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Art Created by Women in Response to Social Change: A Study of Women’s Identity from the Twentieth Century to the Present

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Introduction

This paper examines the changing role of women over the course of the twentieth century into contemporaneity and how this is reflected in women’s art, and in the transformation of history writing from modernism to postmodernism and beyond. Despite this omnipresent overlap of social change and the creation of art and women’s constant role in history, the canon of art history omits women. This paper seeks to create a narrative more representative of art history in an inclusive global context. By contextualizing art with social theory and within the political climate of the region in which the art was created, the art is viewed as a product of socio-political change.

Women and their contributions have been excluded from the historical narrative since the beginning of history writing. In the New York Times series “Overlooked,” the writers of the obituary section reassess the way the main recipients of obituaries have been overwhelmingly white men since the start of the department in 1851. In an effort to broaden the scope of history, they are adding obituaries of notable women, such as photographer Diane Arbus, creator of the 1962 *Child with a toy hand grenade in Central Park, N.Y.C.* (fig. 1). This iconic twentieth century photograph captures the contrast of childhood innocence and human violence, while also highlighting the political turmoil of the United States in the 1960s.

The issue of women being excluded from history is not specific to just the obituary section of the New York Times. In the textbooks used in art history curricula, women are not included in the same capacity as men. In *Seizing the Light: A Social History of Photography* by Robert Hirsch, there are 156 total artists mentioned and only 20 of them are women. Similarly,

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in *Art Since 1940* by Jonathan Fineberg, there are 575 total artists, writers, and theorists mentioned, and only 105 are women. This paper, like the New York Times “Overlooked” series, is to rewrite art history through the narrative of political change, by presenting women artists in a comparative context and analyzing those who were politicized and those who were not. By doing so, the concept of political art is specific to each work depending upon the time and context in which it was created, and the specific political movement to which they might—or not—refer. For the most part, the artists detailed in this thesis include early women photographers and contemporary Middle Eastern, North African, and North American artists.

**The “New Woman”: From the Turn of the Century to the Suffragettes**

The turn of the twentieth century marked a global time of change in the world; as technology and industrialization continued to increase, the way people viewed the world through the lens of increasing modernization also changed. Modernization also affected art, as the way people had access to images and the way images could be created and reproduced changed with technological advancements. In Walter Benjamin’s essay *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, he states:

> Around 1900 technological reproduction had reached a standard that not only permitted it to reproduce all transmitted works of art and thus to cause the most profound change in their impact upon the public; it also had captured a place of its own among the artistic processes.

This changing interpretation of visual culture affected what critics and historians considered to be fine art, and accounts for differing perspectives of the role of women in this time period.

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An example of a woman artist whose art is interpreted in this way is Frances Benjamin Johnston, a Washington D.C. photographer, set up her own photography studio in 1894 and was considered to be the first female press photographer, and one of the only women in the business of photography at the time.\(^5\) Her 1896 self-portrait, *The Rebel*, highlights the changing ideas of femininity at the turn of the century (fig. 2). Also referred to as *Self Portrait as “New Woman,”* Johnston’s caricature of the modern age “new woman,” an idea that arose due to societal changes at the end of the century, features her with her skirt hiked up smoking a cigarette, indicating that women were behaving in more traditionally masculine behaviors.\(^6\)

In 1899, the principal of the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute in Virginia commissioned Johnston to take photographs at the school for the 1900 *Exposition Universelle* in Paris.\(^7\) Her 1899 photo, *Class in American History*, portrays a class of uniformed children of various ethnicities in a classroom, staring at an American Indian man in traditional dress and headwear (fig. 3).\(^8\) The Hampton Institute was a preparatory and trade school dedicated to preparing African American and Native American students for professional careers.\(^9\) Johnston’s photographs of the school were meant to display improvements in race relations in the United States. The photographs were therefore a form of propaganda, conveying the Institute’s goal or assimilating African Americans toward the ideals of a society dominated by white people. Robert Hirsch describes this idea, saying “In Johnston’s allegory viewers observe the stereotypical Native American warrior as a specimen of the old (bad) picturesque wild west dramatically

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\(^6\) Ibid.

\(^7\) Ibid., 65.

\(^8\) Ibid.

\(^9\) Ibid.
juxtaposed with the new (good) examples of Hampton’s ‘specimens.’” Johnston’s photographs reveal the complexities of this concept, while students are being taught the perceived cultural differences between themselves and indigenous people.

Both in the United States and in England, the early twentieth century marked a period of change for women as they fought for the right to vote. The British Suffrage Movement predates its American counterpart, and women were granted the right to vote in 1918, but the Suffrage movement itself was founded in 1903.11 What a woman may be and yet not have the vote, a 1913 print, highlighted the double standards women faced in relation to men (fig. 3).12 This image is an example of a poster created by the Suffrage Atelier, an organization founded in 1909, which was a society that encouraged artists to create politically charged posters and cartoons.13 While originally these images were created to be published in public spaces, they increasingly became used in public campaigns which changed the way art was used politically.14 Along with images created by a similar organization, the Artists’ Suffrage League, they were among the first to be used by women with the goal of creating political change.15 This changed the way women were perceived in the political sphere; while social demonstrations had occurred before this, this was the first time women were explicitly public about demonstrating.16 This serves a precedent for women occupying the public sphere being a political statement.

10 Hirsch, 275.
12 Ibid.
14 Ibid.
15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
While having the right to vote is now viewed as a basic human right, women beginning to occupy the social sphere gave precedent for future social movements, as women achieved a social status more equal to that of men. Throughout the rest of the twentieth century, there exists a struggle between women being oppressed into the private sphere but fighting for a place in the male-dominated public sphere. This struggle is visible in art created around the world.

