

ARTICLE

Licking Milk Cans and Smashing Car Windows on Tape: On the Influence of Feminist Video Art on Today's Pop Stars and the Framing of the Female Gaze in Public Discourse

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(Received 12 June 2024; revised 28 July 2024; accepted 01 August 2024)

Abstract

The essay aims at discussing visual arts and gender issues, with specific reference to models for female empowerment by means of aesthetic paradigm shifts. These took place thanks to pioneering video artists in the 1990s and were then upheld by new millennium music pop stars in highly influential videoclips. I argue that videos by artists such as Pipilotti Rist, Cheryl Donegan, Mona Hatoum, Andrea Fraser, and Susan Hiller matter today for how they tackled gender issues by means of the moving image, especially by challenging the male gaze and creating gender specific perspectives long before women could claim a similar influence on the television business and in the movie industry. They offered ground-breaking strategies in visual representation and video narratives of considerable impact since they were later adopted in public life, particularly through female pop stars' aesthetic transfer into music videoclips, such as with Beyoncé. In this regard, I observe how art historical references are applied in recent videoclips to challenge the male gaze, letting a threefold strategy emerge: thematic reprise, iconographic substitution, and aesthetic transposition.

Keywords: Art Feminism; female gaze; pop star; video art; videoclip

1. Self-depictions as a reference point

Two photographs come to my mind, when thinking of the state of Art Feminism at its historical height, between the 1960s and 1970s, and which function well as a representation of women's efforts to carve out a space for themselves in the art system.¹ I would define them as staged self-portraits, since the two women artists who authored them are depicted in the frames. They function as an ideal reference point for discussing the quest for female self-representation in the art canon and in the public space, which in the era of selfies and social media appears to be an open issue that is not completely devoid of the male gaze.² Furthermore, they serve as a starting point for a wider reflection on the influence, which late twentieth century women's art still has on today's public visual discourse regarding female

¹ Lippard 1976, 337.

² De Marco 2019, 98.

empowerment and self-depiction, perhaps coming so far as to define a long-awaited female gaze, free from patriarchal objectification.³ I shall investigate how women artists offered an exceptional possibility for visualising the cultural genesis and medial coding of gender roles, which were then picked as new aesthetic paradigms by wider society and, recently, by music pop stars in highly influential videoclips.^{4,5} Taking a step forward, from historical Art Feminism to today's Pop Music, may help to question the widely reworked notion of the male gaze and to elucidate how the agency of the female identity is historically constructed and constantly fluctuating.⁶

As for the mentioned photographs, the first I am thinking of is by Austrian artist and activist VALIE EXPORT, which shows her during the public piece *TAPP und TASTKINO* (1968–71), performed on the streets of Munich and Vienna.⁷ She wears a cardboard box over her bosom, the opening closed by small curtains, as if carrying a portable theatre. A young man is allowed to penetrate the curtains with his hands and touch the artists naked breasts, while she gently smiles back. All around them is a cheering crowd of people acknowledging the power of this scene, staged in the capitals of two former Catholic monarchies whose cultural legacy still counts for women's role in society and their reception in the art canon.⁸ The portrayed action is not pornographic, since the artist is not wandering naked about the place and does not let anyone enter in contact with her bare body parts. EXPORT is in control of her body crafting a literal picture of consent played out in the public space.⁹ This is an image of reciprocated relationships, of female empowerment in the face of patriarchy. The woman in the picture defies the male gaze with artistic means, as she retains the power of relational self-determination and bodily self-depiction.¹⁰ This intimacy comes when women retrieve full control over their body by countering the patriarchal vision imposed on their self-understanding and, even more slyly, on the modes of female self-representation.¹¹

The other photograph I am referring to is *Untitled Film Still #21* (1978) selected from a celebrated series by American artist Cindy Sherman, which was recently quoted as one of the most relevant images in the history of female representation.¹² It shows her in disguise as a small-town woman in the metropolis, wearing perfect face make-up and a lovely hat.¹³ Shot from a lower standpoint, the picture presents only the head of the woman on the backdrop of skyscrapers towering above her. One can imagine this woman on her way to the office, probably working as a secretary in a patriarchal environment. She looks scared of the city with its erected buildings, which metaphorically refer to the sexist conditions experienced

³ Mulvey 1975, 13.

