

“In the seamless trajectory of Western art history, one might be forgiven for assuming that art is the province of men and that the place of women is in the picture, as model or muse.”

This applies to how the female form, particularly the vulva has been perceived by the informed and concerned gaze. The male gaze shall be considered within this discussion in relation to the female form. Heavily concerned feminine responses to this issue within a contemporary context will be a focal point within my investigation. In addition to how contemporary female artists have reclaimed ownership of their bodies and their sexuality.

John Berger can serve as a surrogate for the male perspective here as he has stated that, "When an image is presented as a work of art, the way people look at it is affected by a whole series of learnt assumptions [...] Beauty, form, status" (Berger. 1972:11). This statement applies to the fact the vulva has been traditionally under-researched and overly stigmatised. This misunderstanding is further perpetuated by its terminology. Many refer to the vulva as the 'vagina', when in fact the vagina refers to the internal canal that connects the vulva to the cervix. The vulva describes the external genitalia including the clitoris, labia and the vaginal opening. Vagina also translates to "sheath" in Latin. Dr Gunter expresses "I hate having female anatomy defined in terms of how it fits with a penis." (Gunter. 2019: 13).

Popular culture and social constructs heavily inform an individual's perspective/ ideology in regards to imagery depicting vulvas. The subsequent issues raised by this subject will be explored through a series of case studies which will in turn develop an argument through analysing and synthesising upon a series of historical and contemporary sources. These include examples of key philosophers such as Claire Pajaczkowska, Naomi Wolf, Dr Jen Gunter and Simone De Beauvoir. Providing a wide scope of perspectives spanning over decades. Visual artists such as Betty Tompkins, Gustave Courbet, Paula Modersohn-Becker and Jenny Saville provide examples which shall be considered in conjunction with these key thinkers. These artists and thinkers will offer a variety of contemporary and historical contexts to my work. It is my intention to formally and thoroughly investigate these artists via construction, discourse and critical analysis. The knowledge I accumulate shall be derived through a series of sub-questions all of which shall form a conclusive question for my independent enquiry. The sub-questions which shall provide a basis of my analysis are as follows: Is the female form intrinsically a site of arousal, shame or horror? Why is there such a taboo surrounding depictions of the vulva? Is the penis more sacred than a vagina?

Case Study 1

The objective of this case study is to formalise and question; through coherent and critical analysis the subsequent controversy surrounding depictions of the vulva. In addition, the inherent influence traditional historical perspectives have had on contemporary ideologies of the body through this gendered gaze. In order to address

this issue, the painting titled *The Origin of the World*, by Gustav Corbett has been evaluated. This male dominated discourse surrounding the depictions of the female form shall be outlined within this case study with the sub-question of ‘Why is there such a taboo surrounding depictions of the vulva?’

