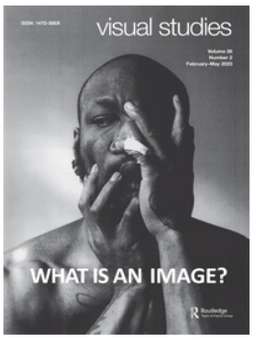


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# In light of #MeToo: reconsidering the art/artist relationship for better futures

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# In light of #MeToo: reconsidering the art/artist relationship for better futures

NICOLA MCCARTNEY

*This article reflects on the impact of #MeToo on the artworld. It examines some of the debates the movement spurred, such as censorship and whether or not we can separate the 'man' from 'his' work, with examples from recent curating around the world. The article uses feminist art history and theories of authorship to show that narratives of artistic temperament and genius are outdated but contribute to a society that indulges the perpetrators of #MeToo. It is demonstrated that the market's investment in this art/artist relationship propagates a system of abuse.*

*Alternative models of authorship are analysed to demonstrate that there are other ways of authoring and understanding art, which could radically shift current asymmetries and abuses of power. These include the anonymous Guerrilla Girls and the pseudonymous duo Bob and Roberta Smith. These artists toy with narratives of artistic genius and actively work against sexism in the artworld.*

*The article concludes that we must still consider the biography when interpreting works – for the personal is part of #MeToo – but calls for a more holistic understanding of the artworld and its financial infrastructures in order to challenge its own apparatus.*

## INTRODUCTION

We are in the wake of an important time, perhaps the aftermath of #MeToo, a time of burgeoning questions and accountability provoked by the movement. #MeToo precipitated a cultural shift in how we perceive art and its makers and what we expect of them. Amid an increasingly online 'call out' or 'cancel' culture, questions include 'can we separate the art from the artist?' The movement sparked new reflections and criticisms within feminist discourse. In principle, #MeToo was open to anyone with Internet access, but academics have argued that it remained a privileged form of feminism and hasn't done enough to make structural change (Bonner 2019; Phipps 2021). This article argues that the financial value assigned to artwork is a key reason that paradigm shifts raised by generations of feminist activism and scholarship have not been fully reified and goes some way to explain the socio-cultural environments that propagate perpetrators of #MeToo. Conversely, we are also reminded that because artists function in an economic system and not as isolated geniuses, they ought not to be given special treatment. The article examines the role of the artist's biography in the artworld, and the ways in which artists known to be abusive continue to have those aspects of their lives and careers ignored or even romanticised. The historically privileged position of the 'author' is destabilised, but it is also made clear that one cannot separate or excuse them from their work. The debate raised by #MeToo over separating art and artist is re-evaluated with the potentially transformative shift in focus from the artist to the viewer with examples of alternative, activist modes of authoring work from the Guerrilla Girls and Bob and Roberta Smith. In doing so, the still privileged male gaze is called into focus and what constitutes difficult or problematic subject matter. The article thus asks how a different story of art and artists might be shared, reflected in galleries and museums, and at what or whose expense.

The #MeToo movement gave voice to those previously silenced by fear and shame, helping them speak against sexual assault, harassment and rape, though predominantly in the English-speaking world. The term was popularised with a hash tag in social media as a means of empathy and solidarity with the women who came forward as victims of sexual assault by the Hollywood mogul Harvey Weinstein at the end of 2017. #MeToo highlighted the abuse of privilege by men with power, it foregrounded

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women's stories and created some unity for those whose lives and careers had been impacted and destroyed as a result. It snowballed, street protests were organised under the term, and it has been used beyond the entertainment industry. For example, in fashion, #MeToo foregrounded the allegations of sexual exploitation of male models by photographers Bruce Weber and Mario Testino; in China in 2017, sexual misconduct accusations led to the firing of a professor at Beihang University; and in Argentina, street protests continue to take place against disregarded femicides.[1]

Some abusers are now being held accountable while others (discussed below) raise concerns whether the movement has gone too far, though the founder of the term (2006), Tarana Burke, has stated it's not a 'witch hunt' (in Jefferies, 2018). While some communities of power may rightly feel more monitored and scrutinised, #MeToo has undoubtedly sparked important debates among many sectors, including the artworld.[2] While one wishes women were not still exploited, abused and patronised, their #MeToo stories of past and present have become powerful tools for reinvigorating a wider cultural critique on the patriarchies of art.[3] Curators are being forced to reconsider their collections, reframe them with more biographical honesty, and maybe even dig around the archives to hang works by Other artists.

This article argues that we must continue to critique the artworld's role in supporting those hegemonies through the canon; its pedagogies, philanthropy and market, but also its responsibility as a 'liberal art' to support and represent Others, not by fetishisation, speaking on its behalf or exploitation (Spivak [1983] 1988, 183). Feminists have made this argument, Queer Theorists and non-white artists too. In 1971 Linda Nochlin wrote 'Why Have there Been No Great Women Artists', comparing the gender gap in 'great' art to the lack of great 'Eskimo' tennis players; women simply were not granted access to the resources that would allow them to be considered 'great', such as the life room. In 1972 John Berger published *Ways of Seeing*, highlighting the construction of the female image as passive and perpetuated by art. Laura Mulvey takes this further in her essay 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema' (1975), demonstrating that the male gaze is a social construct derived from the ideologies and discourses of patriarchy that attempt to justify the 'natural' dominance of men. Griselda Pollock highlighted in *Vision and Difference* (1988) that women were excluded from the public spaces that would govern them the perspective of a 'modern' artist. These ideas have been revisited and updated over the years – regarding sexuality (Evans and Gamman 1995) and race (Hooks 1992) – but remain largely and alarmingly true. As a result, there is still a gender gap in the artworld.[4]

A call for the artworld to be more inclusive and less sexist is not original but #MeToo highlights the depressing necessity to continue this critique; victims of sexual abuse are seeking vindication while we still celebrate art by men not too dissimilar to Weinstein. At the risk of sounding romantic, art is a means by which children express themselves, by which they and the public visualise and learn about histories and culture. Thus, if we do not offer another picture; if we continue to celebrate artists that objectify and abuse Others for their own gain and support the cultural infrastructures that exploit this, how will young non-white, non-cis-gendered men, the dis-abled bodied and those not heteronormative be able to view themselves without self-loathing, and not through the male gaze? How do the dead who were oppressed say '#MeToo' or do we simply say, 'that's in the past'? If we censor works by 'great' artists such as Egon Schiele, Pablo Picasso or Eric Gill, and others, we change history retrospectively and potentially silence a dark past that needs to be recognised in order to learn from it for a better future. Or do we risk repeating past acts of dogmatic censorship or iconoclasm as the kind of protest needed to make change? We might impart that one must not read works biographically, that 'the birth of the reader is the cost of the death of the author' (Barthes [1967] 1977, 128), but if we separate the man from the work then we are excusing their abusive behaviours and a lifestyle that arguably influenced or contributed to their particular creativity and the un-recognition of Others. We need another *hir*story that accounts for previous editing and bias, otherwise we are tasked with the impossibility of providing the whole art story.

