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## **Marni Kotak's Birth of Baby X: Confronting Women's Body Abjection Through Performance Art in the Public Sphere**

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**Marni Kotak's *Birth of Baby X*: Confronting Women's Body  
Abjection Through Performance Art in the Public Sphere**

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MA Thesis

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## Introduction

From the establishment of performance art in the 1970's to performance art now being an important artistic medium in contemporary art, new opportunities for expressing creativity arose for artists all around the world.<sup>1</sup> Performance art enabled the artists to “explore the relationship between the private and the public, social and the personal, the body and the self”.<sup>2</sup> For the first time, the body, the artist, and the message behind the performance became the center of the artwork and the most distinguishing feature of performance art. Additionally, for the first time, the audience played an important role in performance art: The audience members took the roles of participants, observers, spectators, critics, and bystanders.<sup>3</sup> Moreover, performance art made it possible for artists, ranging from Marina Abramović (b. 1946), Yoko Ono (b. 1933) and the members of Gutai group, to be introduced into the art world and make significant changes to it: The artists created new narratives concerning the limits of bodies, representation and introduced new ways of thinking about what art can be. Performance art gave space for the artists to confront worrying societal issues as well as voice their beliefs, which were often silenced.<sup>4</sup> These features distinguished performance art from any other artistic medium.

Performance art became especially important amongst women<sup>5</sup> artists, as it was breaking the traditional expectations surrounding women and creating new ways to express themselves and their individuality.<sup>6</sup> Women artists have been and still are a group that struggles to find their spot in the art world. Even nowadays, women's bodies are still being sexualized and expected to perform according to various gender biases. Moreover, women are expected to be perfect in order to fit into the masculine discourses in society. These expectations are often reflected in the art world as well. In 1969, around the same time that performance art was established, Schopenhauer made a statement saying that women have creative limitations and are incapable of creating art.<sup>7</sup> Simultaneously, women's bodies have mostly been seen as an object, rather than a subject, sexualized in galleries and museums and usually depicted in a

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<sup>1</sup> Millner and Catriona Moore, *Contemporary Art and Feminism*, 49.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> Taylor, *Performance*, 61.

<sup>4</sup> Striff, *Bodies of Evidence: Feminist Performance Art*, 1.

<sup>5</sup> Referring to cisgender women as the thesis focuses on maternal bodies and women, who have female reproductive organs.

<sup>6</sup> Striff, *Bodies of Evidence: Feminist Performance Art*, 1.

<sup>7</sup> Korsmeyer, *Gender and Aesthetics. An Introduction*, 3.

very sensual way, mostly, meant for a male audience, a male gaze.<sup>8</sup> A statement by the Guerilla Girls is a prime example of such an issue: “Do women have to be naked to get into the Met Museum?”<sup>9</sup> When a woman’s body is depicted in various art works it usually is depicted as an extremely ideal form of a woman’s body, without any imperfections: Nude, curvy, long hair, sensual facial expressions. An example could be the painting by Botticelli, *Birth of Venus*, 1485, (fig. 1) as it depicts the ideal beauty of a woman. In other words, a woman’s body is depicted as a perfect body for the man. Whereas the reality is different: A woman’s body, as any other body, inevitably has imperfections and flaws.

Even more so, there is a lack of representation of the maternal body in art as it does not fit in the aesthetic realm of beauty. Whenever a woman’s body does not fit within the aesthetic expectations of the male gaze, it can be seen as an abject – a concept that is closely related to the feeling of disgust – and is rarely represented in the artworld.<sup>10</sup> The concept of abjection is conveyed by Julia Kristeva, a philosopher, literary novelist, and theorist, and explicitly written about in her book *Powers of Horror*.<sup>11</sup> Kristeva conceptualizes abjection as something that “signals phenomena that are manifest in the experience of disgust.”<sup>12</sup> In her book, Kristeva discusses the different reasons for woman’s body connections to abjection, while emphasizing how abjection is mostly related to a maternal/pregnant woman’s body. Kristeva argues that abjection relates to “expelling the Other” starting with the child expelling the mother’s body during birth.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, abjection to Kristeva is the moment of losing your form, the moment that self-identity changes.<sup>14</sup> For example, it could be interpreted as the moment the pregnant woman’s body is changing, losing its usual form, losing its identity, and becoming a bearer of life.

The maternal body has especially been seen as a taboo in the western society throughout times and a body that is the opposite of ideal for the male gaze, which results in it being rarely depicted realistically in the art world. As Rosemary Betterton mentions, in visual depictions the pregnant woman becomes a mere “container for the unborn child.”<sup>15</sup> Additionally, a maternal/pregnant body is often restrained to the domestic space and seen as an object rather

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<sup>8</sup> Gozenbach, “Bleeding Borders,” 31.

<sup>9</sup> Elizabeth Manchester, “Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into The Met. Museum?”, *Tate*, December 2004/February 2005, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/guerrilla-girls-do-women-have-to-be-naked-to-get-into-the-met-museum-p78793>

<sup>10</sup> Meagher, “Jenny Saville and a Feminist Aesthetics of Disgust”, 23-24.

<sup>11</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*.

<sup>12</sup> Korsmeyer, *Gender and Aesthetics. An Introduction*, 148.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Betterton, “Maternal Bodies in Visual Culture.”

as subject, a body, that if seen in the public, threatens to disrupt the social system.<sup>16</sup> Pregnancy and maternity are located within the “personal and private” and is only subjected to the legal and medical constraint.<sup>17</sup>

Nevertheless, it is difficult to find realistic depictions of maternity and “birth giving” in artworks throughout time. However, with the possibilities that performance art provides, women artists can regain their authority, individuality and bring to attention the concept of abjection and how it might be seen as merely a social construct as it fits the patriarchal society: When women are seen in public with a flaunted abject body, it becomes unpleasant to the masculine society and thus often becomes related to disgust, whereas an aesthetically pleasing body is worshipped. The maternal body thus becomes an interesting angle of research as it is not only presented in Kristeva’s book as the ultimate abject, but also lacks representation in the artistic world.

Currently, there are several discussions brought up by various scholars concerning the topics of maternal body and women’s body representations in art as well as issues concerning the concept of abjection and its relation to maternity. Kristeva’s theory and conceptualization of abjection, Jaqueline Milner and Catriona Moore’s feminist theories as well as other scholars, that deal with the topics mentioned above, become crucial as they have touched upon the issues that are central for this thesis. However, there is a gap in the field of maternal body abjection and how performance art, with the help of the public space, helps the artists to confront such taboo.

Nowadays, pregnant women are still often treated as merely the bearers of a new life and pregnancy still remains as one of the scariest experiences as well as one that often creates various negative connotations. Maternity is often seen as an experience, that entails a lot of unpleasant details such as bodily fluids, a growing belly and other body parts, bad pregnancy symptoms and many more. Even though various celebrities, such as recently Rihanna, expose the maternal body to the public, question and disrupt the traditional maternal lifestyle and try to change the narrative concerning the connotations of maternity, it is therefore more than ever crucial to continue and emphasize such discussion. Performance art becomes an important medium as it could allow such topics to be conveyed to the public in a approachable way as well as provide a platform for artistic freedom to convey the messages in an entertaining way.

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<sup>16</sup> Longhurst, *Bodies. Exploring Fluid Boundaries*, 33.

<sup>17</sup> Betterton, “Maternal Bodies in Visual Culture.”

Thus, the thesis sets out to investigate to what extent performance art acts as a suitable artistic medium when confronting maternal body.

Additionally, the thesis will examine the works of Marina Abramović, Carolee Schneemann (1939 – 2019), Yoko Ono and Hannah Wilke (1940 – 1993) in order to create an understanding of the importance of performance art within the works of women artists. The four women performance artists will illustrate the different ways they regained their authority and disrupted the traditional and aesthetic ways of imagining a woman's body, or in other words, how they de-aestheticized and confronted the view of a woman's body as an abject body. Thus, the analyses of the performance by these artists will provide an understanding of how performance art as a medium adds value to confrontation of women's body abjection. Nevertheless, the four artists were carefully chosen as they inspired the performances of the main case study of the thesis – Marni Kotak (b. 1974). Marni Kotak is a performance artist, who often shocks her audience with realistic and intimate performances of her own life.<sup>18</sup> Nevertheless, the artist states that she is a “performances artist that never performs” and that by living, people are “always performing.”<sup>19</sup> The performance *The Birth of Baby X*, 2011 (fig. 15) stands out as the artist places an extremely intimate act of giving birth in a public space, that way disrupting every expectation concerning a maternal body. Nevertheless, Marni Kotak claims that she believes her life is “the ultimate performance” and thus “motherhood goes on, indefinitely.”<sup>20</sup> Through her performance, abjection gains a positive connotation: Kotak treats her maternal experience as art, rather than a medical and unpleasant condition.

The thesis will firstly introduce the theoretical angle that will act as a foundation for the thesis. Kristeva's abjection theory and the feminist theory by Jaqueline Milner and Catriona Moore will be elaborated on, and the methodology of visual analysis and interviewing will be introduced. Secondly, the literature about performance art in connection to women artists, abjection, and the importance of the public space will be introduced in order to create a better understanding why and how women's bodies have been connected to abjection as well as to highlight how performance art could act as the best medium to confront such connotations. Nevertheless, the importance of the public space will be explored as it plays a big role in women's performances. Lastly, the case of Marni Kotak and her performance *Birth of Baby X*,

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<sup>18</sup> Priscilla Frank, “Five years After Giving Birth in a Gallery, This Artist is Still Raising Her Child as Art,” *HuffPost*, November 2, 2016, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/marni-kotak-raising-baby-x\\_n\\_5818c644e4b064e1b4b4f5f4](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/marni-kotak-raising-baby-x_n_5818c644e4b064e1b4b4f5f4)

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

2011 (fig. 15) will be analyzed with a close look on how she confronts the maternal body abjection as well as how she changes the narrative of the gallery.



# Chapter 1: The Woman's Body Abjection, Performance Art and the Public and Private Spheres

## 1.1. *Theoretical Angles and Methodologies*

To understand the role of woman's and maternal abject body in performance art and the importance of the public space it is crucial to look at feminist theories and context. Jacqueline Millner and Catriona Moore's *Contemporary Art and Feminism* work explores the woman's body's roles in contemporary art throughout times as well as the way that women artists have challenged societal norms and disrupted the traditional way of thinking about a woman's role in society. Firstly, the authors introduce the reader with feminism in relation to women's role in society by stating that "feminism has a long genealogy of theorizing the body and materiality. From early on, feminism analyzed biological differences used to justify discrimination against women, and looked to women's lived, embodied experience: their personal stories."<sup>21</sup> The authors mention that the way a woman's body is constructed in society is mostly due to the way the bodies are represented.<sup>22</sup>

Representation, and especially in art, becomes a crucial aspect in the feminist theory as it converts the women's body from the object into the subject and thus allows the woman to pursue her own individuality and identity in society rather than merely being a silent sign/object of the male gaze.<sup>23</sup> For Milner and Moore, the environment thus becomes an important detail for feminist artist as it allows them to "re-imagine" the public space: "cultivating perpetual contingency in response to changing communities, flipping the dynamics of visibility, interrogating narratives embedded in the built environment of specific places, and enlivening the bodies of the public to previously silenced voices."<sup>24</sup> However, the maternal body still seems to not have much space within the feminist theories and thus lacks representation even within the women community. As maternal bodies are deprived from the public space, Marni Kotak holds a significance in this thesis as she, through performance art, utilizes the public space of a gallery in order to gain representation for the maternal bodies in society.

Nevertheless, Milner and Moore stress the importance of performance art and how it became so appealing in the 1970's for women artists. They argue that with the emergence of performance art, it brought about the focus on "embodied subjectivity" and thus gave "the significant feminist explorations and enactments of the insight that the body is the principal

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<sup>21</sup> Millner and Moore, *Contemporary Art and Feminism*, 50.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid, 55.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid, 227-228.

site of power, which it both submits to and resists.”<sup>25</sup> Here Julia Kristeva and her conceptualization of abjection become interesting to look at as performance art allows for confronting the negative connotations of such a concept through its artistic abilities.

Julia Kristeva can be seen as a pioneering author regarding the concept of abjection. In Kristeva’s book, the concept of abjection is analyzed from various different angles, and it becomes clear that this concept is complicated. Kristeva’s frequently used example of abjection is the feeling of the skin that forms on top of warm milk.<sup>26</sup> The milk also refers to the maternal substance that is being produced while pregnant.<sup>27</sup> As already mentioned in the introduction, Kristeva points out that abjection is a term that does not quite mean disgust but most often is related to the experience of disgust, more specifically to a body that is going through changes and produces “spoilage, rot and decay.”<sup>28</sup> Moreover, it is crucial to mention that the concept of abjection might have been interpreted in various ways depending on context and time, however, the maternal body is always seen as the starting point from which the feeling is conveyed. According to Kristeva, during birth giving, it is necessary for the child to expel the “other” in order to allow the development of the subjective identity.<sup>29</sup> Thus, abjection becomes an intriguing angle to study maternal bodies and their representations in art.

As it is mentioned in Kristeva’s book, the feeling of abjection comes from the feeling of fear and disgust, due to it exposing the” border between self and other”.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, the main argument raised by Kristeva concerning women’s body relations to abjection is the bodily fluids that women produce as they are often seen as “embarrassing within the western culture” due to the fact that they “cross the boundaries between inside and outside.”<sup>31</sup> Kristeva further argues that a leaky body, as such, is mostly associated with “femininity, maternity, pregnancy, menstruation.”<sup>32</sup> Thus it is not just the woman’s body that is seen as an abject, but a maternal body in particular. However, Imogen Tyler, a professor of sociology, also becomes crucial as she places a lot of criticism on Kristeva’s conceptualization of abjection and focuses on the problematization of abjection of the maternal body, and is one of the few scholars who brings public criticism when concerning the issues that maternal bodies face in the public spaces.<sup>33</sup> Similarly, the thesis will also aim at changing the negative connotations of abjection

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<sup>25</sup> Millner and Moore, *Contemporary Art and Feminism*, 55.

<sup>26</sup> Korsmeyer, *Gender and Aesthetics. An Introduction*, 148.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

<sup>30</sup> Longhurst, *Bodies. Exploring Fluid Boundaries*, 28.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid, 30.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>33</sup> Imogen Tyler, “About Imogen Tyler’s Research,” <https://stigmamachine.com/about-the-sociology-of-stigma/>.

concerning women's bodies and rather show how women artists are able to expose their body abjection in a positive way – by changing the narratives of the environment and the expectations from society concerning their bodies.

Marni Kotak brings the maternal body, abjection and performance art together in her practice and especially in the work *Birth of Baby X*, 2011 (fig. 15). Kotak through her performance *Birth of Baby X*, 2011 (fig. 15) exposes every feature of a maternal body that is seen as an abject in society and creates a representation for maternal bodies that strives away from the medical and negative connotations. The environment for her thus becomes an important aspect as she aims at changing the narrative of maternity that is restrained to the private medical condition to seeing it as public art.

