

# **Nakedness vs. the Nude**

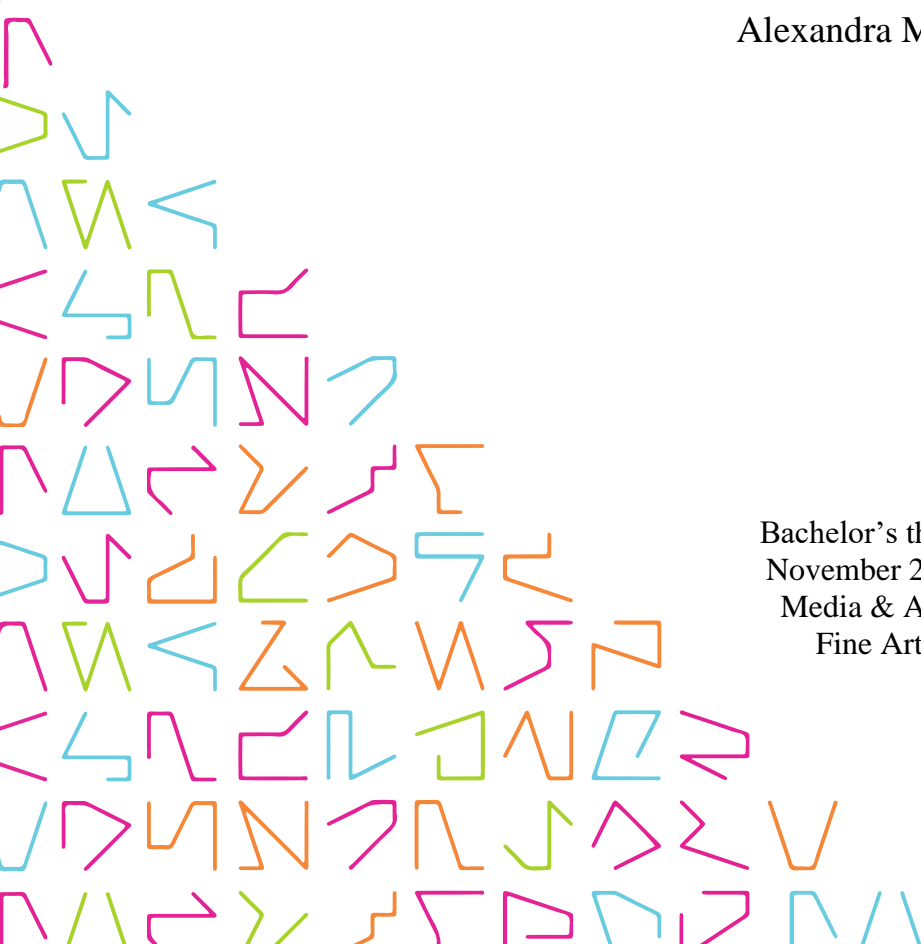
Erasing the male gaze by

re-appropriating the female body as a

female contemporary artist

Alexandra Mitiku

Bachelor's thesis  
November 2018  
Media & Arts  
Fine Art



## ABSTRACT

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Bachelor's thesis 67 pages  
November 2018

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The male gaze within the visual culture is omnipresent. Consequently, this dominating perspective trains the audience how to perceive images of women. Their narratives are confiscated and are replaced by ones that are exclusively of and for the viewer. In this scenario, the female body is exclusively normative and is not recognized as an own identity. Meanwhile, the trans woman is completely exiled from being a representative of the female body; she is rendered invisible. Both female bodies are lessened in the patriarchal image of woman; this disembodiment is considered a designed method of oppression.

The essay begins with a brief background of the female body as seen through the male gaze. Here, two oppressive misrepresentations are established: the diminished normative woman (sexual objectification) and the invisible trans woman (mis-gendered as man). Similarly, the viewer is divided into two categories: the active and the passive viewer.

The central aim is to determine the need to materialize first-hand translations of visceral experience to reform the female body in the visual culture. This is done by examining works by female artists that feature the revalued female body. Amongst the artworks of this research, the artistic part of my thesis, *'WHO/WHAT'* and *'If these walls could talk'*, are discussed in detail.

It also outlines how counter imagery is created when the female body is reclaimed and presented by female artists. Moreover, affirming their own gaze. One recurring method of producing counter imagery is the re-appropriation of attributes that had previously been used as methods of oppression. Additionally, this research analyses how the works invoke subjectivity in the way the viewer perceives the female body. References from researchers in the field of visual culture, gender studies, feminist art, perception and philosophy, are integrated to support the findings.

The main research questions that guide this thesis include: What are the methods used by female artists to empower their bodies? How has this affected visual culture? What do their works invoke in the viewer? How do their works undermine the hegemony of the male gaze and erase it from the female body? Conclusions summarize the need for counter imagery and visibility of women in all their natural semblances to repair the preceding visual transgressions.

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Key words: female artist, feminism, body art, male gaze, perception

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

What are the first images that come to mind when you think of a woman? Despite myself, I see a flicker of images, all of which are common displays of beauty and sexuality; all of which exist for the viewer. It's the prevalent visual information I've witnessed during my lifetime.



Figure 1&2: [Édouard Manet](#) *Olympia*, 1863, *The Luncheon on the Grass*, 1862-1863

These figures above depict classic examples to which John Berger refers when he states that ‘in the average European oil painting of the nude, the principal protagonist is never painted. He is the spectator in front of the picture and he is presumed to be man. Everything is addressed to him. Everything must appear to be the result of his being there. It is for him that the figures have assumed their nudity.’ (Berger 1972, 39.)

Perpetuating these misperceptions of the female figure reflects the subjugation of women in the social structure. Accordingly, woman's existence is a performance, and everyone is her audience; her expressions are neither of nor for herself, but of and for ‘them’. Even though woman is idolized for their appearance, they are simultaneously a subordinate to the will of viewer. These dynamics change when female artists take the same figure and present it through their own gaze. Although the male figure, or as mentioned in the quote ‘the principal protagonist’, has been painted in similar lights to the female figure, they are portrayed and perceived subjectively.

I refer to woman without an article to emphasize it as a social definition rather than a personal truth; the ‘she’ pronouns are attached to this sentiment. For purposes of this

study I engage mainly with the female body, as is socially defined and artists who identify as female. I also delve into the problematic denial within the patriarchal visual culture of the different sexual orientations and birth-given genders that inhibit the female body. This results in the disbelief of lesbian sensibilities and the insisted invisibility of trans women as women. Their non-existence as female representations, contextually results in the divide between the trans female body and the normative one.

The gaze is a technical term that describes the ways in which we absorb images of people and other components of perceived reality (Campbell & Schroeder 2011, 10). The male gaze can be simply defined by the objectification of women from a heterosexual, toxically masculine perspective. More elaborately speaking, it is the projection of normative stereotypes of masculinity and femininity onto men and women, while ignoring or ridiculing those who deviate the binary gender system. It is a worldview that is implemented in patriarchal societies by confirming misrepresentative images of people in the visual culture – this leads to discriminatory views of certain social groups. It is not the male gaze itself, but the hegemony of it in the visual culture that has distorted our way of perceiving.

Visual culture refers to the visual aspects of culture and implies that imagery is a fundamental component of it (Campbell & Schroeder 2011, 1). Contemporary art is a vital platform for expanding visual culture. ‘Artists prepare the mind and the spirit for new ideas, new ways of seeing’ (Parmar 1984, 289). With the works of female artists, the focus is directed towards the experience of the female figure, rather than the fragmented observation of it. Therein, the viewer is encouraged to stop, reflect and reimagine the meaning of the female body. Consequently, dynamics are reset so that the subject of discussion also takes part in the discourse. Herein, the experience of viewing the female body requires the audience to step out and into the subject of the work, consequently creating an opposition that disqualifies the patriarchal image of woman. I will refer to works from the feminist body art movement of the 60s-70s by Yayoi Kusama, Marina Abramovic, Carolee Schneemann and Ana Mendieta continuing onto a variation of contemporary works by Zanele Muholi, Heather Dewey-Hagborg, Paz Errázuriz Monica, Kim Garza, Narcissister, Mickalene Thomas, Jenny Saville, Guerilla Girls, Micah Bantz, Lalla Essaydi, Greer Lankton and Zachary Drucker.

Rather than investigating the male gaze and its long list of side effects, I fixate on its problematic presentation of the female body. The main theme of this thesis is how the female body is reclaimed by the female artist, furthering into how affirming their own gaze creates a catalysis in the visual culture. Moreover, I determine why the growth of this alternative visual information of the female figure is pivotal to neutralize power relations within the patriarchal visual culture. Counter imagery repurposes the female body so that it is no longer for others and becomes an expression of itself.

The research questions that serve as the backbone of this thesis include: What are the methods used by female artists to empower their bodies? How has this affected visual culture? What do their works invoke in the viewer? How do their works undermine the hegemony of the male gaze and erase it from the female body?

## **2 THE PROBLEMATIC DISEMBODIMENT OF WOMAN**

### **2.1 The Narrator**

#### **2.1.1 Who is telling the story?**

Every narrative has its protagonist. This is the character that demands attention and consideration from the audience. When a narrative is told through the male gaze, it forecloses woman from being presented as the protagonist. Even if she may be the protagonist in the plot of a story, her body is still used as a tool of seduction or as an object of admiration. Conjointly, the trans woman is adamantly labelled as ‘the other’ and shut out from being presented at all.

When regarding the female body, this fragmented filter is accepted as the staple observational method - the viewer is respectively handed a certain authority and is presumed to be superior. Jonathan Schroeder notes in his research of the gaze that, ‘to gaze implies more than to look at - it signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of the gaze’ (Schroeder 1998, 208).

Furthermore, Chris Kramarae mentions that materials that document women’s perspective are often inaccurate (K. Foss, S. Foss & Griffin 1999, 43). In other words, second-hand perspectives tend to project own biases when narrating of, for, and about woman.

