
The history of the American avant-garde has traditionally focused upon male artists, but over the past twenty years the focus has changed to include women as well as to focus upon feminist interpretation. This book carries on in this vein, reinterpreting the history of avant-garde performance along feminist lines.

Written by James Harding, a professor of English at The University of Mary Washington, the book focuses on five women artists: Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, Gertrude Stein, Yoko Ono, Carolee Schneemann, and Valerie Solanas, who, Harding argues, all employ performance techniques that incorporate collage aesthetics. He begins by challenging the historiography of the avant-garde by stating that these women artists “lay the foundation for a radically different discourse of what constitutes American avant-garde performance.” He cites much critical theory to support his re-evaluation of feminist performance art in relation to the American avant-garde.

Beginning with Freytag-Loringhoven, Harding demonstrates how this artist’s performances as a living collage (she attached found objects from the garbage to her costume) in the streets of 1920’s Greenwich Village rejected conventional notions of gender, sexuality, and theater, reconstructing these ideas into something radical and different. Gertrude Stein, in her libretto for The Mother of Us All, also through the juxtapositions of collage, embraces the feminist activism of Susan B. Anthony. In Yoko Ono’s Cut Piece, Harding argues that the artist places herself in opposition to the aesthetic traditions of Marcel Duchamp and John Cage through her “unmaking of collage,” where the power is placed in the hands of the audience to cut off pieces of her clothes, thus deconstructing or unmaking the idea of collage. Through collage techniques, Schneemann’s performance piece, Round House, critiques and rewrites the patriarchal modern literary canon to which as a female artist, she does not conform. Lastly, Valerie Solanas’s radical act of shooting the artist, Andy Warhol is an “aesthetically extreme form of avant-garde performance,” that subverts the idea of traditional avant-garde performance through its incompatibility with it.

As there is much jargon and heavy references to critical theory, this book is recommended only for scholars of performance art. Also, because not much historical background, little description, or any photographic images of the artists or their performances are included, it is also assumed that the reader already be familiar with these artists and other artists of the twentieth-century avant-garde in general. (Actually, there is a pretty major mistake in one of the art historical references misidentifying “Robert Avedon” instead of the correct Richard Avedon, as the photographer of a photo of Andy Warhol from 1968.) The writing is dense and difficult and includes copious footnotes and an index.

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