**Women and Modernization**

As modernization progressed, the subjects of art, in addition to the way that art was created changed. Photography became more accessible, meaning that more people could have access to cameras and that cameras were becoming more easily portable. Additionally, the subjects of art changed, as artists aimed to capture the changing world.

In Paris in the 1920s, Hannah Höch was Dada artist “whose pioneering efforts with photomontage helped sever the photograph from its existence as an autonomous artifact and emphasize its role in ideological production.”\(^\text{17}\) Her photomontage *The Beautiful Girl* juxtaposes severed images of women with motorcycle parts, highlighting the commodification of the female body (fig. 4). Her exclusion of eyes and rejection of natural scale undermine traditional femininity and serves as commentary on the way women are displayed in media. The title of the photomontage, *The Beautiful Girl*, provokes the viewer to wonder if Höch is referring to the motorcycle or the images of women. This politically outspoken interpretation of the way women were portrayed remained relevant throughout the twentieth century.

In the United States, Georgia O’Keeffe was also creating art in relation to man-made technology, like cityscapes and paintings of skyscrapers, but also focused on natural forms, like

flowers, shells, and animal bones. O’Keeffe’s painting *Ram's Head, White Hollyhock-Hills (Ram's Head and White Hollyhock, 1935, New Mexico)* exemplifies her treatment of animal bones; although located in the desert, these remains are glowing in the sunlight, decorated with a flower, and suspended in midair (fig. 5). Although skulls generally evoke feelings related to death, this skull is ethereal, floating. Her incorporation of surrealist qualities in her painting was innovative, especially in conjunction with her incorporation of the New Mexico desert, a quintessentially American landscape. This contrasts with Arthur Rothstein’s 1936 photograph *Steer Skull, Badlands, SD*, which demonstrated the natural effects of the severe weather of the Dust Bowl (fig. 6). Rothstein, along with several other documentary photographers, was a member of the Resettlement Administration and Farm Security Administration, which, under Franklin Delano Roosevelt, had the purpose of assisting displaced rural Americans during the Great Depression of the 1930s and helping them find urban, industrial jobs.20 His photograph aimed at documenting the environmental conditions that were causing crop failure and impoverishing farmers.21 Both artists’ documentary photography dramatized subjects while also maintaining some truth in their setting.

Dorothea Lange was another FSA photographer whose photography focused upon the human experience of the Great Depression.22 Her 1936 photograph *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California* focuses on shared human experience and her ability to evoke empathy in the viewer,

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20 Ibid.
21 Ibid., 44.
while simultaneously evoking the theme of a Madonna and Child (fig. 7). Similarly, in Mexico city, Tina Modotti took photos in Mexico City in 1929 which combined art and propaganda.

Born in Italy, Modotti met photographer Edward Weston in 1920 and they moved to Mexico City soon afterward, which was a social and cultural center during the postwar period. Modotti’s photographs take two different approaches; her political photos reveal the sphere of politics to be dominated by men, while images like her *Mother and Child, Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, Mexico*, display women and children, images of hunger, oppression, and childbearing (fig. 8). She believed that “‘We can make social art without giving up pure art’ and that the production of a ‘pure aesthetic emotion’ through plastic form can be combined with ‘revolutionary anecdotism.’” Her documentary photography displayed the social issues of Mexico with subtle reference to the gender divide.

In contrast to Modotti, Frida Kahlo’s art applies these social issues of gender to her personal experiences in her artwork. The idea of the personal being political “rejects the traditional exclusion and repression of the personal in male-dominated politics” and “asserts the political nature of women’s private individualised oppressions.” These arguments influenced feminist aesthetics as women decorated their sphere with applied arts. In some cases, women artists accept this sphere and use it in art as imagery and experience, paying tribute to this assigned aspect of women. Kahlo’s art has the decorative aspects of Mexican folk art, and she often painted from her bed as a result of her injury, which is a private part of the home.

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23 Ibid.
25 Ibid.
26 Ibid., 94.
27 Ibid., 95.
28 Ibid.
29 Ibid., 96.
Kahlo’s art, male fantasy does not exist; she instead depicts the women’s experience as being filled with pain including that associated with not being able to have the feminine role of mother.\textsuperscript{30} Her 1932 painting *Henry Ford Hospital* vividly depicts the physical and emotional pain Kahlo suffered as a result of her miscarriage (fig. 9). The event is marked by several images connected to Kahlo, including the fetus of her son.

**The Role of Gender in Postwar Art**

In the period of postwar reconstruction and the resulting Cold War period, gender roles were polarized.\textsuperscript{31} During World War II, women were required to take on more traditionally masculine roles in the workforce, as a large portion of men were enlisted in the war efforts.\textsuperscript{32} In doing this, women were pushed into the public sphere, and it became more socially acceptable for women to hold public positions. After the war, however, gender roles were reinstated as men returned to their jobs at home, and women were expected to return to their roles as domestic caretakers.\textsuperscript{33} As the Cold War started, homosexuals in addition to communists were persecuted as threats to national security, and thus any deviation from masculinity could result in suspected homosexuality and persecution from the government. Additionally, in the 1940s and 1950s, the ideas of psychoanalyst Carl Jung gained popularity, which polarized the notions of masculinity and femininity through their strict definition of gender roles and archetypes.\textsuperscript{34} Masculinity became closely associated with American identity itself, as the United States developed an

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 154.
\textsuperscript{33} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 147.
The attribution of masculinity to Abstract Expressionist art and its relates to these popular and widely accepted notions of gender.

