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The City of Ladies

Featuring artworks from female artists across the globe, I intend to recreate an allegorical ‘City of Ladies’ (or female/feminist artists) as written in The Book of the City of Ladies by Christine de Pisan in 1405. This work, translated from the Medieval French, is believed to be the first recognisably feminist writing known to us (Barbara Tuchman, 1983). De Pisan praises and defends women by planning to build a safe city in which to home an array of female makers, writers and thinkers chosen from throughout history.

As Griselda Pollock suggests in Vision and Difference (1988), it is generally accepted that western art has been create by and for the gaze of white, middle class men. The female as the ‘the other’, the ‘foreigner’ (Kristeva). In Baudelaire’s Le Figaro essay of 1863, entitled ‘The painter of modern life’, he writes of the flaneur/artist at one with modern bourgeois society. However, there could never be a female equivalent...a flaneuse. “As Baudelairean text goes on to show, women do not look. They are positioned as the *object* of the flaneur’s gaze.” (Pollock, 1988, p.100).

This exhibition is devoted to women artists and aims to unfold all that is a celebration of women’s strength, liberation and equality and possibly raise the question as to why the artists’ have the compulsion to create their work. Each element of the exhibition would draw on a different art practice. Why the art was created...as a response to...

Since De Pizan's ideal was never realised, it is through an imagined space that we may explore the works of several female artists. I have chosen the house the exhibition within the futuristic portico extension of the Serpentine Sackler Gallery, London, which was designed by the late Iraqi architect Zaha Hadid. This piece of architecture itself is an exhibit. Hadid herself was stigamtized in the UK for being a non-white, Iraqi woman in a very male oriented profession. The curvaceous, other-worldly outer surface typifies Hadid's style, whilst the original building, a19th century brick structure, The Magazine, as the more intimate interior, lends itself to the perfect "white cube" space (Obrist, 2014, p. 29). These opposing spaces provides an opportunity to implement E. T. Hall's theory of Proxemics and his "four distances" (Hall, 1969), by considered juxtaposition of exhibits... the physical/spacial relationship to each other and the observer. We might also apply Diole's concept of "changing space" with the viewer able to travel into and out from different architectural surroundings. The portico area seen as transient, this 'absolute space' (Lefebvre, 1974), or "non-place" (Auge, 1995), within which I aim to create a sacred "place...a highly visible public symbol" (Tuan, 1977, pp.163). As Lefebvre states, "In its ancient Greek version, absolute space may contain nothing. The agora is empty – and must remain empty, so that free citizens may assemble there." (Lefebvre, 1974, pp. 237).



