

Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1998, 329 pp., 63 black-and-white illus.

Jayne Wark

Volume 24, Number 2, 1997

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1071670ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071670ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

Wark, J. (1997). Review of [Amelia Jones, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1998, 329 pp., 63 black-and-white illus.] *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 24(2), 75–77.
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1071670ar>

nities, Identities and Writing (London, 1992), 177–202; and Lee Patterson, “On the Margin: Postmodernism, Ironic History, and Medieval Studies,” *Speculum*, 65 (1990), 87–108.

- 2 I use these terms with caution, particularly in relation to non-white visual cultures; they function here only as a convenient shorthand.
- 3 See Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* (London, 1990); Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1990); Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: the Reinvention of Nature* (London, 1991).
- 4 At times I used a second-year textbook designed for Women’s Studies at the Open University because it discussed some issues with greater complexity. See Frances Bonner et al., eds, *Imagining Women: Cultural Representations and Gender* (Cambridge, 1992).
- 5 I use the term “white” with caution, recognizing that it is not a unitary category; see in particular Ruth Frankenberg, *White Women, Race Matters: The Social Construction of Whiteness* (Minneapolis, 1993); see also the bibliography in Susan Stanford Friedman, *Mappings: Feminism and the Cultural Geographies of Encounter* (Princeton, 1998), 281–302.
- 6 See Gloria Anzaldúa, ed., *Making Face, Making Soul — Haciendo Caras: Creative and Critical Perspectives by Feminists of Colour* (San Francisco, 1990), xix–xxi.
- 7 Friedman, *Mappings*, esp. 41–47.
- 8 For a recent study that addresses these concepts within modern and contemporary art, see Lisa Bloom, ed., *With Other Eyes: Looking at Race and Gender in Visual Culture* (Minneapolis, 1999).
- 9 For a more integrative study of race, gender and psychoanalytic analysis, see Claire Pajaczkowska and Lola Young, “Racism, Representation, Psychoanalysis,” in James Donald and Ali Rattansi, eds, *Race, Culture and Difference* (London, 1992), 198–219.
- 10 These terms are used to analyse early Modern culture by Valerie Traub, M. Lindsay Kaplan and Dympna Callaghan, “Introduction,” in their *Feminist Readings of Early Modern Culture: Emerging Subjects* (Cambridge, 1996), 1–15.
- 11 The complexity of students’ responses to liberatory curricula is discussed by Patti Lather, *Getting Smart: Feminist Research and Pedagogy With/In the Postmodern* (London, 1991); and Carmen Luke and Jennifer Gore, eds, *Feminisms and Critical Pedagogy* (New York and London, 1992).

AMELIA JONES, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*. Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1998, 329 pp., 63 black-and-white illus.

Body art first emerged within the nexus of post-conceptual and feminist performance between the late 1960s and 1970s. Although artists have continued to make body-centred work well into the present, the history of body art and performance across the past three decades has remained largely obscure.¹ This history has eluded scholarly attention for several reasons: the ephemeral, often poorly documented and chaotic nature of performance activities have made it logistically difficult to study; the few detailed accounts of the momentous redefining of performance by feminist artists have been confined mainly to feminist histories of art; and even the most recently published and ambitiously revisionist histories of this period continue to marginalize performance by focusing on object-oriented studies of art.² Consequently, the history of performance and body art has continued to be shrouded in a “pervasive critical silence.”³

Amelia Jones’ recent book, *Body Art: Performing the Subject*, thus makes an important contribution to this history, even though it does not aim to provide the broad historical contextualization of performance which is still needed. Jones’ focus is body art, which she distinguishes from the larger category of performance, with its emphasis on theatrical production and live audience. Jones’ interest is in works that are enacted through the artist’s body, whether or not in a live “performance” setting, and which can then be experienced through some form of documentary evidence (p. 13). As Jones

reads it, body art is a set of performative practices which aim to enfold the actor and viewer together in a relationship of “intersubjective engagement,” the significance of which is its capacity to “instantiate the dislocation or decentering of the Cartesian subject of modernism” (p. 1). Her primary concern is to examine why the modernist artistic subject, who is (or was) implicitly masculine (and usually white), came into question during the 1960s and 1970s by means of a performative reconsideration of artistic subjectivity. Because body art proposes the body as a site where the production and reception of art come together, Jones sees it as having more radical potential than performance art to reveal the interpretive desires of modernist criticism. This site of interplay reveals the subjectivity both of the body/self as contingent and particularized rather than universal, and of interpretive acts as projections of interests, biases and desires rather than “disinterested” aesthetic judgements.