In order to investigate the main questions raised in the introduction, visual analysis methodology will be utilized as well as literature analysis and an interview, that was conducted with Marni Kotak concerning her performance. Visual analysis will be adapted on the performance art of Marni Kotak through the documentation, as the performance has already happened and it is not possible for it to be viewed, visited, or analyze live. Nevertheless, visual analysis will help to identify various signs in the environment where the performance by Kotak was done. The objects in the performance art might signify crucial details when it comes to understanding abjection confrontation. Research includes an interview with Marni Kotak to gain more in-depth information about the performance *Birth of Baby X*, 2011 (fig. 15). The answers will be used in the performance analysis part. Moreover, the method of literature analysis will help to look at the context and the history of women in performance art and how/if abjection was confronted.

## 1.2. *Abject Body and its Relationship with a Woman's Body*

Women's bodies and how they should appear have been a topic that has been widely discussed throughout times. More specifically, women are often judged from the way their bodies appear in public. We still live a society where there are various expectations of how a woman's body should look, which is as an ideal for the men. Thus, it is not new to say that women are encouraged by the society to look according to the standards: Various corsets and shape enhancing clothing's, filters on various apps and photoshop, makeup and various other options allow women to hide their "imperfections" from society. Even more so, pregnant women, as they are considered to be less important than their fetus, are controlled by society as in what

they should eat, drink, where they should go or even how they should think.<sup>34</sup> Nowadays, these standards are still present but are more often confronted. Various celebrities have been changing the maternal narrative in society and regaining authority as individuals.

Some scholars have been widely discussing the connections between the concept of abject and women's bodies. As already noted above, the concept of abjection is highly related to a woman's body and in particular the maternal body as it signifies a change in the identity and the loss of the form. When women's bodies strive away from aesthetic expectations and rather appear in a realistic way – with all its flaws – it results in being viewed as an abject, as it is something society does not want to see. As already mentioned, the feminist author Kristeva describes abjection as a feeling we get when we see something abominable, for example, “when the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk.”<sup>35</sup> In her book *Powers of Horror*, Kristeva explicitly discusses the concept, by providing examples of abjection that are approached from many angles. However, she places a big emphasis that the concept of abjection is closely linked to a woman's body as it connotes leakiness (menstrual blood), birth and pregnancy.<sup>36</sup> These kinds of bodily fluids are stigmatized in society and only accepted when they are hidden away.

Tyler has argued, that abjection can be associated with many aspects of the body that are repulsive and at the same time fascinating: “death, decay, fluids, orifices, sex, defecation, vomiting, illness, menstruation, pregnancy and childbirth”.<sup>37</sup> Looking at the features describing abjection, Tyler points out that Kristeva's conceptualization of abjection is mostly related to a feminine, and in particular, a maternal body as it contains the majority of the features that define abjection.<sup>38</sup> These features can also be associated to vulnerability and according to Judith Butler, women have always been more socially vulnerable and precarious, thus it could be said that women are the more precarious gender, meaning that they have less authority over various aspects of life.<sup>39</sup> Mary Condren argues that throughout times women have always been associated to abjection as they experience menstruations, pregnancies and childbirths which were imposed upon them by nature, whereas men, if they encounter abjection within themselves, they do it out of will.<sup>40</sup> In other words, men always have control over their bodies. Nevertheless, as a reaction to Kristeva's claim of maternal abjection, Condren mentions that

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<sup>34</sup> Carson, “Abjection and the Maternal Body,” 104.

<sup>35</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 2.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 53-54.

<sup>37</sup> Tyler, “Against Abjection”, 79-80.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*, 80-81.

<sup>39</sup> Butler, “Bodily Vulnerability, Coalition Politics,” 139.

<sup>40</sup> Condren, “Women, shame and abjection,” 16

women “can never be free of abjection so long as they are child- bearing.”<sup>41</sup> Besides, pregnant maternal bodies are often described as grotesque by others and even the pregnant women themselves.<sup>42</sup>

Some scholars have been publicly criticizing Kristeva’s negative conceptualization of abjection and in particular the abjection of the maternal body. As Maura Sheehy argues, the thinking about a maternal body as an abject has been constructed by societal discourses that take the subjectivity away and silence the mothers.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, Tyler raises a question: “Who writes the limits of what is abjection?”<sup>44</sup> Tyler criticizes Kristeva even further by saying that a maternal body “cannot exist as a subject in her own right but only as the subject’s perpetual other, that ‘liminal reality of human embodiment’”.<sup>45</sup> In other words, Tyler argues that a maternal body is considered to be an abject when it can no longer be recognized as subject by society.<sup>46</sup> Overall, Tyler provides a suggestion that “feminist theory needs to shift its focus away from ‘observational reiteration’ of maternal abjection as it manifests within cultural realms”.<sup>47</sup>

As Marni Kotak has pointed out, maternal bodies have not always been a part of the feminist theory, and only recently was it recognized as part of the realm.<sup>48</sup> Consequently the positive connotations of an abject body of a woman are lacking representation not only in real life but also in the art world. Although the concept of abjection has a close link to the maternal body and a woman’s body in general, it could be possible to change its negative narrative to a positive one through art. Performance art thus becomes an interesting and useful artistic medium for women artist in order to not only convey strong messages to society and confront the negative connotations concerning their abject bodies, but also to regain their authority.

### 1.3. *Women’s Body Abjection and Performance Art*

Vulnerability could be turned out into activism, as Judith Butler stated in her study of assembly. This is significant to understand as performance art could act as a tool for activism, especially

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<sup>41</sup> Condren, “Women, shame and abjection,” 16

<sup>42</sup> Longhurst, *Bodies. Exploring Fluid Boundaries*, 33.

<sup>43</sup> Sheehy, “Sparring the eternal maternal abject”, 66.

<sup>44</sup> Tyler, “Against Abjection”, 86.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid*, 85.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid*, 86.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid*, 95.

<sup>48</sup> Natasha Kurchanova, “Marni Kotak interview: ‘I wanted to have my son’s birth as a performance’,” in *Studio International*, 18 November, 2014, <https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/marni-kotak-interview-performance-coolcarcut-birth-baby-x-microscope-gallery>

for those groups of people that are socially seen as more vulnerable – women.<sup>49</sup> According to Lara Shalson, performance art can be seen as a form of activism, an in particular, political activism, as it has been influenced by various protests and has become a “vehicle for social change.”<sup>50</sup> Tracey Warr and Amelia Jones argue that the confrontation of the vulnerable woman’s body and abjection through performance art, has become crucial in the feminist discourse as the body is the site through which “public and private powers are articulated.”<sup>51</sup> Similarly, Amelia Jones argues that performance art enables women to “play out the ambivalence of gender identity” as through various performances, women are able to confront and display the fluidity of the concepts of male and female as well as object and subject.<sup>52</sup> Nevertheless, Warr and Jones argue that when women artists position their bodies within a movement that alters the “painterly female nude”, it results in denying the negative connotations of abjection concerning their bodies.<sup>53</sup> As it has been discussed by Jones, the exposure of a woman’s body through performance art, leads to the abandoning of the aesthetic expectations and instead it results in the representation of the abject – the lacking and imperfect parts that are not desirable by a male viewer.<sup>54</sup> The arguments by Warr and Jones become crucial as they mention that “it is important to de-aestheticize your relation to the work so that it didn’t become formalized into an aesthetic commodity.”<sup>55</sup> Aesthetics here become important as it is a common feature in various works of women artists. women aim at de-aestheticizing their bodies in order to confront the ideal expectations of their appearance.

Some examples of such confrontations and traditional views on women’s body renderings have been widely discussed by various authors. Erin Striff, in her article, has discussed how women artists aim to “disrupt the cultural associations with the female body”.<sup>56</sup> She mentions the examples of Annie Sprinkle (b. 1954) , a former sex worker, and a performance artist ORLAN (b. 1947), where in both cases Striff argues that in order to deny objectification it “sometimes requires to deny beauty”.<sup>57</sup> Annie Sprinkles throughout her performance, *The Public Cervix Announcement*, 1990 (fig. 2), changes the narrative of a nude body and that way denies objectification by gaining authority of her own body and exposing it to the public by choice, that way taking control of the objectification. On the other hand,

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<sup>49</sup> Butler, *Notes Towards a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 123

<sup>50</sup> Shalson, “Enduring Protests”, 78-79.

<sup>51</sup> Warr and Jones, *The artist’s body*, 21-23.

<sup>52</sup> Jones, “Presence in Absentia: Experiencing performance as documentation”, 13.

<sup>53</sup> Warr and Jones, *The artist’s body*, 24.

<sup>54</sup> Jones, “Presence in Absentia”, 16.

<sup>55</sup> Warr and Jones, *The artist’s body*, 30.

<sup>56</sup> Striff, “Bodies of Evidence,” 1.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 16.

ORLAN in her performance series *7th Surgery-Performance called Omnipresence*, 1993 (fig. 3), by completely changing her appearance, challenges the societies thoughts of how a “beautiful” woman should look like. Nevertheless, the disruption of an “aesthetically pleasing” image of a woman on stage, by appearing nude, angry or aggressive changes the stereotypes of how women should appear in the public spaces.<sup>58</sup>

There are various suitable examples of women artists regaining their authority through performance art. Performance art gives space to a lot of experimentation and a lot of freedom of artistic expression. Thus, performance art is a useful tool for women to become visible with all their flaws in society. These examples relate to the performance done by Kotak as well as with Abramović’s, Schneemann’s, Ono’s and Wilke’s performances as they too position their vulnerable bodies in the center of their work as a tool to regain authority over their bodies and to confront the audience with the fact that a woman’s body still has negative connotations to abjection. Further, the performative space becomes an important aspect in performance art, especially concerning the fact that women in history have not been allowed to appear in the public without a man. Nevertheless, women often are expected to appear in public in a way that is presentable and fits within the societal expectations. Thus, performance art acts as a suitable artistic tool to confront such stereotypes.

#### *1.4. Abjection and the Role of the Public Sphere*

The public sphere becomes an important aspect when talking about women performance artists in that it allows for the bodies, that are often related to the domestic space and bodies, who’s appearance is often stigmatized in society, appear and gain recognition. Thus, performance art provides a platform for women whose bodies are still unrecognized in society, for example the maternal bodies that still lack representation in the art world. It is first crucial to define the public sphere and how museums and galleries as well as theatre spaces enact such definition in order to have a clear understanding of what will be considered private and public in this thesis.

Jennifer Barret stated in her research on the museum, that the public sphere is mentioned to be a complicated term. Barret describes the public sphere as a space “outside of, or apart from, one’s private realm, and to be engaged in social relations with others.”<sup>59</sup> Thus a museum or a gallery can be seen as a public space as it engages with the public discourse.<sup>60</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Striff, “Bodies of Evidence,” 16.

<sup>59</sup> Barrett, *Museums and the Public Sphere*, 7.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

Barrett becomes important to look into as she claims that galleries and museums are places that host public discourses, however, when it comes to performance art, there is still lack of understanding how it can be positioned within the “public” space of the museum and gallery walls as it is still a contemporary art medium. However, the thesis will show, with the help of various examples, that performance art is indeed a suitable artistic medium to claim the public space and change the narratives around the conceptualization of public space.

Geroge Varna’s and Steve Tiesdell’s writing on “Assessing the Publicness of Public Space: the Star Model of Publicness,” separate the conceptualization of the public space into two levels which is the “conceptual level” and the “practical level”.<sup>61</sup> According to Varna and Tiesdell, the first – conceptual level – consists of “individual understandings of publicness” whereas the other – practical level – “involves the production of real public places, which, in turn, become sources of perception and interpretation by the ‘public’”.<sup>62</sup> Varna and Tiesdell argue that the public spaces can sometimes be seen as “less public” in the sense that the space is not accessible to everyone, is limited to the visual perception and is protected by thresholds.<sup>63</sup> It is thus interesting to see how performance art plays with the notions of public and private as it is often performed in the public spaces, but not always in museums and galleries. Performance art produces a performative space within the environment its being done in.

Considering the aspect of private and public spaces and the position of a woman’s body, Butler’s ideas become relevant. Butler points out that public spaces traditionally belong to bodies that are “masculine and unsupported, presumptively free to create”, on the other hand, a private space is often associated with the vulnerable bodies (such as women as traditionally women are seen as the weaker/more vulnerable sex), thus, it is considered to be a more feminine space.<sup>64</sup> Similarly, Barrett mentions that the private space is more “feminized” as it “connotes the domestic familial sphere”.<sup>65</sup> Such restriction to the “feminized” space is often visible in the works of women artists as well. According to Barrett, many museums hold art works utilized by women artist that clearly portray such restriction to the domestic sphere and unavoidably portray their marginalization from the public sphere, as women had a limited access to the public spaces.<sup>66</sup> However, there are some artists, such as Ana Mendieta (1948 – 1985) who through performance art changed the narrative of “feminized space”. Mendieta in her *Siluetas*

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<sup>61</sup> Varna and Tiesdell, “Assessing the Publicness of Public Space,” 577.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.

<sup>63</sup> Ibid, 584.

<sup>64</sup> Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 75.

<sup>65</sup> Barrett, *Museums and the Public Sphere*, 7.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid, 65.



*Series*, 1976 (fig. 18) positions her feminine body to occupy various environments and feminizes them in her own way.<sup>67</sup>

When considering the subject of maternal body, Longhurst points out that pregnant women tend to be “confined to the home”.<sup>68</sup> This could be seen as the result of the reactions and the idea of a maternal body being seen as non-ideal, far from a perfect form and consequently as abject. Carol Bigwood provides an example of some thoughts that a pregnant woman encounters in public: “I become self-conscious by the surprised gaze of other. No longer nice to look at, knocked-up, taken, unappealing. In the eyes of the others, before being a person, I am first and foremost pregnant”.<sup>69</sup> It is important to consider that the maternal body in the public space is clearly a problematic aspect and it affects the way maternal bodies feel and are accepted in public. They lose their individuality, become bearers of life and are often seen and appear unattractive not only to others but also to themselves.

Many scholars have written about women artists confronting the abjection of a woman’s body through performance art. The environment, thus, becomes important during their performances as women artists aim to change the narrative and the traditional thinking that a woman’s body belongs to the domestic space. According to Millner and Moore, women artists aim to make “vulnerability and discomfort public, and so claim space for different bodies and ways of being”.<sup>70</sup> The authors give several examples of various women artists (such as Angelica Mesiti, Bianca Hester and more) that render the public space with their performances or in the words of the authors “loosen public spaces”, “reimagine the public”.<sup>71</sup> Women artists such as Yoko Ono, Marina Abramović, Hannah Wilke and Carolee Schneemann have utilized the public space, including museums, galleries and theatres, in order to render societal norms that have been placed on the visibility of a woman’s body in society and simultaneously render the image of beauty and aesthetics. With the wide creative options that performance art bears, there is a lot of space for the “more vulnerable” groups of people to manipulate the traditional understandings of publicness.