Fig. 1: Zaha Hadid Architects (2013) *The Serpentine Sackler Gallery*



Fig. 2: Zaha Hadid Architects (2013) *The Serpentine Sackler Gallery*

South Elevation

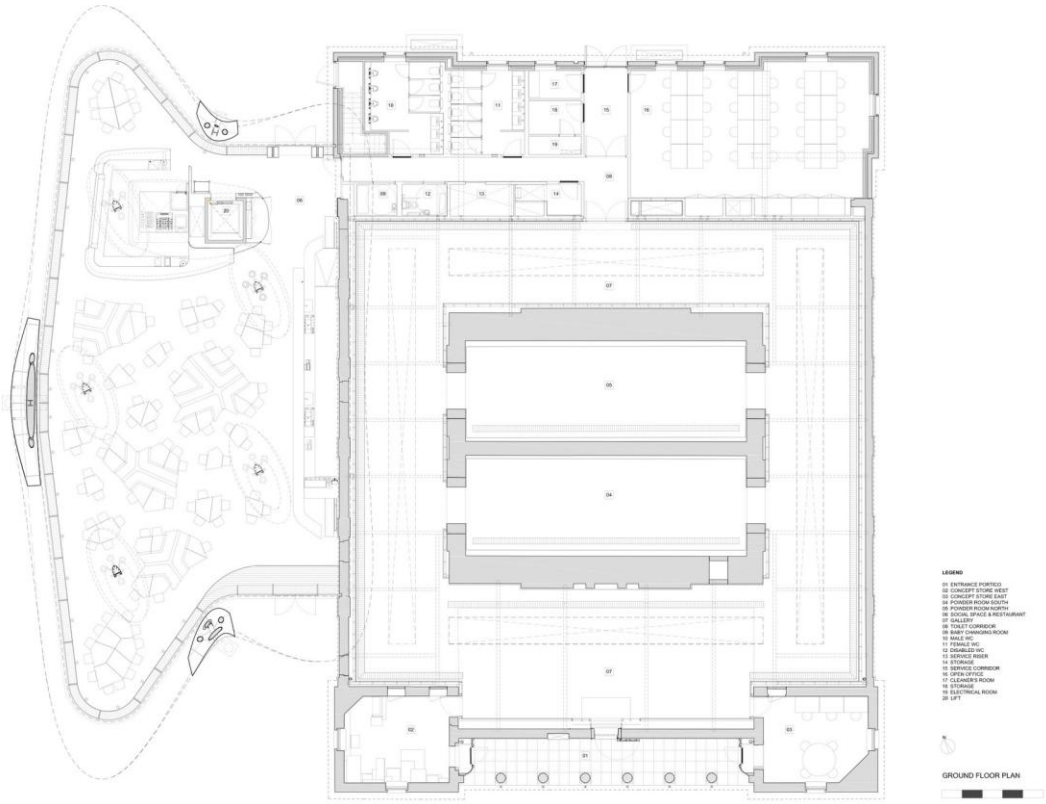


Fig. 3: Zaha Hadid Architects (2013) *The Serpentine Sackler Gallery Ground Floor Plan*

Alternatively another consideration for the gallery space would have been to use an imagined exhibition space, yet to be built, again designed by architect Zaha Hadid. The Nuragic and Contemporary Art Museum, also known as "Betile", is a planned contemporary art museum in Cagliari, Sardinia, Italy. However, the labyrinth-like interior space would not have been conducive to Obrist's "white cube" concept and notions of 'space', although more attuned to the idea of de Pizan's 'city',

with its lanes, corridors, walkways, hidden spaces, and therefore the Serpentine Gallery was chosen.



Figures 4-5: Zaha Hadid Architects (2013) *Nuragic and Contemporary Art Museum*

At the entrance to the portico, we are faced with Louise Bourgeois' giant spider sculpture "Maman" (1999). This steel and marble constructed has megalithic proportions (9271 x8915 x 10236mm) and towers above the viewer.

> "Encountering *Maman* always from the perspective of the child looking up from below, the viewer may experience the sculpture as an expression of anxiety about a mother who is universal – powerful and terrifying, beautiful and, without eyes to look or a head to think, curiously indifferent."
>
> (Tate, 1999)

You may interact with the sculpture; feel its presence as it engulfs you. The psychoanalytic theory of 'flooding' springs to mind as Bourgeois' work aims to fight

specific fears, and although the spider is viewed as a sinister figure, Bourgeois contradicts this notion and introduces her as a friend...clever, deliberate, soothing.



Figure 6: Louise Bourgeois (1999) *Maman*



Figure 7: *The Dinner Party by Judy Chicago*, 1974–79. Ceramic, porcelain, textile, 576 × 576 in. (1463 × 1463 cm). Brooklyn Museum (Photo: Donald Woodman)

Central to the exhibition, as you enter the portico, I will place Judy Chicago's 'Dinner Party' installation. We imagine these women, sat around a table...a mythical, iconographical 'round table'.

> *"The Dinner Party* comprises a massive ceremonial banquet, arranged on a triangular table with a total of thirty-nine place settings, each commemorating

an important woman from history... The names of another 999 women are inscribed in gold on the white tile floor below the triangular table”

(Brooklyn Museum, 2020)

As we gaze up from Chicago’s table, we sense the presence of the gargantuan face staring down upon us. From the far side of the portico looms Jenny Saville’s Reverse 2002-3. Saville, one of the Young British Artists from 1980-90s, sometimes using her own body as a model, explores the portrayal of flesh on canvas. We might question the disfunctionality of the plastic surgeon’s knife within her studies of surgery patients.



