

Proposed question for Independent Project

Gaze, Body and Sex

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Three Keywords: Gaze, Body, Sexuality

I will be investigating the meaning of the words; Gaze, Body and Sex. I have selected these three words in particular because they serve as issues many young female artists might consider and encounter whilst creating work related to feminism. This will be supported by a minimum of three images in conjunction with three key visual artists/philosophers within the context of Fine Art. These will include visual artists such as Sylvia Sleigh (Gaze) , Jenny Saville (body) and Betty Tompkins (sexuality). In conjunction with philosophers such as Simone De Beauvoir (Gaze), Naomi Wolf (Body) and Dr Jen Gunter (Sex). These artists and thinkers will offer a variety of contemporary and historical contexts to my work. It is my intention to explore these areas of interest via construction, discourse and critical analysis. My goal is to use the knowledge I accumulate through this research to form a conclusive question for my independent enquiry.

Gaze

“Look steadily and intently, especially in admiration, surprise, or thought.” (Oxford Dictionaries Online)



Sleight, S. (1974) Paul Rosano Reclining [Painting]. Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/sleight-paul-rosano-reclining-t14281> (Accessed: April 29th 2022)

The deconstruction of the term 'gaze', in this instance the male gaze can be found in the work of Silvia Sleigh. Paul Rosano Reclining is just one example of the reversal of the male artists and female muse relationship audiences have been so accustomed to viewing in the art world.

Sleigh's work is significant for highlighting the position of women in history. Be it a maid, mistress, muse or model. Simone de Beauvoir states in her 1949 book *The Second Sex* "The woman's body seems devoid of meaning without reference to the man". (De Beauvoir, 2015 p. 7) Sleigh subverts this notion through her work. As author Ian Chilvers explains in *The Oxford Concise Dictionary of Art and Artists*, Sleigh's serves the feminist cause by "presenting males as subject for female erotic delectation." (Chilvers 2003, p. 210)

It could be stated the depiction of male nudes is a commentary on the imbalance of genders in the artworld. Niomi Wolfe writes in her 2002 book *The Beauty Myth* "This pattern which leaves out women as individuals extends from high culture to popular mythology: 'Men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.'" (Wolfe, 2002 p.30)

Author Janice Loreck writes in a 2016 article for The Conversation:

“In the male gaze, woman is visually positioned as an “object” of heterosexual male desire. Her feelings, thoughts and her own sexual drives are less important than her being “framed” by male desire.”

(Loreck, J. 2016)

Not only does Sleigh acknowledge this gaze in her work but she makes a point to outright reject it. “It was very necessary to do this because women had often been painted as objects of desire in humiliating poses. I don’t mind the ‘desire’ part, it’s the ‘object’ that’s not very nice.” (Sleight, 1974)



Ingres, J, D (1862) Turkish Bath [Painting]. Available at:

https://www.artble.com/artists/jean_auguste_dominique_ingres/paintings/the_turkish_bath (Accessed April 29th 2022)

The Turkish Bath is an example of the many forms this misogynistic gaze can take. Considered by many to be Jean Dominique Ingres Magnum Opus, The Turkish bath depicts a series of female Harem bathers lounging by a bath. Ian Chilvers describes the piece as “Extraordinarily sensuous” (Chilvers 2003, p.296). Alice Kain writes in a 2015 article for UChicagoArts “Ingres did not paint his bathers from life; instead his painting is a fantasy composed from his other works and draft sketches.” (Kain, A 2015).



Sleigh, S (1973) The Turkish Bath [Painting]. Available at <https://arts.uchicago.edu/blogs/smart/sylvia-sleigh-lawrence-alloway-and-turkish-bath> (Accessed April 29 2022)

Sleigh undoubtedly follows in Ingres footsteps with her Turkish Bath piece, even going so far as the two sharing the same name. The painting still deals with nudity in portraiture by depicting a multitude of male bathers. Therefore, it could be argued Sleight's work is not as progressive as we might have thought. Objectification is clearly still taking place. Our gaze is not being changed, only the subject in view.

However, there is one key difference. As Kain writes “Sleigh chose to paint men in her life—her friends, fellow artists and her husband Lawrence Alloway. These are men that she found to be beautiful as well as intellectually stimulating.” Kain writes. While many can take away from this. While the case can still be made Sleigh’s work might not be as progressive when viewed from a contemporary lens. But it cannot be denied that her work is still a radical and subversive take on gender and contemporary male identity. When asked about her work Sleigh states “I wanted to give my perspective, portraying both sexes with dignity and humanism.”