#### **2.1.2 Patriarchal images**

‘Given that groups can use stigmatizing labels against others to reinforce and boost their own social identity, dominant groups may choose labels for stigmatized groups that are comparatively derogatory’ (Galinsky, Hugenberg, Groom & Bodenhausen 2003, 229). If we replace the term labels with images, the tendencies stated here can be seen in the images that are perpetuated in the visual culture.

Under the male gaze, the female body is a passive entity to be penetrated with narratives that are not her own - narratives that do not serve her, but the audience. The male gaze is based on heteronormative values, where gender is inarguably binary. Therefore, concepts of gender-body relationships, that deviate from this basis, are not included in the



selected narratives that inhabit the female body. Subsequently, the trans woman's body will adamantly be portrayed by a man, implying that she is a man. If a trans woman is featured in media, the main storylines are limited to them either being the victims or the villains of violence, or comic relief. The normative female body, on the other hand, is inevitably attached to sexual motifs.

Rosemary Betterton recognizes visual culture to be a fluid interpretative structure, that is based on response to visual media (Betterton 2013, 13). In other words, the consumers of visual culture determine media, although it could also imply the vice versa – that media puppeteers its consumers. What follows is that when these images are absorbed without criticism, the viewer acts upon the stereotypes they believe in. The two most widespread misrepresentations - and by default misunderstandings - are that a trans woman is fundamentally male and that a woman is fundamentally a sex object.

#### **2.1.2.1 Sexual objectification**

'Sex sells' and woman is bait. A mere by-product of the male gaze, she is commonly presented as a brand of seduction. Paying only erotic attention to female bodies puts them into an inferior category where their sole purpose is erotic entertainment. She is presented as a play thing, void of its own existence. It insinuates that sexuality is activated for, and belongs to, man. A woman's self-claimed sexuality on the other hand, is to be curtailed off and shamed into a corner.

The hypersexualized image of woman, tainted by male imagination, expels her from being the principal focus. - women only appear as partial. 'The embellished additions modify the female natural semblance and shape it to accommodate men's sexual desires and preconceptions of femininity' (Delgado-Marin 2013). It can also be argued that the sexual desires and preconceptions adapt to the embellished versions of the female's natural semblance. The plethora of these hypersexualized images of woman trains the audience to disassociate themselves and to use her body for erotic contemplation. In turn, the acknowledgement of her is directly related to her sexual value and the lust she ignites.



Figure 3: Fashion photo n.d.



Figures 4 & 5: Zanele Muholi

*Basizeni II, Parktown 2016, Senzemi I, Parktown, 2016*

The figures above exemplify two versions of how the presence of the female body occupies an image. The woman in the figure 3 is portrayed as an absence; she is the prop. In the self-portraits by Zanele Muholi, she is the apparent focus of the image. She is prioritized, while the belts and the shoes are secondary. There is a stark contrast in how the viewer relates to the elements of each image.

To outline the female body as a symbol of desire so that this motive saturates all images of the female body, implicates heterosexuality and the assumption of it. Images rotate around the need to conform to the presumed needs and worldview of the heterosexual male – he becomes the only audience that is catered to. The face, a body part that is

heavily tied to identity, is also used in this ploy, developing a deeper detachment from the female identity.

### 2.1.2.2 A man in a dress

It is a deeply ingrained belief within the patriarchal visual culture that male is superior. A subsequent belief is that trans women giving up their masculinity to become feminine is to give up power (Reitz 2017, 2).

Joelle Ryan states that ‘trans media images do not emerge from a cultural vacuum. Rather, they emerge from and into a cultural framework with specific ideologies regarding gender and sexuality.’ (Joelle Ruby Ryan 2009, 14.) The cultural framework that is mentioned creates categories – spaces that disallow the integrity of the self. This means that the reality of the trans woman is not depicted, rather they are assimilated into the binary, heteronormative paradigm. Therefore, media presents her as male and emphasizes her as an otherness. Jackson Taylor McLaren investigates the representation of trans women in media and has pointed out that in popular culture, someone who goes unnoticed as a trans person within society is depicted - and therefore perceived - as deceptive. If she has male genitalia, her femininity is underlined to be an illusion. (McLaren 2018, 25-26.)

This misconception of trans women is reflected in their exclusion from media as women. Rather the focus is on their coming out as trans gender or their socially assigned manhood. The representation of trans women has been rare, therefore the visual confirmation of misconceptions has had a magnified influence on the viewer.

The idea that trans women are male transcends into the casting for roles of trans women. In movies such as *The Danish Girl* (Tom Hooper, 2015), and *Dallas Buyer's Club* (Jean-Marc Vallée, 2013), the roles of the trans women have been played by cis-men (those who identify with their assigned genders). Currently, this is slowly starting to change with the growing awareness of appropriation. For example, when Scarlett Johansson was cast to play a transgender man in 2018, there was international backlash concerning the ethics behind her accepting the role. This resulted in Johansson declining the role and restarting a discussion on the responsibilities of cis-gendered actors to support the casting of transgender persons for transgender roles. (Telegraph 2018)

## **2.2 The Viewer**

### **2.2.1 Who is looking?**

Susan Bordo has summarized that we recognize, consciously or unconsciously, values and qualities that are carried in the images that we admire. These subliminal messages make an irresistible impression – their power deriving from the culture that has generated them. Therefore, these values are not only embedded in the images that are consumed, but also in the psyche of the viewer. (Bordo 1997, 460.)

Regarding the female body, who is ‘the viewer’? This role can be divided into two categories:

- 1) the active viewer - the creators who supply the translations for the public eye and the consumers of their imagery. Both interpret the female body with their own projections and biases.
- 2) the passive viewer: the woman who is taught to use this observational method on herself and identifies herself through the male gaze.

### **2.2.2 What does the active viewer define?**

The spectrum of perception draws out between dissociative objectification and subjective awareness. This means that every time the audience looks upon an image of the female body, they are choosing a point on this spectrum from which to comprehend her being.

According to the studies by John Berger, ‘the surveyor of woman in herself is male: the surveyed female. Thus, she turns herself into an object - and most particularly an object of vision - a sight.’ (Berger 1972, 38.) This underlines how the active viewer installs the filter through which woman is looked at - by others as well as herself. He also mentions how the visual aspect of woman is prioritized. Additionally, Hochberg inscribes that we are guided in how we perceive the world. This implies that we retain information selectively, based on this guided fixation. (Hochberg, 1972.)

‘The media produces and reproduces certain types of representations and dominant frameworks of interpretation’ (Pramar 1984, 288). Mainstream visual culture uses the female body to delineate a worldview and to prescribe needs for the audience to adopt. Gender fluidity, that is experienced by many, does not fit into these heteronormative worldviews and is therefore left out from being presented. By this adamant suppression, mainstream visual culture dictates which narratives can and cannot inhabit the female body.

Since visual information trains the audience how to observe and understand reality, the viewer processes the female body, as presented with the male gaze - through objectification. Therein, passivity is presumed of their bodies, which denies the reality of their own presence. By accepting the representation of the female body as passive, the audience automatically becomes an active superiority - chiming in when decisions are made on the meaning of her body. Like this, the audience plays an integral role in the oppressive observation of the female form.

Witnessing the pervasive validation of the male gaze in popular culture, advertisements, cinema, even in the contemporary art field, discourages self-expression, let alone self-affirmation. Being inescapably observed through this filter, where the self is reduced to merely a vision, has a heavy impact on woman’s relation to the self. Attention tends to rotate around the question ‘how do they see me?’ rather than the question ‘how do I see myself?’ On the other hand, being inescapably eliminated from visual culture might leave a trans woman wondering ‘do they see me at all?’

### **2.2.3 Patriarchal observations in practise**

The viewer carries this limited understanding of the female body when creating social relations. Environments and the practises within them often become mere reflections of this visual stimuli. The presence within the female body is disregarded in the dominant representation of it. Without her own boundaries, the audience is invited to define it themselves. This entitlement is a power, that is more than often an abusive one.

Marina Abramovic’s performance, *‘Rythm 0’* (1974) outlines the consequences these images have had on people’s behaviour towards women. She stood still for six hours in a room shared with her audience. They were offered seventy-two objects of pleasure

and pain. Things took a twisted turn and she was mishandled. She was stripped of her clothes, groped, threatened, etc. One man took a razor to her neck as can be seen in figure 6.



Figure 6: Marina Abramovic, *'Rhythm' 0* 1974

When she started to move again, the same people could not look her in the face. The body they treated as an unfeeling thing came alive and they didn't know how to share the same space with her once she stepped out of passivity.

If we entertain the thought that 'presence for a woman is so intrinsic to her person that men tend to think of it as an almost physical emanation' (Berger 1972, 37), we can understand - to a certain extent - the inner workings behind the behaviour of Abramovic's audience.

Moreover, the conviction that trans women are males in disguise is another example of the male gaze mandating what narratives are and are not allowed to occupy the female body. Transgressions that derive from the dismissal of their innate gender identity, include sentencing trans women to all-male prisons. One example is when Chelsea Manning, being trans woman, was sentenced to an all-male military prison. In response to Manning's prison sentence, artist Heather Dewey-Hagborg created thirty 3D masks, all based on Manning's DNA. Dewey-Hagborg was conscious of Manning's wishes for her face not to appear overly masculine, when designing features of the faces to be more masculine in some, and more feminine in others.

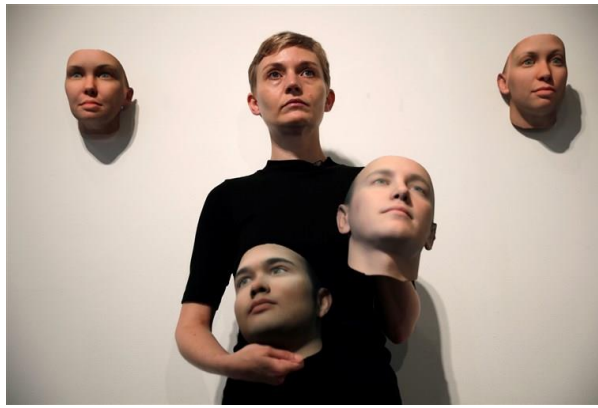


Figure 7: Heather Dewey Hagborg at her show '*A becoming resemblance*' 2017  
photo by Mike Segar

Dewey-Hagborg explained that the exhibition was meant to show that DNA does not necessarily tell you what gender a person is. She also wanted to simultaneously address the inaccuracies that can be found in DNA-based imaging. (NBC n.d.)