As such, especially in the wake of #MeToo, it is time to reinterrogate models of authorship that the artworld still indulges, that of the 'laddish', 'eccentric', 'genius', those that are celebrated and invested in – morally, emotionally and financially; the stories which propel Weinstein, that excuse misogyny. If the biographical model cannot be dispensed with then we should at least reflect on our unhealthy co-dependent relationship with it and try to offer alternative ways of reading art.

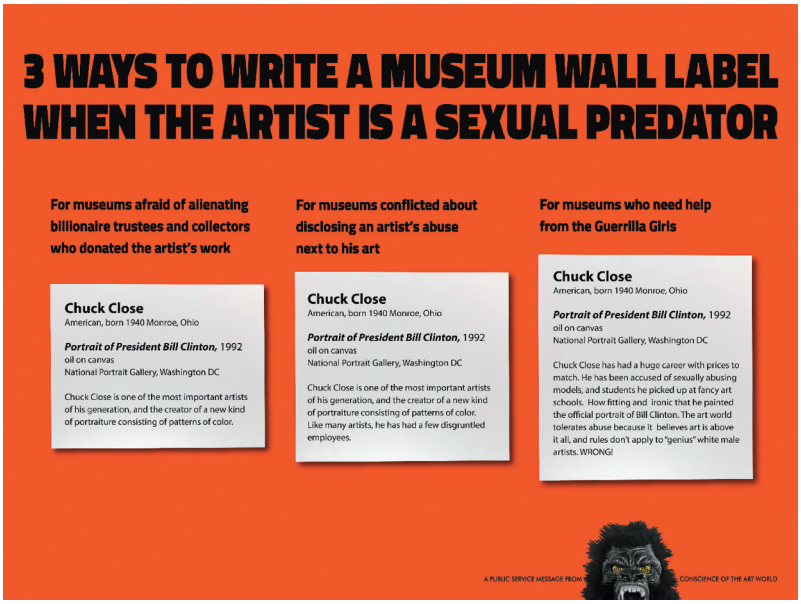


FIGURE 1. 3 ways to write a museum wall label when the artist is a sexual predator, Guerrilla Girls, 2018. © and courtesy of Guerrilla Girls.

## #METOO IN THE ARTWORLD: CENSORSHIP AND SUBJECT MATTER

One need not look very far in the artworld for examples of abuses of power. Caravaggio was accused of murder; Egon Schiele was accused of underage sex; Picasso was an outspoken misogynist; Carl Andre was acquitted of murdering his wife, artist Ana Mendieta, and his exhibitions remain protested by those who believe he was guilty. This case is particularly disturbing given 'the cruel irony for a woman whose work … ruthlessly confronted audiences with physical, performative depictions of rape and murder.' (Bonner 2019, 36). In 2013 Charles Saatchi, the art collector, was photographed throttling his TV chef wife, Nigella Lawson, under still-ambiguous circumstances, and in 2018 more women came forward to accuse Chuck Close of sexual harassment.[5] These are just a few well-documented examples in the public domain and do not consider all the 'fine art' portraits of scantily clad muses and children hanging in notable art museums. Yet these works of art, their collectors and makers, remain largely of value to the market, and as part of the accepted canon and infrastructures of the artworld. Why is this? Violence and the objectification of Others proliferate many cultural industries but some artists have been 'cancelled'. For example, we no longer listen to music by Gary Glitter, and Jimmy Savile is almost invisible in TV re-runs. Dan Reed's 2019 documentary *Leaving Neverland* has cast a shadow over Michael Jackson and only time will tell if his music remains popular. The reason that sexist or morally questionable 'fine art' continues to be heralded is because those that dictate the canon – curators, historians, trustees, collectors and auction houses – are financially invested in the artists and their work. Unlike music, in which it could be argued that, 'if you find the lyrics offensive, change the channel', the dominant Western artworld does not yet have another channel. There are dedicated museums to non-white artists, women-only exhibitions and recently in the UK there have been major shows dedicated to 'Queer British Art 1861–1967′ (Tate Britain, 2017) and 'Soul of a Nation: Art in the Age of Black Power' (2017). However, whilst not wishing to discourage the exposure and visuality of non-white-male art, it also needs to be acknowledged that the danger with such categorisation is that it simultaneously normalises the non-categorised, white-man shows, and forces a story upon those included in such minority spaces. Feminist writer Peggy Kamuf argued that to preface a work with the gender of its maker was to reinstate a concept of a woman's voice and to 'reinvent the institutional structures that it set out to dismantle' (1982, 46). Similarly, curator Helena Reckitt has warned that a parallel, female version of the 'star system so beloved by the art market, which prizes individual genius' fails to critique a biographical reading of artwork (2012, 12), and that it would be counterproductive to celebrate women for the sake of it. Rozsika Parker and Griselda Pollock previously described this as

a recurring problem: 'In the attempt to make art history take notice of women artists, we have submerged them once again in a slightly reformed but still traditional notion of history' (1981, 45). So, if there is a danger in creating a categorised Other, and of fetishising and further marginalising that Other, we need to reinvent the norm and reflect on how art history has been constructed.

In 2018, comedian Hannah Gadsby's Netflix special, *Nanette*, critiqued 'Picassole'. Gadsby used the show to tell her own story of abuse as a queer woman and relates this to the misogynist, heteronormative artworld she encountered as an undergraduate of art history. Gadsby understands that Picasso's multiple perspectives contributed to cubism and Modern art, but if none of those perspectives are a woman's, 'then Fuck Picasso' (Nanette 2018). But is the artworld or its pedagogy ready for this? If I were to teach on Picasso and his works again, I might include some other information such as his treatment of Dora Maar and Maria Thérése. This does not detract from the political contributions of his *Guernica* (1937), for example, but would put his work into the context of Nazism, the Spanish Civil War and an era when sexism was commonplace. Art history is a discipline that uses visual indexes to learn about contextualising cultures, yet critics have reacted to the artworld's #MeToo campaign by comparing it to Nazism and right-wing religious ideology (see Kohl 2018). One must ask, why is censorship considered so threatening?