Abstract Expressionism is an example of an art movement which involved the participation of both men and women artists, but the artists typically regarded as the most important in the movement are all male. Additionally, Abstract Expressionist art is generally interpreted through the lens of the highly-valued notion of masculinity due to its societal context in the postwar period. In comparing the work and relationship of two Abstract Expressionists who happened to be a married couple, Jackson Pollock and Lee Krasner, the Jungian stereotypes of gender present in the postwar era are displayed, and this explains why women artists were less recognized.

These strict ideas of gender present in Jungian theory, in addition to the increase in McCarthyism and the constant presence of politics in American life, produced the stylistic qualities of Abstract Expressionist art. The aim of this movement was to be, in a sense, apolitical, with a lack of representational reference to any political stance. Fionna Barber’s essay “Abstract Expressionism and Masculinity” gives descriptions of this style of art by two well-known critics of Abstract Expressionist art, Clement Greenberg and Harold Rosenberg. Greenberg's description of Abstract Expressionist art focuses upon the artist’s interaction with the standard canvas and the way the artist depicts depth and shape within it. Rosenberg emphasized the physical act of painting as one of its defining attributes. Rosenberg believed that the process of painting was involved with a revelation for the artists, and was thus important.

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36 Ibid., 150.
37 Ibid.
38 Ibid.
The qualities of Abstract Expressionist art that relate it to masculinity are emphasized through Greenberg and Rosenberg’s ideas. Abstract Expressionist art is characterized by the size of paintings, their use of intense color, action-painting, movement. Barber describes this idea, saying “The public machismo associated with Pollock or Franz Kline is seen to be echoed by attributes of their paintings identified with masculinity, such as the size and scale of their work, or even their use of gesture and certain types of brushstroke.”\(^\text{39}\) Rosenberg’s belief is echoed in the action-painting style of Jackson Pollock and other such action-painting artists, whose method of painting was photographed and filmed in depth over the course of his career.\(^\text{40}\) The action of Pollock’s painting, described by Barber as having “primacy” is also visible in the drips of paint on his paintings themselves; even without seeing images of Pollock creating his iconic drip paintings, the application of paint and the motion required to create its aesthetic can be inferred by the viewer.\(^\text{41}\)

As the process of painting was often highlighted as an important feature of their art, many photographs were taken of Pollock and other Abstract Expressionist artists, like Willem de Kooning. In these photographs, both of their wives, Krasner and Elaine de Kooning, despite also being Abstract Expressionist artists, tend to be in the background, seated while their husbands are in the action of painting.\(^\text{42}\) In photographs of Krasner or Elaine de Kooning painting in their own studios, their husbands tend to not be included in the shot at all.\(^\text{43}\) For Pollock and Willem de Kooning, their wives’ inclusion in these photographs emphasized their masculinity and

\(^{39}\) Ibid., 147.  
\(^{40}\) Ibid., 152.  
\(^{41}\) Ibid., 151.  
\(^{42}\) Leja, 349.  
\(^{43}\) Ibid.
heterosexuality. Not only are these artists married to women, these women appear to admire and depend upon them through their passive stance.

This depiction of Krasner, however, is contrary to details of her life. Lee Krasner married Pollock in 1945 and by 1940 she was considered to be one of the most promising up-and-coming painters, but like many other women in Abstract Expressionism, she changed her preferred name from Lenore to the more gender-ambiguous Lee. 

Despite her talent for painting and involvement in the Abstract Expressionist sphere, Krasner was depicted as taking a backseat to Pollock’s widespread success. This is shown physically in the photographs of Pollock in his studio with Krasner behind him, but also in her somewhat nurturing, caretaking role in relation to Pollock, who suffered from alcoholism. This idea is in line with the Jungian archetype of the woman as a nurturer, or kind of inherent mother.

According to Jungian psychology, men have a female subconscious part of their mind and need to find balance with this part in order to have inner balance. This idea is seen in characters of film noir. Male characters in these films are portrayed as being dark and mysterious, often acting irrationally or violently, and are also attracted to femme fatale women over good women as a result of their uncontrollable “internal drive toward danger.” Projecting the reverse onto women is impossible with the lack of character development given at all in these films, providing insight into the differences between women and men in Jungian psychology; although men were able to achieve a transformation of sorts, women were incapable of that.

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44 Barber, 177.
45 Leja, 350.
46 Barber, 177.
47 Ibid.
48 Leja, 352.
49 Ibid.
because of their identities as women.\footnote{Ibid.} This is echoed through interpretation of Pollock and Krasner’s art.

In her 1948 painting \textit{White Squares}, Krasner organizes layered white squares and rectangles on a grid (fig. 10). There is both abstraction and disorganization, as no two squares are alike, and they all fit differently within the space they are given. This painting is representative of Krasner’s identity as a Jewish woman; Krasner was raised by Russian Jewish immigrants and was taught Hebrew as a child, but lost the ability to read it as she grew older.\footnote{Barber, 177.} Barber describes this painting as a “hybridised engagement with a diasporic Jewish culture.”\footnote{Ibid.} This relates to Jungian ideas of the subconscious; this painting, a series of jumbled hieroglyphics, is illegible just like how correctly written Hebrew would be illegible to someone who could not read it as well. This argument suggests that Krasner’s work was influenced by more factors than just her husband’s art, regardless of whether her intentions were to create works based on her identity as a Jewish woman.

