

Persian translation of this paper entitled:  
بازتعریف بدن در هنر فمینیستی (دهه ۱۹۶۰ و ۱۹۷۰)  
is also published in this issue of journal.

## Redefinition of the Body in Feminist Art (1960s and 1970s)

Mojgan Arbabzadeh\*  
Effat Sadat Afzal Tusi\*\*  
Fateme Kateb\*\*\*  
Abolghasem Dadvar\*\*\*\*

### Abstract

In the contemporary era, the body has been the focus of attention of different human life aspects and has been one of the issues undergoing serious critical rethinking. In the past few decades, contemporary art has witnessed transformation of artworks revolving around the body. The presence of the body in these works is set predominantly in opposition to the Western aesthetic discourse until the end of modern art period. The feminist art emerging in the late 1960s, through anti-war, civil and feminist movements, is regarded as one of the most important origins of changes in the status of the body in contemporary art. The present research aims to study feminist body art in the 1960s and 70s and examine its theoretical and social context, as one of the major origins of changes in the meaning and status of the body in the contemporary Western art. The assumption of this research is the transformation in the meaning and status of the body in connection with changes in the social configuration and theoretical foundations of feminist artworks, which shows a position in contrast to traditional (and modern) representations of the body in Western art. For this purpose, first the relationship between key concepts and categories, as concurrent theoretical trends, is analyzed based the post-structuralist approach and ideas of feminist theorists. Then, the transformations in the status and presence of the body in the selected feminist artworks as compared to previous eras, are explained and analyzed. This study, which is of qualitative type, has been conducted using descriptive-analytical methodology, and the library method has been utilized to collect data. The findings of the study indicate that the representation of the body in feminist art (in the period in question) has been in contrast with the aesthetic norms of the body dominant in Western art up to the end of modernist art period. In these works, body is depicted as an active, dynamic agency in interaction with the audience and social issues, with an emphasis on the process rather than the end product of art. From this point of view, the most important transformation in the status of the body in the works of feminist artists is the metamorphosis of the status of traditional body from an objectivized and metaphorical image into a self-conscious subject in connection with identity categories.

### Keyword

The body, Contemporary art<sup>1</sup>, Feminist art, Post-structuralism.

.....  
\* . Ph. D. Candidate ,lecturer , Kerman Islamic Azad university.m.arbabzadeh@gmail.com

\*\* . Associate Professor, Alzahra University. afzaltousi@hotmail.com

\*\*\*. Associate Professor, Alzahra University. F.kateb@alzahra.ac.ir

\*\*\*\*. Professor , Alzahra university. ghadadver@yohoo.com

## Introduction and Problem Statement

A close look at the history of art reveals that most artworks, even the most conceptual and dematerialized ones, are involved with the body. Therefore, the main focus of the present study is on the dramatic transformation that occurred in the approach of contemporary art to the body and challenged centuries-old conventions in this regard. How this transformation occurred can be seen in the feminist art of the 1960s and 70s, as one of the main origins of the new approach to the body. Thus, the present article is based on the presumed changes in the status and significations of the body in the context of the feminist artworks of the 1960s and 70s. These transformations are in line with the theoretical approaches and social movements, and, according to the present research, they attempt to answer these questions: what relationship do the artworks in question establish with their contemporary social context and theoretical trends? How does the transformation in the significations of the body in these works compare to previous artworks in art history?

To answer these questions, in the first part of this article the conditions and background of the emergence of feminist art is explained, and in the second and third parts the ideas of post-structuralist and feminist thinkers and scholars about the body and how it is related to identity are examined. In the final part, the way theoretical and social changes are reflected in art is studied through an analysis of the selected feminist artworks; and thus the nature of changes in the status and presence of the body in these works are explained and analyzed.

## Theoretical Framework

The present research has adopted the post-structuralist approach to explain and analyze transformation in the role and status of the body in feminist artworks and its relationship with identity categories. The ideas of Michel Foucault are employed as the main theory in this study. These ideas started with an analysis of Merleau-Ponty's theories, as an introduction to the

rejection of mind/body dualism, which has inspired post-structuralists' ideas on the body, and were strengthened by theories of feminist theorists like Butler. It should be noted here that in the context of the philosophical tradition of the West, the pure, rational and masculine domain of "the mind" is in contrast with and separate from the feminine, intuitive and visceral domain of "the body". A conclusion to be made from this is the confirmation of a kind of superiority of the mind to the body, and Descartes's statement "I think, therefore I am" supports the same claim. Merleau-Ponty was one of the first thinkers to challenge the mind/body dualism, and after centuries he spoke of the interconnectedness of the body and the mind in his ideas and had an undeniable impact on the ideas of thinkers such as Foucault and other post-structuralist theorists. According to Merleau-Ponty, awareness and the world are inseparable and the subject cannot be perceived without considering the world it inhabits, and perception and awareness essentially occur through the body. Therefore, according to Merleau-Ponty, the body is the dialectic between human being and its environment, between the subject and social group (Merleau-Ponty in Primozic, 2009: 14). Merleau-Ponty's analysis of the body and its relationship with social phenomena and conditions can be regarded as an introduction to the importance of the body and its relationship with identity from Foucault's point of view. Therefore, an overview of the post-structuralist bases and the concept of identity and its relationship with the body from Foucault's viewpoint seems to be essential.