Earlier in 2018, #MeToo influenced a debate at the San Francisco Legion of Honour Museum during the time it was hosting an exhibition entitled 'Casanova: The Seduction of Europe' (10 February – 28 May 2018). The exhibition used the perspective of Casanova to explore works of art throughout his time across the continent. The problem was that it '[was] framing his rapes as seductions and Casanova as a kind of sexy scoundrel' (Wilson 2018). Indeed, in jest we might use his name to describe a charming man; such is history's power to rewrite, normalise and censor rape. On 12 May 2018, Monica Westin and Julia Bryan-Wilson organised 'Reckoning with the Past', inviting scholars to discuss ways around such framing of art and its histories. Again, a recurring question included whether or not to censor art in the wake of #MeToo. This reflects recent curatorial predicaments: The Met declined to remove its provocative painting by Balthus of a pubescent girl, *Thérèse Dreaming* (1938), despite 11,000+ protesters. Similarly, there was public and online outrage when the artist Sonia Boyce staged an intervention at Manchester Art Gallery (UK) by temporarily removing *Hylas and the Nymphs* (1896) by John William Waterhouse. It is understood that censorship's bedfellows have included iconoclasts and so perhaps it reminds the 'liberal' arts of bygone times – dictatorships and the late 20$^{th}$-century U.S Cultural Wars. Censorship can be dangerous but so too is a failure to critique collections and their contexts. The art critic Jerry Saltz posted on his Instagram account that 'if you take this [*Thérèse Dreaming*] out you pretty much have to remove ALL art from wings of India, Africa, Asia, Oceania, Greece, Rome, Renaissance, Rococo, and Impressionism, German Expressionism, Klimt, Munch, and all Picasso & Matisse' (Saltz 2017), concluding with the hash tag #ArtWorldTaliban. However, the Western world's Eurocentric depiction and framing of India, Africa and Asia, for example, does need to be reconsidered. We cannot keep a canon of 'great' art and artists just because a critic says so.

Sheena Wagstaff, the Met's chairman for Modern and Contemporary Art posed that 'If we only see abuse when looking at a work of art, then we have created a reductive situation in which art is stripped of its intrinsic worth – and which in turn provokes the fundamental question of what the museum's role in the world should be' (Pogrebin and Schuessler 2018). But the artworld's gatekeepers need interrogating as much as the collections and the next generation should be asking, 'what is this intrinsic worth' worth to us?

As David Freedberg argues, attempts to censor works tell us a lot about social history (2016). There is a danger that such attempts give these works more 'power' and attention (Freedberg 2016, 69), but the above cases demonstrate that art's asymmetric portraits of power, while far from resolved, are at least being socially questioned and critiqued in light of #MeToo.

The case of *Thérèse Dreaming* demonstrates the pervasive power of the artworld's patriarchal, male gaze. In some cases, however, this might even be in contrast to how the law considers subject matter. In 2015, the London-based Judge Elizabeth Roscoe ruled that works by and belonging to the artist Graham Ovenden, a convicted paedophile, were indecent and to be destroyed. In so doing, Roscoe acknowledged that she was 'inviting the wrath of the artworld'

(Saner 2015). The Tate and Victoria & Albert Museum subsequently removed some of Ovendon's work, but only following his conviction, which demonstrates that the artworld had not previously considered such 'fine art' subject matter problematic. Gaut has argued that 'art has no special grounds for claiming immunity from censorship as compared to other kinds of valuable expression such as scientific and political speech' (2007, 12). However, from the ever-popular work of Egon Schiele to today, there is a proliferation of problematic pubescent imagery in art.[6]

The July 2000 cover of *Art Monthly Australasia* that featured pre-pubescent Olympia Nelson, daughter of the art critic Richard Nelson and photographer Polyxeni Papatetrou, was deemed controversial. Perhaps this was because it was a photograph and seemingly the model or vulnerable subject more 'real'. The piece is titled *Olympia as Lewis Carroll's Beatrice Hatch before White Cliffs*, after the namesake photograph by the author of *Alice in Wonderland* of his favourite child-muse, whom he started photographing naked at the age of five. The cover sparked debate over consent, sensualised and sexualised images of children. The image remains controversial and debate is what is needed. The #MeToo call for censorship of works of art depicting vulnerable subjects is thus difficult but very different to the iconoclasm of the Taliban, despite Saltz' claim (2017). I do not claim to resolve or judge what art remains on show or is challenged, but to demonstrate the inconsistency and unreliability of the artworld's decision making when it comes to abuse and sexism. Furthermore, because it operates on its own shifting laws, the system is harder to challenge.

Professor Sugata Ray (in Wilson 2018) has compared the removal of artworks to controversies like Robert Mapplethorpe's censored exhibition before his death in 1989, but this comparison too is unfair and out of context. His photographs were of consensual adults, were representative of a self and a culture the Western world was not yet ready for; a conservative, homophobic US government removed Mapplethorpe's works. What if a liberal, feminist public decided they wanted to remove the work of a self-admitted sexist, or explicitly sexist work? One need only to look back at the success of artist Alan Jones to know how difficult this is to achieve. In 1970, his work *Chair* was exhibited for the first time, depicting a woman as an S&M piece of furniture. It was protested and defaced but remained on view. Yet nearly 20 years later Mapplethorpe's exhibition at the Corcoran (1989), which, among other things, represented the gay S&M community, was cancelled just three weeks before its opening. While it could be argued that both controversies influenced popular culture and both works transgressive, it is impossible to deny that Jones' work was made with hegemonic privilege and remained on show (see Mulvey 1973).

Censorship is also different to rearranging a collection. Ironically, in 1989 the Guerrilla Girls original poster mimicking Ingres's *Odalisque* (1814), which calls attention to sexism in the artworld, was refused support from the National Endowment of the Arts, a type of censorship, because it appeared too phallic where the model holds the fan, yet images of naked women fill museums (see Figure 2). As the Guerrilla Girls' poster implies, it's time to exhibit more works of art by women and non-white artists. Removing or rearranging one means there might be more space for an Other.