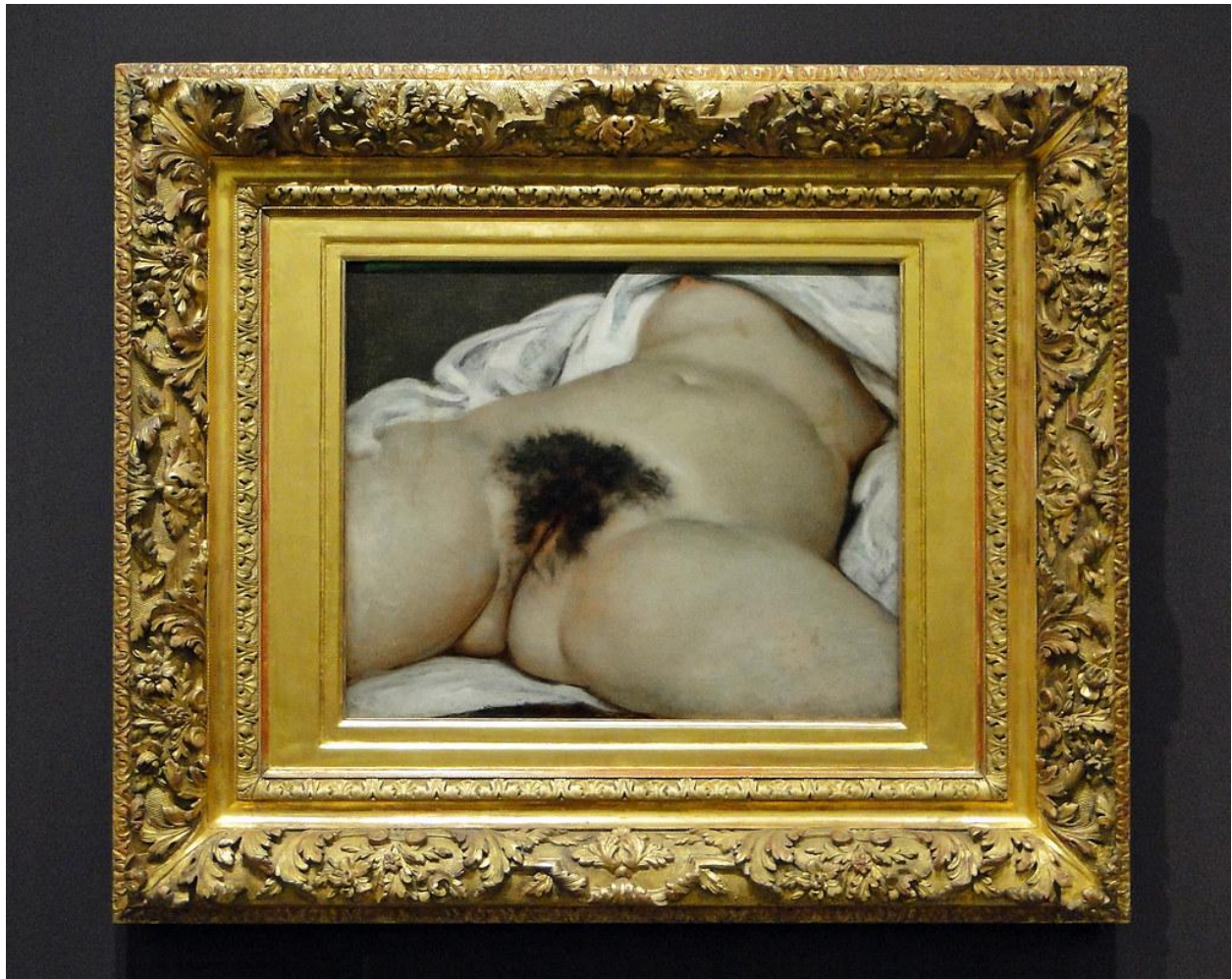


Figure 1: *The Origin of the World*

Described in a 2013 article in *The Guardian* as “a provocative icon of modern art.”

(J,Jones. 2013) Gustav Corbett’s *L’Origine du monde* (“*The Origin of The World*”) is an

oil on canvas depiction of a faceless model. Portrayed only by her torso, a single breast and vulva. Her parted thighs reveal her vaginal lips, black pubic hair and a white sheet.

This almost gynaecological perspective is a far cry from the candid 'peek-a-boo trysts' (A, Mahon. 2016), commonly used by Courbet's contemporaries. Mahon goes on to reference the works of French photographer Auguste Belloc and his erotic stereographic works as a supposed source of inspiration for Courbet. While Belloc embraced this newly discovered medium and utilised it within his art practice, Courbet did not. As Mahon writes:

“If Courbet looked to erotic photographs as visual aids he did not reproduce them. It is his technique with brush and palette knife, and the very materiality of his paint, that renders the work and its eroticism so modern.”

(A, Mahon. 2016)

Courbet goes further in his portrayal of the 'real' through the extremely selective viewpoint. There is no mythological, historical, religious or moralistic narrative to speak of within this piece. As art critic Johnathan Jones writes in the Guardian, “the ruthless "cropping", removes this erotic image from any context that might soften or explain it”. This unconventional means of painting served as a departure from portrayals of the idyllic woman, the purity of Olympia was no more. As Alyce Mahon writes in an article for The Art Newspaper, “Courbet's vulvic image paved the way for this progressive

return of the repressed and the call to make desire not just visible, but egalitarian.” (A, Mahon. 2016)

The subject of religion can also be considered as an important notable dialect between gender and female sexuality with the addition of the aforementioned cultural references. Niomi Wolf in her book *The Beauty Myth*, proposed that female sexual repression was a direct result of religious guilt. “the female sexual organs are what the older religions feared as ‘the insatiable cunt’.” (Wolf. 1990: 39) This correlates exactly to the shock and wonderment received by Corbett’s artwork and the position of the vulva as the focal point of the painting. As Wolf continues “women’s capacity for genital pleasure is theoretically ‘inexhaustible’.” (Wolf. 1990: 39) This greatly feeds into the pervasive issue of vaginal neglect as a direct result of the male psyche

Psychoanalysis is a factor that heavily informs the male perspective and their readings of the female nude. Sigmund Freud, the founding father of psychoanalysis introduced the concept of ‘*castration anxiety*’, a perceived punishment brought on by incestuous wishes towards one’s mother. This is known as the Oedipus Complex, this desire is theorised by Freud to be embedded within the male psyche. If this primitive psychoanalytic theory is in fact embedded in the subconscious mind, it will therefore be triggered when a male gazes upon the female nude. When considering this, Courbet’s work could be viewed as a subversion of this theory.