⁴ Von Braun 2015, 30.

⁵ Adding on the paper's scope, as if to present another layer of how this shift of aesthetic paradigms spreads wider into the public arena, the images and [supplementary material](#) presented in this article are drawn from social media and present the individual appropriation made by web users of the kind of iconography, style, and content drawn either from the mentioned video artists or from the videoclips discussed in the article.

⁶ Hansen 2014, 80.

⁷ It is noteworthy that VALIE EXPORT is the capitalised stage name of Waltraud Hollinger, as well as the brand of a cigarette company, which the artist used to break free from her father's and husband's last name. Iconographic reference to the mentioned artwork can be found in the collection of the MoMA, New York, available at: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/159727>.

⁸ Schwartz and Thorson 2017, 28–9.

⁹ Lippard 1980, 339.

¹⁰ Delpoux and Pleasance 2020, 241–42.

¹¹ Export 1973, 47.

¹² Rickett 2024.

¹³ A general presentation of the photograph series and iconographic reference can be found on the platform of the MoMA, New York, available at: <https://www.moma.org/artists/5392>.

in her workplace. Perhaps this is not the most striking picture of the series, but it epitomises Sherman's attempt to play along the lines of the male gaze and counter it with a female representation that presents an astounding photographic intentionality.¹⁴ As if taken from B-movies, in every picture of the series she interprets a different female role model derived from a kind of public imagery that is immediately recognisable, though left empty.¹⁵ In one she poses as an anxious-looking and half-dressed girl on the phone. In another, she is a hardened working-class woman on the kitchen floor about to empty the shopping bags. Another one shows her as a librarian delicately positioning a book on the shelf. One is left to imagine the whole story behind each fake film still, though they all have a common trait: the depicted women look subject to men for self-understanding and, furthermore, all of them are sexualised. Whether they look into the camera or out of the frame, their life and appearance are subdued to male will and gaze. Sherman leaves us in doubt whether women can project themselves beyond the role models and visual connotations attributed by patriarchy.¹⁶

2. Women filming themselves as a turning point

Most interestingly, Sherman's fictional stills touch upon the issue of the moving image pervasiveness on visual culture, which was problematised by the emerging video art scene during the 1980s–90s.¹⁷ The influence of the moving image grew stronger with the advent of videoclips, thus highlighting the joint venture between the music industry and commercial TV.¹⁸ By then, young women were entering art schools in high numbers, thus changing the gender balance in the Western art world, at least at the starting grid.¹⁹ Eagerly looking for female visual references, they tried to emancipate from the male gaze, intended as a mode of self-representation pervaded by patriarchal values that objectified female characters.²⁰ Young women then were aware of feminist stances originated in the 1960s–70s, especially as regards the visual definition of the female body, but still trying to make them enter the self-understanding of their own generation.²¹ In the visual arts, the theoretical framework to construct a feminine tradition was delivered by highly influential studies by Linda Nochlin and Roszika Parker, who explored women's social reality and silent contribution to art history.²²

Thanks to the 1992 and 1997 documenta exhibitions, video art emerged as a new instrument of young artists' gear, because by then it was a rather accessible technology.²³ A good number of women artists—such as Pipilotti Rist, Cheryl Donegan, Mona Hatoum, Andrea Fraser, and Susan Hiller—picked up this new medium since it worked as a sufficiently neutral language in terms of gender, given it was too recent to have an overwhelmingly male history. These artists' works still matter today, because of the way they tackled gender issues by means of the moving image, finding different aesthetic features to express female objectivity, as well as countering the male gaze and creating female-specific perspectives long before women could stably gain equivalent influence on the television business or in the movie industry.²⁴

¹⁴ Armstrong 2012, 717.

¹⁵ Phelan 2002, 995.

¹⁶ Krauss 2016, 649–50.

¹⁷ Frohne 2001, 222.

¹⁸ Straw 1988, 247; Banks 1997, 306.

¹⁹ Mantoan 2015, 63.

²⁰ Barclay Morgan 1999; Royer 2019, 8.

²¹ Snyder 2008, 177.

²² Nochlin 1971; Parker 1984.