As a critical trend in theoretical domain, post-structuralism emerged in the 1960s and 70s based on different theories and principles that converged on the deconstruction of essentialist categories and meanings. Since the late 1960s, post-structuralism has permeated the ideas of feminist thinkers and concentrated on deconstructing identity categories of sex and gender and resulted in intellectual transformations in the objective aspects of social life. In fact, post-structuralism is opposed to those distinctions and contrasts, which are no longer

considered natural and inherent but are a product of dominant culture and discourses. From this point of view, post-structuralists have moved beyond the subject and its historical evolution and focused on cultural meta-individual constructs; in other words, it is not the subject that creates culture, rather it is culture that creates the subject. The new philosophers of the 1960s accepted the structuralism's refusal to authenticate the mind, but rejected its scientific claims. Therefore, they applied the cultural-structural analyses of human phenomena to human sciences themselves (Cahoone, 2002:5). In this approach, culture is a combination of the conditions of the subject, and identity is a plural and fluid phenomenon affected by different discourses. Foucault's studies played a significant role in developing the post-structuralist theory of the subject and identity. He tried to show how identity is created through discipline and control over the body. In his writings the body appears as the immediate subject of power relations in modern society. The relationship between power and knowledge has turned bodies into the subject of knowledge and made them submissive and subjectivated. Foucault shows in his studies that since the 18th century and as a result of social and political configuration, criminals are judged by authorities such as physicians and psychiatrists. Thus, for the purpose of control and normalization, power justifies its bases in relation to knowledge. Here, human body appears as the subject of knowledge and exercise of power. Power relations bring the body to subjection and turn it into a politically and economically useful and docile subject. Such subjection occurs through special technologies: the political technologies of the body, a collection of techniques that combine the relationship between power, knowledge and the body and present the body as a political subject in connection with the subject and identity (Dreyfus, 2011: 27). This subject has been dealt with in different part of the present discussion. Thus, the body is considered as the main arena of identity categories.

The importance of the role and status of the body

in the construction of the identity of the body from Foucault's point of view had a great impact on the ideas of post-structuralist feminists and the development of female identity theories in different fields, so that they regard the body as a boundary for the distinction of the two genders and the exercise of the dominion in question. Traces of the impact of post-structuralist views can be seen in the ideas of Judith Butler, the feminist theorist in the field of gender studies. She, by drawing on Foucault's ideas about the subjection of the subject through the body, advanced the theory of performativity. To Butler, identity is a performative construct connected with the body. An analysis of these theories below can illustrate the importance of the body in connection with the identity category of gender, and can be an approach to the analysis of works of feminist artists with the aim of explaining how the meaning and status of the body have changed in social configuration and contemporary art.

### Literature Review

Since the present study is interdisciplinary in nature, the literature can include a wide range of studies in the fields of sociology, anthropology, psychology, studies of the body, philosophy and art. Thus, to avoid verbosity and remain directly focused on the main subject, the literature review of the present research will focus on studies on the theoretical bases of the research and studies connected with contemporary Western art (especially body and performance works revolving around identity).

Numerous theorists and thinkers – Merleau-Ponty (The World of Perception, 1962), Foucault (Discipline and Punish, 1975) and Butler (Bodies That Matter, 1990; and Gender Trouble, 2006), among other – have studied the categories of the body and identity in their works, which will be dealt with throughout the present writing. Therefore, for the sake of brevity I refrain from alluding to all of them here. The study of the body in contemporary Western art does not have a long history in Iran. Although considerable attempt has been made to develop key concepts of

contemporary art and theoretical approaches, research studies directly dealing with ideas and categories discussed in the present study, and in fact studies that specifically focus on body and performance strategies of feminist artists and transformation in approaches to the body in these works, are quite rare. The article “The Feminist Decorative Art of the Years 1970-2000 in Europe and America” (Ranjbar, 2004) deals with the concentration of feminist artists on handicrafts and decorative arts in the years in question and there is no reference to the importance of the body in feminist art. The articles “Art and Feminist Aesthetics” (Cheraghi-e Koutiani, 2012) and “Feminist Art: a Launchpad for Rising or Falling” (Zahedinlabaf, 2011) have studied, analyzed and criticized the demands and concepts in the artistic movement out of its context without considering the discursive background and social changes, and therefore, they do not constitute a focused study on the body strategies of feminist artists in the period in question, whose importance is highlighted in the present study.

