BRIEF ENCOUNTERS

ISSN: 2514–0612

Journal homepage: http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE

The Body and the Gallery: Cross Exhibition Review of *Sarah Lucas: HAPPY GAS*, *Women in Revolt!*, and *If Not Now, When?*

Author(s): Nicole Atkinson

Email: nicole_atkinson8@hotmail.co.uk

Source: *Brief Encounters*, Vol. 8 No. 1 (April 2024), pp. 1–17.

URL: http://briefencounters-journal.co.uk/BE/article/view/212

DOI: https://doi.org/10.24134/be.v8i1.212

From autumn 2023 to spring 2024, several of London's galleries showcased the works of contemporary women artists, including Sarah Lucas and Helen Chadwick. This review critically examines three key exhibitions: *Women in Revolt!* and *Sarah Lucas: HAPPY GAS* at Tate Britain, and *If Not Now, When?* at Saatchi Gallery's Season on Sculpture. As the exhibitions highlight themes of identity, resilience, and empowerment, particularly focusing on the female body as a powerful medium of expression, this review explores how women artists utilise the female body in contemporary art as a form of resistance against traditionally repressive, male-dominated art practices. The female body, a common feature in feminist art, is often used as a symbol of rebellion, with artists asserting control and autonomy over their bodies through their work. By occupying these contemporary art spaces, these artists affirm their positions within both the public sphere and the broader art discourse. This cross-exhibition review delves into the current renaissance of the gallery space as a site of resistance, examining its contributions to wider feminist discourses and art practices.

The Body and the Gallery: Cross Exhibition Review of *Sarah Lucas: HAPPY GAS*, *Women in Revolt!*, and *If Not Now, When?*

Nicole Atkinson

On a dark, wintery Friday evening in the depths of November 2023, an audience of artists, researchers, and feminists gathered at the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) in London to celebrate the launch of Silver Press' recent publication, *After Sex*. A collection of essays, poems, and short stories, the book explores reproductive justice, tracing the reproductive rights battles of the twentieth century and the recent insurgence of archaic laws against reproductive rights and the subsequent attack on female bodily autonomy. Book editor Edna Bonhomne welcomed audiences, thanking the ICA for the use of the exquisite fourth floor Nash and Brandon rooms. Normally rooms hired out for wedding receptions, the space was transformed into a site of contemplation and agitation as contributors to the book explored the contemporary struggle for gender equality. The juxtaposition of this functionality of contemporary art space made me ponder on a recent wave of powerful female led exhibitions across London, including *Women in Revolt!* at the Tate Britain, Sarah Lucas' retrospective *HAPPY GAS* at Tate Britain, and *If Not Now, When?* at the Saatchi Gallery. In feminist art practice, such as the mentioned exhibitions, the female body frequently symbolises rebellion, with artists reclaiming control and autonomy over their bodies in both their artistic expression and curation. Artist Catherine Elwes (whose work is featured within *Women in Revolt!*) discusses the body politic within artistic practices, noting that Western art history, 'the exclusion of the personal and the domestic from the subject matter of "high" art has reinforced the marginalisation of both women themselves and women's art'.[1] By taking over these contemporary art spaces, these artists not only assert their place in artistic practice but also champion female bodily autonomy, which appears to be increasingly imperilled. But how are these works framed within the gallery space, and how does the gallery impact the ways in which the works are viewed and understood?

The Conservative Party continue to villainise women, gender nonconforming, and transgender people, using large scale events and conferences to push ill-informed and harmful views such as 'a man is a man, and a woman is a woman, that's just common

[1] Catherine Elwes, 'The Pursuit of the Personal in British Video Art', in *Diverse Practices: A Critical Reader on British Video Art*, ed. by Julia Knight (London: The Arts Council England), 261–282 (p. 263).

sense'.[2] While the party continue to mock and scapegoat these groups to mask issues such as the cost of living crisis or major underfunding to public services, exhibitions and publications such as the aforementioned are paramount in advocating both equality and bodily autonomy.[3] When even criticism within the party is dismissed, perhaps a public space such as the gallery is the ideal site in which the spirit of agitation and rebellion can be harnessed in order to fight back against such oppressive gender discourse.[4] Despite the ongoing "culture wars" engineered by the Conservative Party, women and gender nonconforming artists are harnessing the rebellious spirit of the feminist movement by using the female form within the gallery to fight back against increasingly oppressive administrations. Publications such as *After Sex* and the work of artists and curators dedicated to celebrating women's bodies are just as necessary now as they have ever been. It's often easy to slip into a sense of complacency regarding movements like feminism, with some labelling the current era as 'post-feminist', suggesting that the movement has achieved its goal of gender equality. However, with the rise of increasingly draconian measures, particularly within Western societies and right-wing governments, this notion couldn't be further from reality.

The female form has been central to the feminist discourse since its early inception, and is quoted in *After Sex* by bell hooks who expresses that 'if women do not have the right to choose what happens to our bodies we risk relinquishing rights in all other areas of our lives'.[5] Reclaiming control over the female body is integral in advocating for gender equality, especially in a climate where women's reproductive rights are become increasingly, and more commonly, placed under threat. Not only does the female body serve as a catalyst for gender equality, but also as a vehicle for other social justice movements including queer rights and climate action, as demonstrated within some of these exhibitions. By delving into these exhibitions, we gain insight into the significance of the female body within artistic practice, and how it can offer means of rebellion against oppressive discourse and governments. However, it also becomes evident how certain galleries' regressive treatment of female artists can unfortunately be counterproductive in this artistic endeavour.