²³ Steinmüller 2021, 17–19.

²⁴ Royer 2019, 81.

Independent access to the medium – whether facing the camera or behind it, I argue – is the most relevant aspect to create gender-specific representations. The fact that women in video art were both filming and being filmed gave them control over their body, over its public depiction and social judgement.²⁵ As female practitioners, they highlighted the sexism and misogyny behind the canonised representation of the female body in art, cinema and mass media.²⁶ They were trying to overcome the tension between the subversion of the male gaze and the impossibility to suppress it, as well as to save attributes of the male attitude that did not necessarily fit into a possessive and exploitative nature.²⁷ Through various kinds of critical approaches, they confronted patriarchy by exposing, mocking, examining, reversing, or exacerbating the male gaze, as shown in the following examples.

Hiller's immersive video and sound installation *An Entertainment* (1990) sets the viewer within a multiple projection of enlarged takes from the battering scenes of "Punch and Judy."²⁸ Viewers find themselves surrounded by disturbing big images of struggle and are overwhelmed by the sounds of distorted laughter, thus exposing behavioural patterns of gender violence that are intrinsic to patriarchal society, looking legitimate even in a children's puppet show.²⁹ Shown on a TV monitor to have a 1:1 physical scale of her upper body part, Donegan's video piece *Head* (1993) presents the artist insultingly bouncing up and down on a hard rock soundtrack, while sensually licking a perforated milk bottle to stop the white liquid leak.³⁰ The sequence is an empty imitation of obscene pornographic imagery that clearly mocks the role that patriarchy bestows upon the objectified woman in media.³¹ Hatoum's walk-in video installation *Corps étranger* (1994) is an on-floor and enlarged projection of the endoscopic exploration of her own body holes performed while under half-anaesthesia.³² The audience awkwardly finds themselves in the position of the clinical examiner causing bodily unease, sexual exploitation, and social control over women's corporality that originates from the intrusiveness of the male gaze.³³ In Rist's *Ever Is Over All* (1997) a woman merrily walks down the lane and – taking the automobile as a male surrogate – reverses gender violence by randomly smashing car windows with a metal stick.³⁴ The latter is disguised as a long-stemmed red flower, an impression that is heightened through the right-angle accompanying projection that shows a blooming field shaken by the wind of a feminist springtime.³⁵ To exacerbate gender inequalities based on uneven power relations in society, Fraser brings bourgeoisie voyeurism to the extreme in the video piece *Untitled* (2003).³⁶ The video monitor shows the surveillance camera footage of the artist

²⁵ Mayne 1985, 92–5.

²⁶ Meagher 2014, 131–6.

²⁷ Snow 1989, 40.

²⁸ Iconographic reference to the artwork can be found in the collection of the Tate, London, available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/hiller-an-entertainment-t06987>.

²⁹ Pedersen 1995, 457.

³⁰ Iconographic reference to the artwork can be found in the collection of the MoMA, New York, available at: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/88832>.

³¹ Schorr 1993, 96.

³² Iconographic reference to the artwork can be found in the collection of the Centre Pompidou, Paris, available at: <https://www.centrepompidou.fr/fr/ressources/oeuvre/bnhmTX0>.

³³ Coxhead 2016.

³⁴ Iconographic reference to the artwork can be found in the collection of the MoMA, New York, available at: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/81191>.

³⁵ Eaton 2001, 109.

³⁶ Iconographic reference to the artwork can be found in the collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art, New York, available at: <https://whitney.org/collection/works/45058>.

herself having sex in a hotel room with an unknown collector who paid to “make an artwork.”³⁷

It is noteworthy that these video pieces still cause outrage and calls for censorship, as regularly happens with Donegan’s *Head*, most recently in Bologna.³⁸ One is left wondering what the fuss is all about, if it was not for the male gaze, since there is neither nudity nor explicit sex. It is just a woman with a leaking milk can, if one refers to iconology’s first-level description of an image.³⁹ But then, from a sexist point of view, another level of iconological interpretation can be added, which links it to pornographic iconography. Although *Head* depicts an empty copy of the male gaze patterns – a sexy short-haired woman dancing and drinking from a milk bottle – it results in a fellatio-metaphor highlighting society’s unpreparedness to overcome the continuous public objectification of the female body.

