

Corporeal Objectification: An Analysis of Performative Practice of the Social Turn

Visual Culture

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Others' bodies are but a means to an end, for artists at least. This essay aims to answer the question: 'Choose one of art's re-directional turns – the social turn, the collaborative turn, or the activist turn – and discuss how it has shaped contemporary art practice.' Specifically, We will be using an excerpt by Claire Bishop to define 'the social turn in contemporary art since the 1990s has been the hiring of nonprofessionals to do performance,'(2012b, p.91). I will be examining aspects of the social turn, employing methods of research and analysis, putting forward the thesis argument: That artists' use of people, non-artists, in commissioned performances are leading to the overall objectification of the body within contemporary art practices; its withdrawal of personal agency, individualisation and identity. That socially engaged art has shifted the view of the body from a site of spontaneous, creative output but as a tool, object or material for ideological consumption and viewership. As it is beyond the scope of this essay to fully cover the voluminous literature around the subject, I will aim to address this proposed thesis argument of the social turn in four paragraphs: Marina Abramovic's early individualised performances as a preface for the social turn and its early signs of autonomous humanised objectification, evident in 'An Artist's Life Manifesto, 2011'; Thomas Hirschhorn's interjected installations as a personal ideological assimilation methodology, specifically his piece "Gramsci Monument, 2013', of bodies in a chosen situated space; examining works of Sierra Santiago's multiple pieces utilising of marginalised bodies in performance as a capitalist material; critiquing the work '80064, 2004' by Artur Żmijewski, his lack of care towards his subject as an individual but his body as a tool to access their political, historical and traumatic past.

Marina Abramović is a female performance artist, of communist upbringing, whose work challenged the norms of performance with her initial plan for a piece from 1970, a performance piece in which she wanted to position a firearm at her cranium and to shoot;

this piece did not receive approval for production as it had clear extremely dangerous outcomes(Parry, 2015, p.1-2). We can acknowledge from this that Abramović predates the social turn but can be seen as positioning her own body as the central subject of the performance, suggesting further a precedent for the upcoming 'delegated performances' within the social turn(Bishop, 2012b, p. 91). Her work series from the early 1970's 'Rhythms' exemplifies her auto-objectification through her many performances and her initial context of raising awareness of the prejudice of women(Parry, 2015, p.2-3). 'Rhythm 0, 1974' is a piece conducted by Abramović where she produces clear instructions 'I am the object' and within the performance allows the use of 72 chosen objects upon her(Sotheby's, 2022) some of 'pain' and some of 'pleasure'(Hessel, 2023). This performance continued for six hours, her audience initially unbothered and quite unassertive, eventually becoming aggravated and aggressive towards her(Ibid). We can see this as 'making herself as a passive object subject to the whims of her audience,'(Parry, 2015, p.34). From examining the findings, we can infer that not only from the instructions has she transmuted into an object but from the audiences' presence within the piece and their behaviour enacted towards her. Significantly in an interview, Abramović stated: 'it's finished that I start being by myself and start walking through the audience naked and with blood, and tears in my eyes, everybody run away, literally run out of the door,' (MoMa, no date). Furthermore, when Abramović's agency was regained, no longer a static item for the use of others, we can infer that the audience itself could feel the shift of presence; from the body as an object to the body as a person. One could argue that the audience, even though not paid or preselected, acts as a preliminary framework for shifting the focus off of the artist within performance but onto the other: 'the actions and reactions of the audience define the piece'(Parry, 2015, p.12). Abramović's later work joined in with the Bishop's social turn(2012b) as the outsourcing of her subjects for performance came in at a much later stage, an example being in 2011 at the

Moca LA gala (Los Angeles Times, 2011) her piece labeled 'An Artist's Life Manifesto' (Falk, 2016) where 'eighty-five performers were paid \$150 to kneel on a rotating "Lazy Susan" beneath the tables, with their heads,' (Bishop, 2012b, p. 103). Given this information we can state that through her own early acts of auto-objectification within her career, it gave Abramović the faculties and confidence to objectify others bodies within her art, to strip them of their living identity; which is solidified in an article depicting one of these actors accounts was referred to as 'one of the heads,' (Los Angeles Times, 2011).