Also, there have been some valuable studies around the world since the 1970s on feminist art and the conceptual frameworks dominating feminist art and aesthetics, as an influential movement in contemporary art, some of which should be alluded to here. Some of the most important articles have been written by Linda Nochlin, theorist and critic of art history, entitled “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” (1971), “Women, Art, and Power” (1989), “The Politics of Vision” (1991) and “Representing Women” (1999). In these articles, Nochlin, by relying on concepts such as identity, minority and resistance, explains gender in art and the necessity of changing some words and terms in art history. The article “Feminist Aesthetics” (Peg Brand, 2007) deals with main course of this movement and changes in the expression of art. The article “Body Art/Performing the Subject” (Jones, 1998) studies body art as whole as a postmodern category in visual arts since the 1950s. And the book *The Body in Contemporary Art* (O’Reilly, 2009)

has studied contemporary artworks produced from 1990 to 2009 around the work through different media (painting, sculpture, installation, video and performance) with a focus on the body, as a new phenomenon in contemporary art. These works have been referred to sporadically in the present article.

### **Methodology**

The present study is interdisciplinary, and therefore, in order to analyze and understand the diverse approaches in the field studied here, the data collected from different databases have been analyzed qualitatively. Since methodology functions as a bridge between philosophical paradigms and research methods, the definition of concepts and analyses in this study have been based on post-structuralism. Based on this, the present article proposes a method that is directly connected with the concepts, assumptions and objective of the study. In this method, the study and analysis of the nature of transformation of the key category of the body in Western thought is carried out through post-structuralist assumptions of plurality and instability of meanings, autonomous subject’s lack of authenticity and emphasis and focus on contextual changes, which is a step taken toward finding the relationships between the categories of the body and identity to be used to study and analyze feminist artworks.

### **Findings**

In the present study the post-structuralist analysis of the body and identity, carried out in light of social changes, reveals a fundamental change in the status and significations of the body in contemporary art as opposed to earlier eras – pre-modern and modern. As an accomplishment of the present study, the characteristics of representations of the body in contemporary art have been explained and some works by feminist artists – as the main origin of this transformation – have been analyzed, as presented in the following Table 1.

### Conditions of the Emergence of Feminist Art

The 1960s and 70s can be regarded as the era of the emergence and rise of social movements in Europe and the US among supporters of civil rights, people of color and students; and the second wave of feminist movements was developed under the influence of these changes. However, it should be noted here that the background for the development of collective identity of women and consequently the emergence of feminism can be found in the modernism discourse of the Age of Enlightenment, Industrial Revolution,

development of capitalist relations and the effects of these factors on the women’s perception of their identity and conditions. In fact, it was in the 19th century that women’s movement was formed as a sustainable movement. This was the first wave of women’s movement (1848-1920) and resulted in the establishment of the right to vote for women. However, the question here is: how have these changes been represented in art? Studies show that female artists’ works are not only no different from the ones by male artists in medium and form, but

	Pre-modern Era	Modern Era	Contemporary Era
Form	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The body as a static, visual, representational and inactive phenomenon</li> </ul>	<p>The display of the body is non-representational – the disrupted and abstract form of the body</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Based on dominant formalist concepts</li> <li>- Transformation from figuration to abstraction</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Representation and presence of the body is active and anti-formalist (as a material and tangible entity)</li> <li>- The body as a dynamic phenomenon and an active agency</li> </ul>
Approach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The body stood for an idealized and metaphorical attitude</li> <li>- The Body was presented as classical beauty for visualizing likeness</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The main trend of experimentation with forms of expression and methods of representation</li> <li>- Refraining from presenting the perfection and totality of the body and the exalted human attributes or displaying likeness or grandeur</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Emphasis on and representation of the fluidity and plurality of identity aspects in body actions and displays</li> <li>- Presence of the body in interaction with the audience and emphasis on process rather than the end product</li> </ul>
Objective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Representation of the body, subordinate to classical aesthetics discourse</li> <li>- Reflecting the visual desires and norms of the Western white male audience</li> <li>- The body is the object of desire</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Logic based on the modern discourse “impartial art” and “art for art’s sake”</li> <li>- The aim of artistic creation is producing an artistic-consumer object for middle-class white male audience</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Self-conscious bodily representation and actions, with direct reference to social and political demands and conditions</li> <li>- The aim is to challenge the visual desires and norms of the audience and the conventional concepts of traditional Western aesthetics and to question the assumptions of the modern disinterested model of evaluation of art</li> </ul>
Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Representation of the body is predominantly done through the traditional media such as painting and sculpture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In non-representational embodiment of the body, painting and sculpture continue to be the most important media used by Western white male artists</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- The body itself is regarded as the tool and medium of art</li> <li>- Body as material for expression</li> <li>- The focus is on photography, films and live and multi-media performance, with body as their main focus</li> </ul>

Table 1. Transformation in the status and significations of the body in western art. Source: authors.

are also degenderized in order to be able to compete in the male-dominant realm of art; this tradition continues more or less into the mid-1960s. Nochlin finds the presence of female artists insignificant and influenced by the traditional presence of women and believes that these female artists were mostly recognized through their relationship with an influential male artist (Nochlin, 1971: 19).