However, Krasner’s work was not interpreted through this lens by the masses, but was overwhelmingly interpreted as a product of Pollock. In 1949, Krasner’s work was described in the \textit{Art Journal} as “tidying up her husband’s work.” In contrast to Pollock’s characteristic action paintings, this painting in particular is much more deliberate, as it has notions of representation that are key to its meaning and purpose. This painting still maintains notions of abstraction, but the inclusion of geometry and the organizing principle of the grid do give it a sense of neatness in comparison to Pollock’s action paintings. Krasner’s painting career was overshadowed by that of her husband, as his art was received differently because of his identity as a man.
Pollock and Krasner were given different social expectations and interpretations based on their gender identities and their relationship as a married couple. This lead to the consequent overshadowing of Krasner’s art, along with the art of many other women in the Abstract Expressionist movement, due to the Jungian archetypes of gender associated with the postwar period.

“Is this all?” From Feminism to Postmodernism and Beyond

In the 1960s and throughout the 1970s the feminist movement in the United States began to take form and feminist art came into its own as a genre. While the World Wars allowed women to have a more prominent role in the workforce, the postwar period forced women back into the private sphere. Betty Friedan describes this internal issue in her 1963 book *The Feminine Mystique*, saying:

The problem lay buried, unspoken for many years in the minds of American women. It was a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning that women suffered in the middle of the twentieth century in the United States. Each suburban housewife struggled with it alone. As she made the beds, shopped for groceries, matched slipcover material, ate peanut butter sandwiches with her children, chauffeured Cub Scouts and Brownies, lay beside her husband at night, she was afraid to ask even of herself the silent question “Is this all?”53

Feminism arose in the United States in the 1960s as a method of questioning the socially accepted gender roles. Artists, critics, curators and art historians addressed the oppression of women concurrently in the 1970s. Feminist art historian Linda Nochlin wrote, in her 1971 essay “Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?” that, for centuries, society made it impossible for women to achieve artistic excellence, or success, on the same footing as men, no

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matter what the potency of their so-called talent, or genius.”

Although accounts of the feminist movement, its role and importance vary in art history texts, feminist art’s political engagement, inclusion of satire, and challenge of the notions of high art make the movement a fundamental precursor to postmodernism.

Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party*, which includes place settings for the most important women figures across history. Created from 1974 to 1979, Chicago worked collaboratively with more than 400 women to create thirty-nine total place settings (fig. 11). In using plates, Chicago referenced the way that these artists had been “swallowed up and obscured by history instead of being recognized and honored.” Thirteen guests sit on each side of the triangular table setup, a reference to Leonardo’s *The Last Supper*, arranged chronologically on each side (fig. 12). However, Chicago feminizes that idea, in her use of traditionally decorative arts like china painting and embroidery and visual references vaginas in most of the dinner plates. The tables sit upon a tile floor where the names of 999 other notable women are written, arranged in proximity to place settings based on the period in which they lived, place of origin, or experiences.

One of the women Chicago includes in *The Dinner Party* is American painter Georgia O’Keeffe, whose closeup, cropped flowers, such as her 1926 *Black Iris*, were often interpreted

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55 Fineberg, 373.
57 Ibid., 360
59 Chicago, 362.
and critiqued with the notion that her were representative of vaginas (fig. 13, fig. 14). These criticisms arose as a result of Freud’s ever increasing presence in American society, and because of her relationship with photographer Alfred Stieglitz. Stieglitz was O’Keeffe’s husband but is also credited with starting O’Keeffe’s career as an artist, as he sponsored the first exhibition of her work. Because of her relationship with Stieglitz, O’Keeffe’s art was interpreted with the notion that her art was overtly feminine. Art critic Lewis Mumford described O’Keeffe’s art saying:

She is the poet of womanhood in all its phases: the search for the lover, the reception of the lover, the longing for the child, the shrinkage and blackness of the emotions when the erotic thread has been lost, the sudden effulgence of feeling, as if the stars had begun to flower, which comes through sexual fulfilment in love: all these elements are the subjects in her paintings.

O’Keeffe repeatedly rejected this idea, claiming that she painted flowers for the purpose of having people notice them amidst the increasingly modern world, even when these interpretations came from groups of women praising her for it. Chicago, seemingly accepting of these criticisms, even stated “I used the flower as the symbol of femininity as O’Keeffe had done.” While O’Keeffe was criticized for allegedly creating images of vaginas and repeatedly rejected this interpretation of her work, Chicago intentionally created images of vaginas in her work. This idea of reclaiming female anatomy is present in feminist art.

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62 Chadwick, 306.
63 Ibid.
65 Ibid., 684.
66 Ibid., 685.
However, not all feminist artists believed female anatomy was a fundamental part of creating feminist art. Mary Kelly created the *Post-Partum Document* in 1974, an installation composed of different elements that document her relationship with her son over the first five years of his life (fig. 15).67 Kelly criticized the focus of feminist art, saying “Currently in women’s art practice, there is a proliferation of forms of signification where the artist’s own person, in particular her body, is given as a signifier, that is, as object.”68 Instead of giving the mother a visible role in the work, “the *Post-Partum Document* does not describe the unified, transcendental subject of autobiography, but rather, the decentered, socially constituted subject of a mutual discourse.”69 This approach to feminist art contrasts the idea that anatomy is a fundamental part of female identity, suggesting instead that there is a psychological connection between the shared experiences of women.