If museums and galleries are not yet ready to consider taking down contested works then perhaps the alternative might be to imagine the stories of those depicted; what would they say, what did they see, what was their #MeToo experience? The problem is that we

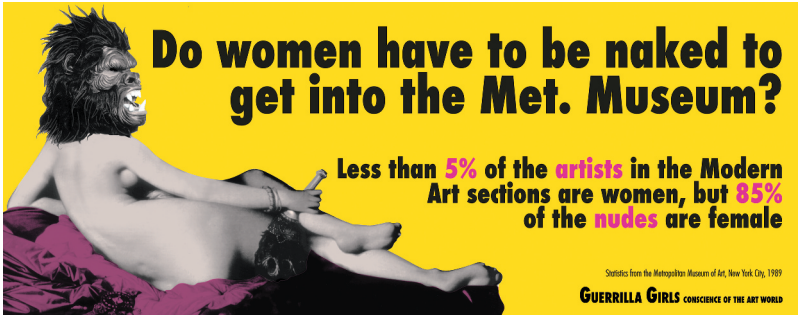


FIGURE 2. Do women have to be naked to get into the Met Museum, Guerrilla Girls, 1989. © and courtesy of Guerrilla Girls.

do not know because their voices have been removed or silenced throughout history. So how can we now give a voice to the pubescent girl in Balthus' painting, to Egon Schiele's young models, to Picasso's Maria Therese, or even offer Olympia Henson her own perspective, when their view is still largely shaped by the male gaze? Conversely, how can we expect more of white-cis-gendered, heterosexual men if they continue to grow up in a world that reflects their desires?

Jock Reynolds, the director of the Yale University Art Gallery, has asked,

> How much are we going to do a litmus test on every artist in terms of how they behave? … Pablo Picasso was one of the worst offenders of the 20th century in terms of his history with women. Are we going to take his work out of the galleries? At some point you have to ask yourself, is the art going to stand alone as something that needs to be seen? (Pogrebin and Schuessler 2018).

Or, as Gaut also argues, ethical decisions should have nothing to do with the 'correct' appreciation of art (2007). But art is not independent of its maker. The art market relies on attribution and monographs to celebrate and historicise these makers.

## #METOO IN THE ARTWORLD: IMPACT AND LIMITATIONS

How much impact, then, have #MeToo's debates had on the artworld? In 2017 an activist collective called 'We are Not Surprised' formed in response to the sexual abuse allegations against *Artforum's* Knight Landesman. As Gwen Allen puts it in her piece responding to #MeToo and arts publishing, the lack of surprise against ongoing sexism is itself distressing but also the fact that spaces in which one might 'make public' and critique sexism are themselves unjust and prejudiced (2018, 6). In 2018, the entire #MeToo movement was ironically listed as third in the *Art Review's* power 100 list, topped by two men (Art Review 2018). Outside of the Anglo-American sphere, the co-founder of the Kochi Muzuris Biennale in India was forced to step down due to allegations of sexual misconduct and the Japanese photographer Nobuyoshi Araki's latest exhibition was subject to various #MeToo protests on the basis he exploited his muses. Stetz (2020) has researched artistic responses to gender-based violence on a transnational level. She curated a digital mapping of creative activities linked to #MeToo illustrating 'the plethora of acts of sexual aggression that women suffer within various cultural geographies.' (Stetz 2020, 15). Her case studies demonstrate that #MeToo was able to disrupt borders but, significantly, that there are global, different, 'scattered hegemonies' to be considered (Grewal 1992, in Stetz 2020, 35). Stetz points out that many countries have attempted to suppress #MeToo, either by censorship or as validation that Western feminism has been unsuccessful (2020, 24). It has nonetheless been pervasive: In China the hashtag was blocked, so activists created a 'rice bunny' that, when pronounced, sounds like '#MeToo'; in Russia they call it #YaNeBoyusSkazat or 'I'm not afraid to say'; in Pakistan it's called #MeinBhi or 'I also stand by you' (Stetz 2020).

On the other hand, Bonner (2019) postulates the hashtag as a form of performance but calls for the corporeal body or its imprint – as used by the works of Mendieta, for example – for any drastic change to take place. Twitter, she points out, like Hollywood, is a corporation and thus the hashtag might be a form of privatised feminism (Bonner 2019, 45). This also calls to mind Allen's concern with 'making public' critique in privatised, prejudiced spaces (like art magazines) but also those who have the privilege to do so (2018, 10). This reminds us that the artworld is not only sexist but 'shot through with class and race privilege, and geopolitical inequity.' (Allen 2018, 6). Allen exemplifies that despite a history of women artists using magazine advertising to claim control of 'space', this does not necessarily, to quote Walter Benjamin, 'transform its own apparatus.' (Benjamin , 228 in Allen 2018, 12). The wider artworld is also a corporatized, patriarchal and largely white, supremacist space. Rose McGowan, one of the first women to accuse Harvey Weinstein of sexual assault, consistently likens Hollywood to a corporate 'cult' (2019); the idea is worth comparing with the cultural gatekeeping of the artworld discussed here. That she is traditionally attractive, and white, like many of the celebrities that came forward, propelling the 'image' and 'voice' of #MeToo, has also be critiqued. For example, Alison Phipps goes as far as arguing that 'white tears' underpinned #MeToo (2021, 10), and that particular narratives of victimhood perpetuate male rage at the expense of marginalised peoples. The movement has indeed 'diverged from Burke's focus on more marginalised survivors' (Phipps 2021, 2). What these scholars have in common is a concern with the limitations of a reaction. The impact of #MeToo in privatised spaces – like the artworld – means that careers might be lost, and contracts cancelled. However, tied in with the media obsession over perpetrators (Bonner 2019), the reactionary 'cancel' culture is actually insufficient to make structural change. This is

further complicated when we acknowledge feminism's intersections and that there are multiple hegemonies to dismantle.

One way to tackle these infrastructures that can nurture abuse is to challenge concepts of artistic greatness, genius and temperament. The artworld has an unhealthy co-dependent relationship with the biography that has led to #MeToo. Let's remember, for example, the original Van Gogh biopic (1956) in which he and Gauguin brawl in a bar and talk of sexual conquests; then think of the various remakes invested in 'Van Gogh' (*Vincent*, 1987; *Vincent & Theo*, 1990; *Van Gogh*, 1991; *Van Gogh Painted with Words*, 2010; *Loving Vincent*, 2017). This is not to take away from the conversation around mental health that society also needs to have, but it is dangerous to confound the two so much. If the artworld cannot censor some of its 'great' artists, perhaps we ought to make sure their biography is all-inclusive rather than a series of stories that merely 'assert the artiness' of the subject, which ignores and perpetuates abuse. Indeed, the artist's monograph, as Griselda Pollock argued, might not even be considered a proper biography and the discipline of art history not a history at all, but an isolated genre of writing, tracing the artist's life 'within the narrow limits of only that which serves to render all that is narrated as signifiers of artiness' (1980, 63).