Thus, “feminist art” should be regarded as the outcome of the second wave of the feminist movement in the 1960s, which brought about a new era for women. In fact, the economic growth and public welfare following World War II paved the way for the entrance of women into fields of education, labor market and services, which can be considered the main factors resulting in new demands concerning the status of women in social arena. Meanwhile, influenced by the counter-culture of the 1960s, artists in the second half of the 20th century tried to bring art and social relations closer together, as an important factor in moving beyond the disinterested aesthetic criteria of modernism; and a part of this goal was achieved through being in line with social changes and incorporating everyday life actions into art. Less conventional media, such as photography, videos and environmental possibilities in the form of pop art, conceptual art, performance art and body art, were employed as a means of establishing a connection between art and life. In the works of feminist artists, the inclination toward the employment of new facilities and media increased. These changes were brought about with the aim of distancing from traditional media and struggling with the hierarchy of genres in modernist art, in which painting and sculpture were two media basically controlled by Western white male artists. Thus, photography, film and live performances, with a focus on the body, turned into the main media employed by feminist artists.

### **The Body and Gender**

What is of great importance here is to understand the theoretical bases and social setting of the

emergence (and influence) of these tendencies in contemporary art. In fact, the late 1960s witnessed dramatic changes in theoretical domain and different disciplines of human sciences in the West, one of the most important of which was the emergence of post-structuralism. As already pointed out, this approach includes a collection of ideas and theories all of which are similar in questioning essentialist perceptions in different domains.

At this stage the definition of the body from the viewpoint of post-structuralism and in connection with identity should be dealt with. From this perspective the boundary between human and other phenomena is fluid and changing. According to Foucault, “the body” is a medium through which institutions exercise their power and supervision over the subject. In other words, discipline and submission to power is in fact a kind of training of the body (McDonnel, 2001: 192).

Based on Foucault’s analysis, discipline is exerted over individuals’ bodies through controlling bodily activities (movements, timing and the like). In each of these institutions, special expectations and behaviors are imposed on the body, which along with consumerist lifestyle impose identity paradigms on the body of the subject. Under the influence of such value judgments, the representational and physical properties of the body give different roles and power to individuals in their social interactions and relate individuals to constructed identities, hierarchies and norms. This process leads to subjection, which is the result of exercise of discipline and observation of the body of the subject, as the means of power. Modernity and capitalism play a key role in this process. The importance of the body as the main setting for the emergence of identity categories, such as gender, can be seen in the ideas of Foucault. Foucault views gender not as a fundamental, biological phenomenon but rather as a historical product and, using his genealogical analyses, he shows that in modern times (since the 18th century) gender has been the subject of scientific research and observation in the West. What Foucault wants to point out is that in modern times the exercise of such surveillance and

discipline has resulted in unprecedented thinking and discussion about gender and sexual instinct, and in this discourse sexual instinct is considered to be such a powerful and irrational motivation that can only be controlled through the development of new forms of individual's surveillance of the self and collective surveillance (Dreyfus, 2012: 289-90). In this modern discourse about gender, Foucault believes that the first power and knowledge strategy revolving around gender was hysterization of women's bodies. It was through this mechanism that women's body was analyzed as highly sexual.

### **Performative Body<sup>2</sup>**

As already discussed in Theoretical Bases section, according to Butler's performativity theory, which was influenced by Foucault, the body is not considered to an essentially biological category but is rather regarded as having a plural concept based on cultural structuration. Thus, gender and sexual identity are not pre-existing, natural entities, but are the outcome of the signification of a normative social context. According to Butler, identity categories, such as gender, acquire a social form and become normative through a stylized repetition of acts in a culture. In his works, he employs Foucault's critical ideas to discuss the formation and destruction of the final forms of power in relation to policies of gender and sexual identity. To him, social-symbolic norms are the same disciplinary consolidation of power in its Foucauldian sense. Butler stresses that the constructs of such norms are not definite and stable and there is always the possibility of agency through performance. Here she focuses on those identity manifestations and performances that reverse the unreal, exaggerated dualisms of gender identity. From this point of view, the passive process of repetitive actions creating norms is disrupted and performance acts as a form of resistance to oppose the constructed classifications. Here, the body serves contradictorily both as setting for distinction and a point for finding similarities.

To confirm and explain the possibility of performative

agency from the viewpoint of Butler, how the body has been connected with the changes in the organization of activism and social movements since the 1960s should be considered. This is because these movements (in line with theoretical evolutions) paved the way for the entrance of the body into the realm of general discussions. Therefore, the process in which the body has gained importance in feminist movements in connection with the concept of identity can be examined through the effects of changes in organization of social activism in this period of time as many scholars have highlighted the historical role of these movements in the formation of institutions and development of thoughts and regard them as the historical product of modernity and the industrial era. It should be noted that the social movements that started in the 1960s (such as the second wave of the feminist movement) and were named New Social Movements were different from the labor movements of the previous years in that they were mostly motivated by identity categories such as racial and gender awareness rather than class concerns. Dieter Rucht considers the first type of movement to be predominantly political and power-oriented and the second type mostly cultural and identity-oriented (Dieter Rucht in Scott, 2009: 56). This means that the activities of these movements are more symbolic than focused on a specific objective and more cultural rather than political. However, what is of importance in relation to the topic of the present paper is that performative and symbolic aspects of their presence have been strengthened. Thus, the organizational formation of these movements is not just a means of attaining an objective but is the objective itself, and since it focuses on cultural criticism, the formation and representation of the movement is in itself a message and focuses on performance.