---

[2] Patrick Kelleher, 'One Year of Rishi Sunak: How the Tory prime minister has failed LGBTQ+ Brits', *PinkNews*, 26 October 2023, <https://www.thepinknews.com/2023/10/26/rishi-sunak-lgbtq-rights-track-record-trans/> [Accessed 24 June 2024].

[3] Cherokee Seebalack, 'How the UK Government Uses Communities to Scapegoat Responsibility', *Spark&Co*, <https://sparkandco.co.uk/blog/how-uk-government-scapegoats-communities> [Accessed 24 June 2024].

[4] Aubrey Allegretti, 'Prominent Tory ejected from conference after heckling home secretary', *The Guardian*, 3 October 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/oct/03/prominent-tory-ejected-from-conference-after-heckling-home-secretary> [Accessed 7 February 2024].

[5] bell hooks, 'Our Bodies, Ourselves: Reproductive Rights', in *After Sex*, ed. by Edna Bonhomme and Alice Spawls (London: Silver Press, 2023), 7–12 (p. 7).

Sarah Lucas: HAPPY GAS at Tate Britain

In 2009, Amna Malik completed a survey of London based artist Sarah Lucas' work, in which she asks, 'does art have a sex? And if so, what does it look like?'.[6] Lucas endeavours to answer this in her latest retrospective show, *Sarah Lucas: HAPPY GAS* at the Tate Britian, running from 28 September 2023–14 January 2024.

Born in London in 1962, Sarah Lucas went on to become one of the most notable members of the Young British Artist movement, alongside the likes of Damien Hirst, Gary Hume, and Tracey Emin. Unlike her male counterparts, Lucas' work became notoriously recognisable for the artist-as-subject approach, with her own body being at the centre of a lot of her works. The most notable of these is perhaps *Self Portrait with Fried Eggs* (1996) as seen in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Sarah Lucas *Self-Portrait with Fried Eggs*, 1996 c-type print 151 × 103 cm / 59 1⁄2 × 40 1⁄2 in © Sarah Lucas. Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London. Photo: Angus Fairhurst.

Lucas is pictured reclining in a chair with two fried eggs placed over her breasts, whilst keeping stern eye contact with the camera as she dominates the image with her traditionally masculine posture. Whilst the linoleum tiling offers a nod to the domestic

[6] Amna Malik, *Sarah Lucas: Au Naturel* (London: Afterall Books, 2009), 1.

feminine realm of the kitchen, Lucas draws attention to her sexuality by mimicking her naked breasts with fried eggs, simultaneously drawing attention to and subverting the male gaze.

This playful and satiric nature permeates her Tate exhibition. Walking up to the exhibition's entrance, audiences are greeted with a brief teaser of Lucas' jovial nature through the salmon pink wallpaper printed with round pairs of cigarette moulds, emulating both the female form and the spirit of mischief that is central to the exhibition. The female form takes centre stage and is used as a vehicle to explore wider issues pertaining to class, gender, happiness, and mortality.

Upon entering the exhibition, audiences are immediately confronted with a blown-up image of Lucas' *Chicken Knickers* (1997), a photograph of her lower body wearing white underwear in which a raw chicken has been attached to, offering a food substitute to the female genitalia, as seen in Figure 2.

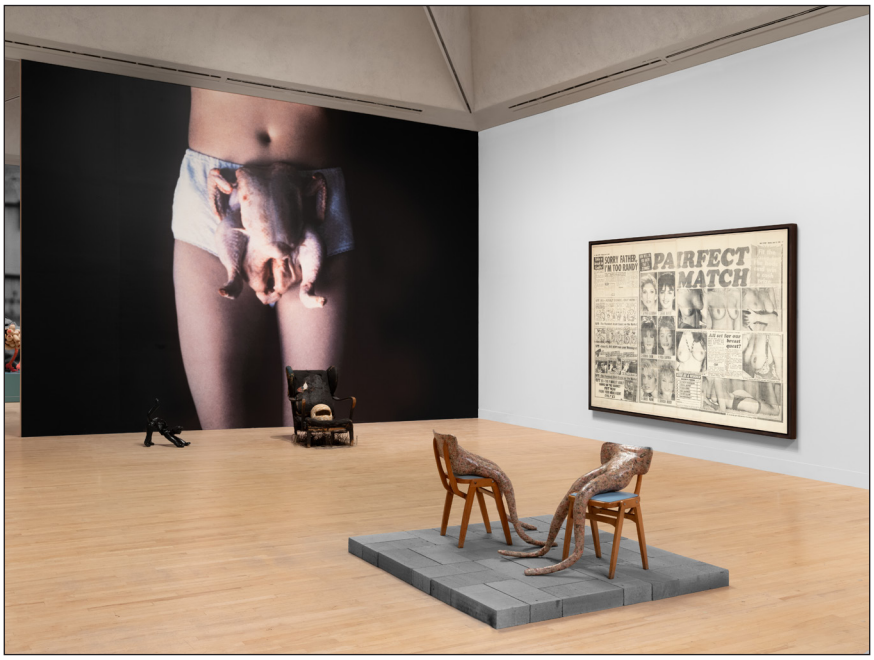

Figure 2: Sarah Lucas Installation view, *HAPPY GAS,* Tate Britain, London, 28 September 2023–14 January 2024 © Sarah Lucas. Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London. Photo: Katie Morrison.

Similarly, to *Self Portrait with Fried Eggs* (1996), Lucas explores the intersection of sexuality and food. Drawing upon Julia Kristeva's concept of abjection, Lucas replaces and subverts the traditionally sexualised imagery of the female form with an unsettling uncanniness meant to evoke disgust and revulsion in viewers. By replacing aspects of the female body with everyday objects or food items, she aims to desexualise the body, prompting audiences to critically examine the hypersexualised lens through which we as audiences have been conditioned to view female bodies.