## AUTHORSHIP AND THE ART/ARTIST RELATIONSHIP[7]

The Western 'myth' of the artist has its origins in classical Greece; artist's biographies became an established literary genre during the Hellenistic period but it was Vasari who took this further with a series of narratives about the personalities of those artists he considered the best. In his *The Lives of the Artists* (1550), a homage to which the Western world terms the 'Old Masters', he arguably set a precedent for an art history that trains and conditions us to examine the artist's life to better understand their work. Vasari actually describes the work of several artists in an attempt to promote a new generation of 'higher' art and artists, regularly appending the works of one to another in order to identify new 'schools' and styles. Cosimo I's regime, under which Vasari was commissioned, encouraged art as production; a set of skills that could be taught so that culture might be standardised or controlled, the antithesis of individual genius. Vasari's *Lives* also uses *ingegno* or *ingenium*, meaning ingenuity; cleverness or originality. The concept of genius – defined as male, unique, original and almost divine – may not, then, have originated in *Lives* (see Battersby 1994/1989). This is not to say that there were not other notions of authorship, but it's this lasting concept of the solitary, mythical artist, whose personality we ought to invest in, that indulges a 'genius' and consequently some powerful culprits of #MeToo.

The belief in a single author and reliance on their intentionality or biography for meaning also denies the viewer agency when it comes to making a judgment of taste. Even graver, it leads to the neglect of other artworks and artists who do not fit so nicely into the canon because of their authorship. In her seminal essay 'Why Have There Been No Great Women Artists?', Linda Nochlin (1971) highlighted the gap in art history where female artists have been obscured and disadvantaged by the patriarchal system.[8] Amanda Hess of the *New York Times* writes of the parallel film industry, where Weinstein, Kevin Spacey, and an on-going list of men have used their powers to quash others: 'their offenses have affected the paths of other artists, determining which rise to prominence and which are harassed or shamed out of work. In turn, the critical acclaim and economic clout afforded their projects have worked to insulate them from the consequences of their behaviour' (Hess 2017).

There are also artworld examples of 'insider trading' that go on, securing the careers of men and marginalising that of women. For example, in 1993 the Guerrilla Girls issue of *Hot Flashes* exposed art collector Alfred Taubman for his conflict of interest in serving both the Whitney Museum and Sotheby's; should an exhibition be staged in a major museum, artworks by that same artist significantly increase in value due to the provenance and exposure of the artist and their work.

> In June 1992, The Art Market column reported that Sotheby's went public. It did not mention the $275 million wind-fall profit that Alfred Taubman, Sotheby's CEO and Whitney Museum Trustee, earned in the deal (Guerrilla Girls 1993, 1:1).

Social historians argue that no one single person is responsible for a work of art; there are many contributing factors such as the materials used, education, patronage, the market and the fact that the work of art only exists as such when it has an audience. In addition, many artists, from Michelangelo to Damien Hirst, make work in collaboration with peers, students or even have employees do it for them. For this school of thought, the notion of a stable or singular authorship is also problematic. Moreover, if we consider the peers and education that influence a picture's composition and style, and the critics that deem the artwork of value

or not then, as the social historian Janet Wolff says, 'the individual act of creation is manifestly a social act' (Wolff 1993, 118). Ultimately, the ideas and attitudes believed to be expressed in that particular work can only be reflective of that artist's social and cultural position, and of those who look at it at that given time.

There are several reasons why the West continues to glorify the artist and dismisses the role of his or her assistants, partners or patrons in the making of their work: the art market relies on a hierarchy of attribution; it is easier to research and insert a singular author into our linear and supposedly progressive history; and, finally, the singular, 'inspired' or 'tortured' artist is easier to identify or empathise with. From Frida Kahlo to Gwen John to Jackson Pollock, the wronged or tragic martyr forms the most popular subject. A psychological study (Van Tilburg and Igou 2014) examined the impact of perceived eccentricity of an artist on the evaluation of their skills and quality of their artworks. It found that, from Van Gogh to Lady Gaga, eccentricity increased perceptions of artistic quality and appreciation to the extent that even a fictitious artist's work was valued higher based on their eccentric appearance. The common narrative of the tortured, solitary genus prevails and, for the record, the position taken here is that artists' biographies have been exaggerated and that artists with mental health issues should be celebrated because they made art despite their disabilities, not because of them.

Most artists' names conjure particular narratives. These are like prisms through which we see the rest of their work. The name of an author, when attributed to more than one work, becomes descriptive and can come to represent (or misrepresent) all his or her works and signify a type of genre. When the author's name becomes an adjective, the product becomes inextricably linked to its author, his or her previous works and a forced *milieu*, upon which the audience relies for a sense of context. The man, therefore, cannot be separated from his art. The name of the author, now synonymous with the work of art, is far more than a means of identification but paradoxically limiting in its ability to convey multiple interpretations. Indeed, art historian Rosalind Krauss famously argued that such referential readings, which she refers to as 'an aesthetics of the proper name' (Krauss 1981, 10), limits meaning and the interpretive act of viewing artworks. This is a circuitous problem perpetuated by the art market's investment in attribution; as soon as we become dependent upon the author we become dependent upon the authenticity of the attribution of that author's name to the work of art. However, market definitions of artworks authored by an artist or that of his or her assistant are also inconsistent. A 'spot painting' by artist Damien Hirst, for example, involves several other technicians yet, unlike Old Master paintings, Hirst, not his 'school', authors his work.

The same relationship exists in Hollywood: 'The entertainment industry seems quite interested in conflating the art and the artist as long as it helps sell movie tickets. If Hollywood weren't invested in selling the people behind the art, the Oscars wouldn't be televised' (Hess 2017). Thus, the artist and their work are inextricably linked. The idea that we ought to watch a Weinstein film and appreciate its greatness in the same way that we should be able to view a Picasso and think on its 'genius' alone is hypocritical.

