

Name: Emma Scott

Student Number: 2404565

Module Title and Code: Research in Context – ADAD5003

Course: BA Fine Art: Studio, Site and Context

Tutors: Alex Duncan and Holly Slingsby

Word Limit: 2500 +/- 10%

Word Count: 2740 (excluding table of figures, table of contents, reference list and bibliography)

Question 1: Explore how artists have approached the concepts around ‘gender’ in art practice; providing evidence from at least 2 artists and thinkers.

Table of Figures

Figure 1: Gentileschi, A. (1620) *Judith Beheading Holofernes* [Oil on canvas]. Uffizi Gallery, Florence. Available at: <https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/judith-beheading-holofernes> (Accessed: 18 November 2025).

Figure 2: Caravaggio, M. (1599) *Judith Beheading Holofernes* [Oil on canvas]. Rome, Italy. Available at: <https://www.caravaggio.org/judith-beheading-holofernes.jsp> (Accessed: 18 November 2025).

Figure 3: Abramović, M. (1975) *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful* [Video]. Available at: <https://zkm.de/en/artwork/art-must-be-beautiful-artist-must-be-beautiful> (Accessed: 21 November 2025)

Figure 4: Rosler, M. (1975) *Semiotics of the Kitchen* [Video]. Available at: <https://www.museoreinasofia.es/en/collections/artwork/semiotics-kitchen> (Accessed: 21 November 2025).

Figure 5: Mendieta, A. (1973) *Untitled (Rape Scene)* [C-print]. The Estate of Ana Mendieta Collection. Available at: <https://www.artforum.com/features/fully-loaded-power-and-sexual-violence-237171/> (Accessed: 21 November 2025).

Figure 6: Pussy Riot. (2012) *Punk Prayer: Mother of God, Drive Putin Away* [Photograph]. Available at: <https://pussyriot.love/2012/02/21/punk-prayer/> (Accessed: 18 November 2025).

Table of Contents

Table of Figures	1
------------------	---

Introduction	3
The Artists	4
Artist one: Artemisia Gentileschi	5
Exploring the female body as a vessel of rage	9
Artist two: Ana Mendieta	11
Artist three: Pussy Riot	14
Conclusion	16
References	17
Bibliography	19

An Exploration of Female Rage in Art

Introduction

“I’ll show you what a woman can do”

The quote above has been attributed to Artemisia Gentileschi and has been cited in various sources. It is an impactful quote by a female artist that can be empowering to other women. It confronts the patriarchy in a direct, powerful way, implying that women can do more than what men suppose. Traditionally, women have been depicted in art as objects of the male gaze, often in motherly and caring roles and engaged in domestic activities (Parker & Pollock, 2020). Gentileschi subverts this within her work, paving the way for later female artists to exert their freedom and independence, portraying themselves through their own eyes.

In the early 20th century, we saw women begin to fight for equality through the Suffragette movement, and the emerging second-wave feminist movement, coupled

with French philosopher Simone De Beauvoir's publication of 'The Second Sex'.

Beauvoir theorised that a woman is not determined by biology but as the "other" sex, moulded by patriarchal expectations of women (Beauvoir, 1953).

Despite being depicted in art for centuries, female rage has often been the subject of scrutiny. As Soraya Chemaly feminist activist and author states, we have been conditioned by society from an early age to "bite our tongues, eat our words, and swallow our pride" (Chemaly, 2018, p. 17). This emphasises how women are taught early on to suppress their emotions to keep men happy. Simone de Beauvoir further supports this claim in her book, 'The Second Sex', stating,

This lack of physical power leads to a more general timidity: she has no faith in a force she has not experienced in her body; she does not dare to be enterprising, to revolt, to invent; doomed to docility, to resignation, she can take in society only a place already made for her (Beauvoir, 1953, p. 330).

This implies that women are often too afraid to speak up for fear of judgment in a society where we are taught to be passive.

Chemaly also notes how studies on children from 2011 show that young girls are "admonished to use 'nicer' voices three times more often than boys are", teaching them to "prioritize the needs and feelings of people around them; often this means ignoring their own discomfort, resentment, or anger (Chemaly, 2018, p. 25). This further affirms that young girls remain pressured in the 21st century to be 'people pleasers,' further silencing them.

The Artists

This essay will discuss Gentileschi and two other female artists who move away from the idea of women being passive, existing only in relationship to men, or being sexual. I will be exploring female rage as a rightful vessel of feminist strength that can be both liberating and empowering for women.