Jones’ first chapter outlines the theoretical and methodological premises of her investigations into body art through a conception of postmodernism which draws upon theories of subjectivity postulated by phenomenologists such as Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Jacques Lacan, while revising their sex-blind models through the feminist work of Simone de Beauvoir, Luce Irigaray and Judith Butler. The challenge of such work to the ostensible coherence and self-defined authority of the Cartesian, masculinist, modernist subject is by now well established within art discourse, yet Jones’ reading offers important new insights into how body art can be theorized as an enactment of Merleau-Ponty’s notion of self/other relations as *intersubjective* and *embodied*, whereby the self, who exists in the world as flesh,

both shapes/desires and is shaped/desired by the other.⁴ Jones' reading of feminist revisions of such phenomenological philosophy is also productive for body art in that it enables her not only to expose the fallacy of the Cartesian split between the mind and body, but also to acknowledge the body without lapsing into essentializing claims that it precedes or exists outside of discourse. Ultimately, her goal is to propose how body art "can radicalize our understanding of postmodernism as not only a new mode of visual production but also a dramatically revised paradigm of the subject and ... develop a new (implicitly feminist) reading praxis that is suspicious of the assumptions and privileges embedded in and veiled by conventional, masculinist models of artistic interpretation" (p. 15).

Having set out these theoretical premises, Jones devotes three of the remaining four chapters of her book to case studies of individual artists, while the fourth encompasses a range of body-oriented work by artists in the 1990s. The chapter on Jackson Pollock elaborates upon the paradox of how his paintings could stand as the critical paradigm of the modernist rhetoric of the transcendence of the coherent artistic subject, while the images of Pollock painting by Hans Namuth and others, widely circulated in the 1950s, opened up alternative readings of his work as performative. While Jones exaggerates the extent to which the historical literature has posited the formalist and performative aspects of Pollock as oppositional, she does provide a nuanced analysis of how Pollock functioned as "a pivot between a modernist and postmodernist conception of artistic subjectivity" (p. 62). For the generation of artists familiar with the Namuth film and photographs, the "Pollockian performative" not only made evident the possibility of obviating the art object by expressing meaning directly through the "pure indexicality" of the body, but it also made visible that which is concealed or veiled in modernist criticism: the embodied masculinity of the normative artist subject.

Jones then explores how this normative subjectivity was "unhinged" in Vito Acconci's body art performances from the 1970s. Acconci's contemporaries saw the aggressively masculine and erotically charged character of his body art as an effort to integrate the body/self into a coherent whole. Jones argues, however, that the profound ambivalence in Acconci's work, which continually oscillated between displays of his controlling authority and of his vulnerable, pseudo-feminized or flawed corporeality, actually opens up a potential interpretation of his masculinity as unstable and incoherent. Jones' reading of Acconci's body art as both undermining and recuperating the authority of the male artist-subject provides an insightful understanding of his work as signalling what she sees as the radical shift from modernist to postmodernist modes of artistic conception and interpretation. Nevertheless, her argument is weakened by an insufficient consideration of how Acconci was

perceived by feminist critics and artists at the time. Had Jones delved more deeply into this historical and interpretive context, she might have been able to account for why so many women body artists were drawn to Acconci's work, even though they perceived its hostile and predatory aggressions as a direct threat to their emerging feminism.

The chapter on Hannah Wilke addresses the particular problems subjectivity presents for women. Like many feminist artists at the time, Wilke deployed the "rhetoric of the pose" to disturb the dynamics of spectatorship by returning the active (male) gaze that seeks to consign her to passive objectification. In Jones's view, however, the most radical implications of Wilke's work derived from the way she flaunted her embodiment to expose the limits of vision alone in providing knowledge of the body-in-representation (p. 164). By using the narcissistic "seductions" of her body to solicit and encircle the viewer within a web of desire, Wilke's work collapses the distance between subject and object upon which vision relies. This results in a phenomenological intertwining, which forces us – the viewer/critic – to become aware of our own corporeal immanence, and thus of how our own interpretive desires to frame and contain the art object ("Wilke's body-in-performance") are anything but "disinterested" (p. 180).