In the second room, the viewer is plunged further into this comical sense of discomfort as they peruse the array of sculptures of women formed from stuffed tights and stockings, all under the watchful eye of Lucas, who looms over the sculptures in *Eating a Banana* (1990), a Sarah Lucas photo series taken by Gary Hume that covers the walls.

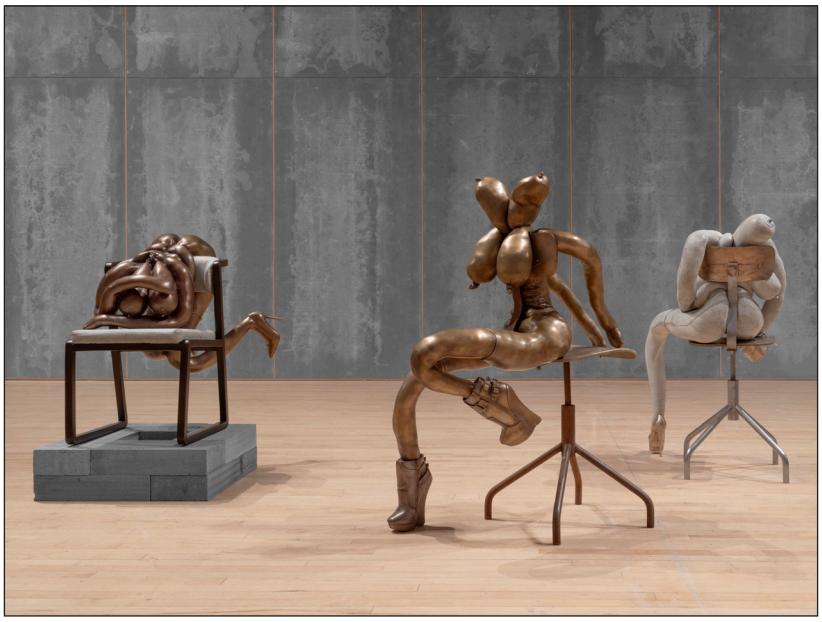

Figure 3: Sarah Lucas Installation view, *HAPPY GAS*, Tate Britain, London, 28 September 2023–14 January 2024 © Sarah Lucas. Courtesy Sadie Coles HQ, London. Photo: Katie Morrison.

As demonstrated in Figure 3, Lucas uses the mundanity of the chair as a versatile object to accommodate the diverse shapes and forms of her sculptures. Rejecting patriarchal notions of the female body as a commodity, Lucas juxtaposes her powerful sculptures by drawing attention to the chair and its purpose to accommodate the human body. Audiences are confronted with the female form as a powerful entity through the likes of *MRS NICUBATOR* (2019), *SLAG* (2022), and *FAT DORIS* (2023). Furniture has always been a key element of Lucas' work, from her earlier substitute for the human body, to now being used to support her characters. On writing on her of use of chairs, Lucas states in the exhibition guide:

> The purpose of chairs (in the world) is to accommodate the human body sitting. They can be turned to other purposes. Generally as a support for an action or object. Changing light bulbs. Propping open a door. Posing. Sex [...] My own, sculptural, purposes are not different.[7]

While the chair exists to support the body, the female form is free to twist, contort, and lounge as the character desires, emulating the sense of bodily autonomy that occupies feminist discourse.

[7] Tate Britain, *Tate Britain 28 Sep 2023–14 Jan 2024: Sarah Lucas HAPPY GAS* (leaflet) (viewed 25 October 2023), 5.

Sexual playfulness runs throughout the show, from chicken carcasses in the first room, to sculptures smoking out of their rears in the final room. Lucas purposely draws attention to the discomfort most audiences feel at the sight of the exposed female form in the public sphere. Speaking to her use of female anatomy, Lucas notes:

> funnily enough vaginas seem to shock people more than a penis. Especially the plaster casts of real ones. I've seen people approach some of the MUSES and, when they're close enough to get the vagina into focus, about turn and walk away.[8]

Lucas not only asserts ownership of her own body but also actively advocates for the liberation of all female bodies, thereby rejecting the sexualisation of the female form prevalent in male-dominated artistic practices.

On writing for her 2015 commission at the Venice Biennale, Lucas describes her artistic practice as 'intimate, objective, comradely, physical', a description that also perfectly describes the sentiment that runs throughout *HAPPY GAS*.[9] Further distinguishing her work from that of her male counterparts and commenting on the sexualisation of the body within art, Lucas expresses 'some artists are Classic Perves. Why else would an artist spend six months, or years, carving, from life, and scaled up to rather large proportions, a plum that looks like a bum?'.[10]

Carefully curated by Dominique Heyse-Moore and Amy Emmerson Martin, the exhibition's presence in the Tate Britain offers a much-needed emancipatory juxtaposition to the archaic depictions of the female body within its main collection. With as little as approximately 13% of the Tate acquisition budget spent on women artists, the Tate Britain is typically known for its exhibition of the mostly male 'greats', including Sir Joshua Reynolds' *Three Ladies Adorning a Term of Hymen* (1773), described as a celebration of the ladies 'desirability for marriage', further reiterating the archaic and infantilising use of the female body as an object of voyeurism within art collections and exhibitions.[11] Sarah Lucas' *HAPPY GAS* offers a long overdue divergence in the representation of both women artists and representations of female bodily autonomy, moving away from the outdated representations of the female body as simply a vessel for fertility and matrimony.

