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Independent Inquiry Proposal: Feminism, Identity and Activism

When considering my role as a photographer it is fundamental for me to consider my position in society and how this is influenced by my gender. With buzzwords like feminism and activism coming to prominence recently, I am interested in delving down into the nuances of these areas and how these have both had an effect on my identity both professionally and personally. It is also fundamental for me to consider how these various theories and ideas have had an influence on the wider community of female artists, which I will explore before coming up with my final question. My practise has developed significantly since becoming more aware of the way gender works within the art world. The way I make work has developed in order to reflect this, which is why I think it is a good area to consider for my independent enquiry.

Feminism

Feminism is defined as 'the belief and aim that women should have the same rights and opportunities as men; the struggle to achieve this aim' (Oxford, 2022), yet it is still a word that people seem to be afraid to use as they believe it is a radical movement or a bold political statement. Issues around inequality because of gender are still extremely prominent within our society and it is important to discuss these issues with an over-arching title. This helps people to work towards a common cause and understand the various areas that all stem

from the basic inequalities. The issues that feminism covers are no different in the art world, 'Only since the Feminist Art Movement of the 1970s has women's art been taken seriously, and the contribution of women artists to image-making in popular culture is still rarely explored' (Brodsky, 2022). This highlights how although there has been some progress within art generally, there is still fundamental structures that need to be deconstructed and rewritten. An art collective in particular that works to speak out against these issues is the Guerilla Girls. In particular they produce activism work that challenges the canon, 'The conventional timeline of artists who are sometimes considered as ['Old Masters'](#) or 'Great Artists'.' (Gallery, 2016), within art history and how these are influenced by gender. Arguably their most famous piece of work is Fig.1 which looks at the disproportionate numbers of female artists compared to nude works containing females within galleries, an issue that is still just as relevant today.

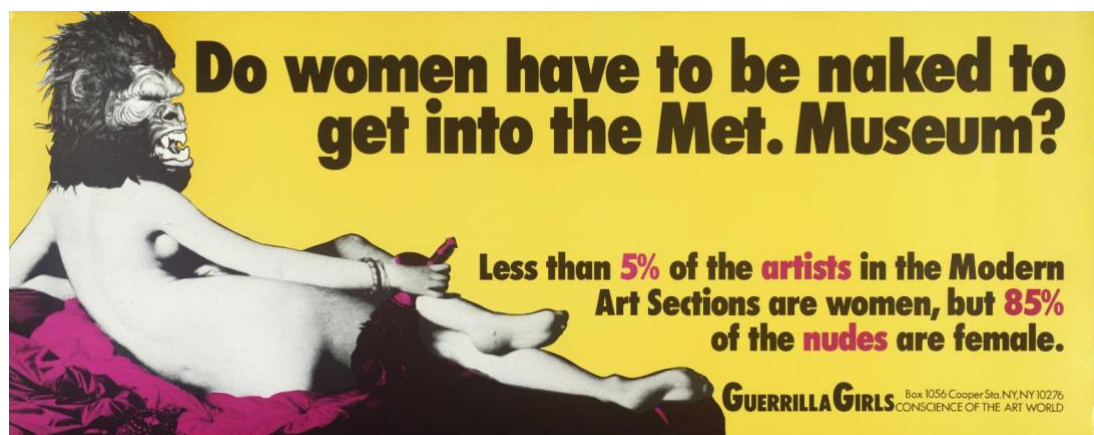


Fig 1.

This work is a perfect example of how there is still a level of gender inequality within the art world and art institutions and that the way the way art is perceived is predominantly through the male gaze. This is as a result of the aspects of society that are built from the idea of the patriarchy. A feminist representation within the art world is essential as it means the problem cannot be ignored and the more widespread the work of these artists is seen, the more likely a change will be achieved.

It is essential to recognise how often issues surrounding gender are missed as 'Sexism is still so insidiously woven into the institutional fabric, language, and logic of the mainstream art world that it often goes undetected' (Reilly, 2015). This is a statement that could also be applied to society as a whole and is one of the driving forces behind my decision to make art from a feminist viewpoint, as a collection of small actions can become the catalyst of a big change.