3. Female cross-referencing as an arrival point

Still today, the above video artworks exert an impressive impact in terms of women’s visual self-determination. At the time of their creation, they could hardly dent dominant models in the movie industry or television business, given their hegemonic patriarchal production system.⁴⁰ If held against the videoclips of established pop stars of the same period, like Madonna and Janet Jackson, it becomes clear that the latter’s aesthetic paradigms pushed moral boundaries, but without subverting the objectifying attitude of the music industry.⁴¹ In Adornian terms, they not only accepted their own commodity character but also the patriarchal ideologies implied by that order.⁴² This holds true even for singers of the following generation, such as Britney Spears and Cristina Aguilera, whose appearance did not create alternative models to the unfair depiction of women.⁴³ It was not until recently that stars like Lady Gaga, Beyoncé, and Ariana Grande started addressing female empowerment by referencing art history in search for a shift in visual paradigms akin to a desired postfeminist era.⁴⁴ Even minorities accessing the mainstream cultural discourse typically confront the historical art canon to question dominant paradigms and carve a niche for alternative models of representation. This is highlighted by African American visual artists in Postmodernism, as is the case of historical portraitist Kehinde Wiley and monumental sculptor Simone Leigh.⁴⁵ What emerges from a deeper observation of videoclips produced over two decades by the mentioned pop stars appears a quest to challenge the male gaze through art history for the power relations implied in its modes of representation, which are addressed in a threefold way.⁴⁶

The first strategy is a thematic reprise, which diachronically anchors contemporary production to the pioneers of a specific genre or subculture, in order to claim historical depth

³⁷ Douglas 2012.

³⁸ Venturi 2014.

³⁹ Panofsky 1997.

⁴⁰ Payne 2012, 57–8.

⁴¹ Smith 1985, 3–4; Snyder 2008, 178.

⁴² Dibben 1999, 336.

⁴³ Emerson 2002, 117.

⁴⁴ Pomerantz, Raby, and Stefanik 2013, 185.

⁴⁵ Schur 2009, 166–88.

⁴⁶ The conclusions offered in this section are drawn on the empirical observations gathered during a research project conducted in October 2023–March 2024 at the University of Palermo, Italy, led by the contributing author together with BA Brenda Lo Nardo, and centred on an analysis of videoclips by influent female pop stars over the last two decades in comparison with masterpieces of Art Feminism since the late 1960s.

for a certain political or social discourse. This can be seen in Lady Gaga's videoclip for *Alejandro* (2010), directed by Steven Klein, that references influential feminist performances of the 1960s, like Carolee Schneemann's *Meat Joy* (1964),⁴⁷ which advanced the debate about female dominance and sexual independence. The second approach is plain iconographic substitution, which means that male imagery is modified to insert female protagonists and favour the reemergence of women in the face of (art) historical invisibility. Ariana Grande's *God is a Woman* (2018), directed by Dave Meyers, makes a neat case for this scheme, since the videoclip sets the singer's body in place of the male figures in renown masterpieces, such as Michelangelo's *Creation* frescoes for the Sistine Chapel. The third device is the most sophisticated, as far as the field of art history is concerned, as it functions by extracting aesthetic paradigms from pioneering women's video art, thus employing the female gaze as a direct source of visual reference. A paramount example is Rist's *Ever Is Over All*, which was visually subsumed into Beyoncé's videoclip for *Hold Up* (2016), directed by Jonas Åkerlund, in which she performs a stroll aimed at destroying cars with a baseball bat.⁴⁸ The fact that all the mentioned videoclips were directed by a man should not diminish my argument, because the pop singers' participation was paramount in shaping the visual narrative of a self-conscious female identity.^{49,50}

The case of *Hold Up* is of particular interest, since Beyoncé did not simply follow the plot of Rist's video piece, she rather set out to appropriate the same aesthetics, framing, and editing: a shot-by-shot comparison shows striking similarities, which must be seen as deliberate.⁵¹ It would be reductive to envision this as plagiarism, given that visual arts have now accepted appropriation practices as legitimate poetic strategies, such as can be seen with the late celebration of artist Elaine Sturtevant.⁵² It rather points at the visionary power of aesthetic paradigms that feminist video artists deliver for countering the sexualising music industry. Although the American singer did not comment on her reference to *Ever Is Over All*, it remains self-evident and joins the ranks of several visual borrowings that the pop star did over her career.⁵³ Rist herself responded with humour, stating she would have liked Beyoncé to hammer more windshields, since the artist herself had budget restrictions that obliged her to smash only side windows.⁵⁴ It is a funny comment, but it fails to see the bigger picture of such an aesthetic appropriation, which operates for the reframing of the female gaze in pop music.