---

[8] Tate Britain, *Tate Britain 28 Sep 2023–14 Jan 2024: Sarah Lucas HAPPY GAS,* 10.

[9] Sarah Lucas, 'Waste Mold', *I Scream Daddio* (London: British Council, 2015), 27.

[10] Lucas, 'Classic Pervery', *I Scream Daddio*, 135.

[11] Helen Gørrill, 'Are female artists worth collecting? Tate doesn't seem to think so', *The Guardian*, 13 August 2018, <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/aug/13/tate-female-artists-museum-diversity-acquisitions-art-collect> [Accessed 18 April 2024]; Joshua Reynolds, *Three Ladies Adorning a Term of Hymen*, 1773, oil paint on canvas, Tate Britain, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/reynolds-three-ladies-adorning-a-term-of-hymen-n00079> [Accessed 18 April 2024].

Women in Revolt! at Tate Britain

While Lucas uses the female body to challenge societal norms and expectations of femininity, the group exhibition *Women in Revolt!* at Tate Britain, from 8 November 2023 to 7 April 2024, surveys UK feminist art from 1970–1990. It demonstrates how the female body has been used as a tool and catalyst for political change in art, highlighting the ongoing challenges in intersectional feminism and gender equality.

The exhibition guide begins with contextual information for the show, stating: 'Larger organisations, Tate Gallery included, were barely showing – let alone collecting – women's work. As a result, access to the history of women's art has not been equal to that of their male counterparts'.[12] From the very beginning the exhibition promises to fill in the missing gaps of female voices and representation within late twentieth-century British art history, promoting the testimonies and talents of collectives such as Spare Rib, Hackney Flashers, and See Red Women's Workshop, and solo artists including Catherine Elwes, Sonia Boyce, and Lubaina Himid. The exhibition is split into several rooms: 1. *Rising with Fury*, 2. *The Marxist Wife Still Does The Housework*, 3. *Oh Bondage! Up Yours!,* 4. *Greenham Women are Everywhere*, 5. *Black Woman Time Now*, and 6. *There's No Such Thing as Society*.

Room 1 begins with a plethora of archival ephemera tracing the history of second wave feminism, using copies of the Feminist Arts News and Red Rag: A Magazine of Women's Liberation to underscore the collective and collaborative nature of women's arts practices in the 1970s. During a period where women were still viewed as second class citizens, the room reflects the agendas of the early 1970s Women's Liberation Movement in the UK, featuring works that both criticised and demanded equality within the workforce, equal pay, and equality for women of colour.

Building upon this spirit of rebellion, room 2 begins to highlight the ways in which artists incorporated the female form within their work, and how it was used in the fight for political and social change. The body is used throughout the works in this room to explore, and criticise, the ways in which the woman exists within the home, critiquing patriarchal notions of domestic labour. Figure 4 shows Helen Chadwick's photo series *In The Kitchen* (1977), a series that makes perhaps the most discernible commentary, consisting of 12 photographs of Chadwick dressed in PVC costumes emulating various households utilities, including a kitchen sink, washing machine, and cooker. In speaking on the work, Chadwick notes: 'The kitchen must inevitably be seen as the archetypal female domain where the fetishism of the kitchen appliance reigns supreme'.[13] Here Chadwick conflates

[12] Tate Britain, *Women in Revolt! Exhibition Guide* (2023) <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/women-in-revolt/exhibition-guide> [Accessed 9 February 2024].

[13] Helen Chadwick, *In the Kitchen* (1977) (viewed 25 October 2023 at Women in Revolt! Exhibition at Tate Britain).

the female body with the kitchen, offering criticism on the expectations of women within the scope of domestic labour, whilst simultaneously addressing the woman as both utensil and commodity.

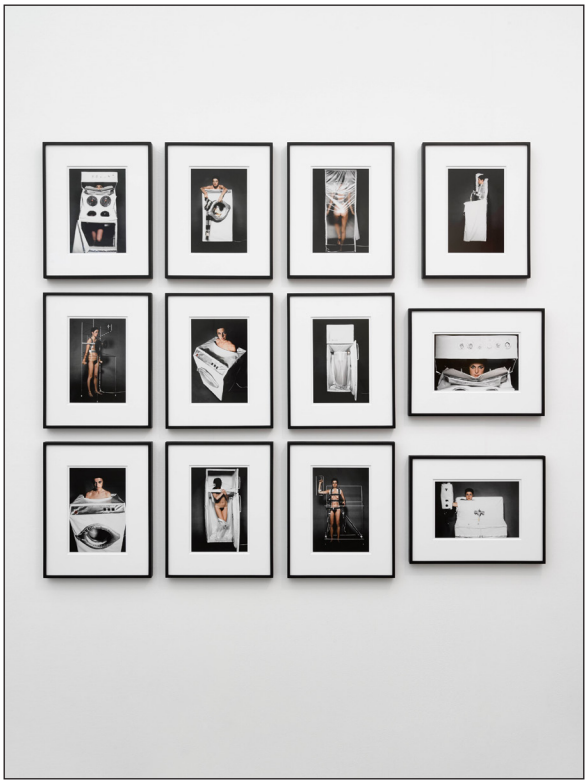

Figure 4: © Estate of Helen Chadwick; Courtesy Richard Saltoun Gallery, London, Rome & New York.