### **3 REPOSSESSING THE FEMALE BODY AS A FEMALE ARTIST**

Female artists reassign the diminutive values that had been issued to their bodies through their artworks. Herein, they reconstruct the paradigm of woman's body. Joanna Frueh suggests that the female body and its abstract figuration stop being conventional erotic models that seek male attention once they are not aestheticized in phallic terms. (Frueh 1996, 105.) Bringing their existence with, through and beyond their flesh, denies oppressive voyeurism.

#### **3.1 Counter imagery neutralizing the imbalance in visual culture**

Meiling Cheng refers to our state of apartness when observing, that alienates most sights from our being - we understand them to be 'other' (Cheng 2003, 30). This stems from our capability to see only that which is separate from our eyes. There is an expression 'out of sight, out of mind' that implies we only acknowledge what is visible. So, in a relative sense, identity only exists when it is seen, and it is only seen if it is exposed.

Camera obscura collective writes about the importance of locating ideology and patriarchy within representations, and to use this as a reference to define a praxis for change and reshape society (Camera obscura collective 2003, 234). It is important to outline issues such as the cultural fetishization of women's bodies and body parts, the presumption that they are passive, and the ignorance of bodies that do not conform to the heteronormative paradigm as the background that needs to be resisted. These are discontinued by presenting female bodies as a telling of experience. The first-person narratives have an authenticity in their motifs and by default, denounce the male gaze in the visual culture.

Like this, the female body leaves the realm of the male gaze, finding independence from oppressive filters. It forms a new context that allows for the broadest understanding of woman; where the diverse identities that navigate the female body actively reach out and communicates to the audience. The viewers' ability to unlearn patriarchal observation methods determines how they receive their messages.



### 3.2 The body art movement

In the era of the 60s and 70s, performance art was a new medium that had not yet been male dominated. This presented itself to be an opportunity for female artists to flourish. Only recently has body art been recognized as its own form, derivative of performance art. Body art explores the relationship between the body and the mind, where the body is its own performer, stage and audience.

‘This focus so narrowly directed toward the body, ultimately forced viewers to hone a spotlight on their own physicality and its role in their fleeting existence...Lines were erased between message and messenger or creator and creation, giving new meaning to, and amplifying the idea of, authentic first-person perspective.’ (Souter 2018.) The somatic effect on the audience has an intensity that distinguishes it from other forms of art.

Amongst others, some of the most influential artworks had been created by Ana Mendieta, Marina Abramovic, Carolee Schneemann, Yayoi Kusama, Hannah Wilke. Some works that will be brought to attention are Ana Mendieta’s ‘*Silueta*’ series, ‘*Interior Scroll*’ by Carolee Schneemann and ‘*Untitled*’ by Yayoi Kusama.



Figure 8: Ana Mendieta 6 photos from the ‘*Silueta*’ Series, 1973-1978

Ana Mendieta was one of the pioneers during the body art movement. She molded her body with nature, creating ephemeral sculptures that she called ‘earth-body works’. In

her *'Silueta'* series, she integrates her naked body with environments and different components of nature. She would leave silhouettes of her body in various places that were dear to her. It was an embodiment of the relationship between location and her identity. She reflects on her past, and the time when she was separated from her home country to be displaced in a foreign environment.

There is a display of her power to leave her own imprint. She validates the presence of her invisibility by letting the viewer engage with the traces she leaves behind. By directing the focus of the viewer to her invisibility she raises the question: what does presence mean? Essentially, this work rejects the idea that there is absence in the female body.

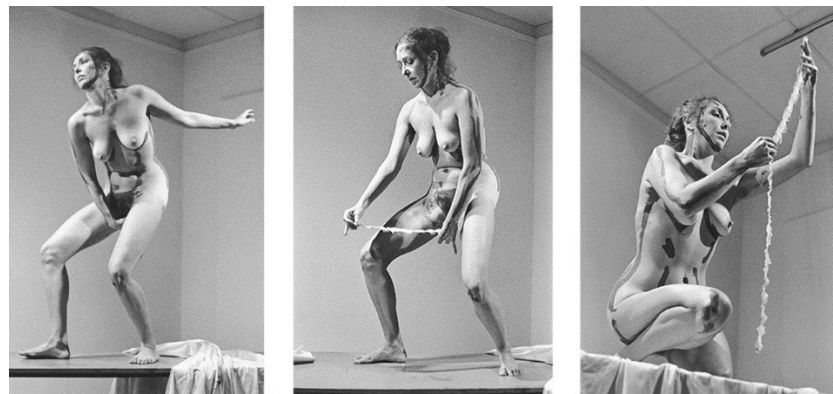


Figure 9: Carolee Schneemann *'Interior scroll'*, 1975

These pictures document Carolee Schneemann's performance, where she climbed onto a table and ritualistically dropped her garments, a white sheet and an apron, and finally pulled out a scroll from her vagina to read aloud to the audience (Ballantyne-Way n.d., read 20.10.2018). As she progressed through the steps of the work, the layers of her being were peeled off, until she ultimately used her vagina as a source of truth. Schneemann explains: 'I thought of the vagina in many ways-- physically, conceptually: as a sculptural form, an architectural referent, the sources of sacred knowledge, ecstasy, birth passage, transformation. I saw the vagina as a translucent chamber of which the serpent was an outward model: enlivened by its passage from the visible to the invisible, a spiraled coil ringed with the shape of desire and generative mysteries, attributes of both female and male sexual power. This source of interior knowledge would be symbolized as the primary index unifying spirit and flesh in Goddess worship.' (Schneemann n.d., read 7.10.)

In this work, her body conducted a ceremony for itself. This is the nucleus of body art; to build a correlation between concept and flesh, for the body to be an observation of itself, and to mold tangible with abstract reality.

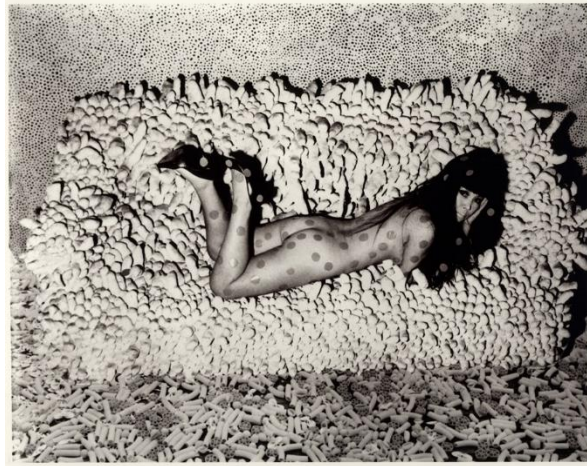


Figure 10: Yayoi Kusama *'Untitled'*, 1966

In the 60s, Yayoi Kusama provoked New York with this self-portrait, where she lies nakedly with one of her artworks *'Accumulation No.2'*. Although her idea was to immerse herself into her artwork, she was criticized for being an exhibitionist. One critic JD Rodenbeck wrote 'Priestess of Nudity, Psychotic Artist, the Polka dot girl, obsessional artist, publicity hound: in the 1960s Yayoi Kusama was the target of a number of epithets, some of them self-inflicted, all of them part of an exhibitionist's notoriety' (Queensland Government n.d.).

This statement reflects the patriarchal understanding that she exists for the audience. She shared her nudity with public, asserting the symbol of naturality through her body. From Kusama's point of view: 'The reason my first soft sculptures were shaped like penises is that I had a fear of sex as something dirty. People often assume that I must be mad about sex, because I make so many such objects, but that's a complete misunderstanding. It's quite the opposite - I make the objects because they horrify me. Reproducing the objects, again and again, was my way of conquering the fear.' (Souter & Nichols 2018.)



Figure 11: A photo from the march through New York in 1967

Yayoi Kusama used nakedness as a means of truth. She would also organize interactive happenings where everyone would be naked except for the infamous dots she would cover them with. One case was when she protested the Vietnam War with nudity. Alongside other supporters, she marched through the streets of New York ending up in Central Park - wearing only dots (Fischer, 2017.) Collectively disregarding the male gaze and baring their bodies, repurposed nudity as an expression of unity.

The body art movement was a pivotal stage for female bodies to reform the way they are perceived. The artworks from this time started the unraveling of patriarchal preconceptions that had been projected onto woman. The female artists of this time were driven by the empowerment that came with rewriting the story of their bodies. Exposing their nudity - on their own terms - created solidarity in nakedness.

### 3.3 The nude gets naked

‘To be naked is to be oneself. To be nude is to be seen naked by others and yet not recognized for oneself. A naked body has to be seen as an object in order to become a nude...The nude is condemned to never being naked. Nudity is a form of dress.’ (Berger 1972, pg. 39.) According to this quote, there are two different ways to perceive the

bared female body. As a nude, where she becomes an item to be observed - or nakedly, where her body is emancipated from the conditions of the male gaze.

Integrating expressions with nakedness eliminates spaces for voyeuristic pleasures - the naked body becomes a materialization of its visceral and abject experience. Simultaneously it empowers the existence within the body.



Figure 12: Paz Errázuriz *Cuerpos XI Santiago Bodies*, 2002

The common notion of the elderly female body is that it is sexually irrelevant, ergo it is also socially irrelevant. Paz Errázuriz magnets our attention to these bodies through her photos. The focus of this image is the playful body language, the direction of their gaze and, most importantly the appreciation of their bodies in their natural semblance. Her photography of elderly bodies encourages the viewer to learn to visually appreciate the elderly female body for its way of being, rather than discarding it as an expired commodity.



