

This essay aims to explore the relationship between postmodernism and performance art, with a particular focus on the artists Marina Abramović and Chris Burden and their use of the body as a tool within the genre.

Postmodernism as a movement within contemporary art emerged in 1960s America and garnered attention due to its rejection of traditional views surrounding aesthetic value and its use of nonconventional artistic mediums. The postmodernists notably challenged the concept of an objective value system which applies to art. They instead believed that the individual's act of creation was far more important than choice of materials, refinement of traditional existing techniques and styles, or artistic finish of their work. This prioritisation of artist and activity over viewer differed significantly from the preceding modernist movement and most earlier movements, where emphasis was placed on the aesthetic value of artworks as they were regarded by a passive viewer. At the time, this shift was received with criticism as some felt the artwork was being treated as a means of individual therapy for the artist, dismissing the viewer, resulting in a "hostile" environment. As contemporary critics saw it, "The idea that art is in some way therapeutic, to audience and creator alike, is now firmly established in our culture. It has almost entirely replaced the traditional notion that the purpose of art is to give pleasure." (Lucie-Smith, 1972, p. 75).

In the book *Postmodernism: a very short introduction* (2003), Christopher Butler presents the idea of postmodernism as a set of values embraced by the artist, rather than a strict visual criterion. This enabled postmodernism to impact every field of the arts, including visual art (Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Stills* [1977-1980]), literature (Thomas Pynchon, *Gravity's Rainbow* [1973]), and music (Philip Glass, *Einstein on the Beach* [1976]). The rejection of the idea that the value of an artwork is determined solely by materials and the artist's craft allowed artists to adopt an experimental approach to creating, toying freely with form and medium to develop innovative ideas of validity and value within art.

During the 1970s, performance art emerged as a medium strongly associated with avant-garde artist's, many of whom are now recognised as postmodernists. At the time, these works were "raw, often undocumented, and frequently spontaneous" (Jones, 2011, p. 19), directly delivering the artists presence to the viewer. Artist Marina Abramović became recognised for her challenging and politically charged performances, which embodied the postmodern ideas of rejecting academic authority and subverting the established roles of artist and passive observer. Performance art provided a direct means of connecting artists with spectators, with the body often being used as a central instrument within the work (Goldberg, 2011). Abramović's *Rhythm 0* (1974) exemplifies those ideas- in this performance the artist stood passively, stripping herself of her agency, permitting the audience to manipulate her body using various instruments and substances, some of which caused physical injury. This intimate experience of physical vulnerability blurred the lines between artist, artwork, and viewer, eliciting profoundly emotional responses from both audiences and Abramović herself.



Figure 1 Table of assorted instruments, *Rhythm 0*, 1974



Figure 2 Marina Abramović,
Rhythm 0, 1974



Figure 3 Marina Abramović, *Rhythm 0*, 1974

Postmodernists aimed to dismantle the differentiation of high and low art. This can be observed in the rise of pop artists, which took inspiration from comic books - a readily available resource for many people. Despite this, they did not intend for their work to be appreciated by all audiences, maintaining the prioritisation of the artist. Instead, they took on a rather pluralistic and self-referential stance, stereotyped as “universal truth is impossible, and relativism is our fate” (Butler, 2002), in similar fashion to their philosophical counterparts. As a philosophical ideology, postmodernism emerged in the 1960s France with Jean-François Lyotard, Jacques Derrida, and Jean Baudrillard being prominent figures within the movement. The postmodern idea insisted on looking upon life from an individual-centred perspective. It dissected the societal desire for idealisation in art and everyday life, opting instead to deconstruct the fundamentals of modern culture and civilisation for a post-war world. There is some debate as to whether the theory precedes the artistic movement, or whether academics were inspired by preestablished artists; in either case it is clear that a symbiotic relationship between postmodernist critical theory and contemporary art practice has emerged over time.

Chris Burden is an American performance artist that is renowned for his provocative and dangerous performances. These performances often push the limits of Burden’s own physical safety while testing the viewers ability to spectate such events.

Due to the compelling nature of his work, Burden has sparked much admiration and controversy, in turn developing a unique and recognisable character for himself- having been described as a “martyr, daredevil, terrorist, activist, and holy-fool” (Schaffner, 2003). This extreme style and dedication to his work has cemented him as a notorious figure amongst performance artists. Burden was a key figure in contemporary art from the 1970s, until he created his final piece, *Ode to Santos Dumont* in 2013. Burden's work exemplifies both postmodern art practice and theory. This influence is particularly evident in pieces such as his 1974 performance *Trans-Fixed*, in which Burden nails himself onto the rear of a Volkswagen Beetle, holding himself in a position reminiscent of crucifixion imagery. Burden’s deliberate objectification and abuse of his body, a priceless resource that is of no cost and holds significant value, to replicate religious symbolism, juxtaposed with the Volkswagen Beetle as an icon of consumer culture, is reflective of the postmodern scepticism towards traditional

religious ideals, the lack of faith towards and within a postmodern society, and the pervading influence of consumerism throughout America.

