composer George Maciunas who cited John Cage and Merce Cunningham as influences. Ono was an early participant, hosting events such as the 'Chambers Street Series' of concerts, which were organized by the composer La Monte Young and held at Ono's loft. Along with other avant-garde artists of her generation Ono was interested in using everyday, commonplace subject

matter. This posed an alternative to the idea of originality in art and its separation from other aspects of life.

The performative and bodily aspects of *Cut Piece* have also been aligned with feminism (Haskell & Hanhardt 1991: 90-91). A number of avant-garde artists working in the context of second wave feminism engaged with performance art to challenge both the position of women as muse or model for male artists and the commodification of art within a cultural infrastructure that often excluded them. They were attuned to the devaluing of women as makers of art, their creativity underplayed in favour of their procreativity, and used an ephemeral cultural form to challenge the trading of a woman's image. Many of these performances involved the (un)clothed body and the prioritization of embodied rather than detached forms of viewing. It can be understood as a critique of the dominance of a Kantian modernist aesthetic in which the bodies of the artist and viewer must be denied and the gaze must be disinterested.

The dominant feminist reading of *Cut Piece* understands it as a critique of scopic and physical violence against women. Marcia Tanner describes the work's politics as an engagement with a number of issues including sexual aggression and violence against women (Tanner 1994: 65). A similar point is made by Thomas Crow who extends this argument to the question of visibility: 'It is difficult to think of an earlier work of art that so acutely pinpoints (at the very point when modern feminist activism was just emerging) the political question of women's physical vulnerability as mediated by regimes of vision' (Crow 1996: 133). Crow signals Ono's artistic agency, her desire to subvert and challenge, by noting the tension that she produced in her

audience. Chrissie Iles argues that the performance 'externalized Ono's sense of helplessness in the face of social pressure to conform to a passive female stereotype, a role particularly prevalent in her native Japan' (2000: 220). Ono's body either stands in for the body of all women or signals the desire to control, visually and culturally, the Oriental woman's body. Either way, the removal of fragments of her clothing is usually read as dehumanizing, objectifying and fetishistic. Accounts of this performance are understandably littered with notions of violence, passivity and sexual control. The work is understood as a realization of the violence of the gaze more commonly associated with feminist artworks made in the United Kingdom and United States a decade later in the context of the women's liberation movement. Thus, *Cut Piece* can be written into the history of women's art as a brave precursor to later artworks emerging within a climate of widespread feminist consciousness largely unavailable to Ono in the mid-1960s. Indeed, as a Japanese woman working in the context of the New York avant-garde art scene the artworld must have seemed a hostile place at times.

There is potential for actual, as well as symbolic, violence in *Cut Piece*. The fear of what might happen when people are able to use a potential weapon such as a pair of scissors on a woman connects the work to Abramović's *Rhythm 0*. In this piece, which was performed ten years after *Cut Piece*, the artist lay on a table for six hours surrounded by 72 items of her choosing. These included nails, lipstick, matches and a gun with one bullet in the chamber. Audience members were allowed to use these objects on her and as a result Abramović was blindfolded, scarred, doused with cold water and had the gun held to her head, pressed against her temple. *Rhythm 0* and

Cut Piece differ in terms of political context and orchestration. Abramović surrendered completely to the will of the audience whereas Ono explained to hers the parameters of their participation at the start of the performance. Ono invited people to do something specific whereas Abramović did not prescribe their actions beyond supplying the particular objects. Nevertheless, the photographs of each performance remind the viewer of the artists' precarious position in relation to the audience and to wider social structures, which has informed readings of both. Edward M. Gomez, for example, notes that *Cut Piece* 'alluded to a woman's vulnerability – public, personal, physical, psychological – in male-dominated society' (2000: 236). The potential for physical danger was made explicit in the Kyoto performance when a man held the scissors over Ono's head as if threatening to stab her. She later said, 'He raised his hand, 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 (Haskell & Hanhardt 1991: 91). As far as possible, Ono remained motionless throughout each of the performances even when she must have been alarmed. At the Carnegie Hall event a man cut her bra straps at which point she moved her hand to stop her breasts from being revealed. This moment was captured in a photograph and has contributed to an understanding of the performance as a critique of the violence done to women's bodies.

The meaning of such incidents has been compounded by the photographs in which we see men and women towering over Ono's body wielding what looks like an over-sized pair of tailor's scissors. It is almost as if the scissors were designed to be seen clearly in a grainy black and white photograph. In one widely disseminated picture from the Kyoto performance a

man leans over the artist bearing down on her with open scissors to gain leverage. His elbow is outstretched and his forearm points down to make the cut. His posture forms three sides of a square and the fabric of his suit is lit sharply where it pulls on his extended arm, forming stark distinctions between light and dark. This contrasts with the image of Ono who looks down at the cut being made. Her clothes are made of a soft fabric and fold more gently around her body. The lighting catches her face and exposed knees, but her clothing recedes into darkness. The framing, composition and lighting of the photograph contribute to the interpretation of this work as primarily about gendered violence.