This is not the first instance of Ingres' work being appropriated to highlight the pervasive and ongoing gender imbalance he helped to maintain. In 1989, over 15 years after Sleigh’s Turkish Bath piece was created. The Gorilla Girls produced a screenprint of Ingres’ famous work *La Grande Odalisque* 1814, titled ‘Do Women Have To Be Naked To Get Into the Met. Museum?’ It states that “Less than 5% of the artists in the modern art section are women but 85% of the nudes are female” (Tate, 2020). Sleigh further addresses this imbalance herself stating in an interview for Myartspace; “there is still more that needs to be done in order for men and women to be treated as equals in the art world.” (Sleigh, 2007)

Through this deconstruction of the term gaze several considerations of other sub-genres of the term have generated such as, performance, gender, femininity, masculinity and androgyny. All of which shall be considered for further investigation following this proposal.

Body

“The physical structure, including the bones, flesh, and organs, of a person or an animal.” (Oxford Dictionaries Online) Jenny Saville is a key visual practitioner through her raw unrelenting depictions of the female form.



Saville, J. Lutchford, G. (1995) *Closed Contact 10* [Photograph].

(Accessed April 25 2022)

The photograph depicted above is a collaboration between Jenny Saville and fashion photographer Glen Lutchford. This photo is a direct confrontation towards the preconceived notions of female beauty, with Saville herself as the model. In her 1990 book *The Beauty Myth*, Naomi Wolf calls into question the relationship between female beauty and female liberation as a whole. "We are in the midst of a violent backlash against feminism that uses images of female beauty as a political weapon against women's advancement." (Wolf, N 1990 p.2). It was only following her observations of several plastic surgeries was Saville compelled to express the violence and pain that was inflicted upon these bodies in her own works. Not only through her photographs of abstracted flesh but through her classical configuration through painterly gestures.



Saville, J (1992) Propped [Painting] (Accessed April 25 2022)

Propped is a revealing self portrait of Saville. Her naked body rests atop a phallic stool, seemingly in front of a mirror. Her bulbous breasts swell between her arms as her hands forcefully grip her thighs. This portrait is a total departure from the idealized female form we are so used to seeing depicted. What many would view as bodily imperfections are on full display. Her blemishes are further enhanced by the 7-by-6 foot scale of the canvas. Her body is angled in such a way that the viewer has no choice but to look upwards as she imposingly stares back. It is in this instance the subject is dominating the viewer. Wolf continues to write that “Pleasure had to be overridden by an

urgent social expedient that would make women's bodies into the prisons that their homes no longer were." (Wolf N, 1990 p. 59) Saville breaks this notion through the mere embrace of her own body. She is a 'prisoner' no more.

This sentiment is further compounded by the faint mirrored text inscribed across the canvas and the skin of the figure. Almost reminiscent of the scrawlings of Cy Twombly's artwork. The text reads : "If we continue to speak in this sameness—speak as men have spoken for centuries, we will fail each other. Again, words will pass through our bodies, above our heads—disappear, make us disappear". (Saville, 1992) The text is in reference to the works of feminist writer Luce Irigaray. Saville chooses to go against the grain of her contemporaries and create something entirely unique with her paintings. Something that speaks true to her.

This encouragement from Saville is reminiscent of the writings of feminist literary theorist Elaine Showalter. In her book, *Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness* she writes:

"The feminist obsession with correcting, modifying, supplementing, revising, humanizing, or even attacking male critical theory keeps us dependent upon it and retards our progress in solving our own theoretical problems."

(Showalter, 1989, p.260)

In many ways, Saville is rejecting the male gaze by putting herself in the center of the canvas. At long last, the muse is allowing her body to be viewed on her own terms. Saville is becoming the heroine of the story, her body is no longer an object. "Women who were preoccupied with their own desirability were less likely to express and seek out what they themselves desired." (Wolf, N 1990 p. 52)

As previously discussed, Feminist artists such as Guerrilla Girls exposed the male gaze through conceptual artworks. Silvia Sleight did express herself through paint however, this expression was a subversion of the male gaze. Jenny Saville on the other hand, reclaimed the female form from the long standing patriarchy of the artworld. She appropriated the works of her male contemporaries to create an unglorified depiction of the female experience.

This study of the Body, several sub-genre terms such as Beauty, Anatomy, Identity, Fertility, Ageism, Identity-and-Self Harm have become apparent. All of which can be pondered for further consideration for the subsequent conclusive question following this proposal.

Sexuality

“The imagery of feminist art often focuses on sexuality, both in celebrating female eroticism and attacking male sexual violence.” (Chilver’s, I. 2003 pg. 210) Betty Tompkins’ use of her husband’s pornography has led to the creation of paintings, drawings and collages can be viewed as a radical celebration of female graphic sexuality. In addition, her work heavily incorporates language and text to address the ongoing objectification and misogyny within the artworld.