These themes relate to Jean Baudrillard's theories on the postmodern consumerist society, specifically Baudrillard's view on sign-value, products that outwardly demonstrate wealth and the consumers attention to social trends and advertisement, overpowering the use-value, items which hold value due to their functionality, as the culture shifts to one of social and consumerist fetishism (Baudrillard, 1981). Burden's use of the Volkswagen Beetle, originally dubbed "The Peoples Car," amplifies this idea of rampant capitalistic dominance as the model was commissioned by Nazi leader Adolf Hitler, yet its sinister history has not impacted the consumers desire to obtain this model of car in current times. This demand is often driven by the desire to display wealth and status, sign-value, opposed to the functional necessity of a car, the use value. This is significant as it highlights the cultural shift from prioritising function and exchange-value, items that are of little function but hold monetary value such as diamonds, to that of a brazen display of social class. "Value no longer resides in the object or the substance represented, but in the *simulacrum*, in the simulacral *relation*, in the operation of *simulation*." (Baudrillard, 1981). In general, performance art is regarded as ethically opposed to capitalism due to its lack of exchange-value, as it is argued the artwork only exists as the artist is present-however; one could argue that attending performance art holds sign-value, as performances are usually limited to select groups, often from art institutions, preventing large portions of the population from accessing it. The incorporation of film within the world of performance art also challenges this idea of presence creating the piece, as it creates the ability for mass production and individual sale.



Figure 4 Chris Burden, *Trans-Fixed*, 1974

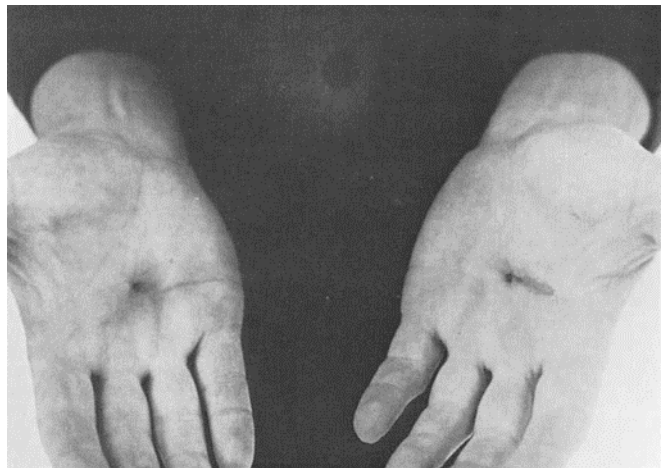


Figure 5 Chris Burden, *Trans-Fixed*, 1974

Baudrillard's theories are present within other examples of Burden's work- such as his 1973 *Through the Night Softly*, in which a bound and exposed Burden is filmed writhing in an animalistic state on the floor atop shards of broken glass. This piece was intentionally shot in black and white, taking on an abstract appearance to refrain from depicting the self-inflicted mutilation inflicted upon Burden's body. Despite this censorship, the piece evokes a sense of disturbance and alarm within the viewer due to the simultaneous groans of pain and sounds of the glass grinding away at itself. To exhibit this film, Burden purchased a month-long late-night spot on a local television station- stating it was to "fulfil a longstanding desire to be on TV.," and "break the omnipotent stranglehold" (The TV Commercials (1973-1977), 1977) broadcast television held. The advertisement is short, lasting no more than 5 seconds, startling the audience in the comfort of their own home, gone before it could be entirely comprehended- Burden stating it "stuck out like a sore thumb" amongst the regular advertisements (The TV Commercials (1973-1977), 1977). This use of television advertisements as a means of engaging an audience further relates to Baudrillard's focus on the capitalistic world, as Burden has transformed his body into a simulacrum. This choice echoes Baudrillard's belief on how the disconnect between mass media and human reality has led to a simulation of information and pseudo-socialisation. "It is already almost impossible to distinguish properly human behaviour from its projection on the screen, from its double in the image and its computerized prostheses." (Baudrillard, 2002, p. 8). This choice also could be interpreted as Burden rejecting the elitist nature of performance art, rejecting television as a form of low art, making his work accessible to the masses.

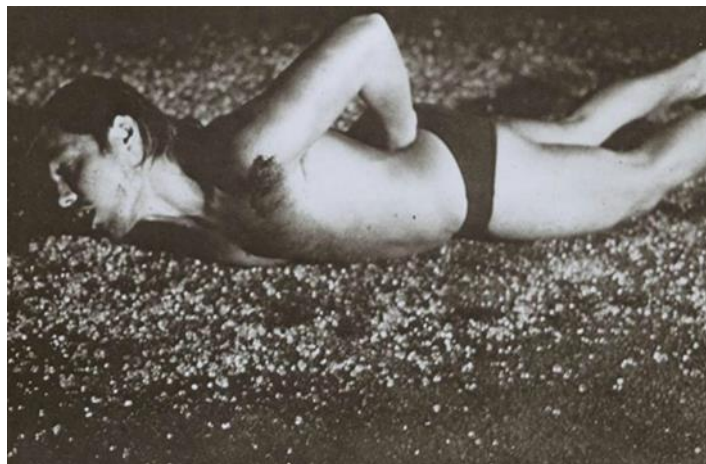


Figure 5 Chris Burden, *Through the Night Softly*, 1973

In conclusion, exploring the relationship between postmodern art, theory, and performance art has presented the numerous links between the topics; through themes of rejecting societal norms, such as the traditional role of the passive viewer, challenging aesthetic value, the concept of high and low art, and the use of the body as an artistic object as a means of rebellion towards the capitalistic society.

Chris Burden's use of his body as an object, which could be interpreted as simulacrum within his work, along with his utilisation of mass media as a means of connecting to an audience further engages with these themes in specific relation to Baudrillard's ideas on consumerist culture. displaying how Burden's performances adopt postmodern values and criticisms, and how his works remain relevant to the ongoing discussions surrounding aesthetic value, the commoditisation of art, and postmodern ideology.

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