The artists in this essay are from three distinct time periods. The first artist I will be looking at is painter Artemisia Gentileschi, from the seventeenth-century Baroque period. By beginning the essay with an early female artist, it aims to show how women have long desired to express their anger for centuries.

The next artist I will be discussing is Cuban performance artist Ana Mendieta, who worked throughout the 1970's during the second wave feminist movement. Mendieta is an artist who has always been a women's rights activist and often created site-specific work, exploring the connection between her own identity, womanhood, and the earth, but some pieces are angry responses to the treatment of women. This essay will focus on one of these pieces.

The third and final artist I will be discussing in this essay is Pussy Riot, a female performance art and political activist group formed in Russia, who continue to advocate for gender equality during the fourth wave feminist movement. I will be looking at a specific performance of theirs while discussing their individual approach to political activism.

Artist one: Artemisia Gentileschi

In Gentileschi's *Judith Decapitating Holofernes* (1620), we are met with an intense scene. We see two women holding a man down, both with focused, tense expressions. The story of Judith derives from the Old Testament; in the painting, we see Judith and her maidservant beheading Holofernes, the Assyrian general found guilty of 'masculine wrongdoing' (Ciletti, et al., 2010).

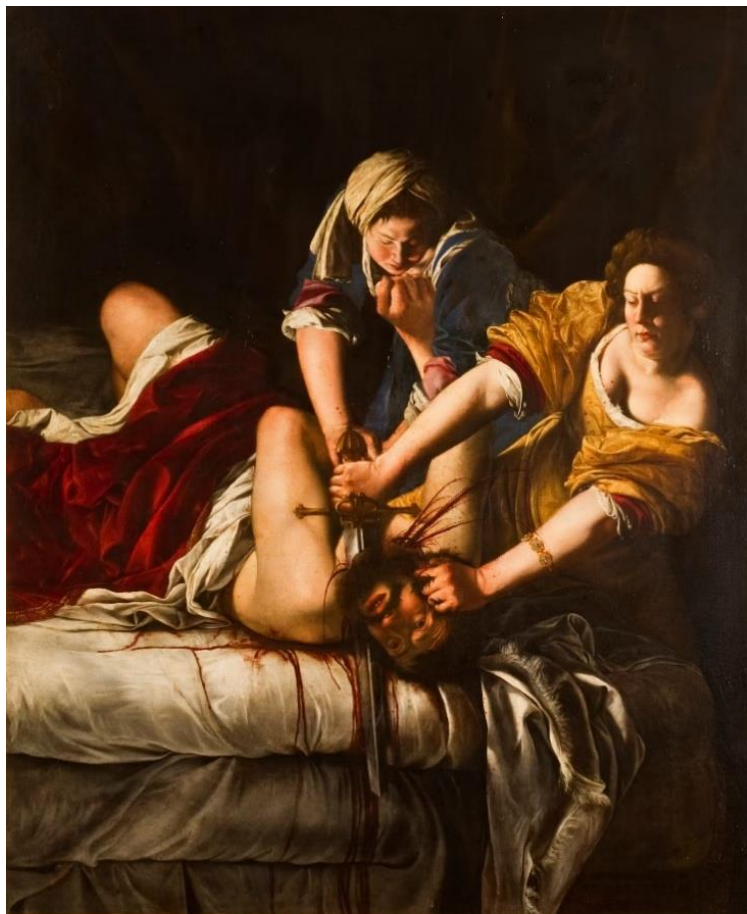


Figure 1 Artemisia Gentileschi, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, 1620

Gentileschi's depiction of Judith tells a story of feminine power, and revenge after being raped by her tutor, Agostino Tassi, whom she later accused in trial (Bissell, 1999). These traumatic events led Gentileschi to portray powerful women seeking

vengeance against men in her work, as seen in *Judith Decapitating Holofernes*. This was a significant achievement as she painted during the Baroque era, where women were actively turned away from training schools and unable to access nude models (Garrard, 2020).

In the Story of Judith, Judith uses her sexuality to seduce Holofernes before killing him. We see this in Gentileschi's depiction of Judith; she is dressed nicely, wearing a gold bracelet with her hair done up, and although she is beautiful and a seductress, this is not the work's primary focus. The painting is a clear depiction of feminine rage and power. There is also a notable sense of sisterhood in the painting as we see Judith's maidservant aiding her in restraining Holofernes, amplifying a sense of togetherness.