Postmodernism was developed in the late twentieth century and marked a departure and questioning of the ideas of modernism. In Wim Wenders’s 1987 film *Wings of Desire* angels are sent back to earth to fix history.70 Laurie Anderson’s song “The Dream Before” defines this idea, saying “History is an angel being blown backwards into the future.”71 This idea is also developed in Walter Benjamin’s *On the Concept of History*, in which he describes a Paul Klee painting, *Angelus Novus*.72 Benjamin states:

> An angel is depicted there who looks as though he were about to distance himself from something which he is staring at. His eyes are opened wide, his mouth stands open and his wings are outstretched. The Angel of History must look just so. His face is turned towards the past. Where we see the appearance of a chain of events, he sees one single

68 Ibid.
69 Ibid.
70 *Wings of Desire*, dir. Wim Wenders (West Germany: Road Movies, 1987), VHS.
catastrophe, which unceasingly piles rubble on top of rubble and hurls it before his feet. He would like to pause for a moment so fair [verweilen: a reference to Goethe’s Faust], to awaken the dead and to piece together what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise, it has caught itself up in his wings and is so strong that the Angel can no longer close them. The storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which his back is turned, while the rubble-heap before him grows sky-high. That which we call progress, is this storm.73

Instead of viewing history as a progression with constant improvements, postmodernism marked a shift to thinking about the relationship between history and the future. Women artists both in Europe and America began to create art that questioned their role in society. In 1987, the National Museum of Women in the Arts opened to the public, and remains to be the only museum in the world dedicated specifically to women artists.74

British feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey developed the concept of the male gaze in her 1975 essay entitled “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” which analyzed the way women were depicted when the viewer of a film was given the perspective of a heterosexual man.75 Mulvey states “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote to-be-looked-at-ness.”76 In her untitled series of film stills, Cindy Sherman puts herself in the role of cliched character tropes occupied by women in twentieth century film, analyzing the lens with which women were viewed (fig. 18).77 Although her film stills were self portraits, they were never photographs of herself, but rather her occupying different characters

73 Ibid.
76 Ibid., 21.
and ideas. Her film stills placed herself in visibly recognizable settings and situations, and in this created a postmodern reassessment of film.78

   Barbara Kruger’s mass-media works combine boldface text, often postmodern assumptions about women, with black and white photographs. Kruger created works to be displayed as art but also to be displayed publicly and commercially.79 Her Untitled (Your body is a battleground) was created in 1989 for the Women’s March on Washington in support of reproductive freedom (fig. 19).80 The words are spread across a woman’s face, severed down the middle vertically, with one side in positive exposure and the other negative. Both the speaker of the text and the recipient are ambiguous. This poster specifically addresses the theme of public and private as the personal.

   The Guerilla Girls specifically began to question the actions of art museums and institutions in regard to inclusion and inequality through posters that demonstrate the difficulties that women artists faced. First created in 1989 and recreated in 2005 and 2012, their billboard created for the Public Art Fund in New York, Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?, compares the number of female nudes in the Metropolitan Museum to the number of female artists (fig. 20, fig. 21, fig. 22).81 Their deconstruction of the male gaze is evident in this piece, which takes Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres’ 1814 Grande Odalisque (fig. 23). The Guerilla Girls “bypassed the high-flown discourse increasingly attaching to gender and identity theory, insisting instead on a plainspoken, often humorous approach geared to a general art public,” which is demonstrated in such works of art that criticize institutions by making fun of

78 Ibid., 444.
79 Fineberg, 462.
the way they lack diversity. This design has been recreated and redisplayed addressing several global museums over the course of time, but the recreations of the original Metropolitan Museum critique prove little improvement, statistically, in the ratio of female nudes to female artists.

Recently, sexual abuse scandals have been making national headlines as several men in Hollywood are being accused of taking advantage of women. The #MeToo movement has united and given solidarity to survivors of sexual assault. Despite the overwhelming number of people and specifically women who have come out as survivors, sexual assault has been a constant but somewhat unspoken issue among women throughout history. Body art and performance art gave specific attention to these issues as women artists were able to use their physical bodies in artworks that relate to the experiences individual to the female body. Cuban-born artist Ana Mendieta created a performance piece, *Untitled (Rape Scene)* while she was a student at the University of Iowa (fig. 24). After a nursing student at the university, Sara Ann Otten, was raped and murdered by another student in March 1973, Mendieta’s performance piece involved inviting students to her apartment where she was naked from the waist down and bent over a table, as recorded in a photograph of the event. Mendieta stayed in the position for about an hour while the audience discussed the piece. Mendieta used her body “to emphasize the societal conditions by which the female body is colonized as the object of male desire and ravaged under masculine aggression.”

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83 Ibid.
85 Ibid.
86 Ibid.
87 Ibid.
More recently, Emma Sulkowicz addressed similar issues of college sexual assault in her performance art piece *Mattress Performance (Carrying That Weight)*, which began on September 2, 2014, and ended on May 27, 2015 (fig. 25).88 Sulkowicz carried a fifty pound, dorm mattress wherever she went on campus for as long as her rapist remained on campus as a part of her senior thesis as a Visual Arts major at Columbia University, New York.89 Sulkowicz was raped by fellow Columbia sophomore Jean-Paul Nungesser on the evening of her first day of classes sophomore year, in August 2012.90 She reported her rape to the university after meeting two other women Nungesser had raped.91 The university found Nungesser “not responsible” of the claims Sulkowicz made against him, and later in two additional reports made by the other women he had attacked.92 Sulkowicz’s performance piece gained immediate media attention and went viral online for its outspokenness and visibility. Her piece made the emotional weight of rape victims visual and impossible to ignore, and culminated in her carrying the mattress across the stage at her own graduation, with the help of students surrounding her (fig. 26).

Mendieta and Sulkowicz address similar themes but give two different interpretations of addressing them. Both artists incorporate their physical bodies in the artwork, even though Mendieta was transposing the experiences of a victim onto her person while Sulkowicz created this piece from her own experiences. Mendieta’s performance, like many of her pieces, was smaller in scale and not open to the public, while Sulkowicz almost forced those around her to

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91 Ibid.
92 Ibid.
participate, whether just in viewing her, being aware of her identity as her case gained more publicity, or in helping her physically carry the mattress as many strangers did.