Figure 13: Monica Kim Garza, untitled painting, n.d

Monica Kim Garza is a Mexican-Korean artist known for her paintings of naked brown-bodied women. In her paintings, she redefines attributes that would normatively be seen as demeaning, for example wearing only a thong. There is a manner of nonchalance in the way the figures look over their shoulders (fig. 13), which deletes the assumed subordination in the performativity of their red lipstick pouts.



Figure 14: Monica Kim Garza, untitled painting, n.d

She insists on depicting sexuality as an expression – a way of being. Like in the sculptures by Ana Mendieta, these images infuse the naked female body with natural surroundings. The combination of nudity and nature comes with sincere undertones. Additionally, it symbolically rejects social constructs. The atmosphere in these images give off a whiff of innocence and there is a certain candidness that is attached to their displays of sexuality.

In the upcoming photos by Ana Mendieta and Jenny Saville, one of the most important qualities is the re-appropriation of anonymity – the anonymity of their bodies is active. Although the head is disinvited from the frame, the bodies determine their presence by communicating directly with the viewer. The distortive display of the body rejects normative presentations of the female form and becomes humanizing in its rawness. The interaction between the hard surface and soft flesh finds its own balance, imitating the contradiction between naturality and performativity. Jenny Saville once said in an interview that she ‘tries to find narratives from the flesh’. (National Galleries of Scotland 2018). In her statement we find that the female body can, in fact, refuse to conform to a concept and tell its own story.

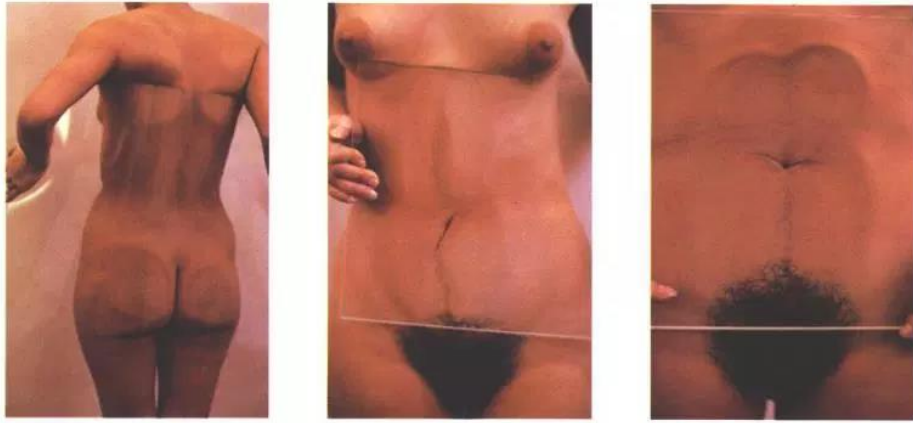


Figure 15: Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (glass on body imprints)*, 1972

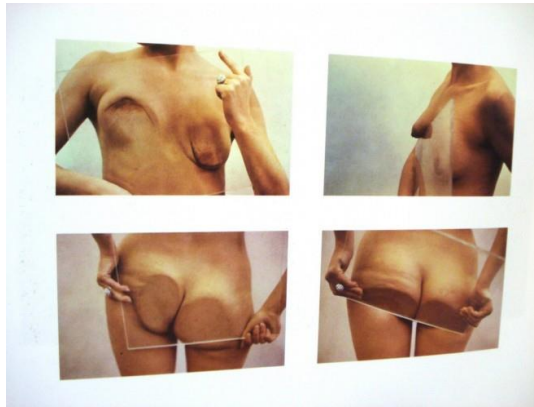


Figure 16: Ana Mendieta *Untitled (Glass on Body imprints)*



Figure 17: Jenny Saville, *Closed Contact #10*, ca. 1995-96

### 3.4 Bare Breasts

The nakedness of the female body in its entirety differs from that of the revealed body part. Body parts such as the breasts are obsessively hyper-sexualized. Their exposure

means zooming into the area so that nothing else is seen - the breasts becomes the nuclear attraction of sexual attention. In the mainstream media, the subliminal message behind a flashed breast is that the woman ceases to exist in its presence. This singular understanding is eradicated by female artists repurposing breasts in their works.

For the female artist, exposing her breasts is not an act of surrender. On the contrary, she rewrites the motif behind the exposure. Amongst other things, it can embody confrontation, as can be seen in the photo below. Immediately grabbing the viewer's attention are the holes - ironically cut out around the breasts. The perceptions of the viewer are put into question by the text on her shirt. She declares: my chest is more than your ideas of it.



Figure 18: Narcissister, part of *'Free the Nipple'*, 2017

Figure 19: part of Narcissister's video installation 2017

'There's this idea that women's bodies are fundamentally sexual and consequently, inappropriate to be seen in the public arena,' Narcissister explained to Metro. '[This project] is about women enjoying a broader experience with their bodies and in their bodies the way that men do ... I want to question whether this law or other laws are built on stereotyping and discrimination have been unconsciously built into law.' (Huffpost 2017.)

Narcissister created a video installation that displayed different women around New York - shirtless and wearing the classic Narcissister mask. By presenting breasts as a mere body part and their exposure as an act of liberation, this work disqualifies them



from being eroticized commodities. It has the similar quality of the interactive works by Yayoi Kusama where nudity unified and empowered.



Figure 20: Zanele Muholi, *'Inkanyiso I, Paris'*, 2014

In this photo, Zanele Muholi explores her self-image. Her naked chest is a part of the it, but it is not the central focus. The viewer is directed to the contours of her body as outlined by the light, her relation to the white lampshade, the abstract description of herself, and other poeties that can be found in this self-portrait. Images like this, that include the breasts but do not revolve around them, change our initial reaction of obsessively sexualizing breasts; it resets how we perceive them.

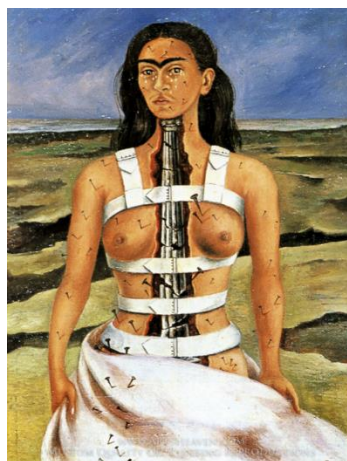


Figure 21: Frida Kahlo *'Broken Column'*, 1944

Like elderly bodies, those with handicaps are generally under-represented and considered irrelevant. The handicapped female body doesn't entice and is therefore left out of

the mainstream visual culture. This piece by Frida Kahlo is exceptionally important to include because she is with a handicap: her paralyzed back. Kahlo makes herself transparent in this self-portrait and the exposure of her breasts is a fortified vulnerability. She bluntly communicates her physical pains and discomfort, a focal point that overtakes the sexualization of her breasts. Again, we see here how infusing nudity with a natural landscape creates sincere undertones.

Regenerating images of breasts as other than sexual commodities, empowers their exposure. It has been deeply ingrained in the psyche of the viewer that female body parts symbolize sex. These examples of artworks defy and subsequently reduce this misperception.

### **3.5 Re-appropriation of the hypersexualized body**

Re-appropriation is, ‘the phenomenon whereby a stigmatized group revalues an externally imposed negative label by self-consciously referring to itself in terms of that label’ (Galinsky, Hugenberg, Groom & Bodenhausen 2003, 201). This self-consciousness is the key element that differentiates re-appropriated sexualization from oppressive sexualization.

Actions that are rooted in the hyper-sexualization of the female body are interrogated, when repeated by female artists. Because the mimicry takes place in the cultural context of contemporary art, the viewer is encouraged to take time to really look and reflect. It opens a space to re-evaluate the fundamental meaning of the specified actions. The artist reappraises attributes that have been used as methods of oppression. For instance, by never taking off her mask, Narcissister re-appropriates anonymity and turns it into a parody. She relates her success as an artist to the fact that she has remained anonymous. She says ‘I had to stop performing as myself to make something happen (Souter 2018).



Figures 22: Narcissister 'Every Woman'. photo by Tony Stamolis, 2009

Figure 23: Narcissister 'Every Woman' n.d.

In a performance 'Every Woman' by Narcissister, she dances to the classic hit song 'Every Woman' by Chaka Khan. All the while, she slowly re-dresses herself with clothes she pulls out from the orifices of her body, like her mouth and vagina. 'Amidst such erotic spectacle this work drives its point home: woman cannot pretend to strip herself bare because as long as she is called "woman," she can never be *bare*. Gender, as such, is inscribed on the body to symbolize and reproduce social order.' (Cercone 2009.) One is reminded of Carolee Schneeman's work, 'Interior Scroll', and the idea of using the vagina as a source for truth.



Figure 24: Ana Mendieta 'Rape Scene', 1973

In 1973 a student at Mendieta's campus had been brutally raped and murdered. It was an incident that triggered Ana Mendieta to start creating artworks that discussed the issue of violence against women at the time, as well as society's indifference of it. 'Rape Scene' was one of these. She recreated the scene in her apartment, where the body that

was found. She uses her body to materialize her horror at the act of sexual violence and somehow in the process, faced her own fears. This reminds of the aforementioned statement by Yayoi Kusama, where she reproduced objects that horrified her, as a means of dealing with her fears.

This artwork was particularly provocative because it was rare at the time to depict rape as a violent crime – with a victim who was terrorized bodily and mentally. In the history of Western art, rape scenes had been painted erotically and the men who committed it were gods, war heroes and kings. She defies this tradition by centralizing on female pain. (Sauers 2017) In this piece she brings the brutality of the incident into the spotlight, where it could not be ignored. She invited her class to her apartment, where she awaited them in this bloodied, tied up state. They were without warning, which made this a shocking visual trigger. It prolonged the discussion about the traumatic event of the fellow student as well as other similar criminal acts. She kept the story alive, making sure that it wasn't treated with indifference. Despite it being counter-intuitive, she adamantly denounced sexual violence by mimicking it.

In these examples the artists raise awareness to the inevitable responsibilities of the viewer and the ethics behind how they perceive the female body. Furthermore, these works challenge the notions of stripping and rape by displacing these actions from their original contexts.