Thomas Hirschhorn born in 1975 in Switzerland, received initial tutelage for graphic design (Art21, 2025). He later went on to installation design as his primary medium within his career, 'that challenge ideas about politics, art, philosophy' (March, 2022, p. 1). Hirschhorn constructs these installations through the use of quotidian materials such as: 'packing tape, cardboard, foil,' (Art21, 2025). 'These materials are used to blur the lines between "high" and "low" art,' (March, 2022, p. 1) within Hirschhorn's career, that is largely framed by his works: 'a series of monuments to great philosophers—Spinoza, Bataille, Deleuze, Gramsci,' (Art21, 2025); these philosophers are representative pieces that were in a four part sequence (March, 2022, p. 1). Hirschhorn meticulously selected the locations for these works and they are specifically situated in 'low-income communities,' (Ibid). These constructions are temporary and are intended to be immortalised in the communal recollection of the residents of the space (Art21, 2025). He employs the people of these areas; therefore we can ascertain that these works fit Bishop's premises for 'delegated performances,' (2012b, p.91); paying them for their participation but assigns them the status of 'executor,' instead of 'co-creator,' (Ibid, 2012a, p. 1-2). Given this information, we can infer that Hirschhorn positions himself above his employees suggesting his view of them as unequal in the process proven further by Lind's critique: 'making exotic marginalized groups and thereby

contributing to a form of a social pornography,”(2004, cited in Bishop, 2012a, p. 1-2).

Hirschhorn ended the productions of the monuments with the ‘Gramsci monument, 2013’ which ‘took place at the Forest Houses projects in the Bronx,’(March, 2022, p. 1-2). The work was raised, ‘which was accessible by stairs or a long ramp. The structure was mostly made mostly of plywood, 2x4’s, and repurposed loading pallets,’(Ibid). There was a huge range of social activities that took place within the monument, ranging from artistic, informative technology to even academic practices of philosophy(Ibid). From these findings, we could argue that Hirschhorn is supporting the development of the community, however he contradicts this directly in an interview of the work while it is ongoing, as a member of the community thanks him for his input Hirschhorn states: ‘I don’t do something for the community. I do something, I hope, for art and the understanding of art. My goal is this,’ (Art21, 2015). In light of this interview, we can assert that Hirschhorn does not view his participants as people but as ideological tools of production, objectifying their socio-economic identity to further his own philosophical belief and opinion around Gramsci, ironically separating them down to only the means of production and failing to address Gramsci’s belief, in Hirschhorn’s own writings, that: ““The intellectual function cannot be cut off from productive work in general”(2022, Cited in March, 2022, p. 3-27). Consolidated by Hirschhorn own words: ““I tell them, ‘This is not to serve your community, per se, but it is to serve art, and my reasons for wanting to do these things are purely personal artistic reasons,’””(2013, Cited in March, 2022, p. 8).

Sierra Santiago is an artist of Spanish descent who works in the medium of performance within his practice (Kim, 2015, p. 2). Bishop states that his conceptual performances were a ‘a forceful combination of minimalism and urban intervention,’(2012b, p. 94) that transitioned from site-specific art, created by low-income labourers, to exhibits of these said

labourers undergoing 'economic transactions' in which the site-specific art is based upon(Ibid). Examples of this being '24 Blocks of Concrete Constantly Moved During a Day's Work by Paid Workers, 1999' conducted in Los Angeles, as the name of the piece alludes where ten employed labourers (Montenegro, 2023, p. 104) 'of Mexican or Central American origin,' to categorically shift these twenty-four units of stone throughout 'spaces of the gallery,' (Sierra, 2025a). From these early signs of a 'delegated performance,'(Bishop, 2012b, p.91) We can infer that Sierra doesn't view his subjects as human beings with live bodies but as faceless mediums for his practice confirmed by his own consideration: 'The exposed result consisted of marks left behind by their work in the form of damage,'(Sierra, 2025) which is confirmed by bishop's observation 'workers are not seen but their presence and the fact that they are paid are made known to us,'(2012b, p. 94). The use of the 'body of The Other' is a prevalent component in Sierra's work that can be seen through multiple moments of his career(Kim, 2015, p. 3), exemplified within these pieces: '250 cm Line Tattooed On Six Paid People,1999' and '160 cm Line Tattooed on Four People, 2000'(Sierra, 2025b/c). From the titles alone we can assert that these bodies are treated like a canvas, not a person, and that I will further prove this as the 'exchange between social and economic capital,'(Kim, 2015, p. 3). In these pieces Sierra employs two groups of vulnerable peoples, migrant workers(Ibid, p. 2) and sex workers(Sierra, 2025c) to have their bodies permanently altered. In '250cm' the men were paid an undisclosed amount, 'minimum wage'(Bishop, 2012b, p. 94), whilst in '160cm' they were each paid around the same as fifteen British pounds for their quotidian use of heroin(Ridsdale, 2016). We can take this as Sierra taking economic advantage over his subjects through their social identities and overall vulnerabilities(Bishop, 2012b, p. 94); being reduced down to these small payments, Sierra attempts to address but only futhers 'inequalities of capitalism,' (Ibid). From these findings, we can infer that Sierra doesn't treat these bodies as living

organisms but as products, objects, through his commodification of the body, the racialized body, which is confirmed in his thesis of these people 'are paid as raw material, and deliberately not as artists and performers,'(Kim, 2015, p. 6).