Twentieth-century critical theorists, such as Barthes and Foucault, did challenge this notion of the author as a fixed, originator of meaning but with reference to literature. In Barthes' critical essay 'Death of the Author' (1967), he argues that the author's text is only ever a string of quotes with the author's role merely that of one who selects various possible permutations of a pre-existing cultural repertoire. Barthes therefore insists that in order to give the reader more credit in the activation of a work's function, he concludes, 'The birth of the reader must be at the cost of the death of the author' (Barthes [1967] 1977, 146). Foucault's essay 'What is an Author?' (Foucault [2003] 1969), instead argues that we ought to view the author as a discursive function whose role has changed throughout history but who, therefore, is as equally unreliable as a sole reference point for interpretation. These essays became canonical because they provided a timely counterpoint to the still-prevalent criteria of authenticity, sincerity, and personal expression by which literary works were understood and judged. The authorship of an artwork is similarly problematic. Critiques of the 'Author-God' have been taken up beyond literary criticism but authorship remains problematic, especially within art, where the 'product' and personal expression of gesture are still considered rare or unique.

There are also reasons that art historians, curators, critics, connoisseurs and other writers have turned to the biography. When constructing an artist's 'story', it's often those aspects of that artist's life, which are deemed

to bear relation to their artistic *oeuvre*, which are included and discussed. In this sense, the biographical art historian secures their own trade because the monograph or *catalogue raisonné* can be re-written, again and again, with new research, revelations and documentation. So much so that gallery-goers become dependent on the 'historian' as a mediator of the artist in order to understand the art, which undeniably perpetuates their career.

It is tempting to take up Barthes' position, to rid us of the 'male genius'. However, while it is understood that the artist's biography or the name under which they practice is unstable, can we really dispense with it altogether? A biographical approach to reading works of art needs to be critically questioned as fraught with myth but it is nonetheless still a significant aspect of artistic interpretation. In attempting to define all works of art without recourse to their author, we are left with a strictly semiotic or formalist approach and, on top of this, if we don't acknowledge the impact of art's wider social production or indeed acknowledge the on-going significance of identity politics, we fail to recognise art not made by the default white male or those who make work *about* their Otherness. If one dismisses the significance of the author or artist altogether, how can one argue for more art by 'women' and Others to be displayed?

Even within the feminist discourse of authorship the question of whether we can 'separate the art form its artist' is fraught. In 1982 Nancy K. Miller and Peggy Kamuf staged a debate on the significance of the gendered 'signature' for an issue of *Diacritics*. For example, is it productive or not to introduce an author as a 'female writer'? Kamuf (1982) argued that to assign a gendered signature or attribution to a text was to limit its meaning and referentiality while Miller argued that the gender of the signature mattered historically and politically, that '"we women" must continue to work for the woman who has been writing, because not to do so will reauthorize our oblivion' (Miller 1982, 48–53).

It is tempting to remove the author from 'his' pedestal, but we cannot dispense with the biography altogether because, most significantly, the #MeToo story is inherently personal and biographical. For example, in 2017, the artist Coco Fusco bravely came forward with an account of her own experiences of being abused and exploited as a younger artist and later as a witness to this culture in art schools as a teacher (see Fusco 2017).

> #MeToo is first and foremost a presentation of the self ('me' as the objective case of 'I'). The 'me', connected to the adverb 'too,' empowers the individual by suggesting me, myself, and my experience is singularly important; additionally, the syntactical configuration suggests my experience also matters in relation to others: the collective 'too.' (Bonner 2019, 35).

These voices and experiences – #MeToo biographies – need to be heard or else we overlook the narratives of hegemony and the potential to call it out and prevent further abuses of power.

## REIMAGINING THE ART/ARTIST RELATIONSHIP FOR BETTER FUTURES

There are artists who negotiate this narrative, who innately challenge the biographical model through their identity structures, names, politics and work. The Guerrilla Girls have expanded and contracted in number since they formed in 1985 but retain their anonymity. When appearing in public, the Guerrilla Girls wear gorilla masks so that only their eyes and voices are distinguishable. Aiding their anonymity is the use of pseudonyms, which are the names of deceased or overlooked female artists such as Frida Kahlo, Käthe Kollwitz, Alice Neel, Alma Thomas, Claude Cahun, Eva Hesse and Meret Oppenheim, to name just a few. Referring to themselves as the 'conscience of the artworld' they formed in response to the diminution of interest in 'active' feminism, the growth of academic and theoretical feminism, and a general frustration with sexism and racism in the artworld. As such, their work is largely protest based, using signature style postcards, posters and banners to raise awareness of the artworld's inherent sexism and marginalisation of the Other. These are displayed in public spaces as well as in internationally renowned museums. Interestingly, the Guerrilla Girls frequently author their prints and posters in a type-font with '© Guerrilla Girls' and 'conscience of the artworld' in the bottom right-hand corner (see Figure 1), further undermining the traditional artist's signature, which commonly appears in the same space.

Beginning with pasting posters illegally on the streets of New York's Chelsea district, naming and shaming local galleries with their researched statistics, through to their exhibition at London's Whitechapel Gallery (2017), there's no doubt that the Guerrilla Girls' anonymity has empowered them to continue their critique while the 'reader' focuses on their work and not their biography. They've become so popular and their research so threatening that institutions have had to adopt them as a means of self-critique. The Guerrilla Girls now work from the inside out, exhibiting while interrogating

institutions such as the Venice Biennale and Museum of Modern Art (NY, USA).

As the group continues to work internationally, more people within the arts community collaborate with the Guerrilla Girls and choose to protect their identities. In so doing, we too join and empower the conspiracy. That they have had to traverse contemporary and commercial intellectual property concerns, through their book publishing and legal incorporation, makes them a pertinent example of how authorship and the patriarchal infrastructures of the artworld might be reimagined.

Figure 1 illustrates connections between #MeToo and the artworld's asymmetric power structures that this article contextualises. Created in response to the movement in 2018, it is a satirical take on how museums might reconsider telling another story when exhibiting the works of Chuck Close, who is accused of multiple allegations of sexual abuse. The poster highlights competing economic interests of museums, which stunt the advancement of feminism, reduce accountability and disregard the abused, because they continue to propagate a market obsessed with the 'genius' or 'Author-God'.

Patrick Brill is a London-based artist who works under the pseudonym of Bob and Roberta Smith. Brill began using pseudonyms while he was working in New York in the late 1980s. While there, he discovered that he became rather successful at filling in application forms and winning arts awards, a large part of the job of an artist. Disillusioned with the artworld (Brill in McCartney 2018), he began collecting and creating a series of 'loser' stories based on an artist called Bob. This was a type of fascination and play on the mythology of the artist's typically tortured personality. Upon returning to the UK, 'Bob' asked his sister to collaborate and, for a short while, Bob and Roberta, really did work together and the double gendered pseudonym stuck. Later works, such as *Letter to Michael Gove* (2011), have questioned the UK government over arts education policies, and exhibitions often advocate for social and gender equality. Like the Guerrilla Girls, Bob and Roberta Smith work form the inside out and often on their own terms. They have exhibited at the Tate, where they were elected a Trustee in 2009, in 2013 Bob and Roberta Smith became Royal Academicians and in 2017 they were awarded the OBE for services to the arts. But they have not always been represented by a gallery; they often paint over their own works, making them less valuable or impossible to sell. Teaching has been a main income to enable a practice that isn't always in keeping with the market and which actively critiques it.

