

Shooting people as performance art

Dangerous Artists of Calibre

Words: Dr. Martin Lang





Mark Jacobs, Shanghai,
"Day Rain Storm 001"

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In *The Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1929), André Breton (1896-1966) claimed that the “simplest surrealist act consists of dashing down into the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd”. He never shot anybody himself; perhaps this was a surrealist statement instead. Elza Adamowicz has noted that the “theme of criminality in surrealism has traditionally been treated allegorically (violence as transgression); metaphorically (crime as a signifier for Surrealism’s disruptive practices); or critically (surrealism’s assault on the female body)”. (2009) But what if we read this statement literally? Shooting somebody at random is clearly a crime, but could it ever be considered an act of performance art?

In his book *Surrealism and the Art of Crime* (2008), Jonathan Eburne makes the case that Breton’s statement was more than merely rhetorical. He draws attention to the surrealists’ fascination with violence and crime, in wars, but also in everyday life. Eburne tells us that the surrealists scrutinised “newspaper reports, scientific studies, and fictional accounts that both represented crime publicly, and speculated about its historical consequences”. Given the surrealists’ preoccupation with Freudian psychoanalysis, it is perhaps unsurprising that they carefully dissected their sources, looking for

underlying causes, perhaps from the unconscious. What is surprising is the jump from this research-based inquiry to incitement to violence. This essay addresses the moral and artistic cases for such actions as endorsed by Breton, by analysing several instances where artists have indeed shot, attempted to shoot, or pretended to shoot people. The first case involved a gun, as well as a bomb.

In 2006, loyalist paramilitary Michael Stone (born 1955) was charged with the attempted murder of Martin McGuinness and Gerry Adams. Stone, already a convicted murderer (released under the Good Friday Agreement), had entered Stormont on the day that Ian Paisley and McGuinness were due to be nominated as Northern Ireland’s first and deputy first ministers. He pointed a gun at a security guard while he threw a bomb on the floor. The bomb failed to explode and he was arrested. When I heard Stone claim that this was an act of performance art, I presumed it was a desperate plea to avoid incarceration. It failed, and he was sentenced to 16 years in prison. But could there be a case that this was in fact a performance?

Peter Bond, a senior art lecturer at Central Saint Martins, gave evidence in Stone’s defence by claiming that carrying nail bombs could be considered as performance art, so long as there was no intention to use them. He told the judge

that there was a marked rise in performance art during the First World War, and that there was a historical link between performance art and political protest. He also pointed out that audiences do not have to be invited, but could include passers-by who do not like what they witness. However, we should note that Bond's argument is that there can be no intention of detonating a bomb, or harming an audience in any way. Therefore shooting somebody, in the manner that Breton encouraged, or in any other manner, cannot be art. (Higgins 2008)

Let us take a detour from the main question, whether shooting somebody could be performance art, and ask if Stone's action could be art. Stone did not detonate the bomb, shoot the security guard, or hurt the 'audience', which is why Bond did not rule out his action from potentially being art. Stone claimed that each object he had with him had symbolic value. He informed the judge that the bombs were "not viable explosive devices and [that they] were improvised from the most basic household items, including a cardboard holder for a kitchen roll, candle wax and powder from fireworks freely available in shops". (*Stone's attack 'performance art' 2006*) However, an army explosives officer testified that "he had found 12 fireworks, firefighters and a two-litre plastic bottle filled with petrol, as well as four pipe bombs filled with nails". (McKittrick 2008) He concluded that these were sufficient to cause a considerable blast... had they been detonated.

Stone referred to the bomb as a prop and claimed that its failure to explode was an essential component in his performance, which supposedly highlighted the futility of protest in Northern Ireland. He claimed that the bomb was constructed in such a way that it was impossible to hurt anybody, but still looked authentic. It contained a 'sumo' firework, which he claimed was a reference to Paisley, "a big fat man who refuses to budge". (*Michael Stone Performance Artist 2011*) He also claimed that he wanted to put a proverbial rocket up politicians' backsides. (Higgins 2008)

The gun could not be fired and had a sponge inserted into its cartridge. This was allegedly a reference to a Paisley speech where he referred to Catholics as spongers. He also carried a fisherman's knife; a reference to

McGuinness's nickname, the Fisherman. Stone walked to Stormont from a statue of CS Lewis because the bomb was "fictional, like Narnia". Stone *claims* to have planned the act to symbolically fail. I can see why such an act might be considered legitimate—and (if we believe Stone) it could fit Bond's criteria—but what about actually shooting somebody, could that ever be considered art?

