

My Vagina Is Not My Gender: Recognizing the Pitfalls of Gender Essentialist Biopower in

Schneemann's "Interior Scroll" To Unlearn the Western Gender Binary in "Feminist"

Performance Art

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From “Pussyhats” to signs bearing the uterus as an emblem, there is no shortage of imagery in our media whose creators have asserted the reclamation of “women’s genitals,” or parts of the body that have been inherently prescribed to women, in an effort for women’s “empowerment.”¹ Image-based phenomena surrounding the “woman’s” body, however, is not unique to the 2017 Women’s March. It has in fact been studied and applied for decades in the greater disciplines of art, activism, and their intersections. While women’s bodies, often termed “the female nude” in art circles, has been a subject for the male artist and art critic for centuries, the 1970s is when art creation, curation, and academia noted the “forceful” arrival of woman-identifying artists re-presenting their bodies by their own design and direction.² Carolee Schneemann, a woman filmmaker and performance artist, came to the prime of her career during this artistic movement with her performance and documentation of “Interior Scroll.”³

Channeling her anger for the sexist industry standards and practices that limited her success and recognition, Schneemann turned to performance art centered on her own body to express her grievances.⁴ Schneemann claims that the process of creating “Interior Scroll”—a photo series depicting herself, with a painted, bare body, pulling a scroll from her vagina and

¹ For more detailed information on the origin of Pussyhats, read “Our Story” by the Pussyhat Project organization: <https://www.pussyhatproject.com/our-story>. Sentence quotations from “Our Story” page.

To see photographic documentation of the 2017 national Women’s March, see Forrest Wickman’s article, “The Best, Nastiest Protest Signs From the Women’s March on Washington” at <https://slate.com/human-interest/2017/01/the-best-protest-signs-from-the-womens-march-on-washington.html>.

² Nina Serebrennikov, “Painted Women, Women Painting,” Lecture, Humanities from Davidson College, Davidson, NC, September 28, 2017.

³ Robert C. Morgan, “Carolee Schneemann: The Politics of Eroticism,” *Art Journal* 56, no. 4 (Winter 1997): 100.

For the referenced artifact (“Interior Scroll”), see Appendix.

⁴ Linda S. Klinger, “Where’s the Artist? Feminist Practice and Poststructural Theories of Authorship,” *Art Journal* 50, no. 2 (Summer, 1991): 39.

reading a “feminist” text aloud—was one from which she derived self-empowerment because of how she utilized her body in the performance:

I thought of the vagina in many ways—physically, conceptually: as a sculptural form, an architectural referent, the source of sacred knowledge, ecstasy, birth passage, transformation. I saw the vagina as a translucent chamber of which the serpent was an outward model: enlivened by its passage from the visible to the invisible, a spiraled coil ringed with the shape of desire and generative mysteries, attributes of both female and male sexual powers.⁵

Schneemann spoke further on her performance and the innate “power” she draws from the vagina in a letter later to a colleague, addressing a critic’s negative review: “. . . It's surprising how disturbed I found myself by your description of ‘Interior Scroll’ involving ‘Tong wads of paper out of her vagina’ . . . wads . . . Feelings of the sanctity, power, ecstatic strength and delicacy of the vagina rose in stupendous opposition to the idea of ‘WADS’ . . .”⁶ With this determination of the vagina as a source of empowerment for women, Schneemann herself describes women’s empowerment in essentialist terms. Because of her biological essentialist definition of womanhood, Schneemann’s “Interior Scroll” is in fact not entirely revolutionary nor feminist, as her definition reinforces the theory of biopower in perpetuating gender norms and oppression. To reach this understanding, this paper will navigate and connect the feminist conversation surrounding essentialism, Michel Foucault’s conception of biopower, the necessary link between definitions of “revolutionary” and “feminist” in art academia, the application of

⁵ Morgan, “Carolee Schneemann: The Politics of Eroticism,” 100.

⁶ Meeka Walsh, “Dangerous Persuasions Carolee Schneemann’s Body of Letters,” *Border Crossings* 33, no. 4 (Dec., 2015): 17.

both essentialism and biopower in Schneemann's "Interior Scroll," and, finally, the implications of Schneemann's (and art academia's essentialist feminists') argument.