English Author, Fiona Carson explains in her book, *Feminist Visual Culture*, “The female body was once viewed by Freud as a ‘dark continent’, an unknown site of sexual difference, neither to be understood nor spoken about.” (F, Carson. 2001:62) Freud’s association of the body as a site further compounds the notion that the female body is nothing more than a ‘site’. A static area of ground upon which is occupied or soon to be occupied by someone else. This greatly feeds into the pervasive issue of vaginal neglect. In her 2019 book *The Vagina Bible*, Dr Jen Gunter notes:

”Male physicians rarely performed pelvic exams on women or even dissected female cadavers, as it was considered inappropriate or insensitive to touch a woman outside of a marital relationship”.

(Gunter, J 2019. p.4)

This lack of agency is further compounded by the title of the painting. ‘The Origin of Life’ can be viewed as highlighting the perceived functionality of women back then to be the facilitators of life and with that ‘the world’. The vagineness of this title alone further compounds Freud’s unwillingness to ‘understand’, nor talk about the female body. The words *Origin of the World* frames this piece as a grand astronomical wonder that can neither be explained nor understood. When considering the historical context behind this piece, it is no stretch to see why it certainly shocked viewers at the time. The daring and frank manner in which the vulva has been portrayed breeds a peculiar fascination; A sense of wonderment akin to how we might gaze at a starry sky, or a vast seascape, woman has here been made a landscape to project onto.

While there is no disputing the impact Psychoanalysis has had on the male perspective and the subsequent interpretation of the female nude, is it worth indulging in the light of Freud's notion of Castration anxiety? Or is this a limiting view? Mahon posits that to consider Courbet's painting in light of Freud's theories, "Would be to foreclose the work's erotic and revolutionary potential." (A, Mahon. 2016) This encouragement 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)

With this considered can we consider Courbet's *Origin of the World* to be a jumping off point for female artists

. If we view it as a glorious celebration of women, open to the male or female gaze, or even as an image of auto-eroticism, we can better explain its cultural impact"

“In the feminist art of the 1970s, vaginal iconography was intended as a power symbol of female sexual difference, a defiant challenge to phallic authority.” (F, Casrson. 2001:61)

Subsequently, generations of women artists have added a further layer to our appreciation of Courbet’s remarkable painting from feminist “vulvic art” of the 1970s to contemporary installations. Carolee Schneemann’s *Interior Scroll* (1975), Hannah Wilke’s *Venus Envy* (1980), Sherrie Levine’s *After Courbet: 1-18* (2009), and Pilar Albarracín’s *L’Origine du Nouveau Monde* (2012), all subvert male artists’ obsessive framing of the female vulva whilst reclaiming it and reframing it for themselves.

This traditional notion of the vulva as nothing more than an object of desire, as depicted by artists such as Corbett has been challenged and deconstructed by several contemporary artists. Mexican painter Frida Khlao has inadvertently challenged this notion through her introducing pain into female self portraiture.

Case Study 2



Figure 3: My Birth

Mexican artist Frida Kahlo compiled a series of abstract paintings to document major events in her life. *My Birth* (as seen above) is the first in her series. Kahlo has approached depicting the vulva in a vastly opposing way in comparison to Corbett. Kahlo visually challenged the presentation of the female nude and with it the vulva through her depiction of birth. However, there is a strong suggestion this piece is alluding to Kahlo's own experience with the tragic death of her mother and recent

miscarriage of her son. The latter of which is further explored in her Henry Ford painting. This piece of contemporary art contributes to answering sub-questions such as 'Is the female form intrinsically a site of arousal, shame or horror?

First and foremost, British art historian Frances Borzello explains "Khalo is responsible for bringing pain into self portraiture" (F,Borzello. 1998:145) This statement is highly pertinent in comprehension of visual analysis and contributes highly into the research of this practice.

