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Figure 2: *Realisation* from the series *Remodelling Photo History* (1981-1982) [Gelatin silver print]. Available at: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/399902> . (Date Accessed: November 30th 2023).

Figure 3: Sherman, C. *Untitled Film Still #2* from the series *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980) [Gelatin silver print]. Available at: <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/56515> . (Date Accessed: November 25th 2023).

Figure 4: Kruger, B. *Untitled (We Don't Need Another Hero)* (1987) [Screenprint on vinyl]. Available at: <https://whitney.org/collection/works/34103> . (Date Accessed: November 30th 2023).

Choose a theme, movement, or selection of artists that relate to your practice or interests, and construct a 2,500-word essay. Critically assess primary themes, key writers, and relevant practitioners.

How did the feminist art movement challenge female representation and stereotypes through the medium of photography?

The medium of photography has been recognised as a powerful tool for social and political commentary; it has played a significant role in challenging female representation and stereotypes in society. Photographers have used their art to push boundaries, question societal norms, and redefine the way women are portrayed, challenging stereotypes within society.

The feminist art movement, which emerged in the 1960s and 1970s, played a vital role in challenging female stereotypes embedded within society. Feminist artists used a wide range of mediums, including photography, painting and performance, to make work that strived to combat sexism, and expose femininity to be “a masquerade or set of poses adopted by women to conform to societal expectations” (Museum of Modern Art, 2023). Female artists sought to challenge the male-dominated world of art, and the patriarchal society they resided in, by using their art to address issues of gender inequality perpetuated through stereotypes. The movement emerged during a time of significant social and political change; a time where the women's liberation movement was gaining support, and gender inequality within society was coming to the attention of the public.

One notable artist whose photographic work contributed to the feminist art movement is Martha

Rosler. According to Rosler, “feminism is a central angle” in all of her work, as she believes that “feminism is a viewpoint that demands a rethinking of questions of power in society and thus has undeniable potency” (Rosler. M, 2012). Rosler used conceptual techniques to “critique beauty standards imposed on women by the media” and revealed the sexual exploitation of women (Caesar. C, 2001). Her work criticises the patriarchal society, and representation within consumerism and advertising. One of Rosler's most notable works is *Body Beautiful, or Beauty Knows No Pain* (1966-1972). Taking and reassembling images from popular media sources, such as glossy print ads and men's magazines, Rosler created a series of thirty-two photomontages. Through repurposing magazine photography and appropriating elements of pop culture, Rosler addresses the external pressures and expectations that a patriarchal society places on women. The series aims to deconstruct and challenge the representation of women in popular magazines. By taking images that were originally intended for male consumption and using them in her work in this way, Rosler is creating a gesture of defiance.



Figure 1

Figure 1, titled *Transparent Box or Vanity Fair* comes from Rosler's *Body Beautiful, or Beauty*

Knows No Pain series. The image shows two women who are modelling lingerie, originally as part of an advertisement, stood against a pink background. The women are posed seductively, around a transparent box, whilst shielding their faces almost concealing their identities. The woman on the right has an image of breasts placed over her image. By repurposing advertising images, Rosler is commenting on the representation of women within advertising. The combination of the women shielding their faces and the overlaid image of the breasts convey the idea that the image is advertising and selling the women's bodies, in a sexual manner, rather than the lingerie itself. The women are staged and packaged like products, which speaks to the way women are objectified within a patriarchal society. To add, the women are both turned away from the transparent box that stands in the centre of the image. This could represent the women breaking out of the transparent case that a patriarchal society has packaged them in, for viewing pleasure and marketing. The women are moving, turning away, from the way that society advertises them in a transparent box to be viewed, and escaping this way of representation. Yet although they are trying to escape this, they are still posed with their bodies being advertised. By creating an image which depicts and represents women in this way, Rosler is appropriating common tropes within advertising, as an act of defiance.

Photographer and writer Jo Spence is another artist who was particularly involved in the feminist art movement. During the 1970s, her work took a turn from more commercial photography as she began to adopt a political approach to her art form, specifically focussing on feminist themes (Tate, 2023). Spence herself took a role in challenging female stereotypes within the art world. From 1974 to 1980, Spence was a founder and member of The Hackney Flashers, a collective of majority photographers who defined themselves broadly as socialist-feminists. Spence founded the group with fellow photographic Neil Martinson, as they discussed creating a body of photographic work around women working in Hackney (Hackney Flashers, no date). Spence's involvement in founding this group alone advocated for women's place in the art world, challenging the roles women were expected to take in society. Spence was also able to challenge the representation of

