

ADAA7000 Coexistent Perspectives Module

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Essay Title: “Seen, Seeing and Unseeing: Feminist Artists Against the Male Gaze”

Abstract:

In this essay, I explore how contemporary feminist artists combat the power dynamics of the male gaze inside modern art. I use Laura Mulvey’s theory work from within her essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’ to investigate the mechanisms within the patriarchal constructs: fragmentation, commodification, objectification. Exploring how these mechanisms continue to shape visual culture, as well as what artists are creating to disrupt them. This essay will act as a demonstration of Mulvey’s theory, applying to contemporary practises, revealing how feminist artists are dismantling the structures that normalise the female bodies unrealistic portrayals.

To address these issues, I examined two contrasting yet complementary approaches. The first being The Guerilla Girls, an activist group whose focus is on the critique of the institutions with patriarchal power. The other being Linder Sterling, a photomontage artist whose weird work confronts the portrayal of the female body. Both artists have a strong drive to destabilise the dominant assumptions about who holds power within the visual space, using their work to expose the embedded patriarchal systems. I conducted case studies on the two artists to explore how they push past the boundary of simply altering the depictions of women, instead criticising the inner works of the men who decide how bodies and identities are constructed. Ultimately, the essay shows an insight into the combat of the male gaze in contemporary spaces and show how feminist artists use visual strategies to redefine the woman's portrayal, using feminist theory to confirm.

Introduction:

To begin this essay, I took inspiration from Question 6: De/constructing the human: *“In what ways do contemporary artists and designers challenge and reconfigure dominant constructions of the human subject through lenses such as feminist theory etc...”* I lean into the feminist theory route and created my own question: **How are feminist contemporary artists using visual strategies to unsettle the power dynamics of the male gaze and rethink what it means to represent “the woman”? In what ways do their works align with feminist theory to reimagine bodies and identities to challenge conventional separations between viewer and subject, or between women and art?**

To answer this question, I wanted to expand my knowledge on contemporary feminist art and feminist theories that apply to the male gaze. I explored past and present art forms, surrounding the portrayal of the ‘woman’, to gain an understanding of other views as well as to create my own. I began researching various routes until I decided on the two artists, I wished to make case studies on. Using these case studies within this essay I aim to answer my own question of how these feminist artists are rethinking the representation of ‘the woman’, but also to answer the original question of how contemporary artists reconfigure dominant constructions of the human.

To further explore ways in which contemporary artists combat the male gaze theory, I will be referencing a variety of feminist theorists. Using the theorists' words to fully analyse my work I will ensure that any information found is backed up by academic writings. I will delve into works by feminists such as Naomi Wolf, Sharon Blackie and Whitney Chadwick alongside the predominant work by Laura Mulvey to analyse the patriarchal visual culture and deepen my understanding of the social and psychological consequences of the gaze. In this way, this essay will demonstrate the complex relationship between feminist theory and art, showing how challenges yet strengthen each other.

Throughout this essay, I will reflect on how feminism within art is not just reshaping the way in which women are represented but is also criticising the conditions in which allow these representations to be made. Challenging the separations between viewer and art, in order to break down the hierarchies that provide the male gaze privilege. Conclusively, this essay acts as an insight into the reality of the male gaze and its longstanding effect on women and the human body. It offers an understanding of alternatives to the current perception of beauty standards in order to redefine what can be shown and what can be seen. These alternatives of the male gaze show an intervention of the ‘human’ category and promote a shift away from patriarchal ideals and towards more inclusive expressions of identity and femininity.

Section 1: What is the Male Gaze?

‘The Male Gaze’ is a film theory contrived by Laura Mulvey in 1975, within her essay ‘Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema’. Throughout this essay, Mulvey explores and expands upon the idea that women in mainstream movies are portrayed through unrealistic representations. Inevitably, these depictions are being constructed through a male point of view, as the majority of the industry are men. “Unchallenged, mainstream film coded the erotic into the language of the dominant patriarchal order.” (Mulvey, 1975). Suggesting the theory that movies build desire from the perspective of a man into the storytelling without being questioned. Mulvey argued the idea that women in film had to be attractive in order to appease the viewers, however, the appearance of the woman in film was often unrelated to the plotline. “The presence of woman is an indispensable element of spectacle in normal narrative film, yet her visual presence tends to work against the development of the story line.” (Mulvey 1975) Mulvey claims the logic for these unreasonable portrayals come from the idea of ‘scopophilia’, a sexual pleasure derived from watching others when they are naked. She declares “The cinema satisfies a primordial wish for pleasurable looking, but it also goes further, developing a scopophilia in its narcissistic aspect”.