"Interior Scroll" stirred communities engaged in art criticism and academia, and essentialism is in fact where the heart of debate in critical feminist theory applied to the arts lies surrounding Schneemann's performance. In the context of analysis for "Interior Scroll," the feminist art perspective of the performance can be divided into two major camps (both of which feature scholars who self-identify as feminist or pro-woman empowerment): anti-essentialist feminist critics and scholars rebutting the essentialist label. Researchers like Wentrack argue that an emphasis on theory-based art (as opposed to body-based art) in the 1980s led the "first phase of feminist art"—women artists of the 1960s and 1970s like and including Schneemann—to be "underappreciated," overlooked, and ignorantly labelled "essentialist."⁷ Witt, a scholar of gender and philosophy, explains gender essentialism theory as holding ". . . that there is some property (or properties) necessary to my being a woman, like being nurturing, or being oppressed, or having a uterus. . . . Generic gender essentialism holds that there is a commonality of experience or a characteristic that unites all women, a core of properties that constitutes the generic Woman and that must be satisfied if something is to count as a woman."⁸ Essentialist feminism today commonly holds that that "commonality of experience" is rooted in particular biological features or bodily existence for women (i.e.: having a vagina).

⁷ Kathleen Wentrack, "The Female Body in Conflict. United States and European Feminist Performance Art, 1963—1979: Carolee Schneemann, Valie Export, and Ulrike Rosenbach," *ProQuest Dissertations Publishing*, (2006): 3.

⁸ Charlotte Witt, "Anti-Essentialism in Feminist Theory," *Philosophical Topics* 23, no. 2 (Fall, 1995): 2.

Anti-essentialist art critics of the time period have argued that Schneemann's work, being centered on her vagina, therefore fulfills a limited and essentialist viewpoint of womanhood. Wentrack argues though that performances like "Interior Scroll" cannot be simplified as intending to simply define "what 'female' meant"; rather, the author argues that the piece attempts to "test the culturally constructed definitions of the 'feminine' that they [women artists] knew" as opposed to simply reduce definitions of womanhood to biological understandings.⁹ Wentrack functionally argues that these women artists, in using their bodies, sought to push boundaries through art rather than limit them regarding what womanhood means. This contention surrounding Schneemann's "Interior Scroll" is particularly important, considering the numerous scholars today who, regardless of their opinion on the gendered impacts of the performance, attribute "Interior Scroll" as seminal, foundational and inspirational for women artists later to obtain platforms and themselves explore representations of women through art.¹⁰

Serebrennikov, an art historian who specializes in women's art history, aligned with pushback against the anti-essentialist critiques of "Interior Scroll" when she addressed the work in her lecture "Painted Women, Women Painting" at Davidson College in 2017.

. . . because those women [of the 1970s] did in fact take hold of the most powerful convention of artistic mastery—the female nude—because they adopted the language of their oppressors and made it their own, [these] images . . . are possible. You might want to ask yourselves in your discussions . . . does this strategy of taking the language, using the language of the oppressor . . . is that part of your definition of a revolution?¹¹

⁹ Wentrack, "The Female Body in Conflict. United States and European Feminist Performance Art, 1963—1979: Carolee Schneemann, Valie Export, and Ulrike Rosenbach," 21.

¹⁰ Serebrennikov, "Painted Women, Women Painting."

¹¹ Serebrennikov.

Serebrennikov suggests that though performances of the same vein as Schneemann may not be the focus in the theory-based feminist art of today, such art for women would not have been possible if women like Schneemann had not first adopted the “language of the oppressor,” which, in such visual arts, means, contestably essentialist, characteristics attributed to the “female” body as the focal point of the artwork. Serebrennikov presents a question at the heart of this dispute of essentialism in art and feminism as applied performance activism: because of the performance’s potentially exclusionary nature due to Schneemann’s focus on representing and advocating for the “generic Woman,” can we call “Interior Scroll” not revolutionary—and, in this investigation, not feminist—when it has paved way for further explorations of feminist art for other women artists? In brief, if the means are problematic or unethical but the ends are beneficial, can it be considered “revolutionary”? I argue yes; however, I also argue that this perspective of “Interior Scroll” being beneficial cannot be applied as universally beneficial—or universally revolutionary, or universally feminist—and therefore the scholarly feminist conversation as applied to performance art thus far has not considered the most direct and pressing questions of intersectional feminist scholarship.