During the Tassi Rape Trial, it is documented in her testimony that Gentileschi attempted to murder Tassi with a knife after the attack for "dishonouring her," instead of being the passive woman he expected her to be (Cohen, 2000, p. 70). It could be argued that Gentileschi embodied herself as Judith, as a way of showing how she wished it had ended with Tassi. Instead, Tassi promised Gentileschi he would marry her after the assault, to restore her honour (Cohen, 2000). Gentileschi's rage is therefore understandable, as despite Tassi committing such heinous acts, it is deeply disappointing how it was she whose honour needed to be restored.



Figure 2 Caravaggio, *Judith Beheading Holofernes*, 1599

The scene is bloody, gory, and brutal. Blood spurts from Holofernes' neck onto Judith's dress. During the seventeenth century, artists believed golden yellows and red could "accelerate heart rates and create feelings of passion or urgency" (Reed, 2025). These feelings of passion and urgency signify power and seduction, remnant of Judith's character in the Old Testament.

Crimson red was also said to evoke feelings of love, passion, and martyrdom (Reed, 2025). The presence of red cloth contributes to the overall feeling of danger.

Gentileschi's choice of draping Holofernes in a red cloth could have been to signify that he is a dangerous man, turning Judith into somewhat of a heroine for killing him.

In the painting, Holofernes appears weak. His skin is pale, he looks vulnerable, scrawny, and even scared. His arm is extended in a defensive limp fist, suggesting his attempt to defend himself, but he is too weak. This subverts how men are usually depicted in Baroque art, as powerful and strong figures. As theorised by Arnheim,

“An object in the upper part of the composition is heavier than one in the lower” (Arnheim, 2023, p. 14). By placing the women above Holofernes in the painting, we view them as more dominant; placing Holofernes beneath them signifies Holofernes’ weakness.

There is a similar, earlier painting of the same story and title by Michelangelo Merisi da Caravaggio (Figure 2). Caravaggio was a close friend of Gentileschi’s father, Orazio Gentileschi (Benay, 2015). Caravaggio’s work had a profound influence on the emerging Gentileschi, and it is likely that this painting inspired her own depiction of Judith. If we compare Judith in Gentileschi’s painting to Caravaggio’s, Judith appears much more resentful and dangerous. In Caravaggio’s painting, we see Judith leaning away from Holofernes with a concerned expression. In Gentileschi’s version, Judith appears strong, intimidating, and tenacious. Her eyebrows are deeply furrowed, suggesting determination and disgust, which could be reflective of Gentileschi’s own feelings.

In Gentileschi’s painting, Judith wears a striking, golden-yellow dress. In Caravaggio’s painting she wears a yellow skirt, nodding to her strength, but her white blouse is more prominent. As well as white being symbolic of purity (Reed 2025), we can clearly see her breasts under the top. Although Caravaggio depicts a strong female character, he is still sexualising her, nevertheless.

Today, Gentileschi’s depiction of Judith tells a story of female power, strength and vengeance, paving the way for later female artists to express themselves freely.

Exploring the female body as a vessel of rage

The 1970s were a key period in the second-wave feminist movement, reflected in the art at the time. Many female artists began using their bodies to express their anger at the patriarchy, misogyny, violence and sexual assault against women (Blocker, 1999). In 1975, there were two powerful performance pieces: one by Marina Abramovic and the other by Martha Rosler.



Figure 3 Marina Abramovic, *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful*, 1975

In Marina Abramovic's *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful*, the one-hour performance consists of Abramovic combing her hair vigorously, growing increasingly angry while repeating the words, 'Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful'. Through her increasing frustration and violent gestures, Abramovic interrogates the art industry and the exhausting beauty standards and expectations imposed on women that persist today (IMMA, n.d.).



Figure 4 Martha Rosler, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, 1975

Rosler's *Semiotics of the Kitchen* demonstrates her becoming progressively angrier as she names and interacts with kitchenware, symbolising the frustration towards the expected domestic role of women. This connection between anger and domesticity is further supported by feminist activist and author Soraya Chemaly, who writes,

anger metaphors are filled with kitchen imagery – anger simmers and smolders before reaching a boiling point; a person has to ‘mull things over’ and ‘cool off’; we are supposed to ‘contain’ or ‘put a lid’ on our anger, or it will leave a bad ‘taste in the mouth (Chemaly, 2018, p. 17).

Through this, Chemaly further reiterates the harmful stereotype of the expected domestic woman, and the anger that lies beneath it, evident in Rosler's performance.