### 1.5. *Maternal Woman’s Body in Art*

The researcher, Deidre Donoghue becomes interesting for the thesis as she is one of the few that raises the discussion about maternal body representation. Thus, her work becomes a good

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<sup>67</sup> Best, “The Serial Spaces of Ana Mendieta,” 68.

<sup>68</sup> Longhurst, *Bodies. Exploring Fluid Boundaries*, 37.

<sup>69</sup> Bigwood, “Renaturalizing the Body (With the Help of Merleau-Ponty),” 61.

<sup>70</sup> Millner and Moore, *Contemporary Art and Feminism*, 224.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 214-216.

foundation for the thesis. Donoghue, in her work provides several examples of maternal artists and their experiences in the art world. She gives an example of the Indonesian performance artist and activist Arahmaiani (b. 1961), who “enabled her maternal subjectivity to (re-) enter into the public sphere through (her) performative maternal aesthetic acts.”<sup>72</sup> Arahmaiani performed ecological performances. She connects the subjectivity of a maternal body with the “ecological self” as she argues that “feminine maternal subjectivities and practices are environmental and ecological forces of contemporary cultural production.”<sup>73</sup> Through the performance of Arahmaiani we see the maternal body connected to the “ecological self,” which is an important detail in the feminist theory as it portrays the woman with her own identity as well as woman’s connection with nature.

Similar connection to the ecological self could be seen in Ana Mendieta’s *Silueta Series*, 1976 (fig. 18) as she portrays her feminine body intertwined with mother earth.<sup>74</sup> Mendieta becomes one of the most interesting artists to look at when considering the environment and women’s bodies and she will further be discussed in the chapter four. Other examples of maternal body in art could be seen in the works of Judy Chicago (b. 1939). The artist in her artwork – *Birth Project*, 1984 (fig. 4) – together with other women who collaborated for this project, depicted various stories of women and their birth experience into textile art.<sup>75</sup> The artistic medium of the textiles was used purposely as traditionally textile art was the main artistic expression for women.<sup>76</sup> The exhibition of such works allowed the audience to see the relationship between a woman and birth, earth and art. Besides, the main case study, Marni Kotak, brings the confrontations of the abjection of maternal body through the performance art medium which consequently allows to interpret and see the connection and importance of maternal body, the child and art through a different lens, that will be explored further in the chapters.

It is clear that with the establishment of performance art, a new platform for the “invisible” social groups has been provided and thus enabled them to voice their beliefs through art. Women artists were able to confront and criticize the way their bodies have been perceived in society throughout times. Through performance art, women were able to expose their flaunted bodies to the public and disrupt the expectations of how it should look. Nevertheless, women artists aim at de-aestheticizing their bodies from the way they are expected to look by

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<sup>72</sup> Donoghue, *The Aesthetics of Interruption*, 156.

<sup>73</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

<sup>74</sup> Best, “The Serial Spaces of Ana Mendieta,” 58.

<sup>75</sup> DeBiaso, “Judy Chicago.”

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

the male dominant society. Furthermore, performance art enables the artists to express and render the gender norms as well as bring attention to many social and political issues.

This chapter has provided an overview of what can already be found within the literature concerning the abject women's body and in particular the maternal body, performance art and the importance of environment. Many women artists have been and are using performance art as a tool to confront negative connotations of women's body abjection. It is clear that the maternal body is considered to be especially an abject due to the way it performs and looks in the public space. Thus, it proves that it is important to continue the discourse concerning such issue.

The second chapter of the thesis will focus on four case studies that have been carefully selected to show how several significant women artists have been rendering the artworld through their performance. They expose their abject bodies, render the way their bodies are expected to look and utilize the performative space to change the narratives of the private and public. Artists like Yoko Ono and her performance *Cut Piece*, 1964 (fig. 5) puts her body in a vulnerable position and allows the audience to take control over her: She positions herself in an objective position. Similarly, to Yoko Ono, Marina Abramović in *Rhyme 0*, 1974 (fig. 6) positions herself as an object, pushing her body to the limits. She allows the audience to use various tools like knives, ropes and even a gun however the audience decides to. Abramović here puts herself into a vulnerable position and explores the fact that as a woman artist, she is exposed to gender-based violence when it is done for the purpose of art. Nevertheless, Schneemann and her performance *Interior Scroll*, 1975 (fig. 9) becomes another crucial example as here she positions her feminine body in a museum, where such bodies are not usually exposed, or at least not realistically. Schneemann's performance highly relates to exposing and confronting woman's body abjection. Similarly, it is also important to mention Hannah Wilke and her performance *S.O.S.*, 1975 (fig. 12) where she allows the audience to chew gum, from which the artist later creates tiny replicas of women's reproductive organ and sticks it on her face. Such performance highly criticizes the fact that women always must look perfect and flawless for the male audience.

The performances will be looked at both from the visual analysis method and the literature analysis as the performances have been widely talked about by many scholars. However, the performances provide a good background for the topic as well as introduce the reader to the power of performance art that is held by women performance artists.

## Chapter 2: Contextualization: Women Artists Confronting the Abject Body in Art

The following sections will explore and analyze the works of four carefully selected women performance artists that do not only confront women's body abjection through performance art, but also are artists that Marni Kotak takes inspiration from. The performances by the four artists aim at contextualizing the topic for it to be well understood and analyzed from a feminist approach. By looking at and analyzing the women artists and their performances, the thesis aims to provide an in depth look at the issues concerning the objectification of women's bodies in art as well as to stress out the importance that performance art holds when confronting such issues. Nevertheless, the four artists, through their performances, prove that the narrative of the public spaces can be possibly changed as well as show how women regain their authority through their performances and become the subject rather than the object. Firstly, Yoko Ono and her performance *Cut Piece*, 1964 (fig. 5) will be introduced and analyzed while specifically focusing on the feminist discourse angle of the performance as well as the importance of Yoko Ono's background. Nevertheless, as it will be show, Ono contributes to the feminist discourse of women in performance art as she represents the "otherness", which also relates to the main case study, as Kotak represents the often invisible and hidden maternal bodies. Secondly, Marina Abramović and her performance *Rhyme 0*, 1974 (fig. 6) will be introduced as well as analyzed from the feminist angle as her performance provides interesting ways to look at the feminist discourse. Nevertheless, Schneemann and her *Interior Scroll*, 1975 (fig. 9) becomes a crucial follow up as her performance rendered the narrative of the museum space as well as dealt with the women's sexuality, which is still seen as a taboo in a male-dominant society. Schneemann was able to portray an abject body on stage, where traditionally other artworks are expected to be seen. Both Abramović and Schneemann inspired Kotak greatly, as they both are iconic women figures in performance art. Lastly, Hannah Wilke will be introduced together with her performance *S.O.S.*, 1975 (fig. 12). The performance highly criticized the gender bias as well as a traditional image of a woman. With her performance, Wilke confronts the audience with a feeling of "disgust" as well as with a body, and in particular body parts, that should not be "visible" in society. Wilke acts as another important figure when concerning Kotak's works as Wilke represents the "flaunted" women's bodies in a public space, that way confronting abjection, by exposing it publicly, which relates to the Kotak's representation of the ultimate abject body – a maternal one that is experiencing labor.

The four artists hence provide a good overview of women artists in performance art as well as prove that women have been aiming at (re)gaining their authority throughout various times. However, the four examples solely focus on the confrontation of abjection of a woman's body in general and none of them address the issue of specifically a maternal body abjection. Consequently, the thesis will aim at building up towards the main case study of Marni Kotak and how she contributes to the discourse of woman's body abjection, by taking it a step further and addressing the issues of the "highest level of abjection" - as discussed in the previous section - a maternal/pregnant body.

### 2.1. *Yoko Ono's Cut Piece*

Yoko Ono was born in Japan and brought her performance work into contact with international art world in 1960's after she and her family moved to New York.<sup>77</sup> Although in the West, she is mostly known for breaking up The Beatles, Ono has a significant place in the performance art: Ono represents a Japanese woman, who in the West is seen as the "Other".<sup>78</sup> Continuing her career Ono had the opportunity to meet and befriend another major figure of her career-George Maciunas (1931 – 1978), the founder of *Fluxus*.<sup>79</sup> With that, she also became one of the founding members of *Fluxus*.<sup>80</sup> However, the reviews she received after her shows and performances were negative and it was clear that as an artist, Yoko Ono was not taken seriously.<sup>81</sup> This might be due to the fact that the Western perception of the Japanese women were often related to passiveness and quietness and if acted differently from the expectations, the women were seen as disgraceful.<sup>82</sup> After going back to Japan in order to explore the possibilities of her art where she wouldn't be seen as the "other", Ono was not received the way she hoped she would: The people criticized her lack of originality as well as her "westernization."<sup>83</sup> Even though Ono was criticized both in New-York and Japan, she was still able, through performance art, to confront the male-dominant art world.<sup>84</sup> Besides, through her various performances, including *Cut Piece*, 1964 (fig. 5), Ono disrupts the stereotypical ways

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<sup>77</sup> Francesca Wilmott, "Yoko Ono," The Museum of Modern Art, 2016, <https://www.moma.org/artists/4410>

<sup>78</sup> Foster, "Self-Stylization and Performativity in the Work of Yoko Ono, Yayoi Kusama and Mariko Mori," 267.

<sup>79</sup> Rhee, "Performing the Other," 98.

<sup>80</sup> Foster, "Self-Stylization and Performativity," 267.

<sup>81</sup> Rhee, "Performing the Other," 98.

<sup>82</sup> Yoshimoto, "Beyond 'Japanese/Women Artists'," 76.

<sup>83</sup> Rhee, "Performing the Other," 102.

<sup>84</sup> Yoshimoto, "Beyond 'Japanese/Women Artists'," 78.

of thinking of certain identities, which in her case is a Japanese woman: People in the West often view Japanese woman as exotic, small and sexually available.<sup>85</sup>

In 1964 in Kyoto, Yoko Ono performed, what now is one of the most talked about performances in the contemporary art world – *Cut Piece*, 1964 (fig. 5). The idea of the performance is to invite the audience to take a stance as active participants and cut a piece of her clothing with some scissors.<sup>86</sup> The artist herself, remains passive throughout the performance and tries to achieve the ultimate vulnerability by maintaining complete neutrality and sitting in a traditional Japanese position- *seiza*.<sup>87</sup> The original idea behind Yoko Ono's performance was rendered as there were some people in the audience that dared to threaten the artist by showing physical superiority. According to Yoko Ono "a man took the pair of scissors and made a motion to stab me."<sup>88</sup> The original idea that Yoko Ono had, concerning this performance, was the idea of the power of giving, "an allegory of Buddhas offering".<sup>89</sup> Thus, Ono, by allowing the audience to cut a piece of her clothing, which could be interpreted as a piece of her body, an extension and, according to Jieun Rhee, in a way enacts the Buddha's giving.<sup>90</sup>

However, the performance took over and maintained a different meaning than the artist has anticipated. The piece became an important work within the feminist art world as it portrayed how aggression is prompted whenever a woman's body is positioned in a passive and vulnerable state. The vulnerability here comes from the act of the dress cutting – taking away pieces of an outfit expose the naked and vulnerable woman's body.<sup>91</sup> Furthermore, her performance critiques the objectification and victimization of the "other": Ono does not only criticize the idea that a Japanese woman are seen as the exotic other and can be treated differently, but also criticizes the idea that a woman that is exposed to vulnerability is also exposed to violence.<sup>92</sup>

The intentions of the performance art were different than the way the audience has interpreted it. Western audience mainly focuses on the body as an object, without seeking further understandings as well as sees a woman's body that is non-Western as the "other" and thus creates various expectations of how it should perform. This could be explained by

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<sup>85</sup> Foster, "Self-Stylization and Performativity," 267.

<sup>86</sup> Gallagher, "Passive Objectification," 11.

<sup>87</sup> Ibid.

<sup>88</sup> Bryan-Wilson, "Remembering Yoko Ono's 'Cut Piece'," 106.

<sup>89</sup> Rhee, "Performing the Other," 106.

<sup>90</sup> Ibid.

<sup>91</sup> Yoshimoto, "Beyond 'Japanese/Women Artists'," 76.

<sup>92</sup> Foster, "Self-Stylization and Performativity," 268-269.

understanding that the Western audience is not familiar with the stories of Buddha. Contrastively, according to Liza Dalby, in Japanese culture, “the clothing and the wearer merge.”<sup>93</sup> Thus, Ono’s initial idea behind her performance has value within the Japanese culture and thus possibly resulted in the differences of the performance reception between Japanese and American audiences.

All in all, Ono’s performance represented the passivity of a Japanese woman that is expected to be seen from the Western perspective as well as from the male-dominant art world perspective.<sup>94</sup> The aspect of victimization becomes a crucial aspect in her performance art, and in women’s performance art in general, as it is an issue that has been prominent in society even nowadays. Performance art allows to expose such issues to the audience and allows to understand that women have been victimized in society throughout times, which positions them in a vulnerable position and thus, creates a stereotypical thought of women’s body as a domestic body. However, as Yoko Ono brings a vulnerable and thus an abject body into a public space on stage, she confronts the vulnerability by putting it as the center of attention. Thus, Yoko Ono made a significant stance by confronting an abject vulnerable body in a public space without even having the intentions to do so – the audience’s participation revealed issues in the society.

## 2.2. Marina Abramović’s *Rhyme 0*

Marina Abramović is an important figure in the contemporary art world and especially important in the performance art world as she brought about many changes and inspirations for the future performance artists. She describes herself as the grandmother of performance art as she could be seen as one of the pioneering artists that took performance art on a whole new level.<sup>95</sup> Abramović was born in former Yugoslavia and later moved to The Netherlands to explore and grow as a performance artist as she states that her performances throughout the time act as a mirror of the growth and her personal development.<sup>96</sup> Abramović mainly focused on performance that experiments with pain, endurance and revolting experiences that cause a physical unease on the body as well as an unease on the viewer.<sup>97</sup> Several of her performances such as the *Rhyme 0*, 1974 (fig. 6), *The Artist is Present*, 2010 (fig. 7) and more, had explored the concepts of endurance, pain, starvation, patience, vulnerability, and emotionality. After

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<sup>93</sup> Rhee, “Yoko Ono’s *Cut Piece*,” 109.

<sup>94</sup> Foster, “Self-Stylization and Performativity,” 270.