Similarly, a critique of domestic labour and the female body is made within the work of artist Jo Spence and her piece *Beyond the Family Album* (1978–79). Involved in debates around photography and its relation to feminism, Spence's work looks to dismantle the overly sanitised ideas of family albums. Within the 21 included photographs, Spence seeks to capture all of life's event, including death, domestic abuse, and divorce, adding in press cuttings and written personal anecdotes to illuminate the story behind the image. In one photo, she writes: 'Just as I learned that I had been constructed as a 'woman' (ideologically speaking), so I have now begun to reverse the process by deconstructing myself visually'.[14] In rejecting rudimentary notions of women existing as homemakers within the realm of domestic labour, Spence attempts to regain control over the self, unpacking the complexity of selfhood and identity, and fleshing out the idea of what it means to be a woman.

Whilst room 1 and 2 explore notions of self-hood and existing within the female body, room 3 and 4 encapsulate the state of rebellion that pervaded feminist movements within the late 1970s and early 1980s, looking at the DIY punk scene and use of the

[14] Jo Spence, *Beyond the Family Album*, Series of 21 Photographs (1978–79).

female body within parallel social movements, including anti-war and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. Room 4, *Greenham Women are Everywhere*, sought to outline the intertwinement between anti-war movements and climate action and the 1980s Women's Liberation Movement. Running for 19 years between 1981–2000, thousands of women from across the country 'used their identities as mothers and carers to fight for the protection of future generations and a more equal society' in communal camps outside the newly nuclear-equipped RAF Greenham Common.[15] Living with bare essentials and no running water, the women were granted a taste of living outside of patriarchal and heteronormative society, engaging in regular discussions around intersectionality and using art as a creative output for their actions. While the other rooms featured works that use the image of the female body, the most striking pieces within room 4 actually play on the lack of the female body to demonstrate the struggle that occurred at Greenham Common.

The most visually striking is Margaret Harrison's *Greenham Common (Common Reflections)* (1989–2016), an installation work that covers the entirety of one wall. The piece recreates the fence at Greenham Common against a large mirror, with household items, clothing, photographs, and other personal items attached to the wired fence. Whilst the piece does not incorporate the female body in the ways seen in previous pieces in this exhibition, the mirror encourages visitors to reflect upon their own body and experience, whether directly related to Greenham Common or to the wider feminist movement. This moment of quiet contemplation asks us how we can use our body as a vehicle of social and political change.

This momentum of relativity and speaking to the present punctuates the final two rooms, focusing on the most recent push for intersectionality within feminist movements, including equality for disabled, gender non-conforming, queer, and women of colour. Works from prominent figures such as Lubaina Himid, Pratibha Parmar, and Mona Hatoum use the female body within their works not just to call for gender equality, but race equality.

Combining paintings, sculptures, moving image works, installation, punk music videos, and archival ephemera, the exhibition carefully highlights the interplay between feminism and art practices, using the female form as a catalyst for social and political change throughout the Women's Liberation Movement of the 1970s–90s. The expertly curated show celebrates the importance of 'creating images that reclaimed the body as both personal territory and personal medium', and hopefully highlights a turning point in the widespread inclusion of women artists within the gallery.[16]

---

[15] Tate Britain, *Women in Revolt! Exhibition Guide* (2023) <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/women-in-revolt/exhibition-guide> [Accessed 9 February 2024].

[16] Elwes, *Diverse Practices: A Critical Reader on British Video Art,* 265.

If Not Now, When? at Saatchi Gallery

Considering the male-dominated and heteronormative management of major institutions and contemporary spaces, especially in the London art scene, it is overly optimistic to expect that every exhibition will successfully advocate for the female form within artistic practice. *If Not Now, When?* at the Saatchi Gallery was unfortunately one example of that. Running from 15th November 2023–22nd January 2024 and curated by The Hepworth Wakefield, the group show featured work from 29 sculptors working from 1960–today, including well-known names such as Helen Chadwick, Cornelia Parker, and Phyllida Barlow. Expanding on a survey of women sculptors in the late 1980s led by Griselda Pollock and Lorna Green, the show aims to examine the woman's place within the traditionally male dominated practice of sculpture, using answers from the original 1989 survey conducted by Lorna Green to trace the development of women's practice within sculpture, and how it exists today.

The exhibition is separated into three themed rooms: *Women's Time*, which celebrates women as life givers, *Tumbling through Time*, which explores the female experience in relation to time and climate action, and lastly *The Time is Now*, a quite nondescript theme in an attempt to bring together contemporary feminist issues and sculpture.[17]

Walking through the first room of the exhibition, audiences are met with a breadth of this fascinating archival ephemera that grounds the show firmly within the context of Lorna Green's M.Phil thesis, *The Position and Attitudes of Contemporary Women Sculptors in Britain 1987–89*. Within the project, Green asked a series of questions to women whose dominant artistic practice was sculpture, asking an array of questions from how they balance their practice and motherhood, to their hopes for the future of women's sculpture. Artists Phyllida Barlow, Helen Chadwick, and Rose Garrard are amongst the displayed surveys, with most women musing on the future of their practice in relation to their gender, and how they hope it changes. A survey from sculptor Ann Christopher provides audiences with particularly evocative answers, with her stating: 'future is whatever women – individually decide to work for. You are a sculptor first, either male or female working side by side'.[18]

The second room is dominated by the sculpture works of Christine Kowal Post and her series of Amazon female figures, as seen in Figure 5. Whilst *Amazon Menstruating* (2001)

[17] Saatchi Gallery, *If Not Now, When?* (2023) <https://www.saatchigallery.com/exhibition/if-not-now-when> [Accessed 2 February 2024].

[18] If Not Now, When? [exhibition], (Saatchi Gallery: London, 15 November 2023–22 January 2024).

seeks to normalise sight of menstruation within art works, both *Amazon Encouraged by a Rat* (2016) and *Amazon with a Fox* (2016) work to represent the relationship between the female form and the environment, retelling the long-entrenched ideology of femininity and mother nature.