From this perspective, some preformative aspects of this cultural criticism, such forming human chains, staging sit-ins in public places, organizing carnivals and using performance and symbolic movements, have been among the characteristics of many social movements in recent decades. One of the most

symbolic of these performances was organized around the Miss World competitions and the movements and protests of 1968. In this event, some feminist protestors, in an attempt to challenge the clichés of beauty of women's body in these competitions and advertisement industry, set fire, in a performance-like act, to fashion magazines, cosmetics and some accessories of women, which they believed had imposed conventional conceptions of beauty on women. In her *Artpolitik: Social Anarchist Aesthetics in an Age of Fragmentation*, Neala Schleuning, the political philosophy scholar, states that such acts proved the power of performance art in political activities (Schleuning, 2013: 21). Thus, it can be seen that since the 1960s, symbolic body actions and their wide-ranging identity significations have been used self-consciously and critically at social levels in Europe and the US. It can be claimed that this body embodies the subject and is in fact the most distinct boundary that by detaching social bonds and values from the actor distinguishes him from the others.

### Body Art

Following the discussion above and in line with the transformation of the concept and status of the body in social configuration and theoretical substructures, the course that the body has been through in the Western art should be examined so that the effects and reflection of these changes in the field of art can be studied.

A brief review of writings and documents on art history reveals that until the mid-19th century, i.e. the beginning of modern art period in Western painting and sculpture, the body assumed one of two major roles: an ideal image of a mythological figure (like the statue of Apollo, the symbol of beauty, proportion and reason in Ancient Greece), a historical figure or a figure from scriptures or religious texts, and a representation the likeness of prominent figures contemporary to the artist (of course without their unattractive features). Therefore, these representations of the body can be affected by ideals and ambitions. Representations of

female body are a perfect example of objectification. They are depicted as a symbol of classical beauty or an embodiment of sensuality and desires of men. In the 19th century, realism transformed idealized representations of the body into images of lifelike individuals, and shifted the emphasis of aesthetic interest from what was being depicted to the way it was being represented, and the status of the body in art, as a merely idealistic symbol or symbol of beauty and grandeur, underwent a dramatic change.

In fact, with the start of the modern era and following the realistic movement, artists of different styles challenged the totality of the body and depicted representations of cut or metamorphosed bodies in their works (Nochlin, 2010: 49). However, in line with the idea of self-reference in artwork, these disconnected representations of the body in modern works of art serve the purposes of the structure and form and are subordinate to the text. These approaches to the body in the first half of the 20th century led to minimalism – the ultimate phase of modern art – in the 1950s and 60s and finally resulted in eliminating body form and dissociation of art from human content. It should be noted that opposition to modernist values started inside the movement itself with Dadaist rebellious actions intended to question hollowed art object and with the activities of Constructivists and Bauhaus theater that developed the idea of the total artwork. Quite clearly, the rejection of modernism as the aesthetic expression of history as progress was an attack on traditional hierarchical structures, especially painting. The Happenings of the 1960s and the performances by the Fluxus movement not only removed the distinction between image and action but also eliminated the difference between product and reception. Viennese Actionists relied on the heritage of the Antonin Artaud's theater of cruelty to pay attention to process and performance through the body. These experiences properly reflected the concepts of opposition to the end product of art and object, the rejection of artworks' capability to be bought and sold, interaction with the audience and

the elimination of the boundary between art and life, which are among the important components of contemporary art that are in opposition to modern art. Following the historical review above, body art as viewed here was formed through the convergence of artistic movements that used human body as a material for expression in the 1960s and 70s. In body art, the body is not presented through artistic material; rather the body itself functions as material, subject and artistic means all at the same time. Performance art, as a form of body art influenced by artists and movements mentioned above (such as Artaud, Dada and Fluxus), emerged with the aim of undermining the positions of modernism regarding art, artwork, audience, artistic institution and art market with the modernist assumption of the clarity and independence of subjectivity. Thus, body art can be considered as a collection of performative practices that try to deconstruct assumptions and self-reference order of modernist art through the body and in combination with other media. It can be said that by surfacing the effects of the body as an integral component (a material enactment) of the identity, artists challenge the idea of artistic genius of the Western autonomous subject through performing plural and fluid aspects of identity (gender, race, ethnicity).