<sup>95</sup> Richards, *Marina Abramovic*, 1.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>97</sup> Demaria, “The Performative Body of Marina Abramovic,” 296.

moving to The Netherlands and meeting Ulay – an artist and a life partner that had changed her style of working, her art became more constructive.<sup>98</sup> Additionally, by collaborating and continuing to work with a male artist, Abramović connected her female energy together with male energy, which was an important aspect, as Abramović tended not to concentrate on gender specific performances, but rather focused on the energy that the different genders have.<sup>99</sup> Similar way of thinking could be linked to Judith Butlers arguments that gender is a socially constructed concept: One enacts a gender through a series of stylized and repeated acts that are bound upon us from society.<sup>100</sup>

It is crucial to mention that Marina Abramović has created several performances that touch upon various issues concerning human bodies, however, *Rhyme 0*, 1974 (fig. 6) results in a shocking and revealing reaction from the audience, which raises concerns for women's bodies being passive and neutral in a public sphere. *Rhyme 0*, 1974 (fig. 6) is known as one of the most important works by the artist and the last performance in her *Rhyme* series.<sup>101</sup> The performance consisted of 72 various objects, including a loaded gun, which were accessible and encouraged for the audience to use against the artist.<sup>102</sup>

Throughout the performance, Abramović remained neutral and passive to the actions that were being done to her body.<sup>103</sup> The outcome of the performance turned out to be shocking and eye-opening. The audience went as far as cutting Abramović's clothes and throat, piercing several body parts using a rose and its thorns, licking the blood from the wounds, and even the pointing a gun to her head.<sup>104</sup> Abramović positioned her body in a very vulnerable position, which resulted in exposure to violence coming from the audience. Additionally, it is intriguing to see that the choice of the environment for the performance *Rhyme 0*, 1974 (fig. 6) is a museum space. As mentioned by Butler, as women are expected to be the weaker and more vulnerable sex, they tend to be related to the domestic and private environment, whereas men, as the "stronger" sex can feel safe and are mostly related to the public environment.<sup>105</sup> Such argument could also be connected to the violence the women sometimes face whenever one is in a public space. Thus, Abramović, in a way proves that whenever a woman's body is

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<sup>98</sup> Catherine Wood, "Rhyme 0", *Tate*, March 2010, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/abramovic-rhythm-0-t14875>

<sup>99</sup> Demaria, "The Performative Body of Marina Abramovic," 299.

<sup>100</sup> Lader, "The Artist is Present and the Emotions are Real," 30.

<sup>101</sup> Catherine Wood, "Rhyme 0", *Tate*, March 2010, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/abramovic-rhythm-0-t14875>

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>103</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>104</sup> Demaria, "The Performative Body of Marina Abramović," 297.

<sup>105</sup> Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly*, 75.



exposed as a vulnerable one in a public space, it becomes a target for violence. The violence could be interpreted as a result to a threat of the unknown as the body of Abramović is unexpectedly neutral and passive. Such passivity might be seen as a threat for many and as a result, the audience becomes defensive by choosing violence. Another curious detail concerning the *Rhyme 0*, 1974 (fig. 6) performance is that most of the participants were men. Women avoided to participate and instead would encourage and tell the men how to act towards Abramović's body.<sup>106</sup> The performance quickly became associated to feminist theories as it portrays an "experience of being a female subject" and it gave space for questions concerning the outcomes of the performance: Would the performance have taken on a different meaning and reactions if the massive and vulnerable body would have been a man's body?<sup>107</sup>

Such question is also relevant in the *Artist is Present*, 2010 (fig. 7) – a performance at the MoMA (Museum of Modern Art) in New York by Abramović.<sup>108</sup> During the performance, Abramović sat in the MoMA for three months, seven hours each day, inviting the viewers to sit in front of her and look her straight in the eyes for as long as the viewer wishes.<sup>109</sup> The performance evoked many emotions from the participants, as well as positioned them in a vulnerable position, which raised a question, if those emotions are evoked due to the fact that one is sitting in front a woman – a maternal figure?<sup>110</sup> As noted above, the maternal body is seen as an abject, however, a maternal figure could be interpreted differently. As women are traditionally seen more softer, and caring personalities, a maternal figure thus could be seen as a symbol of comfort and compassion. However, Abramović, similarly to Butler's arguments, does not perform as a woman, but rather as merely an artist, who with the power of eye contact, time and space allows the audience to feel vulnerable.<sup>111</sup>

All in all, Abramović's performances allowed her to explore a vulnerable and abject woman's body through performance art and encounter shocking results from the audience. By positioning her body in a vulnerable and submissive position as in the case of *Rhyme 0*, 1974 (fig. 6) Abramović confronted the societies actions regarding a vulnerable woman's body in a public space. Although her intentions were not to focus on the representation of womanhood in her performances, the audience reactions and interpretations of the performances were different. The fact that it was a woman's body positioned in a vulnerable and passive position,

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<sup>106</sup> Demaria, "The Performative Body of Marina Abramović," 297.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid, 298-301.

<sup>108</sup> Lader, "The Artist is Present and the Emotions are Real," 26.

<sup>109</sup> Ibid.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid, 31.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.

allowed the audience to act violently upon it as a result of a threat that such bodies carry. The abject here becomes the vulnerable – a body that is not predictable and poses a threat with its passiveness. The two discussed performances, prove, how performance art allows the artist to test the audience, and how the outcomes and interpretations, similarly to Yoko Ono’s performance, become different than the artist intended and, in a way, allows us to understand the society.

### 2.3. Carolee Schneemann’s *Interior Scroll*

Carolee Schneemann is another great example of a women performance artist, who’s focus was on the disruption of a traditional body image and change the negative connotation of abjection by confronting the audience of the realistic ways women’s bodies look and perform. Originally trained as a painter, Schneemann brought about many pioneering works into the performance and film world: One of the pioneering performances could be seen *Interior Scroll*, 1975 (fig. 9) as well as other performances like *Meat Joy*, 1964 (fig. 10) and *Eye Body*, 1963 (fig. 11).<sup>112</sup> The artist’s work was highly associated with the well-known art movement of the 1960’s – Fluxus.<sup>113</sup> Schneemann’s performances often consisted of the depiction of a naked women’s body. She aimed at celebrating the naked body rather than stigmatizing it, which resulted in the disruption of binary gender ways of thinking and visual aesthetics.<sup>114</sup> The artist, similarly to Abramović and to majority of the women performance artists, places a great focus on the women’s body, when it concerns her performances. Schneemann argues that the body is “explicitly sexual.”<sup>115</sup> Thus, she often refused to “divorce sexual experience from art making.”<sup>116</sup> Schneemann, through her performances aims at regaining the authority of women’s eroticism. One of the performances that marked a milestone in performance art is *Interior Scroll*, 1975 (fig. 9).

*Interior Scroll*, 1975 (fig. 9) was first performed in 1975 at a festival in Long Island.<sup>117</sup> Since then, it has been a fundamental work in the feminist art of 1970’s as it tackled various issues such as politics, eroticism, and the realities of a naked body.<sup>118</sup> The performance starts

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<sup>112</sup> Elizabeth Manchester, “Carolee Schneeman. Interior Scroll,” *Tate*, November, 2003, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/schneemann-interior-scroll-p13282>

<sup>113</sup> Morgan, “Carolee Schneemann,” 97.

<sup>114</sup> Horne, “‘the personal clutter... the painterly mess...’,” 1000.

<sup>115</sup> Elizabeth Manchester, “Carolee Schneeman. Interior Scroll,” *Tate*, November, 2003, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/schneemann-interior-scroll-p13282>

<sup>116</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>117</sup> Morgan, “Carolee Schneemann,” 98.

<sup>118</sup> *Ibid.*, 100.

with Schneemann wearing a sheet around her body and reading an extract of a book.<sup>119</sup> Eventually, Schneemann starts to take off the sheet while painting her body contours with mud and the climax of the performance becomes her naked bodies stance on the table whilst extracting a paper scroll from her vagina and continuing to read from it.<sup>120</sup> Such exposure of the completely naked and vulnerable women's body in a public space threatened the patriarchal society as women's bodies were traditionally seen as a domestic body. Additionally, the exposure of the women's eroticism was unusual as erotic women were often related to pornography, but not to art.<sup>121</sup> To Schneemann, the woman's sexual organs do not merely act as a physical source of procreation, but rather as a source of creativity.<sup>122</sup> Additionally, Schneemann establishes power and intellect concerning the woman's reproductive organs.<sup>123</sup> This could also be interpreted as birth representation as she explores the birth giving experience. These connections could be seen in relation to abjection as well as with the maternal body, as Schneemann, contests the patriarchy by giving a new meaning to the usually seen as a taboo woman's sexual organs and their functions. Schneemann's view on the women's reproductive organs disrupts the way the women's reproductive organs are usually connotated with (highest form of abjection or highly erotic within the context of porn), and instead positions the abject naked women's body as a source of creativity and power. Besides, the performance allows to view birth giving, which is the act that is the highest form of abjection, in a completely different way. If the reproductive organs of a woman are seen as a source of creativity and power, then birth giving could be interpreted as the ultimate piece of art, rather than merely connotated as an abject.

*Interior Scroll*, 1975 (fig. 9) as well as the majority of other Schneemann performances were often received critically. Her works were often refused to be shown in museums as they do not follow a certain aesthetic of the sexual expression and the naked body.<sup>124</sup> The lack of aesthetics of women's sexuality in Schneemann's work could thus be argued as having too big of an exposure to the abject body. Her performance confronts the reality of a woman's body that is often not as aesthetic as seen in museums. Further, the society, especially the masculine part of it, see's such an uncontrollable and free body as a threat.<sup>125</sup> This idea of a threat can

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<sup>119</sup> Johnson, "Maternal desire, loss, and control in Carolee Schneemann's *Interior Scroll* and Tracey Emin's *I've Got It All*," 277.

<sup>120</sup> Ibid.

<sup>121</sup> Fineartmultiple, "Masterpieces #15, Carolee Schneemann, *Interior Scroll*, 1975," *fineartmultiple*, <https://fineartmultiple.com/blog/carolee-schneemann-interior-scroll-masterpiece/>

<sup>122</sup> Horne, "'the personal clutter... the painterly mess...'," 994.

<sup>123</sup> Morgan, "Carolee Schneemann," 100.

<sup>124</sup> Ibid, 98.

<sup>125</sup> Horne, "'the personal clutter... the painterly mess...'," 1001.

also be linked to the idea of abjection as women's bodies are often seen as lacking control (menstruations, mood swings, leaky fluids while giving birth and etc.). According to Kristeva that is the reasons why women's bodies are seen as an abject, however, when Schneemann positions it all in a museum space, she disrupts such idea and responds by using "control, discipline and cultural competence."<sup>126</sup>

Hence, the performance of Schneemann becomes relevant when discussing topics about women's body's exposure to the public sphere as she disrupts the museums narrative of an aesthetic sexuality by portraying reality through the potentials of performance art. Moreover, Schneemann's idea that the reproductive organs of a woman should be seen as a source of power and creativity become relevant in the discussion concerning women's body abjection. Such argument allows to understand that the woman's body could be seen as the opposite of an abject, and rather something, that through birth giving, creates the utmost piece of art. Thus, labour gains a new narrative – it becomes less associable with negative connotations of abjection.

#### 2.4. Hannah Wilke's *S.O.S*

Hannah Wilke is a New York based artist who focuses on visual and performance art.<sup>127</sup> Although she is best known for being an artist, she has spent a good amount of her life being an art teacher.<sup>128</sup> Her most well-known artworks include *S.O.S.* 1975 (fig. 12), *Intra-Venus*, 1994 (fig. 13) and many more. Wilke's work mainly focuses on the body, especially within the context of a patriarchal society.<sup>129</sup> Her focus on the body allowed her to explore various angles of the representation of women's body, mainly focusing on the social and erotic sides.<sup>130</sup> The focus on the erotic side of the women's body in Wilke's works could be seen as the most important aspect. By exposing her erotic side and reclaiming feminine erotic authority through performance art, the artist threatened the patriarchal society.<sup>131</sup> As it is similarly mentioned in the section concerning the performances of Schneemann, the threat of a women's erotic body representation comes from fear of the control over their own bodies. Once a woman regains her bodies authority and exposes eroticism, that is most often only expected to be seen in porn, she regains the power to represent that body which causes fear in the male-dominant society,

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<sup>126</sup> Johnson, "Maternal desire, loss, and control," 277.

<sup>127</sup> Tembeck, "Exposed Wounds: The Photographic Autopathographies of Hannah Wilke and Jo Spence," 88.

<sup>128</sup> Guggenheim, "Hannah Wilke," *Collection Online*, <https://www.guggenheim.org/artwork/artist/hannah-wilke>

<sup>129</sup> Tembeck, "Exposed Wounds," 88-89.

<sup>130</sup> Wacks, "Naked Truths: Hannah Wilke in Copenhagen," 104.

<sup>131</sup> Frueh, "The Erotic as Social Security," 66.

where women and their bodies were mostly dependent on the male. Coming back to Wilke specifically, this exact exposure of the control over eroticism, has resulted in her work not being able to fit within “a particular ideology of artistic side” which can also be compared to how Schneemann’s performances have been received.<sup>132</sup> Thus, it is fair to say, that the representation of a woman’s sexuality through performance art has contributed greatly to the way a woman’s body has traditionally been viewed in society. Performance art, even if the reception of it is negative, still allows space for debates that otherwise would not have taken place in society at all, especially concerning feminism and women’s body representation stigmas.

Coming back to Hannah Wilke and how she approaches the above-mentioned topics, one of the performance’s becomes relevant – Her performance *S.O.S.*, 1975 (fig. 12) (standing for Starification Object Series). *S.O.S.*, 1975 (fig. 12) was first performed in 1975 and was mainly known for confronting the stigma surrounding the women’s body.<sup>133</sup> Throughout the performance, Wilke provided the audience with gum which they were told to chew on, and when given back to Wilke she made them into the shape of a vagina and stuck them all over her nude body.<sup>134</sup> Wilke continued her performance by posing and reenacting stereotypical and cliché women poses.<sup>135</sup> Stereotypical poses that Wilke was reenacting in her performance could be related to the images of the pin-up girls as they share similar types of posing – seductive facial expressions, nude or semi-nude body, sexy characteristics – all which was highly directed to the male audience and the things they want to see. By doing so, Wilke ironically criticizes the male-gaze as she “flaunts” her body with the vaginal sculptures and disrupts the male expectations concerning erotic art.<sup>136</sup>

Later on, not only did her performance gain recognition, but also the documentation of the performance. The black and white photographs of the performance clearly portray the message to the viewer as the photographs depict highly stereotypical images of how a woman’s body should look in order to pleasure the scopophilic gaze, while at the same time carry a lot of irony as the tiny vaginal sculptures disrupt the whole pin-up girl portraiture.<sup>137</sup> Additionally, the gum on Wilke’s body was also aimed at connotating scars.<sup>138</sup> According to Wilke, the word *Starification* could also be read as *Scarification* which then relates to the gum on her body and

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<sup>132</sup> Wacks, “Naked Truths,” 104.

<sup>133</sup> Emily Liebert, “Carolee Schneemann,” *MoMA*, <https://www.moma.org/artists/7712#works>.

<sup>134</sup> Wacks, “Naked Truths,” 105.

<sup>135</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>136</sup> Cheng, “Les Demoiselles,” 77.

<sup>137</sup> Wacks, “Naked Truths,” 105.