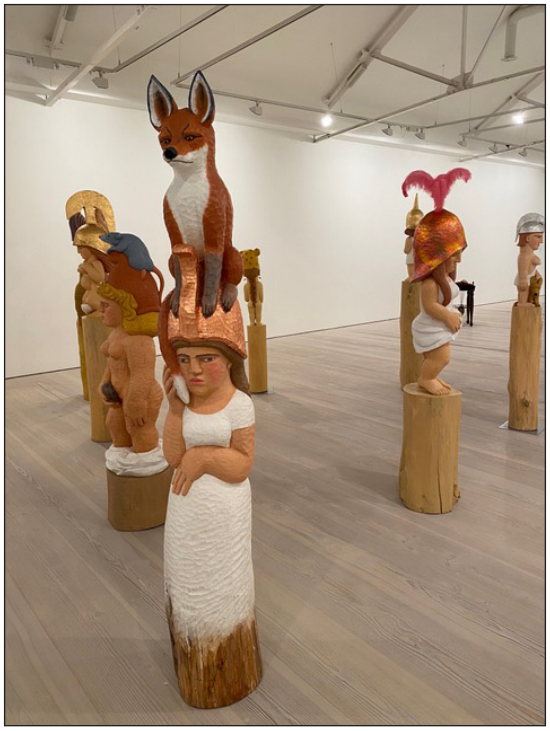

Figure 5: Christine Kowal Post *Amazons* (2000–2016) figures at *If Not Now, When?* exhibition at Saatchi Gallery, Courtesy Saatchi Gallery, London, author's own photography.

The third room perhaps feels the most disjointed of them all, with insignificant reference made to feminism and climate action, reducing the significance women had on broader issues such as nuclear disarmament through the infamous protest camps at Greenham Common throughout the majority of the 1980s. Unlike the careful and sensitive consideration of this pivotal moment as seen within *Women in Revolt!*, a decade's worth of work of women's activism is reduced to a single mention and display of the *Brides Against the Bomb* (1983) performances by artists Shirley Cameron and Monica Ross, with no context given to the significance of the female body in this movement.

Walking through the rest of the exhibition, one can't help but feel a sort of suffocating irony laced throughout. Whilst the first room prompts both the audience and the artist to contemplate the position of women sculptors within the male dominated gallery, the coinciding exhibition as part of the Saatchi *Season of Sculpture* featured two male artists who historically used the female form as an instrument within their work. The exhibition *Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Boundless* drew attention to the work of painter Yves Klein and his use of women in replace of the paintbrush, and the latter inspiration

that Christo and Jeanne-Claude drew from this in their work of wrapping up women as demonstrated by Figure 6. Much like a representation of patriarchal society, the Saatchi celebrates these two artists who utilised the female form within their practice, whilst naturally keeping the women as nameless tools to serve their creative vision. The unidentified wrapped woman and wider exhibition of Christo and Jean-Claude in the main, and larger, exhibition space downstairs poses a stark juxtaposition between the *If Not Now, When?* show, highlighting the perhaps performative agenda behind this women-only show. While the Saatchi Gallery's appears to have evolved since its 2016 debut of its first all-female show, *Champagne Life*, and the subsequent criticism that the sole connection between the works was the gender of the artists, this latest endeavour still falls short of truly celebrating women artists.[19] Marketed as a secondary, supplementary exhibition within the *Season of Sculpture*, it fails to prioritise the recognition and promotion of women's artistic contributions, especially when Christo and Jean-Claude are being celebrated for their use of the unknown female body in the room downstairs.

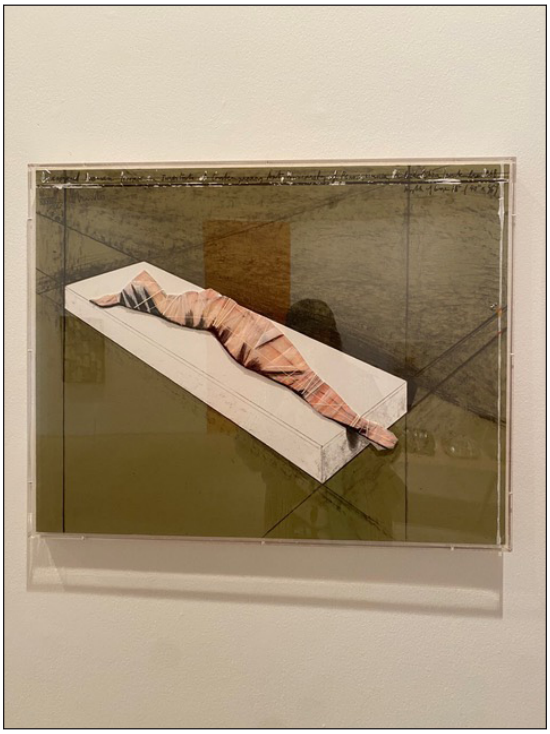

Figure 6: Christo and Jeanne-Claude, *Wrapped Woman* (1997), at Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Boundless at Saatchi Gallery, Courtesy Saatchi Gallery, London, author's own photography.

If this did not already leave a sour taste in audiences of *If Not Now, When?*, then the rather reductive workspace room encouraging visitors to write on scraps of paper 'what feminism means to them' would have. Whilst the exhibition boasts an abundance of work and documentation that supports women in sculpture, the curation fails on its mission to

[19] Emily Gosling, 'Saatchi Gallery's new women-only Champagne Life show: less fizz, more fizzle?', *It's Nice That*, 14 January 2016, <https://www.itsnicethat.com/articles/saatchi-women-only-champagne-life-130116> [Accessed 18 April 2024].

celebrate women's artistic practice, and instead reduces the feminist experience to three quite broad and unfocused subject matters that punctuate each room. To no surprise women are reduced down to mothers and menstruators, two areas cemented in archaic notions of gender equality, completely missing the mark in terms of twenty-first-century feminism and intersectionality.