### 3.6 Mirror, mirror

The mirror is primarily used to grasp visual reality. By using it to instead symbolize introspection, the meaning of this reflective surface is replaced - that which meets the eyes become visceral. In turn, concepts are integrated into the vision of the female body.



Figure 25: Ana Mendieta *'Mirage I'*, 1974

This is an excerpt from Mendieta's film *'Mirage I'*, which discusses the feeling of displacement. It is a remembrance of the separation from her family and home in Cuba as well as the emotional turmoil around it. Here, the mirror represents the fleeting understanding of space and time. When she looks into the reflective surface, she sees herself in the space behind her. The shots that don't include her tangible body in the frame are especially curious when exploring the theme of displacement.

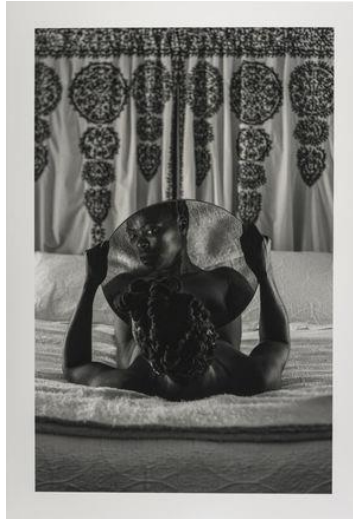


Figure 26: Zanele Muholi *'Bona, Charlottesville'*, 2015

In this self portrait of Zanele Muholi, she looks into the mirror and similar to the photo in fig. 25, sees the reflected environment behind her and herself in that. On the other hand, looking ahead her view is manipulated by the outline of the circular mirror. There is a conviction to her grip on the mirror - a subtle desperation not to let go. The positioning of her tangible self, a physicality, is directed away from the viewer. It contradicts her reflective self - an accessible, therefore approachable, visibility.



Figure 27: Paz Errázuriz

*'Evelyn. La Manzana de Adán'* ('*Evelyn. Adam's apple series* ') 1982

The mirror in this photo plays a symbolic role by acting as a secondary focus. By default, attention is first and foremost directed to the female figure. This is further emphasized by the continuation of the figure as a hindsight reflection as well as the composition, where the mirror is cast to one side as a secondary element. There is a hierarchical contrast between the reflective surface and the tangible reality of her and the room. This gives a respectful and validating space for the figure.

The mirror in these works play with the interaction between physical reality and its reflection. The mirror is an image within an image – a continuity that does not end with the tangible viewer. It insinuates that the understanding of the female body is a matter of perspective.

## 4 Repossessing the female body as an LGBT+ artist

‘Discourses of heterosexuality oppresses us in the sense that they prevent us from speaking unless we speak in their terms. Everything that puts them into question is at once disregarded as elementary.’ (Wittig 1992, 131.) With this statement, Wittig implies that the dominant public sphere is heterosexual and does not recognize deviating perspectives to be equally valid. There is an erasure of certain bodies and identities (The New School 2014). Without sidetracking, it is important to underline that the social position of the female LGBT+ artist differentiates from that of the normative female artist.

Circling back to the main theme, since the queer space lies outside the obedience of heteronormative limitations, the representation of the female body branches out and beyond the indoctrination of femininity. Furthermore, the gender-fluidity that is often depicted turns the female body into a human body. The heterosexual male is inconsequential in an activated queer art space, so their expressions of femininity and sexuality - never having been ulterior motives to appease the straight male - are independent entities. Therein, the female figure depicted by LGBT+ artists is essential in erasing the male gaze from their bodies.

### 4.1 The trans female artist and her body

If the subject identifies as female or their body to be female, their figure is female. Therefore, the portrayal of the trans woman experience is vital to establishing our understanding of what the female body is; that it is indefinably personal. Because they are emancipated from heterosexual demands, their femininity and figure are agents of independent expression with untaintedness to a certain degree. The untaintedness comes from their invisibility in visual culture. It can also be deduced that their motives for their presentations of femininity differentiates from that of someone who has been socially defined as woman. In an interview between bell hooks (a notable feminist author) and Laverne Cox (a trans female actor and producer), Cox defends her use of blond wigs: ‘If I’m embracing a patriarchal gaze with this presentation, it’s the way that I’ve found something that feels empowering. And I think the *really* honest answer is that I’ve sort of constructed myself in a way so that I don’t want to disappear... I’ve never

been interested in being invisible and erased. So, a lot of how I'm negotiating these systems of oppression and trying not to be erased is perhaps by buying into and playing into some of the patriarchal gaze and white supremacy.' (Mirke 2014.) In this statement, Cox acknowledges that expressions of femininity have its own background, while defending her own expressions to be a part of 'the integrity of being she has worked to cultivate' (The New School 2014, retrieved 8.11.2018).

Furthermore, their physical bodies are often presented in various stages of development, which redefines gender to be undeniably innate. The representatives and their images aim to convince the viewer of their existence by self-proclamations.



Figure 28: Zackary Drucker Excerpt from video '*FISH: A Matrilineage of Cuntly White Women Realness*', 2010

Rituals of femininity, for instance, become a medium of self-expression rather than the upkeep of a pleasurable image for the male audience. Therein, they redefine mediums of artifice. It is presented as a part of understanding and processing their truest identity. This screenshot from '*FISH: A Matrilineage of Cuntly White Women Realness*' by Zackary Drucker, disables the subservience behind the staged presentation of herself. Introspections, are translated through make up, for example, reversing it from being an external falsehood.





Figure 29: Zanele Muholi *'Miss Divine IV'*, 2007

In *'Miss Divine IV'*, Muholi manipulates the lighting to the brightest. This exaggeration acts as a spotlight that overcompensates for her erasure and exclusion – both from visual culture, as well as from dominant social spheres. To walk the streets in broad daylight as her true self is fatally dangerous in South Africa. The clothes she is wearing appears to be party clothes and could be a symbolic reference to her public exposure being limited to the night. By visualizing her in the brightest sunlight, this image encourages the viewer to reimagine the social atmosphere, so that her truest self can be shown any time of the day. Although this example is not by a trans female artist, it was included for how it advocates for their visibility.



Figure 30: Greer Lankton Poster of exhibition *'It's about me not you'* 1996

This image of Greer Lankton is taken from the poster for her last exhibition *'It's all about me...not you'*. The distribution of light and shadows seem to parallel which order

of body parts she is most comfortable showing. She looks away from the viewer as if she is distancing herself - prepared to be judged by her body. She materializes as a combination of determination and vulnerability, therein becoming a manifest of strength. Furthermore, the title of the exhibition 'It's about me...not you' redefines the concept of the female on display; that her position is not one of sub-ordinate entertainment.



Figure 31: a part of the afore-mentioned exhibition

The exhibition was an extensive replication of her apartment. It included personal items and shrine-like areas. (Morton n.d.) The most haunting aspect was her use of dolls (see fig.31), an object commonly used to reinforce beauty ideals. Dolls are also a subliminal archetype - beauty goals woman should strive for. In this installation, Lankton reshapes their purpose by customizing each one to have identities that stray from crowd-pleasing attributes.

## 4.2 Lesbian love is for lesbians

In the visual culture dominated by the male gaze, lesbian scenes are depicted with heterosexual biases. This is exceptionally clear in mainstream movies, that consistently follow this assumption that there is always room for a man in lesbian interactions. If not, then the audience is compelled to identify with the male character who feels left out. Through the male gaze, the purpose of lesbian interactions is ultimately for the arousal of the male audience. This filter exists so that the understanding of the social identity of woman - subservient to the needs of the straight male – remains unchallenged.

‘How can lesbian sensibility exist in the context of patriarchal art? A context where “woman” has meaning only in the heterosexual systems of thought and heterosexual economic systems. Lesbians are not women.’ (Wittig 1992, 135.) In this quote, Wittig voices that the art field is predetermined as patriarchal – a worldview that has no tolerance for contradictory perspectives. Therefore, lesbian sensibilities are censored to perpetuate the illusion that the male audience is the ultimate reverence.

Harmony Hammond believes ‘that there is something as yet undefinable in my work and other work that we might call ‘lesbian sensibility’, but for the most part it is hidden. As our work becomes more visible recurring themes and approaches will emerge and we can examine and develop them.’ (Hammond 1978, 129.) Hammond’s optimism in the emergence of lesbian artists is currently being realized. There is a repeated tranquility and sincerity in the atmospheres of the following works by Zanele Muholi and Mickalene Thomas, both lesbian artists. The co-existence and interaction between the female figures are non-performative. This visibility allows the viewer to see through the lens of the lesbian identity. It’s a lens that does not coincide with - and therefore erases - the male gaze.



Figure 32 & 33: Zanele Muholi, n.d.



Figure 34: Zanele Muholi 'Being', 2007

In the art project '*Faces & Phases*', which extended over 10 years, Muholi documented the LGBT+ community in South Africa. The examined photos (see figures 32-34) focus on same-sex relationship and validate lesbian intimacy. The viewer catches glimpses of their realities and the sincerity in their way of being. The visibility of these scenes overpowers the narrative that has been re-played by the male gaze.

Their naked co-existence in the images is a statement of genuine intimacy, which by default eliminates it from being perceived as a performed sex scene. Furthermore, the figures are solely engaged with each other, paying no heed to the viewer – they appear oblivious to the fact that they are being looked at. The viewer is subjected to their experience of a moment that happened to be captured on camera. This deletes the notion that their interaction is an inviting space that is conducted for the viewer.



Figure 35: Mickalene Thomas *Sleep: Deux Femmes Noires* 2013

In this 97.8 x 204.5 cm large mixed media collage, Mickalene Thomas creates an atmospheric piece – a safe space for the two figures to express their closeness. There is a fragility that is conveyed by the cracking fragmentation of this piece. The viewer can see all the layers of the works and a multi-dimensionality is added into their way of perceiving. Here we see elements of nature again, that add sincerity to the tone of the piece. Infusing nature also symbolizes the non-existence of social construct.