Artist two: Ana Mendieta

In Mendieta's performance piece *Untitled (Rape Scene)* (1973), we are met with a horrifying scene. We see Mendieta half-naked from the waist down, with bloodied marks across her body, helplessly slumped over a table. Its confrontational and raw approach makes it difficult for us as the viewer to look away, almost as if we stumbled upon a crime scene.



Figure 5 Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Rape Scene)*, 1973

In the spring of 1973, while Mendieta was studying at Iowa University, a nineteen-year-old Sarah Ann Ottens was found dead in her dorm room, having been raped

and strangled (Szymanek, 2016). Fuelled with anger, a month after her murder, Mendieta began working on a series of performances in direct response to the attack.

In this performance (Figure 5), Mendieta invited her classmates to her apartment, where they would walk in to discover the gruelling scene. Mendieta laid motionless across the table for over an hour as her peers bore witness in the room (Szymanek, 2016). The bloody markings on her body are symbolic and confront the violence of male sexual assault, something that has previously been kept hidden.

Much like Abramovic and Rosler, Mendieta used her body as the primary subject of her work. Author and Professor of Art History Jane Blocker writes,

While many male artists experimented with the unfamiliar experience of making themselves the object of the viewer's gaze, female artists worked to expose the violence and control that can lie behind the gaze, which for them (us) is neither novel nor escapable (Blocker, 1999, p. 15).

This demonstrates that while male artists have attempted to share women's experiences, they did not consider the violent consequences of that experience. By embodying herself as the victim of the attack, we, as the viewers, must confront the violent reality of male sexual violence.

Sarah Ann Ottens never fully received justice, and by law, her murder is still considered an open case (Weinman, 2016). Mendieta's performance is a deeply raw and rageful response to the violent assault of a woman. Akin to Gentileschi, Mendieta took a highly traumatic event that caused her significant anger to fuel her artistic expression, encouraging women to embrace their rage as a fierce narrative. There is also a recurring sense of sisterhood in both Gentileschi's and Mendieta's

work. Although Mendieta did not know Ottens personally, she commented on how her death “moved and frightened her” (Mendieta cited in Weinman, 2016).

Mendieta’s *Untitled (Rape Scene)* directly confronts the traumatic aftermath of male sexual violence, offering a voice for victims while holding accountable a world where it is actively hidden.

Artist three: Pussy Riot

Today, in the 21st century, female artists continue to explore the subject of rage. In February of 2012, a group of five women, dressed in bright balaclavas and funky tights, stormed the Cathedral of Christ in Russia with a message. With the aid of some punky backing music, the women put on a show, dancing around bizarrely while mimicking prayer positions by kneeling and crossing themselves. They later uploaded footage of the performance to the internet, titling it *Punk Prayer: Mother of God, Drive Putin Away* (translated from Russian). Just five days later a case was opened, resulting in the arrest of two of Pussy Riot’s members, Maria Alyokhina and Yekaterina Samutsevich. Authorities called the performance a “premeditated hooliganism performed by an organized group of people motivated by religious hatred or hostility” (Borenstein, 2020, p. 2).

During the performance, the women frequently called for the aid of Mary, the mother of God, pleading her to “cast Putin out, and become a feminist” (Borenstein, 2020, p. 31), directly confronting the patriarchy under Putin’s dictatorship, where women are actively viewed as second-class citizens with restricted rights. Chemaly argues,

If a woman is angry in her 'place', as a mother or a teacher, for example, she is respected, and her anger is generally understood and acceptable. If, however, she transgressed and is angry in what is thought of as a men's arena – such as traditional politics or the workplace – she is almost always penalized in some way (Chemaly, 2018, p. 14).

The Cathedral of Christ in Russia is a highly elite building, where major meetings and politics dominated by men take place (Borenstein, 2020). Women at the church are forbidden to stand at the altar. Pussy Riot acknowledge this, stating, "And we, feminists, will serve the Punk Prayer at the altar, because women are not allowed to be there. The Virgin Mary, for example, would not be able to enter the altar if she were in the Temple" (Pussy Riot, 2012).



Fig 3 Pussy Riot, *Punk Prayer: Mother of God, Drive Putin Away*, 2012

By occupying what is thought to be a 'man's place' Pussy Riot directly confront the Russian patriarchy. It could be argued that they favoured art as an event, as it is more direct and harder to ignore. A painting or photograph is silent, and people can choose to walk past, whereas art as an event is loud and disruptive. Pussy Riot's approach was to deliberately cause a disturbance, to be noticed, moving away from the idea of women being passive.