### **Body in Feminist Art**

In line with this trend in art, since the 1960s feminist artists combined artistic actions with their everyday life realities and demands. In fact, feminists, to oppose the idea of originality in modernism, applied a pluralistic and development-centered approach in form and content to art, and both in reception of and viewing art history a fundamental change occurred: Aphrodite of Knidos (c. 350 B.C), which was once the symbol of ideal female beauty, was considered by feminist critics, who disagreed with the idea of artwork's going beyond time and space, as an example of artworks that reveal the gaze. A large number of feminist artists, who found the traditional media in art history incapable of responding to the artistic movements, employed the body in their

works through the documentation of actions and performances to reveal the domination of male culture, and this trend expanded in art through the right of women to control their bodies, as one of the most important issues highlighted by feminists. This was because feminist artists argued that the representation of women's body in Western art was predominantly controlled and seized by male artists and masculine desires.

This trend paved the way for the creation of controversial artworks in the feminist art arena in the 1960s in which the body was used in an unconventional, self-expressive way in order to arouse different and shocking emotions in the audience. An example is Valie Export's *Action Pants* (1969) in which Export enters a crowded cinema wearing crotch-less pants and carrying a machine gun. She walks around the audience confronting them with the real instead of media and cinematic clichés. In fact, Export's performance in this place was a critical action aimed to criticize cinema productions, as an artistic manifestation of modern technology which had turned women's body into a commodity and abused it.

In 1963, Carolee Schneemann had a performance in which she displayed 36 photographs of herself in an environment filled with objects such as broken mirrors and mannequins. In these images she covered herself in different materials including oil, chalk, paint and plastic and she described this work as a process that completes identity, both as an image and as the creator of the image through a collage in time and space (Jones, 1998: 4). Many critics and analysts believe that at that time this performance was an announcement of women's control over their bodies and sexual desires, which challenged the dominant masculine modernist subjectivity. However, the impact of the social climate and sexual freedom in the 1960s should be overlooked. In her later performances she exaggerated sexual inclinations and characteristics, aiming to criticize the disinterested aesthetic discourse of modern art. It should be noted here that a group of feminist

critics found these performances in line with the process of objectification of the body of women and incompatible with the objectives of the movement. Therefore, these actions should be examined in the context and setting of the changes in the 1960s and 70s (Sexual Revolution). The body presented in these actions is a transgressive body and in many cases is deformed, challenging the constructed conventions about beauty and deconstructing representation of femininity in the media and advertisements. Some unconventional aspects of the body are presented that, as explained in the term “abjection”<sup>3</sup> by Julia Kristeva, had been previously removed from the categorizations of art history and regarded as “the other” in order to defend the integrity of the boundaries of the subject in the patriarchal culture.

Following these transgressive actions in the 1960s, feminist declarations in aesthetics were first made in an organized way in the 1970s as a critique of the historical traditions of philosophy and art. In 1971, Linda Nochlin’s famous article “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” made art historians encounter a controversial challenge so that they would revise their methods of criticizing and analyzing art history. In fact, gender which, as one of the most effective factors in perception of art, had been ignored for centuries by relying on the Kantian idea of beauty free from benefit, appeared in feminist criticism of art from a social perspective.

One of the most influential artworks of the 1970s is a multi-media work by Judy Chicago and Miriam Schapiro entitled “Womanhouse”. The completion of this project in an organized way is what makes this project prominent compared to other works. In this project a house in Hollywood was rearranged by twenty one members of the Feminist Art Program (FAP) and diverse installations were set as a place for artistic performances. These performances were aimed at challenging the traditional roles of women in relation to private spaces. Individual performances of Christine Rush, in which she scrubbed and cleaned the floor and Sandra Orgel’s incessant ironing, in which she repeatedly ironed a piece of

cloth and then folded it (Image 1) are among such performances. Here it can be seen that a new outlook has been developed toward the paintings of women in art history (with the same topic) produced by male artists. The performance and repetition of actions somehow eliminates the distinction between the artist and the subject. These performative actions, through active engagement in the relations of the place of performance, make the audience encounter a kind of accessible experience that can provide a new, tangible domain of connection between art and life for gaining familiarity with women’s demands. In the same way as Foucault and Butler regarded the body as an arena for the exercise of discipline and process of subjection, these performances also, by presenting a collection of repetitive actions imposed on the body, try to deconstruct physical and identity-forming norms and create a kind of “inverse identity” and “de-identification” as a resistance instrument through bodily actions.

By the mid-1970s, along with personal, less well-organized accounts concerning the body, and also crises such as Vietnam War, frequent references to feminist ideas in art could be clearly seen. Also, identity attracted more attention than the past, and both gender and the distinctions between identities and racial and class issues were analyzed. Influenced by this climate, artists with different inclinations included feminist issues in their analyses and by paying attention to different aspects of identity provided it with a multi-cultural aspect.