<sup>138</sup> Frueh, “The Erotic as Social Security,” 67.

connotes the position of a woman's body in society that result in wounds as women in the patriarchal society are often seen as the "other".<sup>139</sup> The concept of "other" and its relation to women could be seen due to the position women have in society: for the longest time, and even nowadays, women are treated differently/lesser than men. Until this day, women are still bound upon the traditional expectations and are often seen as inferior to men.

The topic surrounding scars and depiction of a "flaunted" women relates to another performance art, transferred into photographs, by Wilke – *Intra-Venus*, 1994 (fig. 13). In this art work, Wilke depicts herself in the reality of her illness: She was diagnosed with Lymphoma in 1987.<sup>140</sup> In her photographs, she is referring herself to Botticelli's *Birth of Venus*, 1485, (fig. 1) however, Wilke's version of Venus does not have flowy hair and a perfect body.<sup>141</sup> Instead, Wilke is portraying herself in a very vulnerable state: The naked women's body no longer looks ideal and does not meet expectations, especially concerning the male-gaze.

It is clear that Wilke plays with the traditional images while at the same time confronts the viewer and its expectations concerning a nude women's body. This comes back to the relation between a vulnerable body and abjection, as whenever a body shows flaws, it becomes an abject. Similarly to the works of the previously discussed women artists, Wilke highly confronts the audience and reclaims the woman's eroticism from traditional images and porn into realistic depictions of a woman's body. However, the performances of Wilke were often misinterpreted as the audience solely focused on the beauty of the body (in the case of *S.O.S.*) that way misinterpreting the performance rather than recognizing the significant message that was trying to be conveyed using the vaginal sculptures.<sup>142</sup> Similarly to Yoko Ono and her *Cut Piece*, 1964 (fig. 5) it is telling about the society we live in, where the importance of the beauty of women's body's overshadow the majority of the issues that have been raised throughout the years and even nowadays.

The chapter has provided an overview of the way women artists have been confronting the negative connotations of their abject body through performance art. Additionally, the four artists prove to have brought about significant changes and inputs for the feminist theories and performance art world as they challenged the societies idea of how a woman's body should look like and perform. The upcoming chapter will analyze the performance by Marni Kotak. The contextualization of the topic with the use of the four artists analyzed above provided with

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<sup>139</sup> Tembeck, "Exposed Wounds," 89.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.

<sup>141</sup> Ibid, 92.

<sup>142</sup> Cheng, "Les Demoiselles," 77.

a good foundation to understand how Marni fits within the world of women performance artists and the impact and input she made or will make to it. Additionally, Kotak goes one step further in confronting abjection by performing a live birth performance for the audience which results in not only confronting the women's body abjection but also confronting abjection in its highest form – the maternal body abjection.

## Chapter 3: Marni Kotak's *Birth of Baby X*: Maternal Body Abjection

### 3.1. *Introducing Marni Kotak*

The main case study of this thesis, and an example of a total maternal body abjection confrontation through performance art becomes a New York, Brooklyn based artists – Marni Kotak.<sup>143</sup> The artist focuses mostly on multimedia and performance art and majority of her works are exhibited and represented at the Microscope Gallery in New York.<sup>144</sup> Kotak mentions that her performance art and other artworks in general are inspired by some of the most notorious and influential performance artists such as Schneemann and Abramović, both that are mentioned in the previous chapter of the thesis.<sup>145</sup> Additionally, Marni considers herself to be a feminist artist, especially when it concerns representing motherhood and maternal bodies as she claims that throughout history being represented, or simply being a maternal figure, was not always considered to be related to the feminist movement.<sup>146</sup> What is crucial to mention about Kotak, is that she see's performance art and real life as something that is connected and cannot be separated from one another.<sup>147</sup> According to Kotak, any action that is being done in the public space is a performance.<sup>148</sup> Although Kotak at first started her performances with the reenactments of her own personal life experiences, in 2005 she realized that the best way to authentically represent your life through performance art is to represent what is going on with your life at the very moment.<sup>149</sup> Kotak at first started experimenting with installations, but later they turned to performance art. Throughout the time period of 2005 until 2019, Kotak has produced various solo exhibitions as well as group exhibitions. Some of her most known solo exhibitions include *Birth of Baby X*, 2011 (fig. 15), and *Mad Meds*, 2014 (fig. 14) – both relate to maternal body and motherhood experiences.<sup>150</sup> She has won a total of four awards including one for the woman artist that shook up the world.<sup>151</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Microscope Gallery, "Marni Kotak," *Microscope Gallery*, <https://microscopegallery.com/marni-kotak-cv/>.

<sup>144</sup> "Artist Biography," *Marni Kotak*, <http://www.marnikotak.com/bio>.

<sup>145</sup> Natasha Kurchanova, "Marni Kotak interview: 'I wanted to have my son's birth as a performance'," in *Studio International*, 18 November, 2014, <https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/marni-kotak-interview-performance-coolcarcut-birth-baby-x-microscope-gallery>

<sup>146</sup> Ibid.

<sup>147</sup> Katarina Hybenova, "How Baby X Was Born," *Hyperallergic*, 14 November, 2011, <https://hyperallergic.com/40295/how-baby-x-was-born/>.

<sup>148</sup> Natasha Kurchanova, "Marni Kotak interview: 'I wanted to have my son's birth as a performance'," in *Studio International*, 18 November, 2014, <https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/marni-kotak-interview-performance-coolcarcut-birth-baby-x-microscope-gallery>

<sup>149</sup> Ibid.

<sup>150</sup> Microscope Gallery, "Marni Kotak," *Microscope Gallery*, <https://microscopegallery.com/marni-kotak-cv/>.

<sup>151</sup> Ibid.



Although one of her most notorious and controversial performances is *Birth of Baby X*, 2011 (fig. 15), *Mad Meds*, 2014 (fig. 14) deserves some recognition as well as it explores topics of mental illness after birth, that are often still hidden and seen as a taboo in society. A common thread in Kotak's performances is that she exposes things that are often experiences privately to the public realm that way disrupting the understanding of what is private and what is public.<sup>152</sup> In her performance *Mad Meds*, 2014 (fig. 14), Marni transforms the gallery space into a safe and an inviting space that somewhat represents the hospital room, and invites the audience to chat with her and engage in her everyday activities while she is going off of her postpartum depression medication – an illness she was diagnosed with, as well as many women are, after giving birth to her first child (Baby X).<sup>153</sup> The idea of positioning herself within a space that technically should represent a hospital room, but changing it to a space that is much more inviting and in a way looks and feels completely opposite of a hospital room, is also commonly seen throughout her performance. Throughout this performance, Kotak aimed at confronting the ways the society deals with discourses surrounding mental illness in America, and especially, postpartum depression that is often left in the shadows of such debate.<sup>154</sup>

Kotak's performances are often being criticized for being rather shocking and confrontational as well as ones, that put the audience in an uncomfortable position. As already mentioned before, at the beginning of her performance career Kotak often reenacted her life events from the past. One of her performances, *Doll House* (2005), included a reenactment of a rape scene, while Kotak and her friend are playing with dolls, however, there is no accessible documentation of such performance.<sup>155</sup> Nevertheless, Kotak has also reenacted her various other personal life events, for example, her virginity loss and the funeral of her grandfather.<sup>156</sup> As already mentioned, her performances have received many criticisms claiming that the intentions of the performances are often narcissistic, however, as Kotak mentions, if she wanted to perform out of narcissistic reasons there are various other ways to do so.<sup>157</sup> Besides, Kotak throughout her performances focuses on the exposure of the vulnerable body (life birth, loss of

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<sup>152</sup> Emily Hall, "Marni Kotak," *Art Forum*, <https://www.artforum.com/print/reviews/201409/marni-kotak-48771>.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid.

<sup>154</sup> Ibid.

<sup>155</sup> Natasha Kurchanova, "Marni Kotak interview: 'I wanted to have my son's birth as a performance'," in *Studio International*, 18 November, 2014, <https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/marni-kotak-interview-performance-coolcarcut-birth-baby-x-microscope-gallery>

<sup>156</sup> ABC News, "N.Y. Woman 'Performs' Live Birth for Gallery Patrons," *ABC News*, 4 November, 2011, <https://abcnews.go.com/blogs/lifestyle/2011/11/n-y-woman-performs-live-birth-for-gallery-patrons/>.

<sup>157</sup> Natasha Kurchanova, "Marni Kotak interview: 'I wanted to have my son's birth as a performance'," in *Studio International*, 18 November, 2014, <https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/marni-kotak-interview-performance-coolcarcut-birth-baby-x-microscope-gallery>

virginity, rape, body dealing with mental illness), that way aiming at confronting the various stigmas relating to women in society as well as women's bodies.

All in all, it is clear that Marni Kotak intertwines reality with her performance art and views her life and all the events that follow as performance art. Additionally Kotak becomes an interesting case study when analyzing the confrontation of maternal body abjection as she positions an intimate period of her life – pregnancy – to be explored and experienced together with the public in a gallery space. Consequently, she exposes the body in the most vulnerable states throughout her various performances and thus confronts various issues that are hidden away in society. Not to mention that she is one of the few women artists that deal with the maternal body in their performances. Lastly, the pioneering women artists in performance art such as Wilke, Schneemann, and Abramović, all that have been dealing with issues such as abjection, sexuality and vulnerability, are highly visible in the inspirations of Kotak's performances and thus make her an important artist in continuation of the legacy and one that challenges her body in order to regain authority, a characteristic, that is often seen in women performance art.<sup>158</sup>

### 3.2. *Giving Birth in a Gallery. The Labor Performance Birth of Baby X*

As already mentioned in the previous section, one of the most important performances in Kotak's career is *The Birth of Baby X*, 2011 (fig. 15) performed on October 25<sup>th</sup>, 2011.<sup>159</sup> It is significant as it renders the distinction between a pregnant/maternal body and creativity.<sup>160</sup> The performance is a part of a month-long series of installations and acts as a culmination to the series: Kotak gives birth to her first child in the Microscope gallery in front of a live audience.<sup>161</sup> Marni Kotak, in a written interview, revealed that she has been developing a practice of performing events from her life, that she focuses most intensely at the moment and turns them into performance art.<sup>162</sup> Kotak mentions: "As I see my life as the highest form of art, it was only natural to me that I would give birth and raise my child, ultimately the creation of life, as performance art."<sup>163</sup> The gallery space, similarly to her performance *Mad Meds*, 2014 (fig. 14) was turned into a comfortable, inviting and a safe space for the arrival of the baby. It

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<sup>158</sup> ABC News, "N.Y. Woman 'Performs' Live Birth for Gallery Patrons," *ABC News*, 4 November, 2011, <https://abcnews.go.com/blogs/lifestyle/2011/11/n-y-woman-performs-live-birth-for-gallery-patrons/>.

<sup>159</sup> Ibid.

<sup>160</sup> Fisher and Dolezal, *New feminist perspectives on embodiment*, 204.

<sup>161</sup> Natasha Kurchanova, "Marni Kotak interview: 'I wanted to have my son's birth as a performance'," in *Studio International*, 18 November, 2014, <https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/marni-kotak-interview-performance-coolcarcut-birth-baby-x-microscope-gallery>

<sup>162</sup> Marni Kotak, interview by author via email, April 15, 2022.

<sup>163</sup> Ibid.

had an inflatable birthing pool, a rocking chair that belonged to Kotak's mother and was used to rock Kotak when she was little, Kotak's grandmother's bed, a shower stall with curtains, an altar for Baby X's ultrasounds, a kitchenette as well as a video projector, sound piece and a wallpaper with the depiction of Marconi Beach, as it is of great importance for Kotak and her husband.<sup>164</sup>

As the gallery was not far from Kotak's home, not making to it in time when the labor starts was not an issue. The audience that attended the performance when the labor started was quite small and all have been informed beforehand about how the performance will go.<sup>165</sup> Kotak mentions that the reaction of the audience towards the performance was extremely positive as it was an idyllic situation for Kotak and the small amount of audience to share a momentous experience together.<sup>166</sup> The baby was born healthy and in a natural way and eventually was named Ajax, as the parents wanted to symbolically keep the letter X in the name.<sup>167</sup>

Despite the positive reactions of the participants, there were many who criticized the performance for being too narcissistic, for child exploitation and even for being pornographic.<sup>168</sup> However, as a counter argument to the critiques, Kotak argues that the performance is not just a solo performance but rather a collaboration project together with her son Ajax.<sup>169</sup> The proof for that is a follow up performance of Kotak – *Raising Baby X*, 2011-present (fig. 16). Throughout the series she started using a small camera that was following baby Ajax from his point of view in various life events, such as, his birthday.<sup>170</sup> Thus, she continues to raise her son as a part of the performance art series.

Marni Kotak becomes a significant case study as she is the first woman artists who went as far as to give live birth in a gallery, a public space, as well as to give birth in front of a live audience. Additionally, Kotak, with the performance of *Birth of Baby X*, 2011 (fig. 15) touched upon a topic that is still stigmatized in the male-dominant society. Maternity and pregnancy are still being feared and often treated mostly as a medical condition, rather than a natural and

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<sup>164</sup> Marni Kotak, interview by author via email, April 15, 2022.

<sup>165</sup> Natasha Kurchanova, "Marni Kotak interview: 'I wanted to have my son's birth as a performance'," in *Studio International*, 18 November, 2014, <https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/marni-kotak-interview-performance-coolcarcut-birth-baby-x-microscope-gallery>

<sup>166</sup> Marni Kotak, interview by author via email, April 15, 2022.

<sup>167</sup> Katarina Hybenova, "How Baby X Was Born," *Hyperallergic*, 14 November, 2011, <https://hyperallergic.com/40295/how-baby-x-was-born/>.

<sup>168</sup> Natasha Kurchanova, "Marni Kotak interview: 'I wanted to have my son's birth as a performance'," in *Studio International*, 18 November, 2014, <https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/marni-kotak-interview-performance-coolcarcut-birth-baby-x-microscope-gallery>

<sup>169</sup> Robinson, Buszek and Wiley (eds.). "Maternal Mattering," 478.

<sup>170</sup> *Ibid*, 479.

beautiful part of life.<sup>171</sup> However with the possibilities that performance art enables Kotak explored, and allowed the audience to explore, a woman's body that is exposed to ultimate abjection (labor is exposed to all sorts of bodily fluids, all that are related to Kristeva's abjection), but portrayed it as art rather than a mere abject woman's body that only has negative connotations and unpleasant feelings related to it. Moreover, Kotak stresses out that motherhood should be embraced and seen as beautiful rather than an abject as it is a process that women have been going through throughout all times.<sup>172</sup> As it has already been mentioned in the previous section, Kotak has been highly inspired by several major women figures in the performance art world such as Schneemann, Abramović and Wilke. Thus, it is clear that Kotak continues the legacy of women in performance art, who contest the limitations of their human bodies through art, which in Kotak's case is the birth giving and stepping into motherhood.<sup>173</sup>

### 3.3. *Confrontation of the Maternal in Contemporary Performance Art*

As the performance of *Birth of Baby X*, 2011 (fig. 15) has explored various issues concerning motherhood and the maternal body representation, it is important to look at the visuals and how various signs in the performance have contributed to that. As already mentioned before, the performance included various objects that would make Kotak's labor more comfortable and would welcome the baby in a safe and positive environment, however, some aspects of the performance played a symbolic and confrontational role. In the following section, a visual analysis will be done on Kotak's performance, with the help of a conducted interview and various other sources, such as other interviews, written descriptions of the performance and sources that have been already mentioned in the literature analysis. This way the performance is reconstructed through documentation, even though I did not experience it in real life.

