

Question 1: Is art the best filter for understanding the idea of the present? Explore two artists discussed in the series who you think best express what it means to be alive in the world now.

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The world around us is a constantly changing matter, always evolving and reacting to its surroundings. This in turn affects the art being created in society. It consistently responds to the environment we live in, whether consciously or not. However, its ability to be a fully representational source for showing the present is debatable. In this essay, I will be exploring how art can inform people of current situations and its effectiveness in doing so. I will be researching two artists and analysing how their artwork reacts to current day and how relevant it is in showing the climate of contemporary times.

‘Jenny Saville has indeed returned painting to its origins at the same time that she has made it new’ (Nochlin, 2003). Saville has been highly inspirational in contemporary art. Her unique style of painting in relation to her subject matter of bodies creates an interesting dialogue. What is body image like in society today? What kind of relationship do people, women in particular have with their own flesh?



Fig.1

(Saville, 1992)

Body image and how we perceive ourselves is an important issue in today's society, where we are constantly surrounded with ideas of what our bodies ‘should’ look like. Social media has opened a new platform for our own self confidence issues to be exploited in turn for money and advertising. Saville has commented that, ‘Beauty is always associated with the male fantasy of what the female body is’ (Saville, 1994). In a world where we are made to feel ashamed, Saville offers a moment for us to remember that bodies are allowed to be dimpled and lumpy, and often are. By almost exaggerating these bodily features, we as viewers are forced to remember and recollect over the figures we see every day with our own eyes, instead of filtered through media. It’s refreshing to remember how aesthetically beautiful all bodies can be and Saville is very effective in displaying this

through her practice. A good example being, 'Propped' pictured above. Saville appears to view bodies differently to others. She sees them plainly as flesh, dropped from stigmas and opinions.



Fig. 2
(Sassoferrato, 1609-1685)



Fig. 3
(Saville, 2011)

As well as these artworks, Saville's work in association to the relationship mother's hold with their children is a really interesting interpretation on the theme. Mothers still face a lot of pressure over their ability to raise children, despite the changing times where the role of parenting should, but isn't always, equal. Artwork following the relationship between mother and child is one of the oldest art themes explored, especially in painting. Most famously, we are often exposed to the contact between the Virgin Mary and Child Jesus, which is pictured above. This ancient outlook has withstood time and has imposed the ideology that women as parents should be perfectly capable and caring at all times, as well as being able to raise respectful, tamed children with ease. Saville's painting, 'Mothers', (figure 3) questions this ideology in a direct way.

A mother is shown holding an infant. However, Saville appears to have followed the figures as they move, producing an image that almost appears to show a woman holding two children. This is due to Saville's movements in caring for the child as the baby is perhaps rocked from side to side and adjusted to be more comfortable. The infant on the left-hand side in the painting looks in distress, holding a face that looks seconds from tears, whereas the child in the right-hand side looks curious and calm. This reminds us how fast children's emotions can change and their unawareness to being observed, acting as they would in any other environment. The mother's face is an interesting point in the piece. She looks tired and restless, constantly supporting the moving baby and trying to gauge and comfort his emotions. This raw view into parenting offers a far more realistic view I believe. Saville

reminds us that the mother is more than just a mother. She's a woman and a human, her role of being a parent doesn't equate to her whole being. We can see her struggle which we can all emphasis and relate to if put in the same position. The mother isn't poised and carefully dressed holding a gentle smile as Mary did. The baby isn't content on her chest, resting as Jesus was. They're living and struggling, which I think is a good example of how modern parenting is.



Fig. 4
(Saville, 2005)

Furthermore, Saville has tackled issues surrounding gender identity in her artwork. The piece, *Passage* (2004-2005), is an effective example of this. We can see a nude woman sitting confidently and comfortably, staring at the viewer. We can see that the subject of the painting has both a penis and breasts. Saville approaches the subject of transgender with undoubted certainty, the confidence of the pose shows the artists lack of doubt. Saville seems unfearful of how this painting may be perceived, instead focusing on how there needs to be more exposure of transgender people. The two forms of genitalia are completely unhidden, challenging us as viewers to look at the woman's body, and thus challenge our own views surrounding gender. The subject is painted as they are, their body looks as many of ours looks, just with a slight change which isn't particularly highlighted. Saville emphasises the fact that this woman is a regular human. The way the paint is applied further makes the subject look natural with light and muted colours. When she layers the paint, 'it's like adding layers of flesh' (Saville, 1994). This painting shows further importance to Saville's relevance as an artist as it shows her interest in contemporary bodies. She seems determined in encouraging viewers to appreciate their natural bodies, but if it takes surgery to give people what feels natural to them, that's an important thing to acknowledge.