The Guerilla Girls are a collective that particularly highlight feminist issues within their work, but they are not the first to work with this subject matter. Another good example of a feminist art is Fig 2.

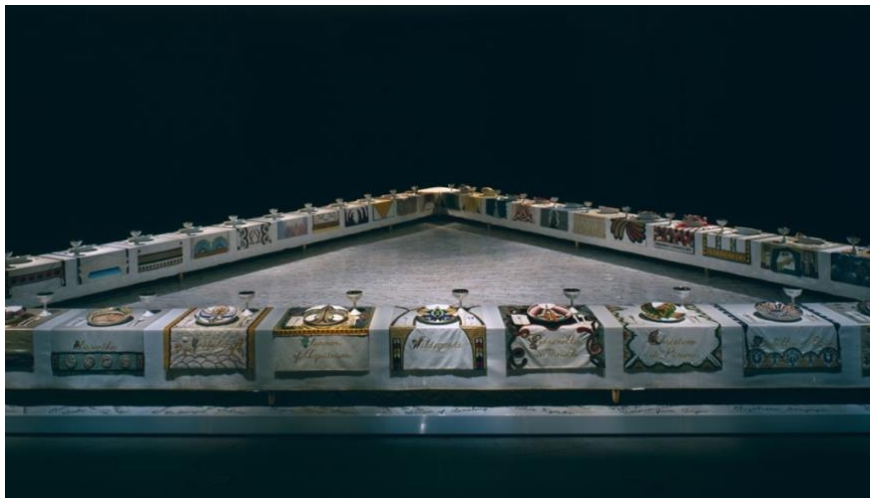


Fig 2.

Judy Chicago highlights the idea of female power whilst also provoking the conversation about why a piece of work like this was made in the first place. As a result of some of the genital like imagery this work was received controversially, which in itself makes a comment about the situation. People don't pass judgement on the many paintings containing nude figures of both genders, yet they feel uncomfortable when a woman creates work that she feels represents her body and the bodies of her peers. I am particularly interested in where this disparity comes from, why does it seem to be one rule for one and one rule for another? Additionally, as an art student who is currently studying within a cohort of majority females, how is the translation lost when it comes to the proportion of work shown in galleries? This is not a new issue as there seems to have always been a high uptake with women in art-based subjects. However, this seemed to be lost as 'the social and institutional contexts outside of the art college meant that women could not practice as artists in a way comparable to

their male colleagues' (Horne, 2017). This goes back to the idea of a patriarchal society and the impact this has on an artist's identity.

Identity

As my photography practise continues to develop through studying, I am realising how important my identity is and how it will always have a huge influence on the way I produce work. As a woman who is young, white, and straight I will perceive things in a way that is relative to these conditions, 'photography is as much of an interpretation of the world as paintings and drawings are' (Sontag, 2005). This idea is further heightened when taking into consideration each nuance of every individual personality which makes for an endless stream of interpretations. The complexity of identity is one that is explored through the work of Cindy Sherman and in particular her series *Untitled Film Stills*.



Fig 3.

Sherman recognises the influence her identity has and created this body of work as an expression of this, exploring ideas of femininity and the patriarchal society she finds herself in the 60s. I get a sense of freedom and play from this selection of work as she is using the guise of a film star to portray her own thoughts and feelings, as shown in Figure 3. This also links in with feminist issues because Sherman feels unable to express themselves without having a character to hide behind. All of the shots are set up in a way that vocalises Sherman's own thoughts of her identity and expectations surrounding her, particularly as a result of gender 'By photographing herself in such roles, Sherman inserts herself into a dialogue about stereotypical portrayals of women' (MoMA, 2022). This series of work is a perfect example of women wanting to break out of the societal norms pushed upon them and this is a movement that is even more prominent today.