Building upon this Dr Jen Gunter, explains "Women are shamed when their body doesn't conform to an impossible ideal set by the patriarchy." (J,Gunter. 2019:41)

Khalo effortlessly challenges the ideology of women derived from the traditional male gaze. Her work further refines Courbett's battle of artifice and deception through her stark portrayal of the inner and tabooed aspects of the female body such as menstruation, miscarriage and abortion. As Borzello posits, "Physical degeneration was brought into self portraits by the demands of honest reporting." (F,Borzello. 1998:145) Kahlo's rendition of her birth is by no means immaculate.

Khalo has challenged the ideology of how the female nudes and with that, vulvas are traditionally viewed. While on paper the concept of a female artist, albeit a non-white female artist giving birth to herself would be considered a bold, empowering statement about self sufficiency, Khalo propositions this notion in a far more unconventional way. Borzello states, "Kahlo's uncomfortable image forces confrontation with all issues- birth,

pain, and the grotesque.”(F,Borzello. 1998:146) The ambiguity of ‘my birth’ could be either Kahlo as baby or mother

As Borzello writes, “In its explicitness it demands to be compared with Courbett’s Origin of the World “. Both paintings similarly place the viewer into the role of voyeur. In Spite of this, we viewers witness the respective vulvas in vastly different perspectives. In ‘Origin of the World’ The presentation of the nude directly suggests erotica. Our viewpoint the female form is perceived as idyllic; passive and faceless. Whereas, ‘In My Birth’ Kahlo’s vulva is not the focal point, there is a clear narrative within this painting. While the woman's face is obscured by the sheet it is easy to deduce she had died. It can be concluded Frida Khalo confronts the reality of the pain and suffering endured by women through grotesque and graphic rawness

With all this considered Corbett’s painting defaults into nothing more than a smooth example of pornography. As Borzello describes it was “Painted by a man for a man” (F,Borzello. 1998:146) Origin of the World simply pales in comparison when placed next to My Birth, which serves as a confrontation with issues such as life, death and the grotesque. Issues which Courbet seemingly had no interest to consider in conjunction with sex.



Figure 4: Henry Ford Hospital

Further bodily trials meant Frida Kahlo would never succeed in carrying a pregnancy to term. Having to endure a series of miscarriages, Kahlo brought these experiences to life through her paintings. Henry Ford Hospital (as seen above) belongs to the same year as My Birth.

She herself is depicted laying in a hospital bed in a pool of blood. Yashvi Ganeriwal, writing in a 2018 article for Feminism in India states:

She herself is painted as a naked body on a hospital bed. This body is not one that would belong to models in magazines or the “perfect” bodies that form the subject-matter of other forms of art. This body is painted as that of a woman who has undergone the agony of miscarriage. Her breasts are enlarged, she lies in a pool of blood and her abdomen is swollen.

Khalo’s depiction of the body can be interpreted as not only a stark and realistic display of the female body and the female experience; but it could also serve as an example of racial disparities in reproductive healthcare.

From the male perspective such as the likes of Gustav Corbett, who insisted on never painting anything he cannot see. Famously stated, “Show me an angel, and I shall paint one!” Corbett was clearly interested in only painting what he could see. While many could view his work as ‘revolutionary’ for its forthright depiction of the vulva, there is no denying that his perspective as a man is inherently limited. In contrast to this, Borzello explains “A body of work like Frida’s offers a visual diary of the horrors of and joys of her personal life could not have existed in an earlier age in such an unmediated form.”

(F,Borzello. 1998:146). When considering these sources from a balance of gendered views, Corbett’s *Origin of the World* work can most definitely be considered a product of sexualisation when compared to the far more nuanced work of Frida Kahlo, which provides its originality, sincerity and a clear incorporation of Mexican artistic traditions.

Khalo’s autobiographical revelation challenges the core of the traditional male gaze, where the female nude has been subjected to eroticism or valorized for its ability to create life. Author for *Daily Art Magazine*, Lilianne Milgro has described Corbett’s *Origin of the World* as a “homage to women for their unique role in the miracle of birth and

creation.” (L, Mllgro 2020) However, My Birth and Henry Ford Hospital twists this patriarchal idealisation and depicts the true horrors of childbirth which was very rarely spoken about. When discussing pregnancy Jen Gunter writes that “Until relatively recently, both society and the medical profession have focused almost exclusively on the baby after delivery.” (J,Gunter. 2019:41) This harmful rhetoric is still apparent today, one only needs to look at recent news with the Aftermath of Dobbs overturning Roe v. Wade. Can we really afford not to question the true ownership of women's body's/ reproductive organs?