women in society through her project *Remodelling Photo History* (1982). This work is a collaboration between Spence and Terry Dennett, who came together through their joint interests in photography and politics. Spence and Dennett hoped to “raise presently unvoiced questions”, which would come about through their “overlapping philosophies” of historical materialism, brought to the project by Dennett, and women in a class society, which is an area of interest for Spence (Spence. J, and Dennett. T, 1982). Working together, the pair completed a body of work, which they referred to as 'phototheatre'. The images are realistic photos which have been staged and constructed as theatrical images (MACBA, n.d). *Remodelling Photo History* criticises female stereotypes, along with the trope of the female nude throughout art history, and how it is traditionally presented from a masculine perspective. This idea is known as the male gaze, a concept described by John Berger. Berger explained that in art “men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at” (Berger. J, 1972, p.47). Berger discusses how males perceive the female body, and how this automatically dehumanises and objectifies them, reducing them to subjects for men to admire. In this way, Spence's work is connected to Rosler's, as both rely heavily on the concept of the male gaze to inform their work, and how they challenge female representation in art.



Figure 2

Figure 2, *Realisation*, is an image taken from *Remodelling Photo History*. The image, which is black and white, shows a woman, Spence, wearing a mask. The mask has a positive expression, with a smile, and also appears to have painted-on eyebrows. On top of the mask sits a short wig. The subject is wearing rubber gloves and holding a bottle of 'Sqezy' washing-up liquid. The subject also wears a wedding ring. Behind the subject, there are two posters, one of which has the caption 'Capitalism Works' and appears to be a propaganda style poster. This photo represents female stereotypes surrounding the domestic role of women. The mask connotes an idea of hidden identity. To add to this, the subject is seen holding the bottle of washing up liquid close to her face, almost as if it is associated with her own identity, a part of who she is. Whilst the subject is masked, the washing up liquid almost replaces the woman's face as her identity.

In her project, *Untitled Film Stills* (1977-1980), artist Cindy Sherman addresses and challenges female stereotypes and representation. *Untitled Film Stills* is a collection of sixty-nine black and white self-portrait images, in which Sherman poses as a fictitious character in a range of scenarios, with each image looking like it was taken from a movie. Her inspiration behind this project came from 1950s/1960s cinema, namely Hitchcock and Hollywood B picture movies. In each frame, Sherman draws on cinematic conventions by presenting herself as various female archetypes. Feminist film theorist and writer Laura Mulvey argued that Sherman's work "stays on the side of enigma" (Mulvey. L, 1991), however due to the political nature of the time her work was created, and the 1970s being a particularly significant period with regards to feminist art, Sherman's work has been interpreted in relation to female representation.

There is an argument that her work "examines and distorts femininity as a social construct" (ArtNet, n.d). This argument is supported by theorist Douglas Crimp, who has described the series as "a hybrid of photography and performance art that reveals femininity to be an effect of representation" (Ricci. B, n.d). Sherman creates this meaning, by dressing herself in a way that represents

cinematic female stereotypes, appropriating common film archetypes. By utilising mass-media techniques, Sherman is raising questions that surround the male gaze, a term coined by John Berger, and heavily expanded by theorist Laura Mulvey. Mulvey's male gaze theory suggests that the male gaze "projects its fantasy onto the female figure which is styled accordingly", as the woman in film "holds the look, plays to and signifies male desire". Mulvey states that "the presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film" (Mulvey. L, 2009). Mulvey's theory of the male gaze suggests that women are only shown in patriarchal terms, and in relation to men. Consequently, women are sexually objectified, stripped of power, independence and status. Sherman's *Untitled Film Stills* project challenges the representation of women by subverting the male gaze. Furthermore, Sherman also challenges female representation by playing on the idea of femininity as a performance. Through doing so, she places emphasis on the idea of femininity being a social construct.



Figure 3

Figure 3 shows *Untitled Film Still #2*. This self-portrait is taken from behind Sherman, as she