In 2011 Bob and Roberta Smith created an entire exhibition based on the sculptor Jacob Epstein (1880–1959), whose archives are held at The New Art Gallery in Walsall, UK. Invited to use the archives as artists in


FIGURE 3. See Esther Walsall's Mona Lisa, work in progress by Bob and Roberta Smith, featuring the artist, 2010. Part of the exhibition 'The Life of the Mind; Love, Sorrow & Obsession' at New Art Gallery Walsall (21 January - 20 March 2011), co -curated by Bob and Roberta Smith; artist's residency funded by New Ways of Curating. Photograph by Jonathan Shaw.

residence, Bob and Roberta Smith organised several events, curated an exhibition and made new works of art celebrating the life and works of Epstein, most of which were orientated towards the artist's biography, though not the 'arty' version. Instead, *Epstein's Walk* mapped a proposed route Epstein would have taken between his wife, Margaret Epstein, and his mistress, Kathleen Garman. Bob and Roberta Smith documented themselves doing the walk with a cardboard cut-out of Epstein's dog, 'Frisky'. The comedic images mocked the artist's biography and in highlighting Epstein's affair, Bob and Roberta Smith critique a commonly accepted trait of male 'bohemianism'.

Bob and Roberta Smith also made a wall painting charting a history of sculpture with Epstein at its heart. Researching this involved considering Epstein's legacy as a whole and, out of this process, grew another project, *If You Make Art, What Happens When You Die?* The installation displayed selected postcards and clothes from Epstein's archive and some of Bob and Roberta Smith's own sign-paintings. It reflected on some of the methodological and philosophical problems of archival research. What one researcher might be drawn to, another is not, and yet it is upon these materials and subjective interpretation of their significance that we come to 'understand' an artist's oeuvre or authorship. Bob and Roberta Smith deliberately selected both the mundane and more obviously significant items pertaining to Epstein's life so as to confound the distinction between them:

> What I'm really interested in is not just destroying the myth of the artist purely for the sake of throwing bricks … I do think that he was an extraordinary artist and I don't want to question that really, but I want to put beside it a bit of the reality of life (Smith and Lebter 2013, 117-118).

This approach demonstrates another way that we might deal with art history. The biography doesn't have to be dispensed with entirely but it does need to be considered critically and as part of a more holistic approach to the understanding of an artwork's making and meaning. In highlighting Epstein's womanising and referring to the 'reality of life' – which I understand as a reference to Epstein's children, two of whom committed suicide – Bob and Roberta Smith do not heroicise Epstein, they remind us that the artist, no matter how 'great', shouldn't be glamorised to the extent of moral immunity.

When faced with the resounding question of how we might give the deceased women of art a voice, as posited earlier in this article, Bob and Roberta Smith offer an example in the form of Epstein's daughter and her confrontational #MeToo gaze. *First Portrait of Esther (With Long Hair)* (1944), is a bronze bust of his 15-year-old daughter, who did not know Epstein was her father at the time. Bob and Roberta Smith referred to it as Walsall's *Mona Lisa* and heralded the piece because it captures the sitter's disdain at being scrutinised or subjected by the 'patriarchal' artist:

> For Bob, Esther is resisting Epstein's gaze in his portrait of her and he saw this as a symbolic feminist action; she looks beyond the artist, refusing to be scrutinised. For Bob, Esther is kicking against the perceived wisdom of the dominant male artist interpreting his submissive female sitter. Therefore, Bob wanted to curate a show that would 'expose this myth of the great male artist who has special insight into the minds of his more "frail" female subjects. (Smith and Lebter 2013, 58).

Figure 3 shows the artist painting a form of protest for Esther. It reads "...Esther is resisting her fathers [sic] gaze. No young person wants to be analysed in that way..." The work demonstrates compassion for the abused or less powerful and tells her story. At Walsall, it accompanied *First Portrait*, putting it into a context of power structures and biographical truth. It links complex issues of the sexist gaze, biography and the artworld itself, while offering an alternative model to its celebrated but detrimental 'genius' authorship. Bob and Roberta Smith may or may not have benefitted from their own white male privilege but they use their practice to highlight inequalities. In this work, they embody their protest, rather than using a hashtag, and, because the work was created prior to #MeToo, I would also like to propose it as sitting largely outside of a 'privatised feminism' (Bonner 2019).

The works of the Guerrilla Girls and Bob and Roberta Smith demonstrate that there are ways around the hegemonic canon and how it infiltrates public spaces. This can be done through protest, one's identity, interrogating the archive and by inviting the audience to consider Other stories. Bonner argues that, while #MeToo and #TimesUp 'elicit press and mass media coverage, they do not radically disrupt the institutions they indicate will be affected by their (valiant) efforts to achieve gender equality.' (Bonner 2019, 47). Artists such as the Guerrilla Girls and Bob and Roberta Smith, however, use their alternative identities and practices to radically shift the focus from the romanticised biography of artists to the problems of a misogynist artworld. By removing the crutch of the outdated authorship model – by

rendering themselves less visible to the politics discussed – a systemic change takes place. The institutions that support and perpetuate patriarchal, toxic masculinity and sexism are themselves then thrown into question. Bonner cites Amelia Jones when qualifying the potential for change: 'the radical feminist practice must aim to displace and provoke the spectator; making her or him aware of the process of experiencing the text' (Jones, 1981, 24, in Bonner 2019, 47). Gwen Allen cites Benjamin: that to protest the status quo one must reflect upon and transform its own apparatus (2018, 12). These echo art historians calling for a change to the 'star system' (Reckitt 2012), ways we exclude Others (Nochlin, 1971) and how history is recorded (Parker and Pollock 1981). It is my belief that alternative authorships like the Guerrilla Girls and Bob and Roberta Smith, critiquing the cannon and 'disrupting the institutions' that they work with/in, are significantly 'provoking' the spectator to experience 'texts' in new ways that challenge structural inequalities of the artworld.