Case Study 3

Through researching and exploring the notions of female sexual repression as an influence on the contemporary womans psyche and overall perception toward's ones own body image, the work of Betty Tompkins will be discussed. Tompkins has also tackled the ongoing objectification of women and misogyny prevalent within the artworld. How Tompkins exploration of female sexuality and the subsequent shame women receive, has influenced her practice will be formally discussed.

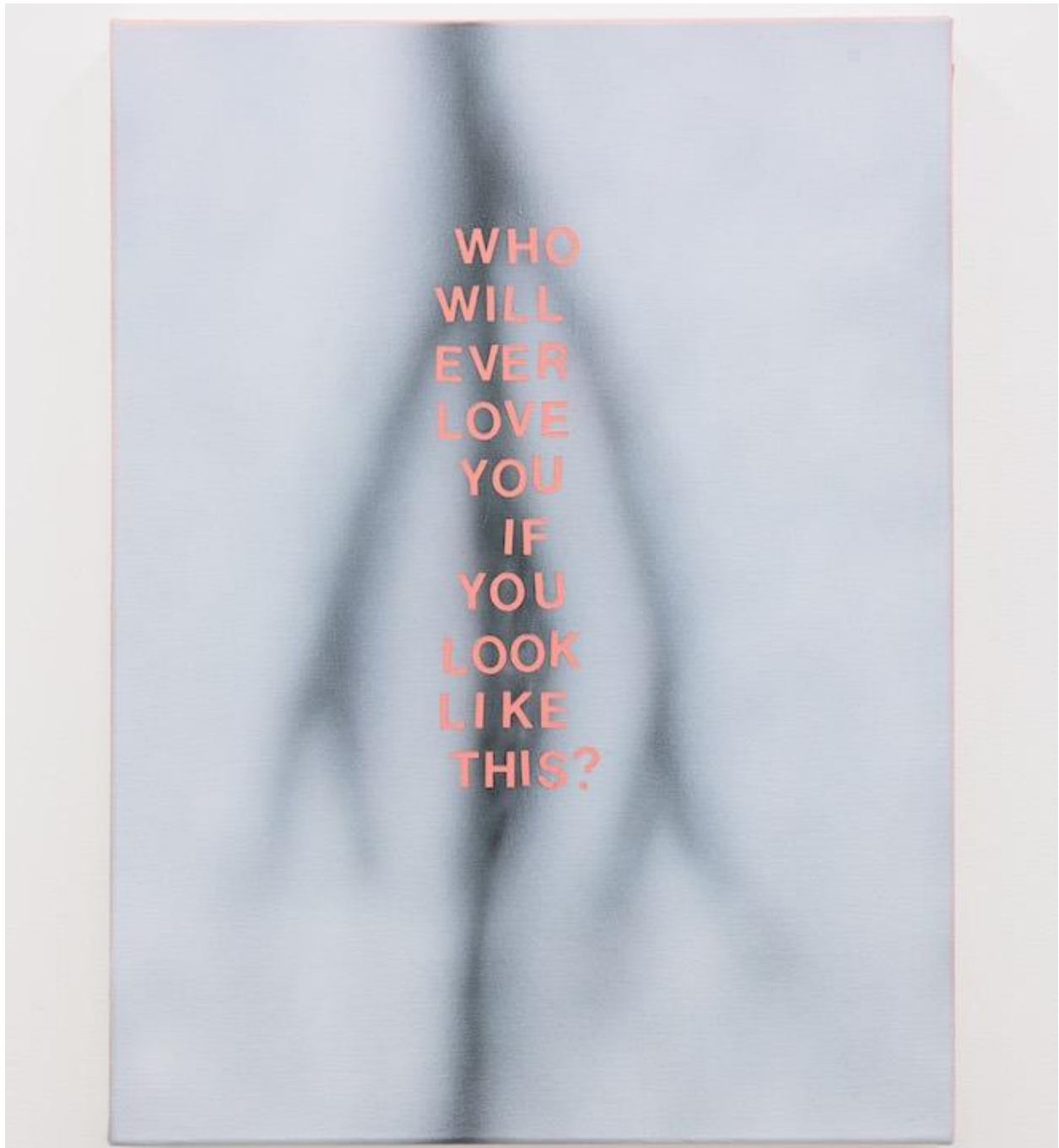


Figure 5: Who Will... Acrylic on canvas 2019

In an interview between Tompkins and New York based writer and contemporary art curator Annabel Keenan, Tompkins has expressed that:

I wanted to make something charged, something I hadn't seen before. I started cropping the images with my fingers and then with pieces of paper, getting rid of the feet, hands, legs, and heads, and I knew I'd found it.
(Keenan, 2021)

'Who will...' is a depiction of a vulva through a direct and unflinching perspective. The impact upon the viewer would be extremely profound through the images sheer explicitness. The unembellished depiction of contact between such an intimate piece of anatomy. Much like *Origin of the World*, the work is unambiguous. However, Tompkins' *Fuck Paintings* lack any sentiment to speak of. Therefore we as viewers are left to our own devices to search for narrative or commentary.

As Robert Cicetti writes in a 2012 article for hyperallergic.com, "It's up to the beholder to negotiate the ambivalent divide between beauty and obscenity." (Cicetti. 2012) Tompkins' work is unflinching, as the viewer is caught in an unresolvable inner conflict between attraction and revulsion as their own innermost thoughts and desires are so frankly projected onto canvas

At the very start of this discussion the term "learned assumptions" served as a reflection to John Berger and the male perspective as a whole. Within this contemporary context, the psyche of the young female is compounded by messages about what a patriarchal

society has deemed acceptable behaviour. Acceptable behaviour upon which the young female will be evaluating herself against for the rest of her life. As Dr Gunter states "Female anatomy is erroneously labelled as 'dirty'". (Gunter. 2019:29) This statement precisely grapples with the subject matter of Tompkins' image. Even though the painting depicts a vulva, it is the prior mindset of those viewing the image that is of great interest in this discussion.

This sentiment is further compounded by the text inscribed across the vulva. The text reads "Who will ever love you if you look like this?" (Tompkins, 2019) This statement provides an insight into the utter turmoil of the female psyche as a consequence of this contradictory male gaze. In *The Second Sex* Simone de Beauvoir writes "Man thinks about himself without women. Woman does not think herself without man". (Beauvoir. 2015:7) The use of language in this piece is especially patronising to the viewer and highlights the berating women receive on a regular basis for not perpetuating the notion of the ideal woman. Beauvoir continues, "no group ever defines itself as One without immediately setting up the Other opposite itself." (Beauvoir. 2015:8) As a result of this, this text serves as a direct confrontation of our culture's desire to compartmentalise female sexuality into two binaries; the 'Madonna and Whore'. Tompkins' image suggests the female in possession of the vulva in the photograph is a victim of "slut shaming". A form of bullying in which women are subjected to degradation or humiliation for their sexuality.

Consequently, women repress their sexuality. Wolf has suggested that “Women’s prodigious sexual capacity is not being reflected in their current sexual experience.” (Wolf. 1990:40) As a result many heterosexual women depend on their male partners to educate them on the mechanics of the female orgasm (more often than not being woefully undereducated themselves). As a result of this the woman is left stranded, removed from their ability to experience full sexual pleasure as a consequence of the male gaze. The female psyche has reached a saddening conclusion as a result of this gaze, in which her own pleasure is but secondary to that of her partners. As Dr Gunter states “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. 2019:29)

When discussing the state of pornography in women’s culture, Wolf categorises it into two conventions: “One ‘just’ objectifies the female body, the other does violence to it”. (Wolf. 1990:42) This Classification can be further observed within Tompkins’ painterly yet pictorial piece titled “Im Going To...”



Figure 6: I'm Going to

Even though this piece does not explicitly depict a direct confrontation with the notion of sexual violence it is implied within the text of Tompkins piece reading “I’m going to Jackson Pollock all over her face” (Tompkins. 2018)

“Discussions of obscenity or nakedness, or community standards do not address the harm done to women by this development”

“The upsurge in violent sexual imagery took its energy from male anger and female guilt at women’s access to power”

At time in which tompkins was coming to prominence

“We often see rape where sex should be”

Sexual explicitness is not the issue. We could use more a lot more of that, if explicit meant honest and revealing; if there were a full spectrum of erotic images of uncoerced real women and men in contexts of sexual trust, beauty pornography could theoretically hurt no one.

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 womans position in society. Gunter further emphasises 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)

It can be concluded that the work of Betty Tompkins forces the viewer to confront the moral reality through the grotesque rawness of sexual contact

Intimate and explicit imagery

The following case study further explores censorship and a conceptual approach to the portrayal of the vulva through the work of artist Judy Chicago.