My positionality in writing this analysis is as a white, cis woman and self-identified anti-essentialist feminist, and I see those positions as necessary in understanding the way that my definitions of “revolutionary” and “feminist” are intrinsically intertwined in this analysis. I seek to complicate the scholarly conversation of “Interior Scroll” by positing a definition of “revolutionary” and “feminist” that is more fluid than static, that accounts for the innate systems of marginalization and privilege that lead to differing perceptions of artistic works for different people. I recognize that Schneemann’s intention for “Interior Scroll” was to fight against political structures and societal positionings that oppressed her as a woman within the art

industry; nevertheless, I argue that there can be layers of “revolution” just as there can be layers to oppression. Schneemann can be both revolutionary and non-revolutionary, progressive and regressive, all at once, across different times, contexts, and spaces depending on who her audience is—what her audience’s own privileges and positionalities are. As a result, I argue that “Interior Scroll” is not an absolutely revolutionary nor absolutely feminist work of art due to Schneemann’s emphasis on the vagina as a source of “sacred knowledge.” Not only is the intention and depiction of the artist essentialist, but it is actually counter-revolutionary to the activist intentions of the artist because the biological definition of womanhood fulfills the cycle of biopower that actually works to reinforce gender norms and systems of gendered oppression.

To understand the theory and implications of biopower, it is necessary to understand a more comprehensive explanation of anti-essentialist feminism beyond definitions provided within the specific scholarly pushback in defense of Schneemann. Broude and Garrard sought to debase anti-essentialist feminist critiques of body-focused art in the 1970s by arguing that “First-generation feminists reexamined what ‘female’ meant, not in an effort to limit it to a biological essence, but, rather, to test the culturally constructed definitions of the ‘feminine’ that they knew.”¹² This response criticizes anti-essentialists for neglecting to recognize the beneficial effort made by women artists to pushback against men’s definitions of women in art by “reclaiming” their forms—to create their own definitions of women in their own art as a form of empowerment. Anti-essentialist feminism in reality does recognize that these women artists sought to redefine for themselves what womanhood meant—and that effort is actually the issue that anti-essentialists identify.

¹² Wentrack, 21.

Anti-essentialists argue that to present any definition of womanhood, to posit that there is or can be such a thing as the “generic Woman” in any context—regardless if it is men or women who make that definition—is the issue. “. . . their subject, feminine sexuality, is always constituted in and as representation, a representation of difference,” and to propose any universal representation of “woman” based upon the body in one’s art is to therefore limit the definition of what a woman can be, and to functionally exclude other women who may not fit the strict definitions of that artist’s bodily representation of woman (i.e.: these definitions or reclamations focused on the vagina can often work to exclude many trans women).¹³ Anti-essentialists “are not primarily interested in what representations say about women; rather, they investigate what representation *does* to women.”¹⁴ In this sense, the definitions of anti-essentialist feminism and the definition of revolution are necessarily intertwined: for a performance to be revolutionarily feminist for *every* woman, and arguably everyone, would mean the art would need to be the *deconstruction* of something being inherently characteristic as woman, as opposed to an explicitly original or reinforced universal construction. In other words, when it comes to representation and feminist anti-essentialism in the arts, “male artists have tended to investigate the social construction of masculinity; women have begun the long-overdue process of deconstructing femininity.”¹⁵

Therefore, if a performance is essentialist—like “Interior Scroll” as defined by its own artist to be women’s empowerment derived from the vagina—and presented as feminist, it is in reality a performance that reinforces the Western gender binary as a function of biopower.

¹³ Craig Owens, “The Disclosure of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism,” In *Postmodern Culture*, edited by Hal Foster, London: Pluto Press, 1983: 71.

¹⁴ Owens, “The Disclosure of Others: Feminists and Postmodernism,” 71. Italics added for writer emphasis.

¹⁵ Owens, 71.

Foucault, who coined the term “bio-power,” defines it as “the set of mechanisms through which the basic biological features of the human species became the object of a political strategy, of a general strategy of power, or, in other words, how, starting from the eighteenth century, modern western societies took on board the fundamental biological fact that human beings are a species.”¹⁶ Bio-power then is a strategy by the state for categorization of society by biological standards in order to control and police the bodies that make up the society in a most effective manner. Indeed, a system of control is the goal of bio-power, as the state seeks to “qualify, measure, appraise, and hierarchize, rather than display itself in its murderous splendor; it does not have to draw the line that separates the enemies of the sovereign from his obedient subjects; it effects distributions around the norm”—this norm that has been set out by “biological” standards and is meant to be internalized by the society.¹⁷ This “biological norm” introduced to society is, in the Western context that Foucault introduces us to bio-power, what we understand as the gender binary today. The state seeks to normalize the gender binary in everyday life and understandings of the human existence, and while such categorizations can be helpful to police a population, “binaries, however, do not allow for identities beyond polar pairs; binary structures render invisible alternative identities that exist within a larger spectrum of identity choices and experiences. Without the potential to exist outside the binary, there is no place for alternative identities to be situated socially, structurally, or culturally. Thus, anything outside of

¹⁶ Michel Foucault, “Security, Territory, Population: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*,” edited by Michel Senellart, London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007: 16.