Throughout history, women in movies have been continuously sexualised, belittled and casted in diminishing roles, a result of this male - dominated industry. Films such as the James Bond series see women as love interests, allies or adversaries, all within a repeated pattern of conformity towards beauty standards. They often make their first appearances with minimal clothing (Fig 1), with the potential to be upgraded to skintight dresses. The characters are created to be hyper-sexualised, seen as a reward or accessory for Bond to enjoy, with little to no narrative significance. This classic example of male orientated directing styles further proves the idea of the male gaze. It also conforms to Naomi Wolf’s (American Feminist Author) idea that men portray women within this way to enforce beauty standards that lead to patriarchal power “I contend this obsession with beauty in the western world – is in fact the last way men can defend themselves against women claiming power” (Wolf, 1990). This series falls into this theory, with the directors of Bond (all of which have been men) making women play these superficial ‘damsel in distress’ roles with exposing wardrobes, leaving them to be seen as vulnerable and/or weak characters, almost acting as a step back from the empowerment women have worked hard to claim.



Fig 1. Film Still from Dr. No (Young, 1962)

Whilst the male gaze theory is predominantly used to analyse directive and/or visual styles of media such as film, tv and the internet; it can also be interchanged with art history. The theory within the criticism of Western art, leans more towards power dynamics of male artists, suggesting a masculine domination depicting women as sexual objects created to look at for pleasure. “Historians began to question the apparently systematic exclusion of women from mainstream art. They challenged the values of a masculinist history of heroic art which happened to be produced by men, and which had so powerfully transformed the image of woman into one of possession and consumption”. (Chadwick, 1990) One key example of this is Titians’ *Venus of Urbino* (Fig 2). Within this oil painting, the subject is a nude woman who appears to gaze at the viewer within a bedroom setting. Her body is on display as an object to be possessed, not engaging in any activity, it suggests she exists purely for the viewer. Her body is illuminated, further emphasising its function as an item to be looked at. The perfected smoothness of her body shows Titians erasure of individuality of the woman who inspired the painting, instead creating a fantasy set up through male desire.



Fig 2. *Venus of Urbino*. (Titian, 1538).

Sharon Blackie makes inferences about these male – orientated depictions within her book 'If Women Rose Rooted'. "What is this power – what is it then, to be a woman?... We are fighting against a culture which has both denigrated and commodified the female body for millennia". This excerpt links to Laura Mulvey's male gaze theory and the mechanism she identifies. The rhetorical question "What is this power?" puts a focal point on the paradox this system creates. Women are 'given' power under false pretences, feeling empowerment through beauty and sexuality, when in fact the standards of beauty are set up and controlled by men. "This pattern reinforces a power structure in which men control how women are represented and valued in society" (Bocinski, 2022). Therefore, the power becomes twisted and equivocal as empowerment is revealed to be regulated and confined by patriarchal systems. "Denigrated and commodified the female body for millennia" also speaks to Mulvey's theory. The male gaze *commodifies* women by presenting their bodies into objects of consumption, simultaneously *denigrating* them by stripping them of complexity, individuality and subjectivity. Blackie states "women may have been complicit – we had been well trained for centuries after all... but men were the ones with their fingers on the buttons. Men were the ones in charge." This again links to Mulvey's theory through the idea that the patriarchal systems control what is shown, how it is shown and who holds narrative. Therefore, whilst women may participate in the 'performance' of femininity, both Mulvey and Blackie would argue the hidden structure of representation remain male – controlled.

There are many contemporary artists whose work combats the male gaze. Feminist contemporary artists continue to reshape worldwide art by fighting against the structures which control how our bodies are represented and perceived. “For women who have historically been the object of the gaze, the self-portrait represents a practise whereby women can reappropriate the power of self – narrative” (Perna, 2020) For example, Cindy Sherman’s self portrait photography which set to make a parody of the tropes identified in Mulvey’s theory. (Fig 3.) “Theres an awareness she will be looked at, that she is styled the object of male desire. Sherman challenges... proving the artificial nature of on-screen femininity. It’s not real, it’s a construct”. (Mullins 2019). For many artists, the body becomes the focus, a site where the male gaze is revealed and minimised, their work reframing who is allowed to look, how we are seen and who holds the narrative power. “The female nude is also a sign of those other, more hidden properties of patriarchal culture, that is, possession, power and subordination”. (Nead, 1990). Within their varied approaches, artists reconstruct the male gaze from a seemingly invisible cultural norm into a revolution of reinvention. Creating art that not only rejects the objectification by the patriarchy, but also creates new ways of looking, influenced by the matriarchy.