Figure 8: Saville, J (2002-3) *Reverse* [Oil paint on canvas, 213.4 x 243.8 cm]

Postcard from Tate Gallery

From the portico, we venture into the 19th century 'Magazine' building which housed military munitions. Along the long passage of the gallery space we find the Bayeux Tapestry. Although not actually a woven tapestry, but embroidered linen, this 270 ft of worked cloth completed by c. 1086, believed to be designed by a man, but an all-female undertaking, is a "complex, multi-layered series of historical...mythical and cultural narratives" (Hunter, 2019), filled with symbolic imagery...all narrated from the male perspective and bias. We might consider Derrida's "false consciousness theory here. Rozsika Parker, in 'The Subversive Stitch (2010, p 26-29), also considers this work. This feminist art historian reflects upon the practice of the craft as a weapon of resistance to the constraints of women in society.



Figure 9: Reading Borough Council (2000) *The Bayeux Tapestry*

We now turn into Powder Room South to view Tracey Emin's seminal installation piece 'Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995'.



Figure 10: Widewalls (2020) *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995 Tracey Emin* – Applique tent, mattress and light (122 x 245 x 215 cm)

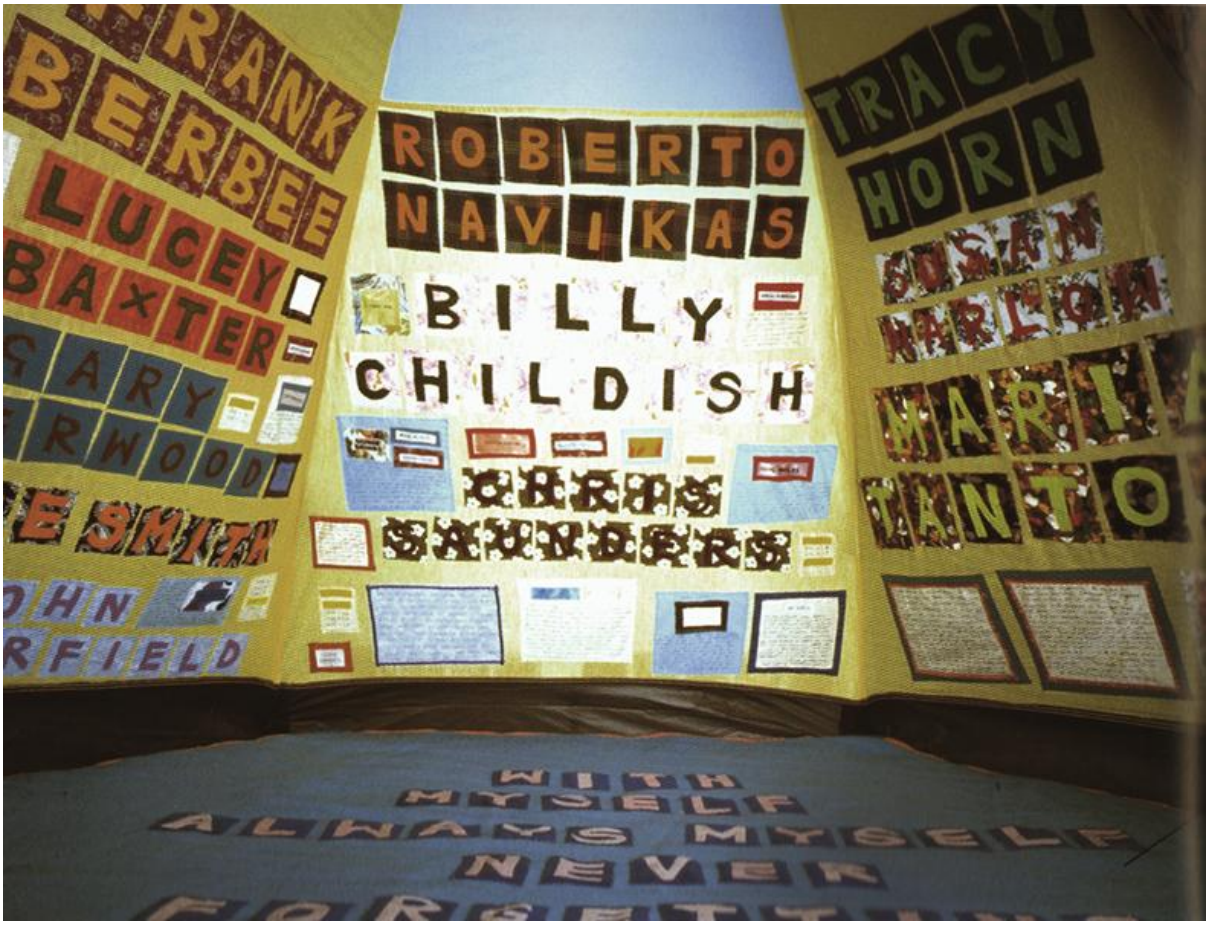


Figure 11: Widewalls (2020) *Everyone I Have Ever Slept With 1963-1995 - Interior Tracey Emin*