**Middle Eastern and North African Contemporary Artists**

Global women artists face discrimination based on multiple facets of their identities; while women’s art is generally excluded from the narrative of art history, global women artists are additionally excluded based on eurocentric tendencies in art history. Non-Western artists face the bias of orientalism, defined by Palestinian-American literary critic Edward Said as “a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between ‘the Orient’ and (most of the time) ‘the Occident.’”93 This idea relates to the way the East is viewed and treated by the west, oftentimes in stereotypical ways informed by colonialist ideas. Art that addresses these biases, or highlights the political sphere in a way that challenges the west, faces further discrimination.

Mona Hatoum is an example of a Palestinian artist in the diaspora producing political art in relation to the state of Palestine and her identity as a Palestinian woman. According to Hatoum, art often transforms recognizable objects, “familiar, everyday things and defamiliarize them, reveal their uncanny side.”94 Said described Hatoum’s use of such objects in her artwork, saying:

In the age of migrants, curfews, identity cards, refugees, exiles, massacres, camps and fleeing civilians, [. . .] they are the uncooptable mundane instruments of a defiant memory facing itself and its pursuing or oppressing others implacably, marked forever by changes in everyday materials and objects that permit no return or real repatriation, yet

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unwilling to let go of the past that they carry along with them like some silent catastrophe that goes on and on without fuss or rhetorical bluster.”

Hatoum’s art, therefore, highlights the social and political connotations of objects, often in relation to gender and culture.

One such work of art is Hatoum’s Keffieh, created from 1993 to 1999, an interpretation of the traditional head-covering worn by men that has become synonymous with the Palestinian struggle for freedom (fig. 27). Hatoum’s Keffieh features a pattern specific to Palestine, but infuses it with anger as she contrasts white cotton with long, black, human hair. Including hair, to Hatoum, was a visual reference to “women tearing their hair out from sheer rage,” a clear demonstration of the anger felt by Palestinians struggling for freedom. Hatoum’s inclusion of human hair demonstrates the intertwining of different features of human identity; the keffieh is a traditional headscarf usually worn by men, but the creation of weaving a keffieh is an art typically related to the work of women, and the visual references of curled hair read as feminine.

In Hatoum’s 1999 sculpture Home, she continues her motif of using ordinary objects to create social commentary (fig. 28). Hatoum places fifteen kitchen utensils on a table connected by a live wire, which buzzes and lights bulbs places under certain utensils. The viewer is separated from the table with rows of wire covering a doorway-like space. The kitchen is emblematic of the domestic, private sphere synonymous with femininity, but by infusing kitchen objects with live electricity, Hatoum makes them impossible to handle. Although the idea of a

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96 “Interview with Mona Hatoum. The Idea Is What Matters!” interview by Urs Steiner and Samuel Herzog.
97 Ibid.
99 Ibid.
home is traditionally a safe, nurturing space, this interpretation of a home infuses the space with anger; if a person were to touch these utensils, they would be injured, if not killed.

Another Palestinian artist, Laila Shawa, addresses similar cultural paradoxes in her 1988 painting *The Impossible Dream*, which depicts women attempting to eat ice cream cones through their veils (fig. 29). Shawa describes the creation of this painting as being inspired by the resurgence of the veil in Gaza, after women took on a more prominent role in the public sphere after the first Intifada, the Palestinian uprising against Israeli occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip, beginning in 1987.100 Shawa said “(Women) stood up to Israeli soldiers while their husbands were hiding in fear of losing their jobs, as many of them worked in Israel as daily cheap labor. Their children were throwing stones at the (Israel Defence Forces). The women defended their children and their husbands, which resulted in men losing their positions as heads of family. Women became too powerful and had to be put in their place. Hence the veiling of women.”101 Shawa saw the veiling of women as “a sociopolitical phenomenon designed to control and subdue women, the so-called weaker sex.”102 Shawa addresses this serious issue in a humorous way in her painting, as she uses eating ice cream to represent the roles women are barred from taking. This painting also has an orientalist facet to it, as eating ice cream stands in for oppression of women, but also represents an issue western people perceive for veiled women.

Shawa addresses similar themes of being constricted by culture in her 2011 mixed media piece *Stranglehold*, where a screaming woman is strangled by a calligraphic letter, caught in the snares of her own culture (fig. 30).103 This piece offers a more obvious approach to the way

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101 Ibid.
102 Ibid.
Shawa views culture as a source of oppression. Shawa’s use of neon colors and bold lettering is a visual reference to graffiti in Gaza, as Shawa describes graffiti on the Israel-Gaza wall “was the only method available to Palestinians to communicate with each other. The Israeli occupiers banned any form of media in Gaza, such as newspapers, radio, or television. The writing is cursive, spontaneous and hurried. It changed almost daily to update whatever was happening in Gaza.”