Fig 3. *Untitled Film Still #2.* (Sherman, 1977)

Section 2: Case study 1 ‘The Guerilla Girls’.

One important ‘activism’ group linked to the male gaze is feminist group ‘The Guerilla Girls’. Their artistic practise plays an important role in the modern societies attempt to combat what Mulvey theorised as the male gaze. They uncover and expose these patriarchal systems by moving feminist critiques towards the institutions that control who creates and profits from visual creativity. Through their work, they reveal that the male gaze isn’t simply about individual artists and their portrayal of women in certain ways, but it is instead about the entire patriarchal structure. It includes the museums and galleries, alongside the curators that decide which artworks get displayed and promoted. They explore and deconstruct the schemes that are constructed in a way that gives power to the male perspective. One key instrument in this artistic resistance is their use of anonymity (Fig 4). The collective adopts gorilla masks, an ode to their name, refusing the role of visible female bodies within their work. This act of resistance is a direct challenge to Mulvey’s ideas on objectification of women through display. By disallowing the viewers to look at their own bodies, which is a common expectation of female artists, they disrupt the very logic of the male gaze. Their masks identify the political messages within their art to be the central focus, not what they look like.



Fig 4. *The 30th Birthday party for the Guerilla girls...* (Norman, 2015)

One of the groups' most well-known activism art creations is their 'The Male Graze' project. This project presents a witty criticism towards the Male gaze dynamics Mulvey explores, through a variety of art and an informational website created with satirical influences. The Male Graze takes a literal approach to the degradation of the male power, altering 'gaze' to 'graze', creating a play on words which highlights that women in art history are not just looked at but 'consumed'. This modification shows the more predatory relationship between male artists and the female body. "There are lots of naked women in post-colonial western art: sleeping in the backyard, splayed out on beds, lounging around with their friends, bathing, dancing, hooking up, being harassed, abducted, bound, raped and murdered" (Guerilla Girls, 2021). This declaration within a video on the male graze website reveals the horrific underlying truths to the portrayal and/or treatment of the female body within contemporary art. The Guerilla Girls explain their ideas that these displays of women within art reflect the ideology and actions of these male painters in real life. "When we looked into how some revered male artists used and abused women in their real lives, we saw more than gazing, we saw grazing".

'Naked' a poster made in 1989. (Fig 5.) This piece presents statistical data, exposing the gender bias of art and artists. Revealing that less than 5% of the artists within the art sections of the met museum are women, however, 85% of nude art in the same museum are females. Whilst originally created to combat the Met museum statistics, it has been altered to portray the stats from various museums globally. "Since then, it's been reproduced thousands of times and travelled all over the world" (Guerilla Girls, 2020). This uncovers a contradiction within the art scene: "women are not recognised or equally compensated for their labour as artists, yet they are suitable as the subject of works of art if satisfying the male gaze" (Plys, 2024). This argument is backed up by Mary D. Garrad's review of Chadwicks work within the 1992 Women's Art Journal. Garrad states "there has been a disjunction between female artists and 'society'. If society is defined as men's culture – a disjunction created intentionally by male artists who saw to it that women were not competitors in men's sphere of creativity". The poster unveils the museum as a space where the male gaze is still actively reinforced, although it is normally seen as a neutral ground. By reframing this space, the Guerilla Girls reveal the institutional bias as an instrument of the male gaze instead of a simple reflection of it.

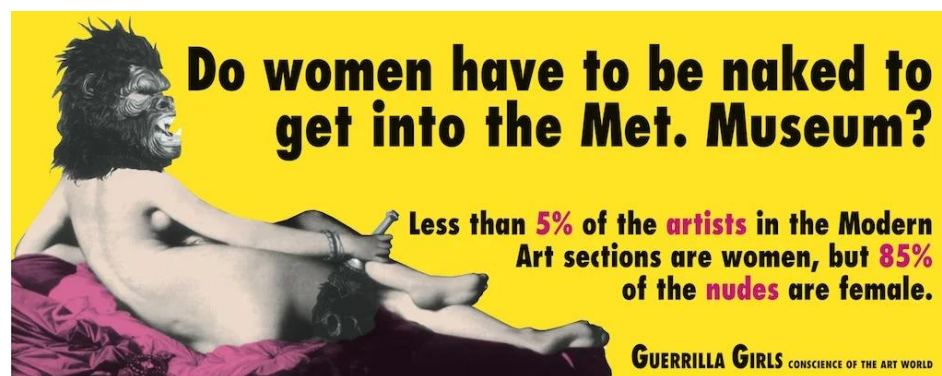


Fig 5. *Naked poster* (The Guerilla Girls, 1989)