However, photographs tell us just as much about what they do not show. What is missing from this record is the fragments of cloth cut off and kept by the audience members. In the drive to read the work as a violent stripping bare of the body of a woman less has been said about these fragments, which functioned at least as much as souvenirs or gifts as they did mementoes of an act of violence. One notable exception is Julia Bryan-Wilson's brilliant analysis of *Cut Piece*, which she situates in relation not only to gender, but also to the politics of race, nationhood and history (2003: 99-123). Bryan-Wilson argues that in this work 'the body announces itself not only as a recipient of risks and threats, but also as a source of gifts' (2003: 103). It is an alternative feminist reading that challenges the limitations of feminist interpretations based solely on resistance to the gaze. Ono invited people to use the scissors and take home the cloth. Spectators became participants who acted on her instructions, in a sense compliant with her wishes for the realization of the performance and implicated in any violence,

either symbolic or physical, that took place. In fact, people generally cut small fragments as if to leave plenty for others. It is possible that the atmosphere was one of respect for Ono's generosity, her gift to the audience. Ono was interested in Buddhist ideas about gift-giving and transposed this to her art. She thought of *Cut Piece* as a form of 'total giving' and when interviewed in 1967 explained:

It was a form of giving, giving and taking. It was a kind of criticism against artists, who are always giving what they want to give. I wanted people to take whatever they wanted to, so it was very important to say you can cut wherever you want to. (quoted in Concannon 2008: 88)

Her gift did require something in advance of itself. It was only given to those who participated in the work, so was not completely outside a reciprocal exchange system. This was not the purest kind of gift, which requires nothing in return, no contractual arrangement or expectation. To some extent, however, people chose their own gift within the parameters marked out for them. It also presupposed no relation between participant and artist beyond the specific event. What happened to these gifts remains a mystery, but these fragments of cloth had an afterlife. A myriad of narratives remain unknown about where they ended up, whether they were cherished as souvenirs or discarded as scrap.

I read *Cut Piece* as an ambiguous, restless dynamic between violence and generosity. This contrasts with the dominant interpretation of scopic and physical violence, which, I argue, is shaped in relation to specific photographic

codes. Furthermore, the emphasis on the violent cutting of fabric has left little room for a discussion of the violence of the photographic cut, which severs stillness from the continuity and movement of performance. There is a brutality within the medium of photography, which interrupts the durational flow of performance and is used knowingly by Ono, particularly in her representation of ethnicity.

This knowingness includes the reference to Western fantasies of Oriental women, which have often been produced photographically. Ideas of female passivity take on a racially specific tenor in the photographs of *Cut Piece*. The artist adopts a kneeling stance, which often connotes passivity, but is played with by Ono via her authorial control including a set of instructions read to the audience at the start of the event. Ono's agency is asserted in this way at the beginning and then maintained using her poise, silence and dignity throughout the performance. It is an interesting power relationship in which she gave people power to make her vulnerable, to enact what is often implicit in photographs. In a sense she performs, rather than rehearses, the objectification of the Asian other. This performance cannot easily be subsumed into the Western fantasy of the Oriental woman because Ono represents multiple cultural identities as Japanese, American and forever attached in the memories of present day spectators to British culture through her marriage to John Lennon and connection with the Beatles. In addition her kneeling posture connotes the submissive sexuality of a Geisha to a Western audience, but this would not have been understood in the same way at the two performances of *Cut Piece* held in Japan. There her pose was more likely to be read as the traditional Japanese seiza manner of sitting, which is

considered formal and polite. Her otherness cannot be secured as she traverses Asian and Western identification, refusing to be fixed culturally or aesthetically. When Ono performed *Cut Piece* in London she described herself in the programme as both an avant-garde artist and Japanese traditional art practitioner. She positioned herself differently in the various countries in which she performed the work, which leads Jieun Rhee to argue that Ono was consciously contextualizing her artistic identity in relation to ethnicity: 'In terms of Ono's endeavour to position herself both in the Japanese and Western art worlds, *Cut Piece* played a crucial role. By playing the 'other' on each stage, she sought to enthrall the gaze of her audiences' (2005: 114). This extended beyond the stage via the photographs, which show an awareness of the currency these scenes have as still images. It is as if the performance was made with photography in mind. Looking back with contemporary eyes this appears as an authorial response to continual othering (or the expectation of it) on grounds of ethnicity, gender and culture, culminating in being blamed for the break-up of the Beatles in 1970.