Artwork addressing transgender issues are important in displaying the issues of contemporary times. Gender identity has always existed, but only recently been properly addressed. Only in 2004 did the Gender Recognition Act become law which allowed transgender people to legally change their sex and have this change recognised in legal terms (Jeffreys, 2008). It's important for all bodies to be embraced and celebrated, Saville is key in some of the social changes being made to recognise these issues.

Choosing Saville as an artist to explore in relation to contemporary art seemed appropriate as she tackles issues such as feminism with undoubted confidence. John Gray described her work as 'point(ing) to areas of sensation that ordinary experience struggles to close off' (Gray, 2005). Her approach to the human form is natural and honest, no filters attached in trying to make bodies seem slimmer or more toned when she paints. The way Saville applies paint is unapologetic, harsh lines and difference between light and dark further draws the viewer's attention to the shapes made naturally by human flesh.



Fig. 5

(Büchel, 2017)

Christoph Büchel also seemed like an appropriate artist to write about in terms of understanding the present day through art. Büchel questions our views and opinions on society, especially in regards to less advantaged people such as refugees and homeless people. He asks the viewer if all our spaces are being used in the best intent. Should we have vast rooms to display art in galleries with people sleeping on the streets outside?

Büchel's piece 'From the Collection | Verlust der Mitte', pictured above, is a good example of his political involvement in art. The piece is made up of 3 sections which occupy a full floor of Ghent's City Museum for Contemporary Art. It's an excellent representation of the differences of lives and places. The first part of the piece is a room easily identifiable as an art gallery space. Clean white walls with a muted, modern floor. The lighting is white and fills the space entirely, meaning nothing is hidden from the viewer. Of course, the most recognisable factor of the space are the bright canvases hanging on the walls. However, we can instantly see that this is not an ordinary gallery space. Four lines of mattresses are lying on the floor. Alongside them, bags filled with what we assume to be belongings. When placed in a different environment, these beds and bags would bring us to the assumption that we are in a homeless shelter of sorts. The beds made up with individual identities, suitcases packed with personal belongings. Sleeping arrangements are always a very personal aspect, it's a time where we are vulnerable. Seeing this displayed almost makes the viewer feel like they are intruding on people's personal space. 'The effect of infusing the two spaces, one into the other, is disturbing, apocalyptic even. It suggests a state of emergency, a loss of code, a violated integrity.' (Dessau, 2017)

This piece can be linked to Saville's artwork as both suggest bodies. Saville's being more figurative, while Büchel hints at bodies without actually physically including them. The sleeping bags imply at bodies that may sleep there. Both explore the subject sensitively, in respect for those who's lives they are exploring.

However, in the context of a gallery space, we feel more comfortable to inspect the environment. By mixing these two 'worlds', Büchel forces the viewer to think about our current social situation. In art galleries, we often feel safe, enough so that we can enjoy the artwork. However, we often forget about the life-altering events that are happening to those around us. The beds are representative of refugees and the displacement they often face after trying to find shelter. Büchel displayed the work very recently, in 2017, a time where these problems desperately needed to be addressed. When a person gains refugee status, they are entitled to just 28 days to find accommodation 'before they are evicted from asylum accommodation'. Across the globe, 'over 65 million people... have had to flee their homes' (Refugee Council, 2017). We cannot ignore such a vast number of people being misplaced and mistreated, yet somehow, we manage to the majority of the time. 'From the Collection | Verlust der Mitte' reminds us of this ongoing issue by bringing in a personal element of the room looking lived in. We can imagine the beds being our own, reminding us that this situation could be ours in different circumstances. The piece is also a stark reminder in how our public buildings are used. Is it acceptable for people to be sleeping in doorways when a closed and safe

gallery rests not far away? Büchel questions why we aren't exploring these possibilities more, is it due to funding or our prejudices towards those without homes? It also questions the lack of involvement the art community has in terms of assisting misplaced people.