The Guerilla Girls also combat the traditional power dynamics of subject vs viewer by transforming themselves into the observers as a substitute to the usual objectification. By placing their poster design within public settings such as billboards, newspapers, on the side of trucks (Fig 6.), they act as a ‘gaze back’ towards the patriarchal industries with intense satirical activism. The confrontation alters the power of control from the viewer, to instead present the viewer with uncomfortable truths. Furthermore, this reversal of ‘ownership’ falls into line with Mulvey’s idea that true feminist art should be disruptive of male – centred outlooks. It does this by making the hidden power dynamics clear, bringing the underbelly of the man orientated art to the surface, allowing those who see the public displays to recognise and challenge those dynamics. “Simultaneously, the look of the audience is denied an intrinsic force: as soon as fetishistic representation of the female image threatens to break the spell of illusion” (Mulvey, 1975). Meaning once the subject's true intention is revealed, it reminds the audience of its artificial nature, and so the viewer no longer has the same powerful gaze, therefore losing its control.



Fig 6. Compilation of Naked. (Bluck, 2025)

In summary, the Guerilla Girls show that in order to combat the male gaze within modern media, it requires more than altering how women are portrayed. The change must come from within the patriarchal systems that determine which of those images and artists are displayed within our society. They reframe the idea of the male gaze as an individualistic problem into an institutional error, captivating audiences through their anonymous humoristic art and their activism related statistical readings. The Guerilla Girls directly challenge the male gaze and the historical authority which has upheld it. Their practise demonstrates that feminist intervention is credible and contemporary feminist art can and must be confrontational. The Guerilla Girls becoming models for the dismantling of the inequality that shapes societies way of looking.

Section 3: Case Study 2 ‘Linder’.

Another important artist who combats the male gaze theory is Linder Sterling, commonly known as ‘Linder’. Linder is a British photomontage artist who is recognised for her radical feminism art. Her series ‘Untitled’ saw her combine magazine imagery into a play on Mulvey’s theorisation that placed women as ‘objects’ of male desire. “To expose these inequalities and reflect upon the issues of identity and representation, many were utilising their own body” (Leuzzi, 2023). Linder’s work, although not using her own body, links to this feminist movement by incorporating the female body. Linder juxtapositioned female bodies, taken from pornographic magazines, with household appliances such as blenders (Fig 7), irons, hoovers and more. This is a reference to the domestication of women to be ‘household wives’ being seen as both sexual objects and labour tools. This is further referenced by the setting of a kitchen as well as the use of a photographed female body that is literally tied up. This is a suggestion to the idea that the woman has to be ‘tied’ to the kitchen as set in the gendered stereotype. The weird, violent and even grotesque nature of these collages act as a confrontation to the viewer, forcing them to realise the absurdity of these objectifications. This compares similarly to the Guerilla Girls confrontational art style, both repurposing the use of the naked female body to challenge society and the patriarchal systems in place.



Fig 7. *Untitled*. (Linder 1976)

“Questioning the commodification of the female body” (Mullins, 2019). Suggesting that the male gaze is tied to capitalism, Linder plays on the idea that women are used to sell products through idealised imagery. By the literal ‘cutting up’ of these components, Linder reveals femininity to be manufactured and the body to be a consumable commodity, ever increasing with the use of internet in modern days. “The rise of the internet has greatly contributed to the growing commodification of the female body, particularly in the context of easy to access pornographic material” (Blackie, 2016). Linder expands on this theory of the male gaze being embedded in capitalist structures by using material take from advertisements and/or pornography (Fig 8). Her work a physical example of the constructed commodity of ‘femininity’, an insight into how what we see as beauty, fashion and domesticity is in fact a male manufactured set up. “When we talk about the commodification of the bodies of women and girls, we are talking about the female being reduced to merely an object of trade” (Akinradewo, 2019). Linder’s work compiles this into a criticism of advertising materials, often linked to commodified fetishism, reassembling the viewpoint on the female body.