The blame perhaps does not rest with the curators, but more with the Saatchi and its tangled history with corporate sponsorship and misogyny that extends beyond the art world. Charles Saatchi and his associates are not unfamiliar to the British press for their remarks and treatment of women. It does not take much effort (a mere search online using the prompts 'Saatchi gallery' and 'women') before one is confronted with a dozen articles and opinion pieces of the Saatchi's lack of acknowledgement and disregard for female artists. Opening in 1985, it took an astonishing 31 years before the gallery exhibited any work by female artists, with the expectation of Agnes Martin between the years of 1985–1988.[20] It is unsurprising then that the gallery's first all-female show in 2016 was met with hefty criticism, with critics condemning the disjointed curation of works and the institution's impertinent self-congratulation of doing the absolute bare minimum for women artists, a similar feeling that also weighed me down as I left *If Not Now, When?*. This neglect is even playfully nodded towards within the exhibition, referencing the Freelands Foundation 2021 report and noting that 'only 29% of artists represented by London's major galleries were women'.[21] The material and essence of the exhibition felt exciting and fresh, yet upon leaving the exhibition one can't help but ask the same old question of institutions such as the Saatchi Gallery, if not now, when?

Where do we go from here?

This leads us to then question, when it is fair representation and when it is just tokenism? In a climate where we are surrounded with many exciting and innovative practices emerging from women and gender non-conforming artists, it feels like there is little excuse for poor curation and treatment of women's work within the gallery space, especially when increasingly more women are being appointed to top director roles across institutions internationally.[22] Whilst some exhibitions stand out for their careful curation

[20] Carey Dunne, 'Saatchi Gallery Congratulates Itself on First All-Women Art Show', *Hyperallergic*, 25 January 2016 <https://hyperallergic.com/267576/saatchi-gallery-congratulates-itself-on-first-all-women-art-show/> [Accessed 2 February 2024].

[21] If Not Now, When? [exhibition], (Saatchi Gallery: London, 15 November 2023–22 January 2024).

[22] Ted Loos, 'Increasingly, Women are Running the World's Great Museums', *The New York Times*, 25 April 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/25/arts/design/women-leadership-museums.html> [Accessed 10 February 2024].

and celebration of women's work, on the whole, representation remains unwaveringly unsatisfactory. Recent reports demonstrate that a gender diverse workplace does not necessarily correlate with fair representation of women artists, with works by women making up just 7% of art within top gallery collections.[23] Feminist art collective Guerrilla Girls, who work to fight against sexism and racism within the art industry, reported in 1989 that less than 5% of the artists in Modern Art at the Met Museum in New York were women artists, despite 85% of the nude works featuring female bodies, highlighting the tendency of art spaces and institutions to disregard bodily autonomy by exhibiting sexualised images of the female form.[24] A similar statistic was reported in an updated survey in 2012, with 4% of the artists in the Modern Art collection being women.[25] Despite the infrequent exhibitions solely focused on women's artistic practices, feminist bodily autonomy and images of the female form created by women continue to face harsh erasure within the contemporary art space. Although it is disconcerting to note that the recent Marina Abramović retrospective at the Royal Academy in London marked the first solo exhibition by a female artist in the institution's 256-year history, we can remain hopeful that institutions will continue to progress by actively featuring and showcasing the work of female and gender non-conforming artists.[26] Likewise, the National Gallery's recent acquisition of *La Psyché* (1869–70) by Eva Gonzalès marks the twentieth women artist in the 200-year-old collection, a sobering yet perhaps optimistic sign that the wave of change is upon London's art scene.[27]

Comparable to the work that has only just begun in relation to the wake of 2020 Black Lives Matter movements and decolonising museum and gallery spaces through re-contextualisation, there is similarly still far to go in order to achieve equal representation and exhibition of non-male artists in the most prestigious and revered contemporary art spaces. Hopefully exhibitions can soon reflect, in terms of both frequency and content, the constantly boundary pushing practices emerging out of women's artistic practice.

---

[23] Liam Kelly, 'Works by women make up just 7% of art in top galleries', *The Sunday Times,* 10 April 2022, <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/works-by-women-make-up-just-7-of-art-in-top-galleries-wgbgdw6m8> [Accessed 10 February 2024].

[24] Ruben C. Cordova, 'Taking it to the Street: The Guerrilla Girls' Struggle for Diversity', *Glasstire*, 28 November 2021, <https://glasstire.com/2021/11/28/taking-it-to-the-street-the-guerrilla-girls-struggle-for-diversity/> [Accessed 18 April 2024].

[25] Ibid.

[26] Katy Hessel, 'Museums Without Men: my project to end their shocking gender imbalance', *The Guardian*, 1 March 2024, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2024/mar/01/museums-without-men-gender-imbalance-tate-met> [Accessed 18 April 2024].

[27] Anny Shaw, 'La Psyché: London's National Gallery acquires its first painting by the Impressionist Eva Gonzalès', *The Art Newspaper*, 18 April 2024, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/04/18/la-psyche-londons-national-gallery-acquires-its-first-painting-by-the-impressionist-eva-gonzales> [Accessed 18 April 2024].