Artur Żmijewski is an artist born in Warsaw during the 1960's, at a time of 'Soviet-imposed communism,'(Sherwin, 2010). Originally a student of sculpture, but quickly became finished with that medium, Żmijewski states himself: 'I don't sculpt any more - I make films - the world is too complicated to sculpt,'(2004, cited in Culture.pl, 2015). These films in which Żmijewski creates a framework or structures a 'scenario' to bring in recruited subjects, people, to enact the situation and observes their emotionality, comportment and their endurance(Culture.pl, 2015). The 'bodies in his movies are handicapped, crippled, sick, old.' and typically are representative of 'the other' within society(Ibid). An example of this would be his work '80064, 2004' a film that interviews 'Józef Tarnawa, a 92-year-old Auschwitz survivor.' about his experience in the concentration camp. Żmijewski, in the film, convinces Tarnawa 'to "renew" the Number Tattoo applied "there" upon arrival at the camp'(film-history.org, 2025). We can view this as an act of recorded 'delegated performance'(Bishop, 2012b, p. 91). An analysis of this occurrence from the film by Van Alphen(2019):

...He does not show any empathy with the survivor when the latter has second thoughts about his earlier agreement to have his tattoo refreshed. He wants to proceed with the original script for this filmic experiment. Probably he insists because he expects that the renewal of the tattoo will release traumatic memories in the old man. But this never really happens. Whereas, before the refreshing of the tattoo, the man tells a few things about his experiences in Auschwitz, during the re-making of the tattoo and after it, the conversation only concerns this event in the present, nothing in the past...

Given this information, we can suggest from the artist's apathetic and borderline aggressive behaviour within this work, that he views his subject not as a traumatized individual but as a

politicized object in which Źmijewski can physically and emotionally manipulate to achieve a desired result. Źmijewski's later comment in an interview on the work confirms this as he compares Tarnawa to be 'treated as a living monument of the past,'(ERR, 2015) stripping him of his individual experience of his trauma and identity, furthering the historicized objectification of Tarnawa's body. In the interview he talks about how the renewal 'is re-creation or repetition of the act of violence toward this guy,'(Ibid) which exposes his awareness of the exploitative position that he takes and that his goal is to 'open access to the past, really open it, not to commemorate it only, but only open access to it,'(Ibid). We can suggest that Źmijewski views Tarnawa as not just a political traumatised tool to communicate his 'filmic experiment'(Van Alphen, 2019) but also as a conceptual historicized 'monument'(ERR, 2015), not a person, to enact his personal narrative. From these findings, we can assert that the effects of the social turn highly shaped Źmijewski's practice to view Józef Tarnawa within the film '80064, 2004' as just another piece of art, a personified canvas for his piece and neglects to address the body of the subject as a living person with emotions and individuality, that his view of 'Art is, above all,' confirms this(Culture.pl, 2015).

In conclusion, I have investigated multiple artistic practices under Bishop's definition of the social turn(2012b, p.91). I have analysed the pieces of the artists and put into the context of what bishop states as 'delegated performances'(Ibid) and their practice of corporal objectification: Firstly, I looked at Marina Abramović's, her early work of self-objectification, 'Rhythm 0, 1974' ,as a precursor for her later work, in La Moca, 'An Artist's Life Manifesto, 2011', of objectifying others' bodies in her practice; I go on to Thomas Hirschhorn, defining his practice and the issues with his piece 'Gramsci Monument, 2013' as being self serving and utilising the community as ideological tools; furthermore, I evaluated Santiago Sierra,

multiple works as objectifying the other, making them into a capitalist material, as a centralized theme in his practice; finally, observing Artur Żmijewski practice, his behaviour within '80064, 2004' as transmuting a holocaust survivors suffering into a historicised monument, objectifying his pain through his body literally and conceptually. To conclude, a more comprehensive analysis to the literature on the social turn is necessary however it reveals various gaps and shortcomings in the representation and overall voice of these 'delegated performers' (Ibid), furthering the systematic objectification of non-artist bodies in contemporary practice.

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