Ana Mendieta, the Cuban-born artists, is one of the most prominent artists who dealt with ethnic concerns along with gender-related issues. She created videos and performances based on instinctive connection between her body and the earth. In her Silueta Series (1973-80), whose process of performance has been documented through photographs and videos, she combined her body in a ceremony (inspired by Santeria tradition of Cuba) with various natural sceneries, and left traces of herself in them. These artworks can be considered a dialogue between a feminine body with identity characteristics of an

immigrant and nature, which while representing the symbolic relationship of femininity with nature, can make her closer to her Cuban ethnicity. Among her other important works are a collection in which Mendieta has pushed a transparent sheet of plexiglass on her face and by taking photographs of the resulting distortion and deformity, she questions the dominant perceptions about beauty (Fig. 2)

Adrian Piper, the American artist and philosopher, benefited from her education in art and philosophy in her *Mythic Being* series (1973) and by focusing on some common points among several identity categories – gender, sex and race – she directly challenged audience's prejudgments about identity. In this performance, while in men's clothes and disguise, she walks in the streets of New York (Fig. 3). After editing and adding sound to it, she presented her performance in the form of a video installation. In "I am the Locus" (1975) she disguises herself and gathers different attitudes and social powers in herself; about it she says "I am an anonymous Third World young boy, wandering through the crowd telling myself in an audible undertone that I am the locus of consciousness, both hostile to and removed from the presence of others" (Piper in Archer, 2009: 131).

It should be note here that what Piper presents in these actions is an alter ego, and to analyze it Butler's performativity theory, which assumes the identity of the subject to be performative, can be employed. Thus, it can be said that Piper also believes that assumptions concerning race, ethnicity and gender are discourse-based, and disagrees with their being understood as a fixed categorization.

In the 1970s, Helena Almeida, the Portuguese artist, in her performances called "A Study for Inner Improvement" (1977) adds touches of blue paint to the photographed images of the reflection of her body and face on mirror; these have been photographed and parts of her body or face have been hidden by the blue paint. She says that "my work is my body and my body is my work" (Lack, 2009). In the most famous photo of this series it seems that she is



Fig. 1. Judy Chicago, Miriam Schapiro (1972), Sandra Orgel's Performance in Womanhouse. Source: <http://www.womanhouse.net/>



Fig. 2. Mendieta, Ana (1972). Source: <https://www.artforum.com/picks/id=21545&view=print>



Fig. 3: Adrian Piper (1973) *Mythic Being*. Source: <https://tiffobenii.wordpress.com/performing-gender/adrian-piper>



Fig. 4. Almeida, Helena (1970), *A Study for Inner Improvement, Photography and Performance*. Source: <http://folksonomy.co/?permalink=3316>

it challenges the idea of self-reference of work of art and questions the conventional and so-called unchanging concepts of the traditional Western aesthetics. Therefore, the theories and approaches of feminist art about the body can be considered as direct reactions to the socio-political, historical and personal conditions, not the conditions of institutions of high art, which invite the audience to an ontological and epistemological rethinking about the mind/body, sex/gender and subject/object dualisms.

swallowing the blue paint (Fig. 4). It is quite clear that the type and color of the blue paint is very similar to the color used by Yves Klein in his *Anthropometry* series in the 1960s, in which he used naked women as “living paintbrushes” to create his works. Almeida swallowed the color blue as a symbol of freedom; the color used in Klein’s process of abuse of female bodies as objects serving men’s desire came to be known as the International Klein Blue.

Gina Pane and Marina Abramović are two well-known artists who in their performances, by inflicting injury on themselves and tolerating pain, carried out extreme actions. These adventurous performances were mostly combined with contemporary concerns, such as perceptive experimenting (inside/outside and mind/body dualisms and focus and emphasis on the body), and bodily autonomy and independence (body ownership and privacy). In her 1975 *Lips of Thomas*, Abramović performs rigorous actions, such as drawing with razor on her body, sleeping on ice and whipping herself, to eliminate the boundary between body and the soul (inspired by primitive tribes and shamanist beliefs).

Based on the analysis of these works, the presence of the body in these actions, which is different from the previous representations of the body, creates a new discourse of women’s body that is contrary to masculine discourses and desires. The ideas of Foucault and Butler can be used to support the argument concerning de-identification and resistance to the dominant discourse through deconstructing physical norms and behaviors of the body in these works.

What is common in the works by these artists is employment of the body as an active agency in connection with social and cultural issues and identity challenges. In fact, all these works deconstruct the visual desires and norms of the audience to disturb the assumptions and foundations of the impartial and formalist criteria of modern art evaluation. Feminist body art is an exercise in which the body of the artist is present or serves as the canvas, and by removing the boundary between the subject and the object