We may perceive the Tracy Emin tent to be a 'representational space' (Lefebvre, 1974), inviting the viewer to invade this personal space, thus the observer becomes the participant, by engaging in the work. I have positioned this exhibit within a smaller more intimate gallery room, forcing the viewer to enter...engage. It is misconstrued that the work reflects Emin's sexual encounters over this period, however, from a recent podcast interview with the artist, Razia Iqbal (How I Found My Voice, 13/05/2019), we discover that Emin also included her family, herself and her unborn foetuses.

Finally, juxtaposed against the historical narrative of the Bayeux Tapestry, inside the second Powder Room, we view the fairy stories based on deconstructed / relationships by Paula Rego. From a BBC podcast archive (Desert Island Discs, 07/12/1997). We discover Rego's privileged, protected upbringing as a single child, from which her memories of fairy tales and story-telling are recreated and subverted as an adult. She re-invents her childhood (Bachelard, 1958). Suffering and dysfunction are inferred within many of her other paintings. We may find an emotive response, or 'affect' towards these works to which we may relate.



Figure 12: Rego, P (1994) *Bride* [Pastel on paper, 120 x 160.6 cm] Postcard from Tate Gallery

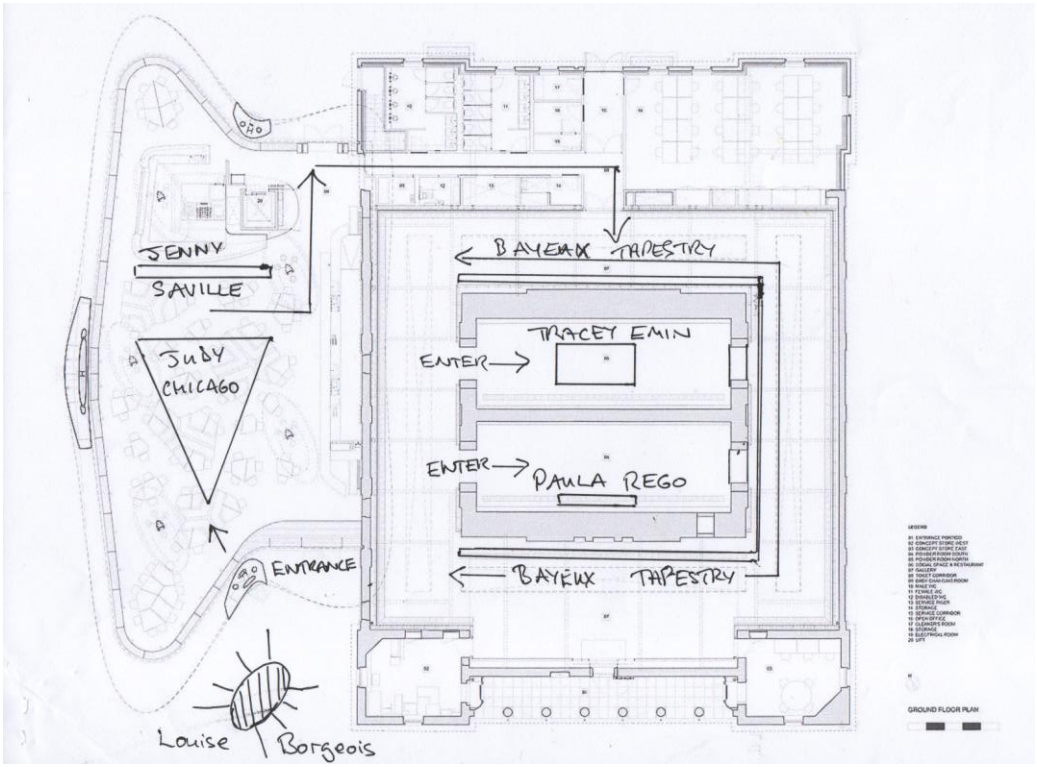


Figure 13: San-Miguel, C (2020) *Exhibition Map* [Pen on paper]

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Map of Exhibition