Tompkins, B (2018) *Apologia (Artemisia Gentileschi #3)*, 2018 [Acrylic on Canvas].

(Accessed May 1 2022)

This attack on male sexual violence is easy to pin point in Tompkins Women Words series. It is here again we see a female artist breathing new life into famous artworks from the past. However, Tompkins' work showcases something different. She does not revive works by male artists in an attempt to subvert the male gaze, nor does she appropriate the works of female contemporaries (As previously mentioned with Jenny Saville and Silvia Sleight). On the contrary, Tompkins brings a renewed energy to female artists and artworks which have been overlooked in the past.

Tompkins' rendition of Artemisia Gentileschi's 1620 piece Jael and Sisera is a perfect example of this radical sisterhood between two female artists from different periods in time. Gentileschi has received renewed attention surrounding her art. Through her strong depictions of dominant and powerful female characters and her many artworks evoking a sense of "pictorial 'revenge' for her sufferings." (Chilver's, I. 2003 pg. 231) Following her rape at the hands of her art teacher. Tompkins is also sure to use works by other lesser known female artists and photographers such as Angelica Kauffman, Judith Leyster and Gertrude Käsebier. This is a radical action as it showcases how pervasive the issues of misogyny have been since the dawn of time. Through Women Word's these female artists are at long last given a voice.

Niomi Wolf's *The Beauty Myth* states "The current allocation of power is sustained by a flood of hostile and violent sexual images, but threatened by imagery of mutual eroticism or female desire." (Wolf, N 1990 p.44) No better is this sentiment exemplified than through the work of Betty Thompkins; Specifically her large scale photorealistic graphic paintings of heterosexual intercourse, aptly titled *Fuck Paintings*.



Tompkins, B (2018) , *I'm going to...* [Photograph].

(Accessed May 1 2022)

In the 2019 book *The Vagina Bible*, Dr Jen Gunter notes:

“Female anatomy is erroneously labeled as “dirty”, and from an early age, girls are given messages about what a patriarchal society has determined a “nice girl should not do”.

(Gunter, J 2019. p.29)

This statement highlights our cultures desire to compartmentalize female sexuality and emotion into two binaries. The Madonna and the Whore. “In *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir writes that no group ever defines itself as One without immediately setting up the Other opposite itself.” This is yet another example of society pitting females against one another.

“It is still apparent that there is an officially enforced double standard for men’s and women's nakedness in mainstream cultures that bolsters power inequities.” (Wolf, N 1990 p.46) Several Museums turned away Judy Chicago’s famous collaborative piece *The Dinner Party* for its stylized depictions of the genitals of important women through history.

“Censorship also applies to what kind of sexual imagery and information can circulate: sexual violence to women is not obscene whereas female sexual curiosity is.” (Wolf, N 1990 p.) This heavily plays into the reason why Tompkins name was so obscured in the

artworld until recently. As she explains in a 2018 interview for Artnet News, “My sex work wasn’t shown for almost 40 years,” (Tompkins, B 2018) It appears that with the rise of the #MeToo Movement has finally caught up with her work and radical messages. To say Tompkins' work was ahead of its time is a gross understatement. However, censorship of such expressions of female sexual agency and desire is severely damaging to a woman's position in society. Gunter further emphasizes this point: “Not knowing your anatomy, how it works and how to make it work is disempowering and puts women at a disadvantage in a sexual relationship” (Gunter, J 2019 p. 29)

Following this exploration of Female Sexuality, several questions have been generated with several possible subjects for further arguments. Triggering questions such as ‘What is the relationship between pornography and sexual violence?’ In addition to this, several sub-genre words have come to light. These include, pornography, desire, censorship, fetishes and sexual violence.

The subsequent exploration and contextualizing of these three key words has led to the inception of multiple questions, in addition to several sub-genre terms relating to the development of a cohesive question. The terms Gaze, Body and Sex feed very well into one another. How has the progression of female sexuality through the past century influenced Feminist Art? Is the current question proposed for the independent research document. However, this might act as a mere foundation into a more developed argument. It is rather early to say. This is before even mentioning the additional sub questions that have materialized from this proposal which can be built upon further.

These include, 'Is Elaine Showalter correct in her rejection of the feminist obsession with correcting male critical theory?', 'Is the female body a source of empowerment or shame?' 'To what degree has the notion of female beauty stunted the feminist art movement?' 'What is the relationship between pornography and sexual violence?' 'What defines pornography in the visual arts?'.

Moreover, Concepts such as performance, gender, femininity, masculinity, androgyny, beauty, anatomy, identity, fertility, ageism, identity, self harm, pornography, desire, dominance, censorship, fetishes and sexual violence. These sub-genre terms will be considered and researched at length for my independent research document next year.

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