## 5 ART AND ACTIVISM

Political art represents and highlights hostilities within current environments. It resonates within its viewer by raising a hyper-awareness of the environment they move through. With all these patriarchal misconceptions of the female body and the definition of woman, there is an undeniable need defend one's rights. Political art activates a consciousness that resists the politicization of the female body.

Guerilla Girls is a significant example of feminist art activism. Their works aim to hold up a mirror and expose the sexism that saturates the art world. They use a tactic that is replayed in Narcissister's persona: using an iconic mask by which they re-appropriate anonymity. In an interview, Guerilla Girls stated that: 'We discovered that the art world takes feminists more seriously when they use humor and wear a gorilla disguise. Pathetic! We think of it as our masculinity.' (Bollen 2012.) They analyze the need to speak in terms that accommodate the patriarchal spaces of the art world, which they seek to navigate. Using humor and hard numbers, they wrap their messages of critique in a package that can be understood. In fig. 36, they add their infamous gorilla mask to the nude figure, thereby reclaiming that nude - they have the last say in the matter. It raises the question: what would a nude be, if more female artists had more places in the spotlight? It's a strong commentary on the misrepresentation of the female body being directly related to imbalance within the art platforms.



Figure 36: Poster by Guerilla Girls, 1989

In the Trump era, the oppressive entitlement to a woman's body has been re-establishing itself. This extends to the bodies of trans women. The Trump administration plans to pass an anti-trans policy that restricts the definition of sex, effectively legally erasing trans people (Glauert 2018). The hashtag #WeWontBeErased that followed, echoes a

collective refusal to succumb to the ulterior motives of these regulations, which would be to blanket them into non-existence.

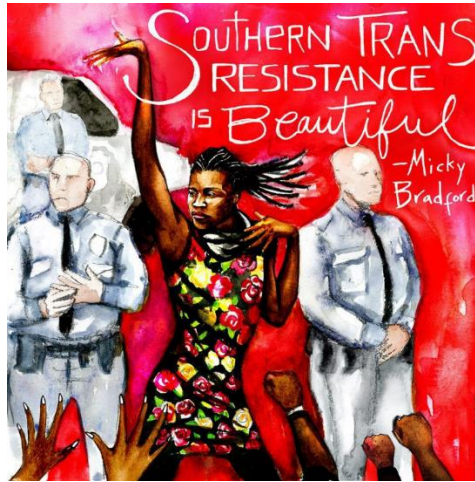


Figure 37: Micah Bazant Portrait of Micky Bradford n.d

Figure 37 is a part of an art project, *'The Trans Life & Liberation'*, by Micah Bazant, where art created by trans persons promotes underappreciated activists and trans individuals. The activist depicted here, Micky Bradford has said 'Our performance is our resistance, and trans resistance is beautiful' (Dupere 2016, read 6.11.2018). The art series affirm, empower and flaunt the existence of transgenders by concretizing their physicality and words. Micky Bradford, who is portrayed in this portrait, uses voguing as a medium for protest. Bradford's femininity is presented as unabashed, confident, even resilient. It is celebrated and supported by the many hands. In contrast, the police are depicted as anonymous figures in the background. This contrast compels the viewer to identify with Bradford and her character instead. Bringing visibility to re-imagined social positions generates new norms.



Figure 38: Micah Bazant Portrait of Keisha Jenkins n.d

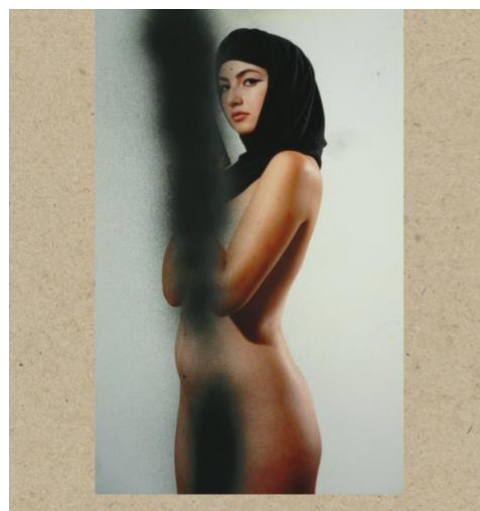
The second portrait is a part of a series, *'Black Trans Lives Matter'*, that is a remembrance of crimes committed against black trans women. This series gives faces and names to the victims. These images address the issues of discrimination and its violence by validating the trans woman and her identity over and over again.



## 6 INTERSECTIONALITY

By recognizing minorities can exist within minorities, I will also delve into intersectional portrayals of female bodies by female artists in comparison to those that are first-hand. The understanding of the bodies, one has not personally experienced, is limited to the exterior aspects, as well as the projection of one's own experiences they portray. This can often be seen in the trampling of delicate sentiments in the presentation of a different race, gender or class.

The upcoming examples consist of borrowed bodies as well as works deriving from first-hand experiences. Visibility is paramount for the social groups that are portrayed in the following works, but the in-depth contemplation of the subject at hand is not always present. At times, this can end up with the repeated gestures of the male gaze: to fit something into one's own narrative to the point that it is disrespectfully represented.



Figures 39 & 40: Rita Ackermann from *'Jezebel'* series, n.d.

In an interview, when asked why she chose to put hijabs, Rita Ackermann skirted around a direct answer. Her full answer was: 'Richard and I collaborated on the shoot. I had the idea that I would style the images, and he would take the photos. I have complete trust in Richard to bring in the right girls and take the right picture. We've had a long friendship. What I love about his photography is that he doesn't take sex or himself too seriously, but he takes photography very seriously. He seems to me more of a conceptualist than a photographer. It was fun to watch how he directed the girls sort of like soldiers.' (Armstrong 2016.)

The cultural appropriation was not acknowledged during the interview. The aim of this work is to criticize the desensitization towards images of sex and violence. Furthermore, Ackermann states that the images are highly erotic and calls them ‘soft political porn’ (Armstrong 2016). It appears that the purpose of the hijab in her works was to simply provoke. Logically, a woman who wears a hijab to cover her hair is probably not going to want to put her naked body on display. Thereby, this photo series is a careless misrepresentation of the values of peoples who wear hijabs. Ackermann seems oblivious to have adapted the male gaze in these works, where she fetishizes the hijab and puppeteers the naked female body into a sexual fantasy. Her works do not coincide with those, that aim for the female body to be an instrument for itself.



Figure 41: Lalla Essaydi, from ‘*Converging Territories*’ series, 2003

Figure 42: Lalla Essaydi, *Converging Territories #30*, 2004

The photo series, ‘*Converging Territories*’ (see fig. 42&42) by Lalla Essaydi, was photographed in the house, in which women from her family were sometimes locked up for weeks if they had transgressed the rules of Islam (Anya Tish Gallery n.d.). In her pieces, everything is layered and with each layer comes a space. Ultimately, each space has its own walls. She liberates the women from invisibility and depicts their relationship with architectural spaces – structures that are male-dominated. The images retrospectively explore her childhood experiences.



Figure 45: Lalla Essaydi, *'Les Femmes du Maroc: Afer the bath'*, 2008

In *'Les Femmes du Maroc: Afer the bath'* (fig. 43), the viewer is also subjected to the abject experience of covering yourself as a Muslim woman. Essaydi states that she wishes to present herself through multiple lenses – as artist, as Moroccan, as traditionalist, as Liberal, as Muslim. She invites the viewer to resist stereotypes. (UAA College of Arts and Sciences n.d.) Looking at these images is a transcendence and gives a completely different understanding of this deeply cultural piece of clothing.



Figure 44: Jenny Saville *'Passage'*, 2004

In this painting, Jenny Saville depicts the development of the body towards womanhood. The unfinished atmosphere of the painting reflects the incompleteness of her transition and from another level the incomplete understanding the viewer has of her. Thereby, she raised a discussion on the relations between beauty, body and gender. Without condemning Saville's painting, it can be seen as a shallow portrayal because it revolves around the most obvious part of her exterior – the penis. In response, Astro Twitch, a trans female artist has commented that 'With depictions of trans women in art, it's often easy to tell when a cis-gendered artist has created it – like with Jenny

Saville's famous piece (*Passage*, 2004) which centres around the subject's penis. It can be difficult for artists not to hyper-concentrate on that. It doesn't necessarily offend me, but it can feel like they're treating trans subjects as a spectacle.' (SBS 2016.) She respectively points out that there are personal biases within intersectional representations of the trans woman. Although Saville raised a discussion, visual culture does not have enough first-hand representation of trans women. Although Saville raised a discussion, the trans woman needs more representation in the visual culture that communicates a deeper sense of visceral identity.

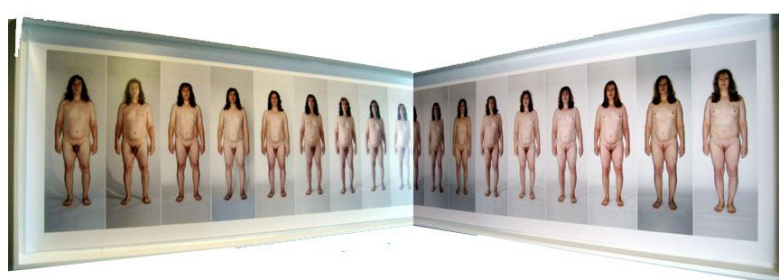


Figure 40: Yishay Garbasz *'Becoming'* 2010

If we look at the piece *'Becoming'* by the trans female artist Yishay Garbasz, it provides a bigger picture. This flipbook illustrates her transition from one year before, to one year after her surgery. Although the genitals are included, the strongest consistency in the flipbook is her hair. Garbasz said in an interview that the hair was the main focus. It implicates that, regardless of her body parts, she was always the same woman. Having people be more than their genitals was a big win for Garbasz. (Huhill 2016). This is further confirmed in the stability of her posture and body language. Redirecting the focus from the initial reaction of obsessing over the genitals and towards her identity, resets the viewer's perception. Her body is perceived as the female that she identifies herself as. It encourages the viewer to contemplate the complexity of innate gender in relation to identifying with one's body.