Another artist who addresses the role of calligraphy in her work is Lalla Essaydi who was born in Marrakech, Morocco and lives in New York. In photographs like her 2008 Les Femmes du Maroc: La Grande Odalisque, a reclining woman is covered in calligraphy, a practice traditionally only taught to men, and henna, a decorative practice available to women, Essaydi converges gender roles. Essaydi describes this, saying “the calligraphic writing, a sacred Islamic art form, inaccessible to women, constitutes an act of rebellion (fig. 31). Applying such writing in henna, a form of adornment considered ‘women’s work,’ further underscores the subversiveness of the act. In this way, the calligraphy in the images is one of a number of visual signs that carry a double meaning.” As part of her “Les Femmes du Maroc” series, she references nineteenth century orientalist paintings, deconstructing the male fantasy evident in them. This photograph is specifically a reference to Jean Auguste Dominique Ingres’ Grande Odalisque, in which orientalism and the male gaze are evident, as a reclining female concubine in a lush setting gazes back at the viewer (fig. 23). Essaydi describes such reclining nudes as “small paintings used like Playboy magazine,” contrasting her nearly lifesize photographs, which

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104 Ibid.
often include the human model staring directly at the viewer. 106 By putting an actual Arab woman in the space previously occupied by an imaginary construct of western male fantasy, Essaydi deconstructs these ideas.

Essaydi grew up in a technical harem, but describes the way harems are portrayed in western art as inaccurate, saying “For someone really born in a harem, how life is depicted in those paintings is ridiculous—all the naked women lying down all day long.” 107 She addresses this in her “Harem” series, shot in the Dar el Basha Palace in Marrakech. 108 Her 2009 photograph Harem #2 addresses the way she describes Arab women were “never seen as human beings on their own” in western paintings (fig. 32). 109 The woman in this photograph is clothed in the same pattern that covers her environment; she is in the reclining pose like the orientalist paintings of Harem women, but she is clothed and staring directly at the viewer. These photographs also address modern orientalist biases against Arab women, as Essaydi says “Instead of seeing the women as naked and walking in a harem, now we see women as being oppressed and covered, without any say, and she’s not doing anything about it.” 110 Essaydi addresses the idea that these women are oppressed by their culture and reassigns the power of the oppressing powers to the women in her photographs. Essaydi says, “These women have become literal odalisques —‘odalisque,’ from the Turkish, means ‘belonging to a place.’ One has only to

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107 Ibid.
108 Ibid.
109 Ibid.
look at the continuity between the henna on their bodies and the patterns of the surrounding tiles to see how they have become identified with their surroundings."\textsuperscript{111}

In Emily Jacir’s project \textit{Where We Come From}, Jacir asked Palestinians living under the travel restrictions of Israel from 2001 to 2003 if they could do something in Palestine for one day, what it would be.\textsuperscript{112} Jacir completed the tasks and documented them through letters both in Arabic and English from the Palestinians detailing their requests, and also included photographs and in some cases video of the tasks being completed (fig. 33. Fig. 34).\textsuperscript{113} Some tasks were mundane, such as playing soccer with a young boy or paying a phone bill, while others were more emotionally substantial, such as visiting a mother’s grave and praying.\textsuperscript{114} Jacir was born in Bethlehem but went to school in the United States, and due to her United States passport was not affected by the travel restrictions in Palestine.\textsuperscript{115}

Jacir’s depiction of tasks represents the activities that people want to complete when visiting their place of origin. Additionally, Jacir highlights the advantage that she has as a United States passport holder; even though both she and the people her art highlights are Palestinian, due to bureaucratic paradoxes she is able to move freely throughout countries while they are not.\textsuperscript{116} Jacir’s art addresses dislocation through the red tape of bureaucracy. She addresses specific laws in different projects, and satirizes the ways that she can get around them or how they can be surpassed in another way.

Jacir’s art highlights the universality of human experiences. Although not every viewer cannot identify with deprivations of freedom demonstrated by travel limitations, the vantage
point given by Jacir’s art allow solidarity and respect to be shared between the viewer and the subject. Jacir’s uses her art as activism; she creates visual representations of laws and social mores while attempting to defy them in a roundabout, legal way, or display why the laws are unfair. In doing this, Jacir highlights the injustices of the laws, and makes the viewers aware of their real effects.

Conclusion

The way women artists have been remembered, discussed, and criticized over the last century reflects the way the role of women has changed. Although women have made strides in achieving equality, the intersections of identity and the changing world reflect that contemporary women artists still face discrimination in the recording, remembrance, and exhibiting of their work. Additionally, the canon of art history, as Linda Nochlin noted, is based upon hundreds of years of women being unable, due to the binds of society, to pursue art and become great artists. This could account for the number of women photographers who used their art in a political way; the accessibility of photography as an art medium increased over the 20th century, and thus allowed more women to become more active in the art sphere. Although, over the course of the last hundred years, strides have been in questioning the way art history has omitted women artists and art has been created that represents the role of women, the way history was written for several hundred years before that proves that achieving total equality is not yet a tangible goal, if it will ever be achieved. Because so much of art history has been recorded in ways that systematically exclude the experiences of any artists who are not white men, this research poses a question: What would art history look like if it were written through the eyes of a woman?
Figure 1.
Diane Arbus, Child with a toy hand grenade in Central Park, N.Y.C., 1962, Gelatin silver print photograph, Dimensions: 39.5 x 38.3 cm (15 9/16 x 15 1/16 in.)
Metropolitan Museum of Art
Figure 2.
Frances Benjamin Johnston, Class in American History, 1899-1900, Platinum print photograph, 7 1/2 x 9 1/2" (19.1 x 24.2 cm)
Museum of Modern Art
https://www.moma.org/collection/works/57091
Figure 3.
*What a Woman may be, and yet not have the Vote*, Poster, published 1913, designed by Suffrage Atelier, Woodcut print
Victoria and Albert Museum
[http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O75893/what-a-woman-may-be-poster-suffrage-atelier/](http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O75893/what-a-woman-may-be-poster-suffrage-atelier/)
Figure 4.
Hannah Hoch, *Das Schone Madchen (The Beautiful Girl)*, 1919-1920, photomontage, 35 x 29 cm
Museum of Modern Art
Figure 5.
Georgia O’Keeffe, *Ram's Head, White Hollyhock-Hills (Ram's Head and White Hollyhock, New Mexico)*, 1935, Oil on canvas, 30 x 36in. (76.2 x 91.4cm).
Brooklyn Museum