Kotak had carefully transformed the gallery space to an ideal place for birth. The objects that were in the room were all positioned there for practical reasons: To make it as comfortable as possible for Kotak to give birth in a gallery space. However, in the written interview, Kotak stresses the importance of two trophies that were also placed in the room. Kotak has positioned two trophies, one for herself as a reward for giving birth and one for the baby, to reward him

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<sup>171</sup> Fisher and Dolezal, *New feminist perspectives on embodiment*, 206.

<sup>172</sup> Natasha Kurchanova, "Marni Kotak interview: 'I wanted to have my son's birth as a performance'," in *Studio International*, 18 November, 2014, <https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/marni-kotak-interview-performance-coolcarcut-birth-baby-x-microscope-gallery>

<sup>173</sup> Geraldine Visco, "Meet the Artist Who Can Actually Say, 'My Baby Is a Work of Art'," *Hyperallergic*, 24 October, 2011, <https://hyperallergic.com/38911/marni-kotak-birth-of-baby-x-microscope-gallery/>.

on being born.<sup>174</sup> According to Kotak, this was done in order to celebrate the birth and the motherhood. The ideas of Kotak contrast the existing ideas that are surrounding the motherhood debate in society. As mentioned by Longhurst, maternal bodies are often related to the domestic space and are often stived away from the public as they relate highly to abjection.<sup>175</sup> Similarly, as Bigwood mentioned, many pregnant women tend to feel ugly and judged within society, thus chose to remain in a domestic environment.<sup>176</sup> This socially constructed narrative of a maternal figure being seen as the “other” and related to abjection which results the bodies in being hidden is completely opposite of Kotak’s actions. Kotak, instead of seeing the maternal as an object, sees it as a work of art and hard work that must be celebrated and appreciated in society. A maternal body thus becomes a subject of beauty and is meant to be seen as a piece of art. Nevertheless, the room included an altar dedicated to Baby X’s ultrasound picture. An altar is traditionally seen as a sacred place in church, mostly used as a place that holds the most worshiped item in the church – the Bible – in Kotak’s performance it could be interpreted as a worship for the fetus.<sup>177</sup> The idea of worshipping motherhood and the baby once again confronts the societal stigmas of seeing pregnancy as just a medical condition rather than the highest form of art – as Kotak sees it.

The maternal body of Kotak also becomes a symbol in the performance art. In performance art, the artist’s body plays a big role in general, for example in the case of Abramović and her *Rhyme 0*, 1974 (fig. 6) the body becomes an object of violence, in Schneemann’s *Interior Scroll*, 1975 (fig. 9) it become an important part of exposure of woman’s sexuality as well as a commodity for art and in Wilke’s *S.O.S.*, 1975 (fig. 12) it becomes a tool to represent the reproductive organs and flaunts the stereotypical ways of imagining a women’s body. Kotak, in her performance, exposes to the audience/ participants a fully nude, maternal body, in the last moments of her pregnancy – moments away from stepping into motherhood.<sup>178</sup> That way, she does not only confront the audience with a feeling of abjection while being surrounded by all sorts of bodily fluids, but also signifies a beautiful and new episode of a woman’s life – motherhood, as well as portrays, as Kotak mentions, birth as the ultimate art.<sup>179</sup> Additionally, bodily fluids heavily relate to abjection and is seen as an

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<sup>174</sup> Marni Kotak, interview by author via email, April 15, 2022.

<sup>175</sup> Longhurst, *Bodies Exploring Fluid Boundaries*, 37.

<sup>176</sup> Bigwood, “Renaturalizing the Body,” 61.

<sup>177</sup> Matthew F. Sheehan, “What Does the Altar Symbolize – Meaning of the Altar,” accessed 23 April, 2022, <https://www.matthewsheehan.com/what-does-the-altar-symbolize>

<sup>178</sup> Katarina Hybenova, “How Baby X Was Born,” *Hyperallergic*, 14 November, 2011, <https://hyperallergic.com/40295/how-baby-x-was-born/>.

<sup>179</sup> Marni Kotak, interview by author via email, April 15, 2022.

embarrassing function of the body in the Western cultures, however, Kotak challenges the ideas of the West.<sup>180</sup> In the case of this performance the maternal body of Kotak becomes the most important sign of the performance and the best example of how abjection becomes confronted through performance art. The audience was left feeling very positive, even though the room smelled like blood, and was full of bodily fluids, which according to Kristeva, is the main reason why maternal bodies are seen as the highest form of abjection.<sup>181</sup> Nevertheless, after the performance, the audience was left with a feeling of gratitude and saw the performance as nothing else but beautiful and eye-opening. The audience felt more appreciation towards the maternal figures after the performance as it exposed the raw but beautiful reality of the creation of life. Thus, it is fair to say that Kotak's performance influenced the audience in a positive way, and made the maternal body be seen as the opposite of abjection – a beautiful and natural thing.

It is interesting to see how Kotak's performance positions itself within the contemporary feminist discourse. As already mentioned before, Kotak argues that for a long time maternal bodies were not considered to be a part of the feminist discourse. Even looking at the critical reaction to Kotak's performance proves that society in the 21<sup>st</sup> century still sees maternity and labor as a taboo and something that should not be exposed to the public but rather hidden away in hospital rooms.<sup>182</sup> Although Kotak is one of the first artists to perform a live birth and expose such issues of a hidden maternal body, she is not the first artist to explore maternal body in art. Raging from contemporary artists and explorations of motherhood, such as Judy Chicago's *Birth Project*, 1984 (fig. 4) to the traditional depictions of motherhood – the traditional paintings of *Madonna and Child*, c.1470 (fig. 17) artists have been exploring motherhood throughout times. However, Kristeva has mentioned that most art works that are depicting motherhood often restrain the depicted maternal bodies from having a voice and merely portray them as sign instead of placing a focus on the experience of motherhood, which conveniently is what the patriarchal society idealizes.<sup>183</sup> Kotak in her performance aims to do the opposite. Kotak's maternal body is an important sign of her performance, and she explores the whole maternal experience as well as places the maternal body at the center of the performance which gives a voice to the often silenced bodies.

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<sup>180</sup> Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 30-31.

<sup>181</sup> Tyler, "Against Abjection," 79-80.

<sup>182</sup> Fisher and Dolezal, *New feminist perspectives on embodiment*, 207.

<sup>183</sup> *Ibid*, 204-205.

As it has already been mentioned, maternal women bodies were often related to the domestic space thus it lacked representation. One of the most important aspects in feminist theory is in fact representation as it allows women to gain their authority and become a subject rather than an object.<sup>184</sup> Performance art here plays a big role as through performance art, as it has been discussed before, the artist is allowed to give a voice to bodies that are often positioned in the shadows of society.<sup>185</sup> Maternal bodies do lack representation in society and are often treated as a medical condition rather a subject of its own. Marni Kotak, through her performance confronted such issue. Kotak claims that throughout times society has told us to be afraid of pregnancy and that birth should be seen as a medical condition that should be hidden in hospital rooms.<sup>186</sup> However, this is mostly since society is afraid of the sexuality of a woman's body.<sup>187</sup> Kotak in her performance does not only treat labor as the highest form of art and something that should be celebrated, but also creates an environment that looks different from a hospital room, but rather a space where she feels most comfortable at, a place that is not hidden from society but rather exposed to it. That way Kotak through her performance also confronts a lot of taboo topics concerning maternity and the labor experience.<sup>188</sup> Additionally, Kotak treats pregnancy and the maternal experience in connection with intellectuality and creative growth.<sup>189</sup> That way Kotak challenges the way the maternal bodies have always been represented and strives away from the historical representation of maternity that has mostly been related to the depictions of Virgin Mary or *Madonna and Child*, c.1470 (fig. 17).<sup>190</sup> One could say that Kotak adapts contemporary forms of art such as performance art to reposition the maternal body representation in society, in order for it to fit the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the transformed feminist theory. Nevertheless, Kotak moves the maternal body representation away from medical relations and creates a new narrative surrounding the maternal body. The maternal becomes art rather than a medical condition.

Aesthetics have always been important in art. Thus, rarely do depictions of maternity actually depict reality. This is done to fit within the aesthetic expectations. However, some women artists aim at de-aestheticizing the art they produce in order to confront the audience

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<sup>184</sup> Milner and Moore, *Contemporary Art and Feminism*, 55.

<sup>185</sup> Ibid, 227-228.

<sup>186</sup> ABC News, "N.Y. Woman 'Performs' Live Birth for Gallery Patrons," *ABC News*, 4 November, 2011, <https://abcnews.go.com/blogs/lifestyle/2011/11/n-y-woman-performs-live-birth-for-gallery-patrons/>.

<sup>187</sup> Geraldine Visco, "Meet the Artist Who Can Actually Say, 'My Baby Is a Work of Art'," *Hyperallergic*, 24 October, 2011, <https://hyperallergic.com/38911/marni-kotak-birth-of-baby-x-microscope-gallery/>.

<sup>188</sup> Robinson, Buszek and Wiley (eds.). "Maternal Mattering," 478.

<sup>189</sup> Fisher and Dolezal, *New feminist perspectives on embodiment*, 204.

<sup>190</sup> Ibid.

with the real depictions of the women's body.<sup>191</sup> Schneemann and Wilke could be good examples for that as the core of their performances was the flaunted bodies. Kotak also aims at de-aestheticizing her performance. For Kotak, pregnancy and the maternal experience becomes a way to de-aestheticize her work.<sup>192</sup> Through performance art, Kotak aims at positioning the experience of pregnancy into an aesthetic form. She places her raw maternal experience as they highest form of art that should be encouraged to be celebrated. The raw representation of reality, thus, could be the new aesthetic that Kotak was aiming at producing through the performance of birth giving. Nevertheless, simply real-life experiences become the aesthetics that should be celebrated and stressed out in contemporary art, as Kotak mentions, real life events are the ones that should be considered to be the greatest pieces of performance art. Such arguments could also contribute to the Guerilla Girls and their statement that only naked women bodies have a place in a museum. Instead of aestheticizing a fake representation of women in art, the aesthetics should shift into the real representation of women's bodies.

To end this chapter, it is important to mention that abjection surrounding a woman's maternal body is once again socially constructed, the same way, as Butler has argued, that gender is constructed by society.<sup>193</sup> The view on maternal body as an abject, due to the fact that it entails the bodily fluids that are seen as disgusting in most cultures, especially the Western ones, only proves that the focus is not on the maternal experience but rather on the way the maternal body looks as it does not fit into our aesthetic expectations that were brought upon us through the lack of real representation of the maternal bodies in art. However, with the possibilities of performance art, women artists nowadays, such as Kotak, are able to confront the audiences with the raw reality and represent the maternal body the way it should always have been represented – as a beautiful and natural thing that creates the ultimate art, the art of life.

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<sup>191</sup> Warr and Jones, *The artist's body*, 30.

<sup>192</sup> Fisher and Dolezal, *New feminist perspectives on embodiment*, 204.

<sup>193</sup> Sheehy, "Sparring with the Eternal Maternal Abject," 66.



## Chapter 4: The Importance of Private and Public Spaces in Performance Art

### 4.1. *Performance Art and the Disruption of the Private and Public Spaces*

As it has been mentioned frequently throughout this thesis, the space and the environment for women performance artists matters a lot, especially since traditionally women have not been able to explore various public spaces and were rather condemned to the private spaces of their homes. Additionally, as the previous chapter makes clear, women artists lack representation in the public spheres and are aiming at (re)claiming them. As performance art focuses greatly on the body and its presence in different environments, it becomes the perfect tool to confront traditional assumptions of women belonging within a domestic space. Besides, through performance art and the exposure of the women's bodies in various public spaces, artists were able to confront abjection that connotes with a women's body and sexuality exposure to the public, as it is often expected to be hidden away from society's eyes. Performance art and the women artists thus enabled to confront art institutions such as museums, for their ways of selecting and displaying art works related to various societal issues, one of them being the portrayal of a woman's body.

As often mentioned, representation is crucial for women in order to strive away from the traditional gender bias that are implemented upon women bodies. However, as already noted, maternal bodies, for a long time, have not been part of the feminist theory, nonetheless lacked representation in the artistic world. Instead of being part of the feminist theory a maternal body in society is considered to be a medical condition and thus belongs within the environment of the hospital. This narrative concerning maternal bodies thus results in misrepresentation as the maternal is hidden away from society and only represented in art in idealistic forms, which misses out the raw reality of motherhood. Moreover, there are many taboos' surrounding the maternal body and it often is seen as an abject body, which consequently should be hidden away from society and kept in the private space. However, Marni Kotak converts the idea of private and public. She places an intimate experience – giving birth – into the public space, that way confronting all the expectations concerning labor. Environment plays a huge role in her performance for many different reasons, which will be explained in this section.

Similarly to many women performance artists, Kotak plays with the notions of private and public in her performance *Birth of Baby X*, 2011 (fig. 15). As maternity is often treated as

a medical condition and condemned to the hospital environment, Kotak aimed at changing that narrative and portraying birth rather as art than an illness. Kotak positioned a usually private experience of giving birth into a public space of the gallery. However, the environment of the gallery that was created by Kotak does connote a private space. In the conducted interview, Kotak mentions that the gallery space was reformed into a room that was an ideal space to give birth to, as it had all the conveniences as well as many sentimental and private stuff of the artist.<sup>194</sup> Before the actual performance of labor, Kotak spent a lot of her time in the gallery space that eventually turned out to be a domestic space for her.<sup>195</sup> Nevertheless, the gallery was a ten minute walk away from her house, thus resulted in being the perfect place to give birth to.<sup>196</sup> By creating such an environment, Kotak aimed at striving away from the hospital space and made the gallery space look as different from a hospital room as possible. The intentions of moving away from a hospital space and positioning herself in a public space was due to fact that Kotak aimed at rendering the scary image of labor that is socially imprinted in us.<sup>197</sup> No wonder a maternal body is seen as the ultimate abject as the maternal body is always hidden away in a hospital room rather than being celebrated and seen as a natural, beautiful experience. Nevertheless, through the use of performance art, Kotak was able to render the narrative of it being an abject and portray labor in an artistic form. By positioning the performance of birth within the gallery space, Kotak allows the audience to view maternity as a work of art, rather than reducing it to merely a clinical definition.<sup>198</sup>

Finally, Kotak proves how environment in performance art matters. As society has implemented the connection between maternity and hospital rooms as well as the private space, Kotak does the opposite. Through her performance *Birth of Baby X*, 2011 (fig. 15) she proves that birth is a natural experience and does not need to be hidden from society, instead, it should be celebrated and seen as art rather than a medical condition. By positioning such “private” performance within the walls of a gallery she allows the audience to see birth as art. Additionally, Kotak changes the narrative of maternity being seen as abject into maternity and birth being seen as the ultimate artwork. Thus, as her child is born within the space of the gallery, Kotak proves that birth could be seen as the ultimate work of art. The gallery space holds a big importance to Kotak as the majority of her performances and exhibitions were held

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<sup>194</sup> Marni Kotak, interview by author via email, April 15, 2022.