In 1971 Chris Burden (1946-2015) famously asked a friend to shoot him in the arm with a .22 calibre rifle. This is widely recognised as an art performance. One reason this action has been accepted is that the artist was the person being shot. This shows clear consent. Another reason is that the intention was to cause as little damage as possible; Burden wanted to graze his arm, which is quite different from Breton's random shot. Thirdly, like Michael Stone's performance, the act was conceived to portray a serious political message; it was carried out during the Vietnam War. Many of Burden's friends were drafted, and many young men of his age were shot. Burden posited that you can only know what it feels like to be shot, by being shot. So, in a way, this was an act of solidarity or empathy with the drafted. It also served as a critique and a warning by showing a shocking action.

If an artist being shot can be art I deduce, by extension, that an artist shooting another person could also be art if certain criteria are met. Firstly, in order to demonstrate that the person being shot has given their consent, it would probably be necessary for them to be a collaborator or co-author. For example, Jake Chapman could shoot Dinos Chapman, or Gilbert could shoot George. I view these examples as commensurate with Burden's *Shoot*.

If the person being shot has no stake in the action, if he or she is a member of the audience, or a volunteer (paid or otherwise), then certain questions of power and exploitation arise that need to be answered. Since, to my knowledge, no artist has asked for a volunteer to be shot, and subsequently fired a gun at them, I will turn to another artist whose work raises similar ethical questions.

Spanish artist Santiago Sierra (born 1966) has paid prostitutes to be tattooed (*250 cm Line Tattooed on 6 Paid People*, 1999), and has paid unemployed people to sit inside cardboard boxes (*Workers Who Cannot be Paid, Remunerated to Remain in Cardboard Boxes*, 2000), and homeless people to stand facing a wall (*Group of Persons Facing the Wall and Person Facing into a Corner*, 2002). In these cases, which are all widely recognised as art, Sierra highlights power relations inherent in capitalism. How much would you need to be paid to have a line tattooed across your back, from shoulder to shoulder, to allow somebody to mark you in the name of art? Everybody has their price. In *Indecent Proposal* (1993), John Gage (Robert Redford's character) famously pays Diana Murphy (Demi Moore) \$1m to sleep with him. Medical testing regularly pays people to be infected with viruses, so they can test new possible cures. They also pay people to have a toe removed and sewn back on, or you can be paid to have your heart stopped, so they can detach and reattach bits before restarting it and patching you up. Is this exploitation, or free choice? These are the questions that Sierra asks. It is not too much of a jump in imagination to deduce that if he can do these things, it is also possible for an artist to shoot a non-artist participant or volunteer in the name of art.

The cases I have proposed so far do not constitute crimes. Surely shooting somebody without their consent would be immoral, illegal, and not art. For Bond, as we have seen, this is the case, but is it that clear? Does he have the authority to decide? There are artists who advocate violence. In 1909 Filippo Tommaso Marinetti (1876-1944) published *The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism*, in which he extolled violence in general and even claimed that "art, in fact, can be nothing but violence, cruelty, and injustice". Note that both Marinetti and Breton were early twentieth-century avant-garde artists, who embodied an aggressive spirit that contributed to the enthusiasm for the First World War. Even the Suffragettes adhered to this logic. Let us refer to an argument in *The Suffragette* in 1913 (just four years after Marinetti published his manifesto) to develop a moral justification for violence that challenges Bond's position. The article does not talk about art, but it does give an account of when violence is morally justified. Firstly, Christabel

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Pankhurst (1880-1958) describes how the then home secretary, Reginald McKenna (1863-1943), claimed that breaking the law is justified, if it prevents a greater evil from occurring. His example was breaking and entering a house in order to save the occupants from a fire. This is a utilitarian argument. For example, if you could go back in time to the First World War and shoot Hitler, preventing millions of deaths in the 1930s-40s, would you do it? For a utilitarian, killing one person to prevent millions of deaths would be morally justifiable. This is how the Suffragettes justified hunger strikes, smashing windows, placing bombs in pillar boxes and St Paul's Cathedral, attempting to strip the prime minister naked on a golf course (Phillips 2003), and even plotting to assassinate him. (Tweedie 2006) Pankhurst developed her line of inquiry to conclude that militancy is never justified to meet your own ends. For example, going on hunger strike is not justifiable merely to get something you want. It is justified, however, if you do it for the greater good: to defend those weaker than you who cannot stick up for themselves, for example. For the Suffragettes, hypothetically at least, assassinating Herbert Asquith (1852-1928) would have been justified, if it resulted in drastically improving the quality of life for women, by gaining equality with men.