https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/opencollection/objects/2096
Figure 6.
Arthur Rothstein, *Skull, Badlands, South Dakota*, May 1936, Gelatin silver print photograph, 7 3/8 x 7 1/2" (18.7 x 19 cm)
Museum of Modern Art
[https://www.moma.org/collection/works/45296](https://www.moma.org/collection/works/45296)
Figure 7.
Dorothea Lange, *Migrant Mother, Nipomo, California*, 1936. Gelatin silver print, 11 1/8 x 8 9/16" (28.3 x 21.8 cm)
Museum of Modern Art
Figure 8.
Tina Modotti, *Mother and Child, Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, Mexico*, 1929, Gelatin silver print photograph, 8 7/8 x 6" (22.6 x 15.3 cm)
Museum of Modern Art
[https://www.moma.org/collection/works/46243](https://www.moma.org/collection/works/46243)
Figure 9.
Frida Kahlo, Henry Ford Hospital, 1932, oil on metal, 38.5x31cm
Museo Dolores Almedo
https://artsandculture.google.com/asset/henry-ford-hospital/kgHTa-02kVhHJA
Figure 10.
Lee Krasner, *White Squares*, 1948, Enamel and oil on canvas, 24 1/16 × 30 1/8 in. (61.1 × 76.5 cm)
Whitney Museum of American Art
[http://collection.whitney.org/object/504](http://collection.whitney.org/object/504)
Figure 11.
Brooklyn Museum
https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/exhibitions/dinner_party
Figure 12.
Leonardo da Vinci, *The Last Supper*, 1490s, fresco-secco, 460 cm x 880 cm (180 in x 350 in)
Figure 13.
https://www.brooklynmuseum.org/eascfa/dinner_party/place_settings/georgia_o_keeffe
Figure 14.
Georgia O’Keeffe, *Black Iris*, 1926, Oil on canvas, 36 x 29 7/8 in. (91.4 x 75.9 cm).
Metropolitan Museum of Art
https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/69.278.1/
Figure 15.

Figure 16.
Laurie Simmons, *Blonde/Red Dress/Kitchen*, from the series *Interiors*, 1978. Silver dye bleach print photograph, 3 1/4 x 5" (8.3 x 12.7 cm)
Museum of Modern Art
Figure 17.
Laurie Simmons, *Walking House*, 1989, Gelatin silver print photograph, 6' 11 1/4" x 47 3/8" (211.4 x 120.4 cm)
Museum of Modern Art
https://www.moma.org/collection/works/48215
Figure 18.
Cindy Sherman, *Untitled Film Still #21*, 1978 Gelatin silver print, 7 1/2 x 9 1/2" (19.1 x 24.1 cm)
Museum of Modern Art
https://www.moma.org/collection/works/56618
Figure 19.
Barbara Kruger, *Untitled (Your body is a battleground)*, 1989, photographic silkscreen on vinyl, 112 x 112 in. (284.48 x 284.48 cm)
The Broad
[https://www.thebroad.org/art/barbara-kruger/untitled-your-body-battleground](https://www.thebroad.org/art/barbara-kruger/untitled-your-body-battleground)
Figure 20.
Guerilla Girls, *Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?* 1989.

Figure 21.
Guerilla Girls, *Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?* 2005.
Figure 22.
Guerilla Girls, *Do women have to be naked to get into the Met. Museum?* 2012.

Figure 23.
Jean-Auguste-Dominique Ingres, *La Grande Odalisque*, 1814, 91cm x 162cm.
The Louvre
Figure 24.
Ana Mendieta, *Untitled (Rape Scene)*, 1973, Photograph, color on paper, 254 x 203 mm
Tate
http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/mendieta-untitled-rape-scene-t13355
Figure 25.
Figure 26.
Photo by Adam Sherman
Figure 27.
Mona Hatoum, *Keffieh*, 1993–99, hair on cotton fabric, 45 1/4 x 45 1/4” (114.9 x 114.9 cm)
Museum of Modern Art
https://www.moma.org/collection/works/153219
Figure 28.
Mona Hatoum, *Home*, 1999, Wooden table, 15 steel kitchen utensils, electric wire, 3 light bulbs, software and audio
Figure 29.
Laila Shawa, The Impossible Dream, Acrylic on Canvas 1988, 76 x 102 cm
Suna and Inan Kirac Foundation, Pera Museum
https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/07/arts/07iht-m07-jordan-art.html
Figure 30.
Laila Shawa, Stranglehold, 2011. Photography and mixed media on canvas, 100 x 100cm
October Gallery
http://www.octobergallery.co.uk/artists/shawa/
Figure 31.
Lalla Essaydi, *Les Femmes du Maroc: La Grande Odalisque*, 2008, Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum with a UV protective laminate, 76.2 × 101.6 cm
The Cleveland Museum of Art
http://www.clevelandart.org/art/2012.13
Figure 32.
Lalla Essaydi, *Harem #2*, 2009 Chromogenic print mounted to aluminum with a UV protective laminate, 180.4 × 223.5 cm (71 × 88 in)
https://www.artsy.net/artwork/lalla-essaydi-harem-number-2-1
Figure 33.
Emily Jacir, *Where We Come From*, 2001-2003
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

Figure 34.
Emily Jacir, *Where We Come From*, 2001-2003
San Francisco Museum of Modern Art

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