¹⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1978: 144.

female/male, feminine/masculine, and heterosexual/homosexual dichotomies becomes increasingly marginalized and misunderstood.”¹⁸

Many cis women artists like Schneemann, who created art for “women’s empowerment” through the representation of a “generic Woman,” neglected to see how their essentialist representations of women were also a form of communication that actually worked to reproduce the state definitions of gender as tied to biology that not only limit women they did not depict but also limit themselves. Foucault posits that the sustaining of biopower also rests upon those oppressed members of the society to “defend society,” and when it comes to the gender binary, those essentialist feminist artists demonstrated his theory that “. . . social defense does not entirely disappear, but is resituated in a more general genealogical perspective that allows us to take account of the ‘great retreat from the historical to the biological’ in the ‘idea of social war.’”¹⁹ In essence, the categorical cause of the state is a cycle that must be normalized by the rest of society so that the work of categorization can continue to be carried out by the society itself.

This reproduction of biopower, this “defense of society,” evidences itself in the world of essentialist feminist art through the fact that artwork serves as a form of communication, or language. “As language becomes normalized, it becomes fixed; superficially there seems to be no need to change or alter language when only a relative few individuals experience the consequences and difficulties of inadequate language and limited expression. The linguistic privilege of many conceals the disadvantages of language to a few, namely those with non-

¹⁸ Leni Dworkis, “Deconstructing the Social and Structural Rigidity of Norms and Binaries: Finding Places for Intersex, Genderqueer, and Bisexual Identities in Language and Disability,” *ProQuest Dissertations Publishing*, (2014): 2-3.

¹⁹ Foucault, “Security, Territory, Population: *Lectures at the Collège de France, 1977-78*,” 489.

normative identities. The use of labels highlights the ways in which language has constituted social hierarchies and managed marginalization.”²⁰ These essentialist women artists of the 1970s see themselves as protesting the way male artists have defined them in art; however, because they do not address the categorization of the gender binary at large—that women can inherently be labelled women based upon a conception of biology—they actually work to reproduce that very binary, that power structure that oppresses them, while simultaneously excluding and marginalizing from feminist activism those identities already excluded from the marginalizing binary—namely, trans women and non-binary folx. The messages of their artwork in fact serves as an example of how the oppressed within a binary can oppress those identified outside of the binary, how “labels can be used to distinguish the empowered from the powerless, placing individuals within societal and intra-identity hierarchies that promote conformity to a norm.”²¹ In their construction of reclamation of their identities, artistic works like “Interior Scroll” actually work to reify that very system of bio-power which oppresses them, and is therefore not truly revolutionary nor feminist.

It should be understood, then, why it is misleading for the scholarly conversations surrounding “Interior Scroll” to claim it as a seminal feminist and revolutionary piece of performance art without acknowledging that it in fact evidences the layered nature of oppression and is a reproduction of the Western gender binary through its essentialist nature as defined by Schneemann herself. Schneemann may have seized the means of her oppressor, but she did not necessarily diverge from the root conception of biopower that is in place to oppress women. She still defines her gender by her body through this conception that she may derive women’s

²⁰ Dworkis, “Deconstructing the Social and Structural Rigidity of Norms and Binaries: Finding Places for Intersex, Genderqueer, and Bisexual Identities in Language and Disability,” 5.

²¹ Dworkis, 6.

empowerment from her vagina. So, yes, Schneemann does in fact use “the language of the oppressor” in her functional message on the representation of women—that there *is* a biological representation of *all* women at all. It is in this very fact that she uses the language of the oppressor to therefore reproduce the system of her own oppression and the oppression of those who are so marginalized that they are not even included within the Western gender binary’s system of privilege versus marginalization. A very real question that may be posed in response to the scholarly conversation that argues for “using the language of the oppressor” in the context of gendered biological definitions of existence is, who has access to using the language of the oppressor for their own personal liberation? For me, a cis woman, I can say that my vagina is not my gender, but some people may not even have the tools to access that language because the biopower gender binary cannot even conceive of their existence. How can you speak if you don’t exist?

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