In 1968 Valerie Solanas (1936-1988) shot Andy Warhol (1928-1987) and art dealer Mario Amaya (1933-1986). Both survived, although Warhol had health problems for the rest of his life and had to wear a surgical corset. Solanas was a playwright and a militant activist who authored *SCUM Manifesto* (first published in 1968, self-published the year before) in which she incited acts of militancy:

Life in this society being, at best, an utter bore and no aspect of society being at all relevant to women, there remains to civic-minded, responsible, thrill-seeking females only to overthrow the government, eliminate the money system, institute complete automation and destroy the male sex.

The shooting of Warhol and Amaya was defended by two radical art collectives: Black Mask in the USA, and King Mob in the UK. (Hahne & Morea 2011) Black Mask had previously shot the poet Kenneth Koch (with blanks) as a symbolic assassination of the bourgeoisie. King Mob (who were expelled from the Situationist International) even went as far as to celebrate Solanas' shooting of Warhol and to include a hit-list of several celebrities: Yoko Ono; Mick Jagger; Bob Dylan; Richard Hamilton; Mario Amaya; David Hockney; Mary Quant; Twiggy; Marianne Faithfull; and *International Times* editor Barry Miles.

While Solanas never claimed to be a performance artist, there is some evidence to question her intentions. After the shooting, she left behind the paper bag in which she had carried the gun, her address book and a sanitary towel. Performance historian and theorist James Martin Harding states that leaving behind the sanitary towel was part of a "calculated aesthetic performance" which calls "attention to basic feminine experiences that were publicly



Mark Jacobs, *Day Old*
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**INSTITUTE COMPLETE
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taboo and tacitly elided within avant-garde circles”. (Harding 2001) Solanas’ association with Black Mask and the legacy of SCUM Manifesto, in both feminist and art circles, may well prompt us to consider her actions in aesthetic terms.

This has been a philosophical inquiry into the moral, legal and aesthetic limits of art. To conclude, let us re-evaluate the question in hand in light of the cases I have sketched: could shooting somebody ever be considered performance art? The answer is yes, if the person is the artist (in the case of Burden) or perhaps a co-artist. For Bond, shooting the audience is ruled out, but I have argued that for Santiago Sierra, it might not be—so long as the volunteer gives clear consent, by accepting payment (if we follow Sierra’s previous actions). Shooting somebody without consent would be a much more unlikely candidate for artistic appreciation. Nonetheless, for Pankhurst, it could be morally justified, so long as it served a greater good.

Breton’s call to shoot randomly into a crowd cannot be accepted as art, neither by Bond’s criteria, nor Pankhurst’s moral criteria. The cases of Michael Stone (should he have carried out his political assassination) and Valerie Solanas are less clear-cut for Pankhurst. I imagine she would find it difficult to make a case that either would be justified because they serve the greater good, although contemporaries today might disagree. Pankhurst’s moral justification leads us on to the question of whether they could be considered art.

For these (or any) actions to be considered art, we need an accepted definition. This is notoriously tricky ground, as there is no consensus about what does and what does not constitute art. One widely accepted definition is the institutional theory of art as developed by Arthur Danto (1924-2013) and George Dickie (born 1926). The theory states that (and I am aware that this is a reductive summary) for something to be art, it must be accepted

as such by an ‘artworld’. This theory is useful for our consideration of the extreme limits to performance art, as it allows for a case-by-case examination. Both examples could be art, if widely accepted as such, but neither Solanas’ nor Stone’s attempted murders are widely accepted as art. Solanas never claimed that the shooting was a performance, while Stone did. Solanas’ actions leading up to the shooting seemed erratic, while Stone’s seemed calculated. This leads me to believe that Stone’s action is a more credible candidate for artistic appreciation than Solanas’. Nonetheless, both appear to have carried with them symbolic objects, which could point to artistic intent. While they both might be considered aesthetically, an artworld is needed to confirm the status of art. There is no need for consensus, but at least a few galleries, curators, critics, historians, academics, artists and so on are required to confer the status of art, and this has not happened, because of the lack of consent.

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BRETON’S CALL TO SHOOT
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