## CONCLUSION

Not every artist will want to risk an anonymous or pseudonymous authorship. Thus, where censorship and 'cancel' culture seem too extreme or insufficient *responses* to #MeToo, change might begin by proactively creating a fuller 'picture' and more truthful art history. The Ditchling Museum in East Sussex, UK, for example, has had to rethink its dedication to the artist and designer Eric Gill. In 1989, Fiona MacCarthy's biography revealed Gill to have abused his two pubescent daughters, and his incestuous relationship with his sister. Previously, this information was censored, but in 2017 curators sought the advice of charities that work with victims of sexual abuse to re-narrate his work. This way, the artist isn't morally immune but the work remains on show. A fuller 'picture' should help the 'reader' construct their own impression and understanding of an artist and their work instead of being dictated to on what is 'great'. To reference Barthes, 'the birth of the reader', or the voice of #MeToo, may not, as some fear, be at 'the cost of the death of the author' (Barthes [1967] 1977, 128). A fuller 'picture' creates a more nuanced and complex understanding of flawed societies and constructed cultures that we can learn from. If the art is then spoilt by this understanding, then perhaps it wasn't ever so 'great'.

Curators are under increasing scrutiny from #MeToo, but they cannot be expected to question or censor every work that was made by an artist anecdotally labelled as immoral. This article does not ask that we begin defaming all those thought to be misogynists but it does question why we cannot archive just *some* of the work by artists we know for a fact to have been abusers. For at the very least, it would create space for Other artists. Nor does this article state that we need to remove works that depict nakedness or sex. These are aspects of life and which form a well-rounded education, but that story too is gendered. However, if we continue to hang the works of well-known abusive artists, and those that belong to abusive collectors, plus look at their subjects trapped within a frame, how can we meet their gaze? Instead, let us use #MeToo as an opportunity to look at art we can celebrate and reflect upon with more honest and different stories, and consider other ways we might read works of art without recourse to our current co-dependent relationship with the biographical model.

This article concludes that the artist cannot be separated from their art. Instead, it uses theories of authorship to shift the narrative of 'genius' and its sexist, abusive consequences to reconsider what and who is 'great', who determines this, and what spaces they occupy. Examples of curating and critical discourse in the wake of #MeToo show a reluctance to change existing power structures due to competing factors like a capitalist artworld invested in sexism. Nevertheless, #MeToo has precipitated an important conversation that has led some spaces to re-narrate the work of abusers and the abused with more truth, with some abusers being held accountable – censored, sacked or 'cancelled'. This impact and the movement remain a form of 'privileged' response that is not necessarily transformative. This article, however, shows that a radical shift in the way art is made and read, through the works of the Guerrilla Girls and Bob and Roberta Smith, can challenge systemic inequality from the inside-out and, if taken up more widely, might hopefully mean less #MeToo accounts of abuse in the future.

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## NOTES

[1] These examples are well documented in the public arena. For example, see NYTimes (2018) available at nytimes.com/2018/01/13/style/mario-testino-bruce-weber-harassment.html; BBC (2018) available at bbc.co.uk/news/world-asia-China-42 659 827; United Nations News (2020), un.org/en/story/2020/01/1055452

[2] The artworld I am referring to here is largely European and North American, though its affiliated biennales and travelling 'blockbuster exhibitions' may take place all around the world. This article is therefore limited in its scope and ability to postulate a globally comprehensive perspective, or of artworlds that take place on the margins and 'outside' of this system, which are equally, if not more, deserving of attention. The 'artworld' is often understood to encompass the socio-economic phenomenon of art's ontology; the network and relationship between art school, dealers, collectors, auction houses, private galleries, public museums, philanthropists, press events, art historians and critics.

[3] Catriona Morton describes sexual violence in particular as being 'about the abuse of power, but currently our patriarchal societies mean that men are in power, and accordingly are in more of a position to abuse it over marginalised genders' (2021, p. 4). However, this article acknowledges that the terms 'men' and 'women' can be reductive; not all men are abusive or privileged and nor are women excluded from being so. Similarly, when the term 'woman' is used, please note it includes all that identify as such and that the 'marginalised genders' who are more likely to be exploited (Morton 2021), include those who identify outside of traditional binaries.

[4] For example, in the USA, in 2009 the National Endowment of the Arts published that female artists earn 81 cents for every dollar made by male artists; in 2017 The Association of Art Museum Directors found that female directors earned 73 cents for every dollar that male directors earned. In the UK, in 2018, the Freelands Foundation published that 63% of the most senior staff at art and design institutions were male while 68% of the artists represented at top London commercial galleries are men, despite more women studying in the creative arts and design sector.

For more information, see Lindermann D J et al. (2016) An asymmetrical portrait: Exploring gendered income inequality in the arts. *Social Currents* 4 (3): 332–348. This shows that women earn approximately $20,000 less than men in the artworld.

See also Association of Art Museum Directors (2017) available at: https://aamd.org/our-members/from-the-field/gender-gap-report-2017

National Endowment of the Arts (2009) available at: https://www.arts.gov/publications/artists-and-art-workers-united-states-findings-american-community-survey-2005-2009-and

Freelands Foundation (2018) Research compiled by Kate McMillan. Available at: https://freelandsfoundation.imgix.net/documents/Representation-of-Female-Artists-in-Britain-Research-2019-copy.pdf

[5] This article acknowledges the difference between paedophilia, sexual and/or violent harassment of an adult and other forms of exploitation, but also views the multiple abuses of power at play in the artworld – from its gendered imagery and gaze to its treatment of 'muses', students and the sector's gender pay gap – as part of an interconnected, sexist, unhealthy and largely unregulated regime.

[6] In 2014–15 The Courtauld (London, UK) held an exhibition dedicated to Schiele; in 2018 the Tate (UK) held an exhibition dedicated to Schiele and Francesca Woodman, while the Met (US) held one dedicated to Klimt, Picasso and Schiele; and in 2019 the Royal Academy of Arts (UK) held an exhibition dedicated to 'Klimt/Schiele'.

[7] Previous research critiqued the artist's biography. My intention was to question the role of the artist but not to excuse their behaviour.

[8] Early feminist art historiography drew attention to the sexist canon but there are further complications when we add other intersections of 'womanhood' such as race, class, sexuality, disability and the question of gender altogether. For a less white account, see Atallah N (2020) Have there really been no great women artists: Writing a feminist art history of modern Egypt. In: Özpınar C and Kelly M (eds) *Under the Skin: Feminist Art and Art Histories from the Middle East and North Africa Today*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

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