Conclusion

The intention of this essay was to show female rage depicted in art, not specifically women who are angry at men or the patriarchy. However, when researching female artists who express anger in their work, the cause is commonly related directly or indirectly to men.

Artemisia Gentileschi was angry at a man who sexually abused her, which turned into rage against a world where crimes against women were accepted. This anger came through in her paintings depicting strong women taking control over unruly men. Ana Mendieta's rage was similar as it was fuelled by the murder and rape of a woman at her university, while Pussy Riot expressed a broader anger, challenging gender inequality and the patriarchy under Putin's dictatorship.

Though I acknowledge an essay should not typically finish on a quote, I found that Chemaly nicely sums up the focus of this essay in this quote, which highly resonates with me:

Your anger is a gift you give to yourself and the world that is yours. In anger, I have lived more fully, freely, intensely, sensitively, and politically. If ever there was a

time not to silence yourself, to channel your anger into healthy places in choices, this is it (Chemaly, 2018, p. 282).

References

Arnheim, R. (2023) *Art and Visual Perception, Second Edition: A Psychology of the Creative Eye*. 2nd ed. California: University of California Press.

Beauvoir, S. D. (1953) *The Second Sex*. London: Jonathan Cape.

Benay, E. (2015) *Caravaggio and Caravaggisti in 17th-century Europe*. Available at: <https://smarthistory.org/caravaggio-and-caravaggisti-in-17th-century-europe/> (Accessed 6 December 2025).

Bissell, R. W. (1999) *Artemisia Gentileschi and the Authority of Art*. Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press.

Blocker, J. (1999) *Where is Ana Mendieta?: Identity, Performativity, and Exile*. Duke University Press.

Borenstein, E. (2020) *Pussy Riot: Speaking Punk to Power*. Bloomsbury Academic.

Chemaly, S. (2018) *Rage Becomes Her*. 1st ed. London: Simon and Schuster UK.

Ciletti, E., Lähnemann, H. & Brine, K. R. (2010). *The Sword of Judith: Judith Studies Across the Disciplines*. Cambridge: OpenBook Publishers.

Cohen, E. S. (2000) 'The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi: A Rape as History', *The Sixteenth Century Journal*, 31(1), pp. 47-75. Available at: [The Trials of Artemisia Gentileschi: A Rape as History on JSTOR](#)

Garrard, M. D. (2020). *Artemisia Gentileschi and Feminism in Early Modern Europe*. London: Reaktion Books.

Irish Museum of Modern Art [IMMA] (n.d) *Art Must Be Beautiful, Artist Must Be Beautiful, 1975*. Available at: <https://imma.ie/collection/art-must-be-beautiful-artist-must-be-beautiful/> (Accessed 10 December 2025).

Parker, R. & Pollock, G. (2020) *Old Mistresses: Women, Art and Ideology*. 1st ed. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Pussy Riot (2012) *Punk Prayer*. Available at: <https://pussyriot.love/2012/02/21/punk-prayer/> (Accessed 10 December 2025).

Reed, I. (2025) 'Color Palette in Baroque Painting and the Emotional Impact of Master Artists', *Art-Cultural-Partners*, 9 May. Available at: [Color Palette in Baroque Painting and the Emotional Impact of Master Artists | Art Blog - Art-Cultural-Partners](#) (Accessed: 10/12/2025).

Szymanek, A. (2016) 'Bloody Pleasures: Ana Mendieta's Violent Tableaux', *Signs*, 41(4), pp. 895-925. Available at: [Bloody Pleasures on JSTOR](#)

Weinman, S. (2016) 'In death, an artist and a young woman meet', *The Guardian*, 21 April 2016. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/apr/21/ana-mendieta-death-sarah-ottens-university-of-iowa> (Accessed 10 December 2025).

Bibliography

Jones, A. (1998) *Body Art/Performing the Subject*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

Safariants, R. (2022) 'From Pugacheva to Pussy Riot: Gender Performance in Russo-Soviet Popular Music', *Canadian-American Slavic studies*, 56(2), pp. 200–230. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.30965/22102396-05602012>.

White, B. (2023) 'Returning to The Scene of the Crime: Gendered and Racialized Violence in Ana Mendieta's Rape Scene', *Art Journal*, 82(2), pp. 68-81. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.2023.2239117>