<sup>195</sup> Marni Kotak, interview by author via email, April 15, 2022.

<sup>196</sup> Marni Kotak, interview by author via email, April 15, 2022.

<sup>197</sup> ABC News, “N.Y. Woman ‘Performs’ Live Birth for Gallery Patrons,” *ABC News*, 4 November, 2011, <https://abcnews.go.com/blogs/lifestyle/2011/11/n-y-woman-performs-live-birth-for-gallery-patrons/>.

<sup>198</sup> Fisher and Dolezal, *New feminist perspectives on embodiment*, 206.

there, thus, her giving birth in the gallery resulted as the highlight of her artistic career and her child as the highest form of art.<sup>199</sup> Kotak's performance becomes crucial in performance art history and will hopefully pave the way for a new narrative surrounding maternal bodies and labor. However, it is not the first, but not less important performance that stresses out the importance of the environment and changes the narratives of gallery walls.

#### 4.2. *Women's Bodies in Relationship with the Performative Space*

“Women stands in patriarchal culture as a signifier for the male other, bound by a symbolic order in which man can live out his fantasies and obsessions through linguistic command by imposing them on the silent image of woman still tied to her place as bearer, not maker of meaning.”<sup>200</sup>

As it is clear from the quote, women have often been restrained by men to “their place” in society. Several women performance artists have been (re)claiming the public space as part of their performances and the narratives they were creating. A notorious artist – Ana Mendieta – is well-known for her utilizations of the natural environments in order to convey strong messages. The well-know *Siluetas Series*, 1976 (fig. 18) of Ana Mendieta, ranging from the year 1973 to 1980, is a collection of performance documentation in photographs where the artist “appears” not with her body but rather with traces/silhouettes of her body in various landscapes such as rivers, air, the seashore, and a riverbank.<sup>201</sup> By positioning her body within these various environments, Mendieta claimed to engender nature and portray it as feminine as well as recreate a link between a woman's body and nature – mother earth – and position alternatives to of the patriarchal culture.<sup>202</sup> With the possibilities of performance art, Mendieta is allowed to claim the environment in order to change the narrative of public spaces belonging to the masculine bodies. Besides, as already discussed, recognition is a big part of the feminist theory as well as an important aspect for the groups of people that are marginalized, or in any other way cast out politically or socially, thus, Mendieta, through performance art enables recognition for women's bodies in natural environments.<sup>203</sup> The performance series could also be interpreted as a representation of the absence of women's bodies in various environments as women's body carry around various taboos in society and lack representation or are

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<sup>199</sup> Marni Kotak, interview by author via email, April 15, 2022.

<sup>200</sup> Mulvey, *Visual and other pleasures*, 15.

<sup>201</sup> Best, “The Serial Spaces of Ana Mendieta,” 57-65.

<sup>202</sup> Ibid, 58.

<sup>203</sup> Gozenbach, “Bleeding Borders,” 39.

misrepresented in often times. Nevertheless, Mendieta is claiming the environments as an exile from Cuba: The silhouette's only temporary occupy the environments, similarly to exile experiences.<sup>204</sup> Thus, the environment becomes a crucial aspect in performances of Ana Mendieta, as it allows her to, even if its temporary, claim the environment and turn it into a feminine space which goes against the often-masculine envisioned environments.

Another essential performance artist, who occupies the public space to raise awareness or criticize museum institutions is Coco Fusco. Together with Guillermo Gomez-Pena they performed *Couple in the Cage*, 1993 (fig. 19) which was a performance that presented them as an undiscovered culture of Ameridians.<sup>205</sup> The most important aspect of their performance was that they positioned themselves within a golden cage (which connotes a zoo) and staged their performance in various historic institutions such as the science museums, history museums, that way criticizing the museum institutions with their choices of what and how to exhibit various cultures and events.<sup>206</sup> The criticism arose from the ideas that society disagreed with their performance being related to museum institutions as the performance does not depict science or the truth, which is what they suppose is portrayed in museums.<sup>207</sup> Additionally, the countries were also chosen not in a random way: The performances took place in locations that highly participated in the destruction of aboriginal people and their cultures.<sup>208</sup> Thus, such performance utilized the environments and positioned the bodies of the artists in history specific sites in order not only to confront the terrible actions of the past but also to criticize the museum environment and the way it chooses to exhibit historical events related to aboriginal people and their elimination. The environment thus becomes the most important aspect of the performance, and the bodies occupy the space to change and confront the narratives around aboriginal people and the contents of museum spaces.

Coming back to the artist that have already been discussed in the thesis, it is important to mention that Hannah Wilke has also utilized a public space with an idea behind it – to confront the patriarchal society. As already mentioned, Wilke has performed a notorious performance *S.O.S.*, 1975 (fig. 12) which was simultaneously documented and turned into photograph exhibition. The photographs were later exhibited in Copenhagen in a church. The church space was not coincidentally chosen. As Wilke mentioned: “A gothic church is a phallic

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<sup>204</sup> Best, “The Serial Spaces of Ana Mendieta,” 72.

<sup>205</sup> Taylor, “A Savage Performance,” 163.

<sup>206</sup> Ibid, 163-164.

<sup>207</sup> Behar and Mannheim, “The Couple in the Cage,” 118.

<sup>208</sup> Taylor, A Savage Performance,” 163.

symbol, but if I say the nave of the church is a really big vagina, people are offended.”<sup>209</sup> Thus, with the documentations of her performance, Wilke confronted a masculine thought object with photographs of her body covered in small women’s reproductive body parts. Wilke changes the narrative of the church environment and similarly as Mendieta – feminizes it while at the same time confronting the abjection and taboo’s related to women’s bodies and sexuality.

Schneemann, in her performance *Interior Scroll*, 1975 (fig. 9) likewise confronts the public space and uses the environment to her advantage while performing. The *Interior Scroll*, 1975 (fig. 9) performance occupied the presence of the stage, positing Schneemann’s naked body on a pedestal like table in a gallery which normally would hold other art objects. That way Schneemann positioned her feminine body in full nude in front of the audience and used the space as a stage to perform her art and confront the abject around woman’s body sexuality. The space and the table she stood on extenuates her bodies position as well as draws all the attention to her body as an artwork which allows Schneemann to gain the authority over her body and performance and temporary occupy the centre of attention.

Similarly to Schneemann, Abramović often performed within the spaces of galleries and museums. Though performance art was often not accepted within the walls of museums as it was not considered to be an artistic medium as other objects in the museum such as paintings, Abramović aimed at deconstructing such narrative by proving that there are ways to exhibit performance art in museums and galleries as well.<sup>210</sup> Documentation is key for Abramović’s performances as they act as a proof of the performance existing and thus have their spot in a museum or gallery space even after the performance has been done.<sup>211</sup> Most of her notorious performances, such as *Rhyme 0*, 1974 (fig. 6), *The Artist is Present*, 2010 (fig. 7), *A Living Door of the Museum*, 1977 (fig. 8) were performed within a museum space. Thus, the environment of the museum became important in her works as Abramović aimed at proving that performance art is as important as any other artistic medium. The artist claimed the public space of the museum and changed its narrative of being merely object centred to being an active performative space.

Yoko Ono has also disrupted the public space, but in the case of *Cut Piece*, 1964 (fig. 5) – the theatre space. The performance took place on stage where the audience could come up to and cut a piece of her clothing, as discussed in the previous chapter. Ono’s performance could be interpreted as another form of performance art where it intertwines with theatre

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<sup>209</sup> Wacks, “Naked Truths,” 104.

<sup>210</sup> Wixon, “Marina Abramović,” 2.

<sup>211</sup> *Ibid*, 50.

performances, as performance art is often related to theatre and acting. However, Ono was not acting and rather exposing her body to the audience as well as inviting the audience to be active participants in the performance. The feminine body of Ono thus becomes exposed to the public space that way changing the narrative of the theatre space and transforming it into a performative space where one becomes the subject.

## Conclusion

All in all, the thesis covered the topics of, women's body abjection, women artists in performance art and how through their performances they were able to confront the abjection leading to the case study of Marni Kotak. As it has been shown, performance art enables the artists, in particular women artist to use it as a tool when confronting various social issues such as taboo's surrounding women's sexuality, flaunted body, and maternity. Performance art allows the artist to position the body as the centerpiece of the artwork, that way exposing flaws of the body that is not "aesthetically pleasing" and does not fit within the discourse of women's body aesthetics that fit the expectations of the patriarchal society. Besides, it allows women to gain authority over their bodies and expose their sexuality, which is something that the masculine audience does not want to be confronted with, thus criticizes it.

Moreover, performance art creates a space for representation, which as important aspect within the feminist theories. As already mentioned, maternal bodies have not been part of the feminist theories for a long time, thus lacked real representation in the artistic world, which created a stigma surrounding it and positioned it within the context of abjection. In this case, Marni Kotak through her performance of *Birth of Baby X*, 2011 (fig. 15) exposed the maternal body to small amount of audience and allowed it to be recognized not only as a medical condition but rather as a work of art. Performance art stands out from other artistic mediums as the audience becomes a big and important part of it. Throughout Kotak's performance, the audience who got to participate in the birth giving got confronted with the exposed maternal body through and were able to see it in a new light – one that sheds away from negative connotations of abjection. Thus, it is clear that performance art becomes a crucial artistic medium when confronting issues and taboo's concerning women's bodies in art and in particular maternal bodies.

Marni Kotak and her performances become an interesting case to look at as she disrupts the narratives of the gallery: By exposing the birth of her baby as performance art to live audience, she positions an experience that in society is considered to be abject, within the gallery walls and thus makes the birth be seen as ultimate art rather than something that is abject. Nevertheless, Kotak, by exposing a maternal experience to the audience within the gallery space, changes the perception of pregnancy from seeing it as a medical condition and something that has to be restrained to a private hospital room to an experience that should be engaged with as a work of art. Additionally, as maternity still lacks a lot of representation in the contemporary art, Kotak put her own input in the way the maternal body is perceived, which

is different from the traditional images of the *Madonna and Child*, c.1470 (fig. 17): She portrayed the raw and beautiful reality of pregnancy and motherhood, that way giving a voice to the maternal woman's body rather than just portraying it a mere sign.

All in all, it is clear that the environment and the space where the performance takes place is a big part of the meaning behind the performance. Additionally, the performative space becomes rendered and infused with meaning whenever it is a women's body that occupies it: Women's body presence in a public space becomes necessary in order to confront the viewers with the abjection, taboos and traditional views that are bound upon a woman. Nevertheless, the appearance of a woman's body in public allows for recognition, which is an important aspect in the feminist theory. Lastly it is clear that performance art allows women artists to render the narratives and expectations within the museum and gallery walls. Thus, performance art is a beneficial and effective medium for women artists: It allows their bodies to claim the public environment, even if temporarily.

The thesis proves that maternal body abjection is something that must be discussed further and addressed more as it still lacks representation. Due to the limited scope of the thesis not all the topics were able to be explored to the fullest. For further research it could be interesting to investigate more performances done by women that confront the maternal body abjection and how performance art becomes an important medium in their works. Nevertheless, the ongoing discourses concerning the maternal body and the way it should appear and act in the public space have been confronted by various celebrities. They aim at disrupting societal expectations of the maternal experience. Thus, in order to widen up the feminist theory, it would be intriguing to analyze how women in the public sphere are challenging the societal norms of the maternal experience and how the feminist theories and the positions of a pregnant body are changing.

Marni Kotak is only one of the many artists that aim at disturbing the societal norms, however, she created a performance that that showed the real representation of a maternal body in art. Kotak's performances confronts the public the abjection that is constantly related to the maternal body (all the bodily fluids of birth giving were exposed upon the audience), however, the audience felt everything but disgust after they experienced the raw reality of labor. As one of the participants confesses, emotions such as disgust were not present at all, instead, the people felt gratefulness and admiration as well as considered the live birth as an extremely beautiful experience. These reactions call for thoughts that maybe in order not to connect the maternal body in abject, there should be more performances of live birth so individuals would get confronted with the reality of the ultimate art creation. Through her performance, Kotak



does not forget her own individuality, and instead celebrates it. Besides, the performance shed a new light on motherhood: It encouraged the participants to contact their own mothers, thank them and created new appreciation towards mothers and motherhood.<sup>212</sup>

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<sup>212</sup> Katarina Hybenova, "How Baby X Was Born," *Hyperallergic*, 14 November, 2011, <https://hyperallergic.com/40295/how-baby-x-was-born/>.

## Appendix A

Gusté: I would be curious to know what were the motivations to give birth in a gallery, a public space?

Marni Kotak: I have been creating work in which I present my everyday life as art since I began my practice of performance art in NYC in my 20s. Whatever I choose to focus most intensely on in my life at the time becomes my art. By the time I got pregnant when I was 36, I had been developing this practice for over a decade. As I see real life as the highest form of art, it was only natural to me that I would give birth and raise my child, ultimately the creation of life, as performance art.

Gusté: Moreover, continuing the last thought, does the environment of the gallery play a special role in the performance?

Marni Kotak: I installed the gallery space as the ideal place for me to give birth including an inflatable birthing pool, the rocking chair my mother used to rock me to sleep on, my grandmother's bed upon which Baby X was conceived, a shower stall with a curtain covered in photos from my baby showers, an altar to Baby X's ultrasound, a kitchenette, and a video projection, sound piece, and photo wallpaper border of myself and my husband at Marconi Beach. Also in the exhibition were two ten foot trophies -- one dedicated to Baby X for being born, the other for Kotak for giving birth. The entire space was meant to support and celebrate my pregnancy and the birth.

Gusté: In other words, was there a specific reason for choosing the Microscope Gallery as the place for the performance?

Marni Kotak: There are a number of reasons why I chose Microscope Gallery. First of all, I highly respect the gallery's programming and it felt like the right place to do this kind of performance. Secondly, I was planning on doing a different solo show at the gallery around the time I was to give birth anyway before I found out I was pregnant. After I found out I was expecting, I spoke to Elle Burchill, and we decided it made sense to do the birth as the show instead! Also, Microscope, until very recently when the gallery relocated to Chelsea in Manhattan, both in its first and second locations, was a 10-minute or less walk from my

Bushwick, Brooklyn home, so it was a very convenient location for a performance where I had to be at the gallery all of the time.

Gusté: Lastly, I would be curious to know about the public reaction and the documentation of the performance. How was the performance or the concept of the performance perceived by the public?