The photographs show her either looking down or straight ahead as audience members look down at the cloth they are cutting. While they busy themselves with the task at hand, looking at what they are doing rather than at Ono's increasingly exposed body, the images belie the power of relative stillness. Indeed the photograph of a man cutting her bra straps appears out of kilter with the other available images of the performance. It is literally violent in a way that differs from the balance of the other images in which Ono's calm presence exerts its own kind of control. The artist appears not to act, but in fact creates a space in which something can happen. It is a space that is

bounded to some extent, framed by Ono's presence as an artist and a woman, and by the presence of the camera, which was a crucial part of the performance.

The performances of *Cut Piece* included the presence of photographers who were on stage with the artist. The camera acted as a form of mediation, not just visually but in terms of preparedness to act. People knew they were being recorded. This was explicit, not concealed. It is not, however, obvious in the photographs, which do not usually show either the audience or other photographers but focus on close-ups of specific people cutting Ono's clothes. Nevertheless, the photographers were not simply recording an event for posterity. They were an important part of it, mediating between artist and audience in the present. Ono did not critique the camera as a penetrating force, as in later feminist art such as Martha Rosler's *Vital Statistics of a Citizen, Simply Obtained* (1977). She treated the camera as a collaborator and witness as well as a documenter.

In *Cut Piece* the photographic has always been entwined with the performative, from the multiple moments of production to the forms of remembering enabled by the static images. This challenges the dominant story of performance art in which liveness and the direct, real-time encounter with the body of the performer is emphasized. Philip Auslander has argued that the literature on performance continues to privilege liveness despite the increasing prevalence of mediated imagery at, for example, stadium concerts or sporting events. Spectators watch parts of the action on large screens whilst enjoying the atmosphere of being there in the present moment. Auslander's intervention is to argue that 'live performance exists within the

economy of repetition' (1999: 26). What has emerged is a debate about both the ontological differences and mutual dependency of liveness and reproducibility, performance and photography, present tense and past tense. Peggy Phelan argues that critical writing on photography has been heavily influenced by Roland Barthes' focus on the past tense, the 'that has been' of photography (1977, 44), at the expense of understanding the urgency of the present tense, by which she means the moment of image capture. Phelan further distinguishes between two kinds of present tense – the now of a photograph's making and the now of its reception – and refers to the relationship between them as the 'photographic effect' (2010: 51). Her purpose is to pause over the present tense of photography in order to reveal what it shares with performance. Where the past tense of photography is often counterposed to the present tense of performance, Phelan offers a refreshing alternative in which the two cultural forms intermingle and inform each other. Looking back at *Cut Piece* through this debate reveals the knowingness with which Ono incorporated the camera as an agent in the 'now' of the performance, a mechanism for tempering behaviour in the present rather than solely a way to record something that would otherwise exist intact.

Temporal proliferation

In 2003 Ono performed *Cut Piece* again, but this time in a different political context. Two years after the attack on the World Trade Centre in New York and the same year that American troops entered Iraq, Ono performed the work at the Theatre le Ranelagh in Paris as a call for peace in a political

climate of fear and retribution. She performed the work dressed in a long black silk skirt and long-sleeved top in front of 200 people, including her son Sean Lennon. Almost 40 years after she first performed *Cut Piece*, Ono's re-contextualization of it echoed the politics of peace that she is associated with from the 1960s. Her instructions for this performance included a request that audience members send the fragments of cloth cut from her clothes to a loved one as a sign of reconciliation.

This event can also be contextualized within a more widespread desire within the artworld to re-create performance art of the 1960s and 1970s. Examples of this recent development include 'A Short History of Performance' at the Whitechapel Gallery, London. This series began in 2002 and restages performances dating back to the 1960s, such as Carolee Scheemann's *Meat Joy* (1964) and Jannis Kounellis' *Untitled (12 Horses)* (1969), for a contemporary audience. The revisiting of earlier performance art events has prompted some artists to reinterpret, highlight and challenge these practices. One notable example is an event organized by Oriana Fox called 'Once More With Feeling' (2009), which presented appropriations of performance art by Rebecca Horn, Annie Sprinkle, Linda Montano and Vanessa Beecroft amongst others. These were new performance works, which drew on the gestures, actions and poses of earlier pieces drawn from the history of performance art made by women. Sometimes irreverent and refreshingly playful, *Once More With Feeling* sustained a dynamic between the present and the past that was energized rather than reverential.