It is particularly interesting the way that Sherman has deconstructed the idea of identity and has been quoted saying "I wish I could treat every day as Halloween and get dressed up and go out into the world as some eccentric character." (Sherman, 2016). This further demonstrates how although there may be pressure to conform with the construct of identity, there is also an opportunity within art to utilise the space in-between and create interesting work. However, Sherman has an advantage because she is a gender conforming woman which

allows her to be seen within this grey area rather than ignored. This work also depicts how identity and feminism are words and theories that are deeply entangled- especially within the art world and therefore my own practise.



Fig 4.

Through my own work I have also explored the complicated fact that it is unavoidable to discuss identity without also considering gender and the implications that this has. Figure 4. is a piece of work I created while studying my first year of university, although at the time I did not realise how impactful this piece would become to my practise and research nearing the end of the second year of that same degree. This piece of work discusses the taboo around menstruation and furthers the idea that women are expected to remain quiet

and accept the pills and remedies given to them in order to keep them quiet. Without realising it my identity and the way I experience life, have all had an impact on the way I produce work, and also importantly how I view other works. Within the art world identity is multifunctional 'It can be used to celebrate an identity, or it can be used as a platform to express and teach others what life can be like from another perspective' (Thomas, 2020).

It is important to acknowledge that as much as identity can be important for artists it can cause further issues with representation, as many races, ethnicities, gender identities, sexualities etc. are still excluded from the mainstream media surrounding art. There is still such a lack of representation when it comes to differing identities which needs to be challenged and changed in order for identity as a theme within art to be fully celebrated. This is where activist movements and work becomes essential in inciting a revolutionary change.

Activism

The previous keywords I have discussed in this essay are instrumental to my practise, however, I feel they are heavily supported by activism as a driving force. Activism within art can be defined in a number of ways, the way I view it is how it, was defined by Michelle Borge 'the photograph is not the end, rather the means to a solution even if the solution is nebulous' (Bogre, 2012). There is a need I believe more than ever to see the emergence of activist art in a world

that is heavily saturated with written opinions on social media. This will bring more recognition to issues that may be currently overlooked. In addition to new work, it is essential to acknowledge art that has been made in the past, yet is still extremely relevant to issues in modern society, the work of Barbara Kruger is a good example of this.