Fig 8. *Untitled*. (Linder, 1976)

“The determining male gaze projects its phantasy on to the female figure which is styled accordingly” (Mulvey, 1975). Within her theory, Mulvey suggests the male gaze uses visual pleasure to push smooth idealised images of women. Linder breaks that idea of pleasure, disallowing the viewer any possibility of objectification. By obscuring the faces, she denies any erotic identification, breaking the idea of eye contact. (Fig 9). “We are packaged up and presented to the world in images of dismembered, fragmented and disconnected body parts; when we are offered up whole, it is in a role which requires us to cater to the needs and desires of others” (Blackie, 2016). By using fragmented body parts and creating repellent hybrids, Linder disrupts visual coherence, making the viewer uncomfortable and thus removing the feeling of gratification. Linder's dehumanisation of the woman parallels Mulvey's idea that the male gaze fragments the female body for visual consumption, “displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men, the active controllers of the look” (Mulvey, 1975). Linder disallows the male viewer the ‘pleasure’ of looking at a woman and therefore combats the patriarchal mechanism that encourages men to enjoy looking at a female body.

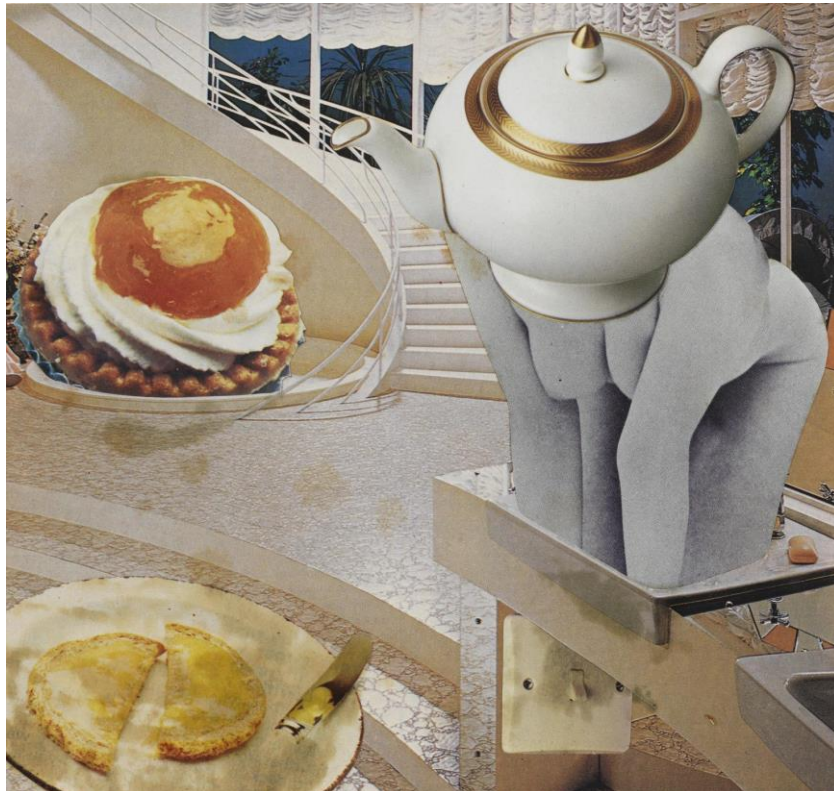


Fig 9. *Untitled*. (Linder, 1976)

Another of Linder's 'Untitled' series features what we assume to be a couple (Fig 10). The insertion of a fork into the woman's eyes is a clear and literal response to the male gaze theory. Mulvey theorises the female figure is often arranged to be visually 'aesthetic', a sense of control for the man. "Women's bodies are often treated as sites of containment, control and oppression" (Grosz, 1994). Whilst the original photograph matches this containment of femininity, Linder's adaptation violently disrupts this expectation. Linder obstructs the eyes, a key component in the ability to 'gaze', which becomes a clear denial ability to subjectify the woman. Additionally, the choice of a kitchen fork has a significance to this intervention, the fork seen as a connection to the domestic labour that patriarchal culture often interlinks with women. Implying that men see women as a function of household service. Furthermore, the disconnection of the couples' gaze proposes a lack of reciprocation between men and women. "Women no longer returned loving glances, suggesting the gaze is never neutral" (Mullins, 2019). This engages with the idea that the male gaze is one sided, a link to John Berger's suggestion that Western art positions women so that "men look at and that women are to be looked at".