stands just off the centre of the frame, in a bathroom wearing a towel. Sherman's face can be seen in the reflection of the mirror on the wall, which she looks into, looking at her reflection. Her hand is posed rather dramatically, just below her chin. Her expression and stance give the impression that she is admiring herself in the mirror. The left side of the frame is interrupted by what appears to be a doorway, which makes it seem like the viewer is watching Sherman in the bathroom, observing without her knowledge. This links to John Berger's idea that within art "men look at women. Women watch themselves being looked at" (1972, p.47). What Berger seems to be describing here links to the male gaze, which can be understood through this image. What this image shows is a woman being watched, as she watches herself, just as Berger described. The composition of the image mimics and appropriates the male gaze. Sherman, by acknowledging the male gaze, is undermining its power. Furthermore, Sherman seems to be presenting herself in a very stereotypically feminine way; she is admiring herself in the mirror, and very concerned with her appearance. This adds another layer to the image, as Sherman is not only appropriating the male gaze but also arguably acknowledging traditional female stereotypes. As described by Judith Williamson, Sherman's images are "a with parody of media images of women", this can certainly be seen within *Untitled Film Still #2*. Williamson also pointed out that viewers "tend to project stereotypical female qualities onto the women in photos in accordance with the costumes and surroundings chosen by Sherman" (Williamson. J, 2006). In this case, Sherman has chosen a bathroom as the setting for this image. Combining this with her own expression reflected in the mirror, viewers are likely to project female stereotypes about women that are embedded into society whilst interpreting this image. However, alongside her other images Sherman is pushing viewers to reconsider the representation of women and question these societal stereotypes.

Similarly to Martha Rosler, and her technique of appropriating advertising to challenge female representation and stereotypes, conceptual artist Barbara Kruger made feminist comments through her work which mimicked advertising campaigns. Kruger, although not creating work during the 1960s or 1970s, was heavily influenced by the feminist art movement. Working as a postmodern

artist, Kruger brought ideas and messages of feminism into her work. Kruger is a committed feminist, who draws on inequalities of gender and the skewed social relations they create to inform a significant portion of her work (Squires, C. 1995, p.59). Kruger worked as a graphic designer before moving into photography, and the influence of her graphic design background is prevalent within her work, which is arguably what makes her work so distinctive and unique (Tate Modern, 2022). Using styles and methods from graphic design, Kruger creates work which appropriates an advertising style to push audiences to question female stereotypes and reconsider the roles and representation of women in society. To achieve this, Kruger uses archived images which present an idea typical of the time they are from and contradicts this by adding a caption in a white font on a red box, which contradicts the original meaning behind the image. This juxtaposition between the original image and Kruger's caption creates an interesting dynamic, which causes a viewer to pause and consider the meaning behind the work. Kruger's method means that her sourced images are stripped of their original meaning, as she injects them with a new meaning through her caption, which advocates for equality within society.



Figure 4

One of Kruger's most well-known works is shown in figure 4, *Untitled (We Don't Need Another Hero)* (1987). The black and white image depicts a young boy flexing his bicep, as a young girl looks intrigued, pointing towards his muscle. The young boy's expression connotes strength and confidence, whilst the young girl looks charmed at the boy's efforts to impress her. The original image, which has subtle underlying elements of sexism embedded within, came from an American

advertising campaign. This is suggested by the composition of the image and the poses of the subjects, which conveys and reinforces the societal stereotypes of women looking to men to be figures of strength who hold power over them. However, Kruger was able to overturn the sexist undertones of this image by adding the caption "We don't need another hero". Kruger's caption transforms the meaning of the image, as it now seems ironic when juxtaposed with this caption. Although the image perpetuates traditional gender roles embedded within society, Kruger's use of the term "we" almost works in the same way propaganda does by collectively talking about women as a whole, stating that women don't need a hero; not just any hero, but not another hero, referring to how men already act as heroes within society. Kruger's choice of image is interesting, as by choosing an image of children that conveys stereotypically sexist ideas, Kruger is acknowledging how gender roles and stereotypes are perpetuated in society: advertising campaigns reinforce these ideas to us from a young age. However, by injecting this image with a new meaning Kruger is breaking that cycle of sustaining societal stereotypes.

To conclude, it is clear that the role photography played during the feminist art movement was significant. Photography gave women another form of media to use, to subvert stereotypes rooted deep within society and assert ownership over their own image and bodies. The work of the artists outlined in this essay is connected by not only their theme, but their stances on art as a political tool, although this is to varying extents. Martha Rosler, Jo Spence and Barbara Kruger's work makes their political agendas very clear, as their work is upfront about this. Both Rosler and Kruger look at advertising and examine the stereotypes perpetuated within consumerism, with Kruger looking at this through the lens of feminist discourse. Spence worked with semiotics to convey stereotypes about women held within society, in a way that was very obvious to an audience. Conversely, Cindy Sherman's work discusses her political agenda much more subtly, in a way that her work is more about the art. Although each artist approached the topic in a different way, they all address issues and inequality that women face in society.

The work of female photographers is something I am interested in, and looking to for inspiration to inform my practice. Although society and women's place within society is vastly different now to what it was during the feminist art movement, there are still elements of gender inequality now. This is why I think it is important to continue to push for change, and bring attention to these issues.

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