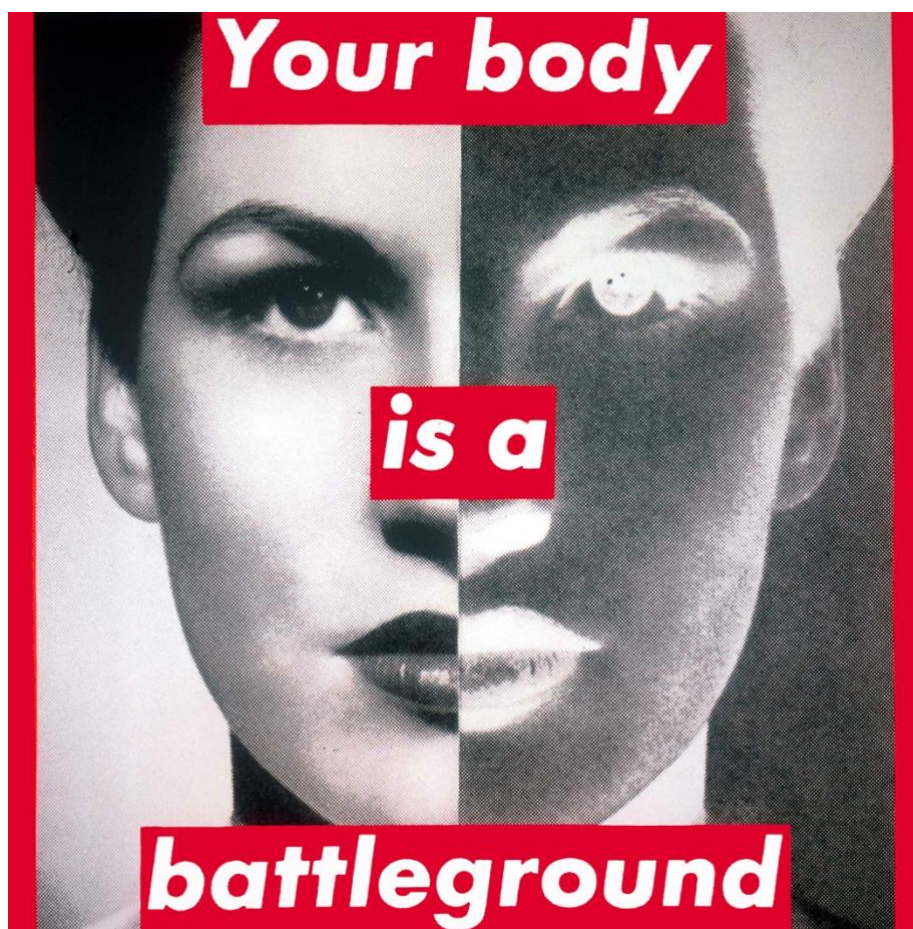


Fig 5.

Figure 5 is a piece of work produced that has a timeless feel to it. The work was originally made in direct response to a Women's March in 1989 supporting the women's ability to have reproductive freedom and therefore autonomy over

their bodies. However, it is still extremely relevant today within current issues and this form of art can just as easily be applied in a different way, perhaps as a result of Kruger's bold and symbolic way of working. 'I think it's important for me to somehow... try to picture-or objectify, or visualize-how it might feel to be alive today' (Kruger, 1991). Kruger's own words are a sobering reminder of why activism within art is important and somehow although the words were spoken in 1991, they seem even more relevant to the fast-paced society of today. Activist photography gives everyone a tool to express their identity and opinions on issues that may be overlooked or easily ignored otherwise, as a media it's a gateway of potential.

When considering this third key word I am also reminded of the work of Nan Goldin, who works considerably more within a documentary style and therefore speaks as an activist in a different form.



Fig 6.

Figure 6 perfectly demonstrates how what can initially be viewed as a documentary photograph, is actually a monumental piece of activism that has come from the decision by the artist to share their real-life experience of domestic violence. I am inspired by the practise of using personal life experiences and sharing them in order to help enact a change that is meaningful and also wide reaching. The decision by Goldin to use this photograph as the closing image of her project *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* is a powerful statement that, she will prevail. This is a message that many others will probably take with them into their own life experiences and demonstrates how documentary work can also function as a piece of activism.

It is possible to argue that all art has the potential to be seen as activism or at least have an essence of the idea, because we are all influenced by our own identity and experiences as I mentioned earlier in this essay. Any work produced can never be truly objective even if that is the aim because every single person will have their own way of perceiving things. As a result, these opinions will affect all aspects of a work from what we chose to have in focus, to what camera angle we use, 'we don't realise is that the creativity we already express is a form of political speech' (st-art, 2021). Every decision we make has a purpose and therefore every act of creativity must have some kind of meaning behind it, even if the creator themselves does not realise it.

Conclusion

The keywords which I have discussed in this essay are ones that I believe to be instrumental to my own practise. As an artist who is also a female, I am interested in how these factors effect myself, my work and the community as a whole. They all have an impact on the representation of female artists which is why I thought it was important for all the artists I included in this essay to be female. I want my dissertation to be a celebration of a collection of artists whose work I believe is important to be seen and at the same time, I aim to deconstruct some of the ways that the art world functions in deceiving ways. I am interested in how the key words I have selected function together within my own practise. I believe that they are all relative to each other and that feminism is the catalyst, identity is the reason and activism is the outcome. The pressure to be perfect as a woman in the limelight is immense. I am interested in how women represent themselves through their work and how this often differs to the way the establishment represents them, especially in relation to feminism, identity, and activism.

Proposed Question: How do women represent themselves through art, in comparison to how they are represented in the art world

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