The body-centred activities of artists in the 1960s and 1970s are posited here as models for a new understanding of subjectivity which, when interwoven with the discourses of phenomenology, feminism and poststructuralism, would emerge as a return to the body in 1990s. Jones' final chapter focuses on such artists as Laurie Anderson, Maureen Connor, James Luna, Laura Aguilar, Bob Flanagan and Orlan, whose work engages the body in relation to technology, to subjectivities which are both particularized and dispersed, and to the impossibility of transcending the body as flesh, as meat. The work of these artists, Jones argues, reprises and expands upon the implications of earlier body art by insisting upon subjectivity as embodied rather than transcendental, as in process and multiple rather than reducible to a singular individualism, and as engaged with and contingent upon others in a world transformed by the political radicalism and rights movements of the past forty years. The value of such work is how it makes us "increasingly aware of our own state of simultaneous intersubjectivity and interobjectivity . . . and forces us to experience ourselves as not only *in* the world, but as also *belonging* to it and thus *owing it something*" (p. 239).

These sentiments are aimed to reconsider subjectivity in an era when the supposed "death of the author" has clashed with the emerging demands of non-subject others for voice and agency. Although Jones' book provides valuable and original insights for thinking about and through the politics of the body in art, it is evident that her thesis, however prodigiously argued,

densely theorized and impeccably researched, privileges a singular interpretation of radicalism as intersubjective engagement. This view is problematic in that it inherently positions practices which are not specifically body-centred (including other feminist, performative or postcolonial practices) as less effective in bringing about the “most profound transformation” of postmodernism (p. 1). Moreover, we are told repeatedly that the radical politics of this transformation lie in its repudiation of the oppressive and moribund modernist “myths of disinterestedness and universality” (p. 5). Yet Jones’ totalizing denunciation of modernism seems to replicate the very modes of binary thinking which postmodernism has ostensibly aimed to ameliorate.

In a further twist, Jones associates the regressive replication of modernist thinking with those forms of postmodernism from which she explicitly seeks to distance herself. For example, because the critical writing which dominated the 1980s in such venues as *October* and *Artforum* focused on production contexts, thus bypassing subjectivity and corporeal politics, it constituted a postmodern strategy which “simply replaces the modernist formalist conception of aesthetic value with an avant-gardist notion of political value” (pp. 30–31). In Jones’ estimation, this strategy is flawed by a lingering Marxism, with its distrust of pleasure, its inability to conceive of the body except in terms of spectatorial objectification, and its insistence upon “the political importance of building cultural resistance to capitalist structures” (p. 23). Since Marxism emerged within modernism, it cannot, evidently, be reconciled in any way with Jones’ resolutely anti-modernist postmodernism. It is worth remembering, however, that the very concept of emancipation, whether in terms of class, gender or ethnicity, has its origins within the critical ethos of modernism.

Jones’ anti-Marxist polemic is most disconcerting when she conflates it with “the conservative, Greenbergian sense” of modernism she imputes to “British poststructuralist feminist discourse” of the 1980s (pp. 21–22). Not only does this argu-

ment grossly distort the premises of such discourse, which aimed to locate the analysis of gender within specific historical and economic production contexts – a mode of social analysis which Jones generally avoids except in the most abstract and allusive terms – it reveals a decidedly partisan, if not overtly chauvinistic, critical position. As many feminists have now recognized, distinctions between so-called essentialist and anti-essentialist approaches to the body and subjectivity in the 1970s and 1980s are arbitrary and divisive. Although Jones has contributed impressively to theories of embodied subjectivity which have emerged in the 1990s, had she developed her thesis in a more dialectical and less antagonistic relation to existing critical discourse, her book could have been profitably strengthened by a consideration of body politics which also engaged, rather than eschewed, the politics of production contexts.

JAYNE WARK

Nova Scotia College of Art and Design

Notes

- 1 For a recent compilation of the literature on performance, see Moira Roth’s course syllabus and reading list, “A History of Performance,” *Art Journal*, 56, no. 4 (Winter 1997), 73–83.
- 2 For example, in Paul Wood et al., *Modernism in Dispute: Art Since the Forties* (New Haven and London, 1993), the only example of performance art discussed is Joseph Beuys’ *Coyote, I like America and America likes me*, 220. Hal Foster’s *The Return of the Real* (Cambridge, Mass. and London, 1996) does not include a single reference to a specific performance work.
- 3 Kristine Stiles, “Performance and Its Objects,” review of *The Object of Performance: The American Avant-Garde Since 1970*, by Henry Sayre, *Arts Magazine*, 65, no. 3 (November 1990), 35–47, esp. 35.
- 4 Maurice Merleau-Ponty, “The Intertwining – The Chiasm,” in *Visible and Invisible* (1964), tr. Alphonso Lingis, ed. Claude Lefort (Evanston, Ill., 1968), 138; cited in Jones, *Body Art*, 41.