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Explore how artists have expressed gender in art practise providing evidence from at least 2 artists and thinkers.

Figures

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Figure 5: Cindy Sherman (1977-1980) *Untitled Film stills* [photography] Available: <https://www.christiesrealestate.com/blog/untitled-cindy-shermans-record-breaking-film-stills/> (Accessed: 1st December 2022)

This essay will explore and analyse the ways in which artists express gender through their art. The concept of gender is a very broad topic and although gender is a social construct, it has had a huge impact on society for centuries and this is prevalent in art. This essay will look at a variety of art forms in which gender expression is prominent. Firstly, we will consider whether drag can be classified as art, using examples from TV shows, protests and PRIDE parades. The essay will also cover gender expression in 20th century photography and the classical art of the 16th century to analyse how women are portrayed in art and question male dominance in art. Overall, this essay will show the excitement that controversy within gender expression can hold, particularly in the world of art where everything is objective, competitive and argumentative. When exploring such a topic as gender expression, we invite a world of opposing views. Even in our current society, where 'political correctness' is key, there are still issues within the system, a key feature being acceptance. This essay will cover artistic expression of gender through the centuries. It will consider the different roles in which women have been opposed to, the outcome expectations of putting gender non-conforming art into the world, and the fight back from brave individuals against seemingly impossible fights.

When thinking of how artists express gender, drag queens come straight to mind. This deems the question: is drag art? All art is subjective to the viewer and

remembering that there should be no hierarchy in the art world, all that should matter is that most drag queens themselves classify their work as art. The speciality to art is that it is about creating, giving people entertainment or something to think about, it is about pushing boundaries, all of which drag includes. Put beautifully by Hannah Conda, 2018:

“Drag is a livin, breathing piece of art. It pokes fun at social norms. Drag has no gender, no age and no colour. It challenges ideals and stereotypes. It is only limited by your own imagination.”

In any case, drag is the perfect example of expressing gender and how art influences others. A big part of its influence over people and the importance of drag culture is shown through it “slowly undoing rigid concepts inherent to the gender binary” - India Alexander, 2018. It seems that there is a correlation between the popularity of drag and the open-mindedness of people and society. It is likely that we can credit its popularity to the way in which drag makes the world seem like a safer, more welcoming place. Furthermore, its use as an outlet for those struggling with their own gender expression demonstrates how art can be used to explore the concept of gender on a personal level.

The expression of gender through the art of drag was used as a form of activism in 1969, at Stonewall. The key figure was the drag queen, Marsha P. Johnson. Although “the Stonewall uprising didn't start the gay rights movement, it was a galvanising force for the LGBTQ+ political activism”, History.com, 2017, it did inspire the LGBTQ+ community to celebrate ‘PRIDE’ on its anniversary. Since then, ‘PRIDE’ has been celebrated annually and could be considered a piece of art in its

own right. It consists of parades full of LGBTQ+ identifying people and allies of the community, often dressed up, showing their support, celebrating their freedom and protesting laws and prejudice against LGBTQ+. PRIDE has become an international event, growing every year, with celebrations through the whole month of June in honour of the Stonewall Riots and those who have fought for the right of the community to be able to express themselves the way they were born. These parades are a perfect example of gender expression through art.

Marsha P. Johnson was a well known drag queen in NYC's drag community as well as a source of power to the other activists during the Stonewall riots. She was an "important advocate for homeless LGBTQ+ youth, those effected by H.I.V. and AIDS, and gay and transgender rights", Emma Rothberg, Ph.D. She has gone down in gay rights and Black history as a strong icon for fighting for what is right. These are aspects of drag which often get overlooked but should be addressed, especially when talking about expressing gender through art. It is such an important thing in so many people's lives; the vision of having a drag queen/trans person be the one standing up in injustices is the vision that pushes for change. This is seen in today's media through the growing popularity of the TV show, RuPaul's Drag Race. Summing up the essence of the show perfectly, India Alexander, 2018, states that "RuPaul's Drag Race brings gender theory out of academia and onto TV." It shines a light on drag and has normalised and informed a wider group in society of the topics surrounding the LGBTQ+ community. It provides a significant safe space to millions of people and tackles important issues like HIV/AIDS and transgender rights. The show has seen openly trans individuals competing as drag queens and one ex-competitor said that it "can function as a bridge to a more authentic, self-realised gender expression", India Alexander, 2018. This type of representation is vital to the