## Conclusion

It can be concluded from this study that conventional identity concepts, such as gender, which has always been closely associated with the body, have been referred to, as a result of post-structuralist ideas and theories, as fluid, constructed (dependent on time and space) concepts. And such deconstructionist perceptions of the concept of identity necessitate criticizing discourses concerning inferiority and the denial of “the other” in different fields, the reflection of which in the 1960s in social and political field can be seen in the emergence of identity-oriented protest movements, which stood predominantly against identity (gender, racial and ethnic) discrimination and employed performative and symbolic actions in a self-conscious, critical manner. Also, it can be concluded that these changes in art were reflected through opposition to autonomy and detachment of art from realities of the society. Since the 1960s feminist artists, in line with these changes, while paying special attention to multi-faceted issues of identity, combined bodily actions with social demands and through deconstructionist actions established the representation of the body against the traditional and modern aesthetic ideals by challenging the autonomy of the nude body in the Western art. In these artworks, the body, as a setting for events and actions, is presented in a direct reference to social and political conditions and demands and turns into a material or a medium for expression. It can be said that in these works, the body is not subordinate to the text, but is rather the text itself. This confirms the transformation in the status and concept of the body in art from passivity to active agency, as the hypothesis of the present study. The presence of the body negates the traditional conventional meanings of the body and as a signifier of the lived experiences strengthens the relations of art and life and changes the process of objectification into active agency. The display and presence of the body in connection with identity categories is anti-formalist (visceral and vulnerable as a tangible entity) and in opposition with the status and aesthetic norms of the Western art history up to the end of artistic modernism (ideal, metaphoric representations, embodying similarity and subordinate to the structure of the work). As a result, the body is not a static, visual phenomenon, but rather turns into a dynamic medium to embody plural and fluid significations.

The influential feminist artists’ bodily actions have paved the way for the development of a wide range of artworks with various objectives and inclinations, which reflect other aspects of identity categories, such as race, ethnicity and contemporary issues. Prominent artists such as Orlan and Stelarc reflect the impact of technology on controlling or expanding bodies and creating fluid, plural and post-human identities through bodily changes and adding implants to their bodies. In the video installations of Mona Hatoum the hidden inner parts of the body are defamiliarized to the audience using medical equipment. In Santiago Sierra’s works the exploited bodies of the working class reflects the relationship between labor force and capitalism. Coco Fusco’s multi-media performances highlight US army’s abuse of feminist discourse in the war against terrorism. These works and many others all point to the diversity and extent of bodily possibilities that can be used in different ways in art. However, further research is required to study these developments.

## Endnote

1. Contemporary art, regarded as the final point of the theoretical and aesthetic foundation of modern art, includes all deconstructionist trends emerging in art since the 1960s. In fact, “contemporariness” signifies a historical transition and also alludes to a theoretical and media rethinking in contrast with the modernist art for art’s sake. (the modernist concept of “art for art’s sake”)
2. The term “performative body” has been coined by the author by drawing on Butler’s “performativity”.
3. Abjection is the term used by Kristeva to describe the hatred experienced by children, due to desire for distinction, at the stage of developing identity and separating from mother; hatred of something that is both

associated with the other and threatens them and is part of them at the same time (the same feeling exists about bodily excretion, such as excrement and blood). This hatred does not mean complete rejection and is accompanied by dependence. The same state develops in the relationship.

### Reference list

- Archer, M. (2009), *Art Since 1960*, trans. Yousefi, K. Tehran: Herf-e Honarmand.
- Breton, D. (2013) *Lasociologie du Corps( the Sociology of the Body)*, trans. Fakouhi, N. Tehran: Sales.
- Butler, J. (2006) *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1993) *Bodies That Matter: on the Discursive Limits of Sex*, London and New York: Routledge.
- Butler, J. (1997) "Subjection, Resistance, Resignification" in *The Psychic Life of Power*, California: Stanford University Press, Stanford, pp.83-105.
- Cahoone, L. (2013) *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology Expanded*, trans. Rashidian, A.K. Tehran: Nay.
- Dreyfus, H. Rabinow (2012) *Michel Foucault: Beyond Structuralism and Hermeneutics*, trans. Bashirieh, H. Tehran: Nay.
- Jones, A. (1998) *Body art / Performing the Subject*, Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press.
- Kristeva, J. Marcano, D. L. (2010) *Foreign Body*, trans. Parsa. M. Tehran: Rokhdad-e No.
- Lack, J. (accessed November 3, 2016). <https://artmattermagazine.com/helena-almeida-my-work-is-my-body-my-body-is-my-work/>
- McDonnell, D. (2001) *Theories of Discourse: An Introduction*, trans. Nowzari, H. Tehran: Farhang-e Gofteman.
- Merleau-Pony, M. (2012) *The World of Perception*, trans. Jaberonesar, F. Tehran: Qoqnous.
- Nochlin, L. (1989). *Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?"* in Nochlin "Women, Art, and Power" 1989 New York: Harper & Row; Reprint edition
- Nochlin, L. (2012) *The Body in Pieces: The Fragment as a Metaphor of Modernity*, trans. Akhgar, M. Tehran: Herfe-e Hormand.
- O'Reilly, S. (2009) *The Body in Contemporary Art*, London: Thames & Hudson.
- Primozic, D.T. (2009) *On Merleau-Ponty*, trans. Abolqasemi, M. R. Tehran: Markaz.
- Schleuning, N. (2013) *Artpolitik: Social Anarchist Aesthetics in an Age of Fragmentation*, New York: Autonomedia
- Scott, A. (2009) *Political Culture and Social Movements*, trans. Karimian R. Tehran: Agah.
- Tong, R. (2008) *Feminist Thought: A Complete Introduction*, trans. Najmraqi, M. Tehran: Nay.
- Zurakhinsky, M. (2015) accessed November 1, 2016) <http://www.theartstory.org/movement-feminist-art.htm>