Figure 46: Paz Errázuriz, *photo from 'Adam's Apple' series, 1983*

Fig. 46 is a part of Paz Errázuriz' photo series *'Adam's Apple'*. She documented the lives of the trans community during the time of the Pinochet dictatorship, when they were persecuted, capturing moments as mundane as getting dressed. By not letting go of their genuine identity, they existed as a political resistance – the act of her documentation was also a part of it. In Errázuriz's statement "I wanted to portray their lives, in their way. I guess my point of view has been an anthropological one. I do not comment on their lives, I wanted to be more of an accomplice, than a foreigner or an outsider" (Dazed, 2017.), she contemplates her position as someone bringing visibility to disadvantaged social groups. This contemplation and her aim for authentic portrayal of the subjects in her imagery, separates her narration from that of the male gaze.

Essentially, the portrayal of the perceived body is limited, in comparison to that of the experienced body. On the other hand, artists with self-awareness support the visibility of other social groups and start conversations with their works.

## 7 MY OWN ARTISTIC WORKS *'If these walls could talk'* and *'WHO/WHAT'*

Both of my projects started off as a personal reaction to the environment I experience. Ultimately, I found which parts of society I wanted to engage with and highlight. The works grew out of being personal projections and into a wider investigation of oppressive dynamics within the patriarchal social structure. There are elements of re-enactment in both works, but *If these walls could talk* is purely abstract, while *WHO/WHAT* also includes a more literal portrayal of the social issues it discusses.

### 7.1 'WHO/WHAT'

We are bombarded with images from media all the time and all the time they are embedding their messages into our psyche. There are patterns in the portrayal of the female body. The girl with the hair that glistens over her face. The girl with the sunglasses so big, all you see are her lips, her body. The girl sitting flimsy on a couch (or other piece of furniture), falling off in a disarray of gangly limbs. The girl who IS the piece of furniture. Etcetera. I focused on images that hide her face, suggesting that everything but her identity is of greater importance. It creates a diminutive anonymity. This is the void I wanted to challenge and fill through the making of this project.

The curious part about recreating images originally created for the male gaze was how I projected personal experience onto them. I tied myself to her objectification from the perspectives of the creator of the image, the viewer and the woman in the image to form a well-rounded understanding of the image.

A transparent surface was used to convey a sensibility towards the wavering build of our perceptions. I wanted to create paintings that were conceptual; a visual allegory.

#### 7.1.1 Work process

One day I flipped through a magazine and came across an image of a man applying lipstick onto a woman, which seeded the idea behind this painting series.. He was looking down on her face with a serious expression, while she looked up at him with a naïve smile. I suppose she was seated and he was standing. He held her chin, gently with the

left hand, tilting it upwards - somehow also performative, with his little finger stiffly parted. But the way he held the lipstick, seemed forceful. The lipstick was too small in his hand and it looked like a weapon he was stabbing her with. All these details of body language pointed towards the disgusting irony that was her compliance of his authority. I heard the words ‘until she bleeds pink and pretty’ and consequently embarked on a thought journey, wherein I analyzed images I have been fed and their subliminal messages.

The basic idea was to paint on both sides of acrylic glass and play with their transparency. One side would outline the original image; something I felt I had seen many times before, something where her face is anonymous. Subtle jabs of irony would be planted in the colors and the details of the image. The second side would expose her intangibility, with portraits of her face opening into a galaxy; an empowering adaptation of anonymity.

The photos I chose for the portraits were found when I googled e.g. ‘Kendall facial expressions’, ‘Kendall Jenner speaking’, ‘Kendall Jenner emotions’. I tried to find candid photos of their faces.



Figures 47: Kendall Jenner reference photos

<https://afrossip.com/2015/04/kendall-jenners-half-naked-pic-sexy-or-insensitive/>

This was the first image I painted. I knew the image was supposed to imply sexiness and give fantasies of her body, but I only felt the brutality of her trying to escape the shirt that covered her face and the bunny ears seemed to be a part of a game that wasn't

funny anymore. The colors I used for her flesh were in resemblance of fresh meat and I tried to emphasize the motion in the pulling of her shirt.



Figure 48: Kendall Jenner reference photo

On the flip side I used a photo of her mid-speech. The expression in her face had an authenticity because it was taken during an argument.



Figure 49: Chrissie Teigen reference photo

The second image was of Chrissie Teigan. I was struck by the composition of the first photo and how every detail pointed towards the objectification of her as well as her husband's need for substance overshadowing hers. The plate full of chicken wings was in stark contrast to her neat chicken bones – it echoed subliminal messages that dictate how big of an appetite a woman vs. a man can have. Furthermore, the sunglasses that hide her identity was a minor detail that completed her pose as a table – a pose that was an obvious performance. In the painting, I used similar colors for the leg and the chicken wings to connect them as being meats for the someone. I left out her second



hand to refer to the subtractions that are made from the female figure to form specific arrangements.



Figure 50: Chrissie Teigen reference photo

When I googled ‘Chrissie Teigen expression’, this was the only photo that came up. After searching for a while I was fascinated by how the upkeep of her appearance was so thorough that it was not possible to find any other non-performative photos of her. To fully engage myself, I projected my own sentiments of indignance on her behalf, while painting the expression of her face .



Figure 51: Reference photo

The last portrait was the most challenging because I could not find the name of the model. I was working with an absolute anonymity. This image was devastating to look at because the limpness in her pose is something I have seen many times in magazines and advertisements. The subliminal message in these images is that woman is incapable. I also noted how the bike she sat on was held in place by a stand, and it only had one

wheel – a bike that will never move is purely decorative. It's as if they were manipulatively grouped together into one category. More subliminal messaging.

The colors I used to paint her body were corpse-like. I wanted to exaggerate the impregnable passivity that often occupies the female body in media. When I painted the face, I combined the sentiments of the first two images and opened her face into a galaxy from the middle, so I could avoid trying to paint defining facial characteristics.

The legs in all the pieces are subliminally portrayed as useless. They are cut off midway from the first two images, while in the third painting they are obviously inactive. They are not really pedaling anywhere on a bike that is screwed in place. Firstly, this underlines the visual violence that take place when choosing which body parts to cut out of a frame. Secondly, it conveys a sense of entrapment.

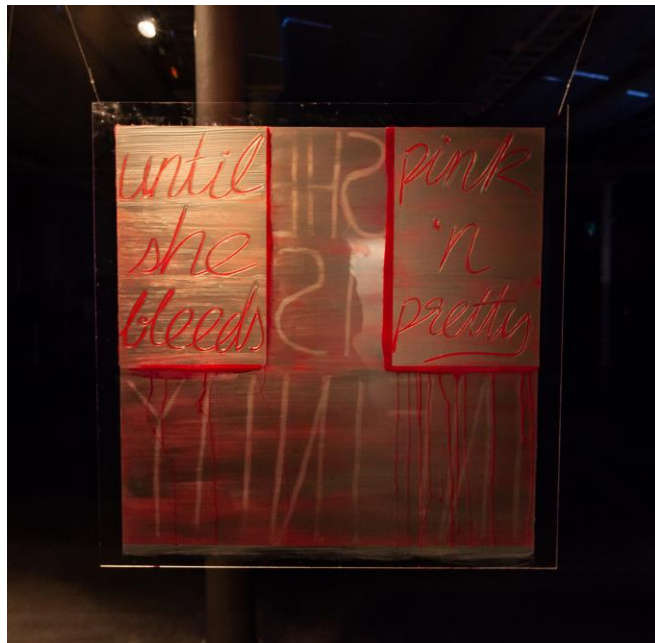
The backgrounds of each side were a crucial part of the process although its purpose was invisible to the viewer. The pink was a blend of red and pink to echo the subtitle of that side of the boards: 'until she bleeds pink 'n pretty'. The paint was smoothed onto the board, mirroring the same action of flattening identity as a part of the objectification process. The silver side was also a thick layer of paint, but it was stroked outwards to create a pattern of illumination around the head. It is an overcompensation of validation for the otherwise overlooked depth of her being.

When I made the work with the text I took care to give meaning to the process as well. Carving the words in the double-layered paint felt like I was chipping away at one layer of falsehood on one side and truth on the other.

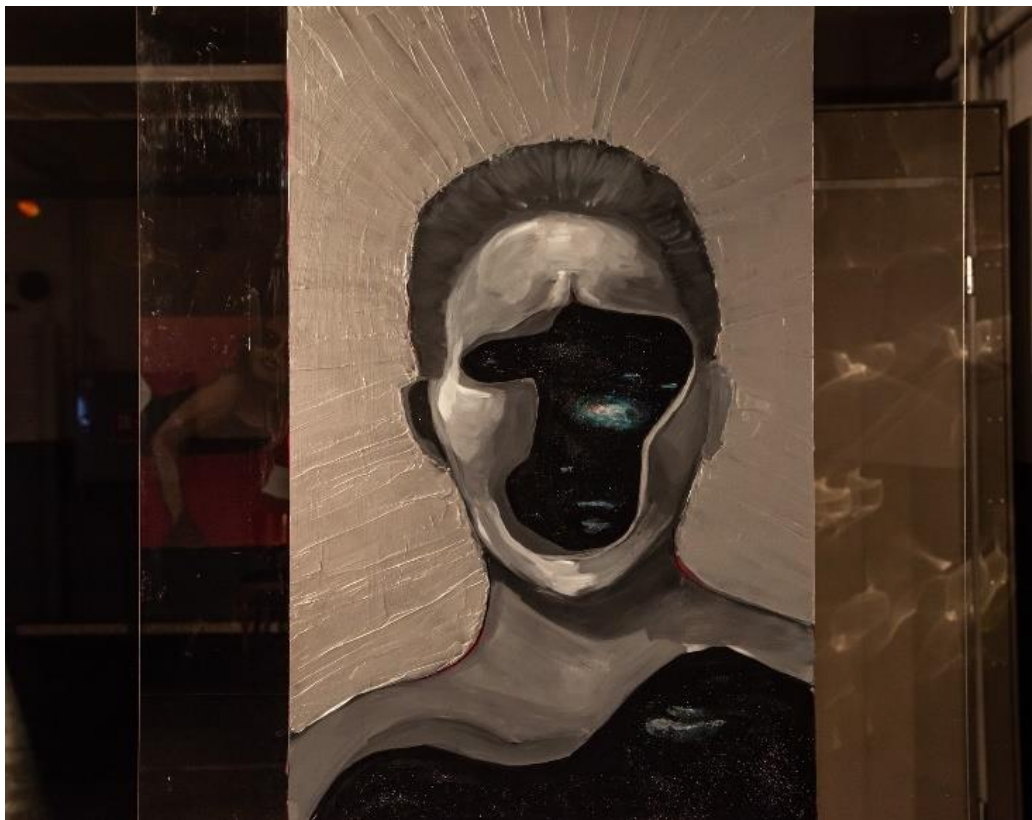
The side that reads 'until she bleeds pink and pretty' is written in small, cursive letters and they are placed in small boxes on each side of the board to reflect oppressive positioning. The 'and' is abbreviated to hint that objectifying portrayal is partial, while the letters are in lower case and cursive to reflect that objectifying portrayal is diminutive. 'SHE IS INFINITY' is written in capital letters and the word 'infinity' acts as a visible growth into the biggest region of the board. This side is an affirmation of her existence beyond flesh.

