

Abstract

Cheryl Donegan's feminist video art of the 1990's explores sexuality, the media, and culture. While critics tend to categorize the work as anything but feminist, I argue that her work is full of historically feminist themes. I compare Donegan's work to the works of women such as Yoko Ono, Marina Abramović, and Carolee Schneemann in order to prove Donegan's work is feminist. Donegan responded to her predecessors by using the same themes such as visual denial and shock factor. In *Kiss My Royal Irish Ass*, Donegan created shamrocks by squatting on pieces of paper, using her body as a tool to create art. Another work, *Gag*, which involved Donegan sitting tied up in a chair and eating a baguette between her legs until she gagged, expresses her critique of silencing women artists. In the final work, *Head*, Donegan drank and spit milk into a jug erotically. She utilizes shocking her audience with reference to sexual activity, and visual denial: the idea of withholding a subject in the work from the viewer. By looking at these three artworks, I show that they indeed share the same themes as the works of her predecessors, thus proving that her work is feminist.

Methodology

Research was conducted by searching various online sources and seeking out different reviews by art critics like Susan Kandel and Philip Barcio, that shed both positive and negative light on Donegan's work. Additionally, research involved finding the original videos of Donegan's work and any statements she made on them. These were found mostly in art magazines from the time of releasing the work. The found videos by Donegan were then cross-compared with historically feminist artwork, mainly the works of Yoko Ono, Hannah Wilke, and Marina Abramović.

Head (1993) (Image to right)

Head shows us the power of 'she,' the woman taking her power back from men everywhere through semi-erotic video. It is about reflection in that Donegan doesn't interact with the viewer and causes the viewer to internally process and understand their feelings during the duration of the video. How does the viewer feel? Are they turned on? Is that bad? Why? All these questions are to be reflected on, because Donegan means for the viewer to question their reaction and if it's a product of the media interpretation of what's porn or art. Why is giving people what they want to see outright erotic? Art Critic Susan Kandel writes off the work as a macho-spectacle of typical feminine submission, but her misinterpretation that it is anti-feminist is because her opinion is formed solely on appearance. We see a similarity between Donegan's work and that of Carolee Schneemann, both using their own bodies as a tool and part of the work. This is inherently feminist because of the shared similarity between Donegan and Schneemann using themselves as part of their works and performances.



Gag (1991) (Image to left)

Donegan's work *Gag* is another feminist performance art piece that tends to be more shocking. This work involves Donegan, bound with her arms behind her chair, eating a baguette whole, to the point of gagging. Her being bound, as a female artist, is a commentary on her being controlled and censored by famous male artists. Eating the baguette between her legs could represent self-fellatio, signifying the idea of men being narcissistic and full of themselves. *Gag* shares its historically feminist roots with that of *Rhythm 0*, by Marina Abramović. In *Rhythm 0*, Abramović leaves herself exposed to the discretion of others with multiple dangerous items, letting the public have their way with her. Both works share the element of being powerless, an important topic in feminist art. Abramović, like Donegan, is tied up and endangering herself by potentially choking on bread. Critic Philip Barcio mentions that she is attached to the words feminist and video art, but he argues that she just happened to be an artist using video at the time. This is a misinterpretation of her work. This piece was intentionally shot on video to make the viewer pause what they are doing and watch it. Using video in conjunction to a performance allows for the ability to come back to a performance that would normally have been experienced only once.



Conclusion

Cheryl Donegan's video art redefines the intersection of video, feminist, and performance art. Despite heavy criticism due to lack of understanding, these works come together to form a strong body of feminist art. Just because it doesn't check all the boxes of standard feminist art doesn't negate it as feminist artwork.



Kiss my royal Irish ass (1993) (Image to left)

In *Kiss My Royal Irish Ass*, Donegan is performing and creating art, but also making a video artwork by filming her process of making the work. This work involves creating shamrocks using Donegan's body. This act of using the body as a medium of art traces back to many early feminist performance pieces. For example, Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece (1964)* work involved members of the audience cutting pieces of Ono's clothing off her. While Ono's work involves audience interaction, Donegan's piece is just her. However, they both use the body as a vehicle to create the work, and engage the audience in interaction, which can tend to change the viewer's perception of the work overall, especially in feminist art. However, art critic Philip Barcio's interpretation of *K.M.R.I.A* misses the point. Barcio mentions that the work itself is like a Rorschach test, that it's juvenile. To call it juvenile can make it seem childish, uneducated, and untalented. However, Donegan's work demonstrates strong talent and meaning, and this could be easy for Barcio to miss because of gender bias.

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