This differs markedly from the desire of performance artist Marina Abramović to establish her place in art history and to ensure her legacy as a

mature artist. Recent events staged by Abramović have reframed the debate about performance photography and consequently have an impact on what it means to look back at Ono's work. In 2010 Abramović had a retrospective at New York's Museum of Modern Art called 'The Artist is Present'. This show included an extraordinary new 700-hour-long performance in which the artist sat on a wooden chair for the duration of each day of the exhibition, which ran from mid-March to the end of May. Audience members queued for hours to sit opposite her for as long as they chose on the understanding that they did not speak or move. Abramović looked at each person without diverting her gaze and as the sitter looked back many were reduced to tears. This was the longest performance ever undertaken by the artist and attracted a great deal of media attention in newspapers, on talk shows and social media. This highly emotional performance was about the intensity of a shared present moment. However, it was situated in the context of a retrospective, which looks back at, celebrates and memorializes an artist's contribution. Abramović is acutely aware of securing both her own legacy and the veracity of performance art, which she distinguishes from the fakery of theatre telling interviewer Sean O'Hagan that 'to be a performance artist you have to hate theatre' (2010: online). To this end The Artist is Present featured re-performances of some of her most well-known works, including some undertaken with her previous partner and collaborator Ulay. The works, referred to by Abramović as her historical pieces, were performed by a group of people trained by the artist (Akers 2012: online).

Abramović has also caused controversy by re-staging the performances of other artists including Joseph Beuys, Yves Klein, Bruce

Nauman and Vito Acconci. Despite claims that securing the historical legacy and legitimacy of performance art is inconsistent with the radical challenge to hierarchies of value that characterised her earlier work, Abramović feels strongly that performance art is not given the credit it deserves as an influence on theatre, dance and music video (O'Hagan 2010: online). Re-performing these works certainly raises awareness and is particularly important for female artists whose contribution to the artworld is frequently underplayed. What is left unacknowledged, however, is the extent to which re-performances are based on photographs of earlier events, especially when Abramović performs a work that she did not experience first hand. These re-performances have a temporality that differs from Ono's 2003 version of *Cut Piece*. In both cases performance art is inextricably tied to the history of the photographs through which it is remembered, but to different ends. While Abramović uses re-performance to produce historical legacy, Ono's work has always included the creation of future memories in the form of small cloth fragment souvenirs, which retain a privacy for their owner no matter how many times photographs of the event are reproduced. Taken as a whole these projects raise a question about whether performance is in fact a reproducible medium, in which case the politics of performance need to be examined beyond the celebration of transient moments. The re-performances are inevitably measured against photographs of the first time they were staged. Indeed part of the pleasure of the photographs is that they evoke a particular time that has past, stylistically and culturally. The performances from the 1960s are historicized as belonging to that time, despite the emphasis on

ephemerality and of being in the moment that pervades literature on performance art.

The re-enactment of a performance suggests that there was an original to be re-staged, a constant reference point against which subsequent performances are judged. There was, however, no such original for *Cut Piece*. Ono produced a script for the performance, which made it clear that it could be performed by others including men. In addition to the five times she has taken to the stage herself others have also performed it over the years. The sense of an original is ironically an effect of the photographs that exist of these performances. It is bizarre that a medium defined by its reproducibility creates a sense of singularity (the 'original') in performance, which is a cultural form also characterised by repetition. In writing a script in the third person, which can be put into action in multiple places and times, Ono's vision for *Cut Piece* can be understood as a series of present tenses. Her 2003 version can, therefore, be described as another incarnation of the event rather than a re-performance, the former suggesting deference to a previous work. It is the work anew. However, the photographs that have been reproduced in anthologies on body art and feminist art have produced the work as deeply historical in a particular way. These images have become part of the canon of feminist and conceptual art history. When used in anthologies they invoke a specific moment that has passed, not a series of reproducible presents. Ono's 2003 performance is understood as a derivative of the 'original' even though no such original exists. She cannot help but be understood as performing the photographs, bringing these to life, rather than performing an action.

Nevertheless, Ono's wish that audience members treat the cloth fragments as a gift, which in her 2003 performance included a request to extend the gift-giving by passing it on to another, suggests a temporality that is ongoing. It invokes continuation, duration and endlessness. This differs to the focus on the singular moment of a one-off event, which endures in critical accounts of performance art. The back and forth of photography and performance over 40 years since Ono first stepped on to the stage in Kyoto enables a different reading of *Cut Piece* as a series of experiences in the present that are laden with historical reference, but also point to an as-yet unknown future. There is no clear separation between performance and photography in *Cut Piece* either at the time of the work's production or in its consumption. It is not only that photographs are ontologically different to performances. The division between these categories of aesthetic practice is inadequate to describe the continual liveness of Ono's work as it endures through time. The many photographs of *Cut Piece* create a sense of an experience, scattered in time just like the fragments of cloth.

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