LGBTQ+ community, so having it so easily accessible will be, and has already been, life changing for so many. For example, trans ex-competitor, Peppermint, said that, “drag offered her an outlet for her gender identity in less constrained ways”, India Alexander, 2018. The show has covered the fact that some people, including people in the LGBTQ+ and drag community, frown upon trans people participating in drag or see it as just a path to becoming trans, and describe drag as “encouragement to pursue a woman’s life offstage”, Samantha Riedel, 2018. This has been shown to not directly be the case, as everybody’s experience in their gender expression journeys are individual to them. For some, drag might have helped them get to their true gender, but for others it is an art form they like to practise, however they identify. Thankfully, with the help of RuPaul’s Drag Race, the boundaries with trans people and drag queens are fading away, especially since the representation on Drag Race has widened, having multiple competitors who identify as transgender, with the latest season “currently featuring five transgender contestants on the show”, Bernardo Sim, 2022.

Gender expression in the art world cannot be discussed without mentioning The Guerrilla Girls. Even though they are not making art directly about gender expression, their cause surrounds the subject of sexism and racism within the art world. The group formed “in 1989 with the mission of bringing gender and racial inequality into focus within the greater arts community”, Emma Brockes, 2015. They are an anonymous group who go by aliases from prominent members of the art world, such as: Kathe Kollwitz, Frida Kahlo, Diane Arbus, Gertrude Stein and Claude Cahun. It must be mentioned that all of their aliases are female or non-binary. This makes a statement in yet another way that there are female/non-male artists who

deserve recognition or that have made names for themselves despite the male dominant bias.

One alias in particular, Claude Cahun, born Lucy Schwob, protested against gender norms simply through changing their name, wanting it to be both masculine and feminine. This little change sent shock waves to a society that on the whole “considered men to be men and women to be women”, Joseph B. Treaster, 2019. Someone making these changes at this time was fresh and exciting. However, it was not seen this way yet and only received real recognition in the 1990’s, sadly, after their passing. Out of the Guerrilla Girls’ aliases, Cahun’s work in particular carries beautiful themes of gender expression, including their personal experience of battling the gender binary. They discussed, in their book, “Masculine? Feminine? It depends on the situation”, how they perceive the rest of the world’s expression of gender and stated that, for them, “neuter is the only gender that suits”, Claude Cahun, 2008. Cahun had an incredible perspective on life and their own gender expression, showing examples of this continuously in their work. One of Cahun’s first photography pieces, *Self Portrait as a Young Girl*, 1914, is exactly that. However their plain and unattractive take of a woman lying in a bed leaves the viewer feeling slightly uncomfortable.



[Figure 1]

They played with gender expression in such a way that has not been shown to people yet. “Many depictions of women on a bed in fine art are eroticized. Cahun’s take is a stark contrast to that”, Jacqueline Martinez, 2020. Considering Cahun was born in 1894-1954, they did not let their generational ignorance stop them from being who they felt. They went so far as to create and publish their work for all to gaze upon. This allowed others to create opposing opinions not just about the work, but about the entire idea of dismantling the gender binary. However, the work eventually became so popular that even:

“decades after her death, she has a growing following among art historians, feminists and people in the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and queer community”

Joseph B. Treaster, 2019.

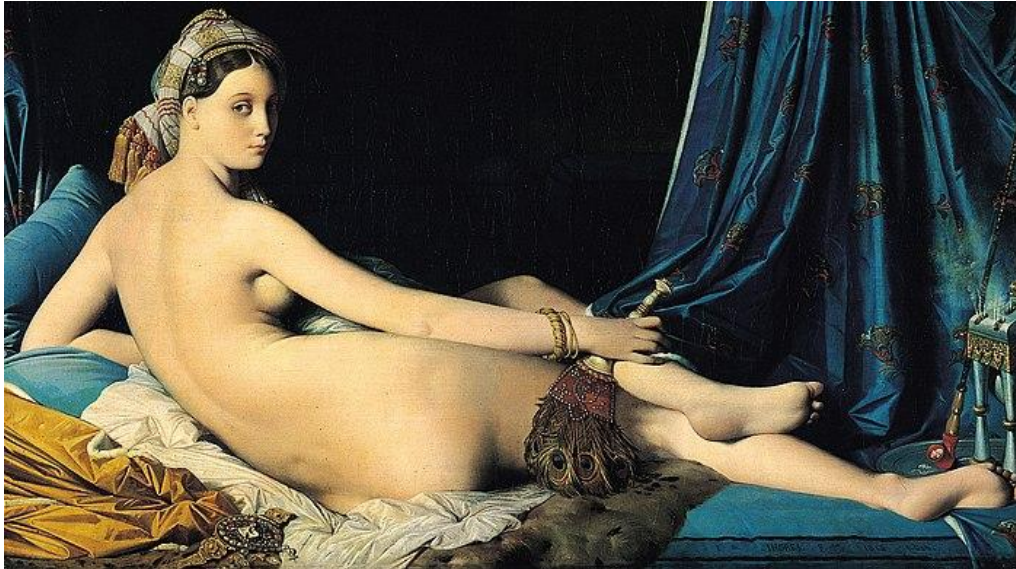
Carrying the legacy of all their aliases through art activism, the Guerrilla Girls work in displays like billboards, posters and public appearances to expose discrimination and corruption in the art world. One of their biggest campaigns demonstrated the disproportionate amount of female nudes in museums, compared to the amount of art work done by women, titled: “*Do women need to be naked to get into the Met Museum*” Guerrilla Girls, 1989.