Fig 10. *Untitled*. (Linder, 1976)

Overall, Linder Sterling's work actively challenges the male gaze theory through her confrontational and grotesque yet ironically humorous photomontages. She interrupts the action of the 'gaze', putting various household goods in place of sexualised female parts, refusing the male to objectify. Therefore, critiquing the commodification of the female body and disallowing the 'pleasure' of the male to gaze upon it. Linder reclaims the femininity, reimagining how the female body can be represented and offering a simplistic yet powerful alternative. Linder's art acts as both a cultural intervention and political art, aiming to expose the patriarchal structures which have control over the perception of women. It's notable how her work doesn't shy away from using the naked female body which has been used to control beauty standards and objectifications for centuries. Instead, Linder makes the female body the focus of many of her pieces, altering the portrayal of women and embracing the new ways feminist art can be used to combat the male gaze.

Conclusion: How do these artists combat the male gaze? How do they compare?

Across many outlets of art and media, the male gaze is still a persistent framework inside which women have been frequently objectified, constrained and commodified. Within Laura Mulvey's 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' essay, Mulvey speaks to expose this theory and explore how the visual world has been constructed to reflect powerful patriarchal viewpoints. The systems in place portraying women as objects and diminishing them to enforce unrealistic beauty standards that are entirely for a male's pleasure. As shown through cross media examples such as the Girls of the Bond films to Titians' Venus of Urbino, the gaze not only shapes how women are represented but also acts as a reinforcement of hierarchies that place women below men, ensuring women are seen as possessions.

Contemporary feminist artists such as the Guerilla Girls and Linder Sterling are fighting to change these worldwide patriarchal systems by targeting both the outside public as well as the institutions themselves. The Guerilla Girls aim to expose the inequalities within the organisations that sustain these gender injustices such as museums, using their art as an activism choice to get straight to the source. Through satire and anonymity, they disallow the gaze to be projected onto themselves, instead ensuring their work is visible and therefore disruptive. On the other hand, Linder uses her weird and grotesque photomontages to disturb the influence of men on the female body itself. Confronting the objectification directly, Linder dismantles the patriarchal power and parades the male desire as an outcome of absurdity. She forces the viewer to change their viewpoint and enforces the recognition of how women and the idea of feminine beauty have been manufactured, commodified and fragmented for the sake of men.

To conclude, both artists demonstrate the need for the destruction of the male gaze within modern art and media. Through their artistic demonstrations they demand the elimination of the patriarchal systems that determine how women are perceived. Therefore, dismantling the social, economic and cultural structures that hold this power. Together, these artists use their art to reimagine the female body as an extension of the human body through the concept of irony and humour, enforcing the reclamation of the female body and the expulsion of the male controls over the beauty standards. Consequently, both artists unsettle the power dynamics of the male gaze through visual strategies, blurring the separation between women and art, reclaiming the female body from its usual commodified state. The Guerilla Girls and Linder Sterling become powerful critiques of the visual culture of the past, proposing a new way of seeing which challenges the hierarchies of art and explore what can become the new portrayal of the "human".

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Figures:

Figure 1: Young, T. (1962) *James Bond, Dr. No.* [film still]

Figure 2: Titian. (1538) *Venus of Urbino*. [Painting] The Uffizi. Available at: <https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/venus-urbino-titian> (Accessed 4th November 2025).

Figure 3: Sherman, C. (1977) *Untitled Film Still #2*. [Image] MoMA – not on display. Available at: https://www.moma.org/collection/works/56515?artist_id=5392&page=1&sov_referrer=artist (Accessed 4th November 2025).

Figure 4: Norman, B. (2025). *The 30th Birthday party for the Guerilla girls...* [Image] The New York Times. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/08/09/arts/design/the-guerilla-girls-after-3-decades-still-rattling-art-world-cages.html> (Accessed 4th November 2025).

Figure 5: Guerilla Girls. (1989). *Do women have to be naked to get into the met. Museum?* [Poster] Available at: <https://www.guerrillagirls.com/store/do-women-have-to-be-naked-to-get-into-the-met-museum-2012> (Accessed 3rd November 2025).

Figure 6: Bluck, M. (2025) *Compilation of 'Naked Poster'*. Personal Collection.

Figure 7: Linder. (1976) *Untitled*. [Image]. Tate – on loan at Glynn Vivian Art Gallery. Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/linder-untitled-t12502> (Accessed 13th December 2025)

Figure 8: Linder. (1976) *Untitled*. [Image]. Tate – on loan at Glynn Vivian Art Gallery. Available at: <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/linder-untitled-t12501> (Accessed 13th December 2025)

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