⁴⁷ Iconographic reference and a clip from the performance can be found in the collection Fondazione Bonotto, Colceresa, available at: <https://www.fondazionebonotto.org/it/collection/poetry/schneemanncarolee/video/3068.html>.

⁴⁸ Rumours on the web hint at the fact the Beyoncé may have written and filmed the song as a response to her husband's infidelity. See: Buxter-Wright, Dusty. 2017. "Jay-Z Just Got VERY Real about Cheating on Beyoncé: The Rapper Opens Up about His Infidelity Properly for the First Time." *Cosmopolitan*, November 30. <https://www.cosmopolitan.com/uk/entertainment/a13982389/jay-z-cheating-beyonce/>.

⁴⁹ Koivunen 2015, 109.

⁵⁰ This fact rather points at the film industry's unpreparedness to accept women as directors and in leading roles, in general, which is comparable to the lack of women as orchestra directors, while the visual arts have improved fast on women as curators and museum directors. In this regard, see: Sperling, Nicole. 2024. "Barbie Was Supposed to Change Hollywood for Women. Why Didn't It?" *The New York Times*, July 22. <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/07/22/business/media/barbie-movie-hollywood.html>.

⁵¹ There are several visual comparisons on YouTube that can be consulted, such as the following two: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2V7tQwnJQE0>; and https://fb.watch/sCjxM5_pmT/.

⁵² Obrist 2014.

⁵³ Shepherd 2016.

⁵⁴ Miranda 2021.

The videoclip *Hold Up* is neither a copy nor a tribute, it is the certification of an aesthetic shift of paradigm that defies the male gaze and functions as a reference to women's autonomous visual culture. Beyoncé re-staged the video because she probably recognised the importance of the original source as a model of female empowerment in the public discourse. In doing so, she accomplished what VALIE EXPORT hoped for decades earlier, which is to give women the opportunity of self-determination through the shaping of their own notions and images corresponding to their feelings and wishes, their social and natural conditions.⁵⁵ The pop star did a good service to feminist video art, dragging it out from the art world's niche to operate in the much wider frame of the music industry. Furthermore, it functions as a powerful precedent for a liberated female representation in media culture and the wider public arena, particularly at a time when social media are stretched between the resistance against hegemonic gender norms and the potential to reinforce traditional gender stereotypes.⁵⁶

What Beyoncé's action entails is that Rist's video piece must function in contemporary society as a self-evident visual reference for the female gaze, which is seen as a long-absent narrative to be rediscovered and reimagined.⁵⁷ Everybody recognises a Picasso, but it is about time that everyone can tell a Pipilotti Rist too.

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Supplementary material. To view supplementary material for this article, please visit <http://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2024.10>.

Author contribution. Conceptualization: D.M.; Investigation: D.M.; Methodology: D.M.; Resources: D.M.; Writing – original draft: D.M.; Writing – review & editing: D.M.

Acknowledgements. Thanks go to BA Brenda Lo Nardo who collaborated at the University of Palermo, Italy, in the initial stages of this research for gathering and confronting video materials.

Competing Interest. The author declares none.

Financial support. This research received no specific grant from any funding agency, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

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⁵⁵ EXPORT 1973, 47.

⁵⁶ Caldeira, De Ridder, and Van Bauwel 2018, 39.

⁵⁷ Hamlin 2020, 133–5.

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Cite this article: Mantoan, Diego. 2025. "Licking Milk Cans and Smashing Car Windows on Tape: On the Influence of Feminist Video Art on Today's Pop Stars and the Framing of the Female Gaze in Public Discourse." *Public Humanities*, 1, e2, 1–9. <https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2024.10>