Fig. 6
(Büchel, 2011)

Another piece that is relevant to current politics is Büchel's 'Piccadilly Community Centre'. The installation was located in Piccadilly, London and has its own website claiming that they aim to - 'enhance the quality of life for local people by providing educational, recreational, health, well-being and leisure opportunities' (Piccadilly Community Centre, 2011). Although not a lot was said by Büchel about the piece, the viewer can dissect and interpret a lot of meaning behind it. One observation of the artwork is that it's representational of the lack of community spirit that English towns and cities tend to have in contemporary times, London in particular. By creating this piece, Büchel is bringing awareness to the subject. The world is one that is now plagued with more and more use and dependency on social media. Although this does allow for many advantages, a fear is present that people may be deprived from face to face conversations. Community centres have been gradually closing in recent years, through his piece, Büchel is encouraging the viewer to be aware of the benefits that can be brought to an area by a community centre.

Piccadilly Community Centre also pushes our view on what art can be. Although Büchel created the idea and notion of having the centre, without people to visit it, it wouldn't have the same affect. The visitors of the centre become part of the art in a way. Prior to the building being converted into a community centre, it was a London gallery. This brings the viewers' attention to how our buildings are used in the same way as 'From the Collection | Verlust der Mitte' did. Should we be using these large spaces in central locations to display paintings and sculptures when they could house opportunities of helping others. The direct opposition between the two uses is almost humorous,

how quickly a formal art gallery can be transformed into a community space, filled with domestic products and the occasional piece of tacky decor. It's interesting to survey human life and interaction this way, to contemplate how people simply live.

The viewer can relate to the piece personally, as they'll find an aspect which they can directly find a link to. The space also involves a closed down business, perhaps reminding the viewer of the large amount of small businesses have closed in recent times, with the expansion of bigger corporations filling the need for them. In its entirety, Büchel reminds the viewer of how social interactions are being increasingly replaced by technology. The community centre seems aged, which shows that these activities no longer really exist. We are left as viewers questioning, 'Is it art – or life just tweaked a bit?' (Searle, 2011). In contemporary times, there is a harsher shift towards social media and technology, Büchel reflects this here.



Fig. 7

(Büchel, 2019)

Finally, I wanted to explore Büchel's 'Barca Nostra'. The piece itself is a rusted boat which Büchel chose to display outside at the 2019 Venice Biennale. However, its story is what is essential to the piece. The boat left north Africa in 2015, holding 1,100 migrants who were hoping to arrive at Italy. The boat sank in the Mediterranean during the trip leaving only 28 of its passengers alive, 'Most of the migrants who died were locked in the hold and machine room.' (Ruiz, 2019). The sinking of the boat became a major argument in the need to rescue migrants who require help. In the Biennale, the boat was located opposite a cafe, further reminding the viewer of how it's easy to forget that these events are happening and dissociate from it. However, the piece faced a lot of criticism from

the public and art world who questioned if it's appropriate to display an object which held hundreds of scared, dying people.

Büchel also chose to display the work with no attached information, meaning viewers weren't usually aware of the context of the piece. Upon visiting the Biennale myself, I wasn't aware of what the piece meant or the background behind it. Personally, I think that a memorial plaque would have been a respectful element to add alongside the boat. As I was unaware of its history, I wasn't able to fully appreciate it while visiting and would have liked to. Also, as an object that was linked to such a terrible incident, a plaque would have meant the public could be educated and reflect on the changes that need to be made. This art is helpful in showing the contemporary world as issues involving immigration need to be addressed, especially as it's become a more regular step that people feel forced to take. If countries held more compassion, would this boat be on display?

In conclusion, I think the artists I explored are effective in displaying what it means to be alive in the world now. Jenny Saville is an important element in showing feminism in her art. With a push towards body confidence and how we view ourselves, Saville is representative in how our bodies truly appear a lot of the time, and how we so rarely see ourselves in modern media. Büchel is also an important contemporary artist, informing the viewer of today's issues surrounding migration and the lack of assistance many countries have resorted in giving. Politics is a major part of our day to day life which Büchel is very effective in displaying through his installation work. His lack of interviews and explanation of work also may symbolise his discomfort with the celebrity status that can come with being an artist. These pieces are already becoming pieces of our art history and thus the history of the world, despite the fact that we are living it.

Bibliography

Fig. 1 – Jenny Saville, Propped (1992)

Fig.2 – SASSOFERRATO, Madonna and Child (1609-1685)

Fig. 3 – Jenny Saville, Mothers (2011)

Fig 4 – Jenny Saville, Passage (2005)

Fig 5 - Christoph Büchel, From the Collection | Verlust der Mitte'

Fig. 6 - - Christoph Büchel, Piccadilly Community Centre

Fig. 7 – Christoph Büchel, Barca Nostrav

Büchel, C., 2011. *Piccadilly Community Centre*. [Art].

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