### 7.1.2 The paintings, 'WHO/WHAT'

The series consists of four 100x100cm acrylic glass boards, with the repeated image of objectified women on one side, where there is a unifying element of derogatory anonymity. The reverse side is an argument and portrays the face making a non-performative expression. Here, the anonymity is revalued as empowering and the face opens up into a galactic landscape. The works are an interplay between the visual and the visceral.



Figures 52 & 53: Alexandra Mitiku 'WHO/WHAT', 2018



Figures 54 &55: Alexandra Mitiku 'WHO/WHAT', 2018



Figure 56 & 57: Alexandra Mitiku *'WHO/WHAT'*, 2018



Figure 58 & 59: Alexandra Mitiku *'WHO/WHAT'*, 2018



Figures 60 & 61: Alexandra Mitku Close ups from '*WHO/WHAT*', 2018

The works as a whole, were installed in such a way that when the viewer walks into the room, they see the pink side first, but on their way out they see the silver side. The placement added to the experience of the work.



Figure 62 & 63: Alexandra Mitiku *'WHO/WHAT'*, 2018



## 7.2 'If these walls could talk'

### 7.2.1 Work Process

My inspiration came from a video of my little sisters. Objectively speaking the face of a 4-year old was being massaged by adult hands. Although she really enjoyed the face massage, as a third-party viewer I saw the distortion of her face. In a small way, it felt like the hands held an authority over the child's face and were committing an act of violence.

Originally, I wanted to use obvious factors of masculinity and femininity as I understood it at the time. Basically, beefy hands on made up faces. During the first draft I realized that the topic I was aiming to discuss required a more complex understanding than this.

The hands of Armando and Kari were not distinguishably masculine and although it went against the original plan, it was a welcome development. It seemed narrow-minded to use pre-conceived notions of manliness in this video. Armando and Kari were concerned for the comfort of Sophia and Lavinia as they touched their faces and were particularly shaken to see what their hands looked like in the video. Also, I noticed that Kari's hands trembled when they touched Sophia's face, as if he didn't want to be hurtful despite the continuation of his movements. I related this to the unintentional harm people cause out of the basic need to conform. I also noticed the make-up I thought would underline womanliness was an artifice and gave an unwanted sexual undertone to the video.

It took me one year to sit on the unanswered questions I found during the first round. It was in Seoul, Korea that I got the idea to manipulate the lighting so that only the face and hands would be visible. The people I asked to participate were all supportive and made much-appreciated efforts. We shot in a small room, the flashlight was hand held (symbolistic for the act of searching for hidden voices), one person was sitting on the chair while one would be right behind, hands ready. During each session, every person who sat in the chair shared some very personal stories and their words were often directed towards family. I say person because a participant in the chair is non-binary although they have been raised and are often treated as a female.

Before I started shooting I tried to create a safety in the atmosphere, for example by sharing personal information. I didn't feel the need to share each time, since some participants were more forthcoming with their stories. I asked them to visualize a person they wanted to talk to and often the participant would speak to more than just one person.

Sometimes one phrase would be repeated, for example 'are you listening to me, can you hear me' and it was the tone of the person's voice that projected more than the words. Something I found interesting were the song requests. One woman asked to play a specific song that helped her process a rape.

One participant said she felt anger both when she was the face and the hands. When she felt hands on her face she was angry at the hands for distorting her face and tried to escape it, while when she was the one distorting she felt a different type of aggression towards the face. Her statement is detrimental when understanding the idea that being oppressed doesn't necessarily rule you out as an oppressor.

At some point I didn't have enough male hands and I realized that I could expand the discussion from gender relations to a social structural background. I began to mix around with gender and race when coupling face with their corresponding hands. There was a diversity in the participants to underline intersectionality and its different relations.

I kept this in mind also when I edited the video, mixing the order of the faces with equal measures. I used transitions that blended the faces to give a unifying element. I also wanted the video to progress in canon, so when the second channel started, the first channel was about to end, and so forth. The final shot was of the poem that can be seen in fig. \_\_\_

When I set up the video, I placed two comfortable chairs so that they were across the first and third channel. This was to hint at the comfort within those phases.

### 7.2.2 The video, *'If these walls could talk'*

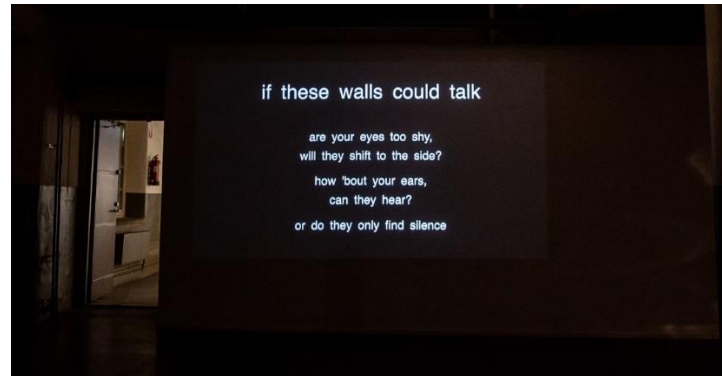


Figure 64, 65, 66 & 67: Alexandra Mitiku Shots from *'If these walls could talk'*, 2018

## 8 CONCLUSIONS

The body is a highly politicised vehicle. It is this concept that drives the artworks that have been examined. To recap, the main questions that were answered include: What are the methods used by female artists to empower their bodies? How has this affected visual culture? What do their works invoke in the viewer? How do their works undermine the hegemony of the male gaze and erase it from the female body?

By scrutinizing the male gaze and its authority in visual culture, two patriarchal narratives were brought up: the sexual objectification of woman and the mis-gendering of the trans woman. The role of the active viewer was supplemented. Their responsibility in the current visual imbalance – and the subsequent social relations - was outlined in order to reason their correlation to the works of female artists.

Female artists of the body art movement, started the radical presentations of the female body - radical in contrast to the one-sided images that preceded before them. They sought to divorce their bodies from the patriarchal messages that had inhabited them. They brought visibility to the undefinable identity of woman and raised awareness of the dysfunctions within the patriarchal structures. They replaced disgrace with glory every time they exposed themselves – it was a decisive rejection of the male gaze. This was not always received accordingly at the time, as was mentioned with Kusama's nakedness. It was clear that the patriarchal observational methods had a strong hold on the psyche of the viewer.

There are still criticisms today directed particularly at female artists who use their body in their work, and that this tactic makes them 'less than' artists who don't (Korvette 2016). This implies that there is only one way to present feminism. While it is important for the female body to be portrayed in a way that is free of patriarchal residue, re-appropriation of nudity is equally crucial. Visual culture needs the diversity. The female body is not liberated, if one dominance is to be substituted with another. The bottom line is that when one gaze, one type of display and perception is dominant, it suppresses the realities of others. There is still a long way in the uprooting of the male gaze, before it is overtaken by alternative perspectives - perspectives that are constantly being proclaimed by the affected social groups. By refusing to succumb to popular demands to suppress, to

hide, to filter themselves, female bodies exposed by female artists become political resistance.

The examined works of more contemporary artists support the underlying sentiment of deconstructing the male gaze, by reclaiming themselves and their naked truths. The female body is instrumental these works; it is used to centralize on their experiences and emotions. There is a palpable sense of identification in each piece. The viewer is invited to live vicariously through them. The details were analysed to outline what their intended influences were on the viewer. The examined works collectively sought to materialize their sensibilities and engage the viewer with their realities. With the ever-growing counter imagery, repurposing the female body, the male gaze becomes less and less impregnable.

Female artists empower the female body by personifying it - a process that aims to bond with the viewer. Redefining this 'viewer-female body' relationship is paramount in the unlearning of patriarchal teachings. Consequently, the viewer perceives with the understanding that narratives already exist within the female body. Some recurring methods were the re-appropriation of anonymity, the redirecting of focal points within an image, as well the naked body integrating with natural landscapes – symbolically illustrating an atmosphere free of social constructs.

The two repeated motifs of erasing the male gaze and highlighting social issues coincide with those of my own art works. *'WHO/WHAT'* investigates media images that objectify woman, and simultaneously denounces them, while *'If these walls could talk'* determines the suppression of experienced realities of woman.

The topic discussed in this thesis is broad and should end with adding that by narrowing itself, some related information has inevitably been left out. For instance, by choosing to focus on artists who identify as female, topics such as body dysmorphia was not brought up. It would require another line of discussion about gender fluidity. Moreover, even though I have used the genders and pronouns for the artists and the subjects of their works according to what I found from texts, such as articles and interviews, it is possible that they identify differently in person. Lastly, I wouldn't feel comfortable with

my definitive statements about both normative and trans woman's generalized experience, nor my analysis of the artworks in the thesis, without underlining that they were based on my own perception.

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Figures 52-67: photographed by Alisa Komendova, 2018