Bibliography

Allegretti, Aubrey, 'Prominent Tory ejected from conference after heckling home secretary', *The Guardian*, 3 October 2023, <https://www.theguardian.com/politics/2023/oct/03/prominent-tory-ejected-from-conference-after-heckling-home-secretary> [Accessed 7 February 2024]

bell, hooks, 'Our Bodies, Ourselves: Reproductive Rights', in *After Sex* ed. by Edna Bonhomne and Alice Spawls (London: Silver Press, 2023), pp. 7–12

Chadwick, Helen, *In The Kitchen*, 1977, set of 12 archival pigment prints, Tate Britain, London

Christo and Jeanne-Claude: Boundless, 15 November 2023–22 January 2023, Exhibition, Saatchi Gallery, London

Christo and Jeanne-Claude, *Wrapped Woman*, 1997, lithograph with collage of polyethylene, 56 × 71 cm, Saatchi Gallery, London

Cordova, Ruben, 'Taking it to the Street: the Guerrilla Girls' Struggle for Diversity', *Glasstire*, 28 November 2021 <https://glasstire.com/2021/11/28/taking-it-to-the-street-the-guerrilla-girls-struggle-for-diversity/> [Accessed 18 April 2024]

Dunne, Carey, 'Saatchi Gallery Congratulates Itself on First All-Women Art Show', *Hyperallergic*, 25 January 2016 <https://hyperallergic.com/267576/saatchi-gallery-congratulates-itself-on-first-all-women-art-show/> [Accessed 2 February 2024]

Elwes, Catherine, 'The Pursuit of the Personal in British Video Art', in *Diverse Practices: A Critical Reader on British Video Art*, ed. by Julia Knight (London: The Arts Council England, 1996), pp. 261–282

Gørrill, Helen, 'Are female artists worth collecting? Tate doesn't seem to think so', *The Guardian*, 13 August 2018 <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2018/aug/13/tate-female-artists-museum-diversity-acquisitions-art-collect> [Accessed 18 April 2024]

Gosling, Emily, 'Saatchi Gallery's new women-only Champagne Life show: less fizz, more fizzle?', *It's Nice That*, 14 January 2016, <https://www.itsnicethat.com/articles/saatchi-women-only-champagne-life-130116> [Accessed 18 April 2024]

Hessel, Katy, 'Museums Without Men: my project to end their shocking gender imbalance', *The Guardian*, 1 March 2024 <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2024/mar/01/museums-without-men-gender-imbalance-tate-met> [Accessed 18 April 2024]

If Not Now, When?, 15 November 2023–22 January 2024, Saatchi Gallery, London

Kelleher, Patrick, 'One Year of Rishi Sunak: How the Tory prime minister has failed LGBTQ+ Brits', *PinkNews*, 26 October 2023 <https://www.thepinknews.com/2023/10/26/rishi-sunak-lgbtq-rights-track-record-trans/> [Accessed 24 June 2024]

Kelly, Liam, 'Works by Women Make up Just 7% of Art in Top Galleries', *The Sunday Times*, 10 April 2022 <https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/works-by-women-make-up-just-7-of-art-in-top-galleries-wgbgdw6m8> [Accessed 10 February 2024]

Loos, Ted, 'Increasingly, Women are Running the World's Great Museums', *The New York Times*, 25 April 2023 <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/25/arts/design/women-leadership-museums.html> [Accessed 10 February 2024]

Lucas, Sarah, *Chicken Knickers*, 1997, photograph on paper, 462 × 426 mm, Tate Gallery, London

Lucas, Sarah, *Eating a Banana*, 1990, digital print on paper, 539 × 596 mm, Tate Gallery, London

Lucas, Sarah, *I Scream Daddio*: *British Pavilion – Giardini* (London: British Council, 2015)

Lucas, Sarah, *Self Portrait with Fried Eggs*, 1996, digital print on canvas, 745 × 514 mm, Tate Gallery <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/lucas-self-portrait-with-fried-eggs-p78447> [accessed 1 Feburary 2024]

Malik, Amna, *Sarah Lucas: Au Naturel* (London: Afterall Books, 2009)

Post, Christine Kowal, *Amazons*, 2000–2016, series of wooden sculptures, artist's own collection

Reynolds, Joshua, *Three Ladies Adorning a Term of Hymen*, 1773, oil paint on canvas, 2337 × 2908 mm, Tate Gallery, London

Saatchi Gallery, 'If Not Now, When?' 2023 <https://www.saatchigallery.com/exhibition/if-not-now-when> [Accessed 2 February 2024]

Sarah Lucas: HAPPY GAS 28 September 2023–14 January 2024, Exhibition, Tate Britain, London

Sarah Lucas: HAPPY GAS 28 September 2023–14 January 2024, Exhibition guide, Tate Britain, London

Seebalack, Cherokee, 'How the UK Government Uses Communities to Scapegoat Responsibility', *Spark&Co*, <https://sparkandco.co.uk/blog/how-uk-government-scapegoats-communities> [Accessed 24 June 2024]

Shaw, Anny 'La Psyché: London's National Gallery acquires its first painting by the Impressionist Eva Gonzalès', *The Art Newspaper*, 18 April 2024, <https://www.theartnewspaper.com/2024/04/18/la-psyche-londons-national-gallery-acquires-its-first-painting-by-the-impressionist-eva-gonzales> [Accessed 18 April 2024]

Spence, Jo, *Beyond the Family Album,* 1978–79, set of 21 photographs, 74 × 50 cm, Tate Britain, London

Tate Britain, *Women in Revolt! Exhibition Guide* (2023) <https://www.tate.org.uk/whats-on/tate-britain/women-in-revolt/exhibition-guide> [Accessed 9 February 2024]

Women in Revolt!, 8 November 2023–7 April 2024, Tate Britain, London