Marni Kotak: The public response to the birth was very positive. The labor and birth were very healthy. It seemed to me that those in attendance were grateful to have the opportunity to be at the gallery on the day of the birth, especially in such an idyllic context; and the sense was that we were sharing a momentous experience together.

Gusté: Nevertheless, as it is almost impossible to find any pictures or images of the performance on the internet, I was wondering if there was any form of documentation during the performance?

Marni Kotak: We have extensive documentation of the installation and performance in photography and video, and there are editioned prints and a video for sale through Microscope. Additionally, the installation from the show is also available through the gallery.

# Appendix B



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## Consent form

For the research on maternal body representation in performance art and how women artists confront the maternal body abjection through their performances, for my master thesis it is necessary to use your personal data. To use this data during our research we need your consent.

### What data are being used?

The data from a written interview conducted via email on April 15<sup>th</sup>, concerning Marni Kotak's performance *Birth of Baby X* (2011).

### What happens if I change my mind?

If you change your mind, you can send an e-mail to [guste.gulevaite@gmail.com](mailto:guste.gulevaite@gmail.com) with a short message indicating that you want your personal data to be removed. Your name will be permanently deleted from the collected data. Any other information that can be traced back to you will also be permanently deleted.

### What will be done with my data after the research project Marni Kotak's *Birth of Baby X: Confronting Women's Body Abjection Through Performance Art in the Public Sphere*?

Your data will be stripped of your name and other information that can identify you, after 12<sup>th</sup> of June, after the research is concluded.

If you agree to further use of your personal data for other research, please indicate this below. Should there be any specific research in the field of Contemporary Art within 6 months after the end of this research, your data will be used for this research as well. In case your data will be used for further research you will receive a notification of this, with the possibility to withdraw your consent.

### Please place a cross in the box that is applicable.

I do not consent to any use of the information collected about me.

I consent to the use of the information collected about me for this research project, but not for further research.

I consent to the use of the information collected about me for this research project, as well as for further research in the field of Contemporary Art

### Name, date, location and signature



Marni Kotak  
6/13/22 Brooklyn, NY  
USA



Universiteit  
Leiden

## Declaration of originality

By submitting this test, I certify that:

- ✓ this work has been drafted by me without any assistance from others (not applicable to group work);
- ✓ I have not discussed, shared, or copied submitted work from/with other students
- ✓ I have not used sources that are not explicitly allowed by the course instructors and I have clearly referenced all sources (either from a printed source, internet or any other source) used in the work in accordance with the course requirements and the indications of the course instructors;
- ✓ this work has not been previously used for other courses in the programme or for course of another programme or university unless explicitly allowed by the course instructors.

I understand that any false claim in respect to this work will result in disciplinary action in accordance with university regulations and the programme regulations, and that any false claim will be reported to the Board of Examiners. Disciplinary measures can result in exclusion from the course and/or the programme.

I understand that my work may be checked for plagiarism, by the use of plagiarism detection software as well as through other measures taken by the university to prevent and check on fraud and plagiarism.

I understand and endorse the significance of the prevention of fraud and I acknowledge that in case of (gross) fraud the Board of Examiners could declare the examination invalid, which may have consequences for all students.

Date: 12/06/2022

Name: Guste Gulevaite

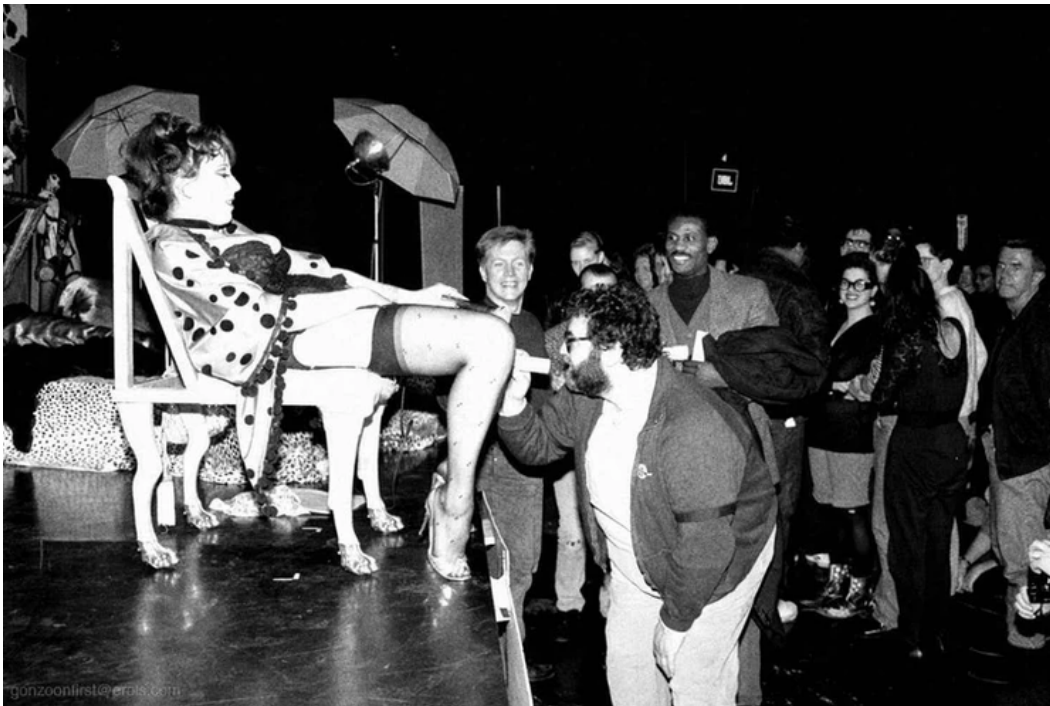
Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Gulevaite', written over a light blue grid background.

## Figures



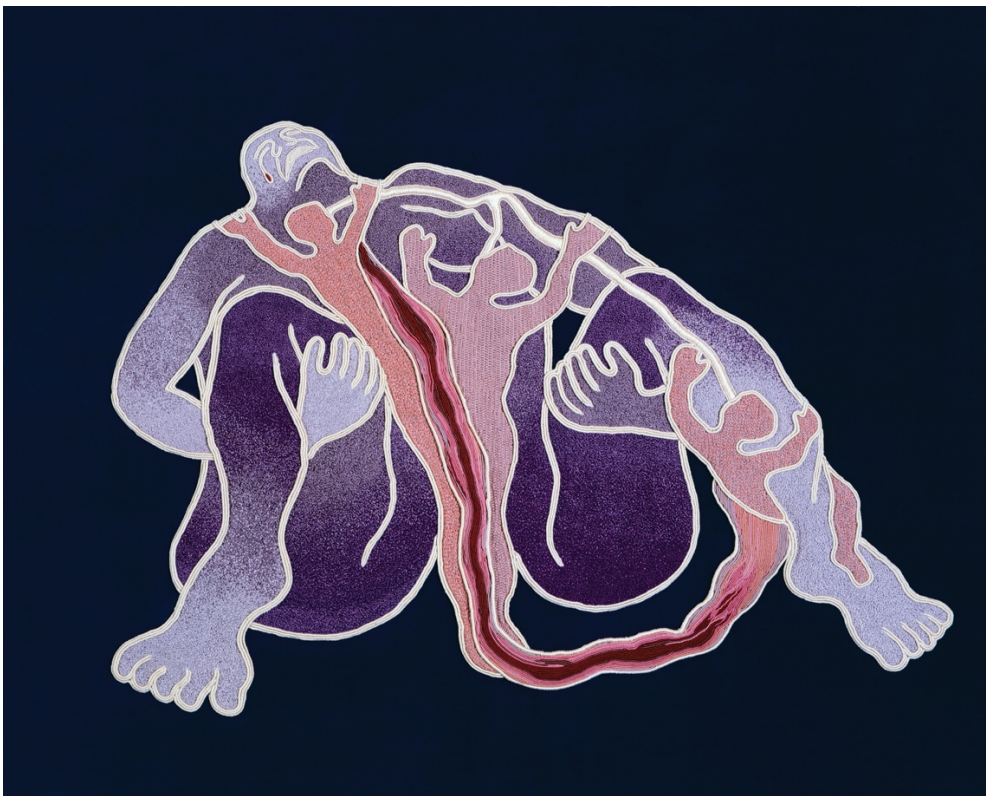
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The Uffizi Gallery, Florence, 1890 n. 878



**Figure 2.** Annie Sprinkles, *The Public Cervix Announcement*, 1990, Photograph of the performance, Kassel's Neue Gallery.



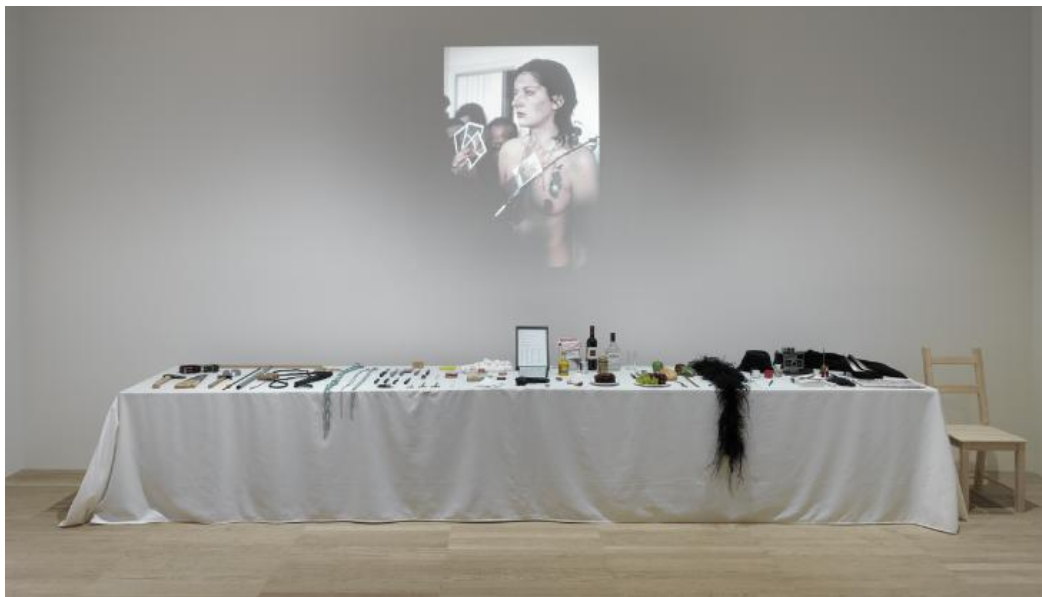
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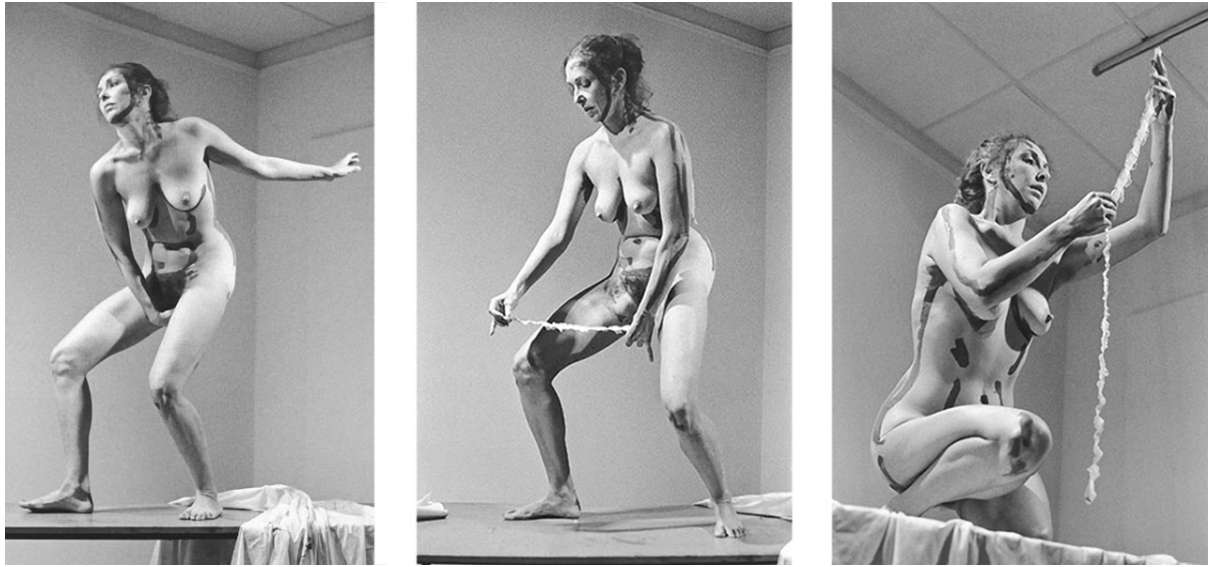




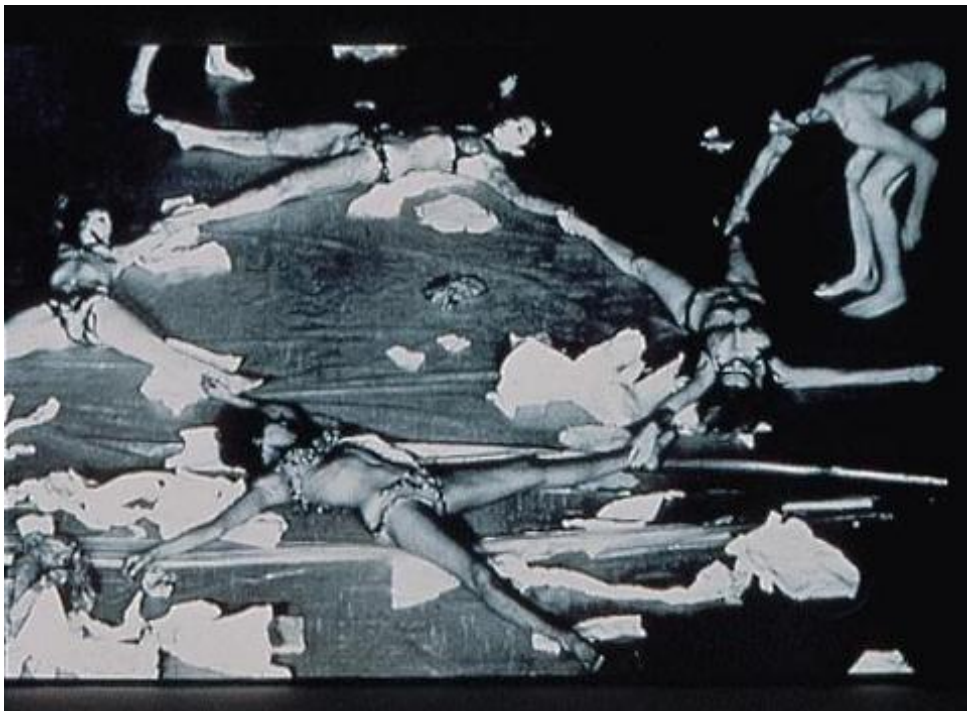
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