[Figure 2]

This shed light on the fact that “less than 5% of the artists in the Modern Art Sections are women but 85% of the nudes are female”, Guerrilla Girls 1989. Ironically, this poster was rejected by the commissioner, so in protest, the Girls displayed it as paid-for advertising billboards across New York City as well as on buses. However, this “ultimately led to further censorship”, Lydia Figes, 2021, claiming the woman was

too suggestive. Considering this was the painting, *Grande Odalisque*, painted by male artist, Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres it was just another misogynistic hit against women in the art world.



[Figure 3]

“The reactions to the work revealed a contradiction: female nudes painted by male artists are revered when hung in museums, but when women artists appropriate the nude for feminist or political purposes it becomes controversial and is swiftly censored.”

Lydia Figes 2021.

This comes down to the way women have been, and still are treated, by men.

Women are viewed as objects, painted how they are viewed by men, not considering how they might express their gender themselves. Interestingly enough, it is known that people can often tell whether a painting of a female nude has been done by a man or a woman. This boils down to the effects of the Male Gaze and how “the male

gaze in art dates centuries back when men created art for the viewing by other men”, Ronni Knepp, 2017. It is obvious to the viewer that women paint a female nude with delicacy, emotion, pose and as if there is a person behind the paint; whereas, men paint a female nude with sexual objectification and desire. This is portrayed perfectly when studying paintings like *Venus of Urbino* - Titian.



[Figure 4]

“By giving the name of Venus to a woman, it becomes socially acceptable to stare at a nude woman, because she is no longer a woman; she is the goddess of beauty and demands to be looked at”, (cram.com)

Having a man title a female nude this shows utter disregard for the person and all the concentration on showing the body. Letting himself be in charge of the

way she is gazed upon, even down to the small details of her “always being watched, hence the maids in the background”, (cram.com) conveying that *Venus* is the one desiring *you*. This makes it no longer about expression of gender, but about expressing the female’s sexuality without her input.

Comparing this directly to the series of self portraits by Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film stills*, shows how differently artists encapsulate the displaying of a woman, especially between male and female artists.



[Figure 5]

Sherman is known for raising questions regarding the construction of the female gender. This series demonstrates the different roles a woman could have within her life and makes the point that women do not necessarily put themselves in those roles. She breaks down the concept to female narratives portrayed in film and television through history, “such as the jaded seductress, the unhappy housewife, the jilted lover, and the vulnerable naif”, MoMA.org. It was in her confidence to to portray these roles herself and in the simplicity of the work, where she gained her

power over the male gaze; not allowing the men to have an angel where they can suppress the female model to just a body that is for them, she “is not perpetuating the objectification of women, but rather subverting the male gaze”, Stefania Sorrentino, 2017. This, especially in 1977-1980, was such a positive movement and, refreshingly, gave a female artist the prestige they deserved. Movements like this have allowed women to express themselves and their gender in their own way. It has given the power back to women and, although the status of male artists and female nudes is not gone completely, the progress has been huge.

In conclusion, this essay has explored the way in which artists have expressed gender in their art. It has portrayed the importance and impact of expressing one's gender, and demonstrates in particular, the impact gender expression through art can have on those having inward struggles concerning their identity. It is important to be able to feel the freedom of sharing your gender expression with the world. The topics of gay rights, the gender binary and women having the ability to express their own gender, come together as one in this essay. This perfectly portrays how gender expression in art can cause waves in the art world, and in turn, in society. The mixture of classical art, photography and television media all hold the same core themes of expressing gender, yet demonstrate different outcomes. This essay has explored how these artists have expressed gender, displaying the vast variety in how gender is expressed through art. What makes these artists particularly interesting when put together is how different they all are. They all have a unique way of portraying their same area of focus: gender.

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